

Judaism *blossoming* in the desert

• BY MICHELLE MALKA GROSSMAN

Is Torah study limited only to the God-fearing? According to BINA, absolutely not. In a country where attitudes toward religion can seem very black and white, BINA and their newest “Secular Yeshiva” in Beersheba is bringing Jewish learning to Jews from all across the religious spectrum.

In the fall of 2015, the Beersheba Secular Yeshiva branch opened and already has 35 people who come to learn on a weekly basis. That’s out of the 200 people in the community already involved with BINA, whether as teens doing a pre-army program or as locals who take part in community and social action events. BINA Beersheba includes people from all backgrounds and beliefs, completely secular to Orthodox and everything in between. They also run a MASA Israel Teaching Fellows program for international Jewish young adults who teach English to local Beduin public school students and study at the yeshiva every week.

“Judaism is not just a religion, but also a culture,” according to Yehuda Golan, a 29-year-old social worker, secular yeshiva student and a new staff member at the Beersheba branch.

Golan said Torah learning is important regardless of background or beliefs because it allows people to better understand themselves. He was inspired to learn at BINA as a result of his own religious upbringing and the desire to extrapolate the beauty he recalled from Jewish texts – in a different way.

He relishes that although BINA’s students fall across the religious and age spectrum, they still come together to learn. Though the Orthodox members of BINA are relatively few, those who attend have an interest in meeting new people and learning a different perspective than what they see elsewhere.

This past semester, topics of study included Shabbat, the Bible, North-African Jewry and the Jewish year and life cycle.

Nir Braudo, head of BINA’s yeshiva programming, said their classes are crucial since a majority of Israelis are secular yet still very connected to their Jewish identity.

The yeshiva, he said, serves those who may not necessarily “believe rabbis should tell them what to do, don’t live a religious life, don’t keep Shabbat in an Orthodox way, but speak Hebrew, live according to the Jewish calendar and feel Jewish.”

Shimon Vaknin, who heads the Beersheba branch, which joins branches in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, said BINA provides the city’s residents with a pluralistic option.

He said Beersheba was chosen over other cities because it has already had a burgeoning pluralistic Jewish community and because BINA had been running various projects in the city for the past eight years. He said the community was already highly involved in volunteer work and interested in becoming empowered through more intensive study of Jewish texts.

“Jewish culture is a rich fabric of many different and connected cultures – Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, Ethiopian and beyond,” said Vaknin. “It includes music, literature, food, values, phi-



STUDENTS OUTSIDE Bina’s new Beersheba branch. (Courtesy)

losophy and so much more.”

It is in that spirit that the yeshiva organizes not only traditional learning activities, but also public events, such as film screenings and Jewish music nights that combine learning with cultural experiences, which have already attracted hundreds of locals. Next year, Vaknin also hopes to launch a special young artists’ “Beit Midrash” to help connect rising local artists to Jewish culture and local Beersheba culture.

Vaknin himself grew up in an observant Moroccan family in the city and found the learning from his traditional upbringing to be incredibly enriching. Although his religious opinions have changed over the past 15 years, his love and appreciation for Jewish wisdom have not. With a doctorate in Bible and Ancient Studies from Ben-Gurion University in hand, he jumped at the chance to work with his home community.

He hopes BINA’s activities can blossom to include even more Jewish cultural events and to eventually have a Beit Midrash that meets on a more regular basis. There, he hopes, BINA will be able to produce its own unique style of “secular Torah scholars” who would go forth and fulfill “the obligation to do good deeds and perform social action.”

From there, he said, Vaknin hopes to help unify the different communities in the city while also strengthening its citizens’ connection to themselves and to the State of Israel.

Golan’s take on the BINA yeshiva experience speaks to a larger development across the country’s population.

“There is more and more variety nowadays. It’s not just secular or religious,” he said. “Something similar is happening across our society and it’s a very good thing.” ♦