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Connecting with the Israel not found on a postcard



The author discovering Israel all over again.

By JENNA COHEN

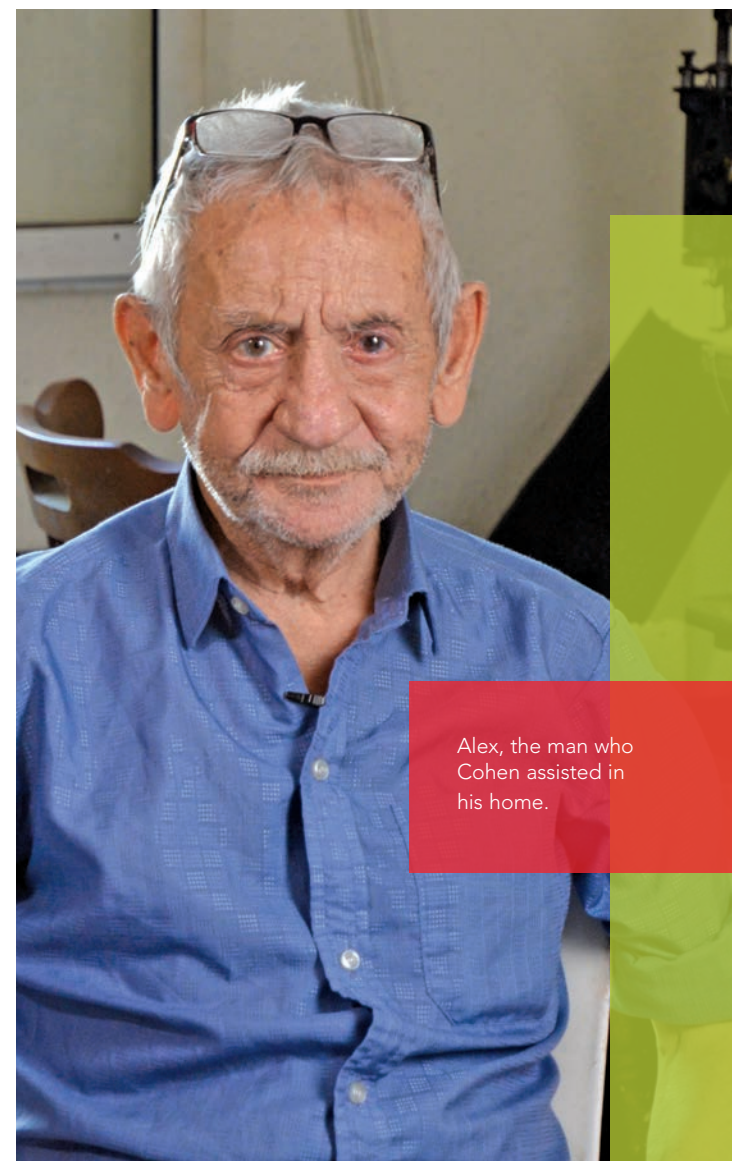
WHERE I LIVE in South Tel Aviv, crumbling facades and rundown buildings are just as numerous as the chic bars and modern storefronts that one typically associates with the city. Appearance-wise, it makes sense that Birthright, a program designed to entice young Jews to come to Israel, would skip my neighborhood.

South Tel Aviv is poor. Daily life is more of a visible struggle here. There are more beggars on the street, more prematurely weathered hands digging through the trash to find their next meal. There are people in need here—Jews in need—and it's not a pretty or an easy thing to see, but it's something we need to see. I had already been to Israel once before, but I knew there was another side to Israel that I needed to experience in order to truly love and understand a country that had come to mean so much to me. So, four years after I first set foot on Israeli soil,

I'm back as a "Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa" participant, working to aid and embrace "The White City" in whatever way I can.

Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa is both an educational and an experiential program. Participants divide their time between studying Hebrew, Jewish texts, art, and history (among other subjects), and volunteering/interning for social action and coexistence programs in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Such programs include (but are not limited to) afterschool tutoring programs for at-risk youth, volunteering at safe houses LGBT teens, and leading integrated acting classes for Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and African teens. It's exhausting work, but each night, my remarkable peers return home smiling with the knowledge that they made a difference for someone that day.

The work I do is a little less hands-on day-to-day. I work as an intern at Latet Israeli Humanitarian Aid, which provides aid to Holocaust survivors and families in need across Israel. I work in Latet's Development and Community Relations Office, where two of my fellow interns and I work on English-language grants, marketing materials,



Alex, the man who Cohen assisted in his home.

and international outreach. Most days, our work at the Latet office is meaningful but not terribly glamorous. However, recently, I had the extraordinary treat of going to visit one of the Holocaust survivors who benefits from Latet's services.

Alex is a wiry gentleman in his 80s with faded Russian military tattoos on his hands and the gruff voice of a man who has smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for several decades. Most of the food on his kitchen shelves is canned or boxed—having come from Latet's supplementary food packages and yearly food drives. His living room doubles as a bedroom in order to make space for the cobbler shop that Alex runs out of his apartment. On the day of my visit, Latet was installing kitchen shelves, a new armoire and safety railings in Al-

ex's home—a service Latet offers to Holocaust survivors who need extra aid and spend a lot of time alone. I was there to photograph the renovations, but all I could see through my camera lens was Alex and the quiet pleasure that filled his eyes each time a new piece was installed in his home. As soon as the kitchen shelf was installed, Alex began piling it with food; when the new armoire was finished, he immediately pulled clothes off the chair that had acted as his dresser and began purposefully placing them inside. When the shower railings were finished, he practiced getting in and out, clearly grateful not to have to use an old plastic strap to steady himself anymore.

It took several hours to build and install all of the additions to Alex's home, but to me, the entire experience seemed to pass in a matter of minutes. As the handymen hammered and nailed away in the background, Alex gathered us on the couch of his living room/ bedroom and told us the story of his life. And while I only understood a fraction of Alex's accented Hebrew, I felt a strong connection to him by the end of the afternoon; I didn't need language to understand his soul. I left that day with a renewed vigor for my work at Latet, having seen with my

own eyes the good that hours of work behind a winking computer screen can do. My efforts not only meant something, they brought about positive change that I got to see with my very own eyes.

Working at Latet and meeting people like Alex are experiences that have reshaped—and continue to reshape—my vision of Israel. Before Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, I thought I knew Israel. But looking back, I see now that knowledge of Israel was limited to the famous places that one finds on a postcard like the Old City and the Dead Sea. However, after two-and-a-half months of working and living with the people of South Tel Aviv, I have richer experiences to write home about.

I can't believe my good fortune to be a part of this amazing program and the profundity of the experiences I'm having. I have never felt so close to Israel and the Jewish people as I feel right now.

This article first appeared in the Beit Daniel News Letter. ■

Jenna Cohen, from Skokie, is a participant on the Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa program under Masa Israel Journey, which provides 2- to 12-month programs for young adults from all over the world. A Graduate of Knox College, Cohen is interning at Latet Israeli Humanitarian Aid and volunteering at Etgarim, an organization that promotes outdoor activities and educational programming for individuals with special needs.



Tikkun Olam participants on Thanksgiving.



Tikkun Olam participants watch the sunrise and take in the view after night hike in the Negev.



Ta'am Yisrael, in 17th year, travels to Israel in February

TA'AM YISRAEL: A Taste of Israel, a program of the Community Foundation for Jewish Education, is an eighth grade Israel experience designed to deliver a meaningful taste of Israel—the people, the land, and our heritage—through a weeklong, interactive, and fun experience Feb. 7-15. The trip's 17th year will be filled with almost 180 participants from across the Chicago area, including 30 different congregations and communities.

Participants will experience the joys of being Jewish with new Chicagoland friends, interact with Israeli peers, and learn from experienced educators and from each other. They will explore their own Jewish identities and spend a week visiting the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Israel.

This year's trip includes a "Choose your own Israel Adventure" Day, where participants will spend a day with eighth-graders from JUF's Partnership community of Kiryat Gat, Lachish, and Shafir, exploring an Israel that matches their interest. Choices include sports, fine arts, culinary arts, science and technology, history and politics, and nature and the environment. ■

Ta'am Yisrael is a program of the Community Foundation for Jewish Education, a supporting foundation of the Jewish United Fund and JUF's department of Jewish Education. To learn more, visit www.taamyisrael.org.