

Voices of Nesiya

קולות מנסיעה



Fall 2007



Iggi Abilia '91

Iggi is in his last year of study at Elbaum College, and works as a therapist for children with special needs. He grew up in Yerucham, a development town in the Negev, and attended the High School for the Arts in Mitzpe Ramon. Following his army service, Iggi worked for a number of years in the acting and entertainment industry. He lives in Gedera, Israel.



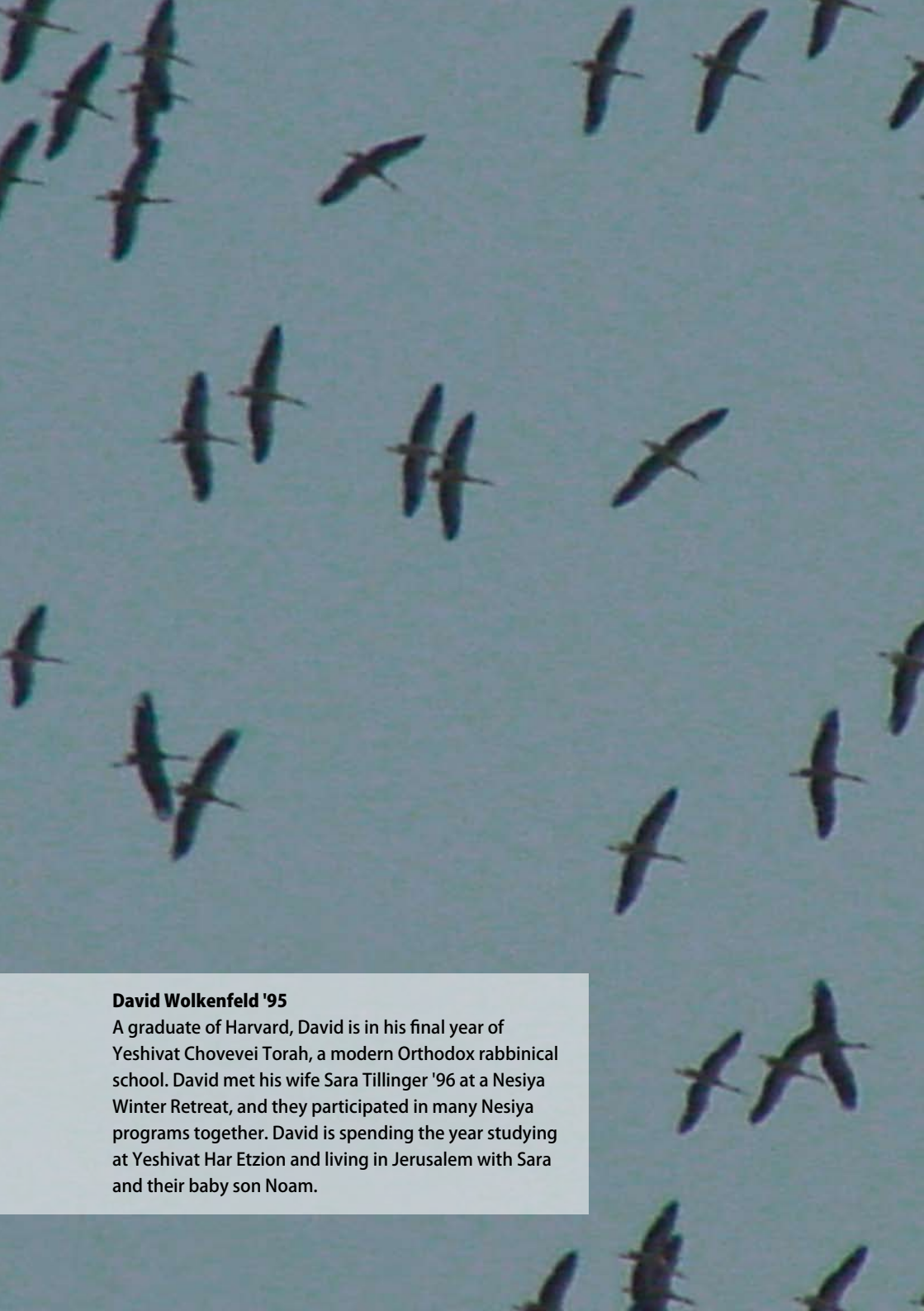
My journey began by chance. The eleventh graders in the highest level English class at my high school had been given a brochure. I wasn't in that class. But I asked my friend if I could take a look. I was excited by the connection between Judaism and art. And I loved that the program would introduce me to American young people. Every child who grows up in Yerucham dreams of an American childhood.

Nesiya made it possible for me to come on the program. I was a kid from Yerucham whom they had just met, and they were willing to do a lot more for me than people who were close to me every day. Both my parents had died, leaving me an orphan. I had a shaky relationship with God.

Nesiya brought me to a renewed and deep love for all the wonderful things hidden within Judaism, and for Jews both inside and outside of Israel.

In 1991, I traveled to the Winter Retreat, again with the amazing help of Nesiya. I remember sharing with my American friends that I had been rejected from serving in the army because of my difficult background. Their interest and support gave me the strength to fight the establishment and eventually I succeeded in enlisting as a soldier.

My most powerful experiences with Nesiya were the arts workshops, which led to my work today as a movement and arts educator working with children. Today I am finishing an internship in therapy for children with special needs, and plan to integrate therapy and theater in my work with children.



David Wolkenfeld '95

A graduate of Harvard, David is in his final year of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a modern Orthodox rabbinical school. David met his wife Sara Tillinger '96 at a Nesiya Winter Retreat, and they participated in many Nesiya programs together. David is spending the year studying at Yeshivat Har Etzion and living in Jerusalem with Sara and their baby son Noam.



I would not be who I am today, I would not be doing what I am doing today, and I certainly would not be blessed with my family, were it not for Nesiya.

I attended a large public high school with only a few other religious Jewish students. In

Nesiya, I found a community of peers searching for spirituality and a connection to Judaism. I found a support network that I had never known before. I was encouraged in my exploration, challenged in my thinking, and pushed to mature in my relationships with others. My own modern Orthodox ideology is in many ways a reflection of my experiences with Nesiya.

My decision to enter the rabbinate can be traced back to organizing the Orthodox minyan at Nesiya Winter Retreats. Nesiya was the first context in which I was respected for my Jewish knowledge and the first context in which I exercised Jewish leadership.

It was also during a Winter Retreat that a cute girl named Sara became my best friend. Six years later we were engaged.

Through Nesiya I learned that dialogue and openness to others can lead to stronger commitments, that tolerance and fervor do not have to be in conflict, and that creativity and self-expression uncover profound insights into the Torah. I hope my own rabbinate will reflect and instill these values in the North American Jewish community.



Avigail Reiner '97

Avigail recently graduated Bezael Academy of Art and Design, and currently works for a leading Israeli graphic design agency. She has worked as a Nesiya counselor-educator, as the leader of Digital Arts workshops in several Nesiya programs, and as Nesiya's graphic designer since 2004. She and her new husband Shlomi Nachmani live in Tel Aviv.



The realization that anyone can make art, even me, was a deeply formative aspect of my Nesiya experience. I discovered that even if I wasn't born with skills in drawing, I could express myself and find my place in the world of art. Nesiya was critical in motivating me to concentrate in the arts during high school, and to pursue a career in art after my army service.

Nesiya focused on the meaning of place: in the desert, we studied Abraham's journey; in Jerusalem, we asked questions about "holy place." Nesiya taught me that something stands behind everything in the world, that every place has its inner meaning, and that you need to search to find that meaning. Since then, many of my artistic projects focus on the social and political implications of the space around me.

Nesiya was the first time I was able to be quiet and alone while also feeling part of a group. I learned to give and receive constructive criticism while developing my capacity to listen deeply to others. I began to understand that community is something that I want in my life, but that community is not just about gathering like-minded people.

The commitment to diversity in Nesiya helped me understand that the unification of different worlds can bring good to both. In my partner, Shlomi, I looked for someone different from me. Our wedding ceremony, which we designed ourselves, came out of our desire to incorporate the different communities that we come from. We thought a lot about the music, since my Ashkenazic family and Shlomi's Sephardic family have different songs and traditions. We decided to use music as a bridge to unite everyone. We created a new melody to accompany us at the chuppah, so that everyone would be coming from the same place. Without breaking from religious obligations, we were able to make our voices heard.

Nesiya taught me to do things in my own way, to ask how I can keep a traditional framework while making it meaningful for myself and those around me – to question how I can redefine borders while remaining within my community.



Beverly Levine '99

Beverly is in her third year of a Ph.D. program in the modern history of the Middle East at Washington University in St. Louis. Following her graduation from Brandeis in 2004 with a BA in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, she worked for a year at Brandeis' Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Beverly is fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic.

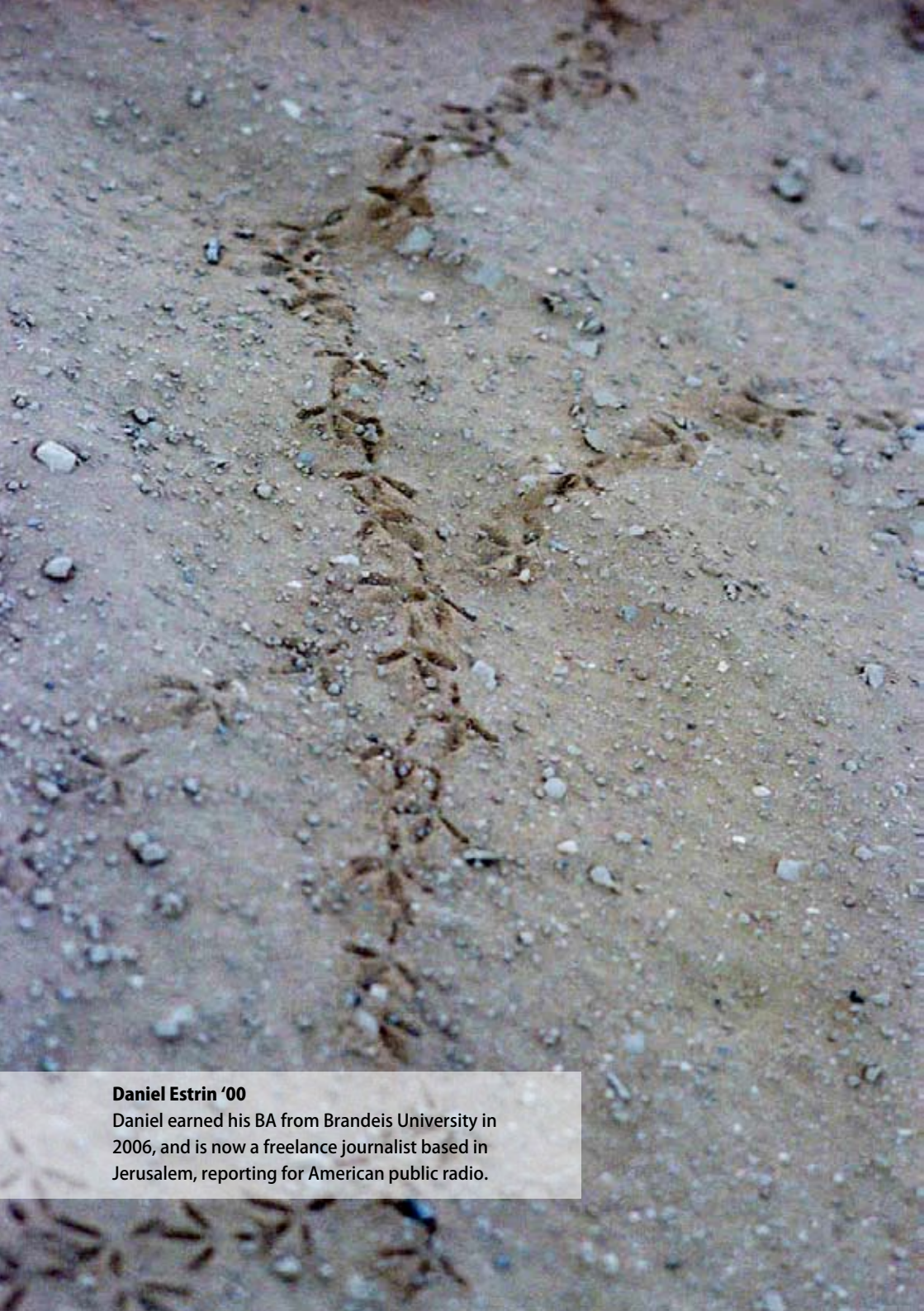


I was born and raised in a biracial and intermarried household between a Catholic immigrant from the Dominican Republic and an American Ashkenazi of Orthodox roots. I grew up as a practicing Catholic, without significant contact with my Jewish father. I received a full scholarship to participate in Nesiya when I was sixteen years old.

Nesiya was a first for me in many ways: my first time abroad, my first time living away from home, my first experience studying anything about Judaism outside of a Judaic club at my public high school, and my first experience learning about Israel and the Middle East. I was sensitive and uncomfortable with my background, and thought I would have little in common with the teenagers in my group. I quickly discovered that I was actually very comfortable in the Nesiya environment, with American and Israeli teenagers from Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and Ethiopian backgrounds.

I enjoyed Nesiya's teaching methods, texts, and tours so much that when I returned home I embarked on a spiritual journey of my own: I began my conversion to Judaism. After conversion and two years at Brandeis, I wanted to delve further into Israel and Zionism studies. I decided to spend my junior year at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, where I became more fluent in modern Hebrew and spent time with Israeli and American Nesiya alumni. I also participated in many Winter Retreats as a college student.

Many of my choices were the fruit of seeds Nesiya planted in my adolescence. And the path I have created for myself is in keeping with the spirit of Nesiya. My personal interest in religious and cultural pluralism, my academic interests in the social and religious history of the Middle East, and my activism for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors were all sparked by Nesiya. The friendships I made in Nesiya have lasted and continue to develop. Now that I see myself as an educator, I respect even more Nesiya's challenging and liberating educational philosophy. I too want to encourage individuality, to support the diverse personal journeys of my students, and to encourage them to confront controversy with patience and respect.



Daniel Estrin '00

Daniel earned his BA from Brandeis University in 2006, and is now a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem, reporting for American public radio.



Journey is not just a word. What Nesiya gave me in six short weeks was not only a journey, but a model for living, a philosophy that states: Don't be shy! Struggle with your heritage. Argue with people unlike you. Work side by side with the other. Find meaning in words and nature and the arts. Ask questions. Challenge norms. Find others who explore like you, and create a community.

Nesiya was just the push I needed. In university, I studied Hebrew and English literature and Jewish studies. I wandered from one praying community to another, continuing my search for spirituality. My experiences in Nesiya meeting Bedouin Israelis led me to facilitating an Arab-Jewish dialogue group on campus. I developed my writing and critical thinking skills, wrote things that I was curious about and started contributing articles to the school newspaper – which led to writing and editing for a national Jewish student publication – which led me to an internship at an NPR station.

I graduated from Brandeis, and came back to Israel on a fellowship with an organization that funds social change organizations in Israel. For ten months, I hosted a show on an Israeli-Palestinian radio station, interviewing all kinds of people doing incredible work in this land – people who are questioning, struggling, volunteering, and following their own tough journey towards reconciliation.

I'm now a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem. I'm following that same curiosity and interest for the ideas, cultures, people, and stories of Israel that Nesiya helped foster in me. How do I find my stories? I keep my ears and eyes open, I read, I meet people, I ask questions – exactly what Nesiya encouraged me to do seven years ago.

Many people my age feel pressure to find success with the snap of their fingers, to land that dream job now, to have all the answers. I'm grateful to Nesiya for teaching me to enjoy the ride.



Renana Kedmi '01

Renana grew up in a religious Zionist community in Jerusalem, and attended the religious pluralistic high school Dror. She is currently an Air Force lieutenant serving as the first female officer to train combat officers in the IDF. Following her summer with Nesiya, Renana participated in multiple Winter Retreats.



Nesiya woke something dormant in me. For the first time I was encouraged to ask questions and take a stand regarding topics that had not interested me before – politics, the reasons for religious observance, education, and social responsibility.

My intensive encounter on Nesiya with participants and staff from diverse religious and socioeconomic backgrounds opened my eyes to the world around me. I became aware of critical factors that influence the society, nation, and land that I live in. My sense of personal responsibility grew, and I began to understand my ability to make a difference. When I returned home, I joined the student council and I started reading the newspaper. I volunteered in several contexts, studied Jewish thought in depth and eventually enlisted as an officer in an elite combat unit. Nesiya gave me a sense of deep caring and responsibility for the world around me that brought me to this point and inspires me as I move forward.

In the summer of 2001, I was like unripe fruit. After much self-reflection and difficult encounters with Israeli society through the army – the disengagement, the war in Lebanon, endless on-call duty, and supervising soldiers from throughout this wonderful, absurd, funny, and impossible society – I now feel ripe to make my voice heard.

I plan to work as a Jewish and Zionist educator in Jewish communities that need my help. Without Nesiya, I would not be aware of the needs of these communities. I feel a deep desire to listen and belong, and to give all other Jews a sense of belonging. The wonderful breeding ground of Nesiya taught me that this is both an obligation and a great privilege.



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Voices of Nesiya is the first in a series of publications in which our alumni share stories about the long-term influence of Nesiya programs in their lives. Since 1985, over 2,800 North American and Israeli alumni have participated in innovative programs conducted by the Nesiya Institute.

About the Nesiya Institute

The mission of the Nesiya Institute is to inspire young people from diverse backgrounds to enrich Jewish life for themselves and others.

Every Nesiya program builds relationships and explores differences among diverse Jews in order to develop creative leaders and invigorate Jewish life. Nesiya programs bring North American and Israeli young people face-to-face with the richness and complexity of Jewish life – and with each other – through a unique model of experiential learning that combines community building, creative text study, the arts, outdoor adventure, and community service.

Nesiya currently conducts three core programs:

The Kehillah Summer Experience, a six-week Israel program for North American and Israeli high school students.

The Winter Retreat, a week-long arts and text-based program in North America, with enrichment and educational leadership training for high school, college and post-college age Americans and Israelis.

The Kehillah Israeli Fellows Program, an academic-year community service and learning program for Israeli high school students from religious and secular backgrounds.

During the past ten years, Nesiya has developed a wide range of new initiatives, including: programs for Jewish community high schools and youth groups; North American college leadership programs with Israeli peers; and programs for educators, lay leaders and families.



Nesiya Institute מכון נסיעה

www.nesiya.org / info@nesiya.org

220 Fifth Avenue #1301 • New York 10001 • NY • (212) 951-7128
16 Bilu Street P.O.B. 10111 • Jerusalem 91101 • Israel • (02) 561-1996