



Journey of A Lifetime

BY ESTY MENDELOWITZ

The terminal at Ben Gurion bustled with the usual busyness of an international airport. Passengers took leave of loved ones, and flight crews hurried to their respective airplanes. In the midst of all the hullaballoo, one unique group stood apart. They stood there with their parents, siblings, friends, and counselors, who excitedly wished them well as they awaited the flight announcement that would herald their departure. Twenty-eight young men with varying disabilities had saved up their own money and were embarking on a three-day journey to visit the *mekomos hakedoshim* in Ukraine!

Parents tried to hold back tears as they parted from their sons. "I never thought this child of mine would actually fly anywhere by airplane," said one mother. "When he was born, who could have dreamed he'd grow up to be so independent?"



The young men visit Mezhibuzh, where the Baal Shem Tov resided.

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“This is the first time I am actually *shep-ping nachas* from my son,” said one father, as his voice choked up. “I can’t believe my special child, who was always so dependent and limited, is now the hero of the hour, and all his siblings are jealous of *him!*”

Anatomy of a Journey

“This trip was carefully planned,” explains Rabbi Shimon Levy, CEO of Seeach Sod, an organization in Yerushalayim for children and adults with special needs. “And what makes it all the more special is that these young men each saved up their own earnings to pay for part of the trip.” The project was titled, “*Yagata, Nasata,*” a play on a saying of *Chazal*, that states that effort reaps results, in this case, the trip.

Seeach Sod is a special education center based in Yerushalayim under the leadership of Rabbi Shimon Levy. Founded in 1971 by his father, Rabbi Dov Levy, Seeach Sod provides multifaceted support for over 1,000 children and adults with special needs. From early intervention services, to elementary and high school programs for boys and girls, to vocational training and supported housing, Seeach Sod’s goal is to ensure an enriching life for all their clients, no matter what their level of functioning.

These young men with special needs embarking on the trip are residents of Seeach Sod’s group homes, and a part of Seeach Sod’s Vocational Training Program, a program for boys over the age of 21 who have graduated high school. Many of the *bachurim* are employed in various businesses in Yerushalayim, where they are paid a salary based on an adapted mini-

mum wage for people with special needs, as stipulated by law. One works in the famous Angel Bakery, another in a local pizza store, and another is employed in a dry cleaning business. They all leave enthusiastically each morning from their homes, and head to their respective jobs. The wages they earn give them the satisfaction of earning their own money, just like “everyone else.”

When these boys began to work, a staff meeting was convened to discuss what would happen to the money the boys earned. All their needs were provided for by the Seeach Sod group homes. Should the money be put aside in a savings account, or would the boys be given the money to spend on day-to-day purchases? Rabbi Levy came up with the idea of teaching the boys to save their money toward an important goal. After much deliberation, it was decided to



At the airport.



Clockwise from upper right: outside a 400-year-old fortress in Mezhibuzh; *davening* at the Baal Shem Tov shul; entering the fortress in Mezhibuzh; pouring out their hearts at Rav Nachman's *tziyun*; a horse and buggy ride in Mezhibuzh.



take the boys on a trip to *mekomos hakedoshim* in Ukraine, and they alone would save the money needed for the tickets. It was an ambitious plan: could these boys with special needs understand the concept of saving money? Would they appreciate the trip?

Much behind-the-scenes effort was needed to ensure the trip went smoothly and all the logistics were taken care of. Two of the young men are wheelchair-users, but they had saved their earnings along with the rest of their friends, so they were most certainly participating, despite the practical hurdles. Each participant needed to obtain a passport, hotels were booked, and food and transportation were arranged. The date of the trip was also chosen with care: What could be more appropriate than to visit the *tziyun* of Harav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, *zy"ra*, *Klal Yisrael's* famous advocate, than on his *yahrtzeit*!

And so, on Wednesday, 24 Tishrei, the day finally arrived. While Seeach Sod fully sponsored the food and other expenses of the trip, the plane tickets to Ukraine were paid for by the boys themselves!

An emotional farewell ceremony was held in the terminal. Each *bachur* received a travel knapsack from Seeach Sod, filled with goodies for the trip, including a neck pillow and eye covers for the plane, along with food, snacks and drinks, and a gorgeous booklet containing their schedule of events. Live music entertained the guests, and parents, siblings and employers got up to speak from the heart, wishing the boys an enjoyable and inspirational trip. One father approached the microphone, and implored the boys to *daven* for themselves, their families, and also for all of *Klal Yisrael*.

Off to Ukraine

Takeoff was accompanied by the boys singing along to *niggunim* of the Baal Shem Tov, and the boys were excited to finally be on their way. El Al went out of their way to accommodate each of the boys' needs. When the plane finally landed in Kiev, all the boys and their counselors applauded. The group was met by Seeach Sod staff who had arrived ear-



lier to ensure everything was in place. They were taken to the hotel for a good night's sleep after the day's excitement.

The behavior and decorum of the boys created a tremendous *kiddush Hashem* in the airport, on the plane, and in the places they visited on the trip. The young men work hard all year to practice interacting properly in all circumstances, and especially before the trip, the staff at Seeach Sod taught the young men how to behave appropriately in the new situations they would be facing.

On Thursday morning, the group traveled to the Great Synagogue in Kiev. After *davening Shacharis*, the boys were addressed by Harav Moshe Brandsdorfer, *shlita*, son of Harav Meir Brandsdorfer, *zt"l*, author of the *Sefer K'neh Bosem*. He spoke to the *bachurim* about the great *zechus* they had to be traveling to the *kever* of Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev on his *yahrtzeit*.

On the way to Berditchev, the group stopped off in Zhitomer, where they enjoyed a boat ride, then ate a delicious lunch and *davened Minchah*.

Berditchev

The boys approached the *tziyun* of Reb Levi Yitzchok and began



to emotionally say *perakim* of *Tehillim*. The crowd around the *tziyun* joined in, and the *kvitlach* of the staff, the boys and their families were read. Each *bachur* asked for his own personal requests in his own words and inspired all those around him.

“There was an *avira m’romemet* — an exalted atmosphere,” recalls Mrs. Tirtzah Levy, who accompanied her husband, Rabbi Shimon Levy, and the boys on the trip. “I cried throughout the entire trip. It was so amazing to see these *bachurim* *davening* with such sincerity at all these holy *kevarim*. It was a dream come true, for them and for us.”

Shabbos in Mezhibuzh

The next stop in the packed itinerary was Mezhibuzh, to spend a Shabbos in the cradle of *Chassidus*, the famed city where the Baal Shem Tov lived. The men got to have a fully authentic *shtetl* experience when they rode a horse and buggy to an ancient 400-year old fortress, and were treated to fascinating historical tales and a view of the entire town. They learned that during wartime, the Baal Shem Tov hid in this very fortress.

As Shabbos arrived in Mezhibuzh, Yidden of all stripes streamed to the shul of the Baal Shem Tov. The Seeach Sod group joined in, fully participating in the *davening*.

Rabbi A. Alter, a tour guide from Bnei Brak, who leads groups to *mekomos hakedoshim* in Europe, encountered the Seeach Sod group

while in Mezhibuzh. He relates, “After the Friday night *seudah*, I bumped into Rabbi Shimon Levy, who told me he was in Ukraine with a group of Seeach Sod *bachurim*. He said the group was eating and *davening* in a room on the third floor, and he invited me to join them for *Shacharis* the following morning. I mentioned to my group about my meeting Rabbi Levy, and that I had decided to join the *bachurim* for *davening* the next morning. I was certain that in the presence of these special souls, my *tefillos* would be more readily accepted in *Shamayim*. I didn’t realize how much of an impact my casual comment would have; all 34 members of my tour group showed up at the Seeach Sod *minyan* at 8:30 the next morning!

“When I joined in with them, I felt like I was in a typical *minyan* in Yerushalayim or Bnei Brak.

“In the middle of *davening*, the door suddenly opened, and one of the *bachurim* popped in and loudly shouted, ‘Cockadoodledoo!’ three times. I was instantly reminded of a story of the Baal Shem Tov. The Besh”t was *davening* with his Chassidim, when all of a sudden, a shepherd boy took out a whistle and began to blow it. With his *ruach hakodesh*, the Baal Shem Tov saw that the whistle-blowing of the boy was accepted in Heaven because of the boy’s total sincerity. And the boy’s “*tefillah*” was *poel yeshuos*.

“At that moment,” continues Rabbi Alter, “I felt my heart open up, and my first thought was, ‘Hashem, please take my prayers, along with the sounds made by this pure *neshamah*, and I’m sure they will reach the *Kisei Haka-vod*.”

On Motzoei Shabbos, the Seeach Sod boys enjoyed a lavish *melaveh malkah*. A live band, flown in especially from Eretz Yisrael for the trip, entertained the boys and accompanied the spirited dancing that followed.

On Sunday, the boys traveled to Uman, the burial site of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, where they recited *Tikkun Haklali*, *Avinu Malkeinu*, and *Shema Yisrael*, led by the noted *mashpia*, Harav Eliezer Moshe Halperin, *shlita*. The trip ended with a visit to Sophia Park near the *tziyun*.

Coming Home

At 5 the next morning, just at dawn, the Seeach Sod *bachurim* landed in Eretz Yisrael. They had done it! They had exceeded all expectations. The trip was more than a successful endeavor. It was proof to the world that individuals with special needs can work like anyone else, save money like anyone else, travel like anyone else and more than that, *daven* with purity and sincerity more than anyone else. There is no doubt that their special *tefillos* were answered and that their visit created a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*. The pride they came home with will serve as a foundation for their self-esteem for many more years to come. ■

A series of events to benefit Seeach Sod will be taking place in Monsey, Five Towns and Los Angeles on November 15-17, 2015. To find out how you can participate and help enrich the lives of over 1,000 children and adults with special needs in Yerushalayim.