



After enjoying camel rides, Tarbuton families plant a tree — one of 40 planted that day — on Tu B'Shevat at a camel dairy in Ramona. Tarbuton includes in its programming family weekend outings.

A Little Bit of Israel

Tarbuton brings Israeli culture to San Diego

BY TINAMARIE BERNARD

One of the frustrating challenges for those who love Israel is that too few really understand this vibrant country in the Middle East. Perceived through the prism of a distorted, myopic media lens, Israel continues to be portrayed in inauspicious ways despite her accomplishments and contributions to the world. Politics and a religious landscape overshadow the culture and people who call Israel home, or at least those who want to maintain a love affair with her from our own American landscape.

Some organizations are working to change that. Tarbuton, an Israeli cultural center, is a grassroots program that started in San Diego



Tarbuton participants pose with their new T-shirts during a Tzofim Caravan visit last summer. They enjoyed activities conducted in Hebrew followed by a performance.

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with a simple premise: bring a little Hebrew and Israeli culture to children whose parents all had connections to Israel. Those involved in its launch recognized that a love and appreciation for Israel starts in childhood, and that the children of today must be her ambassadors of tomorrow. That was January 2006. What started as two classes of 11 children now boasts programming for more than 50 youngsters ages 3-12, as well as social and community events for many more parents, families and seniors. Tarbuton has filled a void and grown into a collaborative effort that provides services to Jews and non-Jews of all ages.

Remarkably, the success is due to the efforts of only a few. One individual who deserves recognition is Jennie Starr, a lawyer by training who articulates her words with enthusiasm and determination. I quickly became impressed with this dynamo mom, the American-born daughter of an Israeli father and American mother, who grew up listening to Israeli music and enjoying Israeli food but still didn't really feel connected to the Holy Land until years later. Like many youngsters, she took her ancestry for granted until becoming a parent herself. That was when she realized that since neither she nor her husband learned to speak Hebrew until they were adults, they wanted things to be different for their own growing family. That meant making sure their "children learned Hebrew when they were young, and when language acquisition came easier."

Starr wears many hats. However, she is quick to give credit to those who have helped actualize this dream despite the financial, organizational and security challenges Tarbuton must deal with. Many folks — native Hebrew speakers and others — have stepped up to the plate to teach and coach Tarbuton participants.

"I have the most amazing, committed teachers and Jewish educators working with me and the most amazing community of

families joining in the fun," she says.

What drives her to grow the program and reach more San Diegans? A desire to "turn a generation of American kids on to Israel and keep my own connected" along the way.

Tarbuton Programs

Tarbuton offers conversational Hebrew classes, reading and writing courses and enrichment programs in Hebrew (such as play ball and karate) at three locations: Congregation Beth El in La Jolla, Temple Solel in Cardiff-by-the-Sea and the Ken Jewish Center in San Diego. Each of these organizations has generously offered Tarbuton students a place to meet and practice their Hebrew language skills. Starr clearly appreciates the support and commitment.

"Without their generosity, it would not be possible to offer the programs close to people's homes," she explains. "The right relationships with the right institutions make all the difference in the world."

Besides the youth programming — which is not a replacement for Sunday school since, Starr says, "we don't focus on religion or prayer" — Tarbuton gives hundreds of adults the opportunities to socialize and practice Hebrew at regular social gatherings. For example, every Friday at noon, Cafe v'Ivrit meets in Carmel Valley, and on Tuesday evenings, Cafe v'Spharadit meets in UTC at Vienen Por Una Taza De Café. People of all ages and from all backgrounds are welcome to join these gatherings, which, Starr says, are "a lot of fun! They love having Israelis drop in. Many in the group have children who are living in Israel, or they themselves travel a lot to Israel."

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of Tarbuton is that many of the programs are suggested and implemented by the families themselves. As Starr puts it, the program has grown "organically based on the

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Adult Tarbuton participants prepare hummus and Israeli salad together in February. They reap the benefits of Tarbuton through Café v'lvrit, where they enjoy food and conversational Hebrew.

needs and passions from within the community." Most recently, a mommy and me Hebrew-speaking playgroup, "Kishkushim," began, and the Café v'lvrit participants visited seniors at Seacrest Village, creating more opportunities for intergenerational bonding.

Tarbuton Philosophy

The philosophy behind the teaching method is to make the learning fun in the context of an "ethnic enclave in which children and adults use the language, see others using it, and enjoy fun activities together. [This] can be key to achieving fluent language skills," Starr says. When participants learn Karate or how to cook in Hebrew, they are socializing with friends and practicing their acquired skills in everyday social events; they aren't sitting in a class somewhere learning the language in a vacuum.

Those who participate are primarily Americans, and many are non-Jews married to Israelis. Starr says she is particularly happy that, "the community is a vibrant, multicultural, multilingual community." Participants hail from North and South America, South Africa, Russia and Israel. A recent survey of the languages spoken by the participants — in addition to Hebrew — includes German, Spanish, French, Russian, Italian and Chinese. In other words, Tarbuton is reaching a group of people who already have fingers in many other cultures and places.

Building Bridges

Another important success factor for the program is its ability to build bridges between Jews from different religious and secular backgrounds. The children come from both Jewish day schools and public schools, and the "adults and families belong to different

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synagogues or may not belong to a synagogue at all, live in different parts of San Diego and may otherwise not have known each other were it not for their shared passion for Israel," Starr says.

That love for Israel can find anyone, at any time, and as Tarbuton models, can be transmitted with just the efforts of a few well-organized folks. Of particular interest is how the organization is able to take the focus away from religion and politics — a stumbling block for those who know too little about the land — and empower the participants to learn about the culture. Starr explains how important it is to separate the "amazing people, food, places and music and a melting pot of nationalities and languages" from more controversial subjects. Tarbuton "creates the linkages for a warm, connected community [and] turns others on to Israel in a magical way."

The Future of Tarbuton

As a fledgling organization, Tarbuton has some immediate and long-term goals. Most pressing is to ensure that the three Tarbuton locations remain strong with solid enrollment. The central San Diego and coastal communities are well situated for the current classes and gatherings, but demand is starting to grow in other areas, including Rancho Bernardo and Poway as well as Downtown San Diego and Del Cerro.

Opening new locations will require more resources, and in fact, financial support is welcome, particularly since the organizers are strongly motivated to keep the program affordable and its teachers paid well. Starr volunteers her time and gives credit to those who have helped Tarbuton to this end.

"We have covered our costs until now, but only because Congregation Beth El, the Ken Jewish Community and Temple Solel have graciously supported our needs for classrooms and provided some operational support," she says.

Short term needs include fundraising to cover operational costs. Long-term goals include raising scholarship funds for students who might otherwise not be able to afford to participate. Tarbuton can provide a tax deduction to anyone interested in donating to its programs. But Starr is quick to add that it isn't only money that makes Tarbuton successful — it's participation.

"With each additional family who joins in the community activities, we gain a richness of experiences, additional children that fill our classes in the three locations and the possibility of creating new programs." \diamond

- For more information on Tarbuton, please visit its Web site at www.tarbuton.org. You can also contact Jennie Starr at jennie@tarbuton.org or (858) 245-9375.



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