At the Joint Israeli Leadership Program in the Jezreel Valley, participants understand that to advance social discourse about partnership, there first needs to be partnership. And that is exactly what these idealistic high-school graduates — Jews and Arabs, native Israelis and new immigrants, religious and secular, Muslims, Christians, Circassians, Druze and Bedouin — are doing: partnering for change.

The Midrasha (college) is the only leadership program in Israel intended not merely for high-school graduates in the year or two before starting their military service. Rather, it is open to anyone who seeks to prepare for an adulthood that embraces diversity and values tolerance. During an intense six-month period of living and learning together, it’s inevitable that the program will prepare the ground for meaningful friendships, as well.

Participants study philosophy, politics, leadership, Hebrew and Arabic, and travel together around the country to volunteer and get to know Israeli society in all its diverse facets. It’s the first step in what the program hopes will be a lifelong journey of contribution, commitment, and the creation of a new kind of leadership for and among all the social, national, religious, and cultural groups in Israel.
Cracking the Glass Ceiling in the Sky

Nechama Spiegal Novak isn't only broken the sound barrier. She's also broken the glass ceiling. Just 6 percent of the world's pilots are women; in Israel, that number is just under 1 percent. In the case of this pilot, she's a minority within a minority: Spiegal Novak is the first ultra-Orthodox female pilot to fly for the country's national airline.

Nechama first stepped into the cockpit at age 17; by 21, she already had her commercial flying license. But she had her sights set even higher: becoming a pilot for El Al. For this soon-to-be mother of six, nothing was going to stop her, although she's honest about the challenges she's faced on the way up.

When you set a precedent, she says, "You yearn for a professional mentor. There's no-one to turn to with questions or to share concerns, because you're the first."

"I have six children, and at the height of my pregnancy, I had the most difficult time. It was so hard because you have no-one to talk to about your problems."

"In Israel, the difficulties are specific to being a female pilot. But they are also universal for any working mother," she adds.

"Many of my challenges are no different to those an ultra-Orthodox female computer programmer faces in a large company."
"My status is that of a lone soldier, but the last thing I am is alone." - Ben Levinger

Ben Levinger is a Hungarian who spent a year of his childhood in Israel. That year made quite an impression: When he finished high school, he determined to return to Israel and join the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a lone soldier. On the one hand, he left his Hungarian family behind. On the other, he was welcomed into a new family, that of Yehudit and Ofer Zandany of Kibbutz Ashdot Ya’akov Meuhad.

Today there are more than 5,000 lone soldiers in the IDF, most of them young men and women who feel a deep sense of belonging to the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and volunteer for military service in Israel. Many come from families where there is a tradition of service, and are expected to serve, but the Zandany family is one of many Israeli families who welcome these lone soldiers with open arms, a warm heart, and a home-cooked meal whenever they’re off their base. Indeed, when their soldiers arrive on the weekends, Yehudit and Ofer set a table that stretches from the kitchen to the far end of the dining room, around which they, their four grown children, and all fourteen of the lone soldiers they’ve “adopted” happily squeeze. It’s a table this special family will be setting for a long time to come: Long after their service is over, these soldiers continue to visit the Zandany family, the first family they had in their new home.
In 2019, millions of Israelis fell in love on the same night: The night of the Israeli finals for the Eurovision Song Contest. And millions of Israelis can't be wrong: before long, the whole world was enchanted by a very special group of Israeli musicians.

The Shalva Band is a project of The Shalva Center, one of Israel's leading nonprofits for the support of disabled children and their families. Through its band, made up of eight professional musicians with disabilities, Shalva works to promote awareness of people with disabilities and to facilitate their integration into society.

Over the years, The Shalva Band has performed on numerous stages in Israel and around the world, inspiring audiences wherever it goes. It was even the official band of the President of the State of Israel, and was the house band for the Eurovision Center in Tel Aviv. In undeniably musical talent on the one hand, and its example of the resilience of the human spirit on the other, made for a winning melody.

On account of the Sabbath observance of some of its members, The Shalva Band eventually decided, in a show of unity and mutual respect, to withdraw itself from the Eurovision contest. Nonetheless, in recognition of their success, they were invited to perform in the second Eurovision semi-finals with a song about a million dreams. When they were done, the cheers could be heard around the world: It was the sound of millions of dreams coming true.

Shalva: Tranquility that Stirs the Heart

Yoav Alon
Thousands of Voices – One Nation

Imagine 12,000 people standing side by side, all singing the same song. A song so beautiful that it tugs the heartstrings, and an effect so powerful it makes the mind shiver. Now imagine that same mass of singers, all singing in unison, all with one voice. An event that tugs the heartstrings, and an effect so powerful it blows the mind. And now imagine right at the center of this swaying mass of singers, none other than the President of Israel. And as you probably also imagined—he's singing the loudest of all.

In the life of a president, there are many exciting and inspiring moments. Few, however, can approach the sense of excitement and inspiration that prevailed at Kululam, the largest public singing event in the country, hosted by the Office of the President in 2018. Held in honor of Israel’s 70th anniversary, the event invited thousands of Israelis from every place, every background, and every worldview to put aside their differences for the sake of a song, and to distill the essence of a presidency for which partnership has always been the defining purpose.

Led by popular Israeli singer Shlomi Shabbat, the crowd sang a much-loved song by the iconic lyricist Naomi Shemer, known for her words’ ability to express a country’s emotions. As those 12,000 Israelis sang together, they created harmony both in song and among each other, and showed that the sound of Israeli unity is music to everyone’s ears.

Amit Sha’al
כדי לנפץ דעות קדומות די לפעמים במבט אחד מקרוב. עת بشן גורט הופיע לראשונה בבית המשפט השריף, הוסיפה הלילה עם המילים: "ĳהחיינו". גורט, איש חסידות גור מירושלים, הוא החרדי首个 התמנה כפרקליט מטעם המדינה.

יידרשו אולי עוד שנים עד שהבחירה המקצועית של גורט תהפוך לדבר שבשגרה, אבל עם כל יום שעובר, הגשר שנבנה מעצם היותו של גורט במשרה começar לSSFWorkbook תחת רגליים הולכים בו – בשני הכיוונים.

גורט מבהיר שהוא איננו נציג של עולם הפרקליטות בעולם החסידות, או להפך, ושעם זאת די那样 הוא מתווך את חוויותיו מנקודת מבטו הייחודית כדי לטלטל מחשוריים בשני הצדדים. והאם הוא עצמו נתקל בקושי בנוגע לבחירה המקצועית יוצאת הדופן שלו? לדברי גורט, נהפך הוא. בקהילה שממנה בא, הוא זוכה למן ההתחלה לתגובות חיוביות, ואכן בפרקליטות המדינה הוא התקבל מיד בזרועות פתוחות. ובנוגע לעתיד הוא אומר: "אם פעם אף חרדיה לא צועדו במסדרונות הפרקליטות, היום צועדים כמה וכמה, וזו תופעה שתצבר תאוצה.

When Pinchas Gurt first appeared in the Supreme Court, the judge welcomed him with the Shehecheyanu ("Who has given us life"), a Jewish prayer recited on special occasions and to express gratitude to God for new experiences. And indeed, for those present, the experience was altogether new: Gurt, a Gur Hasid from Jerusalem, was the first ultra-Orthodox Israeli ever to be appointed as a state attorney.

It will take many more years until Gurt's choice of profession will stop raising eyebrows, but with each passing day, his presence in the courts builds a bridge of mutual awareness and acceptance. Gurt insists that he did not set out to be the voice of the Hasidic community in the legal, secular, world; nor, for that matter, does he see himself as the representative of the Israeli legal system in the Hasidic community to which he belongs. Rather, he believes it is sufficient to mediate his professional experiences from his unique point of view. If that causes barriers on both sides to crack just a bit — all the better.

"If once upon a time, no Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) person ever walked the corridors of the justice system, today, we're seeing more and more of them in these halls",  says Gurt. "It's a phenomenon that will only gain momentum."
At the Hinam Center in the Arab village of Abu Ghosh, in a stone structure more than one hundred years old, a group of men and women, Arabs and Jews, and religious and secular Israelis come together to read texts. Not just any texts: The Koran, the Torah, and other religious writings. And by this very act, they’ve established – in both theory and practice – a different type of study hall. A study hall for tolerance.

At the Hinam Center, everyone of every religion, every nationality, and every gender – is invited to study together, and to learn from one another. When posterity marvels at this place, the legacy it evokes is of the readiness, openness, and eagerness to learn that has enabled Arabs and Jews, and seculars and religious, to come together. In a practice nicknamed “barefoot reading”, they approach texts without reference to prior knowledge, and without the help of an interpretive tradition. Rather, they search for a raw and authentic encounter, the kind that leaves you with food for thought.

At Hinam, there is no attempt to resolve disputes or patch over disagreements. Instead, the only goal is to get to know one another. Politics, like casts, are left at the door. Everyone enters in his or her natural state, as curious, knowledge-seeking people. In a country as small as it is diverse as this, learning and search for knowledge can be a very good thing, as the growing, thriving community that has sprung up around Hinam makes clear.
The New Face of Israeli Academia

Rosalie Lipsh-Sokolik from Kfar Chabad, Shir Tobiana from Haifa, and Rim Al Assam from Tel-Sheva are three of 49 doctoral students in the prestigious Ariane de Rothschild Women Doctoral Program, a project of the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation which was created to revolutionize, revalorize, and revolutionize the role of women in higher education. Together, they are the new face of Israeli higher education and a reminder that, with enough will power and courage, social conventions can be overcome.

Promoting equal opportunities for women in academia and increasing the number of women — particularly those from Israel’s social and geographical periphery — studying for advanced degrees is a top priority of the State of Israel. The Ariane de Rothschild Program, which partners with five of the country’s leading research institutions, awards scholarships and research grants to promising female doctoral students from every background, geographical region, and religion in Israel in order to support their academic pursuits.

Take Rim, the first Bedouin woman to graduate with both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in computer science from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. When not engaged in writing and research, Rim volunteers for three different nonprofits that help Bedouin high-school students envision and prepare for an academic future of their own.

The Ariane de Rothschild Program believes that diversity enriches all areas of life in Israel, including its college campuses. The program is another chapter in a long story of determined efforts to create a better society and state, a chapter that 49 women are writing as we speak.
Knowledge is Power - to Connect Together

They say knowledge makes it possible to connect the dots. At CONNECTION, they do much more than that: CONNECTION is an initiative for boys and girls aged 12-14 from the Jewish settlement of Misgav and the nearby Arab village of Salame who share a love for robotics. Watching them at work in their studio in Misgav, surrounded by the robots they’ve built — and hearing them at community meetings, presenting technological solutions to local challenges — one can’t help but be struck by how a passion for learning, collaboration, and innovation seems strong enough to overcome barriers. Strong enough, too, to raise these teens’ self-confidence, and to build bridges between cultures and peoples.

Unsurprisingly, it is precisely these partnerships between different cultures and peoples that yield the most impressive results. Last year, CONNECTION was selected to represent Israel at the FIRST robotics competition in the United States, hosted by the world’s leading nonprofit for the promotion of STEM education.

Of course, for these kids, the most prestigious international robotics competition for youth is hardly the pinnacle. It’s almost certainly just the beginning.
We stir both our histories together in a single pot", says Dafi Kremer. "Her shish-barak soup with my kreplach, my kugel with her kubeh. We each contribute something, and the result is more delicious for it."

When Dr. Muzna Bishara, a dentist by training, and Kremer, a chef and catering-business owner, discovered that they share a love for the study of their people's food history — Kremer, by way of the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, and Bishara by way of Ibn Sina, one of the most significant thinkers of the Islamic Golden Age — they decided to join forces for a cause. All they needed? A bigger table.

At the women's joint meal adventure, Jews and Arabs come together to taste thirteen different dishes, all derived from the histories and cultures of both peoples. Both cuisines, the women point out, owe much to their roots in the Middle East, and both share much in common. As they eat, diners are treated to fascinating tales of the dishes' origins, which often stir recollections from their own parents' and grandparents' kitchens. "We're not interested in talking politics or arguing about who was here first", says Muzna. "We talk about food, we reminisce about meals, and we share the most wonderful stories...in our vision for this partnership, there will be tables like this all over the country, at which both peoples sit, eat, and enjoy — together."
Ricki Sitton believes that in order to know someone, you need to talk to them. So she founded Hevruta, a project to facilitate conversations between secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, and to ensure that neither remains a stranger to the other.

As part of its innovative “Up Close and Far” program, female students from Tel Aviv University, the Education College of Kfar-Saba, and Sapir Academic College meet with ultra-Orthodox women for weekly discussions over the course of a semester. Sometimes, these meetings take place outside the classroom, such as the time they squeezed into a wig salon in the Orthodox neighborhood of Bnei Brak to learn about religious hair coverings. But most of the time, participants speak with their “phone-pal” from a distance, just two girlfriends chatting about things as large as Jewish tradition and culture as small as their upcoming weekend plans. And invariably, they come to view each other as friends. When you speak to someone, after all, there’s no way you can stay a stranger.
How are waves formed? If you ask a scientist, she’ll say they’re the result of energy passing through water. If you ask the hundreds of boys and girls who participate in My Wave, an inspiring social-sports movement, they’ll say that their wave is created when the power of nature meets the power of the human spirit.

My Wave, which began six years ago as an experimental program for youth at risk, saw surfing as both an educational tool and a catalyst for positive personal development. In a historic group of towns, My Wave took place in five busy surf centers along Israel’s coast, each of which challenges students to discover the extent of their physical and mental abilities — and remain standing.

In other words, this is a wave that we as a society should try to catch — and ride all the way to the top.
Saving Lives and Bringing Worlds Together

Breaking boundaries and being first takes both vision and daring. Fortunately, Sanaa Mahameed of Umm el-Fahm has both. In a world that seems set on entrenching divisions, Mahameed dared to make connections instead — in her case, as the first Muslim woman in the United Hatzalah’s Ambulance Riders’ Unit.

United Hatzalah, which began as a volunteer Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) initiative, now has thousands of volunteers around the country ready to provide emergency medical assistance to anyone in need. Sanaa’s story, which began in the wake of a family tragedy, is that of a double breakthrough, both with regard to the society in which she grew up and that of the organization for which she volunteers.

Since joining United Hatzalah, Sanaa has inspired more women, both Jews and Arabs, to join its ranks. She has therefore achieved even more than she intended. She not only saves lives, but also brings worlds together.
A Winning Spirit

For many soccer teams, victory is measured by the number of goals on the field or trophies on the shelf. But for this one, it’s measured in spirit: Namely, the spirit of unity, and of good sportsmanship and mutual respect.

On Israel’s national football team, there are Jewish and Arab players and a Circassian captain too, all of whom proudly wear the uniform that represents their country to the world. And there are tens of thousands of fans, none of whom will forget the legendary Euro 2020 qualifying tournament against Austria last year.

The Austrians were in the lead. Yet in quick succession, Eran Zahavi scored three goals, passing to teammate Moanes Dabour at the last second for a fourth. The score? Israel-Austria 4-1. But as the stadium’s 16,000 fans cheered, the players knew the real winner was the power of partnership — a power even the best defense can never overcome.
"Every person has a disability, whether visible or not. I have one too. The most important thing is not to let a handicap, or the way we look, walk, or talk, hold us back or define us. Only if we choose not to allow our disability or the way we look, walk, or talk to hold us back or define us, will we be able to live life to its fullest potential."

— Nechama Rivlin

In a conversation with members of the movement Krembo Wings, Nechama Rivlin, the late wife of President Rivlin, insisted that when it comes to inclusion programs, everyone gains — both the special-education participants and their able-bodied counselors. Nechama should know: Having herself suffered from a respiratory disability, she modeled the virtues of empathy and acceptance for an entire nation, and was much loved for it.

Krembo Wings, a network of youth groups for children and young adults with and without disabilities, is named after Israel’s popular marshmallow treats. Coated with a thin chocolate layer, each of them needs to be wrapped by hand, since no machine can do it gently enough. At Krembo Wings, every branch is its own rainbow: Some have disabilities, while others don’t; some are considered “at risk”, while others enjoy privileged backgrounds. There are religious and secular participants and members of every nationality and community representation in Israel, and together, they create a world in which everyone finds power in empowering others.

In this spirit, participants in the dozens of branches throughout the country, no matter their rank, wear a tie of the same color. It symbolizes the collective contribution of each person sharing this movement. In addition, the equal value each has in the eyes of those who, together, make a difference.

In acknowledgement of the movement’s success in shaping its participants into young people who live and love to help others, the United Nations declared Krembo Wings an official advisor on integration and inclusion in 2018.

The Wind Beneath Their Wings

"The Wind Beneath Their Wings" (Alyosha Kolomoisky)
Separately and Together

Separately and together: This was the founding principle behind Mazkeret Batya’s pioneering Keshet School. For the last 14 years, Keshet has brought religious and secular students together under one roof, while at the same time making space for their distinct lifestyles and worldviews. It’s a balancing act, that’s for sure, but one these students and their communities believe is well worth the effort.

Take, for example, Keshet’s popular tree-planting activity, by far one of the students’ favorites. Part of a series of activities that address identity, the planting is overseen by two different school coordinators, one religious and the other secular. Since the activity is optional, it takes place after school; moreover, students need parental permission to attend. Nonetheless, there are hardly enough saplings to go around; at Keshet, students are excited to put in the extra hours and effort.

The values of inclusion and social equality are woven into the very fabric of the school day at Keshet, beginning with the choice to attend either morning prayers or morning circle — each according to his faith or her level of comfort. The fact there is a choice, Keshet’s leadership and faculty will tell you, is itself a statement about tolerance. And the community that has grown up around the school is growing as fast and as strong as the saplings from each year’s tree planting. It’s a group of dreamers and doers, each with his or her own voice and unique identity, but all joining together in respectful and productive dialogue.
The girls in Jerusalem's Hapoel Katamon soccer club don’t just talk about “girl power.” They practice it: on the field, at their games, in every opportunity in between. Selected on the basis of athletic talent and ability, these young players come from both the western and eastern parts of Jerusalem for twice-weekly training sessions and a weekly league game. Since the group was founded less than a decade ago, they’ve not only overcome both literal and psychological barriers to teamwork. They’ve also managed to win the State Cup — twice.

The soccer club was the first team of its kind for girls in the city. But for Hapoel Katamon, it was just one in a long line of social initiatives the club sponsors, part of its ongoing efforts to educate for non-violence through sports, fight against discrimination and racism, and enhance internal dialogue between different sectors and groups in Israeli society.

Sports for youth at risk; soccer matches between Jews, Muslim, and Christians; games for native-born Israelis and new immigrants; teams for individuals with disabilities; and neighborhood leagues. All these and more take place every day at Hapoel Katamon, which is run entirely by a team of community volunteers. Today, almost 1,000 Jerusalem children and youth of every background and socioeconomic level participate in one of Hapoel’s activities, and help make the club a model of coexistence, on the field and off.

Kicking Conventions to the Curb
Yoav Alon
יואב אלון
These young men and women grew up in different communities, speaking different languages, and among families from different cultures. But at Igy, what they share in common is far more important than what sets them apart: The desire to empower LGBTQ individuals, and to ensure a better future for the LGBTQ community in their state.

Igy, an acronym for Israel Gay Youth, is home to thousands of young men and women from every walk of Israeli life — religious and secular, Jewish and Arab, native Israelis and new immigrants — and every corner of the country. Igy’s counselors and educators work to create a space in which all people can grow and thrive, nourished by an atmosphere of openness and acceptance and unimpeded by the need to hide their sexual identity or gender. In other words, they build a home in which everyone is welcome. And together, they create the change they want to see.
The story of Bedouin society in the Negev Desert is an important chapter in the narrative of the State of Israel. Its transition from a traditional nomadic lifestyle to a modern one is both challenging and promising, offering the opportunity to create a cohesive, inter-tribal leadership, one united by the desire for a better future for the next generation.

The nonprofit Desert Stars offers Bedouin children from tribes and settlements in the Negev a ten-year-long educational framework as well as mentoring in a chosen field. These young Bedouins learn the value of personal and social responsibility, and how to contribute to the community as a whole and as leaders.

Diab Algalban and Amir Abu Kiff are just two of Desert Stars' many success stories: Diab, who discovered a love for teaching, became the first Bedouin coordinator in Israel's national scouts movement; today, he's also a manager of several branches of Krembo Wings, a movement for children and young adults with and without special needs. Amir, who created a program that teaches English to Bedouin children scattered throughout the desert, was invited to join forces with the Umm Batin Community Center at the start of the school year. By combining a commitment to education with the value of community, they and others like them are creating a new tradition for young Bedouins to follow.
Sweet Encounter

How does a Druze beekeeper from Peki'in and a religious Jewish educator from Akko end up starting an energy-bar business? Easy: His honey, her recipe, and one innovative community center.

A-CAT, the Akko Center for Arts and Technology, offers career-training and mentoring workshops for aspiring entrepreneurs in the diverse city it calls home. Jessan Salah and Yafit Peretz discovered the secrets to success in a community center they created in Akko to support aspiring entrepreneurs in the diverse city.

In its third year of operation, A-CAT has not only inspired new businesses but also new partnerships across religious, cultural, and national divides. And as beekeeper Jessan Salah and educator Yafit Peretz discovered, it can also lead to an unexpected friendship.

"As someone who lives in Akko, I know that it’s a city that has really good relations between its various populations," says Yafit. "I’m part of a cooking project here in the city, with both Jewish and Arab members. When we work together, we bring our worlds together, and we knock all the barriers down. The same thing happened with Jessan: He stole my heart."

At the end of the day, she insists, “We’re all equal, we’re all just human beings, and we all want to live in peace.”

Jessan describes how his partnership with Yafit is characterized by fun and endless laughter, a partnership as sweet as the honey he grows. “She’s a religious Jew and I’m a young Druze. But when we’re together, we forget about that. She’s like an aunt to me. She’s family.”
At Moona: A Space for Change, they believe that Israel’s diversity is a source of strength, and that the language of technology is one we can all speak together.

The Moona Center, located in Majd al-Krum in Israel’s north, is a space for innovation that engages youth from across the religious and national spectrum in three points of intersection between the worlds of science and gaming: robotics, drones, and escape rooms. Walk in one morning, and you’ll find Jewish students working together with Arab, Druze, and Bedouin students. Later on, you’ll hear both religious and secular youth conversing animatedly with retirees. And in the country’s future success, but also, more importantly a reason for hope.
When Adam Ziv from Kibbutz Sasa and Alaa Sweitat of Tarshiha decided to open an ice-cream parlor, they wanted to use quality ice cream to satisfy their sweet tooth. But they also dreamt of accomplishing something more: using “buza” (“ice cream” in Arabic) to sweeten both Jewish and Arab lives. Or, as they like to say, their ice-cream parlor serves up “coexistence in a cone.”

Adam and Alaa made coexistence the organizing principle of their venture: They opened their first ice-cream parlor in the center of Kfar Tarshiha, they sourced their ingredients from the surrounding Galilee communities, and they hired both Jewish and Arab staff. They even created a special flavor that symbolizes their understanding of what it means to live together in Israel: cashew with salty toffee, or “Cashiopedia,” the flavor you taste when “the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.”

From the very beginning, they knew they were onto something special — and not just with their inventive flavors. Adam and Alaa opened more branches around the country, each with a budget for communal activities: adopting a youth group, ice-cream parties in nursing homes, and other initiatives of the branch managers’ choice.

In 2017, Buza won the prestigious AIM2Flourish award, granted to a select group of businesses that help fulfill the United Nation’s vision for a better world. Can there be anything sweeter than that?
A Door Open to Everyone

The word “bab” in Arabic means “door,” and the suffix “com” means “yours.” When the company Babcom put the two together, it expressed its vision of a door open to everyone, which offered all who pass through it an equal chance at success.

Babcom, which provides call center services to leading Israeli companies, was founded a little over a decade ago by the entrepreneur Imad Telhami and the late industrialist Dov Lautman. They conceived of Babcom as an answer to the challenge of employment in Israel’s periphery, and an experiment in bringing employees from every group in Israel together in a single workplace.

The response was overwhelming. Arabs, secular, religious, and ultra-Orthodox Jews, Circassians, Bedouins, and more—all came to Babcom and proved through a thriving work culture that social vision and business excellence can both complement and enhance each other.

At Babcom, Hanukkah is celebrated together with Christmas, and Easter alongside Ramadan. Observant members of all religions work side by side without conflict. And all employees end each workday with the awareness that if mutual respect and the celebration of difference can result in a more successful company, it can surely be the blueprint for a more prosperous society, as well.
At Link 20, no one is spinning his or her wheels — unless, that is, they’re on the dance floor. Come to any party thrown by this network of social activists, and you’re as likely to see people dancing on two legs as twirling themselves or their friends in wheelchairs. Either way, they’re all having a great time, and sending a message of inclusion, accessibility, and respect in the process.

Link 20’s activists are young men and women with and without disabilities working to promote the rights of disabled people in Israel and to ensure their full integration into society. An initiative of the Ruderman Family Foundation, the nationwide network convenes every year for leadership training, the highlight of which is the Hackathon for digital entrepreneurship. This year’s theme is handicapped access to public transportation, and if previous years’ campaigns are any indication, Israel had better watch out: With a motto like “Act Up for Inclusion”, you can bet changes (for the better) are on the way.

Yoav Alon
| יואב אלון
"I feel more Jewish than I ever felt before. We want to stand on that podium, see the Israeli flag waving, and bring a medal home to Israel." - Ryan Lavarnway, player, "Team Israel"

Ironically, it was one of Israel's least-popular sports that formed the basis of a shared sense of pride between Israelis and Jews around the world when Team Israel qualified to compete at the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games. This astonishing achievement was realized thanks to Jewish-American baseball players who accepted Israel's invitation to don its national team's uniform. Citing both the warm embrace of the Israeli people and the newfound connection to their Jewish roots, some players even began the process of "making aliyah," literally "going up," or immigrating to Israel. Thus, Israel gained both rising baseball stars and new citizens at the same time. It was, as they say in baseball, a home run.
A large part of Rona Ramon's magic lay in her ability to bring people together. This path, which connects Mitzpe Ilan to the village of Emek al-Dum and Umm al-Qutuf, is a fitting way to commemorate Rona in our lives.” - Reut Winter, The Nachshon Team

Two years ago, the Bnei Akiva youth movement from the settlement of Mitzpeh Ilan — named for the Israeli astronaut and Rona’s late husband Ilan Ramon — decided to restore the old bicycle path that led to the nearby Arab village, and just beyond that to a kibbutz. They sought to turn it into a “neighborly path,” one that would serve as an invitation to residents of all three places to visit the others. In other words, a path that would turn residents into neighbors.

Rona Ramon, a public activist for the education and advancement of youth in Israel, played an enthusiastic role in the settlement’s initiative. Tragically, she passed away before work was completed. The trail was consequently named in her honor and in recognition of the path she walked in life.

In Rona’s Path will feature not only trail markings, but also signs that tell the stories of three members of the Ramon family: Rona, Ilan, and their son Assaf, an air force pilot who was killed in a training accident in 2009. Those who read them will undoubtedly be inspired by all three individuals, and struck by the courage of a woman who never let grief keep her from moving forward on this small plot of land we all call home.
Finding Our Roots

To be a better person, one first has to develop a deeper understanding of one’s self. The Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI), located in Hod Hasharon, near Tel-Aviv, aims to help Jewish youth from around the world do that, along with building a sense of Jewish identity.

The Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI) is a Jewish youth community located in the heart of Israel. It is a place where Jewish youth from around the world come together to explore their roots, identity, and heritage, and to build a sense of Jewish identity.

Each year, almost one thousand Jewish youth from the United States, Britain, Australia, and other countries around the world begin a several-months-long journey of self-discovery in the State of Israel. Through an emphasis on experiential learning — there is nothing, students insist, quite like a biblical history lesson at the site described in the Bible — students are exposed to the range of values, dilemmas, and aspirations that characterize Jewish thought, as well as the social, religious, and political currents that characterize society in the modern day.

From the responses of participants, the experience seems to be well worth the effort. As one student explained, “I learned a huge amount about who I am as a Jew, as a Zionist, and to be honest, as a person.” For far too few youth today, this one’s about as good as it gets.
The road to greater understanding always passes through new encounters. The 11th graders, from the Makor Ha’ayim religious high school for boys in Such Utsion, know this well. For them, each year, to mark their graduation, they embark on a fascinating journey that takes them far from the classroom — far enough to experience Israel’s diversity first-hand. In the process, they hone their skills in listening and conversing, and learn that responsibility for a better future begins with every one of us.

The journey is designed and led entirely by the students themselves, who create its educational content and decide on every detail of the packed itinerary. Just a glance at this year's plans are enough to show how seriously they take the goal of moving outside their comfort zone: There’s a meeting with the principal of the Arab School for Science and Engineering in Lod; a meeting with the popular (and provocative) television personality Lior Schleien; a tour of the neighborhoods in south Tel-Aviv, populated largely by African asylum seekers; a viewing of a series on ethnic and political rifts in Israel; and a tour of the Museum for Islamic Art.

These are just some of the many stations at which these high-school graduates will stop on their way into the adult world. What’s clear is that, wherever they end up, these students are heading in the right direction.
When Rivka Vardi was appointed director of the fledgling Oman ["Artist"] School of Higher Education for the Arts, she dreamed of a place in which ultra-Orthodox artists could be true to their faith and to their creative impulse. In other words, she didn't set out to change ultra-Orthodox society, but she did want to let the power of self-expression open new doors and opportunities for its members.

Today, there are 75 ultra-Orthodox women studying in Oman's joint bachelor-degree program with Jerusalem's renowned Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and as they say, new doors and opportunities are opening up all around them, ones they never even knew existed. The Oman-Bezalel program for ultra-Orthodox women offers two degrees, one in art and the other in architecture. Courses are taught jointly by professors from both institutions, all of whom not only teach artistic expression, but also express the views and values of the world from which they came. Students are encouraged to respect the religious boundaries that their community has erected, but at the same time to push artistic boundaries to the limit — and beyond. It's a challenge, but one that Oman's faculty and students are determined to take up.

Indeed, for them it makes perfect sense that the Hebrew word for "faith" comes from the same root as the word for "art": Both faith and art are universal languages, through which we can all find a way to communicate.
School Twinning: A Lesson in Connection

It’s well known that twins enjoy a special relationship, a bond as deep as it is unique. The Jewish Agency "School Twinning between" projects, together with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, establish that bonds between twins are enduring, especially as they are "twins" already. By matching schools in Israel with those in the Jewish Diaspora, tens of thousands of Jewish students around the world have the chance to develop a sense of connectedness and mutual responsibility with their brothers and sisters— even ones in faraway places.

Through computerized activities, parallel learning, and even in-person encounters, people and places that once seemed foreign to students become familiar, and shared experiences form the basis of memories that sustain these new families in the years and decades to come.

Take, for example, the delegation of Marimba-playing students from the 'King David' school in Johannesburg, South Africa. They traveled across a continent to visit their twins at the Hartuv School in Mateh Yehuda. They brought the school a gift of three handmade Marimbas, and led musical workshops, played in joint performances, and even trained Israeli music teachers to teach the Marimba to their students. When they returned home, the connection was strengthened by means of real-time video music sessions.

Indeed, if this innovative initiative has showed anything, it's that the bond between twins can survive any distance and differences in language, background—even musical instruments.
A Shared Organ, a Shared Destiny

In the Kidney Transplant Department of Soroka Hospital in the Negev, they’ve long since done away with externalities. Here, what matters is what’s inside — both the body and the soul.

When Naif Altura needed a kidney donation, his wife underwent a donor test. She turned out to be a match — for a patient in Jerusalem. But that patient’s son was a match for Naif. The twists to this crossover-transplant story don't end there: The transplant team, led by Prof. Yosef Haviv, included Dr. Oz Yakir and Dr. Abed Abu Ganim, the latter of whom made history as the first Bedouin surgeon in Israel.

Soroka Hospital, like medical centers across the state, is both a microcosm of Israeli culture and a place where religious and national backgrounds are left at the door. Here, there are only dedicated doctors and nurses, and only patients in need of care. "We were supported in every way," recalls Sharon Zippora of Ofakim, who received a kidney from his son Reuven. He tells of how encouraging Prof. Haviv was in the face of his fear and uncertainty, and of his meeting with Dr. Abu Ganim, who "gave me his full, undivided attention, and treated me as if I were the only person in the room."

For Dr. Abu Ganim, it's only natural to relate to his transplant patients as family. "An organ transplant is symbolic of the connection between people. It shows how, at the end of a day, a person is a person," he insists. "Just like any other."
The power of women’s movements is tremendous wherever they’re found, even — or especially — on the cachibol court.

The Mamanet League, the largest social-and-sports league geared specifically for mothers, was established in Israel in 2005. Now it is played in countries far and wide, including the United States, Austria, Italy, and Greece.

The Mamanet motto gets right to the point:

Mothers create families, families build communities, and communities catalyze change.

Today, Mamanet is played by thousands of women throughout Israel, from every walk of life: secular and religious, Arab and Jewish, Druze and Bedouin, and many more. They may work up a sweat, but the real work is in coming together on the court. The spirit of camaraderie, the shared discourse, and the commitment to coexistence — for those who play at Mamanet, there can be no losers. They — and we all — win when the value of partnership is promoted, both on the court and in daily life.

A Network of Mothers

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Respect is the Name of the Game

The sensei bow to their students and to each other, and with that — the session begins. At home, the students speak Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, or Amharic. But here, they share a single language: the language of respect. And on the mat, that language sounds a lot like Japanese.

"Bodu" is a general term for the traditional Japanese martial arts, and the dedicated group of instructors behind the organization Bodu for Peace believe these martial arts can help students develop skills in not only self-defense, but also self-improvement and ultimately, in social harmony as well.

And it seems to be working. At the door to the dojo (the training arena) in the Bedouin village of Abu Quidar, the students remove their shoes, then, they walk onto the mat and hold hands for preliminary stretches. When the session is over, they all head out for a tour of the village, the highlight of which is a shared meal. In a few months, they'll do the same thing, but this time in the Jewish town of Kiryat Gat.

The nine different clubs that make up Budo for Peace work to channel the values of Bodu toward the goal of equality. In training sessions, students learn that every opponent is also a partner. They're encouraged to confront their own anxieties and fears, but also to strengthen the muscles required for tolerance and open-mindedness. Indeed, to watch Bodu for Peace in action is to see boys and girls kick down metaphorical walls and build both self-esteem and lifelong friendships in their place.
A Journey of Israeli Hope

"A Journey of Israeli Hope" is a journey throughout Israel that provides unmediated encounters with the various groups in Israeli society. Designed to build a deeper, genuine understanding of each other and of the connections among us, it aims to break down prejudices and to develop a sense of shared responsibility. The journey is designed for three different segments: one for educators, one for students at teaching colleges, and one for junior and senior high school students.

In its first two years, the journey has been taken by hundreds of participants from all three segments, and it is just the beginning. As Tali Amirim, a senior from the Rabin High School in Kfar Saba, explained: "We were given an amazing opportunity to get to know every group in Israel, and to challenge the stereotypes about all of them."

The journey, undertaken in partnership with Israel’s Ministry of Education, the UJA-Federation of New York, the Lautman Foundation, Masa Israel Journey, and the Rothschild Foundation, is one of the flagship programs of "Hope of Israel," the initiative of President Reuven Rivlin, to strengthen statehood and establish partnerships between the various tribes that compose Israeli society.