

# NIF News

A REPORT ON BUILDING A STRONG AND DEMOCRATIC ISRAEL

WINTER 2007

## The Centrality of the Periphery

### Israeli Civil Society Comes Together to Support the North

“Thirty-five days have passed since the ceasefire that ended the war in Lebanon came into effect and, on the surface, it looks like life has returned to normal. But we all know that beneath this deceptive exterior of normality, pain and suffering abide. The lives of families who lost loved ones will never return to what they were before.

Civilians and soldiers who felt their lives were endangered in vain or who felt neglected in shelters will have a difficult time rehabilitating their faith in a leadership that abandoned them. There are houses that have not been repaired, traumas that have not been treated... and in the background, questions are being asked about the justice of the war and about the absence of an effort to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis...”

With those words, SHATIL Director Rachel Liel opened the conference, “Israeli Social Change Organizations During and After the Second Lebanon War,” in Tel Aviv in late September. Dozens of social change organizations, most of them NIF grantees and SHATIL clients, wrestled with the troubling issues brought to the fore by the 34-day conflict with Hezbollah — and with the role of civil society in the aftermath.

### The Toughest Issues

How do we help the public understand that the failure of government services during the war was a direct result of years-long neglect and not an issue of “the preparedness of the home

front”? How do we prevent an exclusive focus on military as opposed to human security? How do we convince people that a healthy society that does not abandon its weaker members is a prerequisite to the continued existence of that society? How do we prevent the relegation of social issues to the bottom of the government's agenda? How do we safeguard and strengthen Jewish-Arab cooperation in the State of Israel and in NGOs, when the chasms all around are growing?

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## Message from NIF President Peter Edelman



As I write this, we have settled into a new year with hopes of a better time in Israel in the coming months. Israelis are immersed in recovery work from the rain of missiles, and are debating deeply significant problems and issues that were revealed or highlighted by the war. It is a time of considerable uncertainty.

At the New Israel Fund, we find ourselves doing double duty – not unlike others, I suppose. We are working hard to help with the recovery in the North — getting help to people not reached by other actors, and helping people advocate for assistance that otherwise would come in lesser measure to their communities. And we are doing everything we were doing previously.

All of the pressing problems that were there before the war are still there, so we double up. We are like a plant with so many orders it has to hire a second shift of workers, only our second shift is composed of the same people as our first shift. All of us who give the money and provide the psychic support are always in awe of our fabulous colleagues who do the actual work in Israel, but now

our admiration and respect are exponential. Everyone at NIF in Israel has been working around the clock since July, and they deserve our special gratitude. (Of course those who raise the funds have been working extra hard, too, and they also deserve a round of applause.)

As this issue of the newsletter shows, our work for social justice produces results all the time, and new challenges arise almost every day. This means it is especially helpful when your gifts come in flexible form, which lets us use funds in whatever area is most pressing at the moment. This is underscored by a

***A needed rapid response often has to be multifaceted, with grants needed for multiple organizations and support needed for work by SHATIL as well.***

further fact — a needed rapid response often has to be multifaceted, with grants needed for multiple organizations and support needed for work by SHATIL as well. Flexible funding enables nimble response.

Our successful advocacy on the so-called Wisconsin Plan, described more fully elsewhere in this newsletter, is a good example. This is the previous government's highly questionable importation of a punitive approach to welfare-to-work that has been tremendously controversial in the United States. With new leadership on domestic social policy responding to the well-informed advocacy of NGOs and constituencies in Israel, those now responsible for social welfare policy have made fundamental alterations in the pro-

gram to remove its most negative aspects.

This was not the activity of one NIF grantee or of SHATIL operating alone. The NIF family of grantees, operating individually and in coalition with the advice of SHATIL, combined together to bring about this good result. A donor might conceivably have made a gift to support all aspects of our advocacy on the Wisconsin plan, but it would have been even better from our organizational point of view to have undesignated resources available to respond to this issue as it arose and developed.

We, of course, value the support

you provide us in whatever way works for you, but it is extremely important to us that we have resources we can apply flexibly to issues as they arise. Especially in this period when things are happening so quickly, and when our staff are working overtime and then some on all the issues needing our attention, I hope it is not inappropriate to remind all of our donors that flexible gifts are the ones that help us the very most.

I am pleased about the outcome of our advocacy and that of our partners on the Wisconsin plan. It is a prime illustration of the difference it makes to have an instrument for social justice like NIF at work in Israel.

These difficult issues were discussed at the conference, and underlie NIF's growing efforts to effect social change from the bitterness and polarization following the war. During the war, NIF mobilized rapidly to meet the challenges on the ground; NIF grants staff surveyed grantees in the region, and SHATIL staff in Haifa were in constant touch with other organizations to identify needs and develop responses. By early September, NIF had authorized \$275,000 in emergency grants. And, more than \$2 million is funding a number of new initiatives developed and/or managed by NIF/SHATIL to address the needs of those most deeply affected by the conflict.

For example, a coalition of NIF grantees, led by SHATIL, is carefully monitoring the distribution of government and philanthropic resources in the North, to ensure that the "invisible Israelis" are not left out of the rebuilding process. Another coalition is spon-

***The war exposed an unpleasant truth: Israel's government long ago abandoned the nation's periphery.***

soring Northern Exposure, a program to assist northern micro-businesses that are often not eligible for formal compensation, and help them market their products and services over the Internet. The SHATIL-founded Mobadara (Initiative), a coalition of 11 Israeli Arab organizations whose mandate is to deal with war-related issues that continue to affect those citizens, is working to bridge the chasms between Israeli Jews and Arabs exacerbated by the conflict.

The war also demonstrated the lack of locally-based and representative civil society in the North. As the office in Haifa continues to grow as the hub of our northern activities, NIF/SHATIL will soon add another office in the remote northeastern Galilee to assist the many Israelis who feel cut off from assistance and support. New donations will also facilitate a mobile organizing unit — colloquially known as the "SHATIL-mobile" — to foster local activism and provide training to new community leaders.

**An abandoned periphery**

The war exposed an unpleasant truth: Israel's government long ago abandoned the nation's periphery.

Despite years of budget cuts that led to the near collapse of the social support system and increasing gaps between rich and poor, Israelis were still surprised at the government's neglect of the needs of the country's home

front. Many towns and villages lacked bomb shelters or even warning sirens, yes, but what was even more startling was the evident socio-economic gaps between the North's Mizrachim, new immigrants and Israeli Arabs and the prosperous center of the country.

Wartime and post-war provision of shelter, food and other vital necessities for residents of the North were largely initiated and paid for by charities and private individuals. Single mothers, the

elderly, migrant workers and other vulnerable population segments lacked the means to refugee to a safe place and were given no government resources to shelter safely in place.

And, of course, the new focus on northern Israel is raising concern among citizens of Israel's other periphery — the Negev. There, too, education, income, housing and infrastructure lag badly behind — and the budget cuts to social services the government must institute to pay the cost of the war will fall too heavily on families already stretched to the limit.

**The Next Steps**

"As Israeli politicians and generals continue to blame each other for the war's inconclusive results, the New Israel Fund will continue to drive attention to civil rights and social issues," said NIF CEO Larry Garber. "Our 27-year investment in building communities from the ground up is paying off — we are often the first, and sometimes the only, Diaspora-Israel partnership that can work at the grassroots level in underserved places in the North.

"With the continued support of our donors and partners, NIF is determined to prevent another Katrina-like abandonment of Israel's most vulnerable people, in times of war and of relative peace," he added. "The Jewish value of social justice, as well as Israel's long-term survival, mandates that we empower the powerless and strengthen the unheard voices in the North and throughout Israel."

# First Secular Yeshiva Opens

Think of the word “yeshiva.” What picture does that word call to mind?

Most likely you thought of rows of Orthodox men and boys, chanting and swaying over their books.

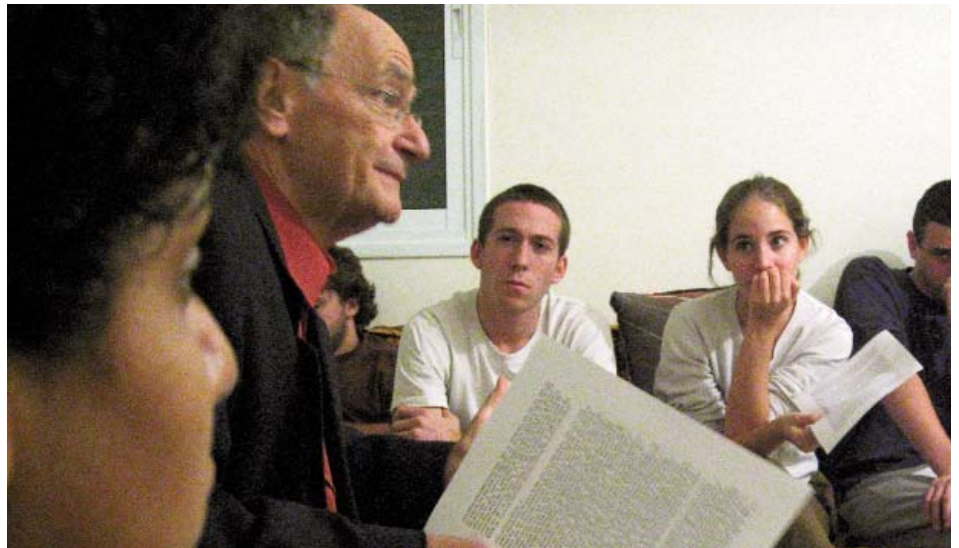
Think again.

The yeshiva is no longer the sole province of the Orthodox. Two months ago, the first Secular Yeshiva opened with 20 teachers and 150 students. Located in the southern Tel Aviv neighborhood of Shapira, a disadvantaged area of the city near the central bus station, the Yeshiva emphasizes the connection between Jewish studies and human rights and social justice. Students live and study in the neighborhood, dividing their time between Jewish texts and social action projects.

NIF is the first funder of this new initiative of grantee BINA: Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture and worked with BINA in the conceptual planning of the project. Yuval Yavneh, who directs NIF’s pluralism programs, describes the Yeshiva as an outgrowth of longer-term trends within the Israeli secular public.

“For the last 15 years there’s been a movement called Returning to Jewish Books, in which people study texts in a pluralistic environment,” he says. “When it started, it was mostly individuals looking to enrich their Jewish identity. It was spontaneous — no one was thinking then in terms of social change.

“There are many secular Israelis who need their own model. They are interested in their Jewish identity. They know about the Conservative and Reform movements but they don’t want them. They don’t want to have the rabbi as the leader. In many aspects they are close to the Reform movement with the importance they place on social justice. But when it comes to learning, praying



**The Secular Yeshiva is attracting young Israelis who want to combine intensive text study with social action.**

or conducting ceremonies, they don’t define themselves as religious but as secular.”

While he admits he doesn’t know how far this movement will go, Yavneh sees it as the possible beginnings of a new stream of Judaism that now must build its own institutions to train leaders, conduct secular weddings and other life cycle events and create a community.

As always, Yavneh adds, NIF is on the cutting edge. “The main reason NIF has now given priority to this is not because it is more important. The Reform and Conservative movements are relatively established. This is a fledgling initiative and no one else was ready to support it yet. NIF was the first funder.”

## A model updated

BINA came to NIF with an idea that grew out of another BINA initiative in which young secular Israelis move to disadvantaged neighborhoods to study and volunteer in the community. BINA Director Eran Baruch and Tal Shaked,

who now heads the Yeshiva, spent two years developing their concept of what a yeshiva would look like modified to suit secular Israelis in their lives today. They visited yeshivot all over Israel, from very Orthodox to less Orthodox and pluralist batei midrash [houses of study]. They came up with a mix of old and new.

“We wanted to take the basic model of young adults coming to study Torah morning until evening in an intensive way,” says Shaked, who left her career as a lawyer after completing a pluralistic leadership development program run by Tehuda, another NIF grantee. “The yeshiva is a spiritual center for them, a place where they go deep inside their culture. They study in hevrutah [pairs], in which each person brings his or her own worlds to the text, something that does not exist in the secular world.”

At the same time, Tal emphasizes that they don’t want their students to be closed up with their books. “It’s a tough neighborhood but we want the people who study there to live there,” she says. She offers a list of projects they have

taken on: tutoring neighborhood kids, teaching classes for seniors, organizing holiday celebrations, gathering the stories of older residents, which they turned into a book. Another project they are launching will award “social kashrut” designation to restaurants that pay minimum wage, treat their employees well and make their places accessible to those with disabilities. And students plan to lead a campaign to persuade the city of Tel Aviv to establish the heavily populated neighborhood’s first high school.

### Study and volunteer where you live

The yeshiva, which has already enrolled young Israelis from all over the country, has several tracks that combine study and volunteering in varying proportions. In one, high school graduates spend a year before entering the army studying three days a week from 8 am to 11 pm and two days doing social action projects. Young people ages 22-25 who have finished the army study two days a week and work, volunteer or study at university the rest of the week. Other students study one day a week. Students from outside Israel are also welcome to enroll. All are encouraged to commit to living in apartments in the neighborhood rented to the Yeshiva for one to two years; over half the students do so, some in groups, others individually.

Gali Fux is spending her year between high school and the army studying at the Yeshiva. She and 15 fellow students have set up a communal living arrangement in three apartments in the same building. She studies Bible, Talmud and Israeli culture and identity.

“I studied Bible in high school but I never touched these texts,” she says. “It was an opportunity for me to know them. I feel that as a secular Israeli I don’t know any of my culture. I look at

Judaism as my culture, not as something to do with laws or belief in God. Judaism is a way of life, which has values, such as social justice, that we can live by.”

Gali feels her studies are already affecting her. “I feel like I’m experiencing things I never read before,” she says enthusiastically. “I’m thinking of the texts in a different way. I feel like I’m changing and developing new ways of looking at life and at how I want to live.”

She also believes deeply in living and participating in her new neighborhood. “Living here is saying we are not

## *Judaism is the common language that will create solidarity among all Israelis*

forgetting these populations. We help with the elders and with kids at risk. We have a community here and we want to be attached to the neighborhood. We are not just coming here and ignoring what’s going on around us.”

### A common language

When asked why the Secular Yeshiva is important at this particular time, Tal Shaked looks to her own life for the answer.

“To create a common language is the way to create solidarity between people,” she says. “I grew up in a very different neighborhood from Shapira. What is the connection between us? Judaism. When we all speak this language it will bring back the solidarity between the different populations in Israel. It will make us strong.”

Interestingly, learning the history and stories of Israel’s chalutzim [pioneers] is a core part of the Yeshiva’s curriculum. By bringing the best of history and Jewish tradition to the service of twenty-first century Israel, the Yeshiva and

its staff and students may just find a workable formula to address some of the country’s most pressing challenges.

“In the Orthodox world, learning is very serious, it’s not a hobby,” says Yuval Yavneh.

“The secular movement doesn’t yet have this core group of people who are very fluent in learning. Unlike Orthodox yeshivot, which are just interested in studying, social action is very important. This group of yeshiva men and women are the core of a new group of leaders who will be able to deal with halachic questions, but for people who aren’t committed to Orthodox halacha.”

And, unlike the Orthodox yeshivot, the Secular Yeshivah will turn out learned graduates who are committed to changing the world.

“We will create talmidei hachamim [wise students] who are committed to social change,” says Yavneh with a chuckle.

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and click on **“News”** and **“Subscribe to NIF News”** to get our e-newsletter every **Tuesday via email.**

# Wisconsin Plan to Undergo Major Changes

Israel's social change movement won a major victory in September in the fight against the MEHALEV plan, an adaptation of the American welfare-to-work program known as the Wisconsin Plan. In September, Minister of Industry, Trade and Labor Eli Yishai announced his acceptance of a ministerial committee's recommendations to overhaul the program and give automatic exemptions to single mothers with children under 12 and workers nearing retirement age.

The two-year Mehalev pilot project involves 14,000 participants in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Hadera and Ashkelon. NIF had serious concerns from the start and gave grantees Commitment for Peace and Social Justice (Mehuyavut) and Community Advocacy — Genesis Israel an emergency grant to monitor the program through Wisconsin Watch. Wisconsin Watch played an important role in exposing the fundamental flaw in the program: The private companies running Mehalev would be paid the same bonus regardless of whether they found participants jobs or dropped them from employment rehabilitation courses, which meant they lost their social support benefits.

Wisconsin Watch has handled hundreds of cases stemming from serious problems with the program: Participants who already had half-time jobs could not attend required workshops given during regular working hours; Russian-speaking immigrants and Arabs lost benefits because they could not comprehend Hebrew-only training materials or conduct job interviews in Hebrew; single mothers, given no options for child care, were forced to choose between taking care of their children and meeting the program's requirements; "community service" assignments that were supposed to be preparation for real jobs often turned out to

be menial work; and the plan made no allowance for differences among Israel's multicultural populations that affected the kinds of work they could accept.

Thanks to pressure from Wisconsin Watch, NIF and other NIF grantees, the Knesset established a joint subcommittee of the Finance and Welfare committees to monitor MEHALEV itself, and the subcommittee's chair appointed Wisconsin Watch's lawyer to work with the program to ensure that appeals procedures were fair and gave sufficient notice before benefits are terminated.

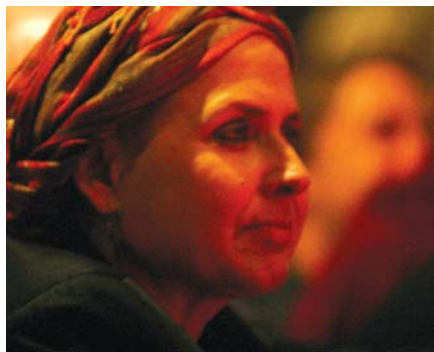
The new modifications to the pro-

gram mean that about 25 percent of the current participants will now be exempt from participation, and others can appeal to a newly-formed independent committee of social workers who will decide their eligibility.

NIF grantees have done a great job in ameliorating much of the arbitrariness of the so-called Wisconsin Plan, pushing it toward a more constructive approach to helping welfare recipients find jobs and making humane decisions about who has a good reason not to participate.

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## In Memory of Alona Vardi (1956 – 2006)



The entire NIF family lost a dear friend in October when Alona Vardi, founder and director of SHATIL's Environmental Justice Project, died after two-year battle with cancer. Alona, worked for SHATIL for the last 17 years and was a central figure in the birth and development of the Israeli environmental movement.

Before coming to SHATIL, Alona was contributing editor at two environmental magazines, curriculum developer for environmental education curricula at the Tel Aviv University School of Education and an instructor and international seminar coordinator for the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). She actually began her career as a nature guide for SPNI and

over the years she grew to be a guide in a broader sense as she inspired many of the leaders of Israel's environmental movement to the cause.

Alona helped to establish Israel's Public Health Coalition at SHATIL and, together with the Green Environment Fund, coordinated the annual Environmental Power Conference for five years running, which transformed Israel's diverse environmental groups into a movement.

"Alona came to SHATIL with the idea of starting an environmental project at a time when no one was even thinking about this in Israel," remembered SHATIL director Rachel Liel. "She inspired us all with her nobility, her wisdom, her sense of humor, her simplicity. We love her and we'll miss her very much -- as a colleague and as a person."



## Crisis Response '06

**Three months after the ceasefire, the New Israel Fund and its grantees and partners are putting programs into place that seek to remedy both the immediate effects of the war on northern Israel, and the years of neglect that created a social and economic backwater in the North.**

The war resulted in \$1 billion in lost productivity and production, \$2.5 billion in unbudgeted military costs, and inevitably will require higher taxes and budget cuts, especially for social services. All NIF's existing advocacy, coalition-building and training programs for social and economic justice take on immediate and critical importance.

Long before the government acknowledged the social and economic problems in the North, the New Israel Fund was working from the top down and the bottom up, investing in social change grantees and coalitions to advocate for

the invisible Israelis. Now, we are working furiously to:

- Empower civil society, social organizations and activists throughout the North by providing intensive and targeted outreach, consultancy and leadership training;
- Ensure the equitable distribution of government and philanthropic resources through the initiation and coordination of a broad-based forum of organizations for monitoring rehabilitation in the North, networking, sharing of information and advocating with government agencies;
- Create partnerships among a broad range of grassroots groups through the training of community workers and directors of community centers in the principles of social change;
- Assist small-businessowners to rebuild their businesses, receive fair

compensation, and market their products and services; and

- Bolster Jewish-Arab cooperation through the initiation of in-depth roundtable discussions, the creation of a model for joint Jewish-Arab living in Haifa, provision of necessary tools for promoting co-existence and foster a climate for workplace dialogue.

Because of NIF's unique role as the leading funder of progressive causes in Israel, social change organizations representing the country's marginalized and vulnerable communities are looking to us for leadership, support and technical assistance.

**Please help us — now, as you consider your end-of-year donations — to continue our important work, and address the new needs of Israel.**

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[www.nif.org/crisis06](http://www.nif.org/crisis06) or 1-888-988-FUND

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