



Our Challenges and Needs

Dear Friends,

As promised, though somewhat belatedly, I am sending you background materials about Kehilat Hakerem and its challenges and needs.

Our rabbi, Reuven Resnick, will be visiting your synagogue shortly, during which he will be participating in various synagogue activities.

Despite the cost of sending him on this mission, we want to increase our connection with your community, because it is important – for both sides – that we maintain good relations with Diaspora communities.

It is important that your community understand the importance of what we are doing here and the challenges we face, and it is important for our community to know that we are understood and supported by those who we feel we represent.



So let me tell you a little about all the things we are doing and how we are doing it.

First of all, Kehilat Hakerem has been active in the City of Karmiel now for 30 years – we just marked our 30th anniversary this past Rosh Hashanah. Karmiel is a "new town" located about 45 minutes northeast of Haifa that was established in 1964 with the intention of absorbing Jewish immigrants ("olim").

What began as a small group of English-speaking olim attempting to

establish a pluralistic and conservative prayer group has blossomed into a culturally diverse community that is also home for Spanish-speaking olim from Latin and South America, Russian olim and, most recently, native Israelis who are seeking ways to reconnect with Jewish observance that reflect their own lifestyles and beliefs. We are a member congregation of the Masorti movement in Israel.

In trying to cater to such a diverse group of people, and in addition to our regular schedule of Shabbat and holiday prayer and observances, Kehilat Hakerem has been holding regular weekly study sessions in all four languages, led by our rabbi and members of our community for more than 10 years.



This experience in Jewish learning has made the transition to the next phase easier – this year, we began a joint project with the **Schechter Institute for Jewish Studies** in Jerusalem to set up a Beit Midrash – *Midreshet Hakerem*. We began this fall with the first of a series of courses and lectures. In addition to continuing with the weekly Friday morning course in Russian, we are now offering courses in Hebrew and Spanish, and will begin a new course in English beginning in January. These courses, taught by our rabbi and senior lecturers, will bring our study offerings to a much higher level and, with the backing of the Schechter Institute, will allow us to reach a much broader audience in Karmiel and the region.



In addition to these courses, we have also begun a series of special lectures and study sessions. Our first kickoff lecture was in May, when we hosted the well-known Israeli author Yochi Brandes, who challenged the audience with her own special feminist interpretation of the Book of Ruth. We are now making plans for a series of panels during this year that will deal with subjects that have

contemporary relevance such as relations between Masorti Judaism and orthodoxy in Israel and the connection between Judaism and environmentalism.

While on the subject of special lectures, it should be mentioned that we hosted an *Interfaith Panel* early in November at the Rabbi's initiative that featured religious leaders from our area from the Muslim, Christian and Druze faiths, as well as representatives of the Orthodox and Reform streams in Karmiel. As far as we know, this was the first attempt to bring about an interfaith dialogue among religious leaders in the region. The very act of bringing these leaders together was a first and successful attempt at bringing down barriers between these various communities.





Beyond this, we also see our role as reaching out to various population groups in the city and region. Rabbi Resnick and his wife Shulamit, who are both fluent in Russian, have been active in reaching out to the very large Russian population in Karmiel. Among other things, we have sponsored special Russian-language High Holiday services for the last two years led by Shulamit. These services were held in parallel with our own High Holiday services and were attended by Russian olim who would otherwise probably never enter into a synagogue. This year, in cooperation with the Immigration Department of the Municipality of Karmiel, the rabbi has also begun to lead a special Erev Shabbat service for elderly Russian olim once a month in one of the outlying neighborhoods of Karmiel.



We have also been active for several years now in the local schools through the TALI program. This program, which has strong ties with the Masorti movement in Israel, is designed to introduce Jewish observance and Jewish values in the nominally secular school system. This is an ongoing program, which frequently brings new interest in our synagogue, particularly among native Israeli families, some of whom have held Bar Mitzvahs at Kehilat Hakerem and subsequently

joined us following their initial contact with the TALI program.

In this regard, we should also mention our ongoing bar mitzvah program. Beyond the bar and bat mitzvah events celebrated by our long-time member families, we have been supporting an active bar mitzvah program that brings in families from Karmiel and the region.

This program, managed by our part-time bar mitzvah teacher, Robert Sasportas, often brings families into our synagogue for the first time, and frequently brings in guests who are in a synagogue for the first time in their lives. We hold about 25 bar mitzvah ceremonies each year and, notwithstanding the burden it sometimes places on our volunteer staff, we see this work as key to our mission.





We recently began work with the Nefesh BNefesh organization, which has taken on the role from the Jewish Agency of bringing North American olim to Israel. Nefesh BNefesh has initiated and funded a special program *Go North*, which is designed to encourage olim families to move to Northern Israel. We are working with them to improve services to all olim coming to our area. Among other things, we will be hosting an employment workshop for olim this December.

Our new building addition

All of this, as you probably know, is also taking place on the background of the construction of our new building addition. I can report to you now that the addition is substantially finished and that we will begin to use it in the coming weeks.

This new addition, funded primarily by Morris Spitzer of New York, following up on his original donation of our sanctuary, will enable us to be much more flexible in our activity scheduling and range of offerings. The principal space in the new building is the Beit Midrash Room, which will also be used as a secondary sanctuary, lecture hall and children's play area during services. The new large kitchen and spacious entry hall will make it possible for us to hold catered indoor events. In good weather, the entry hall will connect with a large garden area, tripling its size.



Bringing the project to its current state with the limited resources at our disposal was and continues to be a great challenge. Most of the finish work has been completed, and lighting and bathrooms are installed. It is in a usable state, but there are still a number of substantial items to be completed.

More than its impact on the community and its ability to provide for its own needs, the building addition represents a significant leap in our ability to reach out and provide the needs of a much wider audience. We hope it will also enable us to be more self-supporting by providing a venue for other groups and individuals seeking to rent space at times when it is not otherwise occupied by community events.

Our goals

I purposely began this letter with the heading “our challenges and needs”, with the intention being to the challenges that our community faces, together with Conservative Judaism in the US.



The work that we are doing today can provide the basis for the growth of Masorti Judaism in Israel, far beyond what it is today, providing an answer to many of the ills of Israeli society. I say “can”, because it is certainly not assured. Here, we face many pressures – unrelenting hostility from the Orthodox establishment, which fears inroads on their hegemony and power, as well as financial pressures – on the one hand, we do not receive support from the state and must compete with recognized Orthodox institutions, while on the other hand, people in Israel are simply not used to the idea of financially supporting religious institutions as is the case in the US and elsewhere.

We have been doing all this based on a single full time employee – our rabbi – and our part-time bar mitzvah teacher. This year, the Schechter Institute has agreed to fund a quarter-time lecturer/coordinator for the Beit Midrash. Other than cleaning services, all of our other programs and activities are performed by volunteers.

Let me be clear – we could be satisfied with being a small shul, catering to a limited membership on the fringes of Israeli society. But we have the opportunity of being something more, much more. Today, Israelis are seeking to explore and express their Jewishness in ways that are relevant to their lives. Most polls show that a vast majority of nominally secular Israelis – much like American Jews – share values that are common to ours – values of religious pluralism, gender equality and adherence to traditional Jewish observance. At the same time, the vast majority of Russian olim, not having been able to experience or learn such values in the former Soviet Union, are only now being given the opportunity to be exposed to them. Together with the current wave of immigration from North America and the continuing immigration from South America, our potential impact is great.

Rabbi Resnick will be visiting your community and focusing his attention on creating bridges with your congregation. You will undoubtedly hear more about this when you meet him.

We look forward to strengthening our ties with your community. I hope you will work with us in order to meet these goals and objectives.

Best regards

Don Jacobson, President
Kehilat Hakerem Karmiel

