



The Master Rebuilder Of Gush Katif Lives

Two years after the Gaza pullout, a lone rabbi is helping restore work, and dignity, to wrecked evacuees.

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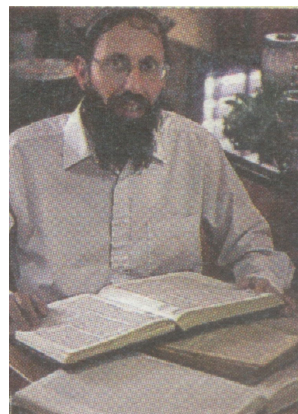
Alon Shvut, Israel — When Tal Nishri opened her school supplies store last year in Yad Binyamin, a religious community in the center of the country, the 25-year-old's prior experience was only tangential. She had been a teacher at a woman's seminary in Gush Katif, in the Gaza Strip, but opted to launch the store together with her sister when the government relocated her family as part of the disengagement that razed the settlements of Gush Katif in the summer of 2005.

But the business got off to a slow start. Nishri saw only a smattering of customers, a problem she relayed to a business consultant who had helped her set up the shop. The consultant asked Nishri what she thought students would most likely buy.

The first-time retailer was sure the hot item was an orthopedic backpack, but they were expensive even at wholesale, with little prospect of a profit.

Undeterred, the consultant subsidized a supply of backpacks, letting Nishri sell them for well below the retail price at neighboring stores.

And, as the consultant guessed, students — and their parents — jammed the store, buying up not only the backpacks but many other supplies as well, and they now keep coming back for all of their school purchases.



Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon has provided seed money for hundreds of Gush Katif evacuees, including Tal Nishri, above, who runs a school supplies store in Yad Binyamin.

“We sold close to 500 of the backpacks, and the parents bought the other supplies the kids needed from our store as well,” says Nishri. “I

couldn't believe it. When we had to start restocking our shelves, I felt empowered and knew the store could be a success."

How could Nishri, unemployed since the evacuation, afford a consultant and a new business? She couldn't. Which is just as well — this consultant doesn't take a fee for his service. In fact, don't call him a consultant.

Students at Israel's prestigious Yeshivat Har Etzion, families in the West Bank community of Alon Shvut South (in the Gush Etzion bloc southwest of Jerusalem) and thousands of people evacuated from Gush Katif call him by his proper title: Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon, a highly regarded teacher of Jewish law at the yeshiva, chief rabbi of the city of Alon Shvut South, and, since summer 2005, founder and head of JobKatif, a nonprofit employment and new business agency for evacuees from Gush Katif.

With the two-year anniversary of the disengagement from Gaza nearing, JobKatif is a bright spot in what observers say has been a dire situation for many of the approximately 8,000 Gaza settlers trying to rebuild their lives since the pullout.

So far, JobKatif has found jobs for more than 600 evacuees and helped establish about 85 new businesses. But 1,200 people from Gush Katif — a third of the 3,700 evacuees of employment age — remain unemployed. The government has placed fewer than 10 percent of the evacuees in jobs, according to Benny Fefferman, an official at Israel's Ministry of Industry Trade and Labor. And it has provided little compensation for lost businesses, according to Ruth Elbaum, who handles overseas relations for JobKatif. In fact, the government's own Web site directs people to JobKatif.

The trauma of being uprooted has taken its toll. A recent report by the Gush Katif Committee, which oversees all aspects of the evacuees' resettlement, found that almost no one has rebuilt their home. It also found an increase in the number of people seeking mental health and emotional assistance, and that about 500 families are receiving funds and food from social service organizations — despite having been employed while they lived in Gush Katif. Even those in the agricultural sector that have been able to start new farming

business have lost markets, as well as clients abroad.

"With each week that passes the challenges of finding work are exacerbated, especially for those over age 50," says Elbaum.

The Accidental Job Counselor

Rabbi Rimon's new life as an employment consultant began quite by accident. Just after the disengagement, rabbi friends from the evacuated areas contacted Rabbi Rimon and asked him to visit evacuees in Jerusalem's Shalom Hotel to see if there was anything they needed. Rimon, 40, a wiry man with a wispy beard, wise eyes and a smile children flock to, set out to see if the evacuees needed prayer books, toys or food.

"I got there just a few days after many of the families arrived," says the rabbi. "What I found were adults previously busy with their farms, their jobs, their careers, their livelihoods, with nothing to do." The rabbi worried that with no work, these heads of households who had already lost their work, their homes and their community, might soon lose their self-respect and the respect of their children.

While the government had made promises about restarting businesses and job retraining, Rabbi Rimon decided not to wait. Where he could get government resources, he would; if not, he would rely on private funds and volunteers. He hired four full-time field workers, all former Gush Katif residents, who rewrite resumes and coach job seekers for interviews. To date, JobKatif has raised about \$1 million, all of which has been distributed.

"The enormity of the situation has to be underscored," says one volunteer, a retired businessman who made aliyah in 1970 and joined JobKatif within hours of hearing Rabbi Rimon speak in Petach Tikva.

"Only 15 percent of those evacuated had their jobs or businesses outside of the Gush Katif community," the volunteer says. "Everyone else needed immediate funding to start a farm, restart a business or train for new employment."

Rabbi Rimon won't criticize the government, at least to a visitor. He says only that his group of volunteers is often able to skip the red tape

usually associated with looking for work through government services. In fact, Rabbi Rimon works with the government, having built trust with not only the evacuees, but also the ministries charged with helping them. He helped pass legislation in the Knesset this year to give businesses a \$250 bonus per month for 18 months for each evacuee they hire.

According to Fefferman, surveys of the employment situation among the evacuees has found that JobKatif is “the primary body in Israel solving the employment issue [for evacuees].”

JobKatif maintains the only comprehensive list of evacuees, detailing new address and job status, says Elbaum, and that information is used by the government. “[Rabbi Rimon] has shown he can get the job done, and we are just happy to be able to work with him,” says Tomer Moskovitz, deputy director general of Sela, the government’s office for the Gush Katif evacuees.

Rabbi Rimon’s work has caught the attention of the wider Jewish communal world.



Cycles of Life: Rabbi Rimon chats with Ilan Tartakes, kneeling, who owns a bicycle shop in Yad Binyamin started with capital from the rabbi’s agency, JobKatif.

After visiting resettlement neighborhoods and meeting with Rabbi Rimon in February, John Ruskay, executive vice president and CEO of UJA-Federation of New York, wrote in his Executive Message posted on the UJA-

Federation Web site: “Some evacuees are thriving, particularly those who left Gaza and immediately began to rebuild their homes and businesses. But others, including those who are more advanced in age or have limited capital, continue to wait for the promised government compensation. ... The leaders with whom we met are increasingly desperate for help, not just to begin building but also to address the growing needs of those struggling with depression, substance abuse, marital tension, and more...”

Officials at United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group for federations nationwide, who were on the same mission with Ruskay, this week announced the allocation of \$2.6 million in aid for the Gush Katif evacuees, about \$300,000 of which is earmarked for JobKatif.

‘It’s Not Just Income — It’s Pride’

Rabbi Rimon’s volunteer and support base is largely from the Gush Etzion area, including the city of Efrat, which is near Alon Shvut, where many successful, retired business people, largely American, have closed ranks with the rabbi and offered their volunteer services as social workers, business consultants, psychologists, doctors, lawyers and accountants. A call to one volunteer (there are about 200) at 8 p.m. on a weeknight finds him sitting with a family in their new home in Yad Binyamin, looking through a profit-and-loss statement on the new business they’ve just opened.

Two office workers and three young women doing their national service set their sites on matching employers to job candidates, and the organization’s Web site, www.jobkatif.org.il lists job postings.

Currently, Rimon is focusing mostly on those still unemployed — “It’s not just income — it’s pride, and joy in life, and how they are perceived by their children and friends,” he says — while his volunteers and staff stay in frequent touch even with those who are turning keys into new greenhouses and office space.

Previously, Yoav Berger headed one of the largest farms in Gush Katif. Since the evacuation, he has had to rent space in a hothouse near Yad Binyamin, one of the communities where evacuees were relocated,

and relied on JobKatif for start-up capital. He's completely self-sufficient now, but grateful to JobKatif for the initial help.

Yif'a and Gabi Feuchtunger, also in Yad Binyamin, had a successful accounting business. JobKatif helped them find offices in a school, "a bit noisy, but we are lucky," Yif'a says. JobKatif helped provide cash to pay the rent, and is helping to arrange a loan so that they can start construction on their own offices.

Feuchtunger says that in addition to the money, the couple appreciates that JobKatif volunteers and Rabbi Rimon periodically check in. "We're getting on our feet, but we're still shocked at the changes to our lives, and every so often it's nice to look up and see that someone cares about us."

Not everyone's situation is working out as nicely.

In Gush Katif, Debbie Rosen, 43, was employed by the area's Regional Council as a spokeswoman with the foreign press. She would have liked to continue working with the foreign media, but the office is in Jerusalem, and she was evacuated to Nitzan, which is to the south and is an hour trip each way. With six children ages 8 to 21 to care for, the commute is too long, and she is looking for employment closer to home that would capitalize on her skills.

Currently, she works eight hours a week as coordinator at an art gallery in Nitzan — a job set up by JobKatif — but is paid only \$150 per month. She's grateful but "I need to earn a living," she says with frustration. She spoke with Rabbi Rimon about funding for a photography business last Passover, and is still waiting for approval of her request from the JobKatif staff in Nitzan. JobKatif says her request is being reviewed.

One person, still waiting for work, says that while Rabbi Rimon is thoughtful and deliberative, not all the staff employed by the group seem well qualified or professional. Some job seekers have bristled at the need for a full business plan before their business proposals will be considered, but JobKatif staff say it's just not possible to hand out money based on unstructured ideas.

One job seeker questioned the wisdom of paying so many evacuees a stipend for

volunteering in hospitals or attending job retraining courses when the money might be better spent on start-up capital for new businesses or more job training that would allow additional people to earn salaries.

Time Running Out?

As Rimon forges ahead, he worries about money. A recent fundraising trip to New York netted \$400,000 — he's grateful, but still underfunded. More money is needed, he says, for stipends and training programs and he would like to be able to give additional assistance to people restarting their businesses so that they can see greater profits sooner.

And he worries that time is running out — for himself, and for the people he is trying to help. Rabbi Rimon took a one-year unpaid sabbatical from the yeshiva to run JobKatif full time (for which he draws no salary).

The rabbi's current financial goal is to raise at least \$7 million to be spent in seed money for businesses, job retraining programs, stipends for evacuees doing volunteer work while they retrain for jobs, and professional assistance — including with industrial psychologists and social workers.

In September Rabbi Rimon will return to Yeshivat Har Etzion and other schools where he teaches, including Migdal Oz, a woman's yeshiva in Alon Shvut, though his students say he has continued to teach all along.

The government's Tomer Moskovitz says he wishes the rabbi would continue his sabbatical through the end of 2008, though his staffers and volunteers know he is constantly available. "I have no idea when he sleeps," says Elbaum.

Back at the school supplies shop in Yad Binyamin, Tal Nishri, expecting her third child any day, will turn over the pencils, notebooks and backpacks to her sister for a short while. But Nishri expects to be back at the shop before school starts.

"This year, with help from JobKatif, we hope to sell 500 backpacks and many other supplies. I am so grateful to JobKatif for helping me get on my feet with honor. But next year," she says, "with God's help perhaps we won't need any outside assistance at all. That is my dream."