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HOMEPAGE

Miami's young Jewish leaders find a sense of belonging as Israel marks 75-year milestone

BY DANIEL SHOER ROTH

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Young Jewish leaders from Miami experience Ethiopian culture in Israel





Young leaders from the Greater Miami Jewish Federation's Israel 75 Mission had a chance to learn Ethiopian dance during a visit to Beta Israel Village, a center in Kiryat Gat that educates young people about Jewish Ethiopian culture, heritage and traditions.

BY DANIEL SHOER ROTH



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JERUSALEM

As the Russian military offensive continued in his native Ukraine, Gabriel, a 20-year-old soldier in the Israel Defense Forces, shared a story of hope. He emigrated 2 1/2 years ago with the assistance of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which helped him get settled in a place where he has no family.

His poignant story — on the eve of Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance for fallen soldiers and victims of terror — drew tears from the audience, a delegation of 800 people participating in the Jewish Federation of Greater Miami's mission on the 75th anniversary of the independence of Israel. The Federation helps fund the program helping Gabriel.

Listening to the soldier, Josh Kligler, a 39-year-old Miami Beach lawyer, pulled out his phone to search for a quote from Hillel the Elder, one of the most influential rabbis in Jewish history, that reminded him of the Ukrainian soldier's account: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

"That's why we're here," said Kligler, among a group of 86 young professionals, ages 20 to early 40s, on the Miami Mega Mission in Israel this week to learn about culture, tradition, current events, history, connection.



Members of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation's Young Leadership Division at the Beta Israel Village, in Kiryat Gat, on Monday April. 24, 2023 Beta Israel is a term used to identify Ethiopian Jewry. Daniel Shoer Roth



A visit to the greenhouses of the Northern Negev Desert offered Miami Mission participants a comprehensive insight into advanced Israeli high-tech agriculture. Daniel Shoer Roth dshoer@miamiherald.com

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Michael Wagner, a 38-year-old financial advisor, is also finding a purpose on the journey. He graduated from the Young Leadership Division and joined the Federation's Board of Directors. He also is co-chair of the Mega Mission.

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“The Federation has been really open and supportive in putting younger people in positions of responsibility,” Wagner said. “There are people in this bus that will get involved and rise within the Federation,” he added, noting the friendships made on the trip. They hope that back in Miami, those friendships among young professionals will promote philanthropy and community engagement.

[**KNOW MORE: ‘Invigorated, educated, inspired’: 800 Miami Jews strengthen faith on a visit to Israel**](#)

Rabbi Adam Gindea of the Center for Jewish Life, who accompanies one of the two buses with young professionals, explained that “the Miami community is uniquely pro-Israel. This ushers in a very exciting energy” to foster a deeper connection to their ancestral homeland.



Young Jewish leaders from Miami attend a ceremony to commemorate Yom Ha'zikaron, Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terror. Carlos Chattah *Greater Miami Jewish Federation*

JEWISH INVOLVEMENT IN THE U.S.

A 2014 Jewish demographic study in Miami-Dade, commissioned by the Federation, showed that 71% of Jewish households in the county have someone who has visited Israel, and 62% report a strong emotional attachment to Israel. These were the highest percentages of any Jewish community in the U.S., Federation officials said.

Still, young adults are significantly less likely to be affiliated with a religious group, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, which found that, particularly in the U.S., “younger people are less likely to claim

a religious identity.”

The Federation’s youth engagement model is not synagogue-oriented, Rabbi Gindea said, but philanthropic and social, providing “Jewish experiences” to those who yearn for them, such as connection to the Jewish state.





At the Israel Defense Forces Search and Rescue Training Base at Zikim, young Jewish leaders from Miami performed a joint exercise with IDF soldiers of the Home Front Command for a “search and rescue mission.” Daniel Shoer Roth dshoer@miamiherald.com

ISRAEL IDENTITY

Karine Nissim Hirschhorn, a 40-year-old writer and entrepreneur, defined the Miami mission as an exploration of identity.

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“With the rise of antisemitism comes a hesitation to be Jewish out loud,” Nissim Hirschhorn said. “But the Jewish American story is deeply seated in the escape of hatred. Hatred is not easily unlearned but it can be chipped away at with the expression of our unique stories as Jews and the need for a safe space that protects our right to exist, first, and then to thrive.”



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Israel. Part 1. The Identity Question.

Israel. I am in the identity question.

I was born in Israel but raised in America. To a mother who was raised in Italy and a father who was raised in Israel. My grandparents immigrated from Iran to Israel before it was a state. My extended family was all over Europe. Yet I am American.

I am "Americanized." A confused identity. As a child, I was Israeli in America. But also Persian. A little Italian too. And not really any of it. I was everything. And nothing.

Often asked "Where are you from?" Because my hair is dark. And my skin. And my eyes. But I have always been Jewish. Indisputably. Even though I didn't always eat or speak or celebrate the way the Jews around me did.

I grew up hearing stories about the Israeli army. But not so much from my father. Who almost died. Twice. Serving his country. In multiple wars.

I grew up cooking the Persian foods. And Israeli. And Italian. I ate well. Now I've been seasoned and diluted by the diaspora of my growth. I've spread into the corners of myself and the world. I'm all the things. And with many years in between. And the hurt of life.

On the eve of Israel's Memorial Day, Yom Hazikaron, I think about grief. Collective grief. And how sacred it is to mourn in community for those who have fallen at the hands of hatred or in service of the only place that welcomed them. And how important it is to remember.

Grief is a reminder of life. To be able to live is a privilege and a right. And with space in between this and that. Them and us. There is still a central truth. We are one. The rivers of bloodshed deposit in the same pool of pain. Let us speak up against hatred by revealing our nuanced authentic selves. Layers and layers of the history of pain and survival. And rebirth. Let us know deeply in our hearts that we all seek love. But first. To be seen. For what we were born into. And what we become. The dove flies with an olive branch. But she only sings to those who will listen.

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ESCAPE STORY

Geula Hadarai told the young Miami leaders of her journey on foot, at the age of 8, from Ethiopia to Sudan, and later her arrival in Israel. Hadarai runs Beta Israel Village, an Ethiopian experiential cultural conservation center in Kiryat Gat, which also receives support from Miami Jews through the Jewish Agency.

The center combines farming and activities to educate about the culture, heritage and traditions of Ethiopian Jews, also called Beta Israel, who face discrimination and prejudice because of their race and religious practices,

Hadarai said. During centuries of living in Africa, these Jews had no access to the Talmud or the rabbinic codes of Jewish law, making their traditions unique.

TRADITION AND CULTURE





Julia Platt, 24, from Miami, participates in an activity to experience Ethiopian Jewish culture and tradition in Kiryat Gat, Israel, on Monday April. 24. Next to her is Geula Hadarai, a leader of the Beta Israel Village. Daniel Shoer Roth dshoer@miamiherald.com

That fact delighted Julia Pratt, a 24-year-old Brickell resident, who volunteered to wear typical Ethiopian Jewish clothing and participate in a social coffee-making ritual.

“Seeing other Jewish traditions, customs and rituals is inspiring,” said Pratt, who works at a Jewish nonprofit. “We are going to leave Israel as better persons with a stronger sense of Jewish identity and connection to the land.”

Later, they visited The Salad Trail, in the northern Negev desert, where they observed advanced agricultural technologies, and went to the IDF Search and Rescue Training Base at Zikim. At the base, they participated in an exercise with IDF soldiers of the Home Front Command, a “search and rescue mission” in a mobile simulator.




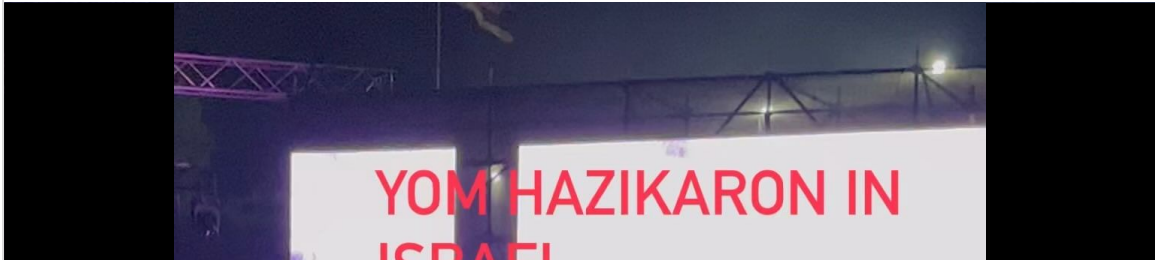
And after visiting a moving English-language Day of Remembrance ceremony attended by more than 7,000 people, mostly Jews from North America, the young leaders from Miami shared their feelings on the return bus ride.

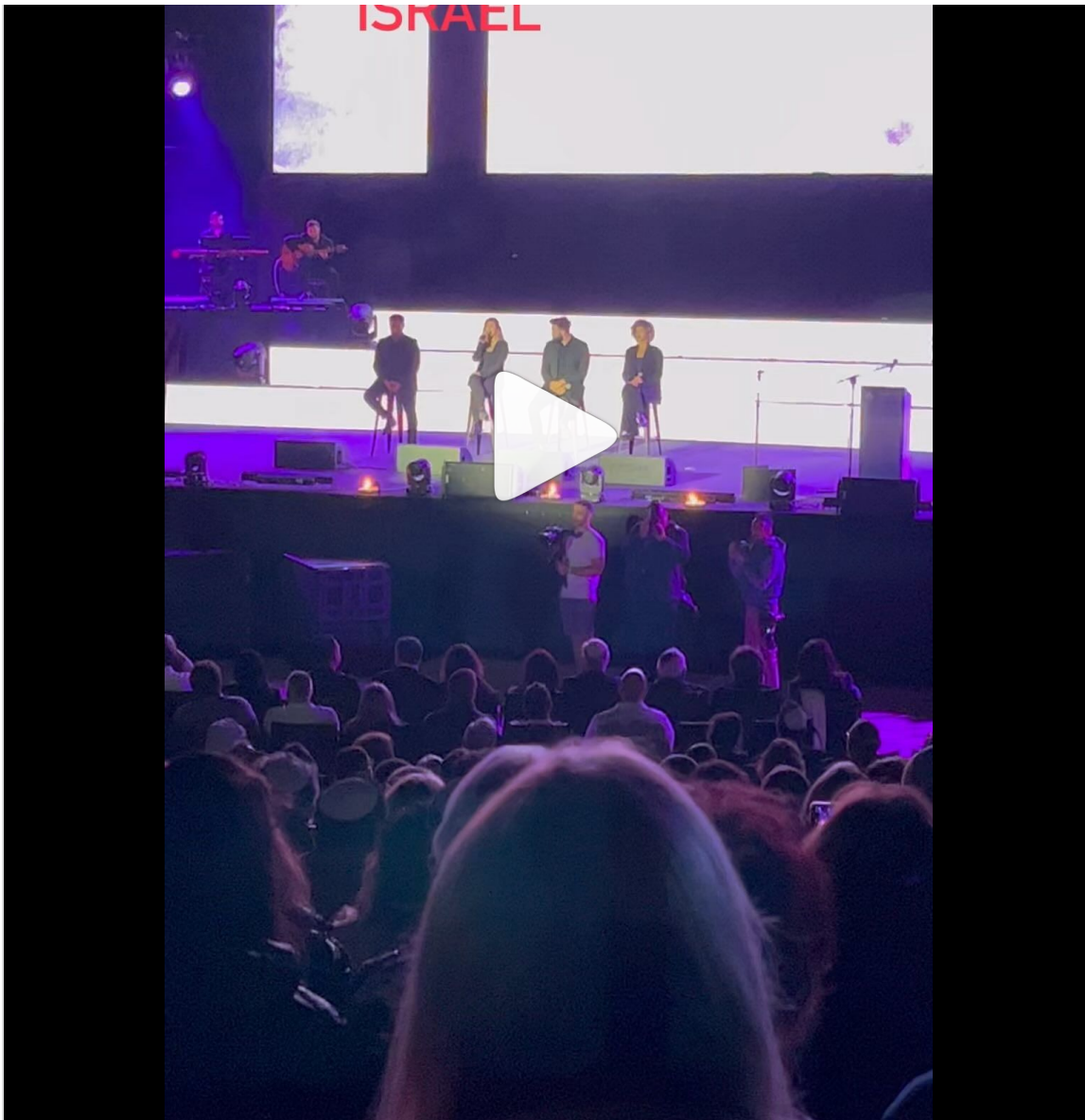
They spoke of pain and anguish, pride and a deep sense of belonging.

And many pledged “to do more for the Federation” when they return home.

Daniel Shoer Roth, an editor for el Nuevo Herald, is participating in the Greater Miami Federation’s mission to Israel and is reporting on the delegation and events.

 **danielshoerth**
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A video thumbnail showing a banner with the text 'YOM HAZIKARON IN ISRAEL' in red capital letters. The background is dark, possibly a stage or event space.



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Israel 75 Erev Yom Ha'Zikaron Memorial Day program in Latrun with MASA Israel journey participants from around the world. More than 7,000 Jewish, mostly from North America, including [#israel75miamimegamiission](#), came together in a moving ceremony honoring Israel's fallen soldiers and victims of terror. [#israel](#) [#latrun](#) [#yomhazikaron](#) [#jews](#) [#masaisrael](#)

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DANIEL SHOER ROTH

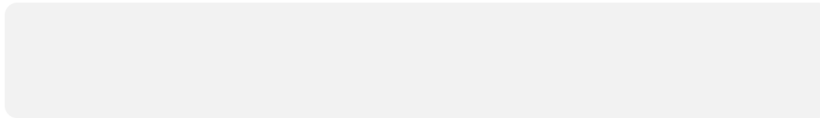


305-376-2167

Daniel Shoer Roth es un galardonado autor, biógrafo, periodista, cronista y editor con más de 20 años en la plantilla de el Nuevo Herald, donde se ha desempeñado como reportero, columnista de noticias, productor de crecimiento digital y coordinador de Acceso Miami. Hoy es el Editor de Sociedad y Servicio Público para el Nuevo Herald y the Miami Herald.

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