



Never a dull day: the children of Alumot have fun in the Fens

A warm 'shalom' for Israelis in Cambridge

A new centre, Alumot, is offering Hebrew classes and cultural activities for the Israeli community in Cambridgeshire. **Tamar Drukker** meets some of the parents involved to find out more

In 1540, under Henry VIII, the first ever professor of Hebrew was appointed at Cambridge University. For the past five centuries Hebrew has continued to be taught there. But over the past year the city has seen a new type of Hebrew teaching set up by a group called Alumot to cater for the growing number of Israelis in the city.

In 2017, a group of Israelis living in Cambridge met informally to discuss their need to improve their children's Hebrew reading and writing skills. "I have two boys aged five and three and both were born here," says Alumot's director Tamara Novis, who arrived in Cambridge from Kfar Saba, Israel, in 2010. "I was worried that if they didn't speak my language they would miss a big part of my identity. It's not just about the vocabulary, but also how you think about things."

Within weeks a group of over 30 families was formed and, five months later, in September 2017, Alumot was established, operating weekly from a base at Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue. Meaning sheaves of wheat or beams of light in Hebrew, Alumot denotes grouping together. They now have over 40 families involved, with 62 children aged 3-13 who attend five different Hebrew classes.

The children meet every Sunday for two hours of Hebrew instruction and play, while the parents enjoy lectures and workshops offered by members of the community, from a talk on medieval illuminated Bibles to issues in gendered education. One member recently shared his experiences from a research voyage in the Pacific Ocean; another described her research into the memory of mice.

The Hebrew teachers are parents and members of the community. Jewish holidays and other celebrations are also marked – after the birth of Alumot's first baby, the group set up a rota to provide meals for the family. Three more babies have been born since, so the rota has been busy. The synagogue also houses Alumot's Hebrew-language library, which has books, CDs and DVDs, all donated by members.

Alumot offers newcomers a place to feel at home and make new friends. The Arad family relocated to Cambridge from Israel in January when the parents took up jobs in the city's IT industry. The parents wanted their eldest daughter, who would have started school in Israel in September, to learn to read and write in Hebrew.

"Even when we are fully integrated here, she will always be an Israeli," says the mother, Ronit Arad. "We want her, and those around her, to understand what this means. But Alumot is much more than an after-school club, it's a community. The teachers put much thought and energy into planning the meetings, and the parents help in setting up the classes, clearing up and adding content to the lessons. All of this cannot be achieved simply by a Facebook or WhatsApp group."

Other members are long-term residents of the city. "We arrived in Cambridge from Beer Sheva in 2006 for post-doctoral research," says Dr Sharon Morein, a senior lecturer in psychology at Anglia Ruskin University. "One research post led to another and, eventually, to a permanent position. We joined Alumot because we wanted our children to learn Hebrew, but also to have a meaningful link to Israel and its culture. We also enjoy the activities for grownups. I'd like to see the social aspect of the community grow and strengthen the sense of belonging."

Many of the Israelis in Cambridge are not religious and don't feel at home as synagogue members, yet want to lead a Jewish life and pass it on to their children.

"Our main reason for joining Alumot was to extend Hebrew and Israeli secular Jewish education for my two sons," says Adi Naamati, a biologist who works at one of the Cambridge University labs and who moved to the city from Jerusalem three years ago. On a recent holiday to Israel, her seven-year-old, Matan, enjoyed practising his Hebrew reading with his grandmother. For Adi this is what Alumot is all about.

Alumot is only one of many emerging Israeli communities in Europe that are forming alongside, and in cooperation with, local synagogues, reflecting the need for Hebrew cultural centres outside Israel. ■

"Many Israelis don't feel at home in a synagogue, yet want to pass on their culture"



For info see alumot.uk. Note some names have been changed in the article.