Agents of Social Change in Israel

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Tamar Zaken is the Director of Development of Memizrach Shemesh. This article appears in issue 7 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Rabbi Chaim Meimran, born and raised in Kiryat Gat, sees himself as an agent of social change within his community and within Israeli society. He is the founder of the *Social Yeshiva High School* in Kiryat Gat and after two years of study in the Merhav-Rabbinic Leadership for Social Change program at Memizrach Shemesh, he decided to introduce a Social Justice curriculum and rewrite the mission of the school to include an emphasis on the Jewish social values of solidarity and justice. These changes to the school are especially important in Rabbi Meimran's community where poverty and social inequalities are prevalent. Rabbi Meimran enjoyed his experience in the Merhav program. "Studying at Memizrach Shemesh made me look at my role as a Rabbi through a different prism; I understand now the important responsibility I have towards my community."

Rabbi Memiran is one of many Israelis who have been inspired by Memizrach Shemesh, the Center for Jewish Social Leadership based in Jerusalem. Since 2000, Memizrach Shemesh has promoted a language of Jewish social responsibility in Israel. The Center, inspired by Mizrachi and Sephardi Jewish experience, philosophy and commentaries, trains social activists and fosters leadership that is committed to the Jewish values of social responsibility and community action. The aim of the Center is to strengthen a Jewish identity in Israel that emphasizes social values; by placing these values of communal responsibility and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) at the center of Jewish identity, Memizrach Shemesh graduates will work to mitigate social gaps and at the same time reduce ideological polarization within Israeli society.

Eli Bareket, Executive Director of Memizrach Shemesh, says that this emphasis on social values is imperative for the future of Israel. "The work we do can have a significant effect on the way Israeli society deals with social challenges like poverty and inequality; we have the opportunity to make a change using Jewish text study as our tool."

The learning methods employed at Memizrach Shemesh are based on individual journeys and the use of personal stories in a Beit Midrash setting. Memizrach Shemesh participants meet weekly to study Jewish texts relating to social issues such as poverty, racism, inequality, education policy, community organizing and empowerment. Each session begins on a personal note, followed by Jewish text study and ending with a current event related to the social issue learned. The center initiates programming for rabbis, youth, students, educators, parents and activists. Many Memizrach Shemesh alumnae continue on to become leaders within their communities: on campus, in Israel's geographic or economic periphery and in the Israeli public school system.

The Center's curriculum puts a special emphasis on Jewish texts, commentaries and responsa of Sephardic Rabbis. The philosophy and writings of these Rabbis are significant, because of their dynamic and fruitful encounter with modernity and assimilation, an encounter that was drastically different than the strict dichotomy between religious and secular that was evident in Ashkenazi Jewish communities following the Emancipation in Europe. This tolerant and inclusive Judaism has a lot to contribute to Israeli society today. The tools these rabbis used to deal with the challenges of assimilation and social conflicts within their communities can serve as a guide for Israeli society and Jewish life in the 21st Century.

Memizrach Shemesh recognizes the increased need for Jewish social justice learning in Israeli society today. Every year the Israeli Social Security Authority announces that there are more and more families living under the poverty line. Also, there are growing ideological gaps between religious and secular Jews. If more Israelis connect to the idea that the guiding principles of Judaism are those of solidarity and justice, Israeli society can be unified and strengthened. With the help of Rabbi Meimran, his colleagues and many other Memizrach Shemesh alumnae, we envision a future of peace, unity and strength in the State of Israel.

For more info on Memizrach Shemesh, the Center for Jewish Social Leadership in Jerusalem , visit www.mizrach.org.il