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Israel is one big bonfire when it comes to celebrating Lag B'Omer, says Shai Nemesh, director of New Jersey's Israeli-American Council, based in Paramus.

"The entire state is one big cloud of smoke," he said. "For Israelis, it's a big celebration for families, sitting around the fire drinking coffee and eating potatoes."

Mr. Nemesh, whose group co-sponsored a Lag B'Omer celebration on Saturday night, said the program had two major goals — "For us, to keep the tradition and the culture we left at home and do as much to preserve it as possible, and, when we have something like this, to share it."

With few exceptions, he said, Lag B'Omer does not receive the same attention here as it does in Israel.

"This is something new," he said. "It's not addressed at the level we do it. It's important to introduce our traditions and to share them, working with the American Jewish community to tighten the bonds between these two communities that live among each other and break down the barriers."

Saturday night's program, which Mr. Nemesh called "amazing," attracted some 1,500 attendees, 80 percent of them Israelis or children of Israelis. While he and his wife recognized many people from Bergen County and around the state, "others simply walked in," he said.

The celebration, cosponsored with Bereisheet, a Tenafly-based after-school program that Mr. Nemesh described as focused on Israeli culture and Hebrew immersion, was held at the Henry Kaufman Campground in Pearl River, N.Y.

"I can only start and end with the word amazing," Mr. Nemesh said. "There was a bonfire, an art circle, sports, a drum circle, plenty of food," and, other than the \$20 per family admission charge, no cost to participants. Along with an Israeli-style barbecue, "with humus, tahini, hot dogs, marshmallows cooked in the fire pit, and potatoes," it featured activities for children, including some led by members of the youth movement Hashomer Hatzair

Everything was led by volunteers, Mr. Nemesh said, noting that the event ran "extremely smoothly, with plenty of parking. People walked in with lawn chairs and blankets," and children had ample room to run around. All that, and a 90 minute concert by well-known Israeli pop star David Broza.

Mr. Nemesh said Bereisheet ran a similar program in the past, but it was targeted only to the children and parents associated with its after-school programs. This year, with IAC's participation, "we were able to open it up community wide, as big as we can," he said. He stressed, however, that it is important to maintain the "volunteer nature of the program."

Attendees came from all over the area, including mainly "people who saw it in the newspaper or heard about it from friends. We had people from West Orange and the entire Bergen County area." Because the group is trying to grow its presence in East Brunswick, IAC sponsored a bus from that community.

The IAC started 8 years ago in Los Angeles, "going national" two years ago, Mr. Nemesh said. Now it has seven branches throughout the United States — in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Florida, Boston, New York, New Jersey, and most recently Washington, D.C.

“The expansion plan is working,” Mr. Nemesh said, adding that the organization of each regional office is guided by the unique needs of the community. He pointed out that his chapter has no formal membership system. Rather, “people just come to activities.” The chapter does, however, have a council, with 11 members.

“Every chapter has its own council, with the autonomy to decide how to use their funds,” he said. His group has held many successful programs, including one in Closter featuring the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations. It drew some 170 people.

“We aim for activities that connect the two communities, to bridge gaps and strengthen connections,” he said.

On Purim, the IAC attracted 500 people to a Purim party — with more than 100 teens attending their own party, in costume. Last Sunday, Mr. Nemesh attended an activity for Russian Israelis in North Bergen that drew 150 local residents.

On Shavuot, the New Jersey chapter will work with Nitzanim, a non-profit, non-religious Israeli Hebrew school in Fair Lawn, to create a holiday activity. “They’ve been running for 20 years,” Mr. Nemesh said. “We’re here to allow them to become better known.”

While the Lag B’Omer program was “the jewel in the crown,” Mr. Nemesh said he wouldn’t hesitate to offer an activity for only 30 people “if it was a valuable program that has deep impact.”

He said that Gvanim, one of the educational programs the chapter offers, deals with the “triple identity of Jewish Israeli Americans and how to deal with those three points of identity. Where do we stand in the triangle?” he said, citing the goal of merging Israelis into the wider Jewish community.

“Our desire is not to replace existing Jewish organizations, but to attend to the Israeli American community and their specific needs,” he said. Some communities, such as Bergen County, are fortunate to have resources like the Israel Center at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, which meets many of their needs.

“But go a half-hour south to West Orange and the JCC doesn’t have a specific program for Israelis,” he said. “And go an hour, to East Brunswick, and there is no Israeli programming.”

Mr. Nemesh said that Saturday’s Lag B’Omer event was a success because it was, to his knowledge, “the biggest gathering of Israelis around an Israeli festival” to have taken place here.

“They were all happy. There were no issues. There was a calm atmosphere, and people had patience, and smiles, and enjoyed themselves.”