

THEY ANSWERED THE CALL

## Yoel Berman

Kiryat Sefer, Israel

Making the dream of living in Eretz Yisrael attainable for every chareidi family

By Devorah Druxman

### Here to Stay



**T**wenty years ago, when an idealistic Yoel Berman and his wife first settled in the Brachfeld neighborhood of Kiryat Sefer, he noticed a disturbing pattern among many of his fellow *avreichim*: the constant presence of moving sale notices on *yeshivah* bulletin boards, testifying to yet another young family facing a lack of prospects and making the difficult decision to leave the country. Life in Israel for the long term felt unsustainable. Many felt the crush of financial pressure—meager livelihoods and the rising cost of living. Many others felt unable to adjust, whether to Israeli culture, the style of *shul*, the *chinuch* or neighbors they could

relate to. Many missed the close *kehillah* feeling they had grown up with. Usually, it was a combination of all these factors, along with a lack of knowledge and resources, that stopped them from making the dream of living in Eretz Yisrael a long-term reality.

Yoel expressed how deeply this upset him. He was born in Los Angeles to Israeli parents. Though he grew up in LA, geographically distant from the Holy Land, his mother tongue was Hebrew; he learned English at school. He read books about the immigration to Eretz Yisrael by the *talmidim* of the Baal Shem Tov and the Gra in the late 18th century.

He read of their sacrifice and the idealism, and he was especially inspired by Rav Yisrael Ashkenazi of Shklov, who

led the third wave of immigration of the *talmidim* of the Gra. This *tzaddik* suffered tragic personal losses, as did many of his fellow immigrants, due to hunger, plague, marauders and earthquakes. Rav Yisrael lost everyone in his family except for a daughter. Yet he kept his post faithfully. “Never in his memoirs did he express regret for having made his move,” said Yoel. “I read of these unwavering men of Torah who immersed themselves in aiding and recovering communities and would not desert the land. This made a powerful impression on me and gave me a vision for the future.” At age 19, Yoel returned to Israel to learn in the *Mir yeshivah*, and he never left.

With Yoel’s historical perspective, he could not bear the thought of *chareidi*



On a visit to Harish. L-R: Shlomo Levin, Yonatan Sayag and Yoel Berman.

families unable to find a way to make their lives in Israel permanent. In 2011, he made it his mission to help English-speaking *chareidi* families hold onto their dream of living and thriving in Israel. Laser focused on his goal, he decided to create an information and guidance base that would include accessible data and knowledgeable contacts to advise them. He describes the transformation from concept to actuality as “puzzle pieces coming together with incredible *hashgachah pratis*.”

Although he had only minimal information at the start, Yoel pushed ahead and began networking. He brainstormed with a few Israeli *askanim* (first and foremost, Nosson Rosenblat), as well as *rabbanim*, who were already helping Israeli *chareidim* in similar straits, and then with other like-minded Americans. Creating a spreadsheet with the features of each potential location, over a dozen locations were whittled down to two promising cities in the north where communities could be grown (with Tzfas, Teveriah and Meron already familiar destinations for *chareidim*, the north held the best prospects). The project was named Avira D'Eretz Yisrael.

The first was Afula, which had a few neighborhoods with small *frum* communities of *chasidim*, *Ashkenazim* and *Sefardim*. The small population made for a diverse yet cohesive mix. Yoel realized that the recent establishment of a new *yeshivah gedolah* there (an offshoot of Nachlas HaLevi'im in Haifa) would be a draw, as would the reasonably priced neighborhood of Givat Hamoreh, near where the *yeshivah* was located.

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zt"l, had advised the founder of the Israeli neighborhood there of how to make it work: “A *yeshivah* needs a *kehillah*, and a *kehillah* needs a *yeshivah*.” These words were both advice and a *brachah* to assure successful growth and permanence to the area. So would the development of the local Afula *cheder* and the founding of a Bais Yaakov for the girls. Most importantly, with some English-speaking leadership there as well, interested Americans had potential.

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English said, “If you’re interested in affordable living in a *chareidi* location outside the city, join us for a meeting.” That meeting, held in a *bachur’s* modest apartment, lit a spark that caught and spread with tremendous *syata dishmaya*.

Afula has become a flourishing success story, continuing to attract people to its many neighborhoods beyond Givat Hamoreh (including Berman himself for several years). But while Afula was a true success story, Yoel’s ultimate goal was to find as many attractive options as he could. “I wanted to make people aware of options they weren’t aware of at all,” Yoel said. So he persisted, networked and collaborated

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tirelessly with more *askanim* across the *frum* spectrum, and his roster expanded. Soon, Yoel's idea had grown into an actual project, then a network of linked projects, all meant to support motivated *Torahdik* Anglo *chutznikim* make their move to Israel permanent.

Today, Yoel attracts all kinds of families. He's discovered that not all *frum* immigrants are seeking a low-cost area, nor are all in need of a *kollel*. Many are ready for a whole new experience, while others desire to replicate the kind of close American-style community they were used to.



Yoel Berman manning an information table at an ADY community fair.

No matter what their needs are in, Yoel and Avira DeEretz Yisrael are the go-to resource to find the right *charcidi* community. They now offer personal help to individuals and families, matching them with exactly the right neighborhoods with the most suitable infrastructure, schools, shuls, *yeshivahs*, neighbors and job opportunities. "I wanted to make a change," said Berman. "Finally, these solutions could make it happen."

Since the founding of his organization, Berman and his volunteers have helped grow several *kehillot* into full-fledged communities in an ever-expanding radius. More recently, he has helped support entire groups who are looking to settle in a promising new area. But Yoel's primary emphasis will always be for the individual—those who he says "would otherwise

fall through the cracks."

Recently, Yoel's project linked with the new *It's Shayech!* program of Nefesh B'Nefesh to offer a more seamless experience for *charcidi*m. On his websites and communication forums, contributors consistently add information about new neighborhoods and list community contacts. Yoel also recently published *Living in the Land* (Mosaica Press 2025), which features personal stories and insights from successful Anglo immigrants countrywide. He is also the managing and content editor of the Hebrew language *Ke'dushas Tzion Magazine*, which presents both Torah and real-life pieces related to the mitzvah of *yishuv haaretz*.

Yoel Berman's work has brought growing numbers of *charcidi* families to settle in Israel—and stay there happily. ●