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How troubled teens become goodwill envoys

Posted By [Abigail Klein Leichman](#) On March 30, 2015 @ 12:00 pm In | [No Comments](#)

Five SAHI clubs at a ceremony before distributing 250 Rosh Hashana food packages to needy Jerusalem families.

Stav was hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting into trouble. And then he joined a neighborhood club, [Sayeret Chesed Yehudit \(SAHI\)](#) – in English, the Special Grace Unit – which empowers disenfranchised Israeli teens by turning them into anonymous goodwill ambassadors.

Through SAHI and its founders, Avraham Hayon and Oded Weiss, Stav became attuned to people in need and how to help them discreetly.

When Stav noticed a boy out in winter in short sleeves, he called Hayon for guidance. Hayon said, “Get his size.” Stav introduced himself and invited the boy to play soccer. Purposely throwing the game, he embraced the boy in a victory hug, surreptitiously noting the size on the tag inside his thin shirt. The next day, Stav left four coats at the boy’s door.

“My mom thinks that ever since I started going to SAHI, I’ve become more mature and I know what it means to give. I’ve started taking my life in my own hands,” says Stav in a video about the work of this voluntary organization, which started with seven teens in Kiryat Gat and now encompasses 400 teenagers in 15 clubs throughout several cities.



In 2009, when Hayon was 31, his father became ill with cancer. During a two-month break between treatments, Hayon took leave from his management job and went to India “to do some yoga and breathe.”

“Just before I came back to Israel, I wrote down all the things I wanted to start changing, and I concluded that in the end the only things that stay with you are the things you give. I wanted to give part of my life to the community, but I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do.”

That very day, a friend emailed him about Oded Weiss, an experienced youth counselor who had founded the Netina K’Derech Chaim (Giving as a Way of Life) Association in 2007 and was seeking help to empower youth at risk in Kiryat Gat, a southern development town.

“I felt it was coming from karma, or from God; it was very mystical,” Hayon tells ISRAEL21c.

When the two men met, Weiss related that over the past two decades he had discovered that the best way to assist troubled teens was to teach them how to give to others and thereby recognize their self-worth.

"I really liked that idea," says Hayon.

In July 2009, Weiss and Hayon brought a tea kettle and some pillows to a parking lot in a crime-ridden neighborhood of Kiryat Gat. As night fell, they made a bonfire, steamed herbal tea and waited. Slowly, teenagers started arriving.

"While we were sitting around our campfire, we raised the issue of giving food to local people in need. The kids from the neighborhood knew better than anybody who was in need and were excited to be involved in distributing the food," Hayon recalls. "From finding food for one family a week, our project has grown to giving to hundreds of families across Israel."

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, center, with SAHI members. Oded Weiss is fourth from right, next to Barkat; Avraham Hayon is third from right.

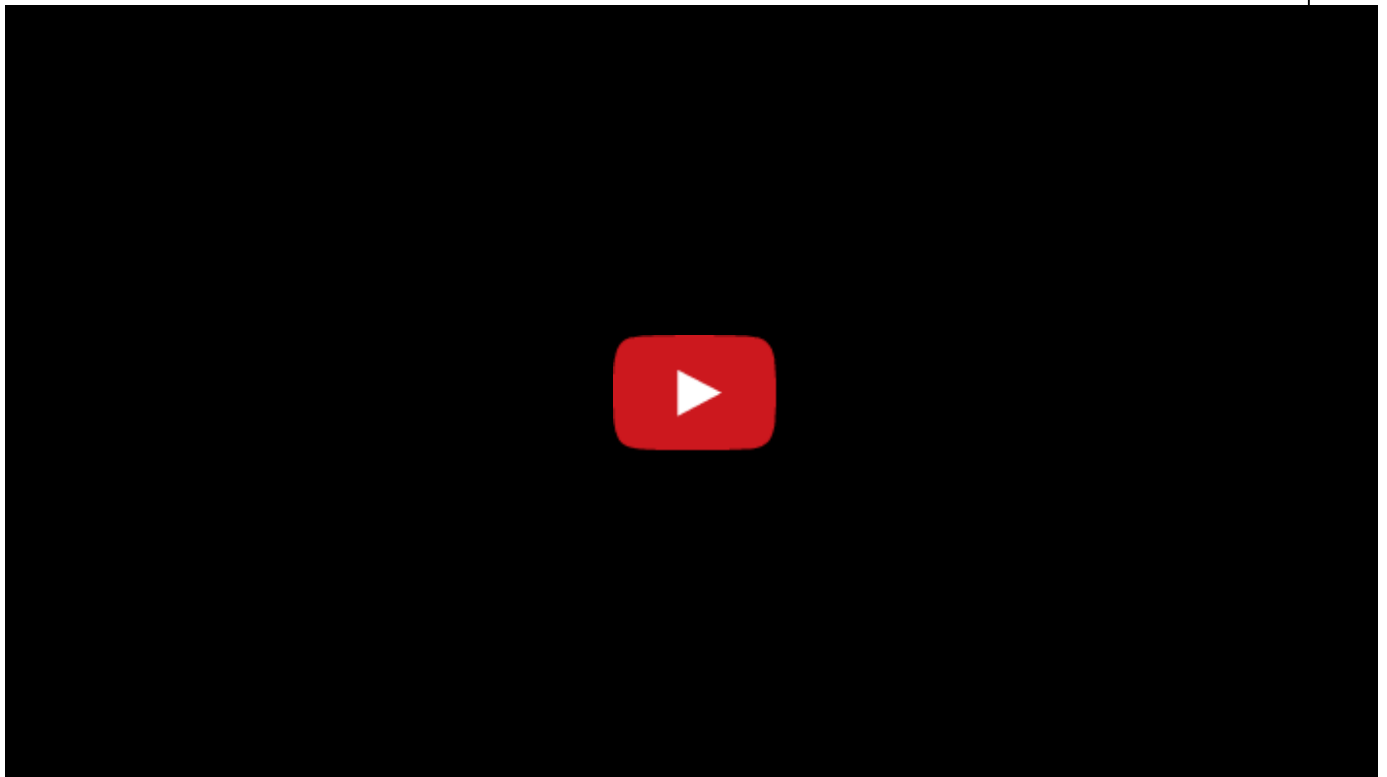
The food distribution, carried out in cooperation with national poverty-fighting organization Latet and other NGOs, is carefully organized. Four teenagers and one adult volunteer do the shopping; another team organizes the food and delivers to the recipient's door. They knock and then leave quickly, so as not to embarrass the family and to remain anonymous.

"When I bring a crate of food up to some family, I have shivers all over. I feel I'm doing the biggest, kindest act in the world," says one SAHI member.

The weekly food distribution stops for nothing – not snow in Jerusalem, not missiles from Gaza.

However, SAHI youth do much more. They help people with disabilities, the elderly, the downtrodden and Holocaust survivors with shopping, chores and home repairs. They visit hospitals and nursing homes. If they see someone scavenging in a dumpster, they'll follow the person home and make a note of the address.

"What we teach them is to open their eyes to anyone who needs help in the community," says Hayon. "When you're part of SAHI you're on a mission all the time. If you see another kid in school sitting alone at recess, you need to go and talk to him and make sure he's okay, maybe invite him to join your group of friends."



This simple approach seems to work wonders.

"Before we were in SAHI we would sit around, messing things up, harassing the neighbors, making noise, burning stuff, wrecking the neighborhood, writing on walls. We were bored. Today all I think about is helping my neighbors," says one SAHI participant.

When Hayon's father passed away in 2010, he decided to honor his father's memory by forming a SAHI group in Jerusalem, the city where the Hayons have lived for seven generations.

Now there are five Jerusalem clubs and two more are opening soon in cooperation with the municipality. Each city where SAHI operates pays the salaries of SAHI counselors; local adult volunteers also participate. The remainder of the operating budget comes from donations from individuals and foundations such as the Good People Fund and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

Seven SAHI groups are active in and around Kiryat Gat. There are groups in Ashkelon and Petah Tikva, and next in Rehovot, Bat Yam, Lod and Tel Aviv. "We have a big vision to have SAHI in every neighborhood in Israel," says Hayon.

This SAHI club meets in an immigrant absorption center.

In response to requests from mayors, next year Hayon expects to adapt the SAHI model for Arab communities.

"Because our program is based very much on Jewish values and lifecycle, we'll research verses from Koran about giving and helping, and will adjust it to their needs," he says.

SAHI also is running a successful pilot group in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem and plans to open another.

Two offshoot projects recently kicked off: SAHI Golani, which takes 18-year-olds the army initially rejected and works to qualify them for the Golani brigade; and GPS (Girl Power SAHI), focused on issues specifically affecting female teens in the neighborhoods where SAHI is active.

An initiative called Palmach is aimed at stepping up altruistic activities in times of emergency such as last summer's war, when Hayon and other SAHI leaders were called up to the reserves. Teens showing great promise are enrolled in SAHI's Young Leaders course.

Until last year, Hayon personally led the first Kiryat Gat group. A grant from the US-based [Good People Fund](#) enabled him to become SAHI's CEO and to hire Kiryat Gat native Yohai Buhbutas area coordinator for the South. Hayon's army buddy Ronen Cohen, who has a doctorate in education, heads training and Weiss handles program development.

Though Hayon now guides SAHI from behind a desk, "My energy is always coming from the field, so I go once or twice a week to meet with the children," he says. "I feel very lucky because I'm doing the thing I want to do the most."

For more information, click [here](#).

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