

Israel's birthday means nostalgia for some and big plans for others

by **Elaine Durbach**
NJN Bureau Chief

Celebrating Israel's birthday at the Green Lane Y in Union on Wednesday, May 3, was a bitter-sweet experience for Neustadter family of Elizabeth. Nine-year-old Monica, who had just performed with the Jewish Educational Center's elementary school choir, pointed out that it would be her last chance to do so at a celebration like this. "Next year we'll be in Israel," she said.

She and her parents, Penina and Adam, and her three brothers are going on aliya either in July or August. "We don't know yet exactly when we'll be flying," Penina said. "But we're very excited. We've been planning to do this for about five years. And next year, yes – we'll be celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel."

Sharing their pleasure at the party – but also feeling a twinge of nostalgia for their own childhood experiences of such celebrations in Israel, were Shirley and Eytan Naftali, both transplanted Israelis who live now in Elizabeth. But they will be seeing the Neustadters in Israel soon enough, when they go over later this year for their son's bar mitzvah celebration.

Amid all the festivity, Arie Halpern was sorely missed. The philanthropist, who died this past January, together with his brother Sam initiated annual celebration of Israel's birthday at the YM-YWHA of Union County three years ago, as a shared event with the Jewish Federation of Central New Jersey.

But that mixture of sadness and gratitude seemed apt, even the day after Yom Hazikaron, the memorial for those lost in Israel's wars. Last year the celebration was on the eve of Yom Ha'atzmaut, bridging the two observances, but this year – to be early enough for children to share in the festivities, it was moved to the end of the day.

"The Halperns gave us half the funding that first year, and they did it again last year," Y executive vice president Bryan Fox recalled, as the party wound down last week. "It was them who urged us to have the Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration here, on this side of the community." Judging by the turnout, a cross-section of all ages, Jewish denominations, and levels of community involvement, the idea fell on fertile soil.

Sam Halpern, who was present at the celebration, and his wife Gladys cosponsored the event this year together with fellow survivors Sol and Clara Kramer, and also with Gregg and Donna Rothstein, all of Elizabeth.

Opening the event, Gordon Haas, chair of the federation's Jewish Community Relations Council, encapsulated the mixed emotions of the day. "Israel has continued to flourish beyond the wildest dreams of its founders," he said. "But its astounding achievements have been hard won."

He recalled the 6,000 people who lost their lives in the 1948 conflict, one percent of the whole population at the time. To put it into perspective, he pointed out that a similar loss in the United States would mean 3 million deaths. But on this occasion, as in Israel the day before, the focus shifts to celebration. "The joy is tempered and strengthened by the pain that mingles with it," he said.

Determined to engage the children in that joy, three youth directors from the JEC drew them into the event's activities. Erica and Jason David set up two tables of craft activities in the adult lounge, and had youngsters adorning maps of Israel armed with coloring pens, glue and sequins. In the Gering Hall, where Israeli musician Sandy Shmueli and his band were filling the room with rollicking folk favorites, Mitch Rich was seeing to it that children joined in the dancing. "It's a *simcha*, a celebration, and – though we also need to bear in mind the sadness – it's good that they feel the happiness in their bodies," he said.

Giving the *d'var* Torah for the evening, Rabbi Avrohom Herman of the JEC posed the question why God had Moses lead his people away from Egypt, where the Nile River made survival relatively easy, to Canaan, where there could never be any certainty when the next rain would come. "Why, instead, didn't He just give them Egypt?" he asked.

Perhaps, he suggested, it was precisely because of that hardship, and the constant need for help. "In Eretz Yisroel the

Jews will always have to look to Hashem for their salvation,” he said. “It was true then, and we realize it’s true now in more ways than rain.” Thinking of all those who’ve sacrificed their lives for the country, he said, it’s clear that there is a never-ending need for His miracles to enable the country to prevail. Herman prayed for “total salvation” for Israel, “so that in our lifetime we may see Jews living there in peace and security.”

Elaine Durbach can be reached at edurbach@njewishnews.com.

Pictures:



Decorating maps of Israel at the Central New Jersey Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration are, from left, siblings Esriel, Mattisyahu, Avigayil, and Lilly Dittus, and Hannah Swissa, Maria Bangiyeva, and Molly Aflalo.



(Not published in the NJN)
More map decorating!



Marcia Steinberg, left, with her son Avi on her lap, and Rachel Brown, with her daughter Sarah and friend Chaviva, listen to the music at the Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration at the Green Lane Y.

(pic not available)

Shirley Naftali and her baby Reut, the youngest of her five, enjoy the Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration at the Green Lane Y.