



THE GESHER FOUNDATION BOX 170 COOPER STATION NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10003

January 19, 1971

Rabbi Norman Lamm
The Jewish Center
131 west 86th Street
New York, N. Y. 10024

Dear Rabbi Lamm:

As per our telephone conversation, allow me to give you a brief summary of Gesher progress in the United States.

Finances:

In the last twelve months we have solicited pledges and contributions totaling approximately \$38,000. This excludes the \$10,000 pledge of Mr. Stanley Stern which occurred well before this period.

Nine individuals have pledged \$1000 or more, including well-known philanthropists like Mr. Ludwig Jesselson, and Mr. Louis Striar. The balance of the \$38,000 has come from smaller donations, membership dues, and profits from our various social functions.

In addition, Gesher has received grants from various agencies of the Israeli Government, and a grant from the Rothchild Foundation of England. I am requesting a precise breakdown of the nature of these grants from our Israeli office.

Organization:

We began the building of a broad-based membership organization here in the United States, in September of 1970.

Since that time we have attracted 340 dues-paying members, and expect to pass the 500 mark by the end of February 1971.



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A Gesher branch in Los Angeles-Beverly Hills has already raised over \$1500, and we have firm commitments from Mr. Herbert Joshua to organize a Gesher function in Minniapolis, from Mr. Murray Cohen in Cleveland, and from Rabbi Emmanuel Forman in Toronto.

In New York City we have been organizing various types of functions for our membership. The latest of these is the Champagne & Silver affair of last Saturday night which, as you know, attracted hundreds of people and was an unqualified success.

We have established liason with the National Council of Synagogue Youth, with the ultimate ambition to create a junior Gesher for pre-college youth, with NCSY youngsters at the base.

In addition, we have made close contact with the Zionist Youth Foundation of America, and are presently negotiating for an office and free secretarial service at the Jewish Agency.

All of these activities are being supervised by a very active Gesher Board of Directors which meets regularly bi-weekly at our temporary office at 10 East 40th Street.

In summary, during the time that you were in Israel we have come a long way toward transforming Gesher from the pet project of a handfull of do-gooders, to an exciting broad-based movement. We are pleased with our progress thus far.

Ultimately, of course, the American organization will rise or fall by our performance in Israel, and that performance is directly dependent upon the amounts of moneys we can raise. Considering the present economic situation, I guess that we haven't done too badly here, but it hasn't been nearly enough. All we have been able to afford are various pilot projects, some of which, as you know, have been spectacularly successful. We have amply demonstrated that a gesher can be built, and have developed the techniques for building it.



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Let us hope that as the Gesher membership grows, as Gesher becomes increasingly well-known and respected, and as the economic situation improves, we can begin to attract more substantial grants, and really begin to make a dent in the critical social and spiritual problems which face our Land.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to call me.

Yours very truly,



CHAIM BILLET

P.S. Enclosed, please find a copy of our latest Jerusalem Letter. I neglected to mention that the Yeshiva University Charity Drive has adopted the Gesher project, and that there is an excellent prospect that the RAMAZ Yeshiva will do likewise.

the Jerusalem letter

The Gesher Foundation, 10 East 40th Street - Ninth Floor, New York, N.Y.

Jerusalem: Gad Building, Hassoreg 2 - Ramat Gan: Jabotinsky 61



THE GESHER FOUNDATION

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Shalom,

In this newsletter we would like to report on two Gesher seminars which represent extremely significant and successful experiments in attitude-changing toward religion.

First, a postscript to the last Jerusalem Letter. In the September issue we reported on Gesher's seminar for adult kibbutz members — religious and non-religious — which was held at the Gesher sponsored Field School in Kfar Ezion. We related that the participants' "attitudes towards each other were significantly changed by the confrontation." The following is a quote from an article in the Mapai journal, ha-Iggeret, written by a participant in the seminar from Kfar Blum:

...But most important was the contact which we had with sensitive religious youth. Young and enthusiastic, keepers of all mitzvot both large and small — yet not fanatic or strange, but people searching for a way toward mutual understanding and tolerance — this is what distinguishes them. In our day when it sometimes seems that there is nothing in common between us and religious Jewry, and the abyss which separates us is only widening — it is refreshing to see that there are indeed others. Within religious Jewry there are groups whose members recognize a genuine value in the State, who serve in the armed forces, who settle the country, and observe the mitzvot of the Land of Israel with their bodies and souls...And yet with all their observance of mitzvot, they are trying to understand us, to meet us halfway, to stress that which unifies us rather than that which divides. This is a unique phenomenon among religious Jewry and it seems to me that our youth can also find a common base with it. Suddenly, one becomes aware that much of that which divides us is a product of lack of knowledge, I would almost say outright ignorance, of our extensive traditional literature and values. We have emerged from the week of study enriched...

This alone would warrant a degree of excitement. Yet as important as this is, it is dwarfed in results and ultimate significance by the Sukkot seminar for youth, also held at Kfar Ezion.

On Sunday, October 18, thirty-two Israeli high school students (twenty two from non-religious and ten from religious schools) came to Kfar Ezion to participate in Gesher's first "Seminar on Jewish Thought." The group — student leaders and newspaper editors from seven schools in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, Kiryat Ono, Ramat Gan and Kfar Saba — spent five days under Gesher auspices touring, studying and experiencing traditional life. For all, it was their first serious encounter with fellow students of different religious orientations. For the non-religious students it was in addition their first encounter with daily prayer, with Jewish thought, with an emotionally and intellectually exciting presentation of Tradition.

The students were divided into five small groups, each under the direction of a competent madrich (advisor). In the mornings, the groups toured the surrounding area of Gush Ezion and Hebron. In the afternoons, they met individually for workshops on religious issues. In the evenings, there were lectures and entertainment. One evening Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University delivered an address on "The Selection of Israel" which initiated brisk discussion. Another evening, the Jerusalem String Quartet offered a program which included the first performance of an original composition by Andre Haydu, "Simchat Bet Hashoeva". Private discussion between the participants and the advisors continued late into the night.

The crowning event of the seminar was the holiday of Simchat Torah which was spent in Jerusalem. The group jubilantly joined the throngs in the streets of the city and danced and sang its way to the kotel where each of the boys received an aliya to the Torah.

How were the participants affected? The last two pages of this newsletter — a translation of a letter written by one of the participants — will answer this question. We only wish to state that many in Israel view the seminar as the most dramatic breakthrough in religious-non-religious relations. Even the evening newspaper Maariv (October 20, 1970) called it "a first of its kind." Unquestionably, "Seminars on Jewish Thought" will be in the forefront of Gesher's programs in the coming year.

Your very truly,

THE GESHER STAFF

To the Gesher organizers:

I am one of the students from Ramat Aviv, who participated in your seminar for "Yiddishkeit" held at Kfar Ezion.

First of all, I want to thank all the organizers of the event; I hope that they will continue to organize such gatherings - many of them.

Second, may I ask that you make them longer!!

...Now to my impressions of the seminar. First of all, I learned a great deal. As far as feeling like a Jew, in this week I felt like a real Jew. At the beginning it was somewhat difficult to rise early for prayer, and to pray three times a day. But I became accustomed to it. Second of all, I learned to understand my brothers, the datiim (religious). I discovered that to be a religious Jew one must sacrifice a lot, and that, perhaps most important, to be religious is a matter of education. In this week I became close to them (religious peers), I observed them, I came to understand them. Previously I looked upon a religious person, certainly as upon a fellow Jew, but, I felt some sort of invisible barrier separating us. In this week I learned so very much. I enjoyed this week that passed so quickly. And the barriers between us disappeared completely.

The Simchat Torah celebrations at the Yeshiva in Kfar Ezion and at the Kotel were, both for my friends and myself, the greatest experience ever. I felt just wonderful, and one of my friends actually went into ecstasy. It was wonderful, simply wonderful. Truly, with all honesty, I felt (and here the feeling was a most genuine feeling) the joy. I sang. I danced. I came to recognize the way of life upon whose foundation I was born, perhaps all of Israel was born.

The seminar brought me close to prayer. I began to understand its meaning, why I must pray. I learned the essence of Judaism. Although I did not agree with every point in the debates which my friends and I had with the datiim, I believe that we all agreed on the fundamental, crucial point which is the basis of Jewish existence -- the presence of One God or One Power in the world.

As I said, the week was like a dream, something unusual, something which I never experienced. When I try to explain it to my friends (who did not attend) they look at me, as if to say, "What's so special?" And I can understand them. Because one cannot explain an experience. This was an experience which words and speech cannot describe, part of something intimate and private, something hidden in the heart of every Jew, which needs only to be awakened. We, our small group of forty students, were awakened - but, it seems to me that my other friends at school could also use this awakening...

I can't say that I now pray every morning or put on Tefillin. That is another matter. I still turn on lights on Shabbat. It is with regard to my attitudes toward Judaism, prayer, and faith, that everything is changed - and only because of this week. This is a fact. These words are not carelessly written -- we all returned from the experience deeply moved. One can't explain the enormity of the experience: the joyous dancing at the Kotel and at the Yeshiva which lasted for hours. And on the way home one of the girls singing the songs we had learned -- it was lovely!

I do hope that you will keep in constant contact with us. We are ready with all our hearts (at least I am) to respond to any activity. Continue your programs for they are worthwhile. The seminar (an empty word, for it was so much more than that) was a fantastic success, and again I want to thank the group leaders and all the organizers of the event, and hope that future seminars will grow in both the number of participants and in time. We tasted of everything -- of the Kotel and Simchat Torah, of religious experience, of study, of group life, of the kibbutz and its history.

In conclusion: it was wonderful. We hope to see you again soon and - keep in touch!!

Gratefully,

Menachem Z.