



Taglit - Birthright in Sha'ar HaNegev – August 2015.

Once in a while we are having visits here in the region by a Birthright mission. Forty-two young adults from the San Diego region typically aged 20 and up, come here to discover Israel together.

Between touring Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Masada and other sites, more and more of them are requesting to come to Sha'ar HaNegev.

For all of us in the Sha'ar HaNegev-San Diego Partnership, it is important that they visit here. With time, they extend their visits and learn more about their Israeli partners who are both close and distant at the same time.

During the last visit they requested visiting Sha'ar HaNegev High School, and despite the school vacation and despite the fact no students were present, the second part of the visit was held there.

And now, in the middle of our early August heat wave and just before the Birthright visit, I receive a call from Nicole, who works at the San Diego Federation and is responsible for the Birthright group. She asks me if there's a venue to hold a bar mitzvah. After looking into the matter, I discovered that typically, when people older than 13 are interested in having a bar mitzvah in Israel, it's usually held in a group format at Masada or Jerusalem as part of the Israel trip. But the oppressive heat struck their plans and prevented them from holding the bar mitzvah ceremony.

After briefly consulting with people, we decided to hold a shorter than planned tour of the school and conclude it in the school's auditorium, which also serves as a synagogue.

After the group finished listening to Noga Gulst (projects coordinator for the Regional Council and a tourist guide when the occasion arises), the group guide invited 14 members of the group who wanted to do their bar mitzvah in Israel to come up to the stage. He took out a Torah from the cabinet and unfurled a *chupah* above them as they recited from the Torah together.

This was followed by the guide explaining the custom to the Americans and opening a discussion about the necessity of having the bar mitzvah at the age of 13; this in contrast with choosing to hold the bar mitzvah at a later age in Israel, and in Sha'ar HaNegev in particular.

Then he invited each one of the group member, young men and women, to speak about their choice to have a bar mitzvah once again (or for the first time)—without family, without absolutely needing to do this. Finally, each of the members chose someone from the group to bless them.

Seemingly it was a very modest and very small event, certainly different from what we're accustomed to in Israel. But in fact, this was intimate and moving event in which these Jewish American youths truly began their adult lives as a Jew. Our life choices are many, the most important being our studies, our first years at work, choosing a life partner, and choosing one's lifestyle. In this case, each of this group was choosing a Jewish lifestyle, and suddenly the connection all seems so right and so appropriate.

As far as we're concerned, on this unique day each of the birthright group created their own special connection to Sha'ar HaNegev. Israel is no longer just Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it's also Sha'ar HaNegev—their home in Israel in which they can return to their roots and mainly be in touch with themselves.

We look forward to hosting the next groups!

