



A ONE-STOP JEWISH LEARNING CENTRE

THE VISION IS NOT THE HORIZON, ITS BEYOND

At the scenic lookout overlooking the entrance to Jerusalem's German Colony are the words of **Yehuda Amichai**, considered to be Israel's greatest modern poet: "*Jerusalem is a port city on the shore of eternity.*"

If man's journey through time would be incomplete without 'docking' in Jerusalem, then so too would such a visit be incomplete without a walk through its German Colony (*HaMoshava HaGermanit*). Probably the trendiest area of Jerusalem with its picturesque old refurbished homes nestled in leafy lanes, old historical buildings, and a main street lined with boutique shops, res-

taurants and cafés, now add comprehensive community Torah study for English-speakers which is flourishing at the **Emek Learning Center** in Emek Refaim, the *Moshava's* main street.

Opened in March 2013, the centre is headed by **Rabbi Steven (Shalom) Myers**, together with **Rabbi Azara Berzon**. Steven is formerly of Cape Town where he was the Reverent of Rondebosch and Parow synagogues, a *Chazan* at the Claremont shul, a chaplain in the South African army, as well as practicing as a qualified accountant. While today *Chareidi*, Steven had three sons serving in the IDF and his wife Lynne, also from Cape Town, is a practicing architect. Lynne and Steven

have known each other since "Bnei Akiva days in Cape Town," and today have eleven children, while the number of their grandchildren is still 'a work in progress'.

Following Aliyah in 1985 with his then much smaller family, Steven attained Smichas, taught at Yeshiva Or Sameach in Jerusalem, ran a *Kollel* in the evenings which included training students for the Rabbinate, and was the accountant for many years for 35 *Amutot* (Registered charitable organizations). Trained for the temporal world with a lifelong passion for the spiritual – "I was born in a shul" – Steven's journey has been one of absorbing and processing experiences along the way that "has served as my GPS" directing him precisely to his present destination – heading the **Emek Learning Center**.

"I have been preparing my whole life for this job. Everything that I have done to this point has prepared me – even *shofar* blowing." "*Shofar* blowing?" "It's a talent I perfected from blowing the bugle in cadets at school."

GENESIS

What was the impetus for such a center offering Torah Learning, *Tefilla* (prayer), and *Avodat Hashem* (Divine Service) in an area more familiar with attracting folk for cappuccino, latte and "the best bagels and lox in town"?

"On the contrary, we are not out of place but an enriching addition to the town's tapestry of life. If there is an attractive smorgasbord of offerings, are we not adding a healthy addition to the menu of life?" asks Steven.

More specifically, a local South African resident who shies away from publicity and felt there was a need to cater for the growing community of English-speakers, provided the seed money to get the project moving. Well "move" it has as evidenced by the swelling numbers of local residents, students, lone soldiers and visitors from abroad that are attending services, *shuirim*, lectures, students studying for the rabbinic examinations, intense Torah studies, and women's classes.

All who attend testify to "the wonderful, warm and enriching atmosphere." What's more – local residents no longer need to seek *shuls* culturally 'closer to home' *outside* the German Colony – it's virtually on their doorstep.

However there are other issues. "We are more than a shul, we are a learning centre; our emphasis is on learning and growing which is not the norm at a regular *shul*. The regular *shul* is a place of prayer with a little learning." Steven uses the word "growing" frequently to emphasize the gravitas of personal development.

So how does it differ from a Kollel?

"While at a Kollel scholars learn primarily for themselves, here they learn with the added purpose of imparting their knowledge onto others." Using accounting parlance, "*the bottom line* is to enrich participants who can make a difference both in Israel and abroad."

Steven advocates "Scholar Empowerment" – to offer the tools to a growing army of "scholar soldiers in the deepest sense of *Hasbarah*. It is not only that today we need to explain Israel's case – important as this is – but also to explain what it is and means to be a Jew. What is the commitment of being a Jew in the world today? These issues are no less vital existentially and we at Emek Learning Center are playing our part."

With this aim, there are a number of programmes catering for either individuals or groups. The 'Executive Programme', offers a one-to-one enriching learning

experience, "where doctors, lawyers, financiers, psychiatrists, people in hi-tech come here from abroad for a two-week intense programme. Most of them have had some formal Jewish education but not all of them. It's like an infusion and we are already seeing that these participants will return periodically. Most important, is that these people will then impact upon others in the Diaspora in the battle for Jewish continuity."

In the same vein is the 'Rabbinical Leadership Training Programme' – a "finishing school for rabbis." As Steven explains: "These are young rabbis in the twenties and early thirties and they may have millions of gigabytes of raw data but to be affective rabbis, they need to know how to impart it, how to present it to people. We are providing them with the tools."

On the question of being prepared, Steven recalls when as army chaplain in the SADF the Christian chaplain was suddenly unable to deliver his weekly sermon to the men on parade and "suddenly, I was called upon to fill in". "I'm the Jewish chaplain," I answered, "besides I'm unprepared." "*Maak nie saak nie,*

Rabbi Steven Myers and Rabbi Azara Berzon standing outside the Emek Learning Center in the German Colony, Jerusalem.



Myers (makes no difference), proceed," barked his superior.

Officer Myers looked out at the sea of men standing before him, and the words flowed. Afterwards, the officer congratulated him on the most inspiring sermon he had ever heard and his stature in the military henceforth was rock solid. "The point is," Steven asserts, "You need to be prepared not only with knowledge but the confidence to impart that knowledge when you might least be expected to."

So far there are ten rabbis enrolled in this programme, four with secular degrees, and "who all plan to practice as rabbis, teachers or educators."

How have the local secular residents taken to your presence?

"We are good neighbours. Everything one does, especially if one wears a Kipah, you have to always be aware that you are making a sanctification of G-d's name and not a desecration. We are not foreigners but *Am Yisrael* – an integral part of civil society. We say the *tefillah* (prayer) *LeShlom Ha'Medinah* (for the State of Israel), the *tefillah* for our soldiers and missing soldiers, and are fully bound up with all that is happening in Israel and the Jewish world but our main aim is to educate people about their Judaism – *Torah, Mitzvot* and to widen the concentric circles of influence."

On the first night of Succot, the **Emek Learning Center** hosted 25 Lone Soldiers in their Succah. While a Succah represents a temporary shelter, the Center today exudes permanence – an enriching addition "on the shore of eternity." •

ALL ARE WELCOME

THE EMEK LEARNING CENTER, LOCATED IN THE HEART OF THE GERMAN COLONY ON EMEK REFA'IM STREET, SEEKS TO BUILD A WARM AND CARING COMMUNITY FOR THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING RESIDENTS OF BAKA, KATAMON, AND BEYOND.

"THE DAILY AND WEEKLY SCHEDULE WHICH INCLUDES SHIURIM FOR MEN AND WOMEN, GUEST SPEAKERS, AND TEFILLA, OFFERS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE, REGARDLESS OF EXPERIENCE OR LEVEL OF EXPOSURE TO TORAH LEARNING.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CALL RABBI STEVEN MYERS AT: 054 8435007 AND/OR VISIT WEBSITE AT: WWW.EMEKLEARNINGCENTER.COM