



The Beit Shemesh Running Club

Marathoners Unite Religiously Diverse Israeli City

By Hillel Kuttler

Upon completing each Monday's 90-minute group run at 10:30 p.m., Rael Strous takes leave of his mates and drives to a nearby bakery whose fresh-from-the-oven whole wheat rolls he craves.

Dripping 10 miles' worth of street-pounding sweat and still clad in running shorts, Strous tends to draw gazes and conversational interest from the black-hatted, black-coated ultra-Orthodox men who likewise visit the bakery for a late nibble here in Beit Shemesh, an unassuming city of 85,000, 20 miles west of Jerusalem. The curiosity seekers inquire about Strous' workout; he asks what Jewish scholarly texts they've been studying.

"It's just a bunch of guys getting together, schmoozing. It's the human condition. People have this natural tendency to connect," the 46-year-old psychiatrist and South Africa native says of the bakery crowd.

Strous could also have been referring to the athletic group to which he belongs, the Beit Shemesh Running Club. The club unites disparate Jewish segments of society around a common appetite for pavement and trails, then sends them and their differences home until the next workout.

Its members and town officials view the running club as a stark example of sports' power to foster tolerance and inclusion. That is no small feat, especially following a series of ugly incidents in late 2011 near a Beit Shemesh elementary school that had just opened on property that adjoins—but also divides—the separate neighborhoods where Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews live.

Modern Orthodox female pupils walking to the Orot Girls School that autumn suffered harassment from male ultra-Orthodox protesters who had coveted the building as a school for their own community. Some men even spat on the little girls. The periodic harassment suddenly halted after a crying eight-year-old pupil's televised interview in late December 2011 about her ordeal. The scene shocked many Israelis and crystallized the sometimes-hazy fractures that have long split the country's Jews along religious-observance grounds. A subsequent demonstration held in Beit Shemesh drew Modern Orthodox and secular Jews who identified with the girls and their families and opposed the nasty form that religious coercion had assumed.

Tempers quickly cooled. The club's runners, some of whose daughters (including Strous' three girls) attend the school, said they believe that only a minuscule number of ultra-Orthodox extremists were involved in the troubles. Individual and group

Members of the Beit Shemesh Running Club, Shlomo Hammer and his father Naftali Hammer (front right and front left), stretching before they re-enter the trail, 14 miles into their 20-mile run to Jerusalem.

All photos by Debbie Zimelman



Left: Members of the Beit Shemesh Running Club pause 12 miles into their 20-mile run to Jerusalem at the end of the Nachal Soreq trail.

training runs through various neighborhoods proceeded uninterrupted, they said, and club members continued offering ultra-Orthodox pedestrians waves and Saturday-night greetings after the Sabbath for a good week ahead as they trod on.

Since the group began nine years ago, relations with the surrounding community of ultra-Orthodox residents have always been fine, says the running club's founder, Chaim Wizman.

Approximately two-thirds of the club's 90 adult members are Modern Orthodox, and one-third is secular; half the members are immigrants (mostly from English-speaking countries), and half are native Israelis. Runners include women and men—and a 110-member youth division. There are no membership dues in this all-volunteer group.

An ordained rabbi raised in Commack, N.Y., on Long Island, Wizman says he did not initially foresee the running club as anything but a sports endeavor. He says he is glad, though, that other Israelis might see it as a model for coexistence.

"Life can be transformed through sports," Wizman says, as several customers enter his sports and fitness shop north of town. It is in a chalet-style structure at the foot of Israel's legendary Burma Road, the path U.S. Col. David "Mickey" Marcus helped build to relieve the 1948 siege of Jerusalem.

"One of the benefits of running is that it causes you to form deep relationships with your running mates because you're doing things that are extraordinarily difficult, like getting up at 4:30 in the morning to train," he says. "The intensity of that shared experience causes a very deep, natural bonding. That tendency to bond transcends divisions between religious sensibilities and socioeconomics... It's amazing how these gaps are bridged in the context of this running club."

It is an achievement that Beit Shemesh officials have noticed, too.

"They set a good example of people who, after 12 hours of work and family, go for a run" and who "include different streams of Judaism: secular, traditional, religious," says Eithzik Kanizo, director of the town's youth sports and recreation department.

Club members are commonly seen throughout Beit Shemesh and its environs, gathering four times weekly for runs and training regimens that Wizman fashions with precision.



Dov Lipman, a local rabbi and town resident who considers himself ultra-Orthodox, says he runs regularly but has not joined the club because he prefers solo workouts for their head-clearing benefits.

More Israeli haredim, (literally, those who tremble) as the ultra-Orthodox are known in Hebrew, in Israel ought to take up running or other sports for the physical-fitness benefits and also to mix with other Jews, Lipman says. He even invented for himself the classification of "modern haredi," since he is open to the contemporary world while remaining stringent in observance.

With a laugh, Lipman acknowledges that many would consider the phrase an oxymoron. The point, he continues, is that it needn't be.

Runners prepare to begin the very steep three-mile climb to Mount Herzi.



Sarah Wizman (right) stops for a water break 16 miles into the run. Here the runners stop to say Tehillim, from the Hebrew Book of Psalms, for the wife of a club member who is sick with cancer.

“If someone is haredi and wants to run, it doesn’t mean they shed their affiliation in the process,” says Lipman, a teacher in a seminary who moved to Israel from Washington, D.C., nine years ago.

“Labels very much hold people back. That’s what we as Americans can do to change things here,” he says. “In America, you can be in yeshiva and play ball, watch your team play. We don’t have barriers there as we do [in Israel].” As more Western-raised haredim settle in the Jewish state, “Israeli haredim will learn from that and see that it’s not a contradiction, that you don’t lose your religiosity by being involved in things you enjoy.

“I bet there are hundreds of young men who would flourish if they had a running team, a basketball team to be part of,” he adds, referring to haredim in Israel.

Several Beit Shemesh Running Club members said they have tried to build bridges to the haredim and to invite them to join the group. Those attempts, they said, have been rebuffed, and no ultra-Orthodox have joined. Some men whom they approached expressed interest in keeping fit by running, and in the club itself, but confessed to fearing ostracism from their communities.

Meanwhile, club members continue their serious running. Theirs is decidedly not a group with social activism at its core.

On a crisp night last March, nine runners traversed a 5.5-mile loop through the city’s deserted streets—a “tapered,” or reduced distance, because it came just

days before the Jerusalem Marathon, in which they would be competing. Afterward, Wizman led a visitor to his home. He pointed to his car and to the vehicles in his neighbors’ driveways. Nearly every back bumper sported a black-and-white, oval-shaped sticker sporting the number “42.2”—the metric standard for the 26-mile, 385-yard event.

“This street has, per capita, more marathon runners than anywhere in Israel,” asserts Wizman.

The town’s sloped terrain is such a factor in training that Wizman predicted that his charges would excel on Jerusalem’s equally challenging topography. “Our motto is: No one passes a Beit Shemesh runner on the hills,” Wizman says.

Nearly half the club’s adult runners, and a third of its youths, would compete in the Jerusalem Marathon, half marathon and 10-kilometer run. All finished their races. Some even competed in the Tel Aviv Marathon held two weeks after Jerusalem’s—a physically demanding schedule.

On this night, six sweaty Beit Shemesh Running Club members already were gathered around Wizman’s dining room table and noshed on leftover Purim candy. All had completed marathons in less than three-and-a-half hours. One of the men, Wizman’s brother-in-law Moshe Shaulson, had dropped 55 pounds since taking up running two years earlier. In January 2012, he competed for the first time, finishing the Tiberias Marathon in 3:29. Two club members have broken three hours, including Wizman, with a 2:57 at the 2006 New York Marathon.

Richard Levitas, a technology executive raised in Baltimore, ran a 2:57 in Tiberias in 2012. Wizman notes slyly that his personal best had bested Levitas’ by 37 seconds.

The men sitting at the table—several women also run in the club, including Wizman’s wife, Sarah, and their teenage daughter, Batya—were no spring chickens. Their average age is 45. Levitas is 52.

The running club is one of the factors drawing Dror Ben-Ami back from Australia to Israel to live. Ben-Ami, who returned to Israel in October, regularly had commuted one hour each way from his Tel Aviv-area home to join the club every Friday morning. He found the other runners to be an intriguing lot in their range of professional, personal and religious-observance backgrounds.

Beginning at 4:30 a.m., 40 runners set off from Beit Shemesh toward Jerusalem. Here, the runners are more than halfway there.

Ben-Ami defines himself as a secular Jew imbued with a love of the rolling, oak-forested trails outside Beit Shemesh that he says provide “a very Biblical feeling” while training.

“Running through that landscape enhanced my connection to being a Jew in the land of Israel. It’s running, but it’s spiritual. I feel that together we share a spiritual connection,” Ben-Ami, a zoologist, says. Ben-Ami had first learned of the club after meeting Wizman while they delivered meals to residents in northern Israel who’d been shut in at home during the 2006 war with Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia. Wizman was then wearing a marathon-themed T-shirt and a kippah.

Their meeting was a profound revelation, Ben-Ami says. Wizman’s aid work, he explains, “conveyed for me the values it normally would take a lot of time in a relationship to find out.

“That broke the ice for me,” he continues. “Long-distance running is a very soulful experience, and those are very strong values to share.”



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