

# 'Ambassadors' bring Israel to Akiba-Schechter

By ANNETTE GENDLER

*EACH of us is a small light – together we shine so bright.* In big red and yellow letters, this slogan recently graced the front hallway of Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School in Chicago. To bring it alive, middle schoolers participated in an activity led by the school's two *b'not sherut*, Israeli ambassadors, wherein two teams of students had to cross a large room without once touching the floor.

Their method: passing chairs to each other and using them as a makeshift bridge. Chaotic, of course; but fantastically fun. The lesson? Working as a team yields results that working alone does not. It's no wonder that, when students are asked what the *b'not sherut* bring to Akiba-Schechter, they invariably respond: "More fun!"

But there is more to the *b'not sherut* than fun. This is Akiba's third year participating in the program, which sends young Israeli women to the U.S. to work in a Jewish school for a year as part of their national service. Initially, Akiba-Schechter was unsure if it could afford the program. By the second year, it was clear that the school couldn't afford *not* to host it. Rabbi Holman, Director of Judaic Studies, initiated the program. He finds that "the *b'not sherut* relate well to students because they aren't so much older. They understand the kids' jokes, music, and interests."

Last August, Akiba welcomed Efrat Ben David and Inbar Aviezer from Hashmonaim, a community of about

600 families located halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

What are the big differences between Israel and Chicago—aside from the cold? "When you're in Israel, being Jewish is obvious," says Inbar. "At Rosh Hashana, the Coke cans say *Shana tova* (Happy new year). Here, Santa is on the Coke cans. In Israel, you can feel Shabbat or the *chagim* (holidays) coming on. Here it's not like that." Efrat adds: "Before we came here, we couldn't understand how you could be Jewish and not live in Israel. But now we're starting to understand. People have a good life here, and it's hard to leave that behind."

"What surprised me about Chicago was the amount and quality of the Jewish community," said Yael Parnes, one of Akiba's first *b'not sherut*.

The *b'not sherut* take on many roles at Akiba-Schechter. Most importantly, they add a lively Israeli component to the school. Thanks to them, Hebrew is less of a theoretical language, and Israel—and its culture, which includes food, dress, and slang—becomes a tangible place.

Apparently, that culture is very different from America's—especially in the classroom setting.

"In Israel the teaching experience is more intense, focused on different subjects. It's very clear what is expected of you," says Lital Slavin, the school's other "inaugural" *bat sherut* (singular form of *b'not sherut*). "At Akiba expectations are clear, but you can still do activities which weren't planned months in advance, and



Inbar Aviezer (left) and Efrat Ben David (middle) cook shashukah with Rivka Kahana (right), as an activity during "Israel Day." Every month, Israel Day deals with a different aspect of Israeli culture. December focused on Israeli food.

which are practical for that moment." In short, there is more spontaneity.

Leah Goldstein, whose daughter is in 7th grade, feels the effect of the program. "For the past three years, my daughter has been reading with a native Hebrew speaker who's more of a friend than a teacher. It's an awesome opportunity." Boaz Keysar, father of a 4th and 1st grader, feels that "while the school has always been able to

recruit Israelis to work with kids in advanced Hebrew, the *b'not sherut* program is even better because it brings over girls specifically from Israel, strengthening ties between Akiba-Schechter and Israel."

Efrat and Inbar love being appreciated for who they are: young, modern Orthodox, Israeli women. "We love our country," says Inbar. "What could be better than spending a year spreading that love?"

The bond with Israel lasts beyond the time the *b'not sherut* spend at Akiba-Schechter. Lital's stay wrapped up in June 2008 but, she says, "there are some children with whom I'm still in touch, and I hope to keep in touch with them in the future." And there are some unexpected benefits, too. "Now that I'm back in Israel, I'm never cold... What's Israel's cold compared to Chicago?" ■

*Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School is a beneficiary day school of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.*

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