

**THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON**

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***Imagine Israel Podcast:***

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**Interview with Avi Naor**

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Robbie Gringras: Welcome to the Imagine Israel Podcast, brought to you by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Imagine Israel is the initiative of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, connecting Washingtonians to Israel and Israelis, through the lens of social change. With every Imagine Israel podcast, we get to meet innovative Israeli influencers and changemakers, people addressing social and economic challenges in Israel. We'll hear from people whose lives and whose work intersect as they address issues in Israeli society. And I'm your host, Robbie Gringras, and I'm coming to you from Makom, the Israel Education Lab of The Jewish Agency for Israel.

So in this episode, we have the honor of meeting Avi Naor. As well as being a successful businessman, Avi has been instrumental in the creation and operation of two crucial NGOs in Israel: Shahaf is the first NGO, works to establish and support young social-action communities. So, what's that? What are young social-action communities? They're where ideological young adults have chosen to settle down permanently in underprivileged towns and tough neighborhoods throughout Israel. And these communities work in the towns, living in the towns, working alongside local residents, helping to reduce socioeconomic inequality and strengthen Israeli society.

Where are these communities established? Well, the word that tends to be used in Israel is the word "periphery", geographical periphery, like Dimona, which is a town some two hours' drive from the center, from Tel Aviv, and economic periphery, in tough neighborhoods in larger cities.

So I'll be talking with Avi about this later in the episode but, first, we're going to

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talk about Or Yarok (Green Light). This is the other incredible NGO that Avi's  
instrumental in creating and maintaining. Green Light is dedicated to road  
safety in Israel.

Now, on the one hand, compared to, say, Greater Washington, Israel has about  
half the number of annual road fatalities per 10,000 than you guys have. So it's  
not that bad on the one hand. But on the other hand, road fatalities are still so  
high that we actually in this crazy situation whereby more people have died on  
the roads in Israel than have died throughout the Israeli-Arab conflict on both  
sides since 1920. Okay? More people have died on the roads than in the wars.  
So if we're talking about the safety of Israelis, the real war has actually been  
waged on the roads and not the battlefields.

After losing his own son to a fatal car accident, Avi Naor decided to do  
something about it and set up Or Yarok. So we're going to be looking at both  
these areas of Avi Naor's work. In a sense, we might say that his philanthropic  
work is dedicated to the two sides of what it means for Israel to survive: looking  
after life itself with Or Yarok's work on the roads, and looking after the quality of  
that life with Shahaf and the social-action communities.

Let's meet Avi Naor.

So, Avi Naor, very pleased to meet you. Funny enough, I must say that the first  
time that I met you or came across your name was when my son was about to  
take his driving test. And somebody came round and insisted on sitting down  
with me, the father of the driver, and the driver together, to explain to us how he  
could stay safe. And all this was due to some strange organization called Green  
Light, Or Yarok. Tell me, how did that connect me to you?

Avi Naor: Or Yarok was founded little bit more than 20 years ago after my son was killed  
in a car accident, and I wanted to do something that will be somehow  
connected. I still was in business then. I was traveling a lot. And I decided to

spend one, two days in each place where I came, and to learn what they are  
doing regarding road safety, and to see how we in Israel are in comparison to  
those countries that we should compare ourselves with. And I found out many  
countries, they have succeeded to cut, sometimes in half, every five years or  
decade. And they did it year after year, decade after decade.

And when I went into the details to learn how they succeed doing it, I found out  
that there are things that are in common to those countries. All of them had a  
long-term, multiyear, national plan.

Robbie Gringras: Long-term, multiyear, national plan, which I guess it doesn't sound all  
that Israel, that idea.

Avi Naor: Right, at that time. Multidisciplinary, because road safety, it's not falling, in any  
country, under one discipline or under one ministry.

Robbie Gringras: Right. Right.

Avi Naor: It's always transportation and interior and health and education.

Robbie Gringras: Right.

Avi Naor: So they succeeded to build a multidisciplinary plan with a commitment of all  
ministers associated with it. And always it was led, at least from the  
responsibility of the public, responsibility point of view -- it was by the prime  
minister or the president.

Robbie Gringras: So, also an expectation for cooperation and collaboration between  
ministers?

Avi Naor: Between ministers.

Robbie Gringras: Which also doesn't sound that Israeli.

Avi Naor: Yeah. So it built the understanding that we can make things happen in Israel  
and that our organization, Or Yarok, should push the government and the  
parliament to have kind of multiyear, multidisciplinary -- ask for responsibility.  
For a short time when we pushed them and they didn't respond, I said, "Okay, I

understood the message. I will set up a team to set up this program." And I set up the team. And government officials, they don't like the private sector to interfere in their business. So, very short after, they set up a team to build this program.

So we went out to the public with a petition demanding from the government to adopt and implement the program as it will be presented to them by this committee. And in time of three months, we have succeeded to get 1.2 million signatures, adults in Israel.

Robbie Gringras: Wow, which is more than one in eight, one in seven persons signed it.

Avi Naor: All over. But since we didn't speak with people less than 60 --

Robbie Gringras: And these are adults, right.

Avi Naor: -- then it's much higher. I would say that it's 1.2 out of -- then it was about 3 and a half million people.

Robbie Gringras: Wow.

Avi Naor: One-third. And we put all the signatures very nicely in six volumes, books, covered with leather, and we came to the prime minister, Sharon at that time, and gave it to him and said, "Look, the public's expecting from you to be in charge and to promise us safety." He was very impressed. And it was a breakthrough in the way that Israel actually approached and handled road safety. The minister of transportation, by law, his title has been changed to minister of transportation and road safety.

Robbie Gringras: I remember when the minister for security, *sa'ar ha bitachon*, he thought he was demoted and he ended up becoming the minister for transportation.

Avi Naor: Right.

Robbie Gringras: And I remember thinking, if we're looking at the numbers of casualties, now you're the minister of safety. Looking after road safety is more important for

- people's health than anything else these days. 1
- Avi Naor: Yeah, that's correct. And you're referring to Mofaz. And he took it as a demotion 2  
because he was the minister of defense and now he's only minister of 3  
transportation. 4
- Robbie Gringras: That's right. It hit his sense of pride. 5
- Avi Naor: But he took it very, very seriously, and actually he put road safety before 6  
transportation. 7
- Robbie Gringras: Wow. 8
- Avi Naor: And he was one of the good ministers regarding road safety in Israel. 9  
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- Robbie Gringras: And then we moved on to talk about Shahaf and the social-action 11  
communities. Now, in a sense, the idea of social-action communities in Israel 12  
isn't new. We used to call them "*kibbutz*" or they're agricultural partner, 13  
"*moshav*". *Kibbutzim* and *moshavim* were established even before the 14  
establishment of the state, to inject ideological activists into regions that needed 15  
developing, by creating ideological communities. Even at their height, kibbutz 16  
members were never more than 3% of Israel's total population. Only 3%. But 17  
look at what an impact *kibbutz* had. 18  
So now the Shahaf Foundation, with Avi Naor backing - and I guess you'd say, 19  
Kibbutz Mark II - powerful, motivated young people ready to commit to their 20  
vision of a healthy society. 21  
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- Robbie Gringras: Now what I'm interested in also hearing from you is the work with the 23  
Shahaf Foundation and this work with communities. And this seems like almost 24  
the opposite, that this is something which needs to happen from grassroots and 25  
not from the government. What's the problem and why can't the government do 26  
it? 27

- Avi Naor: First, I believe that always there is a need -- if you want your operation to scale up, to be sustainable, you need the government as a partner, because the private sector can never do things just by themselves. Now, the huge difference between Or Yarok and Shahaf is that Or Yarok cannot do things -- we cannot do enforcement, we cannot do infrastructure. Nobody can do it; only the government.
- Robbie Gringras: Right.
- Avi Naor: So, one of the main things for Or Yarok is to do the advocacy so the government will do what they need to do.
- With Shahaf, it's about building communities of young people from the periphery and from the other regions, the more established regions, in Israel, coming together to the periphery and build their life there. This is something that can be done by the public. Government is very limited.
- So, by nature, this is grassroots regarding who are the people that go there, the backbone, and the overall ideology.
- Robbie Gringras: And why periphery? What's wrong with the periphery?
- Avi Naor: When I say "periphery", first of all I mean the geographical and the social periphery. In Israel, there is a huge gap between this periphery and the center. It's not only that it's unjust, it's immoral; it's also something that divides, separates the social fabric of the Israeli society.
- President Reuven Rivlin spoke about the tribes, and in many aspects we have tribes; we have periphery and the center, we have the religious and the nonreligious, we have Arabs and Jews. All those things separate between the Israeli social fabric.
- I believe that when we look at the overall strength of the Israeli society, first of all it should come, and it will come, from our ability to be united, to recognize that there are differences and appreciate that there are differences in opinions,

in ideology. But all people should get basic rights, chances for education, for contributing individuals in the society.

Robbie Gringras: There's something I don't fully understand about the need to set up purposeful communities when I know probably most people in Washington were brought up to understand that Israel is one big community. It's a small country. It's not much larger in terms of population than Greater Washington. It was set up by *kibbutzim* and by *moshavim*. And isn't everything a community in Israel? What's not happening now?

Avi Naor: When I spoke about the tribes, it's that even though we are only eight million, we are quite segmented and separated. And the difference between Ofakim and Tel Aviv is not only in terms of how far Ofakim is from Tel Aviv; it's in many aspects different culture, different countries. The chance for a child in Ofakim to get decent education is less than in Tel Aviv, significantly. The chance of a person in Ofakim to get decent medicine is less, and this is something that we can measure and we see it by results.

Robbie Gringras: So why communities?

Avi Naor: There is a social chain, and the strength of this chain is as strong as the weakest link. And we are talking about weak links not because the people are weak or are not as good as the one in the center. They have less chances. The government is putting less resources per capita there than they are putting in Tel Aviv. Parents cannot afford their children to go after-hours different kind of classes to give them support. An average child in Tel Aviv, in my children's school, other than having courses in different kinds of sports and computers and whatever they want, they will have teachers that will help them in mathematics, in English, in whatever they need. So their results will be better, not because they are better.

Now, the communities that we are talking about, actually they are going to the periphery with the decision, with the willingness to stay there and to build their life. They are not coming to correct, to fix things, first of all to be part --

Robbie Gringras: No parachuting in and out.

Avi Naor: Exactly. -- to be part of the society there and to build their life there, to have their children and the children will go to the regular schools with everybody, and they will be part of the PTAs and they will be part of the community. And they will be able to help the neighbors and to support their neighbors. And it's important to emphasize not only about young people that are coming out of the periphery to the periphery. I'm talking about an environment that actually keeps the young people from the periphery at home, because if you have a young person in Dimona, right now if you will ask them what is their dream, it's to go and study --

Robbie Gringras: To get out.

Avi Naor: To go out. So, who goes out? Those ones that have the better chance -- the best chance --

Robbie Gringras: The strongest.

Avi Naor: -- to go to the university, to find a job in Tel Aviv. So the best ones are going out.

Now, if you can challenge them by giving them opportunities, by giving them challenges, they will stay, because by the end of the day their preference is to stay in their place. But they need these challenges. They need the hope. They need the future.

So these communities are about offering an environment to the young people in the periphery that want to stay, those ones that already left and are coming back now because they have something to come back, and together they are putting their energy and efforts in supporting the society, in general, at the



	periphery.	1
Robbie Gringras:	And so how many of these communities are there?	2
Avi Naor:	There are over 200. There're about 250 communities already --	3
Robbie Gringras:	Wow.	4
Avi Naor:	-- with over 1,000 members.	5
	You mentioned the <i>kibbutzim</i> and <i>moshavim</i> . You know, at the peak, I would	6
	say that the <i>kibbutzim</i> and <i>moshavim</i> were less than 3.5% of the Israeli society,	7
	yet the impact, the social impact, was enormous --	8
Robbie Gringras:	Was huge.	9
Avi Naor:	-- much, much more than their proportion, size.	10
	So we believe that that's what see now happening. It's not that we will see it.	11
	We see it happening, because around such a community of 20, 30, 40 people,	12
	there are about 100, 200, 300 of volunteers that care about their community --	13
Robbie Gringras:	A huge energy multiplier.	14
Avi Naor:	-- and together they are doing things. And it's like an onion; you can see that	15
	there are layers and layers and layers. And by the end of the day, you can see	16
	thousands of people around activities, community activities, activities at school	17
	and different places. It's a new spirit. It's something that is very, very important.	18
Robbie Gringras:	Sounds fantastic. Avi Naor, thank you very, very much.	19
Avi Naor:	Thank you. Thank you.	20
	Bye, Washington.	21
	I want to take this opportunity and invite everyone listening to us to meet the	22
	community members at the Meet the Changemakers event on February 7th,	23
	hosted by our wonderful partners, The Jewish Federation of Greater	24
	Washington.	25
		26
Robbie Gringras:	He's right. Two of Shahaf's mission-driven community members will be	27

in Greater Washington on Wednesday evening, February 7th. Come to listen to 1  
the personal stories of Hadas Goldman and Yuval Bdolah. The event will take 2  
place from 7:30 p.m. until about 9, at VisArts in Rockville. Register now at 3  
[www.shalomdc.org/changemakers](http://www.shalomdc.org/changemakers). Hope to see you there. Of course I'll 4  
actually not be there with you, but I'm still left with the impression of Avi Naor 5  
nevertheless; not only left with his generosity but also an appreciation of his 6  
wisdom. Jewish tradition asks *Eze hu chacham?*, Who is wise? And the answer 7  
is, *Ha lomed mi kol adam*, One who learns from every person. And it's clear that 8  
Avi Naor listens, learns from everywhere, in order to empower others to achieve 9  
lasting and crucial change. 10

And thank you for listening. This podcast, part of the Imagine Israel initiative, is 11  
brought to you by The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and hosted 12  
and produced by me, Robbie Gringras of Makom. You can find us on 13  
[shalomdc.org/ImagineIsraelPodcast](http://shalomdc.org/ImagineIsraelPodcast). 14

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