



Union of American Hebrew Congregations

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NEWS RELEASE

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REFORM IN GALILEE

Har Halutz -- Reform Judaism's New
Free Enterprise Settlement in Israel

By Wendy Elliman

The father was a cabinet minister and later prime minister. The son is a renegade kibbutznik.

"Our family has had its share of politics," says Haim, whose father changed the family name from Shertok to Sharett when he became Israel's first foreign minister.

"But we grew up involved in our country -- taught to love every Jew because he's a Jew. I'm still a very involved person, but I've found a different way."

At age 52, Haim is helping to turn a stony Galilee mountain into the Reform Movement's first free-enterprise community.

Haim Sharett and the Reform Movement?

"My upbringing was totally secular," he says, "but a few years ago, when the United Kibbutz appointed me its shaliah in the United States to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, I found good people inside a movement of strength and vitality.

"I haven't started believing in God, but I respect and admire the Reform way of life. I'm happy to join them in Friday night prayers -- but on Saturdays, I work in my garden or go hiking, as I always have."

Haim spent a year in the Bronx High School of Science, while his father led the 1947 struggle for a Jewish state in the UN, before returning to Israel. After his army service, he moved to Kibbutz Hamadiya, where he has lived for 33 years.

'I'll Bring You the People'

Five years ago Sharett went to the Jewish Agency's Rural Settlement Department with a plan for a hilltop community of new immigrants. "Send me to the States and I'll bring you the people," he told then department head Ra'anan Weitz.

There was no budget. "But the next year, everything came together for me quite unexpectedly. In 1981 I was appointed shaliah to the Reform by the United Kibbutz Movement, mainly to recruit in the U.S. for two Reform kibbutzim, Yahel and Lotan in the Arava."

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"I rushed back to a Ra'anan Weitz and demanded that the movement be allocated a Galilee hill, where new immigrants could build themselves a community. My dream was for a hilltop in the very center of the Galilee, from where you could see both the Mediterranean and the Sea of Galilee.

High on a Hilltop

Har Halutz, a 750-meter hill north of Carmiel, was available. Though Har Halutz was a jumble of cherticles, chertms and massive limestone boulders, everything about it was

(more)

right for Sharrett -- from the view of the sea to the hills, which were

"The site is precious," says Sharrett. "There aren't many places left in the Galilee where it's possible to build a viable settlement, and people had to be convinced that the Reform Movement was serious about building a community, and capable of pushing it through."

Once the approval was given, Sharrett threw himself into recruiting members for Har Halutz.

Sharrett's main approach was to the newly-converted. Hal Applebaum, 29, of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, remembers visiting Reform Jewish headquarters in New York with his Israeli-born wife, Esti, on his way to Israel with a youth group. Sharrett buttonholed him in the corridor and persuaded them to attend Har Halutz' first mini-convention. The Appelbaums were the first to stand up and declare themselves Har Halutz settlers.

The first group of 20 families will occupy the site in August. All are new olim -- or at least mixed Israeli-immigrant marriages -- and most were recruited in the States by Sharrett. They began arriving in Israel last summer and waited at the Carmiel Absorption Center while the site was being prepared.

The settlement they are planning to build is experimental. It has yet to decide how it will express its Judaism.

"What I'd like to see," says Applebaum, "is a community that examines its Jewish roots and heritage and makes decisions about its lifestyle -- as individuals, as families and as a group. We're leaning heavily on the Reform Movement in Israel to guide us."

Har Halutz admittedly is experimental. It is neither a kibbutz, moshav, village or town. The degree to which it will be cooperative or private is still undecided.

For former Americans Bob and Benita Smallman, this new type of community represents the end of a three-year search. The Smallmans were among the families who came to Israel 11 years ago to live in Yamit, which Israel buried in the sand when it returned the Sinai to Egypt as part of the peace treaty.

"Very few of us are still in Israel," says Bob Smallman, 57. "The withdrawal from Yamit was too traumatic. Benita and I were just marking time until we found something as exciting. We think we've found it at Har Halutz."

The Smallmans are considerably older than most of the settlers, who are in their 20s and 30s. But Sharrett clearly includes himself when he declares, "Age doesn't matter if the spirit is there." His replacement as the shaliach at the Union of American Hebrews, Shalom, is the man to talk to for those interested

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A Rugged Life

Life on Har Halutz will be rugged for a while. Roads are being built, but they are still unpaved. Families will live in trailer-homes -- luxurious compared to the days of the early pioneers, but still makeshift for the windy hilltop -- with a store, offices, kindergarten and clinic also situated in temporary dwellings.

Most of the settlers, like Esti Applebaum, who teaches aerobics at the Carmiel Community Center, will continue working in surrounding towns. But ultimately Har Halutz plans to develop its own cooperative enterprises.

Most important of these is the adjacent Tourist Mountain -- a rock-strewn barren hill on which will be built a seminar and recreation center to attract the 1,000 Reform youngsters who come to Israel each year.

About 75 percent of the community's 200 families will come from abroad -- mainly from the U.S., says Sharett. The Jewish Agency already has spent some \$1.5 million on temporary housing and searching out light industries for Har Halutz. The government's contribution is for infrastructure, development and permanent housing loans through the "Build Your Own Home Plan."

The settlers will be putting their own funds into building permanent homes on Har Halutz and developing the Tourist Mountain. ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, is subsidizing further recruitment in the U.S. Additional support from the Reform Movement for specific projects is likely.

"But you can't do it without the people who will love the project and make it succeed," says Sharett. "Without them, there's no point in even beginning."
(Reprinted from the Jerusalem Post)