

# Guardsmen' seek to protect Israeli farmlands

## Volunteer security force 'impresses' visiting federations



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Avishai Bokovza thought it was odd when he saw a car driving without lights on his Negev ranch at 2 a.m.

Bokovza followed the car to the tent of a nearby Bedouin family and warned them that he would hold them responsible for stealing if he found them on his property again.

It was just another night for Bokovza, who had 60 sheep stolen from his ranch two years ago, including pregnant sheep that are worth \$500 each.

Luckily for Bokovza, young Israelis from around the country now come regularly to his ranch to help him keep watch. The volunteers are from an organization called Hashomer Hachadash, the New Israeli Guardians.

The organization was established in 2007 to help farmers and ranchers in the Negev and Galilee who tend vast tracts of state-owned land and had to deal with the theft of their livestock by local Bedouin or Palestinians from the West Bank, and illegal building by Bedouin and Israeli Arabs. Named after Hashomer, the guardsmen who protected remote Jewish settlements 100 years ago, Hashomer Hachadash also works to ensure a stronger Jewish presence in the Negev and Galilee.

“Only when Hashomer Hachadash are here can I sleep at night,” Bokovza told a visiting delegation from New Jersey last month. “Before them, I slept with one eye open.”

The Jewish Federation of Central New Jersey has contributed to Hashomer Hachadash for a year through the Mack Ness Fund, which promotes economic development in Israel's "edge" communities. The partnership will continue following the anticipated merger between Central and United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ. The top professional leaders of the two federations, Stanley Stone and Max Kleinman, met last month with the leaders of the organization on Bokovza's ranch and pledged their continuing support.

"What struck me about Hashomer Hachadash was the idealism and positive energy of their leadership," Stone, Central's executive vice president, said. "I've been moved by being exposed to intelligent, handsome young people who can be anywhere but decided to dedicate their lives to helping the periphery. The organization brings a snapshot of different sectors of Israeli society together."

Hashomer Hachadash was founded by Yoel Zilberman, a third-generation cattle breeder from the northern town of Zippori who saw his father brought to the brink of bankruptcy by thieves who destroyed his fences, stole and slaughtered his livestock, and physically threatened him. Zilberman, who was a young soldier in an elite IDF combat unit at the time, decided to defend ranchers in northern and southern Israel who could no longer protect their land.

He took a leave of absence from the army for a year, settled in a modified shipping container overlooking his father's property, and kept watch at night over the land and the herd. Zilberman founded the organization with On Rifman, a Negev man who was facing the same problem. Zilberman said he has since attracted more than 2,000 volunteers to guard more than 20 ranches in the Negev and Galilee.

More than 300 regular volunteers give over at least one night a month for guard duty. A significant portion of the volunteers are young students from Tel Aviv. There is also a new leadership program for gap year students from Israel and the United States.

Now 27, Zilberman said he wants to build a program for young people immediately after IDF service. He hopes they will go to the Negev and work the land while learning about Zionism, Judaism, and the history of the region.

The organization hopes to increase its corps of volunteers to 6,000 by 2013 and operate 30 outposts protecting over 100,000 acres of land, supplementing the work of law enforcement organizations that have insufficient manpower.

"With all due respect to the prime minister and the police, we felt there is no one in charge before we came," Zilberman told Kleinman and Stone. "The police should be doing what we do. If we weren't here, someone violent would be here."

State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss wrote in May 2009: "Land theft is a national plague. The state lost control over land theft. The police are not doing enough."

The program, however, is not without its critics. Israel's relations with Bedouin tribes are often strained, with the Bedouin arguing that some government-owned land was itself the communal property of tribes. One of the strongest critics of Hashomer Hachadash is the only Bedouin member of Knesset, Taleb a-Sanaa.

“The so-called New Guardsmen are neither guards nor new. It is a racist, terrorist organization,” a-Sanaa told NJ Jewish News. “They guard Jews who have no right to the land and pursue the Bedouin. They bypass law enforcement organizations and the courts. They are criminals and they should be in jail, but the state encourages them.”

Ahmad Falach, the Bedouin chairman of the El-Hed local committee in the northern El-Batof Regional Council, is more conciliatory. “I don’t think the New Guardsmen are racist. We have no problem with them. We are not against them. We are with them. There are always problems with theft. A thief is a thief, no matter whether he is Jewish or Bedouin.”

Adds Falach: “I hope the New Guardsmen will be expanded and start protecting Bedouin land, too. After all, the Bedouin serve in the army and they can volunteer. If they guard my land too, I will salute them. If we work together, we will succeed.”

Responded Zilberman: “Whoever wants help, we will be there.”

The Central federation, meanwhile, is involved in efforts to improve the lives of the Bedouin in the Negev. Last year, federation leaders met with Bedouin entrepreneurs and students to discuss educational opportunities for the Bedouin as well as security for their Jewish neighbors.

The federation’s Israel director, Tehila Nachalon, said that helping Israeli farmers was the key to the continued economic success of the Negev. She stressed that her office also helps the Bedouin with education and employment problems.

Asked why Hashomer Hachadash should interest American Jews, Zilberman told NJJN that Jews in America want to be part of the land of Israel and a partner in building the state. Noting this week’s Tu B’Shevat holiday, he said land bought by Jewish National Fund a century ago using contributions from American Jews was being abandoned by ranchers pestered by thieves.

“The Middle East is getting more crazy day by day,” he said. “When there is such uncertainty, if we aren’t connected enough, we won’t be worthy of the land of Israel and we won’t keep it.”

Zilberman emphasized that he was fighting not for disputed land like the West Bank but for consensus areas over which there currently is no political argument but there potentially could be in the not-too-distant future.

“There are places in the North and South where Jews are the minority and they don’t act like the sovereign,” he warned. “We are our brother’s keeper and when they need help, we must help them. This need to protect our brothers must apply to all Jews everywhere.”

“These people are today’s pioneers,” Kleinman, MetroWest’s executive vice president, said. “They do a social good that lets people sleep soundly. I was very impressed.”