

Kibboutz

with a    

Cause

Special-needs adults have found a haven on Kibbutz Kishor, a Western Galilee community built especially for their needs. Whether it's working in the winery, tending to the goats and horses, or pitching hay, members credit the kibbutz with giving them skills and purpose, redefining what it means to have "special needs" along the way

BY *Binyamin Rose* PHOTOS *Lior Mizrachi, Kishorit Archives*



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Roni Isakov, *mashgiach* at the Kishor winery, siphons wine from oak barrels into a pair of waiting glasses, drawing the season's first samples. A warm, dry winter produced an early harvest, and Isakov is eager to taste the product of months of work.

You've got to be nimble to keep up with the wiry Isakov, whose hands are tinted from the rich purple color of fine red wine. As he hurries from the vat room to the barrel room, the heels of his knee-high white boots squeak with every step on the slick black slate floor.

Isakov stops to convey guidance to a valued assistant — one of the 171 adult employees with special needs who are members of the Kishor community — and who require extra supervision and forbearance. Some of the members live and/or work in the nearby city of Karmiel, while others choose to live in the kibbutz and work in the kibbutz's own revenue-generating businesses.

"It's not easy. Some of the work is very intensive, and I've had to train myself what I can say to them and what not to say," says Isakov, adding that he first learned essential lessons in restraint on his previous job in a yeshivah kitchen. "I've learned to listen and communicate with sensitivity. I've learned to keep

myself balanced. When I'm balanced, my workers stay in balance too."

In the next room, Yair Una, director of the winery's visitor center, lines up bottles on the wood countertop, in preparation for the imminent arrival of a group for a wine tasting. His right-hand man is another adult with special needs, Yaron, who watches over the small dishes of green olives that will serve as a garnish to the wines. "I'm here to help the visitors," Yaron says. "To get them seated, to explain about the vineyard and just to be a good host."

"He is the best," Yair says in tribute to Yaron, who has learned every facet of the winery's operations over the past six years. "He doesn't have fine motor skills, but you ought to see him in the fields with a scythe in his hands. He doesn't miss a stroke. And sometimes, after a tasting, we will leave late and the place is a mess. He's here at six o'clock the next morning cleaning up. It would be hard to imagine the vineyard or winery without Yaron."

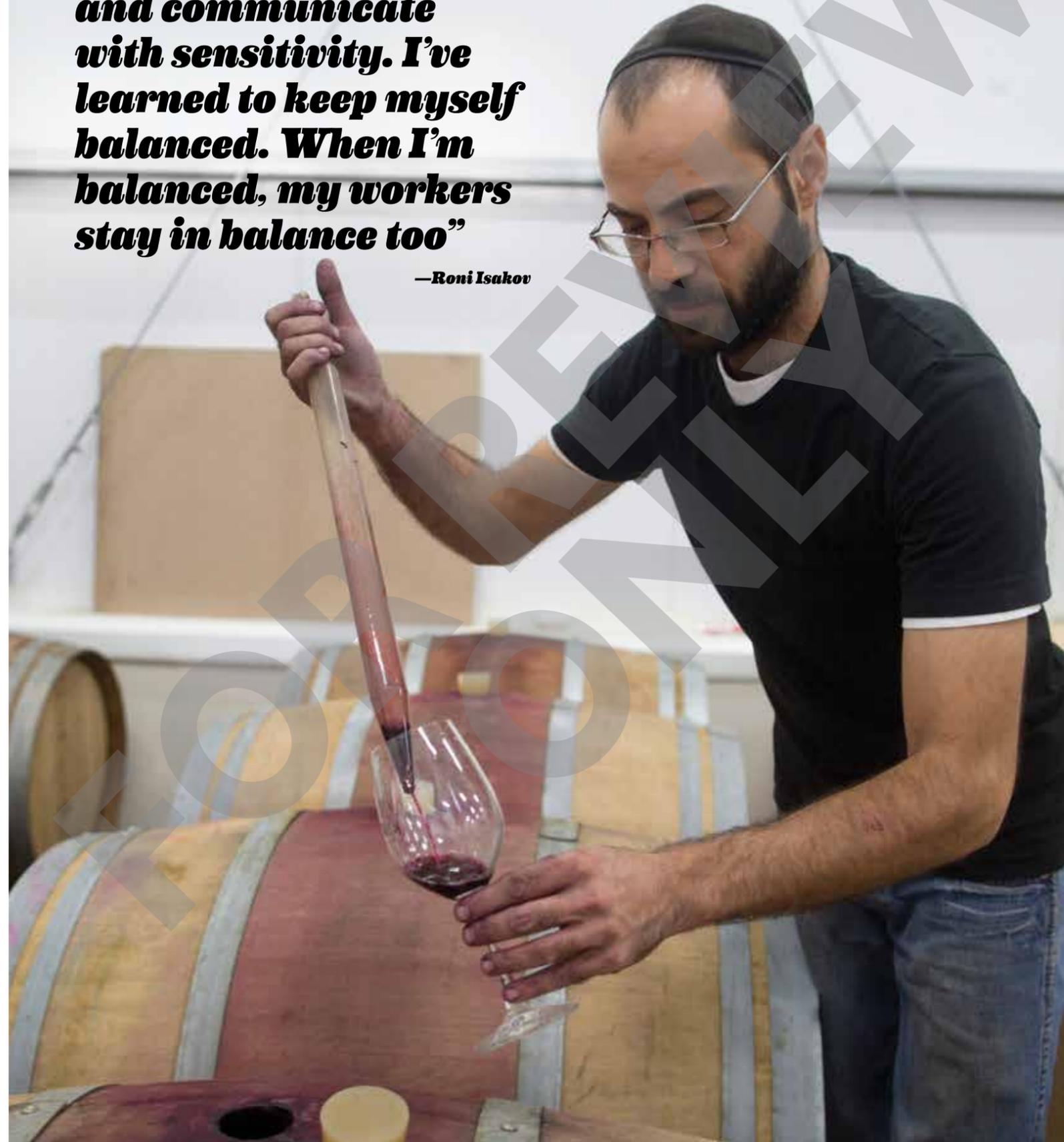
The same could be said about all of the special-needs adults who staff the diversified enterprises at Kibbutz Kishor, nestled 500 meters (1,650 feet) above sea level in the upper Western Galilee. From Kishor's highest geographic point, Acco and the Mediterranean coast are visible at



Producing wine from grapes always takes special care. At Kibbutz Kishor, special-needs adults provide much of that special care

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—Roni Isakov



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a distance of 12 miles. The Lebanese border is just six miles away, as the crow flies. But Kishor's highest spot of human compassion is how it has quietly yet diligently provided a home, meaningful employment, and 24/7 tender loving care to men and women with a range of emotional and cognitive impairments, such as Down syndrome, autism, and schizophrenia.

Some are orphans or were abandoned. Others come from foster homes or other residential care facilities. In many cases, their parents cared for them until early adulthood, and then decided they needed a long-term solution that could offer their sons and daughters employment, friendships, and lasting security.

By providing these adults a community built exclusively for their needs, Kishor has given them a dignity and confidence they've

found nowhere else. The community is based on the fundamental principle that people with special needs are entitled to the human right of autonomy and self-determination. With support, the members make decisions for themselves regarding their medical care, living situations, and employment settings. For many members, it is the first time they have ever been given full control over their lives and the experience has profound positive impact on the therapeutic and rehabilitative process.

Give and Take It wasn't easy at the beginning. Kishor was supposed to be just another dot on the map of the kibbutz movement. Members of the secular Hashomer Hatzair, along with veterans of the IDF's Nachal unit, were the early arrivals in the 1970s. With no infra-



Stable Buddies



Stable manager **Nadav Golan** hands both the reins and an invaluable dose of confidence to member **James**, who has arrived for his weekly riding lesson. Nadav shows James how to grip the reins, sit tall in the saddle, and keep his balance.

"Sit straight," Nadav instructs. James obliges and confidently presses both legs on the horse's sides. Nadav walks them around the ring, instructing James to alternately stretch his arms straight out and then thrust them forward.

Meanwhile back in the stable, **Yoni** grooms his favorite horse, Nevada. He brushes, cleans it, and wipes mucous off of her eyes and nose with a wet sponge. "If you ask why I take care of this horse, it's because she's beautiful. She's larger than the other horses. I feel very attached to her. It makes me feel good."



Kishor was supposed to be just another dot on the map of the kibbutz movement

structure to speak of, and little hope of government funding on such remote turf, they jumped ship, leaving a handful of small buildings on the empty 125-acre plot.

Kishor lay dormant until 1994, when Shuki Levinger, a social worker and deputy director of a special-needs facility, saw the need for a new therapeutic approach.

His concept was to focus on the strengths of special-needs adults rather than focusing on their limitations. And he felt that a kibbutz setting would be ideal to accomplish his goals.

When Yael Shilo, the stepmother of one of Shuki's clients, heard the social worker planned to strike out on his own, she borrowed a line from Megillas Ruth: Wherever you go, I'm following, but let's do something big together.

Over dinner in a Chinese restaurant, Levinger and Shilo signed a "contract" on a napkin, sketching out their idea for a freestanding community devoted to adults with special needs, one they hoped would be self-sufficient one day.

They incorporated and embarked on what turned into a three-year mission to find a suitable location and win support from the Israeli government, the kibbutz movement, and private donors.

Kishor became that suitable location. Then, Levinger became CEO and Shilo the chairwoman of a nonprofit entity that would reside within Kishor, serving the special-needs population. They named this new entity Kishorit and in 1997 began taking in special-needs adults, whom they call members, while simultaneously building up the infrastructure.

In the early days, most new members came to Kishorit from inside and outside of Israel, either through word of mouth, or after being referred by various welfare or health agencies.

Some 20 years later, Kishorit is filled to capacity with a long waiting list for scarce available spaces. Groups from almost every continent have come to Kishorit to study their model in the hopes of replicating it elsewhere, or at least borrowing some of its successful concepts.

Fruits of Labor Thanks to the level of rehabilitation Kishorit provides, it has become a productive enterprise in its own right. The community generates more than NIS 7 million (\$1.8 million) a year in revenues. While product sales and government aid cover some 75 percent of its operating budget, the remainder is raised from private donors and charitable foun-



Yair Una (right): "It would be hard to imagine the vineyard and winery without Yaron" (left)

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dations, such as the American Friends of Kishorit.

Its main lines of business include the winery, organic farming, and production of milk, cheese, and eggs. It also makes recyclable packaging, operates dog kennels for breeding and boarding, and a communications center for film and television production.

As Kishorit is a registered nonprofit, all of its revenues are plowed back into the support of the community.

“The residents are the ones who benefit fully from their labor,” says Shira Reifman, Kishorit’s director of resource development. Shira hails from Binghamton, New York, and worked in various capacities for NCSY, including as a regional director for eight years and a stint as its interim national director. She started working for Kishorit shortly after making aliyah in 2007, and commutes there twice a week from her home in the religious *yishuv* of Yad Bin-yamin, a drive of well over two hours each way. Shira served as my tour guide for the six hours I spent touring Kishorit on a delightful late summer day.

Kishorit, Shira explains, is run according to the most wholesome ideals of the kibbutz movement. “Everyone gives to the community according to their ability and takes from the community according to their need.” This credo is equally true for adults with special needs, she says. “Kishorit takes people who have always been viewed as a burden on society and turns them into givers. This radically alters their sense of self. By working, they gain self-esteem, allowing them to draw from the community knowing they have truly been productive.”

Kishorit acclimates its members to work by helping the members set their own modest short-term goals and instilling the self-confidence that they can achieve them. “We say, let’s see what we can do today,” Shira says. “Some people are only capable of picking crops with aid. So we teach them how to tell when something is ripe. Some people can package, others can sort and even deliver to customers. We always find



Got Milk



Yariv Nofech, the job coach on the goat farm, shovels stacks of hay with a pitchfork toward a corral of hungry goats.

Yariv is responsible for Kishorit’s 1,200 goats, with the help of ten Kishorit members, and supervises the twice-daily milkings at four a.m. and four p.m.

For the first three days after birth, the kids must nurse from their own mother’s milk, the colostrum, to obtain necessary nutrients and immunity. After that, the members bottle-feed the goats.

It’s crucial to keep close track so the mother goats and kids remain together.

“We attach a chip to each goat, showing what day it got pregnant, so we know when to expect a birth,” Nofech says. The chip is also used in the milking pens to track production for each goat.



The prestige of winning allows Kishorit to command better prices at sales, but also confers confidence in the dogs’ handlers, all of whom are the members with special needs

the task they can accomplish. Once they’ve achieved that, we encourage them to set their next goals.”

Asher, 36, is one of Kishorit’s longstanding and upstanding members. Born in Haifa, he moved to Kishorit at age 18. Normally, the minimum age for admission is 21, but Kishorit made an exception for Asher because he was abandoned. Social services workers had discovered him sleeping in a barn.

Kishorit enrolled Asher in a welding course in Karmiel, the nearest big city, seven years ago. He persevered through an eight-month course that was so rigorous, more than half of his classmates dropped out along the way. Once he obtained his welder’s certificate, Kishorit supported him by purchasing the tools and the safety equipment he needed to ply his new trade. Today, Asher is Kishorit’s most skilled handyman.

“They really developed me here,” Asher said. “I’ve seen how they do it for others too. Anyone who wants to learn a trade in the free market will get all the assistance they need from the management.”

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People, Not Diagnoses Kishorit's goal is full employment for all members. Members work in the general community in kindergartens, factories, coffee shops, and health clinics (*kupat cholim*.) Members who choose to work in the kibbutz can opt for a wide range of employment opportunities based on their capabilities and interests. As part of Kishorit's emphasis on autonomy and self-determination, social workers work closely with members to ensure that each is working in the desired environment. The kibbutz divides its diversified businesses into "employment centers." Each center administers its own training program, and employs professional managers who oversee the work and deploy job coaches to work with the members in the field. With 175 staffers, Kishorit maintains a one-to-one ratio of staffers to members.

There are members with limited mobility, in addition to cognitive impairments, but that doesn't preclude them from pitching in.

"We have a member who has a driver's license, so he drives people to work, to the kibbutz dining room, and back and forth from their homes in a golf cart," Shira says.

Kishorit does not administer formal aptitude tests to its members, as most of them move in along with a bulging file of assessments from the Ministry of Education and other government agencies. While the government paperwork is important in assessing disabilities and determining funding eligibility, Kishorit CEO Shuki Levinger insists, "We don't look at people as diagnoses. We look at people as people. What do you like to do? What makes you happy? What gives you the incentive to get out of bed in the morning?"

For those who enjoy farm work, there is plenty to do at Kishorit's organic farm, covering ten dunams (2.5 acres). Gourds the size of watermelons grow in hothouses. In open fields, rows of vegetables including mustard, garlic, peas, green beans, carrots,



(Top to bottom) Hundreds of chickens on a free-range organic farm lay 500,000 eggs a year. Organic tomatoes ripen on the vine. The typical residences for special-needs adults all have porches and patio furniture.



Dogged Determination



Shachar has traveled overseas five times to dog shows in Belgium, Italy, and Holland, representing Kishorit's prize Schnauzers before the judges.

"I love all the dogs. I feed them. I clean the pens, whatever Kitty [his boss] tells me to do."

Asher not only maintains the cages so they are secure and none of the dogs can run loose, but also makes sure they remain in tip-top condition and are groomed to perfection.

"The iron gets rusty and iron today is very expensive, so we have a special paint I use."

What does Asher appreciate the most about Kishorit? "I see all the help we give each other. I've learned cooperation."



"We don't look at people as diagnoses. We look at people as people"

—Shuki Levinger, Kishorit CEO

radishes, cabbages, broccoli, beets, celery, and lettuce are neatly spaced apart. The bounty is enough to remind me that time has passed quickly and I've skipped lunch, but there is still more to see, including the grapevines and the fruit orchards with olives, peaches, pomegranates, and other summer fruit.

No matter what jobs the members hold down, they get an early start, are expected to arrive on time, and adhere to the schedule.

After breakfast at 7 a.m., the first shift runs from 8 to 10 a.m., followed by a half-hour coffee break. Many Kishorit members made their first true friends in life on these short breaks.

At 10:30, it's back to work until 12:30 p.m. Members can choose between eating kibbutz-style in the common cafeteria, or taking food from the kitchen and eating in the privacy of their quarters, which consist of studios or one- or two-bedroom apartments, all neat and well-kept with patios.

The afternoon shift lasts from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., followed by a recreation break. Members can enjoy the swimming pool, a fully equipped gym, and 40 different extracurricular activities, including art, dance, singing, classes in current events, quiet reading in the library, computer room, or playing board games. Some members have their own laptops. One member creates computerized music and sells it online.

Kishorit's communications center provides opportunities for self-expression to some 15 members who write, film, edit, and produce a monthly program for Channel 98, Israel's community channel.

"It's the only show where people with special needs tell about their lives in their own voice," Shira says. "You think they'll talk about things so differently, but in fact, the topics they choose to feature are so universal. One member was overweight and went through gastro-bypass surgery and lost over 100 pounds. His production chronicled his life for that entire year; the medical process as well as how it changed his relationships and the way he thought about himself."

Kishorit charters a daily bus to Karmiel for those who want to shop or browse around town, returning in time for a seven p.m. dinner.

“Everyone gives to the community according to their ability and takes from the community according to their need”

—Shira Reifman

The winery, which carries an OU *hechsher*, produces some 45,000 bottles of eight different vintages, including blends and varietals. The wine has won several gold medals at domestic and international wine competitions and is sold throughout Israel. It is even exported to the US and soon, to Europe. “The work we do here is sent out to stores,” explains Amit, a longtime member of Kishorit, with pride.

The kibbutz’s 1,200 goats are prolific, producing some 550,000 liters (145,000 gallons) of organic milk each year.

“If you drink Tnuva’s organic milk, you’re drinking milk from Kishorit,” says Shira.

Whatever Tnuva doesn’t buy, Kishorit retains and processes into organic goat cheeses. Hundreds of chickens roam on a free-range organic farm, laying half a million eggs per year that are then collected, cleaned, packaged, and prepared for sale by the members.

“A pillar of Kishorit’s philosophy is that the members should always be at the forefront of the work. In essence, they aren’t only employees, they are actually the owners of the businesses,” Levinger says.

We discover that the chickens are especially friendly, waddling over excitedly as my photographer and I sidle over to get a closer look. Disappointed that we don’t have any food for them, they scurry away, but not before discovering some leftover pumpkins for an afternoon feast.

Animal Therapy Apart from raising the domesticated animals, Kishorit opened a wildlife rehabilitation center that tends to injured animals ranging from bobcats to donkeys. Kishorit has also earned a reputation for breeding prize dogs, mainly miniature, and a few giant Schnauzers. Their large trophy room, already filled with dozens of

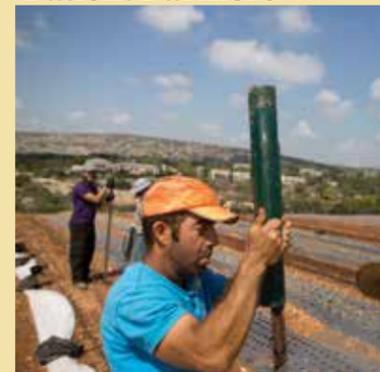
trophies from European competitions, welcomed two more trophies in early September, when one of their giant male Schnauzers took second place for best male in the recent European championships in Brussels, Belgium, while one of its giant female Schanzuzers finished second in the best-of-breed competition. The prestige of winning allows Kishorit to command better prices at sales, but also confers confidence in the dogs’ handlers, all of whom are the members with special needs.

Rotem, a Kishorit member for 16 years, began working in the kennel three years ago, after many years staffing the kitchen and the laundromat. “I liked the change. I needed the diversity. I developed a lot here. I trim the dogs’ hair with clippers and I also hand out customer receipts at the kennel, which is something I never did before.”

Kennel workers are trained to handle



Patient Farmers



Yonatan Segev, the professional manager of the organic farms, is working with **Itai**, one of his assistants with special needs. The organic farm provides Kishorit’s residents with fresh vegetables at every meal, as well as supplies of high-quality, fresh produce to local grocers and retail buyers.

Yonatan is proud of Itai’s accomplishments. “He’s learned not to give up on himself. Planting teaches patience. Most people have an expectation of instant gratification. Planting lettuce and watching it grow teaches the satisfaction that comes with being patient.”



Kishorit’s vineyards produce some 45,000 bottles of kosher wine per year for both domestic consumption and export



“If there is a *beit kneset* here, the people will be focused on Hashem and it will make them feel better”

—*Shimon Franklin*

affirm and reaffirm our position as a Jewish community in the predominantly Arab western Galilee,” Shira says. “Some of our members grew up in religious families, and even if they are not religious today, going to shul and singing familiar melodies and reciting familiar texts are calming, comforting, nurturing, and warm experiences for them.”

Shimon, originally from London, came to Kishorit 12 years ago. He used to work on the goat farm, but as a Chabad chassid, he considers his real job to be putting tefillin on kibbutz members.

“When I lived in Kfar Chabad, I used to sleep in the *beis medrash*. I felt something was missing here,” Franklin says. “If there is a *beit kneset* here, the people will be focused on Hashem and it will make them feel better.”

The shul received a lead naming gift from Lady Beryl Steinberg of Manchester, England, in memory of her husband, Lord Leonard Steinberg. The main sanctuary of 3,800 square feet was dedicated by Tzili Charney from New York in memory of her husband, Leon Charney, a Yeshiva University graduate, attorney, and real estate mogul credited with playing a back-channel role in fashioning the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

While Kishorit’s special-needs membership is operating at 100 percent capacity, Kibbutz Kishor has received approval for the development of up to 100 private homes. Some 36 are already in various stages of construction. Kishorit is already a “home for life” for its members with special needs and the community is eager to integrate and provide the same high quality of life for the normative families.

It’s admittedly a bit of an experiment. Normally, the challenge is to find a neighborhood that will be hospitable to a group home. In Kishorit’s case, it will be the special-needs community at the forefront of providing a welcoming atmosphere to new mainstream residents. The synagogue is expected to be one of the many places where the two populations will mix and mingle. The community plans to have shared Kabbalat Shabbat services, *parshah* classes, and holiday celebrations in the shul.

Shira Reifman is confident the mix will work. “Where better than a shul to appreciate the *tzelem Elokim* of every person?” ●

the show dogs in the ring and present them to the judges. Rotem has taken a few such trips, which she enjoys, but admits they’re tiring. “I don’t relish traveling. I survive it,” Rotem says.

For those who prefer horses to dogs, Kishorit features a therapeutic riding stable. Horseback riding and grooming horses provide physical benefits, such as balance and gross motor skills, as well as emotional benefits.

“People with special needs are sometimes tactile defensive,” Shira says. “Touching the dogs and horses helps them feel more comfortable with physical contact. They learn how to build a connection through touching a dog, and they learn to be more assertive by handling the dogs and riding the horses. Also, we use the animals as teaching tools. We explain that just like

the dogs and horses need special diets, exercise, and grooming, so too people need to eat healthy food, exercise, and pay attention to their personal hygiene.”

Spiritual Growth For two decades now, Kishorit has been tending to all of the material needs of its members, including raising their spirits when necessary. Recently, it has embarked on a major construction project to attend to their spiritual needs.

Kishorit hopes to dedicate an Orthodox synagogue by next Pesach. The building is up, the infrastructure is being installed, and shul furniture is on order from Kibbutz Lavi.

The inspiration for the synagogue came both internally and externally. “The desire to have a synagogue was really a desire to



Top: Kishorit hopes to dedicate its Orthodox synagogue by next Pesach. Bottom: The first 36 of 100 new homes approved for development are under construction