



One of the house mothers and a child at the Neve Michael children's home in Israel. Photo by Chanan Nachmani.

## *Neve Michael children's home 'healing the souls' of Israeli kids for 76 years*

Primarily rehabilitative and therapeutic, it gives some of Israel's most troubled youngsters, starting at age 5, a stable home with on-staff psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers.

**BY DEBORAH FINEBLUM**

**(October 8, 2019 / JNS)** Many a third-grade memory features vacations with family, swimming with friends or getting a new puppy. But Chofit remembers another sort of life. One marked by extreme poverty and regular visits to a big building where she would sit across from a man she barely knew. "Say 'I love you, Abba,'" her mother would whisper.

These painful jail visits to her drug-addicted father were among the reasons that a quarter-century ago, Israel's Welfare Department sent 8-year-old Chofit to the after-school program for at-risk children at the Neve Michael Emunah Children's Home in Pardes Hanna.

Chofit, however, couldn't help but notice that her friends who lived on campus were happier than she was in a home without electricity, a washing machine or consistent parenting. "I begged them to let me stay there," she recalls. "And thank G-d, they did."

They placed the young girl in one of the youth village's "family homes" along with 11 other children.

Then there's Rona, who arrived at Neve Michael at the age of 12 in 1986, after her mother died and her father wasn't able to care for his children. Two years into her stay there, she learned her older sister was trapped in an Arab village with a boyfriend who beat her. In desperation, Rona turned to Neve Michael staffers who hatched a daring plan: Late one night, the sister and her baby were smuggled out of that village ... and never looked back.



A Neve Michael house mother and a young girl prepare food together. Photo by Chanan Nachmani.

It's been four decades since 10-year-old Shlomoh, along with his brother and two sisters, were sent to Neve Michael following the murder of their mother.

"I was completely broken," says Shlomoh, speaking from his office in Skokie, Ill. "But, through unconditional love and, when needed, tough love, over the next two years, they healed my soul."

### **'Abused in unimaginable ways'**

Neve Michael is home to 150 youngsters born into a variety of tough circumstances, priming them for lives of drug addiction, poverty and crime. In addition, some 30 more can be found in the two crisis centers, while 85 other at-risk children attend an after-school program that feeds them, helps with their homework and, equally important, keeps them out of their (often dysfunctional) homes until bedtime. Israel is home to more than 30 youth villages designed to rescue kids at risk. Some are run by the Jewish Agency, others by nonprofits like Hadassah, WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization) and Emunah, the parent organization of Neve Michael.

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and I'm their friend."**

Whereas many of the other villages have an educational focus, Neve Michael is primarily rehabilitative and therapeutic, giving some of Israel's most troubled youngsters, starting at age 5, a stable home complete with on-staff psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. Also on campus: therapy for 80 families, whom the Welfare Department insists come for counseling. And it's the only youth village in Israel to house two 24/7 crisis centers for children and teens in need of immediate rescue.

"Because of who we are and what we offer here, the courts and welfare system know we are often the haven of last resort, so they send us the most troubled children," says programs and projects director Hava Levene, who has been with Neve Michael for 30 years.

"Some arrive with cigarette burns on their tender, young skin. Others have watched their drug-addicted fathers beat or even kill their mothers, and too many have been abused in unimaginable ways," she says. "People don't like to think these things happen in Israel, but when they do, we are here. Treating these kids so they can have the life they deserve is a 24-hour job that demands all our staff's patience, skill and love."

### **'Break the cycle'**

Israel's youth village movement dates back to the pre-state 1930s when Henrietta Szold (the founder of Hadassah) and fellow activist Recha Freier pioneered "youth *aliyah*" for youngsters on the run from the Nazis.

Over the years, as waves of immigrants have come and gone (including those from Arab lands, the FSU and Ethiopia), the languages have changed but their problems—and those of children from dysfunctional families—remain.

**“The only way to make miracles happen for these kids who’ve lost all hope is through multi-level programs in a safe, stable, nurturing environment.”**

Neve Michael was founded in 1943 on seven acres in Pardes Hanna, then a town of orange groves and camels. Like other such youth villages, the goal is "to break the cycle," says director David Fridman. "Our vision is for youngsters who've been dealt such a difficult hand in life to be able to heal from the abuse they've suffered. Only when they do can they have a chance to grow into happy, healthy contributing members of Israeli society."

Much of this healing takes place in the 12 "family homes," where house parents live with their own children and a dozen others. Those with learning challenges attend the special-education school on campus, whereas others are bused to local ones.

Most of the children tend to stay many years, often until age 18, when more than 90 percent join the Army, says Levene. Others are ultimately sent to live with relatives that court judges deem able to care for them.

"Neve Michael takes children with so many problems of all kinds and gives them a wonderful home with emotional and educational support," says child-development psychologist Jackie Weinberg, retired director of school psychological services for the nearby city of Hadera. "It's almost impossible, but they do it—so much so that after they leave, they visit again and again because this is their real home."

Another integral part of the program are the young adults who live on campus for weeks or months at a time, helping provide the love and support these children crave.

"I live with them, help them with their homework, and I'm their friend," says Leora Bar-Chaim, a Florida native who arrived at Neve Michael as a summer volunteer at age 16. Three years later, she's made *aliyah* and returned to Neve Michael for a year of Sherut Leumi, Israel's national service program. "When you form a connection, they start to trust you. When you see that smile on their face, there's nothing like it," says Bar-Chaim, who is planning to study family law to serve this population. "It's also amazing to see how the house parents with their own kids have enough love and patience for these other kids who've never gotten it before."

## **'A safe, stable, nurturing environment'**

Teens who volunteer—typically four weeks in the summer—tend to receive as much as they give, says Rachel Bargad, Neve Michael's director of international programs. "Coming from privileged homes, they've never been exposed to the hardships these kids have lived through," she says. "Even with such differences, they form bonds that last for years."

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Funding this full-service village—each child living at Neve Michael costs 8,000 to 12,000 shekels (averaging \$2,800) a month—involves a complex formula, including income from the government that pays about 75 percent of the kids' basic needs, as well as donations from individuals and organizations. The youth village is part of Emunah, an organization devoted to helping Israel's most vulnerable children and families, which oversees Neve Michael, in addition to Emunah's four other youth villages and four high schools.

"The only way to make miracles happen for these kids who've lost all hope is through multi-level programs in a safe, stable, nurturing environment," says World Emunah director Shlomo Kessel, a Cape Town native who worked at Neve Michael for years before stepping into his current role. "The staff tells them, 'We won't give in to you, but we'll never give up on you,' and eventually, the kids see the world isn't the hurtful place they thought it was."

One secret to Neve Michael's success, insiders say, is its strong Jewish values—from its kosher cafeteria to its on-site synagogue (now undergoing renovation), where the youngsters pray and learn with the community.

Boys wear *kipot* and girls wear skirts, and there's a "no cell phones" policy for Shabbat. Holidays typically find the kids with their families (when possible) or with volunteers' families. In addition, each spring the village throws a group bar and bat mitzvah celebration.

"It's a holy place, where real change happens and where we work with the kids to become *mensch*es," says Yechiam Cherlow, director of education and residential services. "They may arrive scared and missing home, even with all of its difficulties but, given time, we watch them grow into family."

## **GROWING TOMORROW'S ISRAEL, ONE CHILD AT A TIME**

One long-term study in Israel reflected on the success of the nation's youth villages in changing young lives for the better. Tracking hundreds of village residents from 1973 through the late 1980s, researchers concluded that "those who had continued in residential group homes were functioning better than those who had gone home or who had moved into foster family care."

They are functioning like Chofit, who's now a parent, graduate student in political science and house mother at one of Neve Michael's family homes.

Or Rona, who's also a house mother. A postscript: Not able to have children, Rona and her husband adopted a young girl from the youth village whose homeless and unstable mother gave up her parental rights. A few months later, the biological mom gave birth again, and asked Rona and her husband to raise the baby, too.

"Of my siblings, one is a nurse, another is a carpenter, another a secretary, and I happen to be a businessman," says Shlomoh, who now donates to and speaks publicly about the village, as well as sends his daughter to volunteer there. "We're all productive members of society, and I have to credit much of it to our years at Neve Michael."

"Healing broken souls like ours; that's a big job, it takes a lot of hard work and dedication. And that's what they do best."

*To learn more about Neve Michael, visit: [nevemichael.com](http://nevemichael.com).*