

‘Warm corners’

Teaneck shuls sponsor goody-filled canteens to help soldiers ‘chill’

BY ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN | September 7, 2017, 11:56 am |

It’s well known that an army marches on its stomach, and Israeli soldiers indeed are well fed from the bounty of the “blooming desert.” But when they have 12-hour patrol shifts, in full gear, under the Mideast sun, there’s nothing like a free cold drink and a snack served with a smile in an air-conditioned space.

That’s the idea behind Pina Chama rest stations for IDF soldiers set up at the entrances of many towns and villages in the West Bank. The first Pina Chama — which means Warm Corner — was established in 2001 at a strategic junction in Gush Etzion, south of Jerusalem, in memory of two Israelis killed in a terrorist attack.

“Warm” doesn’t refer to the temperature inside the canteens — they’re kept comfortably cool in summer and warm in winter — but to the warmth of the community volunteers who establish and maintain them.

Over the last year, six new Warm Corner kiosks have been set up through the generosity of American donors to nonprofit organization Yashar LaChayal (Straight to the Soldier). The first station, built at the entrance of the Ateret community about half an hour north of Jerusalem, was sponsored by Congregation Bnai Yeshurun of Teaneck.

This Shabbat, Yashar LaChayal founder and director Leon Blankrot will visit Bnai Yeshurun and Congregation Rinat Yisrael, both on West Englewood Avenue, to thank members for their support.

Mr. Blankrot, a native of North Bergen who made aliyah from Passaic in 1995, started Yashar LaChayal during the second Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, when food and other critical supplies were slow in getting to Israeli troops on the frontlines.

The organization has worked closely with the Israel Defense Forces leadership over the years to provide specific extras on request — warm winter gear, hydration backpacks, supply closets filled with personal hygiene items for needy soldiers, air conditioners for barracks, and the like. More recently, Yashar LaChayal has embarked on long-term projects, including Warm Corner stations.

There are now Yashar LaChayal kiosks in Nokdim, Tekoa, Otniel, Einav, and Ateret. The organization also is taking over responsibility for an existing Warm Corner in Kiryat Arba, neighboring Hebron. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who lives in Nokdim, called

the Warm Corner phenomenon “a very important contribution” to the welfare of Israel’s soldiers when he visited the opening of the newest station in August.

Yashar LaChayal is building five more stations, including one in Neve Tzuf (also called Halamish), where three members of a family were murdered in a July terrorist attack.

“Ateret is in a strategic area very near Halamish,” Mr. Blankrot said. “When the terror attack happened, the army brought a lot of personnel to Ateret as a staging area. At least 150 soldiers were in our Pina Chama that Shabbat.”

He said that when he scouts out new sites for Warm Corner stations, he looks for spots at the entrance to a village, “so it’s comfortable for soldiers to stop there and it also provides an extra sense of security for residents.”

During an average week, more than 100 soldiers stop into the 3-by-4-meter (32-by-43-foot) Ateret kiosk on their breaks. “You should see the soldiers, sitting on the floor under the air conditioner,” he said. “They’re dying for the cool air.”

The site also includes a storage room and a 7-by-9-meter (75-by-97-foot) tiled patio, which soon will be home to some picnic tables, and will be shaded by a pergola.

Yashar LaChayal pays local grocery stores \$200 to \$400 a month up front (often this cost is covered specifically by donors) and local volunteers take the responsibility of working with the grocery owners to keep the stations stocked with items such as bread, cheese, cakes, cookies, coffee, tea, popcorn and cleaning supplies. The kiosks are outfitted with refrigerators, microwave ovens, and toaster ovens, as well as a phone-charging station and a television.

“On Fridays, local residents come and drop off cakes and other homemade treats,” Mr. Blankrot added. “We’ll install electric kettles for soup in the winter.”

The organization plans eventually to hire a dedicated maintenance worker to service all the Warm Corner locations it sponsors.

Yashar LaChayal provides a USB drive for the TV at each location, containing videos about the history of the particular community and its residents, so that soldiers can learn more about the citizens they’re protecting.

Jon Bendavid, president of the Bnai Yeshurun men’s club, explained that he and a few Teaneck neighbors decided to start supporting the IDF through Yashar LaChayal in 2004.

“The initial reason I got involved was the fact that all funds raised go directly to soldiers because administrative costs are paid by a separate donor,” Mr. Bendavid said. “We have the satisfaction of knowing that 100 percent of the money goes to Yashar, and that Leon has the ability to get needs met really fast. He knows a lot of the commanders and he gets to support the soldiers on the front lines, in the trenches. It’s a fast-moving organization with good connections.”

On a Shabbat around Israeli Independence Day each May, the men's club sponsors an IDF kiddush at Bnai Yeshurun for the benefit of Yashar LaChayal, to which all 500-plus of the shul's member families are invited. The initiative generally raises about \$50,000 in pledges from about half the membership; last year the total was \$55,000.

At Rinat Yisrael, fundraising for Yashar LaChayal was spearheaded by Reva and Dr. Aaron Tokayer, whose late son Ilan served in the IDF for a year as a foreign volunteer.

Congregations Keter Torah, Netivot Shalom, and Young Israel of Teaneck also have participated in Yashar LaChayal benefits.

"It's important for the soldiers to know that they have moral support," said Mr. Bendavid, who frequently travels to Israel to visit his son in Ra'anana and his daughter in Neve Daniel, a Gush Etzion community.

To find out more about the "Warm Corner" Project, go to <https://www.yasharlachayal.org/project/the-warm-corner-project>. To find out more about donating a new "Warm Corner" or of making a recurring donation to sponsor monthly costs, write to Mr. Blankrot at Leon@yasharlachayal.org.