

For Emissaries in a Crowded Field, Friendship Circles Become Popular

Charlotte Jewish Day School Grad Serves as Manager of Friendship Circle International

By Sue Fishkoff

Palo Alto, CA (JTA) — In the old days, a young Chabad couple “going out” on shlichus — becoming outreach emissaries — usually would be sent to a new

city or college campus to set up a Chabad center.

As Chabad outposts proliferated in the late 1980s and into the '90s, however, the playing field became quite crowded.

Some young couples still can find virgin territory for their rebbe's message, but more often these young Lubavitch rabbis and their wives are signing on now as second or third couples at established Chabad centers. They fill positions such as preschool teacher, for her, or adult education director, for him.

“The face of *shlichus* is changing,” says Rabbi Ben Tzion Groner, a native of Charlotte who graduated the Charlotte Jewish Day School, and manager of Friendship Circle International, which set up operations a year and a half ago at Chabad-Lubavitch headquarters in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. “Twenty years ago it was one rabbi doing everything in a city. Now you can have a youth rabbi, an education rabbi. There are so many specializations. It's definitely the new thing.”

One popular choice for a young emissary couple is starting a Friendship Circle.

Until last year, says Levi Shemtov, who with his wife, Bassie, sister of CJDS director, Mariashi Groner, founded of the flagship Friendship Circle in West Bloomfield, MI, Friendship Circles popped up slowly, organically, “as we responded to people's interest.”

A year ago there were 25. Then one of Shemtov's big donors told him he “wanted to see 100 by 2010,” so Shemtov says he started promoting the idea actively to promising young emissary couples.

Today there are 59 registered Friendship Circles, Groner says. Some are not yet operational,



Ben Tzion Groner

Shemtov says, very few of the husbands devoted themselves exclusively to Friendship Circle work.

“They did other things and ran Friendship Circle as a hobby,” he explains.

Nechama Schusterman started the Friendship Circle in Palo Alto, CA, with a girlfriend three years ago when she was living at home before her marriage. Now she and her husband, Ezzy, run it from the Kehillah Jewish High School, which allows them to recruit volunteers from the student body.

“Some Friendship Circles run as a project of a larger Chabad House, and a young couple comes to run it,” Ezzy Schusterman says. “It's really a full-time job. This is what I do. We need to be able to cover our budget and run it on our own.”

Sometimes there isn't enough work for both spouses while a new Friendship Circle is growing. Miryum and Peretz Mochkin opened their Friendship Circle in early November in San Francisco, soon after they married and returned to the city where Miryum Mochkin grew up.

“All summer we laid the groundwork,” Miryum Mochkin says.

She now has nine families, some referred by her mother, Chabad emissary Hinda Langer, who runs the Shalom preschool, and others sent by the Bureau of Jewish Education. This will be her full-time work while Peretz teaches adult education through Chabad of San Francisco.

In December, her first group of teen volunteers will go for training with Nechama Schusterman, Miryum Mochkin's childhood friend.

“She told me how incredible her program is,” Miryum Mochkin says, “and I knew I wanted to do it.” ☆

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Israeli Coffee House

Last month, the Levine JCC held another Israeli Coffeehouse, and once again the evening was a magnificent success. In fact, it was obvious that few people wanted to leave by the end of the night. As many began to pick at the assortment of typical Israeli cuisine like hummus and babaganoush, the Rappaports kicked off the evening with a moving Havdalah service followed by a special Havdalah dance.

Although most came to enjoy conversation with friends, others focused on the various activities. There was a brief slideshow on Israel accompanied by a breathtaking photo exhibit of “Israel from a Bird's Eye,” an Israeli sing-along and even some Israeli board games. Those feeling especially festive joined in the performance of Israeli dance, while others couldn't get up from Sheshbesh and Rummikub.

Some were content to end the evening with Turkish coffee and

baklava while many warmed at the idea of karaoke and belted out their best versions of some oldest-but-goodies, forcing many to ask, was that the real Shlomo Artzi or “The Boss” Bruce Springsteen?

Whether it was dancing, eating or singing in typical Israeli fashion, the event brought the community together. As people filtered out saying one final Erev Tov, everyone wanted to know one thing: When are we doing this again?

To find out more, contact Tair Zach or Aree Pearlman at 704-366-5007. ☆



Israeli dancing at the community coffee house.