



# 'My kids don't speak Hebrew, where can they study?'

A new English-language high school program called Green Village aims to help teenage olim integrate into mainstream Israeli society

"TO INTEGRATE successfully, children need to understand and work within the cultural norms of their new country," says Avi Silverman, Community and Education adviser at Nefesh B'Nefesh.

• By JOANNA PARASZCZUK

Starting a new school is daunting enough for any teenager. For those who have just made aliya, it's even tougher: As well as making new friends, they must learn a new language and navigate a strange culture. Unsurprisingly, some teen olim find it hard to settle at school and can fall short of their academic potential, says educator Lori Bacher from the Kfar Hayarok Youth Village. To help teen olim get a first-class Israeli education post-aliya, Bacher and her colleagues at Kfar Hayarok have developed a new English-language high school program. Kfar Hayarok – "the Green Village" – is an experimental school and youth village just north of Tel Aviv. Established in 1950 as an agricultural boarding school, today's Kfar Hayarok combines a healthy dose of farm and community life, with an emphasis on

academic excellence and hi-tech skills. Its 1,200 students are aged 12-18 and come from a wide mix of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures. Bacher has firsthand experience of being a teenage immigrant in Israel. When she made aliya from the US in 1971, she was enrolled in an Israeli high school – Kfar Hayarok, no less. The experience was tough, but character-building, says Bacher. "I learned to be an independent person here, an engaged member of a community," she relates. "At Kfar Hayarok, I decided that my gift back to the world would be education." After many years of running her own school, Bacher returned to Kfar Hayarok in 2004 to establish Because We Care, a volunteer program for English-speaking adults. Volunteers spend a year on the Kfar, teaching English and working on the farm. So far, a third of participants have made aliya. Now Bacher and Kfar Hayarok want to do more for

English-language education in Israel and for new olim. One of the issues faced by families who make aliya, says Bacher, is how their children will cope, particularly with school. "People were calling me up asking for help," she relates. "They had just arrived on aliya and were saying, 'My kids don't speak Hebrew, where can they go to high school?' I realized that something had to be done to help them." Avi Silverman, Community and Education adviser at aliya organization Nefesh B'Nefesh, described to Metro some of the important issues teens face when they start school in Israel. "Social life, making new friends, fitting in – all these are paramount," says Silverman. "To integrate successfully, children need to understand and work within the cultural norms of their new country, learn how to communicate with their peers in the classroom and playground, read newspaper articles, understand

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Israeli music, and form opinions on important matters." Hebrew is one of the most important considerations both before and after aliya, adds Silverman. The ability to understand Hebrew will help a child cope with what is being taught in class and also communicate with his or her new peers. Bacher agrees that Hebrew is essential, stressing the difficulties some children face when their Hebrew skills are not sufficient to cope with school. The rate at which any new oleh – adult or child – acquires Hebrew depends on many factors; and although schools provide Hebrew classes for new immigrants, slower children or those with disabilities or learning difficulties like dyslexia can struggle to learn a new language. Israeli public school classes are large, often with as many as 40 students in each, and Israeli teachers frequently lack the time or resources to give extra help to struggling immigrants. "Imagine entering a new school when you don't even know the language, having to make friends and study for tough exams," says Bacher. "It's incredibly hard." The Israeli Education Ministry offers new immigrants certain leniencies when taking the *bagrut*, the Israeli high school diploma. "Olim who made aliya aged 15 or over can take the bagrut in English," explains Bacher. "So according to Israeli law, it is possible to run a high school program in English for new olim aged 15-plus." Bacher says that Kfar Hayarok has the infrastructure and drive to offer such an alternative for English-speaking teens struggling to fit into the mainstream Hebrew public school system. "The major factors we took into consideration when we created our program were affordability, accessibility, quality of education and cultural identity," she adds.

THERE IS a small but growing number of schools in Israel that prepare olim for the bagrut in English. Among them are the GMAX Yeshiva High School and Yeshiva Torah Academy in Jerusalem, which cater for religious students, and the Meir Shfeya Youth Village in Zichron Ya'acov, a pluralistic, co-ed high school. All these schools specifically aim to integrate their students into Israeli society. Also offering tuition in English are two American International schools, but these cater mainly for children of expatriates or diplomatic corps staff. Kfar Hayarok's Green Village High School is set to open for its first school year in September. It will run alongside the regular Kfar Hayarok high school, and English-speaking students will use the same facilities and experience the same community programs as



LORI BACHER has firsthand experience of being a teenage immigrant in Israel. The experience was tough but character-building, she says. (Joanna Paraszczuk)

their Hebrew-speaking peers. "Green Village High students will study for a five-point bagrut in Math, Hebrew, English, Bible, Israeli History and Civics," says Bacher. "They can also take electives in a wide range of subjects like computer programming, sciences or the arts." In addition, all students are required to work on the farm for up to three hours each week. Green Village High's aim is not to isolate its English-speaking students, but to help them integrate into mainstream Israeli society. After all, these teens will serve in the IDF, and most will go on to university in Israel. To prepare these new olim for post-high school Israeli life, says Bacher, they need to understand Israeli culture – and for that Hebrew is a must. "Students get five hours of Hebrew classes each week and have the option to take elective classes in Hebrew," she explains. As the English high school operates alongside the regular Hebrew-language school, there are plenty of opportunities for students

on the program to mix with their native Israeli peers. "Each English-speaking student gets assigned a Hebrew-speaking mentor their own age," adds Bacher. "This way, they can make Israeli-born friends and understand Israeli culture from the inside." Silverman sees the growth in the number of English-speaking high school programs as a positive thing for aliya and absorption. "There's a receptiveness in the English-speaking community for these programs," he says. "Schools like GMAX and YTA emphasize integration, and it's good that Kfar Hayarok is joining them." As anyone who has been through it will surely agree, aliya is a tough process. The end result – living in Israel as an Israeli – is a wonderful achievement. For teen olim, the opportunity to get a great Israeli education is a major step toward a fulfilled life here. "It's about giving back academic opportunity to children who might otherwise be lost," Bacher concludes. "This way, we are helping aliya."