

BIKING WITH **geerz**
 מעבירים הילוך לייצר מנהיגים

How do you feel when you are surrounded by nature? Let's hear from Rabbi Nachum Wasosky how taking local youths on weekly bike rides in the Judean Hills has changed their lives. Rabbi Wasosky is the founder of Geerz, a nonprofit organization in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel.

RABBI WASOSKY, PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.

I grew up on a farm in Ohio with no religion. At the age of seven, we moved to Pittsburgh and my mom sent my brother and me to an Orthodox Jewish day school. I don't know why my mom made that decision, but it exposed us to a Torah way of life.

I became very involved in NCSY and Bnei Akiva. After three years of business school at Yeshiva University, I came to Israel for a short trip but ended up staying for six years. During this time, I married and received *semichah* from Aish HaTorah in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Part of our agreement with Aish was that we would do *kiruv* outside of Israel for a couple of years. We chose to work in Denver, Colorado. We moved to an area where there were tens of thousands of unaffiliated Jews. My wife, Shana, and I ran the youth department. She created a Hebrew School and after-school program for Jewish kids from public school. I created the Jewish Teen Center. We were so busy introducing Judaism to so many people that two years turned into six years. Once our oldest child was eight, however, we decided it was now or never, and we moved back to Israel in 2008.

WHAT IS GEERZ AND HOW DID IT GET STARTED?

Geerz is a leadership training program for kids and teens using arduous mountain biking as the medium. When I came back to Israel, we moved to Ramat Beit Shemesh and I was hired to run a teen program by a local organization. It was a relatively smooth transition, as I had been working with teens in Denver. Even though the teens in Denver were

not religious and the teens in Ramat Beit Shemesh were, the common denominator was that all kids love attention and want a deep understanding of what it means to be Jewish.

While I was really enjoying interacting with these kids, I felt they needed something more. I have always been into sports. A friend of mine introduced me to mountain biking when we were living in Colorado and I kept riding when we moved to Israel. I started a biking group for men in Ramat Beit Shemesh. I posed a question to the whole group of 150 men: Rabbis, doctors, lawyers and other professionals. It was this: How is mountain biking affecting your life? The general consensus I got was, "I feel like I can be a better husband, parent, teacher, doctor, living a more spiritual and healthy life in G-d's land." I was floored! If this was the response of grown adults, I had to know how biking could affect teens.

I approached the owner of the local bagel store and asked him if he could provide bagels and cream cheese each week for our Friday morning rides. He agreed. My wife agreed to make eggs and cocoa for the kids and we were off to a great start. Each Friday, I would take the kids out first thing in the morning. As soon as we would hit the trails, the kids would start to open up and confide in me. They also started feeling motivated in other aspects of their lives.

When summer came, I decided to take a break, but I immediately got tons of calls from all the parents telling me these rides have meant so much to their kids that there was no way I could stop. This is how Geerz started.

WHAT DOES A TYPICAL RIDE LOOK LIKE?

The Geerz program consists of thirty bike rides in a



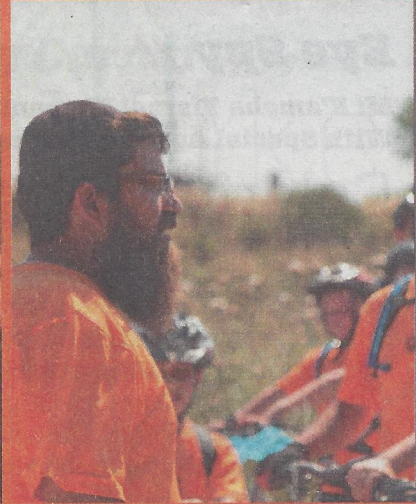
Hitting the trails



Beit Shemesh
Bike-a-Thon



Making sure equipment is in
tip-top shape



Rabbi Wasosky speaking
to his group

PHOTOS BY MIRIAM EPSTEIN

ten-month span from September through June. Currently, Geertz has ten groups riding in the hills weekly. Each group has an average of ten riders and always has at least two bike guides. Halfway through the ride, we give the kids a toffee and the guide stops to teach them the lesson of the week. We have a full Torah-based curriculum, with each topic emphasizing leadership skills based on the Torah.

We also emphasize the concept of perseverance. When a kid sees a mountain that he doesn't think he can climb, but then goes ahead and climbs it, and he does this time and time again, the confidence that he gains from this repeated experience will carry into the classroom and also into his everyday life. Geertz is about taking a good kid and making him incredible!

ON LAG BAOMER, YOU HAD A BIKE-A-THON IN THE BEIT SHEMESH AREA. WOULD YOU TELL US ABOUT IT?

Besides leadership and perseverance, another core lesson we teach the kids is about community. We opened up the bike-a-thon to anyone in the neighborhood. Each participant had to pay a nominal registration fee and also raise money to finance a child who cannot afford to join Geertz. This is teaching the kids to think beyond themselves to the community at large. We had a great turnout, with Jews of all ages and all backgrounds: chassidic, Modern Orthodox, Sephardim, etc.

As I love to say, "One of the beauties of Geertz is that you can never tell what *kippah* lies under the helmet."

MOUNTAIN BIKING CAN BE A DANGEROUS ACTIVITY. HOW DO YOU KEEP THE KIDS SAFE?

Before we leave, we do a head count of all the kids. There

is always one guide in the front and one in the back. Anti-puncture "goo" must line the inner tubes of the tires. Each kid must bring at least a liter of water and wear sunscreen. If anyone gets a flat tire or needs a chain change on the trails, the whole group has to stop to wait for him. Part of the lesson plan includes bike safety and repair. For example, how to travel up and down hills safely.

DO YOU HAVE ANY INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FOR OUR READERS?

One mother had a bunch of very active kids. They only had exercise in school one day a week and they came home from school so late that they never really got to exercise very much. Friday and Shabbos were the days to let out their energy. It was quite stressful for the family. The family enrolled several of the kids in Geertz, and the mother said it this was the first time in years that they got their Shabbos back — the kids are so much calmer now, because they get their energy out on the trails on Erev Shabbos.

There was another story with a kid who was having a really hard time in school. The mother signed him up for Geertz, and when she came to a parent-teacher conference, the *rebbe* asked, "Which tutor have you hired for your son? In my twenty years of teaching, I have not seen such a turnaround in a child." The mother answered, "The only thing I did was send him to Geertz."

DO YOU HAVE A MESSAGE FOR OUR READERS?

Geertz is a fun, safe and life-changing outlet that affects its participants mentally, physically and spiritually. If you want to bring Geertz to your community, please have your parents contact me through *Binyan Magazine*. ■