

A GLIMPSE OF YIDDISHKEIT WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED

A THREE-DAY MEDITATION COURSE ENTITLED "AN ENCOUNTER EXPERIENCE BY THE LIGHT OF THE FULL MOON" WAS RECENTLY OFFERED IN TZFAS. DOZENS OF PEOPLE, YOUNG AND OLD, FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY CAME TO EXPLORE THE MYSTERIES OF THE SOUL AND TO EXPERIENCE THE MAGIC OF TZFAS. * MENACHEM ZIEGELBOIM JOINED THEM, AND ALONG WITH LAWYERS, DOCTORS, AND BUSINESSMEN, HE RECEIVED THE TORAH ANEW. * A FASCINATING ARTICLE ABOUT ASCENT OF TZFAS.

BY MENACHEM ZIEGELBOIM

It was 3:30 a.m., and outside the Ascent Institute in Tzfas by the light of the full moon sat a group discussing *hashgacha pratis, emuna, Igros Kodesh*, the Creator of the world, and related topics. Mumu, a 27-year-old Yemenite from Ohr Yehuda, summed up the phenomenon whereby thousands of young people go on spiritual quests in the Far East: "They're like Berel, who traveled to seek the treasure under the bridge in Prague, not knowing that the real treasure was right in his own house!"

"Look what we have here," he said in astonishment. "Spirituality, *nefesh, neshama, G-dliness*, everything! If people knew they could find it here, they would fill the place up."

I heard about Ascent a long time ago. It's where people are awakened and inspired to a life of Torah and *mitzvos* - especially young people looking for treasures on foreign soil, in cults in India and the Far East. *Mysticism, Kabbala, souls, spirituality* - these are key words that draw the youth to Ascent. If that's what they want, Ascent will provide it!

They hoped for dozens, but only four turned up, "but two out of the four became observant, and one of them now has a beautiful Chassidische family!"

I arrived at Ascent on Thursday afternoon in response to an ad for a "Spiritual Seminar by the Light of the Full Moon." The ad describes a rich three-day program including topics such as: A Jewish View of the Dimensions of Time, Space, and Soul, A Musical Meditative Journey, A Spiritual Hike - Contemplating Nature, Study of Jewish Mystical Texts, A Workshop of Soul-Inspiring Niggunim, Personal Analysis, and Connect to the Rebbe in the Multimedia Center. Of course, behind all the mystical terminology lay... Chassidus! The ad speaks in the young people's

language, promising them the mystical experience they long for, but according to Torah.

About fifty people, mostly young adults, but also some older adults, came to participate, discovering to their surprise that the organizers are religious Jews, Lubavitchers in fact, with large *yarmulkes* and beards.

After orientation, everybody went down to Ascent's *shul*. The lights were dimmed, candles were lit, and *Chassidische* music played in the background. Everybody sat with eyes closed, concentrating on the *niggun*, and our leader, Rabbi Yitzchok Ohrgad, with his dramatic voice took them back to their childhood, to their birth, to *mattan Torah*.

The *niggun* did its thing and everybody's concentration intensified. When our leader asked, "Who connected to the event?" - the *maamad Har Sinai* - some of the participants raised their hands.

The Ascent Institute was founded 19 years ago by three young men: Rabbi Shaul Leiter, Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles, and Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky. None of them dreamed of an institute. All they

wanted was to open a small class, a branch of the Chabad *yeshiva* of Tzfas in which classes would be given in English to those who came to experience the mysticism of Tzfas and were interested in Judaism. The original idea was presented by the *menahel* of the *yeshiva*, R' Rami Antian, who helped Ascent financially for quite some time.

The director of Ascent, R' Shaul Leiter, relates how over the course of six months the three of them prepared a program called "In the Ways of Chassidus," which was supposed to last four weeks. After much effort and lots of advertising, they hoped for dozens of young people, if not hundreds. How many people came? Only four!

"We were so disappointed," remembers Shaul Leiter, "but two out of the four became observant, and one of them now has a beautiful Chassidishe family!"

The three rabbis were most astonished at what happened on the first Shabbos of that program: "Suddenly about fifty English-speaking young people who wanted to learn about *Yiddishkeit* showed up

for Shabbos. After Shabbos they left, and dozens more came the following Shabbos. That's when we realized that the secret to success was short, two- to three-day programs. Not a program that lasts for weeks. We adjusted the program and prepared weekend seminars. They quickly became extremely popular."

This program was actually a prototype. Although there were *kiruv yeshivos* for English-speaking students, they consisted of protracted programs for those wanting serious learning. It didn't meet the needs of those who wanted a glimpse at *Yiddishkeit* with no

Ascent was the first of its kind in Eretz Yisroel, offering a glimpse at Yiddishkeit with no strings attached.

strings attached. Ascent was the first of its kind in Eretz Yisroel.

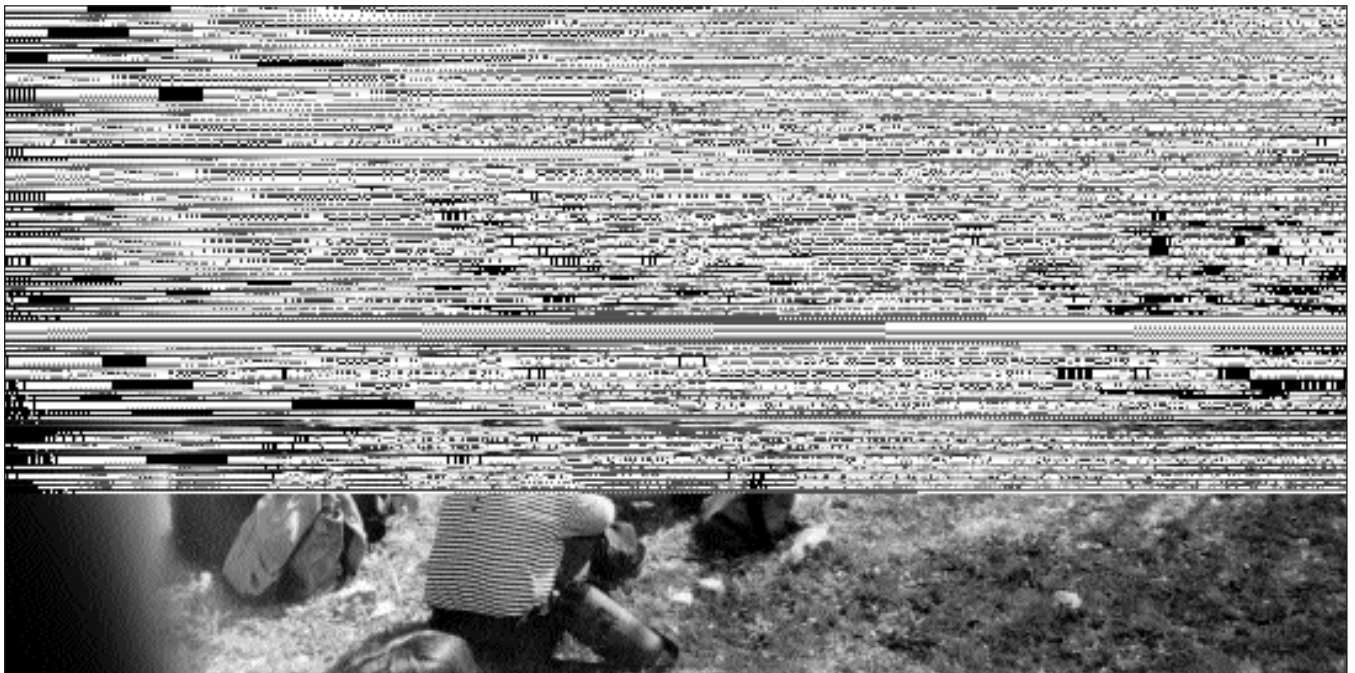
Rabbi Leibel Kaplan, *a'h*, *shliach* in Tzfas, paid the salaries of the three rabbis. However, when expenses grew, Shaul Leiter had to fundraise abroad. He felt his first fundraising trip was unsuccessful, and he wrote to the Rebbe that perhaps they shouldn't have an institute after all. If the Rebbe thought they should continue with the institute, then perhaps they should move it to Yerushalayim, in the center of the country, where there was a greater chance that people would attend.

The Rebbe responded:

To all those who participate in the work of strengthening and disseminating *Yiddishkeit*, who are led by Mr. Yerachmiel, Mr. Moshe Yaakov, and Mr. Shaul Yosef, in Tzfas...

Shalom U'bracha!

I was pleased to receive the good news about your work in disseminating *Yiddishkeit* permeated with *Chassidishe* light and warmth, and that they do this with devotion



and enthusiasm.

We clearly see that activities done with *simcha* and enthusiasm are far more successful.

May you continue with this in a way of increasing and adding light.

If in all locations this work is necessary, all the more so in our Holy Land, "a land which has Hashem's eyes constantly upon it from the beginning of the year until the end of the year," especially in the holy city of Tzfas.

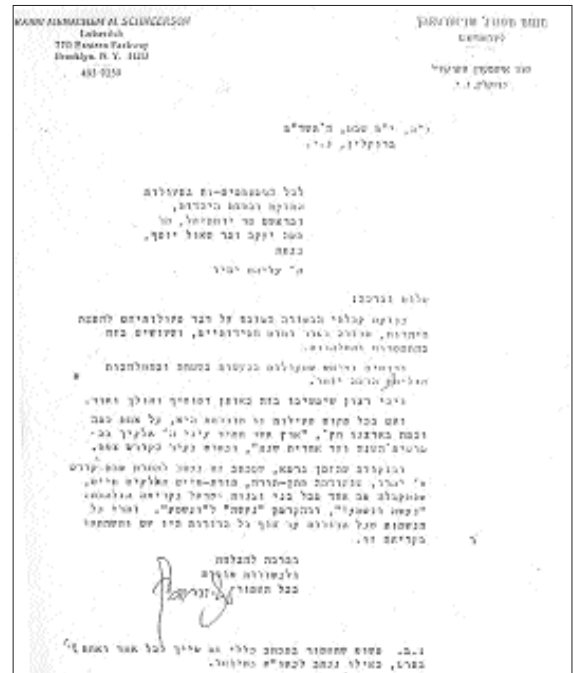
With the added point that the time is auspicious, for this letter was written the day after Shabbos Kodesh Parshas Yisro, whose essential point is *mattan Torah*, the Torah of life from the G-d of life, which was received from the one G-d by all the men and women of Israel with the enthusiastic cry: *Naaseh V'nishma!* And all souls of all generations were there and participated in this cry.

With a *bracha* for success and good news in all the above.

(Signed by the Rebbe)

P.S. Obviously what was written in this general letter was meant for each one individually, as though it were written to each one separately.

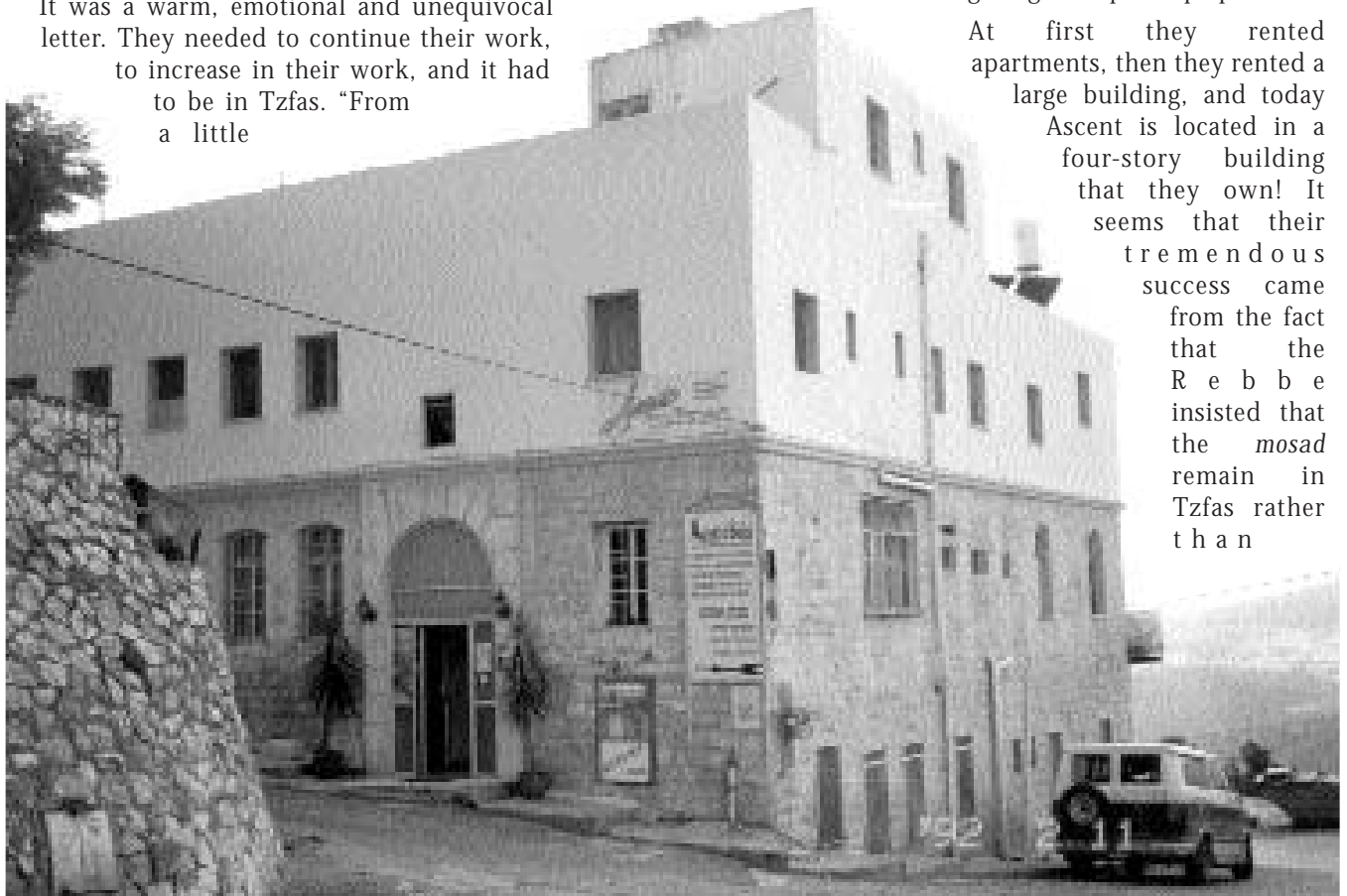
It was a warm, emotional and unequivocal letter. They needed to continue their work, to increase in their work, and it had to be in Tzfas. "From a little



The Rebbe's letter to the directors of Ascent

class in *yeshiva*, the Rebbe turned us into Ascent, an independent *mosad*," says Shaul Leiter. From that point on, things began to pick up speed.

At first they rented apartments, then they rented a large building, and today Ascent is located in a four-story building that they own! It seems that their tremendous success came from the fact that the Rebbe insisted that the *mosad* remain in Tzfas rather than





Yahel Dahan, Hebrew programming director

move to a more central and heavily trafficked area like Yerushalayim.

“It was open *ruach ha’kodesh*,” says Leiter in amazement. “Over the years we saw how Yerushalayim had tremendous competition among all the programs for English-speaking people. We in Tzfas, however, were the only *mosad* around, so everybody who came up north came to us. Nearly all English-speaking Jews come to seek the mysticism and *Kabbala* of Tzfas, and they end up coming to us.”

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Fifteen years passed until Ascent realized that the time had come to translate their success from English to Hebrew, and to provide programs and seminars for the Hebrew-speaking population. This realization was also the result of the huge numbers of young Israelis who upon finishing their army service travel to the Far East in order to seek spirituality and to connect to the soul. The problem is that the young Israelis end up at the wrong addresses. Ascent resolved to jump in and offer them a kosher substitute. The Hebrew-speaking division was established four years ago and is run by R’ Yahel Dahan. “We have seminars once a month by

the light of the full moon, a spiritual idea familiar to any spiritualist.”

How do you know about that?

(Laughing) “I am also a graduate of India...”

Yahel was born on *Kibbutz Dalia* in the north. His parents left the *kibbutz* when he was a child. After he finished his army service he traveled to India in order to connect to spirituality, as he put it, and indeed, he found himself exploring various idolatrous cults. He meditated on the beaches of Goya, where he became acquainted with the idea of the light of the full moon. “It’s considered an auspicious time, and they don’t know that the idea is taken from Judaism: *Kayma sihara bi’shleimusa*.”

So you decided to “import” the full moon to Tzfas?

“Why copy from them if we are the originators?!”

Yahel was deeply into idolatrous cults, but he explains how he felt the Chassidic concept of *isarusa d’leila* [an awakening from Above], in the fullest sense of the term.

“One day I felt a powerful feeling of inspiration wash over me,” he

says. “Within a few days I had returned to Eretz Yisroel, went to Tzfas, and became *frum* with the help of Betzalel Kupchik (who runs the Chabad House in Poona today) and Shlomo Berkowitz (director of the Chabad House in Rosh Pina).

“I went back to India twice after that, together with Betzalel, in order to run programs for young Israelis there. Today I run the programs for Hebrew-speaking people, the seekers of spirituality, as they are called.”

Yahel maintains that the situation today is such that everything is available right here in Israel. “Whoever seeks spirituality doesn’t need to travel anywhere. There are already dozens of mystical festivals, workshops, gatherings, and meditation courses in Eretz Yisroel. There are even a few newspapers that carry information on these popular subjects.

“So we decided to speak their language and advertise our seminars in these papers! We offer varied programs that deal with spirituality, mysticism and *Kabbala*, and there’s a great interest in this. People are thirsty for spirituality and you have to bring them to the well of living



LEARNING WHILE ON A “SPIRITUAL HIKE” IN THE FORESTS OF THE GALIL

water.”

Describe the people who come to Ascent.

“They are usually tourists, backpackers, and people who come to Tzfas seeking spirituality. The people who come to the Hebrew division are all types, of all backgrounds and ages - young and old, intellectual and non-intellectual. There are seventy-year-olds here along with kids right out of the army, and even before the army. Whoever seeks spirituality and wants to get to know his inner soul a bit is greeted happily here.”

Many come in response to ads in the mysticism brochures that can be found all around Eretz Yisroel. Nobody guesses that behind all the catchy ad copy are *frum* folk. Many of them express their shock, to put it mildly, when they see obviously religious group leaders.

In a conversation the first night of the seminar, Varda said she was taken aback when she realized it was Chabad. I asked her if she was disappointed, and she declared, “No, definitely not. The programs here meet our expectations.”

Yahel adds, “The fear of religious people comes from the fear of pressure and coercion. Ascent is the last place to use any kind of force. Everybody is accepted here in a warm and friendly atmosphere. We talk about the inner world that Judaism has to offer and about the inner richness of each *mitzva* and every idea. People find what they are looking for on their own terms, and they soften. The atmosphere quickly warms up and people feel more comfortable with *Yiddishkeit*, which up until then they found strange and threatening.”

I felt the warm atmosphere the very first night. After the spiritual meditation I described earlier, a powerful personal experience for

me, there was a program of Far Eastern music.

Everybody gathered in Ascent’s lower floor. The vaulted ceiling, the old walls, all conveyed a sense of the past. Idan Gal, the drummer, and Nissim Ben Chaim, the guitarist, finished final preparations for their performance tonight. Each of them has a fascinating story to tell.

Idan is from *Kibbutz Dalia*. His religious connection began back in Tashkent with his grandfather. He began putting on *t’fillin* at a certain point. After his army duty he went to the Far East, where he joined various cults. That’s where he encountered Chabad of the Far East, and he became *mekurav* to *Yiddishkeit*.

When Idan returned to Eretz Yisroel, he visited Ascent with his girlfriend. From there it was a short road - he to *yeshiva*, and she to *Machon Alte*. Today Idan is busy in *hafatzas ha’Yahadus* through his Indian drum and cymbals.

At midnight the two musicians played together. A dim purple light faintly lit the vaulted hall. The ambience was just right and the last resistance crumbled. “Fortunate are we, how good is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot,” sings out Nissim’s deep voice. The composition is his own, but soon everyone has learned the song and joined in. Some tunes were familiar. Everybody was sunk deep into stuffed armchairs and many people accompanied the singing with Indian noisemakers. At 3:00 a.m. he finished with “*Ani Maamin ... B’vias HaMoshiach*.”

Now, relaxing into the warm and open atmosphere, people began to talk and to get to know one another. Sarah of Ramat Gan is about 60. She told a string of personal *Igros Kodesh* stories. She even contributed a set of *Igros Kodesh* to Ascent’s library,



Idan Gal Nissim ben Chaim



Rabbi Nissim ben Chaim



Rabbi Ayal Reiss

“in order to bring merit to the many and to give them a taste of the great miracles that occur every hour,” she said.

Nissim, the guitarist, sat down next to me. He has a long, graying beard and he sports a Russian cap. He poured a little *l’chaim*, and then I discovered he isn’t even Russian. He arrived in Eretz Yisroel from Morocco as a child and lived in transit camps until he was sent to learn in Kfar Chabad.

“There, I got a *bracha* from the Rebbe,” he says. I wondered how that happened and he simply said, “I learned in the Kfar that merited *brachos* from the Rebbe, so didn’t the *bracha* ‘stick’ to me? Otherwise, how would I have come back to *Yiddishkeit*?”

After a year of studies in Kfar Chabad, Nissim went to study in an agricultural village where he left *Yiddishkeit*, was drafted into the army, and then left to see the world. He arrived in Columbia where he lived a wanton life. He supported himself by playing in clubs, where he met his wife.

Nissim arrived in New York in 5750 and somebody told him about the Rebbe. He went to 770,



Seeking to unravel the mysteries of the soul



Rabbi Shaul Leiter in conversation with a visitor to Ascent

remaining in Crown Heights for a year, eventually exchanging his music for Jewish compositions with Chassidic content. His wife, Ruti, converted, and today they have a Chassidic home in Chaifa. They go to Tzfas once a month where he runs the musical portion of the seminars.

Nissim finished his story at 5:00 a.m., which is when everybody dispersed, feeling spiritually fortified. *Shacharis* was at 8:00 a.m., followed by a mystical trip between Tzfas and Meron.

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On Friday morning I spoke with Rabbi Ayal Reiss, administrative director of Ascent. Rabbi Reiss has a broad smile and speaks Hebrew and English fluently. He began working at Ascent 8 years ago teaching an English class in Chassidus. With time his job expanded, and today he runs Ascent most successfully.

Rabbi Reiss was born in Tel Aviv. His connection to Chabad began 9 years ago in 5752, after he finished army service. He received his university degree in history and political science. It was during the Gulf War, and his Lubavitcher neighbor, R' Itzik Roter, invited him to a Shabbos meal. Then he got to know Rabbi Yosef Gerlitzky, *shliach* in Tel Aviv, and from there his connection to Chabad grew. After starting to observe *mitzvos*, he went to learn in the Chabad *yeshiva* in Tzfas.

"The idea here is to give people insight into the Jewish-Chassidic world in a pleasant fashion. At first Ascent was geared towards English-speaking people, but now we've opened other divisions to include Hebrew- and Russian-speaking people."

What is the key to Ascent's success?

"We developed an approach that

allows people to participate in a pleasant spiritual experience they can identify with," says Rabbi Reiss, summing it up succinctly. Then he elaborates: "It began with Shabbatons, with tours among the old *shuls* of Tzfas, and with lectures for English-speaking people geared particularly for tourists, backpackers, and foreign students studying in Israeli universities.

"Many *mosdos* send their *chevra* here to get them acquainted with *Yiddishkeit* in an experiential way. People come for Shabbos, enjoy the experience, and then leave. Evidently, the sweet taste of Judaism remains with them and brings them back for more. After a relatively short stay, we suggest that they try a *yeshiva*. Many of them go on to Rabbi Gafni's Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, or the Chabad *yeshiva* in Tzfas or Mayanot in Yerushalayim, and the girls are referred to Machon Alte.

What happens to those who want to get more involved in Judaism?

"We handle the beginners, and then, if somebody wants to, he or she can stay on for a week or two to study at the three to four classes we have each day. They sleep in our guest quarters, which are open all year long."

Here Rabbi Reiss described one of the basic services Ascent offers. Many tourists come to Tzfas to experience its magic and mystery. The Ascent four-story building functions as a guesthouse, providing sleeping accommodations with full room and board at a reasonable price. They also offer classes to tourists and guests that acquaint them with the inner world of Judaism. For the tourist who wants to get to know the spiritual heritage of Tzfas, there's nothing better, and he'll even get a stipend from a special scholarship fund for every

class he attends.

That's Avrohom Avinu's approach!

"Right! A backpacker who reads about us in a guidebook comes here and we offer him a room, and inform him that we have classes on Jewish mysticism."

Do all the people who come want to hear about spirituality and mysticism?

"Not necessarily. Tzfas is a tourist attraction and many tourists come to Ascent merely to take it easy. Many of them are very far from anything Jewish. They tour all of the Middle East - Turkey, Greece, Egypt, and Eretz Yisroel - and in Eretz Yisroel they spend a day or two in Tzfas. They sleep here, get a taste of the inner dimension of Judaism, and sometimes ask to spend Shabbos with us, which might be followed by another week or two. From there, their lives change drastically."

Can you give some examples?

"There are lots of examples. I'll tell you a story: A month ago, a group of mysticism journalists from the U.S. came here. They had a half-day program arranged for them. One of the participants, a religious Jew, suddenly announced that her Jewish spark had first been ignited here 15 years before, when she visited Ascent on a tour of the country. "Over the years I've heard many reactions like: 'Ah, how nice it is to be back here again,' or 'I was here 10 years ago and since then my life has changed.' What they experience here is an authentic Jewish experience that makes a deep impression."

How many people visit Ascent a year?

"About 8,000 people sleep here, and including those who visit but don't stay over, I think it comes to about 15,000 people—maybe more."

Do people stay in touch?

“Some return a second and even a third time. We continue to send out mailings, and we refer our graduates to Chabad Houses around the country. We work closely with certain Chabad Houses. They just have to pick up where we left off. Some Chabad Houses regularly send us guests and even come with their *mekuravim*. In turn, we refer graduates of our programs to them.

Can you give an example?

“Right now Dovid Aziza is here. He runs the Chabad House on Dizengoff Street, and he came here with some of his people. He brought some of his *mekuravim* a year ago, and one of them, a Frenchman, was married to a gentile woman. After attending our program, he left her. He’s come back to visit us, and now has a beard.”

Did you ever encounter Chabad House directors put off by your mysticism and *Kabbala* because it’s not the typical Chabad approach?

“I’m familiar with their criticism. One Chabad House director said,

‘Why should I send you people when you deal with mysticism, like some kind of cult?’

“But it’s really a false comparison to say we deal with mysticism like a cult. What we do is uncover the *p’nimiyus* and light of the Torah. All our programs revolve around

participant receives a questionnaire. Among other things, we ask whether they’re interested in connecting with a spiritual center in their hometown. Those who answer in the affirmative are referred to their local Chabad House. We don’t just give them an address. We get involved by giving the *shliach* background on the person and suggestions on how to work with him.

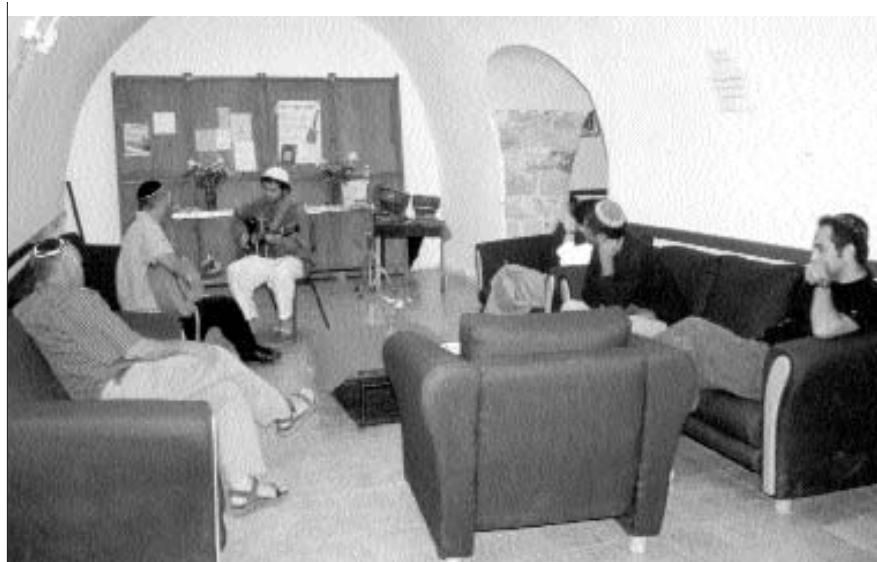
“We recently sent letters to all the Chabad Houses here and told them that each month we have dozens of people interested in joining classes on Chassidus and other Chabad House activities. We asked for lists of their classes and programs, and it’s a shame that we got a very poor response.

“Our lecturers are tops. They are doctors, academicians, scientists, and professionals. The founders of Ascent are academicians. Rabbi Leiter and Rabbi Tilles, as well as myself, are all university graduates.

Recently we had the head scientist of the science ministry attend one of our courses, and he loved it.”



Lunch at one of the seminars



It’s 4:00 a.m. and people are still schmoozing and singing

Chassidus - but in order to attract the people we use mystical, spiritual, and *Kabbalistic* lexicon.

“At the end of our seminars, each

It was Friday morning. The men congregated in the *shul* for *Shacharis*. Results were already apparent - many wore a *kippa* for the first time in their lives. *Davening* is not part of the official program; it simply takes place, and those who want to join are free to do so. Some put on *t'fillin* for the first time since their *bar mitzva*, and *davened* a complete *Shacharis* for the first time in their lives.

While the men *davened*, the women ate breakfast, and afterwards everyone went on a Meditative Nature Hike. A bus took us to the entrance of one of the forests situated between Miron and Tzfas. We walked deep into the forest. This wasn't just a pleasure hike; rather, at some point we reached the Naboria Spring where we learned what a spring is, and what wellsprings of the soul lie buried deep within us, as *Chassidus* explains. We learned to follow the stream.

We came across the remains of an ancient *shul* about 2,000 years old. Many people learned what a *shul* is and what *t'filla* is (according to Chassidus) for the first time in their

lives. Right before their very eyes, they could see that the Jewish religion has endured throughout the upheavals of the generations.

The hikers went to the *kever* of Rabbi Yonason ben Uziel, where they heard about the significance of a *tzaddik's* grave, what can be

At the end of the hike, everybody returned to Ascent to make the final preparations for Shabbos.

The women gathered in the dining room to light Shabbos candles. For most of them it was the first time in their lives that they were doing this.

For the first time in my life I greeted the Shabbos Queen facing the magical mountains of Tzfas. Ascent is located on a mountainside, and one can see the purple mantle covering the mountain slopes. You stand there and imagine how the Arizal stood there with his students and nearly flew off to Yerushalayim to greet Moshiach. This is where the author of "*Lecha Dodi*" stood and composed his poem.

There's no question that the atmosphere of charm and mystery, along with the pure air of ancient Tzfas works its magic on the hearts and souls of the seminar participants.

The Friday night meal is eaten with families in Kiryat Chabad. Rabbi Ayal Reiss says that he has a list of 200 or so families that have



A class on the mystical texts



Rabbi Amram Muell enthralls his audience with Chassidic stories and spiritual adventures

accomplished there, how great is the *tzaddik's* power to pray for salvation for the Jewish people, and the necessity of connecting to a *tzaddik*.

been hosting guests for 18 years nearly every Shabbos. "This is one of the strongest aspects of the seminar. Sometimes a strong connection is forged between the guests and their host families, and even when the guests return home they keep in touch. Naturally, this leads to a stronger connection to *Yiddishkeit*."

Towards midnight, when most of the participants have returned to Ascent, they sit and *farbrenge* and relate Chassidic stories, mostly about the Rebbe MH" M. *Igros* stories are a hit. I guess there is nothing more spiritual and extraordinary than that.

Various interesting programs take place throughout Shabbos, including one called "The Secret to Eternal Happiness," which is given by Rabbi Amram Muell. It is a spiritual tour of the old city of Tzfas. In the afternoon there's a Chassidus class called "The Study of Jewish-Mystical Texts: the Tzaddik as Connecting Intermediary."

The icing on the cake was the Motzaei Shabbos musical program, which included a series of uplifting Chabad *niggunim*, directed by Rabbi Muell. The barriers had come down a while before, and hearts were open and receptive. In this kind of atmosphere, Rabbi Muell does his work wisely, sensitively, and with his signature charm.

"The Intifada came to Tzfas"—

sounds strange? Despite the fact that the upheavals have taken place mostly in far-off Yesha, Ascent has been affected, too. The main effect has been a lower number of students from the U.S. and abroad who come to Eretz Yisroel to study at universities. Reiss says that the number of students studying in Israel has decreased by 20% in comparison to 5 years ago, a fact that hits home at Ascent.

Despite the decrease in visitors, a new department has opened, called Kvutzot. Kvutzot will deal with tourists and guests who come to Tzfas and want to get to know the



Chassidic dance on Motzaei Shabbos after Havdala

city, its mysteries and Kabbalistic secrets. As surprising as it sounds, no organization in the city has taken on the job of dealing with groups of visitors.

Rabbi Leiter says that the new department will be run in cooperation with tourism professionals in the City Council and Department of Tourism. "Every day we get phone calls from groups that want to come to Tzfas but have no one to show them around the city or to speak to them about Judaism and Moshiach.

"We recently attended a meeting at the City Council, to which tourist guides who deal in Kabbala were invited. An artist, a sculptor, a jewelry designer, and a spiritual guide, as well as people from Ascent, came to this meeting. As of now we are the only ones in town who have official permission to guide groups, teach them Judaism, and give them a taste of the spirit of *Kabbala* and *p'nimiyus ha'Torah*."

Ayal Reiss: "Many organizations have heard about us and many of them call and say, 'We have a group coming.' We are prepared for groups of any size. Every Shabbos we are packed with guests who join our activities on Jewish themes.

"The directors of Ascent don't need records to catalogue their work. Hundreds of Jews have taken on Torah and *mitzvos* thanks to Ascent. One story is more amazing than the next."

Yahel Dahan: "I hear many stories about families that came to *Yiddishkeit* and Chassidus because of us. There was a guy who got interested in Judaism and wanted to become a *baal t'shuva*, but his girlfriend refused. They went from one seminar to another, but she was adamant in her position. One day they came here. The atmosphere and the program did their thing and the spark was ignited. Shortly thereafter, she went to study at Machon Alte. Today she is a secretary at Ascent, and has a beautiful Chassidic home.

“We recently had a young couple here who heard about the wonders of the *Igros Kodesh*. They wrote a letter and received an answer that had to do with a wedding; it said ‘*chuppa k’das u’k’din*.’ They told me they had gotten married only a month before. We asked whether a *rav* had been *mesader kiddushin*, and they said no. ‘Were there witnesses at the *chuppa*?’ we asked, and they answered, ‘What do you mean? The hundreds of guests were witnesses...’ Not too long afterwards, they married according to *halacha*.

“We once advertised a spiritual seminar, inviting everybody to attend. The theme was joy. Somehow the ad got on to the bulletin board at Channel 2 and one of the employees there took down the information and brought it to her daughter saying, ‘Lately you’ve been down. Go to this seminar!’

“The girl came to Ascent and today she is fully observant!

“Four or five Jews returned to *Yiddishkeit* at Kibbutz Dalia, where I was born, because of Ascent, and today they too are involved in

outreach work. Some of our staff went through the whole process right here at Ascent, and many of them established fine Jewish homes.”

Ayal Reiss: “One day a girl came here after experiencing the depths of the 49 gates of impurity. Even her name had been given to her by monks in India. After an extended stay here, she left that nonsense behind and went back to Judaism.”

Rabbi Leiter: “On my trips abroad I often meet Jews who ask me if I remember them. I usually

ASCENT’S WEBSITE

Ascent has a website through which its message reaches all over the world. Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles is in charge of the website. He is also the editor and producer of the quarterly publication Ascent puts out, which deals with spiritual subjects, *Kabbala*, mysticism, and, of course, Chassidus.

The website has been up now for three years. Any would-be tourist who plans to visit Eretz Yisroel and Tzfas can find the Ascent site and see that they offer room and board at reasonable rates, as well as classes on mysticism.

What’s on your website?

Rabbi Ayal Reiss: “Chassidus, *Kabbala*, information about Tzfas and all the amenities and programs we offer. We present various aspects of Judaism such as the weekly *sidra*, the significance of the Jewish month from a Kabbalistic and Chassidic perspective, a virtual tour of Tzfas, and more. We’re always adding to and improving our website.”

Rabbi Shaul Leiter: “Unfortunately, today there are dozens, if not hundreds, of sites that present *Kabbala* in a way contrary to Torah. We want to offer authentic *Kabbala* and *p’nimiyus ha’Torah*.

“It’s interesting that the entire history of *Kabbala*, which comes from Tzfas, cannot be found on the Internet. This is why we have already set up two sites that deal with *p’nimiyus ha’Torah*.”

The facts are impressive. Thus far there are, on average, about 30,000 hits a month.

Rabbi Leiter remains dissatisfied with the current situation. “There are millions of people in the world

who want to know about *Kabbala* and mysticism, and want to come to the source - Tzfas. There’s no reason not to get a million hits a month! This is why we are presently working on building a site that will disseminate the wellsprings in a bigger way.

“Our website helps Chabad Houses around the world. People ask via the site about where they can study *Kabbala* or where they can get spiritual help in their area. We refer them to their local *shlich*. Sometimes we hook up tourists who visited Ascent to the *shluchim* in their city, and the *shluchim* continue where we left off. There are many Jews who wouldn’t dare to peek into the world of Judaism if not for the special atmosphere of Tzfas. The *shluchim* can only benefit.”



don't, but after I get to talking I discover that they got acquainted with Judaism, and some of them even turned their lives around to Torah observance, thanks to Ascent."

Ascent is located on the road that leads to the old cemetery of Tzfas, on Rechov HaAri. Ascent's secret to success is its large, professional staff, as Reiss puts it: "Dozens of people work here with *chayus* and tremendous enthusiasm."

R' Leiter runs it all. Before leaving, I went to his office where he shared plans for the future, some of them quite grandiose.

"Thank G-d we've gotten to this point. This building is ours, so we can develop programs, seminars, and lectures, all at low prices. What's left for us to do is focus on the quality of our programs. At the same time, we hope to buy the building next door and connect the two buildings so we can build another long row of guest rooms and double the number of beds. This would really do wonders for us."

R' Leiter, in his down-to-earth style, imagines aloud what Ascent will look like after its expansion. "The open courtyard will be enlarged, and there will be gardens. There will be a little waterfall, and people will be able to sit in this peaceful garden and think and meditate about Hashem."

"We're currently working on

expanding our Torah library. There are many English-speaking Jews who want to learn about Judaism, but we don't have enough books in English. We also want to expand the Hebrew section so that people can find what they need: books on Chassidus, *Kabbala*, Jewish *hashkafa* and *machshava*, and Chassidic



Young people putting on t'fillin for the first time since their bar mitzva

storybooks.

"We also want to improve the multimedia section of the library through computers and Jewish programs, as well as with Jewish videos, so people can see the Rebbe, learn about Judaism, see lectures, etc.

"A third plan is to expand the Kabbala dimension of Ascent. We consulted with Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu and Rabbi Yitzchok Ginsberg, and decided to erect a *Heichal HaKabbala*. It will be a four-story building divided into four sections, corresponding to the four worlds and the four letters of Hashem's name. It will accommodate up to 1,000 people a day, and we anticipate many tourists who will come to see, hear, experience, and learn the 'secrets of the secrets' associated with *p'nimiyus ha'Torah*.

Tzfas is synonymous with *Kabbala*. Tzfas is the source of *Kabbala*. This is where the Rashbi and the Arizal disseminated *Kabbala*."

What about funds?

"Most *mosdos* that close down as a result of lack of funds usually have other problems, as well. Not that we don't have money problems. In fact, the main problem here is money. But we keep on planning and developing the place, while anticipating the revelation of Moshiach at any moment. It definitely goes hand in hand."

You were the one who wanted to close the place 18 years ago because you were embarrassed to fundraise, and now you're working on plans that cost

millions!

"The real answer is that we see the Rebbe's *ko'ach*. Over the years I've seen that when you proceed in the right way, to the right people, with the right dream, and with the Rebbe's support, then all obstacles disappear."