

Reforming the Jewish landscape in Tel Aviv

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Pluralism in action: The first two groups hosted by Mishkenot Ruth Daniel center for Progressive Judaism this past Shavuot were secular Sderot families of children with special needs alongside an orthodox youth group. But beyond promoting pluralism, diversity and community building, the newest edifice on Jaffa's Sderot Jerusalem is promising to bring something new and different to the city: Reform Judaism.

Since it opened its doors in late April, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel has also worked hard toward achieving its goal of being more than a center for the Reform movement, rather a unique cultural and educational center, and guesthouse.

Funded in large part by the Daniel family, for whom Beit Daniel - Tel Aviv's first Reform synagogue and community center opened in 1991 that operates 12 pre-schools throughout the city - is also named, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel was named in memory of a woman staunchly dedicated to Reform Judaism with a deep love for the city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.



Ruth Daniel, who passed away on June 22, 2006, and her husband Gerry played a key role in conceptualizing, developing, and implementing the new building, in collaboration with Rabbi Meir Azari of Beit Daniel. Based on the success and popularity of Beit Daniel in North Tel Aviv, the Reform movement decided the time had come to expand their presence in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. According to their mission statement, Beit Daniel, "stands on three pillars: learning, prayer and social justice."

Community leaders decided that while the new building should still strive to promote and uphold these pillars, it should not be another synagogue in the mirror-image of Beit Daniel. Instead, they decided to build a youth hostel-guesthouse to help fill what Azari describes as "a dearth of frameworks for youth in Israel."

Jaffa was selected as the location with the hope of creating a center deeply involved with the diverse local community, as well as promoting tourism, culture, education and religion. According to Azari, "the center was built to promote three main concepts: tourism, Jaffa and its residents, and Reform Judaism."

With 66 high-standard guestrooms, activity rooms, a large event hall and rooftop terrace, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel has the facilities to host a wide variety of events. Guestrooms can serve either as private for couples, families or individuals, or dormitory-style for groups. All rooms have private bathrooms, TV, coffee/tea corner and mini-bar refrigerator. There are also handicapped accessible rooms.

Since opening just a few months ago, the guesthouse has already hosted some 3,000 guests. Mishkenot Ruth Daniel's events hall can hold 350 people and the roof can serve 250. The facility's kosher kitchen is designed to cater for events. Moreover, its terrace has a stunning view over the rooftops of Jaffa and Tel Aviv out to the sea, and down into neighboring Bloomfield stadium. (If you can't get tickets to the game, be sure to check it out from the top of Mishkenot Ruth Daniel.)

The guesthouse is also affiliated with the Israel Youth Hostel Association, and Azari insists that they want most of their guests to be part of organized groups to help facilitate educational and unique experiences, which make full use of the center and its capabilities.

Beyond the physical amenities, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel also offers educational programming focused on Tel Aviv-Jaffa, its history, geography and culture. A sample four-day itinerary includes tours of Jaffa, Neveh Tzedek and central Tel Aviv, creative music and/or photography seminars, the Nahalat Binyamin arts fair and study sessions.

The center wants to design programs to serve Israelis of all ages, faiths and socio-economic statuses, and create programs to attract Diaspora Jews to Tel Aviv-Jaffa - a city where most Diaspora groups spend little time. Azari believes that by offering a space and programmatic options, more Diaspora groups will be drawn to the city and learn to appreciate it as the cultural, intellectual and economic heart of Israel. As a center for Reform Judaism, Azari hopes to tap into the community of 1.5 million Reform Diaspora Jews, most of whom have never visited Israel.

Although the center has not received any funding from the Ministry of Tourism, Azari believes they have found "the right niche and the right direction" that will attract high numbers of tourists to the guesthouse. Moreover, he believes, using the guesthouse as a jumping-off point will bring a greater number of tourists into Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

The decision to build Mishkenot Ruth Daniel in Jaffa was deliberate, as are its efforts to incorporate and serve the local community. The majority of the center's staff are local residents. Mishkenot Ruth Daniel's director, Tzvika Bergman, has many ideas about how the community will be integrated into the center: There are plans to open a kosher dairy café in the first-floor lobby within the next month. Bergman also says that he wants to see the building's spaces used for local artists to display their work.

Furthermore, he wants to see meeting and activity rooms used by local groups, not just visitors, in hopes of becoming a true educational and cultural center of Jaffa. While trying not to step on the toes of existing community centers, Bergman and his staff are working to establish partnerships with local groups and organizations to utilize their facilities. Some groups even sought out the center on their own asking to use the space, such as a Jewish-Muslim women's choir. Other locally-based organizations, such as "Sedaka-Reut: Arab Jewish Youth Partnership," are considering using the center's facilities for their activities.

While the guest house, seminars and programs are fully functional, construction of Mishkenot Ruth Daniel is not yet complete. Finishing touches are still being added to the attractive square in front of the building on Sderot Jerusalem, and there are plans to build a second building which will house a synagogue. However, even without a formal Beit Knesset, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel is equipped with a prayer space and has already held prayer services.

Despite a declared interest in multicultural, multi-faith activities, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel is, in large part, designed to advance the Reform movement in Israel. Also known as the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, Reform Judaism is still small in Israel, but constantly growing. Groups were able to celebrate Shavuot this past May in the building, and they expect to commemorate many other holidays in the future.

As Beit Daniel has grown, pushing the limits of its capacity, Mishkenot Ruth Daniel will provide a natural site for spillover, and its staff hope the center will be used for bar and bat mitzva celebrations, religious learning and other religious activities.

It is too soon to judge the success of Mishkenot Ruth Daniel, as a guest house or a community center. However, if the achievements of its predecessor, Beit Daniel, can be taken as any indication, it is a fair assumption that the future of Mishkenot Ruth Daniel will be a bright one.

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