



Repairing the World

Nitai Schrieber, the founder of the Gvanim Association, is applying an insight that many have forgotten - in order to improve the periphery, you have to live in the periphery.

Parents of toddlers, families-at-risk, people with disabilities, elderly people from the Kavkaz, and members of the Ethiopian community – all enjoy the services of the Gvanim Association operating in Sderot. Nitai Schrieber, member of the urban kibbutz Migvan, started the Gvanim Association 16 years ago as part of a social revolution led by him and friends in the city. Gvanim, which is run today in conjunction with Barak Bitnun, initiated and manages tens of social projects such as a center for early childhood detection of developmental problems, programs for children and youth-at-risk, a center located in a neighborhood of immigrants from the FSU, which helps young adult strengthen their identity and integrate, and another center who facilitates connections between young adults in the city and potential employment and academic opportunities.



The beginning, 23 years ago, was modest. Schrieber, who was born in kibbutz Nirim and served in the army in the Shaldag commando forces, arrived to Sderot as part of a six member group who came to found the urban kibbutz. The members of the community were living in crowded apartments in housing projects and were running joint-household chores. Their aim was to build a real partnership with the people who were on the fringes of Israeli society, not as a national service or as a temporary stay, but as permanent residents. This did not go without suspicions on behalf of the residents who possessed bad connotations towards the term kibbutz. During that time, the members bought land in the city and built houses. Today the suspicions are history, but the battle of Sderot is still far from over.

Approximately 30% of Sderot's population is on welfare. If that is not enough, the city had plenty of alternative reasons to collapse under the pressures of reality over the past decade. After struggling to rise from a weak starting point as a tent city, Sderot absorbed thousands of immigrants from the Kavkaz, essentially doubling its population – a result that is a blessing in itself but devastating when if the city lacks the adaptive infrastructure to absorb the new residents. Since the new immigrants needed substantial support, the city sunk again into difficulties. In addition to this, the horror of the kasam rockets crushed the soul and body of the city's residents year after year. "Sderot is a strong settlement, but with challenges," says Schrieber, today 49 years old, married and father of four children who were raised in the city under continuous rocket attacks. "The kasam rockets have affected us all. It is an ongoing trauma that is still present in our lives."

If Sderot survived all of the difficulties and somehow came out stronger, it is to the credit of the model developed by Schrieber and his friends. In spite of all the difficulties that Sderot faced, the city has revealed a surprising resilience because of its strong sense of community. One of reasons for the strong community, even if it is not the only one, is the activities of strong collective communities such as the

urban kibbutz where Nitai is a member, and a large collective of religious people in the city, which developed many dominant community services. The secret of success is that Gvanim puts Sderot in the center and not itself. In this way, it succeeds in attracting other players in the city to cooperate. “Gvanim deals with cultivation,” says Schreiber. “The secret is the organizational culture that enables development. My contribution is that more people will think in terms of partnership instead of competition. This is why we sleep well at night.”

The partnership that Schreiber is talking about, has become so central in the life of the city, which Gvanim today has a central part in running as does Afikim BaNegev, which was established by the religious collective. In the era of the previous mayor, Eli Moyal, there were even claims that Sderot is actually managed by a forum of the active collective communities in the city and the city’s executive director has given up on elected officials.

Now, Schreiber aims to expand his model of residency and social activity through a new umbrella organization called Rikma. This organization is in fact a supportive network of about 100 collective communities who are spread in the geography and social periphery of Israel. Some of the communities are religious; others were started by graduates of the youth movements or by communities of Kavkazis and Ethiopians. The funding for the Rikma activity where Nitai is the co-executive director with Shlomo Klein, comes from 5 foundations: the Jewish Agency, JDC, Oran foundation, the Gandyr foundation, and Magbit Canada.

“I am trying to give meaning to my life through contributing to society and dedicating my life to social activities,” says Nitai Schreiber. In 2008, the Gvanim Association won the Speaker of the Knesset prize for quality of life, but refused to accept as a sign of protest towards the security situation in the city. “How can we accept a prize on quality of life when we can’t even feel safe or send our kids to school?”

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