

mitzvot

Harvesting Smiles

Israel's war with Lebanon may seem like old news, but the damage is still fresh.

JEREMY GELMAN

They hid it well. The houses looked normal, restaurants were full, and children played in the street after school. People smiled and were quick to reminisce about good times. Not a hint of bitterness could be found in their voices.

To a casual observer, this all may seem like a normal December day in the north of Israel, but that was before they took you to the bomb shelters. And that was before you saw the craters in backyards, the charred forests, the nightmare-filled sleep of children and the feeling that one day, the bombs will inevitably return.

These were the things that brought us to Kiryat Shmona, an Israeli city only miles from the Lebanese border. In joining over 500 Jewish college students and young adults this past December for two days of a ten-day program called Leading Up North, the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization's (BBYO) International Board arrived ready to help.

Our service started when we found ourselves on a barren moun-

"WE HAVE COME TO THE LAND TO BUILD IT AND BE REBUILT BY IT."

Israeli Folk Song



tain slope with over 40 busloads of North American teens and young adults. A tour guide told us that the empty acres of land surrounding us had been a lush forest that burned in a fire started by a single Katyusha rocket. It took hundreds of us to replant the trees which fell victim to just one rocket—one of thousands



Jeremy (right) and the BBYO gang at the tree-planting ceremony in the Naftali Forest

that rained on northern Israel for over 30 days this past summer. The mountain slope's vast emptiness was humbling, but the process of replanting an entire section of a forest proved therapeutic. We finally understood that our presence was really making a difference.

Once we were finished helping the land, we set out to help the people. We traveled to the local Jewish Center in Kiryat Shmona and helped staff a children's carnival as part of a community-wide concert called Festival B'Shekel. The carnival seemed like a fun task, with my group working the balloon animal and cotton candy station.

After I handed balloons to a set of 6-year-old twin brothers, their parents thanked me profusely. In broken English, their teary-eyed father told me how one of his boys was having trouble sleeping ever since the bombings began and how neither boy wanted to play outside anymore. But today, they were full of joy, smiling constantly and

demanding cotton candy at a rate that our cotton candy machine from the late 1980s just couldn't handle. All of the carnival activity made it easy to forget the trauma these 3-foot-tall bundles of laughter had to experience when they should have been enjoying a carefree summer break.

Just one short day in Kiryat Shmona helped me to understand the impact of the war far beyond what we all saw on television last summer. It will take years for these kids to get over 30 straight days and nights of hell. It will take decades for forests to grow back and a lifetime for people to stop looking at the sky expecting the next rocket to fall.

But having the chance to join with over 500 North American students and young adults who were dedicated to making a difference showed me that Israel is still in need of healing even when it isn't the top headline on the news. Each of us has a role to play in making it easier for those who should never have to live in terror again. ★

JEREMY, 18, lives in Greenwood Village, Colo. He is currently serving as the Grand Aleph Godol of the Aleph Zadik Aleph, or International President of the men's half of BBYO. For the past seven months, Jeremy has traveled the world, meeting with BBYO members from Los Angeles to Bulgaria and everywhere in between. When his term ends in June, Jeremy will attend the University of Colorado-Boulder.