



# A HOME AWAY

## FROM HOME



**Deborah Cicurel** learns about Kishorit, the home for disabled adults that is changing the lives of hundreds of Israelis and their families

"It's like a different planet, a place you never thought existed. As a parent of a handicapped child, not even in your sweetest dreams are you aware that a place like this exists."

These are the words of Benzi Cohen, father of Amit, blind since he was born, and now aged 35. Looking after a disabled child is never easy – but the Cohens have been fortunate to find somewhere Amit "can regain his eyesight", as his mother, Tamar, puts it.

Kishorit, a home for life for adults with special needs in the Western Galilee, is more than just a care centre. It is a community, a place where people with all kinds of mental and

physical disabilities can blossom, can work, can fall in love, can be independent, can receive the kind of unique care they deserve.

"Kishorit changes the lives of individuals and families, but it is also blazing a new path in the treatment of people with special needs," says Shira Reifman, Kishorit's director of resource development. "It is creating a totally inclusive community, but on the terms of the people with special needs."

This focus on community is at the heart of Kishorit's philosophy. Based on a kibbutz, the home is far more than just a place to live. There are employment opportunities, leisure activities, medical supervision and the opportunity

to integrate into the broader community.

Reifman has worked at Kishorit since 2008, and says the continued devotion and constant desire to do better helps the home be the best it can.

"I like the sense of vision, of constant evaluation," she says. "We always ask: are we doing what is best for the members? We never rest on our laurels."

Members of Kishorit are encouraged to work, both because of the therapeutic value it brings and because of the home's notion that every member should give as much to the community as their abilities allow.

The centre believes that with the right training, support and guidance, most people with special needs can be integrated into the workforce – which brings about hugely important feelings for the members of being appreciated, challenged and valued.

Almost every member – 95 percent, to be precise – of Kishorit is employed, whether in the general community or in one of the kibbutz's service centres. There are opportunities to work in the kitchen, the central laundry, the dog kennel, the communications centre, a therapeutic riding stable, an organic garden, a bakery, a petting zoo, a free-range egg farm, an organic goat dairy and cheese factory, and a vineyard and winery.

Kishorit believes that working is a vital part of the rehabilitation process and an important part of becoming more independent, saying that "employment provides tremendous functional and emotional advantages".

Work gives the members a schedule, stimulation for both mind and body, the opportunity to connect socially. It also helps them to learn self-discipline, take on new responsibilities and become productive, contributing members of the community. The home helps members to feel happy and engaged in their work, and to be motivated to get up each morning knowing they are making a difference to their community.



**The bakery offers employment opportunities**

Kishorit is home to 160 members, who are looked after daily by 175 paid employees and up to 20 volunteers annually. There is a sense of compassion and shared understanding between the people who work there, who feel passionately that they can bring out the best in their members and help to rehabilitate them into society through the right combination of support, therapy and, most important, the sense of belonging to a community.

As well as working, a typical day in the life of a Kishorit member includes eating communal meals with fellow members, leisure time in the pool, sports groups or singing groups, and an evening filled with activities, including musical events or games. There are also daily trips and the chance to take part in Israeli or modern dance groups.

"The members' human right to self-determi



**At Kishorit, a riding stable becomes a place where adults with special needs can enjoy working**





*Those who want to work with cute dogs in the kennels get the chance at Kishorit*



nation is at the core of our value system," says Reifman. "We believe that they have the right to choose how to live, where to work and whom to love."

There are currently 24 couples at Kishorit, who met at the home.

"Some of them are married and others live together in long-term committed relationships," Reifman says.

The members can live in Kishorit for their whole lives. They will be supported each day, and grow old with dignity, which can prove difficult in their parents' homes, as parents grow older and less able themselves. The members are encouraged to build relationships with each other, sharing in common happy occasions, and equally, commiserating together when faced with disappointments and difficulties.

"We provide long term residential, vocational and social solutions under one umbrella," Reifman says. "We make a commitment to families that we are a 'home for life', so ageing parents know that their children will be cared for once they can no longer care for them."

Members do not pay to live at Kishorit. Instead, the home receives a per head allocation from the government for each person who lives there. Families that can afford to make a gift are requested to do so on a sliding scale, but on principle, Kishorit has a policy that at least 50 percent of the members come from families that cannot provide for them financially.

Raising money to continue its vital work and to keep providing the highest possible quality of life for people with special needs has never

been more important. Projects in the pipeline include a Kishorit synagogue, plans to increase the centre's security, and a project to build more residential housing to allow more members to come and live in their own unique homes, whether as singles, couples or same-sex flatmates.

Kishorit are also building a sister community, Alfanara, for Arab adults with special needs.

"Alfanara members will work in Kishorit's businesses and share leisure time activities with Kishorit members, but will also preserve Arab culture including cuisine, language, religious holiday celebrations and gender separation in the living quarters," Reifman says. "The first building in Alfanara – a Jewish-Arab high school for adolescents with schizophrenia – has been completed and has almost 70 students studying in it. We hope the residential units will be built within the next two to three years."

Reifman truly believes that Kishorit is one of a kind. "While there are other group homes and facilities in Israel, Kishorit is the only kibbutz of its kind," she says. "It has a unique philosophy that strongly emphasises the autonomy and right to self-determination of the members."

"One mother said to me of her adult son: 'There is Marc before Kishorit and Marc after Kishorit,'" Reifman says. "Every member's life has been hugely changed by the work we do."



*Above and Left: The organic garden and a free-range egg farm provide a small revenue stream, but it is really about continuing to expand the residents' horizons*



*Below: The organic goat dairy at the centre, which is home to 160 members who are rehabilitated at Kishorit*

