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NEWS: Building on Mount Zion

Atlanta Rick Halpern helps Diaspora Yeshiva ensure its eternal mission

Tova Fruchtman
Staff Writer

It was a chance meeting in the street that first brought Rick Halpern, the president and founder of Torah Atlanta, to Mount Zion.

While his family spent six weeks in Israel in the summer of 2005, he decided to take on the project of getting to know the neighborhoods in Jerusalem better.

The third day he was there, he saw a man walking with an English translation of the Gemara, the rabbinic commentary that forms Jewish law, and asked him about attending a class. The man, Rabbi Shabtai Herman, invited Halpern to learn in the Diaspora Yeshiva, where Rabbi Herman taught.

The connection has led to much more than a chance for Torah study. The Atlanta developer soon was given the opportunity to be a part of redeveloping Mount Zion.

On Feb. 3 and 4, Jewish Atlantans will have a chance to hear about how they, too, can be a part of rebuilding Jerusalem, building by building.

On Shabbat and the Sunday after, Rabbi Abraham Goldstein, who will be in town from Israel, will speak with Halpern in various synagogues about the Mount Zion Redevelopment Project, which Halpern is heading.

Rabbi Goldstein, whose father is the rosh yeshiva (head of school) of the Diaspora Yeshiva, will speak on "Redeveloping Mount Zion: Atlanta's Special Role."

The Goldstein family is responsible for obtaining and keeping many of the buildings on Mount Zion since 1967, when they received the area, a 10-minute walk from the Kotel and a five-minute walk from the Jewish Quarter, from the Israeli government to start a yeshiva for Baalei Teshuvot - boys with a desire for Torah but no background.

An e-mail message from Rabbi Herman details the history of the yeshiva and its location on Mount Zion, as well as the threats to the yeshiva's future as some people try to obtain the more than 100,000 square feet the yeshiva holds.

Mount Zion sits on prime property in Jerusalem, not only for developers who want to put condominiums in the area, but also for Christians who claim that the Last Supper Chamber, where Jesus supposedly ate his last meal, is there.

Just one floor below the Last Supper Chamber is what is said to be the tomb of King David.



Rabbi Avraham Goldstein



The Diaspora Yeshiva maintains the Chamber of the Holocaust on Mount Zion.

"The Jewish people owe Rabbi Goldstein and his family a tremendous debt of gratitude for, first off, assembling this amount of property, but also for keeping Mount Zion as a Jewish place, a spiritual place," Halpern said.

While the yeshiva holds a 49-year lease dating from 1973, many of the buildings surrounding the yeshiva and the tomb of King David have not been used for many years.

Now that Halpern has signed on, the buildings are on their way to being rebuilt to be useful and profitable.

Just before Passover last spring, after Halpern started working with the yeshiva, he met a rabbi from Aish HaTorah who was visiting Atlanta.

Aish (www.aish.com) offers a variety of outreach programs for young Jews to learn in Israel and was planning to bring more than 2,000 students to Israel that summer.

Halpern told the rabbi about the Mount Zion Redevelopment Project, and after a few conversations, he found Aish would use a building if it could be ready by May 15.

Halpern and the yeshiva had 30 days to work on a far-from-ready building. With the help of a generous contractor, they completed the building on time.

Groups stayed there in May, June and July.

An August group canceled because of the war, but the new beds came in handy, housing 167 people from Safed who had been displaced.

During the summer, Harold Schroeder, the president of Congregation Ariel, visited the Diaspora Yeshiva, where his son Michael had studied after high school, and had a chance to see the renovated facilities.

"It's obvious that we need these buildings," Schroeder said. "The key is that it has to be developed."

He's glad Atlanta has the opportunity to participate.

"This is our chance to physically do something for Israel," he said.

The dormitory-style housing is on its way to sleeping 300 people. The yeshiva has a catering kitchen and a facility for holding simchas, where Halpern celebrated his son's bar mitzvah last summer. There are plans for a visitors center and gift shop, plus a museum and media center around the tomb of King David.

"We're already seeing a lot of demand for the buildings," Halpern said

But there is work to be done, and Rabbi Goldstein and Halpern will tell more about that when Rabbi Goldstein visits.

"Our main purpose is to educate the community on what is there," he said. "And even though the Diaspora Yeshiva controls this, this is really a national treasure. This is something that belongs to the Jewish people. ... Once it's fully developed, this can be in a sense the largest keruv - Jewish outreach - facility of its kind in the world."

With the goal of outreach and the opportunity to rebuild a part of Jerusalem, Halpern, who has worked on a variety of projects in Atlanta, said this is the most important.

"I tell people that there is only one building project that exceeds this one," Halpern said, "and that would be the rebuilding of the Temple."

The crucial factor is that the project covers such a large piece of the Old City.

"We pray three times a day for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and here's an opportunity to actually do it, to be involved with it," Halpern said.

He said the project gives people a chance to have an enduring impact.

"All of the projects we work on here in Atlanta are great and wonderful and necessary, but 100 years from now, who knows how many Jews are going to be left in Atlanta to use them?" Halpern said. "We have to remember this is still the exile, and our future is limited here, but [the Mount Zion Redevelopment Project] is an opportunity to build something that's eternal."
