

Israeli Program for Troubled Jewish Youth Trying to Kick Drug Dependency Operates out of Cyprus

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JTA

August 17, 2023



This story was sponsored by and produced in collaboration with [Free Spirit Experience](#), a unique therapy program in Israel where at-risk teens and young adults from all over the world can have meaningful communal experiences away from home. The story was produced by JTA's native content team.

By Larry Luxner

Young people grappling with substance abuse dependencies often face a stark challenge when trying to overcome their problem: Any kind of lapse is seen as a failure, and if they backslide even occasionally they start to see themselves as hopeless recidivists.

“This 12-step idea says that once you’re an addict, you’re always an addict — that as soon as you touch drugs, you’re off the wagon,” said psychologist Tamir Rotman. “But it’s very detrimental to teens at such an early stage of their lives and self-exploration. It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Rotman is director of change at Free Spirit Experience, a program in Israel for troubled Jewish teens and young adults struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression or other social and emotional problems.

Now, Free Spirit Experience is launching a new program for Diaspora Jewish teens and young people with drug or alcohol dependencies that interfere with their daily living. This new therapy program, [Free Spirit Holina](#), is organized around the idea that their problems can

best be addressed by zeroing in on the core impetus for the substance abuse.

“It’s a different paradigm than the traditional rehab center; we deal much more with the underlying issues of drug usage, rather than the usage itself,” said Rotman, stressing that it is not meant to be a full-blown rehab center or a detox clinic. “We expect these kids to have a better sense of self that will enable them to function on a daily basis. The main point is for them to be productive and positive in life.”

The program, which opened in May, will be run by Israeli therapists but situated in Cyprus, a Mediterranean island about a 45-minute flight from Tel Aviv. Designed to be a three-month course, the program will enroll 15 youths per session, divided into two groups: one for ages 14-17 and the other for ages 18-26.

The site for Free Spirit Holina Cyprus, located about half an hour’s drive northeast of the airport in Larnaca, is a 2.5-acre tract of land with horses, farm animals, a swimming pool and fruit trees. The farm previously was used by Chabad-Lubavitch of Cyprus, which will be involved in some aspects of the new program including kosher food, communal *Shabbat* dinners and celebration of Jewish holidays for those who choose to participate.

The therapists behind the program are importing many of the practices and principles that undergird their successful Israeli therapy program, Free Spirit Experience, an immersive therapy program located at Kibbutz Hazorea in Israel’s Carmel mountains. While some participants of that program have struggled with drug or alcohol use, the new program in Cyprus is geared toward young Jews from North America for whom substance-abuse is their primary problem.

Free Spirit Holina will be staffed by 12 employees in Cyprus, most of them Israelis with specialized training in addiction issues. Besides taking care of horses and other animals, daily activities will include routine farm labor, building projects, meditation and yoga.

There’s to be more than just farm chores and mindfulness, however. The program will include excursions to the Troodos Mountains, cliff jumping off the Mediterranean coast near Ayia Napa, and eventually sailing to Israel — a trip that takes 24 hours — on a yacht that can accommodate seven participants and two staffers.

“It’s the same Free Spirit program for people with dependencies who need a more isolated environment,” said Rotman, explaining that Kibbutz Hazorea “is not an appropriate environment for people with addictions because it’s a living community and it’s not isolated enough.”

Rotman and Free Spirit’s managing director, Rami Bader, had been looking to expand their program for a while, scouting out potential sites in Israel’s Negev. But then an opportunity appeared from an unexpected source: Thailand.

Holina, an addiction treatment and wellness center on a remote island in the Gulf of Thailand called Koh Pahngan, works exclusively with adults. When Holina began fielding numerous inquiries from parents looking for treatment solutions for their teenage children, Holina's owner approached Free Spirit. The two eventually entered into a partnership to run the center in Cyprus.

Tuition will cost \$20,000 per month for the three-month course. Comparable programs in the United States can cost as much as \$30,000 to \$40,000 a month, according to Rotman.

Chabad's Cyprus director, Rabbi Arie Raskin, has lived in Larnaca since 2003. He says the new program will fill a gap because drug use among youths is high — and Orthodox Jews are no exception.

"Cannabis and alcohol use is becoming almost normal, and among *Haredim* as well," Rabbi Raskin said. "Recently I was at an Orthodox wedding in B'nai Brak [Israel] and I smelled grass everywhere. In the past, when people smoked marijuana, they were ashamed. Today, they hold a joint in their hand and smile at you. This is very worrying."

Rotman agreed, though he noted that dependency on marijuana is not necessary the main issue; it's the underlying anxieties and depression that may have led youths to cannabis use in the first place. While most marijuana users can smoke pot occasionally and be OK with it, about 20% of youths become depressed and anxious.

"We're seeing a lot of weed issues," he said. "The idea that weed isn't addictive or harmful is medically true, but that allows teens to be persistent in their usage."

This, in turn, leads to a lack of motivation. In some cases, youths reach a point where they aren't motivated to do much other than smoke weed, Rotman said.

"A lot of these kids don't have coping skills," Rotman added. "They learn to deal with their emotions via medications, so they don't develop sufficient emotion regulation skills. Feeling anxious or depressed are normal parts of life. But for them, it just means they need more medication."

In order to enroll in Free Spirit Holina Cyprus, Rotman insists on a crucial condition: The kids themselves must agree to the treatment. "We need to hear them say in their own the voice, 'We want to come.'"

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