

BEIT MORASHA

IS MOVING VALUES TO ACTION

• Alan Rosenbaum

“I founded Beit Morasha in Jerusalem in 1989,” says founder and president, Prof. Benjamin Ish-Shalom, “to deal with the challenges of ideology, values and identity that then characterized both Israeli society and Diaspora Jewry. A profound sense of alienation, different and, at times, conflicting aspirations and dreams, and the lack of a common cultural language between the various factions of our people, all heightened the need to courageously confront the unprecedented challenges arising from the existence of an independent Jewish state for the first time in two millennia.”

“At Beit Morasha,” Ish-Shalom continued, “we do this through values-based leadership training and the development of a conceptual infrastructure for understanding the meaning and significance of Judaism in the era of a sovereign Jewish state and at a time of the dramatic transformation of ideas and values that marks the post-modern era.” Chaim Nagus, chair of the Beit Morasha Israel Board says, “For me, Beit Morasha represents the Zionist ideal of advancing a model society of values and identity through leadership training.”

Ish-Shalom explains that the organization’s DNA is in training and developing values-based leadership and translating those values into action. One of Beit Morasha’s flagship programs in this area is the Jewish Identity and Value Educational Program that it provides to officers in the IDF and the country’s security forces. Each year, Beit Morasha provides training to approximately 10,000 officers and NCOs on issues of ethics, values and identity. Since 2000, the organization has guided more than 250,000 IDF and security forces personnel in this area, “making a change in the language and the awareness of the army and security forces,” in the words of Ish-Shalom.

Brigadier General (res.) Eli Shermeister, former Chief Education Officer in the IDF and a board member at Beit Morasha, says that the organization’s educational work in the IDF is of great value. “In a time when alienation and violence are increasing,” says Shermeister, “and the boundaries between what is permitted and what is forbidden

communities to work together as a task force to respond actively to religious and ethnic conflicts, as we have seen recently,” says Ish-Shalom. He adds that these forums will be expanded in the coming years.

Beit Morasha’s leadership programs are based on study, discourse and research in Jewish thought and ethics as well as from

and develop a joint vision through writings that offer a contemporary and relevant new Jewish thought.”

Bet Morasha’s leadership team is composed of educators, academics and professionals dedicated to bringing the vision of Judaism to 21st-century life in Israel and the Diaspora. Ish-Shalom adds that the organization is updating its programs for the internet and other modern forms of communication. For example, Akdamot, Beit Morasha’s academic journal of Jewish thought, which addresses the meeting point between tradition and modernity, is now available online.

Ish-Shalom notes that Israel, as the nation-state of the Jewish people, must take into account the voices, the needs and the views of Diaspora Jews. “They are vital partners in the future of the State of Israel and the Jewish people,” he says. Rabbi J. Fredric Schwalb, chair of the American Friends of Bet Morasha, adds, “Beit Morasha is unique in that it is an organization committed to Judaism that includes Orthodox, Liberal and Secular Jews among both its

leadership and its membership. All are working together to achieve one goal – to make the moral standards which Judaism espouses part of our everyday, personal decision-making process.” Freda Rosenfeld, President of the American Friends, and Howard (Hillel) Wallick, a leading board member, echo Schwalb, saying, “The way that Bet Morasha’s team helps develop strong ties among people from all walks of Jewish and Israeli life is remarkable. They put ethics at the forefront of society and, these days, that is more important than ever.”

“Our goal,” concludes Ish-Shalom, “is to shape a modern Judaism with values and train leaders whose decisions are based on these values and who take their inspiration from the Jewish world. This is no less important than it was at our founding, and perhaps it is even more so today.” ■



▲ Benyamin Ish-Shalom

are sometimes blurred, Beit Morasha works to spread the light of values, wisdom and proper leadership. Beit Morasha is a source of inspiration for many commanders in the IDF and leaders in Israeli society who have experienced its unique activities for over three decades. I am privileged to participate in the educational efforts of Beit Morasha.”

A second area in which Beit Morasha has influenced Israeli society is in the interfaith forums and training programs it conducts in mixed Arab-Israeli cities in conjunction with the Interior Ministry. Almost 20% of Israel’s population is Arab, and the relationship between Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze is one of the most complex issues in Israel today. “These encounters are held not only in the context of interfaith dialogue, but also to coalesce the religious leadership of these different

the sacred texts of other religions. Ish-Shalom, himself a prominent researcher, scholar and writer, says that its “*Hagigim*” program, which trains, encourages and promotes writing in Jewish thought among talented scholars, is key to the organization’s vision.

He notes that providing training in values and ethics to IDF personnel and security forces, easing interfaith tensions and developing a cadre of leading Jewish thinkers are essential in Israel of 2022. “These three areas,” he says, “are very relevant to contemporary society. First, issues of ethics and values in the IDF come into play daily. Second, when we address the interfaith tensions in our streets, we are responding as a sovereign Jewish nation that must take responsibility for all areas of daily life in this country among all its citizens. And finally, we need to provide a conceptual infrastructure