

STRENGTHENING THE PERIPHERY

It's no secret that Israel's peripheral areas face many challenges, including the negative migration out of these regions. At the Jewish Agency, the **Israel Department's Priority Regions Division** works to connect the Jewish communities abroad to Israel by increasing their involvement with these priority areas / Liza Rosenberg

"One of the most pressing issues for the Galilee and the Negev is the need for an infusion of young people who can effect positive change for the people living there," asserts Larry Joseph, a committee chair of the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors. To that end, the Priority Regions Division, led by director Offer Isseroff, is always looking for ways to try to make those changes happen, both in the Negev and in the Galilee.

Isseroff and his team are involved in a number of different initiatives geared towards providing support and assistance for young people of all ages – from school children through university and beyond – with some programs helping people into their late twenties and up to age 30. The idea is to create wide circles of cooperation, fostering a sense of community and meeting economic needs, while also helping to instill pride in the peripheral areas. Says Isseroff, "we are looking at the younger generations, as we want to close the gap for the children in the Negev and Galilee."

Involving world Jewry

It is important to note that the Jewish Agency is not trying to take over the government's role in these areas, nor does it want to get involved in formal education, preferring to work with youth outside of the traditional educational framework. Says Isseroff, "we are not stepping in instead of the government. We see ourselves as being the trustees of world Jewry."

The department's mission is to ensure the involvement of world Jewry – alongside the Israelis – in shaping the future character of Israeli society. "We believe it is of paramount importance to connect North American Jews with the periphery. This is our best tool," he adds.

This involvement of Diaspora Jews is critical, as it reinforces the centrality of Israel in their Jewish identity, and also allows Israelis to deepen their ties and their connection to the Diaspora. Like all Jewish Agency projects, the programs run by the Priority Regions Division are mainly funded by contributions from communities around the world. In many cases, Diaspora communities are connected to specific locations through the Jewish

Agency's Partnership 2000 program, and target their contributions to influence their Israeli Partnership 2000 region. "In my case, we are partnered with the Negev town of Yerucham. As a result of this connection, we've developed close relationships with the town and its inhabitants," explains Joseph.

North and south

As strengthening Israel's peripheral regions in both the north and south of the country remains a national priority, two non-profit companies were set up in order to design and implement comprehensive planning programs for these areas. These companies, "Tzafona" ("North") and "Daroma" ("South"), were established by Israeli and Jewish entrepreneurs and philanthropists. Israeli businessman Eitan Wertheimer served as chairman of the board for both companies.

As a strategic partner in these companies, the Jewish Agency works in cooperation with various government agencies, local municipalities and other entities to increase economic development, improve the local education system by narrowing gaps, encourage settlement in the periphery by improving the current housing options, improve local infrastructure and environmental quality, and nurture the younger population in order to develop regional leadership. Remarks Isseroff, "many things happening in the Negev today are a direct result of the Daroma initiative."

The plan laid out by Daroma was approved by the government of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005, and it was decided that 17 billion shekels would be allocated for Negev development between the years of 2006 and 2015. The influence of both Tzafona and Daroma can be felt throughout the division's programming.

Choosing Tomorrow

In order to strengthen the periphery, a young, vibrant population is paramount. With this in mind, the Jewish Agency's "Choosing Tomorrow" initiative works to retain the graduates of local academic institutions in the area once they've finished their studies. Choosing Tomorrow is an intensive two-year program for university students, with separate tracks geared towards educating students, business students, medical students and more. At least 50% of the students in the program are native to the periphery, and participants enjoy weekly trips and other activities designed to increase their knowledge of the region and provide them with the tools needed to acclimate successfully, as well as to become community leaders.

Once they have completed their studies, these young people commit to remaining in the periphery for a period of two years, during which they are given practical support in finding employment and in dealing with other social aspects and community issues. With 95% of program graduates from the first two years opting to stay in the area, the program can be considered a success.

Some of the graduates choose to settle in new communities, while others decide to live in more established towns. Says Choosing Tomorrow's Yomit Azulay: "Through our initiatives, university graduates develop a strong connec-



Participants on the Atidim program become leading forces for strengthening the periphery

tion to the area." Adds Board of Governors committee chair Joseph, "Choosing Tomorrow aims to change the way that young people in Israel, both those who grew up in the Negev and those who come to study or volunteer there, see the Negev. This program gives these young people the tools to make a decision and choose the Negev as the center of their lives when starting a family or finding a place to work. It can help them to start their own businesses and provides them with an opportunity to belong to a group of young people that share the same values."

Incubating New Young Communities

Another Priority Regions Division initiative encourages young people to establish new communities in peripheral areas in order to improve and enhance the local quality of life. These individuals are looking for ways to positively contribute to society, while at the same time establish their own sense of identity and belonging. The Incubating New Young Communities program provides them with a framework for either creating their own community or working together as a group in order to assist the weakened neighborhoods and towns in which they live.

Groups of young people looking to form such a community in these regions can approach the Jewish Agency, and once a group is approved, they are given professional assistance to help them establish their community on the ground. Funding comes from both the Jewish Agency and local industry, and self-sufficiency through the founding of businesses is a goal.

One such successful business is the Ringelblum Café in Beersheva, which was made possible following a loan provided by the Jewish Agency's Ness Loan Fund. The café employs local at-risk youth who are guided by youth counselors and a social worker and taught the ropes by a professional chef. Profits from the café are poured into other local projects, creating a win-win situation for the

community at large.

Communities often maintain the characteristics of an urban-style kibbutz, as members buy or rent homes next to one another, helping each other out and working to create a community spirit through social interaction and the sharing of projects, though there is no sharing of money. Says group head Eliad Melamed, "these communities are very supportive, providing a network for finding employment and building a strong sense of community – all very important factors in convincing young people to settle in the periphery. More and more people are looking to join these communities."

Atidim

Atidim is another successful program which aims to strengthen the periphery. Its goal is to invest in educational opportunities and encourage young participants to strive for educational excellence. There are currently ten different tracks, including a pre-Atidim track for 13-18 year-olds, tracks geared towards engineering and business studies, a public service track and tracks for young immigrants. Atidim currently comprises 21,000 participants.

Atidim provides outstanding youth from the periphery with a variety of opportunities for enrichment, advancement and integration into the military, industry, business and public sectors, giving these young people the tools they need to successfully strengthen the periphery when they return, by becoming leading forces in local industry. According to Atidim Director General Devora Chasid, "the potential for youth in the periphery is immense, but many of these young people simply don't have the self-confidence to succeed."

One-third of Atidim's budget comes from the Jewish world abroad through the Jewish Agency. Says Chasid, "there are many more young people who meet the criteria for Atidim, and if we had more money, we would be able to help these youth as well."

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For more information about the Jewish Agency for Israel's Israel Department's Priority Regions Division, go to www.jewishagency.org