

HAIFA OFFERS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE TO ITS ANGLO COMMUNITY

by Charlotte Halle
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Ask an Anglo living in Haifa what activities are available specifically for the city's English-speakers, and you get more or less the same answer. "Almost nothing," they respond.

While it makes sense - Israel's third largest city hardly has the reputation for pulling native English-speakers like Jerusalem or Ra'anana - it simply doesn't happen to be true. Unobtrusively, among the city's trademark hills and tucked into pockets in private homes and small communal spaces, the city's Anglos get together in numerous configurations from bridge nights and book clubs to pub nights and play rehearsals. It's just that no one quite seems to know what anyone else is up to.

"There isn't really an English-speaking community, nowhere is there a real hub," says Laurie Rubin, undoubtedly one of the best networked English-speakers in the city. The San Francisco native, who volunteers for the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel (AACI) as a one-woman welcoming committee for English-speaking immigrants to Haifa, aims to provide newcomers with local contacts, guidance and support. But she can't always find them - especially those who have arrived in the northern port city unconnected with immigration frameworks such as the Jewish Agency and Nefesh B'Nefesh.

Just last week Rubin's ears pricked up when she suddenly heard English in her local gym and she introduced herself to some young American women living in Haifa while their husbands studied at the Technion American Medical Students Program. "They'd been here for a year and no one had ever welcomed them," says Rubin, sitting outdoors in a restaurant on Haifa's rejuvenated Ben-Gurion Boulevard this week, where she always brings visitors to the city. "Often, I have to wait for [newcomers] to find me. It's a real problem as there's no real central place to go."

Once, things were different. Until seven years ago, the AACI operated a clubhouse in the city, maintaining an office and a secretary, but following Jewish Agency budget cuts and with few North American immigrants heading to Haifa, the facility was closed and the city's Anglos now make do with a weekly visit from AACI counselor Yanina Musnikow (see information box, page 11). "It was a real loss," says Rubin of the clubhouse closure.

It is not the only loss in recent years for the city's Anglo community. The United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA), formerly known as the British Olim Society, dispensed with their counselor in Carmiel who also served Haifa's new immigrants until a few years ago. "It was never that popular [with British immigrants] and now they end up in Haifa once in a blue moon," says Beulah Goodman, who heads the UJIA's counseling service. "Finding employment is very difficult there and immigrants tend to go where they've got friends and know people."

Even some local initiatives have shut down. A year ago, Rose Bloch packed in the local English-speaking chapter of WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization). "Slowly but surely, [members] were either dying or leaving for old-age homes. There was hardly anyone left and those that were left were running to the doctors all the time. Haifa's a dying city anyway. We've got the highest percentage of elderly in the country - 20 percent."

Bloch, who says she chose to live in Haifa because the sea and mountains reminded her of her native Cape Town, attends the monthly meeting of the AACI Haifa Seniors group. Last time she went, she learned another member had died. "It happens nearly every month. Sometimes it's three a month," she says matter-of-factly. "The main thing is to keep active and keep the brain working. That's why it's good to get out to these things."

The once highly active branch of the Hitachdut Olei Britannia (Association of British Immigrants) is also now defunct, but it still maintains a Haifa representative, 75-year-old Reuven Carp, from London. He and his friends continue with the voluntary work they began under the auspices of the organization - such as helping Ethiopian school children with their English - and they help make up a busload each year for an Independence Day outing. "It peaked in about 1977," recalls Carp of the city's HOB branch.

The Haifa branch of Telfed (the South African Zionist Federation) also faded out some years ago, admits Irma Zaslansky, who chaired the local committee in the early 1980s. She, like all of the veteran Haifa residents interviewed by Anglo File this week, extols the beauty of the city, talks of her close friendships with other Anglophones and says she doesn't regret moving there for a moment.

What Zaslansky found missing from the city when she moved there 35 years ago were the first-rate musical and theatrical performances staged in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. To solve the problem, she founded a nonprofit organization, The Culture Club, which arranges tickets and transport for Haifa residents to cultural events outside the city. Later this month, three busloads of mostly native Israelis will travel down to the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center to see Verdi's "Il Trovatore."

"We're probably better integrated as a community than other cities," she says of the city's native English-speakers. "We don't live in a concentrated area, we're all scattered across the city. We've involved ourselves in Israeli society. Maybe we don't have the same need for English-speaking groups or a special organization to look after us."

Perhaps this is one reason why an effort a few years back by ESRA (English Speaking Residents Association) to establish a branch in Haifa failed to take root. But the organization, which has over a dozen branches around the country that offer both cultural activities and volunteering opportunities, is once again attempting to crack the city this month. The situation may be a little easier today as some identify new Anglo blood arriving in Haifa which could replenish the aging veteran Anglophone community, estimated to number a few thousand.

Nefesh B'Nefesh reports that 150 North Americans who have immigrated under their auspices have made Haifa their home in the last three years. On Wednesday evening, for the first time since May 2005, the AACI organized a networking and information evening for newcomers. Thirty native English-speakers living in Haifa and a dozen others from elsewhere in the north showed up at the event.

The municipality too is hoping that its efforts to increase employment opportunities in the city will attract the rising numbers of immigrants from Western countries, according to city spokesman Roni Grossman. Its strategic planning department, led by head of social programs, Yoline Goldberg, is making a particular effort which has included linking up temporary English-speaking residents with established Anglo immigrants, such as British-born Stuart Palmer.

Palmer, together with his wife Hasja and some friends, have led overseas students from Haifa University's International School on orientation tours of the city to try and deepen their connection to Haifa. "We want to make them feel more at home here. Hopefully they will want to come back Israel and back to Haifa," says Palmer, adding that he views Haifa as the most "undersold" city in the country.

Up at the university campus, the director of admissions at Haifa University's International School, 27-year-old Lisa Kama, is not only trying to attract more students from overseas to the city, she and her husband also began efforts last year to hook up young Anglophones living in the city for regular social events. Between 5 and 30 people meet regularly for pub nights, holiday celebrations and occasional lectures.

"We realize there's not a large community of young English speakers here and it's pretty hard to meet each other unless you're in a framework like studying," says Kama, who is originally from Portland, Oregon. "We felt we wanted to make more of a community for ourselves and believed a lot of other people are also looking for that." Her mailing list for events now numbers 80 and she has also succeeded in hooking up a group of young Anglo mothers in the city, who now meet from time to time.

'Haifa gets under your skin'

One of the few places in the city where you can be guaranteed to hear English being spoken on a regular basis is Moriah, a Conservative synagogue in the Ahuza neighborhood. Along with various bridge games, book clubs and musical groups arranged informally by and for English-speakers, there are also choirs and religious study sessions, along with active chapters of Emunah for Orthodox women and Hadassah-Israel women's organization.

Another venue with ongoing activity in English is Beit Hagefen, where Haifa English Theater rehearses and performs its shows twice annually, drawing some otherwise unidentified English-speakers out of the woodwork. These occasionally include members of the city's Bahai community, who rarely mix socially with the city's Anglo immigrant population.

The company's next production of Peter Shaffer's comedy "Lettice and Lovage," opens on Thursday. The theater provides respite for all involved, says the production's director Ruth Willner, especially important in the wake of Katuyusha rockets that bombarded the city daily during the war last summer. Although a casual visitor to the city spies no sign of the war, some of its residents – and it seems the large majority of veteran Anglos stayed put for the duration – calmly refer to their experiences of constantly rushing to bomb shelters and restricted movements as "horrific," "traumatic" and "absolutely awful."

The war has done little to counter Haifa's shrinking population and its stagnant property prices. One sadness for many of Haifa's veteran Anglo immigrants is that despite their own fondness for their city, very few of their children continue to live there as adults and generally raise their families outside the city or abroad, a trend that is not restricted to the Anglo community.

"Haifa just doesn't have the vibrancy of Tel Aviv," says former South African Lola Harris, who has a daughter and grandchildren living in the southern metropolis.

Malka Baruch, who has lived in Haifa for more than 45 years – along with at least four friends who came to Israel with her on a youth movement program in 1952 – says that very few of her friends' offspring live in the city, although one of Baruch's own three children recently returned to live there after more than a decade abroad. "I couldn't possibly think about leaving though," she says. "Haifa gets under your skin."

Former Londoners Clive and Wendy Noble also point to the city's mixed religious population – and relative coexistence – as a welcome contrast to many other parts of the country. Both optometrists, they socialize with their work colleagues, who include a Druze woman, three Christian Arabs, a Romanian Christian, plus Orthodox and secular Jews. "That's very, very Haifa," says Wendy.

"We feel very privileged here," continues Clive. "We live on the Carmel overlooking the ocean from our lounge window. There's not a night when we're not spellbound looking out as the sun goes down."

'We really felt this show must go on'

At the beginning of August, when the Haifa English Theater was supposed to hold auditions for its January show, the last thing committee members were expecting was to find themselves on the front line of a war with Hezbollah. But canceling or delaying the show was not an option, says the theater's board chair, Betsy Lewis Yizraeli. "We felt very strongly the show must go on despite the damage done to everyone in Haifa. We knew it could be a healing experience."

Audiences who arrive for the show, which opens on Thursday, will be offered a glass of wine to toast the new year. "We're offering the citizens of the city a chance to come and laugh ... Everyone who comes will leave with a smile on their face. It'll be that kind of evening. Life's been serious and what people need is laughter."

Yizraeli adds that the theater, now celebrating its 25th anniversary, attracts people from all walks of life and casts include Muslims, Christians and Bahais as well as Jews. "It's a melting pot where people are doing something they love. Love of the theater is the common ground that does away with differences between people," she says.

"Lettice and Lovage" will be performed at Beit Hagefen Auditorium, 33 Zionism Boulevard, Haifa on Thursday, Jan. 11 and Saturday, Jan. 13 at 8:30 P.M.; on Tuesday, Jan. 16 at 5:30 P.M.; and on Thursday, Jan. 18 and Saturday, Jan. 20 at 8:30 P.M. For details, call Hazel at 054-539-8196.

What's happening in Haifa

Here's a partial listing of activities and services in Haifa for the English-speaking community:

- AACI counselor - Yanina Musnikow is available every Monday from 10 A.M to 3 P.M . at Merkaz Meda, 131 Hameginim. (04) 856-7638 or ymusnikow@aaci.org.il Information on housing, schools, ulpan, job, immigrant rights, etc.
- AACI absorption volunteer - Laurie Rubin, (04) 825-7690 or rubinesk@tx.technion.ac.il

- AACI (Adult) English Library - 55 Moriah St. (corner of Shimshon) in the Merkaz Oleh Europa building. Mon. and Wed., 9 A.M.-12 P.M.; Tue., 3-5 P.M.
- AACI Haifa Seniors - Millie Powell, (04) 857-0507; Dorothy Fajans, (04) 824-2885
- The Culture Club - Irma Zaslansky, (04) 826-1833
- Emunah - Shirley Weiner, (04) 866-6772
- Hadassah-Israel Oren Chapter - Lee Freeman, (04) 811-0344
- Haifa English Theater - Betsy Lewis Yizraeli, 052-637-0137. www.h-e-t.org
- Moriah Conservative synagogue - (04) 825-1495
- Technion American Medical Students Program - <http://teams.technion.ac.il> University of Haifa International School. www.uhaifa.org
- Young English Speakers - Lisa Kama, 054-7689-338