

On Wings of Song – Renanim Youth Singers 2010 Israel Concert Mission

By Eric Cohen

Last month I had the honour of accompanying the Renanim Youth Singers on a concert tour of Israel. While it was my fourth trip to Israel, and each has been special in its own way, this was by far the most interesting and meaningful.

Now in its 12th year, the Renanim Youth Singers is a pluralistic, Jewish community youth choir in the GTA which attracts both observant and secular choristers. The choir enables students to develop skills and passion for choral music, enhancing a positive sense of Jewish identity, community involvement and a love of our rich Judaic heritage. Setting the musical standard for the GTA, the choir has won many awards, has had its music used in a documentary and has also earned a coveted world-wide recording contract to record *t'filot* (prayers), songs and blessings for the school system.

The success of the trip was due to Founder and Artistic Director, Susan Michaels, the heart and soul of the choir. “Travelling to Israel is always inspiring, but when a choir goes, the entire experience is heightened through the emotional resonance of song. The kids elevate each other through their harmonies as the passion of their singing strengthens their ties to Israel and community.”

Twenty children, ranging in age from 10 to 19 went on the trip, with concerts scheduled at such diverse venues as Beth Halochem and Yad Lakashish Seniors Centre in Jerusalem, the Renanim School for Developmentally Delayed Children in Kiryat Shemona, the Leo Baeck School in Haifa, Tzipori Bet Sefer (a predominantly Ethiopian school) in Tel Aviv, as well as an outdoor concert in the Old City of Jerusalem for three Birthright groups.

We also performed Tikun Olam projects – packing gift boxes for Israeli soldiers with the children at Tzipori Bet Sefer and painting the sanctuary of an Ethiopian Community Synagogue. The children attacked these projects with the same enthusiasm they show for their singing.

In addition to the scheduled concerts, impromptu concerts seemed to break out everywhere we went. From the first song at the Toronto Airport when our plane was delayed to singing on top of Masada, on the roof of the International Kaballah Centre in Safed and on the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean at the Lebanese Border, their voices carried throughout Israel. Passersby would stop to listen and spend a little time from their busy days enjoying the music.

For some of the children it was their first trip to Israel and others were making return trips. With such a wide range of ages, they experienced the trip in different ways, some paying more attention to historical aspects of the trip, some to the religious aspects and some to the social aspects.

As Mindy, a 15 year old chorister said, “*The most meaningful experience for me was at Rosh Hanikrah, a series of grottos right on the Mediterranean Sea and walking distance to the Lebanese border. The desire to sing a song about peace was so intense we burst out into Oseh Shalom. When*

we were finished, a naval patrol boat that had been watching us spoke to us on their loudspeaker and said 'Od Pa'am' (Again). Being able to give those soldiers our support by means of song was unbelievably inspiring."

My own 12 year old daughter, Loren, was on her first trip to Israel. While she enjoyed all of the singing and the Tikun Olam, the touring that we also did opened her eyes to the amazing country that Israel is. One of her best memories was singing at the choir's namesake – the Renanim School. As she said *"At the Renanim School I realized that kids may be disabled, but they can still have a real gift for music. Music isn't only something that amuses you – it is also a way of communicating with others and making people feel like they're not alone in this world."*

While we were in Haifa, we visited the Leo Baeck School where the choir met the Carmelim Singers/Dance Troupe – a youth group that has performed around the world, including Toronto. They each performed in front of the school's student body and then finished with a joint song they had just learnt. We were there shortly after the Carmel forest fire and on the way from Haifa to Jerusalem we passed close to the devastated area, witnessing some of the destruction and seeing how close the fires came to Haifa University.

For me, seeing Israel through the eyes of these artistic and caring children, whether it was during one of the scheduled concerts, seeing them interacting with disabled children or Ethiopian immigrants or listening to them singing Eli, Eli at the grave of Hannah Senesh and Hatikvah at the grave of Theodore Herzl, it created new images of Israel for me that I won't forget.

For Susan Michaels, singing a Kabbalat Shabbat Service at the Southern Gate of the Kotel (at the Davidson Center) for Birthright participants from across Canada, was the fruition of every mandate she had for this mission. *"There we were, over looking the sun-drenched, golden hewed Mount of Olives, singing on the very spot where pilgrims travelled two thousand years ago to get to the Temple. Passersby stopped to listen and a white dove floated in the air as the choir passionately sang L'Dor VaDor and Oseh Shalom. It was an intensely emotional moment, filled with joy, enhanced by an elevated sense of spirituality, love of Israel and Judaism. Everyone in attendance, chorister and listener alike, was touched and transformed by the experience, even if just for the moment. What more could a choral director ask for?!"*

Adina, a 17 year old chorister, summed up the trip by saying *"We weren't just coming as tourists to simply help the Israeli economy; we were giving back in a way that was unique to us. We were singing for people who really needed that cheer in their lives. We touched the Israeli people's lives and they, in turn, touched ours."*

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