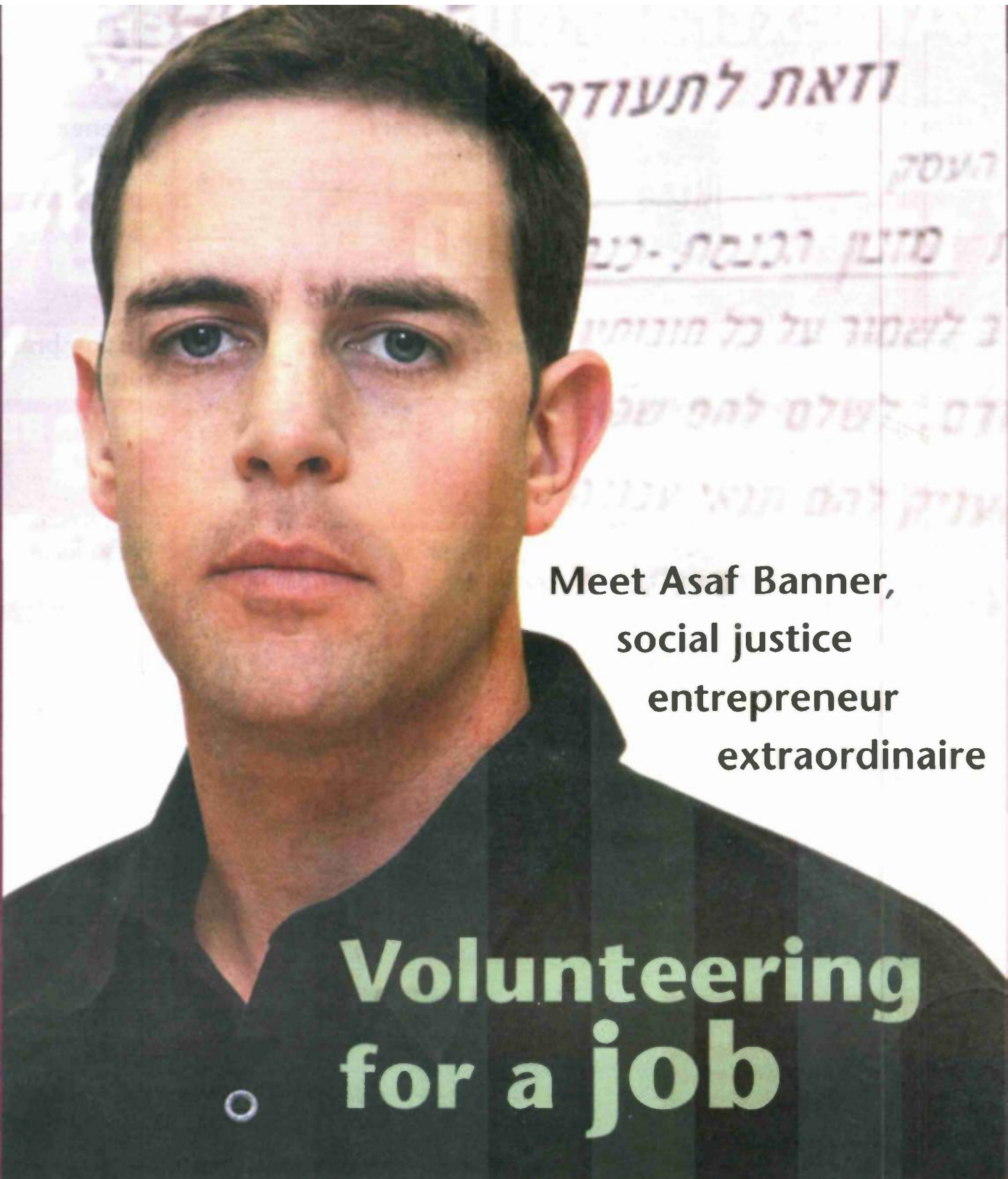




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Meet Asaf Banner,
 social justice
 entrepreneur
 extraordinaire

**Volunteering
 for a job**

Waving a Banner for altruism

At 33, Asaf Banner has already founded three leading Jerusalem-based nonprofits



Social justice from a Jewish perspective. The core of Judaism according to Asaf Banner. (Marc Israel Sellem)

By SHARON UDASIN

For Asaf Banner, helping other people is simply in his genes. Growing up with a mother in social work and school counseling, he just couldn't help but head in a similar direction after his army service.

"As a religious person, there are two parts of me practicing. One is what happens between me and God," the 33-year-old Jerusalemite tells *In Jerusalem*. "The other 50 percent is what do I do for the community. I think that Zionism today is much to do with how can we make Israel a state worth living in and worth being the only Jewish state in the world. There's a lot to change."

Banner's most recent venture in serving the local community is Hotam: Teach First Israel – a program modeled after those in the Teach for All Network, such as Teach for America and Teach First UK – which encourages the best and brightest students to teach in Israel's most underserved populations for at least two years.

This month, Teach First Israel is in its second year of recruitment, and has already received

710 applications for 110 places, with an ultimate goal of reaching 1,200 by the end of this season. This year, Teach First Israel is particularly seeking English, science and math teachers, and is actively recruiting graduates of top universities and colleges throughout Israel.

But Banner's inspiration for establishing Teach First Israel came from years of community service and a drive to improve other people's lives.

Born and bred in Jerusalem, where he has lived all his life, and active in the religious scouts here, Banner left the city only briefly for a South American tour after the army and then two or three months of living in New York. "But basically I've been here," he says, noting that he did both his undergraduate degree in psychology and business and his MBA at the Hebrew University.

"Everything started when I finished my army service," Banner says. "We were a couple of friends looking into where we could do good. And we found the results of the social security report from the year 1999, and then we started to deliver food packages to people in need."

This group of friends – "three guys and a girl"

– ended up starting the organization Shachen Tov (The Good Neighbor Association) which today distributes meals to about 1,500 families around the country through the hands of thousands of volunteers, Banner says.

In addition to providing food to those in need, Shachen Tov hosts "coffee shops on wheels" for battered women, seniors and at-risk youth, and also runs learning centers and a textbook-sharing library. With a yearly budget of \$261,000, the organization's functioning is based solely on private donations.

"We were doing this for a couple of years and then we thought we needed to do something to get to the core of the problem and not just to the symptoms of the problem. So we thought about starting with social justice, mainly in terms of handicapped individuals, workers' rights and disabilities rights. Another angle was that we understand that the State of Israel is the only Jewish state in the world, but this 'Jewishness' was mainly being expressed through laws about the holidays and kashrut. But it's not related enough to the core of Judaism" – which Banner describes as dealing with social justice from a Jewish perspective.

Anxious to explore this "core" of Judaism, Banner and his friends decided in 2004 to start another new organization – Bema'aglei Tzedek – which serves to engage thousands of young Israelis in social change, in the classroom, youth movements and the army.

The organization holds biannual conferences – on 17 Tamuz and 10 Tevet, days of fasting and soul-searching – in the city's center. The first conference, in 2005, attracted over 1,000 people, and since then, the conferences typically offer some 25 simultaneous lessons from different experts on Jewish social justice, such as prominent rabbis and academics from the field.

"Every conference people went out with homework – saying this is what you can do about accessibility for people with disabilities and workers' rights," Banner says.

The goal of Bema'aglei Tzedek continues to be a twofold vision of defining the Jewish identity of the State of Israel in terms of social justice and by pinpointing the roots of the country's community issues, rather than just treating the symptoms. Thus far, the organization has gotten these missions under way through practical social justice projects. The first, he says, is pro-

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Just causes. Bema'aglei Tzedek serves to engage thousands of young Israelis in social change in the classroom, youth movements and the army.

viding a social kashrut certification called Tav Hevrati, a free certificate earned by about a third of Jerusalem's restaurants, which have demonstrated that they are accessible to the disabled and treat their workers ethically.

A SECOND project, called Employment Watchdogs, focuses on making sure security guards and custodial workers are not exploited by their employers, by teaching high school students to advocate on their behalf. "They're going to be the poor of the next decade – no one is paying them as they should be paid," Banner says.

Bema'aglei Tzedek also brings educational programming to the country's various youth movements, building up their social justice curriculums and enabling group members to partake in the organization's larger projects and ideas.

"Now Bema'aglei Tzedek is working toward creating cities of justice. The idea is to take a city and work really hard with the municipality and youth movements and educational organizations and to work on the city in order to change it into a city of

justice," he says. Jerusalem is the pilot city in this project.

In the midst of getting Bema'aglei Tzedek on the move, Banner meanwhile worked with a group of friends approximately three years ago to establish a fund called Keren Psifas, which provides funding to individual families for services like psychologist visits, transportation and additional schooling. Each of the 10 friends initially involved soon brought in additional donors, and the group now provides about NIS 25,000 per month to families all over the country. Last year, the fund was dedicated to the memory of IDF soldiers Yosef Goodman and Eliezer Globerman.

"The idea is that we met families' needs to take a significant step in their lives, with not too much cash, that can change their life trajectory," Banner says.

"For example, we help kids who need to be examined by psychologists to know they have ADHD. If your parents don't have NIS 2,000 for psychological tests, then you're not going to do it."

While one of his friends was visiting a child he had been working with in Ramle,

he found an awful smell in the family's apartment. "They said that every month all the sewage of the building comes up in their bathtub – they just lived with this awful smell in the house, and they had little kids."

In the end, Keren Psifas was able to help pay for a plumber to fix the pipes.

"We don't give the people themselves the money, but we pay for the service," Banner explains, noting that another service the fund provides is vocational courses for battered women, so that they can move on with their lives as best as possible.

Until about 18 months ago, Banner remained CEO of Bema'aglei Tzedek, and though he still serves on the board there today – and was on the board of Shachen Tov until two years ago – he decided that since this organization was up and running on the right foot, he'd move on to the next thing.

THIS, OF course, was Teach First Israel, which is now operated under the joint administration of the Education Ministry, JDC-Israel, the Naomi Foundation and Hakol Chinuch, an organization that works to advance the Israeli educational system. The Naomi Foundation is named after the late wife of the donor, who Banner says has supported the organization from the beginning. But the name of that foundation bears additional significance to Banner because his own mother, who was responsible for so much of his interest in social action and who died last year, was named Naomi.

"A lot of times when people want to start something, they have no funding," Banner says, stressing how raising money has presented so many difficulties along the way. "If you start on a small scale and you can show you are really doing things, then it's a great help. And I had a lot of luck."

The 110 places available to interested applicants this year is a sizable increase from only 70 spots last year, and students have the opportunity to simultaneously earn their teaching qualifications through programs at the University of Haifa and Beit Berl College, so that they will be able to then teach in any Israeli high school. Currently, the students teach in 22 underserved schools across the country.

'I think at volunteerism we are doing much better in terms of volume. In terms of donations, we are not there yet'



Tav Hevrati is a free certificate earned by restaurants that have demonstrated that they are accessible to the disabled and treat their workers ethically. About a third of Jerusalem's eateries carry it.

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"I met a guy who told me about Teach for America and his idea for bringing it here," Banner says. Simultaneously, he continues, a friend working in London met with Brett Wigdortz, the CEO of Teach First UK and the cofounder and president of Teach for All, who as a New Jersey-born Jew was really passionate about getting something like this started in Israel as well.

With these connections, Banner was able to start meeting with representatives from Teach for All, the global umbrella group, which held a conference in Mumbai earlier this month that a couple of his teachers attended.

Banner gives a huge amount of credit to Rabbi Shay Piron, executive director of Hakol Chinuch, for the progress he made getting Teach First Israel started. Before launching the program, Banner worked at Hakol Chinuch with Piron for about six months to develop the program, and then met with former director-general of the Education Ministry, Shlomit Amihai, who also wanted to encourage new, young teachers to join the system.

"Then we started to work together, and here we stand today," he says, noting that Amihai is now the chairperson of Teach First Israel, while he is the CEO.

The first round of students began teaching this September.

"They are in the battle zone for five or six months, doing some amazing stuff, from creating a library in a school and fostering among other teachers the idea of reading five or six books a year," Banner says. "They are working with kids who nobody really believed in" – building and organizing new activities like basketball teams, soccer clubs and bands.

"We started recruitment for the second cohort six weeks ago," he says. "This year our goal is to reach 1,200. I think we are going to break it."

Banner says great care was taken to avoid stepping on teachers' toes by suggesting that graduates who are not trained in education would make better teachers than those with certificates.

"First, all of our teachers go through an accredited teaching program provided in collaboration with our partners Haifa University and Beit Berl college and earn a teaching certificate by the end of their first year of teaching. Secondly, we realize that there are so many great teachers within the education system and our young teachers can learn from them. That is why each participating school selects a veteran and excellent teacher to support our teachers. As a mentor they have weekly meetings with each teacher, observe their classrooms and provide feedback," he says.

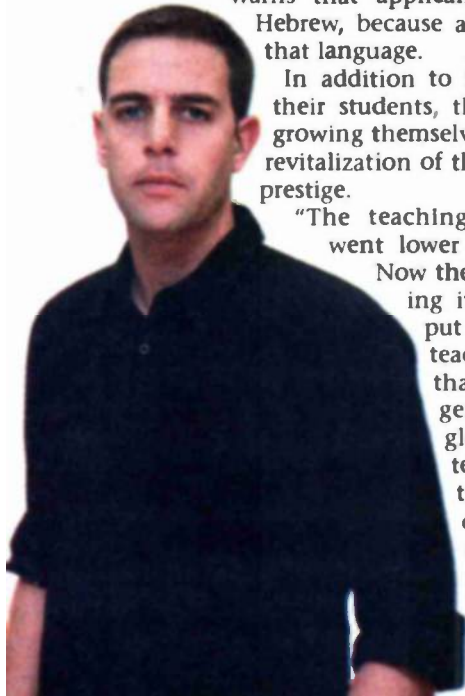
"While there are wonderful teachers in the education system we believe that not enough of the highest achieving university students and Israel's most talented young people are selecting a career in teaching and we want to be part of the effort that seeks to change this. After only a few months we have seen that Teach First Israel participants have been well received at their schools. They have entered the schools with a lot of humility and eagerness to learn and others have responded well to it – principals, mentors and other teachers alike."

While the program really needs English teachers, Banner warns that applicants must be fluent in Hebrew, because all of the training is in that language.

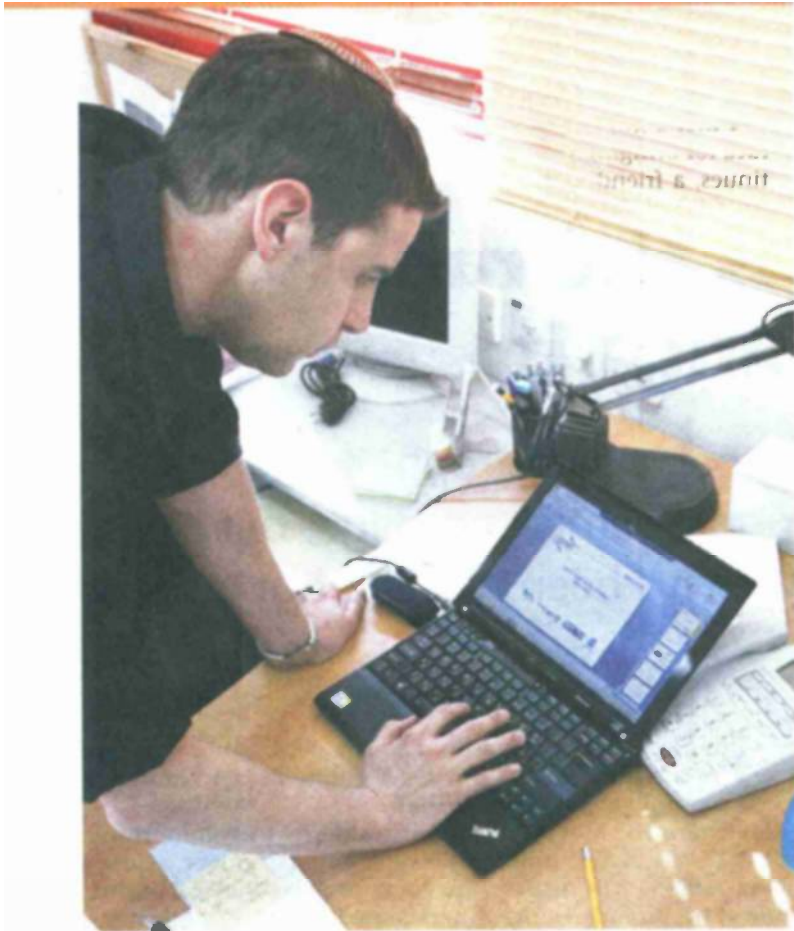
In addition to improving the lives of their students, the student-teachers are growing themselves and are witnessing a revitalization of the teaching profession's prestige.

"The teaching profession's prestige went lower and lower and lower.

Now there's a momentum driving it. If a country doesn't put its best and brightest in teaching, then what does that mean for the next generation? There is a global concept of being a teacher and how attractive that is, and this doesn't relate only to salaries. It mostly relates to social status – how the environment will treat you."



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Charitable start-ups. While he likes founding nonprofits, Banner hopes to stay with Teach First Israel for a while. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Repeating a comment of one of his new teachers, who prior to this year would never have admitted to teaching, Banner says, "I'm out of the closet; I choose to be a teacher."

While Banner finds the new excitement over teaching to be encouraging, he still believes that there's a lot of room for improvement in Israel's educational system.

"I think that as the people of the book we can be much, much better," Banner says, noting that Israel's international rankings are far lower than they should be.

"This is one of the biggest challenges Israel has, if she wants to keep her advantage," he says.

IN ORDER to maintain that advantage, however, Israelis must also involve themselves more in social action and in donating money where they can, according to Banner.

"I think at volunteerism we are doing much better in terms of volume. In terms of donations, we are not there yet. As a nation we have the demand that's harder than many other countries – being the chosen people means we are chosen to do more good. We need to do much more in this field."

And Banner predicts that more and more Israelis will become interested in pursuing this goal. "People are looking for Zionism today – how can I build the country today? And I think people are seeing this as a path to how they can really do it."

Though he does enjoy starting up new social justice organizations, Banner sees himself staying here at Teach First Israel at least until it's stabilized.

"You evolve from what you do," he says. "You start from a food package and then you go to the core of the problem. Now the idea is to create a group of people and influence in education in ways that no one thought about – to create a virus, a mob of people."

Banner's advice for budding young social justice entrepreneurs? "Do only things that you are passionate about. You won't be able to make people go after you if you're not really, really passionate about [what you are doing]. Pick the thing you really want to change. Don't listen to the skeptics and the cynical remarks, phone calls, e-mails, that say 'It's never going to work, no one will come.'"

And as for his own family, Banner is already encouraging his two children – particularly his eldest at two and a half years old – to get involved with the local community. "He learned how to give tzedaka, so he's [going] in the right direction," Banner says. ●