Shabbat

at Livnot

The view from the Livnot Balcony

Letters from Participants

Collected November 2013
“Just as Shabbat has bound the Jewish people together for centuries, so it has the potential to revitalize Jewish commitments among those for whom Jewish experience has lost its interest and edge...Our goal must be to make Shabbat a habit in the lives of this generation so that they experience the true ethos of the Jewish people: The ways in which the social, spiritual and sensual come together as one.”

- Michael Steinhardt.

An excerpt from an article which appeared in the Summer 2013 edition of Contact Magazine, the Journal of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

Dear Reader,

This week, we began a concerted campaign to collect 1000 letters from Livnot participants describing their Shabbat experience at Livnot. What you see before you is a compilation of the first outcomes of this campaign—over 300 letters collected in just four days, and a constant flow of letters ever since. These letters come from a wide variety of participants, who experienced different Livnot programs over a span of our 34 years of existence.

This effort was triggered by the recent article written by Birthright Israel co-founder Michael Steinhardt entitled "Shabbat is our Birthright." The article describes the Shabbat experience as the central component to connecting young, unaffiliated Jews to their Judaism. We at Livnot share this belief in the value of Shabbat, and as a response to this article chose to share how the unique Shabbat experience at Livnot has significantly impacted our participants’ lives and connection to Judaism.

We urge you to open on a page. Any page. What you will find are hundreds of individual stories, each with its own different path taken in search of a Jewish identity.

With assimilation rates higher than ever, a meaningful Jewish experience in Israel is vital to the Jewish nation. When a Jew comes to Israel, whether he knows it or not, he has a spark inside his/hers Jewish soul, that is yearning for a connection to thousands of years of Heritage, culture, and wisdom. We feel responsible for igniting that spark. No place can do that as in the Land of Israel, and Tzfat especially has a magic of its own. We hope a part of that magic is conveyed through the following words and descriptions.

Livnot U’Lehabanot
Tzfat
November 9, 2013
www.livnot.org

From: Michael Ambrosio
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Prior to my trip to Israel this summer, I had never really been exposed to the Jewish world. My parents had always raised me more secularly Jewish, only celebrating major holidays. To me, the term Shabbat had never meant more than the Jewish equivalent of going to Church. My understanding of Shabbat and Judaism was clearly very minimal. While I learned quite a bit about Judaism and Israel on my Birthright trip, it was my experience at Livnot, in Tzfat, that truly opened my mind. I had initially come to Livnot to
participate in their weeklong Northern Exposure program. But as the week went on, and as Shabbat approached, I knew I was not ready to leave the magic and life that existed in that place. I had first been exposed to Shabbat during my ten days with Birthright, and I really loved the atmosphere around it; particularly the way it brought my group together. In your article *Shabbat is our Birthright*, you describe Shabbat as: “A community taking a break and celebrating life together.” I could not agree more, as that is exactly what I found so refreshing about Shabbat. Yet while I loved the fact that for 25 hours, an entire country essentially shut down, I still felt that something was missing from my experience. It was almost as if I could not fully embody all that Shabbat was.

I soon found this missing piece at my first Shabbat at Livnot. It’s hard to say when exactly this feeling “clicked” with me, as there were so many fond memories, yet I have a strong feeling that it was sometime between the first time we sang Yedid Nefesh and watching the sun quietly find it’s resting place, just beyond Mount Meron.

To this day, I have yet to feel the way I did that first Friday night, standing at the balcony of Livnot, gazing across the mountains to the setting sun. Every time I remember Israel, I imagine myself being back on that balcony, staring across the mountains as the sun set the sky ablaze for its last few moments.

As I mentioned earlier, I had never celebrated a Shabbat before coming to Israel. Yet I knew, coming back to the States, that I wanted to incorporate it into my everyday (or week) life. You say in your article that “...it is at Shabbat meals — whether as a host or a guest — that I feel most profoundly and intimately Jewish.” Having grown up never really considering myself very Jewish, I now am proud to say that I am. My experience in Israel has truly helped me find a sense of Judaism that I hope to continue to explore. One of the main reasons I have begun and continue going to Shabbat services here in Boston, is because it helps me to remember the strong feelings and emotions I felt during Livnot Shabbat. I continue to hold on to these feelings, with the hopes that I will one day have the chance to return to Tsfat, and relive those few moments on the Livnot balcony. Where time seemed to slow down around me, and as the sun set, I knew this was exactly where I was meant to be.

Yours truly,

Michael Ambrosio
Dear Michael,

By the end of my Taglit trip last June, I was thrilled with all of the sights I had seen and people I had met across Israel, but I was disappointed that my Taglit program (through IsraelExperts) didn't provide more of a forum to explore my spiritual connection with Judaism and deepen my understanding of its teachings.

Not ready to leave Israel after just 10 days, I signed up for a week with Livnot in Tzfat. It was through Livnot that I had a real opportunity to engage with Judaism, to challenge Judaism, to question Judaism, to witness Judaism and to learn about Judaism with expert teachers. That all culminated with Shabbat. Livnot gave me the opportunity to experience Shabbat in a way I would never have understood it in the U.S. It is one of my fondest memories from the month I spent in Israel.

I wish I had time to write more at the moment, but I will just summarize by saying I will be forever grateful for my experience at Livnot and hope many more will have the opportunity to experience it themselves.

Regards,
Jeremy Ogul
3875 Wilson Ave. #2
San Diego, CA 92104
USA

When I reached Livnot at age 24 in 1991 I had only the foggiest notion of what Shabbat was. I had heard about people’s grandmothers who refused to answer the phone or drive on Saturday, but that was literally it. So it was a heady experience to go from that to singing Lecha Dodi during Kabbalat Shabbat in the holy city of Tzfat from the Livnot rooftops, chanting Kiddush and Birkat Hamazon at the dinner table, and feeling the tranquility and peace of a Shabbat afternoon. After returning to Boston and getting married, I am blessed with four beautiful kids. My oldest had the opportunity to travel to Israel with his Solomon Schechter Day School 8th grade class. Unlike me at his age, he understood very well what Shabbat was all about and was able to experience it in Israel with great appreciation. As an added bonus, Aharon Botzer toured him around the Livnot campus where I had had my own awakening more than 20 years earlier.
Livnot is a uniquely valuable program for exposing young adults to the Shabbat experience. There really is nothing comparable.

David Williams
Brookline, MA
T34
From: Mirm Kriegel  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Subject: Re: quick reminder about 1000 Letters

There are few defining moments through which people measure things "pre-and post." (the world before 9/11, the world after; life before kids, life after.) Livnot was clearly one of those moments, one of those experiences so transformative that it's impossible not to see your life outside of that lens. Before going on Livnot (1994), Judaism was an ancillary part of my identity. I 'happened to be Jewish,' with perhaps even a tinge of self-loathing brewing (growing up in the WASPy South didn't help…). Livnot turned my whole conception of Judaism on its head, from antiquated and unrelatable to something accessible and wholly relevant. It helped me understand that values I've always held dear -- social and economic justice, compassion, etc. -- are, in fact, profoundly Jewish… This recognition has shaped virtually every fundamental decision i've made since that time… from choosing my life partner (who happens to be a proud, staunchly secular Jewish educator) to career moves both inside and outside the Jewish community. I owe all of this -- and more -- to Livnot.

From: Yonah David  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Dear Michael,

Until my three-month Livnot program, the closest I came to a Shabbat experience was, as a child, watching my grandmother light candles on Friday night at her home. All I really remember is that she would light the candles, guide the light into her face with her hands and then, every week, she would cry for a few minutes.

Only many year later, after I experienced my first Shabbat at Livnot in 1998, did I begin to understand what she might have been crying about. The moment when Shabbat comes in, as the sun is setting, is simply beyond time....a connection to our ancestors, our families and ourselves, and that feeling comes over you of of 'how lucky am I to be Jewish!' Shabbat at Livnot was amazing, and of all the eyeopening things I learned at Livnot, Shabbat was what kept me coming back yearning to learn more about my heritage. The signing, the dancing of the balcony overlooking Mt. Meron, roaming from synagogue to synagogue in the Old City of Tzfat, delicious home cooked meals filled with deep Words of Wisdom, the rest, the quiet, the deep conversations. Week after week, the Shabbat experience became something that I really looked forward to....almost needed. We also were invited into the homes of local families for meals and they showed us the importance of opening up your home to strangers.

Today, I live in the Golan Heights with my wife (also a past chevre) and our four children. They too, have been fortunate to experience many Shabbats with Livnot chevre in Tzfat. We feel lucky to have the opportunity to share the magic with them.

Yonah David
Dear Michael:

Thank you for all you do to connect Jews of all ages and backgrounds to the beauty of our tradition.

In my early twenties, I had one of the most blessed, meaningful and formative experiences of my life, learning and living at Livnot for three months. I arrived in Tzfat as a typical suburban Jewish kid who had made my way through a decade of Hebrew School, complete with a gala Bat Mitzvah, without ever experiencing anything of the depth, awe or nourishment that Jewish tradition offers. In fact, it was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, curious about the lives of his young Jewish students, who challenged me to "check out my Jewish roots." So it was, I found Livnot and discovered what I had been missing.

In Tzfat, on Shabbat, in the company of magnificent teachers, open hearted friends, and a community modeling vibrant soulful Judaism, I finally experienced the wellspring of Jewish spiritual life. I felt connected to all of the generations that have honored Shabbat. I felt connected to joy of song and celebration. I felt connected to holy space time. I felt connected to the peaceful pace of a Shabbat afternoon that invites gratitude and contemplation. I felt connected to words of Torah and Jewish learning. I felt connected to Jewish people throughout the world. I felt connected to myself and a path of Judaism that felt like a homecoming.

I am forever grateful to Livnot U'Lehibanot for inviting me-- body, mind and soul--- to jump in and awaken to a vitality of Jewish life that continues to unfold as the deepest source of nourishment and joy for myself, my family and my communities.

With my sincerest gratitude for all those who support Livnot,

Sara Levine

From: Stef Foster
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 8:09 AM
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

I have been on my spiritual journey for about seven years now- traveling from Las Vegas, to China, to Peru, to Belize and far beyond. Nothing magnetized to my reform Jewish upbringing and I found myself exploring the world intentionally "forgetting" about Israel and a Jewish presence in my life. I found Livnot accidentally whilst visiting family in Israel, traversing the streets of the North, yearning for something to intrigue me about all I heard and imagined from Israel (but simultaneously looking to confirm all my suspicions and conclusions I had created about my uninspiring Jewish exposure). Immediately as Livnot U'Lehibanot entered the picture, I realized- internally and externally- that something was dynamic and different about this organization- something had become lighted and rooted. It was Israel. It was Tzfat. It was Shabbat. It was Judaism. Shabbat has taught me how to implement reflection and awareness into my life and the memories of my first shabbat with Livnot is always present at the forefront of my mind- as I am now proud to call myself a Jew. I have Livnot U'lehibanot to thank for that.

-Stef Foster
Dear Michael,

This morning between readying my children for maon, gan and kita bet, I took the time to read your article "Shabbat is our Birthright". It brought back my memories from my own Birthright Shabbat experiences with Livnot and the many Shabbats I have had since then. Those two Shabbats became a model for me of what Friday night and Shabbat can be. The meaningful conversations, good food, and building of new relationships that has changed the way I see my weekends.

Of the two Shabbats, the Shabbat I spent in Jerusalem with Livnot definitely sticks out more in my mind. We were paired up and sent out to families in the surrounding area. The other Livnoter and I never found our host, they must have gone away for the weekend or had not updated the address. However, someone in the building where we had shown up asking for assistance and direction invited us in to join their Shabbat meal. We were all strangers, but what an amazing experience! The people we met were kind and interesting and we were humbled by our fellow Jews who had invited us into their home. They set an amazing example of hachnasat orchim and what it means to build up a community of Jews.

About 6 months later I had the pleasure of attending another Livnot Shabbat, this time an alumni event. It was wonderful. I was new to New York and that weekend I made some great new friends. We enjoyed lively conversations, built social connections, and learned a bit of Torah. The connection was so strong, that a dozen or so of us decided to extend the weekend and meet up in the city motzi Shabbat. One of the people from that event whom I had connected with, introduced me to the man that is now my husband.

My family has been in Israel a year and a half now. I have since taken my husband and three children up to Tzfat to experience the magic of a Livnot Shabbat. We continue to celebrate shabbat every week in our own home with our friends, children and the occasional stranger. Twelve years after my birthright Shabbat experience, it is still the template I use when I really want to reach out to my fellow Jews (religious or not) and spend time connecting with one another. I hope you will continue to support programs like Livnot that provide a meaningful Israel experience that allows individuals to find that hidden yearning for connection and for Shabbat, that will remain with them when they return to the diaspora and perhaps when they make aliya as well.

Sincerely,

Yael
Dear Michael,

Livnot Shabbat in Tzfat....Incredible! Magical! Spiritual! Energizing! Many words come to mind when I look back on my Shabbat experiences at Livnot. But at the same time, its indescribable, because the truth is that you can't understand how amazing it is unless you live it and experience it for yourself. Candle lighting together and singing the songs that we all know. Bringing in Shabbat while watching the sunset over the mountains from the Livnot balcony. Shul hopping and walking the streets of Tzfat, which should be quiet with all stores closed, yet they are alive with the ENERGY of Shabbat. Dinner filled with good food, great conversation, and more celebration. Shabbat lunch with local Tzfat families so that we can meet new people and experience how each family observes differently. And Havdalah. The perfect end to Shabbat.

The best part of it all? Sharing it with the people that have become your FAMILY over the past weekend/week/month. When I tell people about Livnot Shabbat in Tzfat, I say "Its amazing, crazy energy, you have to experience it yourself to understand!". So go, do a program, or just visit for Shabbat. Only then will you understand. And you'll go back again. I know I will.
Dear Michael,

Thanksgiving was my favorite holiday growing up in Chicago. My family was not particularly involved Jewishly, and we certainly didn't keep Shabbat in any way. But every Thanksgiving, we got together with my cousins and uncles and aunts and have a big, wonderful meal together and hung out and played guitar and sang and talked together. When I came to Livnot in Tzfat when I was 21, and celebrated Shabbat with my new-found friends, who quickly transformed into a cohesive community, it was like Thanksgiving every week. Shabbat became part of the rhythm of our week, and while we all loved the learning and hiking and volunteering, most, if not all of us, looked forward to Shabbat. They asked us to refrain from using electrical items on the campus, or to do anything else that might negatively impact someone else's Shabbat experience on the campus, more out of consideration for the other participants, but for those of us who wanted to, we had the option of going off campus to do whatever we wanted. But most of the time, especially as the weeks rolled on, most of the participants, including myself, found that we didn't feel the need to break Shabbat. We had what we needed: friends, time, space, freedom, and food. It was like Thanksgiving, but for a whole day, every week. When I came back from Livnot to university, I looked for other Jews, and for the first time got involved with Hillel and the Jewish community on my campus. I found a core group of friends, and together we made Shabbat lunch every week in someone's apartment. We all contributed to the meal in some way, and usually had a few non-regulars join us. As with my friends from Livnot, I am still in touch with many of those friends. I am now almost 42, with a three beautiful children and a wonderful wife, and every Shabbat is like a microcosmic Thanksgiving, with friends and family, and time and space, and the sense of joy that pervades the day for all of us is palpable. My little girl jumps up from the table to dance every time we start singing. My three children love Shabbat, and my wife and I love the time that we have with them and each other. My Shabbat experience at Livnot changed my life.

Steve Goodman
Dear Michael,

I was part of the T35 program of Livnot U'Lehibanot, which means that I was in Tzvat in the winter/spring of 1992. In simple terms, Livnot changed my life.

I have two Jewish parents, I went to public schools in Massachusetts with many Jewish friends, and I went to a majority Jewish college. Despite all these experiences, I did not "feel" Jewish until I went to Livnot. It was there that I fell in love with Judaism and made a commitment to raise my own children (not even a twinkle in my eye at that time) to be proudly and knowledgeably Jewish.

I spent 3 months in Tzvat, learning, building, creating life-long friendships, and touring Israel. When I think back to the experience, I think of Shabbat and singing the Birkot Hamazon at the top of my lungs. Loving the melody, sounds of the words and the community built. I had not grown up with Shabbat so even eating Chicken Soup was a relative thrill.

I came home to the States committed to Judaism. I ultimately found my husband on Jdate.com. We have been married 11 years and have two daughters. Our oldest is 10 years old and next week we will go to a Shabbat lunch for parents of 2016 Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to get our date! Having never been Bat Mitzvah'd, I could not be prouder of her. And I am very excited for the journey my family is about to take. We belong to a large Reform synagogue, Baltimore Hebrew Congregation and my husband and I are active on the board.

Today my two sisters are not married or dating Jewish men and my parents continue to not celebrate Shabbat. But I know that the family I have built is Jewish, proudly so. And I can thank Livnot for that.

Jill Feinberg

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Dear Mr. Steinhardt:

Thank you for your support of Livnot u'Lehibanot. I was a participant in 2000 and say with certainty that it was a formative part of the Jewish life I live today. It was the perfect immersive experience for a 20-something in search of meaningful connection to Israel and/or Judaism. I walked away with both. Today I am a married professional with two children in a community Jewish Day School, a member of two synagogues, and involved in the Jewish community in the DC-Maryland area. I thank Livnot for helping me to take those initial steps.

Best,

Sharon
Dear Michael Steinhardt,

Let me start by saying I have now stayed at Livnot on 2 different occasions. The first being right after Birthright in the summer and again I went back to Israel for winter break and went back to Livnot.

The two experiences were incredibly different, in just a week both experiences changed the way I see Judaism, the world, and the way I lead my life. My experience at Livnot profoundly changed the way I see myself as a person, as a jew, and the spiritual depth of what Judaism is.

To me, Birthright gave me a lifelong connection and love for Israel. Livnot gave me a lifelong connection and love for Judaism. Until my experiences at Livnot I would say my connection to Judaism was fairly shallow, and Livnot gave me a chance to see the incredible depth and blessing that the Jewish teachings have to offer.

So more specifically Shabbat at Livnot... Shabbat at Livnot and within Safed... it is the peak of what Livnot is doing. Shabbat there I would describe as a window into how truly incredible life and the world can be. People dance and sing together, it truly feels like a celebration of life, there are no strangers on Shabbat there, its like everyone is family... and getting together to simply celebrate life and all its wonder.

... I am normally not this hokey, or romantic in the way I describe something but, I don't know any other way to describe my experience there. Both times being there changed my life in one week... it is truly a magical place.

Sincerely,

Aidan Levy

From: Max Harris
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:08 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Livnot letter

Shabbat at Livnot had a life-changing impact on me as a secular Jew. It was too incredible not to take back and I now observe the Shabbos every week to the fullest extent that I am able. It is the best way I know to wind down one week while simultaneously rejuvenating myself for the next.

I had been on Birthright and a post-Birthright Israel trip, but Livnot is what solidified my experience in this important tradition! I cannot express my true gratitude to Livnot but I suppose this is an attempt.
Dear Michael,

There is something to be said about Livnot and the connections they create within every single one of its participants. I was blessed to have been a participant with Livnot on the FIRST Birthright Trip in January of 2000.

The experience of creating an environment and space was amazing for me to take a time out from my life and look deep within myself to learn what it is to be a Jew. The time away from "normal life" took place over a 14 day period but we also too a break from our break. I spent my first Shabbatot with Livnot. We lit candles, ate amazing food, sung songs and danced under the starts in both Jerusalem and Tzfat.

These experienced uncovered within me a purpose in this world. To Build and be Built...and continue to build which I find inspiration every day from Aaron Botzer..

Fast forward 13 years, I now live in Israel with my wife (a former national service girl with LIVNOT) and our 4 beautiful children.

There is no question that without Livnot and the experiences in which they facilitate, especially the Shabbat, that I would not be where I am today;physically or spiritually....not to mention without Livnot I would never had met my wife.

I am not sure what the cost was for you to send me, but I am sure as a donor/business person you are looking for a return on investment.

So here it is....your return of investment. If you like you can even come to our house and babysit :)

Thank you!!!

Gedaliah Blum

Birthright Participant, Livnot
January 2000
Dear Michael!

Having spent 4 weeks this past June in Israel with Livnot, I have to say it, was an unforgettable experience! Since going on a birthright trip in 2011, I knew I would find myself back in Israel, but never knew how or when. I was feeling a bit empty inside, so I went to Rabbi Google and entered “youth volunteer programs in Israel” and Livnot was one of the first programs to come up. I pondered some different programs, but I immediately realized that Livnot was the only choice!

Birthright planted the seed and Livnot turned it into an olive tree. Birthright was like getting all the pieces to an orange and then Livnot turned those pieces into an orange and showed me how to make orange juice!

From watching the sun set on Mount Meron every night to hikes to learning how to forget about myself and join with everyone as a community, it was all incredible! One of the key things about Livnot is that the “staff” doesn't babysit you or treat you like a kid, you are all treated with respect and valued for the unique person that you are. I was taught, not by words, but truly by example. The folks at Livnot are really living it!

Since Livnot, I have been going to Shul every week for Shabbat, something which I had never done in my life. I don't go because somebody said, “Go to Shul every week!” I go because I want to stay connected to my Jewish roots and try to always remember everything I learned and experienced at Livnot!

Lastly, I feel like I am now part of the Livnot family. No matter what happens in my life, I know they will be there to encourage me and point me in the right direction!

Ike

From: Adam Biegeleisen
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:26 AM
Subject: RE: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Prior to Livnot, I had never known a Shabbat full of spirit, wisdom, and welcoming. Since Livnot, the Shabbats I experienced in Tzfat and Jerusalem remain two of the most meaningful memories I have of my own Jewish awareness of my entire life. I am a practicing Jew and it is a top priority for my wife (also a Livnot alumna) and I to raise our children with the same love of Judaism that we never truly understood before our time with Livnot.

Best Regards,
Adam Biegeleisen
Dear Michael,

Nearly 9 years ago I came on Birthright with Livnot U'Lehibanot. I was coming for a vacation. What I got was an experience that opened my eyes and changed my life. Today I live in Israel with my wife and three sons. By making aliyah I received new life, my life. Livnot is responsible for my aliyah. After one week I was thinking about aliyah, and after two weeks, at the closing circle, I was decided. I am not the only one. Quietly Livnot is responsible for bringing many Jews on aliyah. And for nearly everyone who comes on Livnot, it is an unforgettable, wonderful experience. It changes the way people think of Israel for the rest of their lives. I think it is because it is an eye-opening experience. Somehow Livnot finds a way to go the places, to meet the people and to give over experience which connects Jews to Israel. And it is so strong because so many of them never had a connection with Israel.

I recall my Shabbat experience with Livnot. I did not even realize or know how to define it, but it was the first Shabbat meal I ever took part of. Something different from what I knew from home. Maybe because we were at the table longer. Maybe because of the way the head of the house spoke seriously, calmly, and joyously, the way he addressed us, his guests. Maybe because of the halachic facets of the meal. Even today I don't know why exactly it was different, but I can recall sitting there at the table as if it was happening right now. I remember that one of the sons joined us in the middle of the meal, and his father told me he would be getting married that week. The groom promptly invited me to his wedding, in all modesty and earnestness. Suddenly, this one Saturday afternoon, this one Shabbat afternoon, I understood that I was part of the Jewish people and I realized it was something real, something with many implications. I try every day here in Israel to live close to that reality.

With immeasurable thanks,

Eli Rous

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Dear Michael,

Thirty years ago I participated in a Livnot U'Lehibanot program and my experience transformed my life as it has for thousands of other young Jewish adults. At the heart of Livnot is a remarkable Shabbat experience that was filled with lively worship, engaging discussions, riotous singing, and joyous communal meals with students and staff. I am now a Reform Rabbi and have served Reform congregations for 25 years and it has been my honor to recommend Livnot to my students and congregants. It is also my honor to financially support Livnot. I pray that you, too, will support Livnot and help many other young Jews discover and forge a meaningful, engaged, and committed Jewish life.

B'vrakhah

Rick

Richard Rheins, Senior Rabbi
Temple Sinai Denver, Colorado
From: Jason Pressberg  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:33 AM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

I've spent many, many Shabbatons in Israel. Tzfat in Livnot trumps them all. The sun setting, the peace of the city coming over the city - there really is nothing like it.

I've rubbed elbows with every Israeli trip organizer. I'm biased - Livnot is my favorite. They're in a category all their own. I encourage you to go beyond the stereotypes and take a hard look at their educational model and extraordinary staff - I guarantee they'll surpass your expectations.

Sincerely,
Jason Pressberg

From: Jake Teitelbaum  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 6:00 AM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael

I must say that Liv'not was one of the best experiences of my adult life. That short week helped me realign my life with what would make me happy as opposed to other people. I came home and made big changes to make my life what I wanted it to be. Shabbat at Liv'not was a pretty great experience as well. It is a testament to how Shabbat should be spent. Relaxing and learning with people that are fun, meaningful and interesting, and maybe eating challah that we made into funny shapes.
-Sincerely,
Jake Teitelbaum

Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 7:15 AM  
Subject: RE: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael

I had the honor of staying with Livnot for several weeks in the winter of 2010. Not only is Livnot located in a very spiritual city, it is a very warm and engaging place. The counselors are very passionate about Zionism and Judaism and the centerpiece is definitely Shabbat. Whether choosing from a variety of shuls or preparing Shabbat dinner, it was a group effort and further ingrained in me the beauty of the Jewish people. I think birthrite is fantastic and I think that having all birthrite trips experience Shabbat at Livnot would really enhance their experience.
I always recommend Livnot to friends who are considering travelling to Israel. Thank you!
Sincerely,
Eliza Ghanooni
Dear Michael,

I am writing to let you know the incredible impact Livnot has had on my life. I participated in the program in 1994, when I was just 24 years old (please do not do the math to figure out how old I am now!!). I can honestly say that without the Livnot experience my life would not be as Jewishly connected or infused with as much Jewish meaning as it happily is today. My children proudly attend Day School, my family is actively involved in the Jewish Community Federation and our Synagogue, I learn twice a month with a Women's Mussar group and we look forward to Shabbat dinners (most) Friday evenings.

Livnot is truly magical in the ways it makes Judaism relevant and important to young adults at a pivotal time in their lives. Without Livnot I am not sure what path I would have chosen, but I am forever grateful that I did have that Livnot experience. If every young Jewish adult could experience Livnot I would have complete confidence in the continuing strength of the Jewish people.

Thank you,
Hallie Abrams

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From: David Jaffee
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:07 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Dear Michael

I was on the program many years ago. It was great. Learned many thing about Jewish and Israel that I was not showed or leaned in the states.

Thank you
David Jaffee
Dear Michael,

I am fortunate to be living a fully integrated Jewish life in the U.S. My life revolves around the Jewish calendar, starting with Shabbat and moving into the Jewish months and holidays. Thanks to a Livnot U'Lehibanot immersion program, living Jewish life as I never experienced in my home growing up, I found myself comfortable to return to the States and live a more fully religious and spiritual life. Livnot brought a taste of Shabbat to me, full of singing, study, and prayerful experiences, that I enjoy to this day. Livnot also helped me experience a Shabbat-centric calendar, using Friday to prepare for Shabbat, really spending the whole week moving toward the sweetness of Shabbat. My husband and I, 16 years after my Livnot experience, continue to hold Shabbat sacred. We are active and engaged Jewish Americans, and both of us even switched careers to become nonprofit professionals, and hold the taste of Shabbat and all that is possible in separating the holy from the profane. Shabbat is a time to unplug and reconnect with family and community, and is, as you suggest in your recent article in Contact, "an oasis of social, spiritual and sensual sanctity." Thank you for the funding you provide to help ensure that young Jewish Americans experience this taste of Shabbat.

Michele Prince J11

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From: Evan Alter
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 8:24 AM
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

I had an amazing week in the Northern Exposure program learning about myself and Jewish traditions. The atmosphere created by the Livnot staff is truly incredible, as it makes all feel like part of the family and pulls out the good in everyone. I really love the positive environment centered on Jewish values. As a result of Livnot, I now consciously look for the best traits in all of the people I meet and try to help them express them. Additionally, I learned about the customs of Shabbat, which is very interesting and fun in Tsvat (the singing and dancing in the streets was awesome). I feel like I have become closer to the Jewish community and Israel through this program, and I'd like to become more active in it. I really wish I could have spent more time at Livnot because the program is wonderful and was easily the highlight of my month-long Israel trip!

Sincerely,
Evan
Dear Michael,

I spent 14 days with livnot over 9 years ago and I still think back about the power the Shabbat experience had on me in Safed. It was mid January and we were in the middle of our trip at that point. From Kabbalat Shabbat at the carlebach shul, to Davening shabbas morning at the Sephardic synagogue, it was an intensely rich experience. I remember discussing our experiences at lunch on Saturday and the intensity of positive emotions from the experience remains vivid even today. The opportunity to have had the livnot experience was transformative in my outlook for my Jewish life and continues to evoke wonderful memories.

Thank you!

Noah Orenstein DMD, MS, FACP

Dear Michael,

I come from a small town in upstate New York, where Shabbat at the local synagogue was what I considered boring and irrelevant to me. I didn't feel any spirituality or joy in the celebration.

So you can imagine my surprise and delight when I had my first Shabbat experience at Livnot. I was in Jerusalem for a three month program in 1995, and Shabbat became my favorite time of the week. I loved the singing, dancing, and celebration. Shabbat became something it never was when I was growing up: a deeply spiritual and meaningful event and experience.

Shabbats at Livnot were important to me because it was the first time that I felt like we were part of a family. Of course we prayed and studied, but it was more than that. It was a coming together that I had never had before. Even singing niggunim had an impact on me.

I remember that at Livnot, we often watched the sun set on the roof of the Jerusalem building, marking the end of Shabbat on Saturday. And I vividly remember NOT wanting to leave that spot, even though Shabbat was over.

This was the impact Livnot Shabbats had on me. I wish everyone could experience that amazing feeling.

Best,
Ariane Pinchuk
From: Chana Mason  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 2:54 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: {Disarmed} 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Mark Twain got it so right when he said that more than the Jews keep the Sabbath, the Sabbath keeps the Jews. More than anything else, Livnot gave me the gift of Shabbat. Better said, they facilitated my chevre creating Shabbat for ourselves. We cooked the entire meal, baked the challah, had a flour fight, tasted raw cake batter, sang songs, and prepared thoughts to share at the Shabbat table. When Friday night finally came and we watched a fiery sun set below the Tzfat mountains, we felt we had earned our day of rest. We soaked in the Shabbat atmosphere the city of Tzfat offered. Despite not understanding the words, the melodies of prayers and Shabbat songs seeped right through our skin and into our hearts. I have taken the sweetness of Livnot's Shabbat into my home. We even have their song books at our Shabbat table, which welcomes Jews and non-Jews alike no matter their background, color, flavor, or experience. Livnot is unique in that its staff create a safe, welcoming, and totally non-judgemental space in which chevre can explore Judaism and Jewish practice. There can be no better gift than to offer a young person the opportunity to share in a Livnot Shabbat experience, or better yet, a full Livnot program.

Wishing you an incredible visit and many gifts from the Holy Land.

Best Regards,
Chana Mason J127

From: Devorah Fish  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 9:14 AM

Dear Michael,

I was twenty one years old, about to finish University in California when I came to Livnot in the Fall of 1988. It was the first time I had ever experienced Shabbat. I remember walking home with other chevre after the Friday night meals and Aaron would be waiting outside asking us how it was, who we had the meal with. I remember thinking this must be a really important activity if Aaron is waiting to greet everyone. I remember hearing “more than the Jews kept Shabbat, Shabbat kept the Jews.”

I am a hundred percent certain I would have been intermarried today if it weren’t for Livnot and the amazing, profound, emotional experience I had there in those three months. I was in a long term relationship with a non Jew at the time of Livnot. I was private about it but as I sat in all the classes, went on hikes and experienced the beauty of this land that belonged to me, I just knew my life was going to change.

Livnot gave me something I already had but it was unknown to me. A history, a land, holidays, rituals, a Torah for the Jewish people, Jewish marriage and more.

I’m happy to tell you that today I live in Israel with my Jewish husband and two wonderful children. A lot happened in the years between Livnot and now but all I can say is if it weren’t for Livnot, my life would look totally different today.

Sincerely,
Devorah Fish
Dear Michael:

I want to take a minute to describe what happened to me when, as a much younger adult, I spent my first shabbat at Livnot U'lehibanot. I had taken a leave of absence from college because I was disenchanted with my purely intellectual academic pursuits. I knew I was searching for something else in my life, something meaningful, but I really had no idea what that was. By a fluke, I ended up in Israel and was trying Livnot out. I had no real intention of staying at Livnot - my ulterior agenda was to try it for the 3-day trial period and then head for Turkey to backpack around and see the sights. The staff at Livnot were very warm and open, and that helped to give me pause. But what really clicked for me was shabbat. As we sang kabbalat shabbat and kiddush on Friday night, I had the most intense deja vu experience. I realized that I had heard these tunes before. When I was much younger, and my parents were new parents who were striving to raise Jewish kids in America, we were more active in our synagogue (first Reform and then Conservative) in Dallas and celebrated shabbat by having family time at shabbat dinner and making havdallah Saturday night. As my sister and I got older and had other interests that competed with these Jewish rituals, they fell by the wayside. That first shabbat at Livnot, it was as if a part of me re-awakened and I realized that the connection I had been missing - connection to people, to community, to history, to God, whatever - had been there all along. I had been born into the "intentional community" I had left college to seek out. It is a true statement that Livnot put me back on the path I was meant to follow, and my Judaism-infused family and career owe a lot to that. I hope that Livnot U'lehibanot is recognized for the powerful programs that they run and for the life-changing experiences they offer.

Thank you for your time and consideration - Russ

Russell Hoffman, Psy.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist
3600 Fieldston Road, Suite 2K
Riverdale, NY 10463

Dear Aharon,

Shabbat at Livnot was incredible. The beauty of singing Kabbalat Shabbat while looking out at the hills of Tzfat was amazing. I will always remember the kindness of the Livnot families and the ruach while singing zmirot.

I have been working in Jewish education for 15 years which is something I never would have done without Livnot. I will be eternally grateful to the Livnot staff for giving me such a positive Jewish experience.

Todah rabah,
Valerie Feldman Dubnoff, T38
Letter on Facebook:

Dear Michael,

I attended Livnot U'lehibanot in 1999, and was permanently changed because of it. At the time I arrived in Tzfat, I was dating and intending to marry a good Christian girl. I had my future planned out: I knew where I wanted to live (the Midwest U.S.), I knew what I wanted to do for a profession (financial professional), I knew who I was going to marry (the good Christian girl), and my closest family and friends supported every bit of it.

After the 2nd Shabbat of my program, I knew my choice of professional careers was not the right one. My Livnot experience at the Kotel pointed me to my passion of education, and reignited my desire to work with students. But I kept fighting to keep my plan.

After the 6th Shabbat of my program, I fell in love with Eretz Yisrael, and felt a nationalistic pride for Israel that I could never imagine. I was wondering if I should continue eating pork and my mom's famous sausage lasagna. But I kept fighting to keep my plan.

After the 8th Shabbat of my program, I knew everything I had planned was not what my ancestors intended for me. I knew things had to change...everything had to change. I had to abandon my plan. It would take my family and friends YEARS to accept the tough decisions I made from this.

On the final Shabbat of my Livnot experience, I looked out on the balcony of the campus, saw the sun setting, and I felt the Divine presence. I sang from the pits of my soul, danced with abounding energy, and awakened a Jewish identity I never knew I had. It was the identity I had been fighting the entire time, possibly my entire life.

Don't get me wrong: I still enjoy my college football Saturday tailgates, chicken wings, steaks, and beer. But I no longer eat the pork and shellfish I grew up on. My last cheeseburger was in Eilat, my last shrimp was in Tel Aviv.

And now, on every Shabbat in my house, after my 6 and 4 year old daughters sing the blessing of the candles, after my wife (a good Jewish girl) and I each bless our children, including our 7 month old son, and after we break bread over my home-made challah (that I first learned to braid at Livnot), I am reminded of the old saying: Man plans, and G-d laughs. I think it's more like "Man plans, and G-d smiles."

I firmly believe nothing can make G-d smile like the Livnot Shabbat experience.

Joshua A. Katz
High School Math Teacher
Orlando, FL
Dear Michael,

I would like to share with you a journey that over the past twelve years took me from Wall Street to studying Tanach at Harvard and ultimately to Jerusalem where I now live a Torah life with my husband - the besheret it took me twenty years to find.

In June 2002 I came to Israel on a Livnot program that only had twelve people on it - intifada was in full force. From the moment we set foot in Ben Gurion, we felt in the heart of Israel. That heart was Livnot - the people who took us on a difficult journey of return to our spiritual home, with love, thoughtfulness and great care. I am confident that no other group or organization could have reached out to Jews as far removed from our roots as we were then.

When Shabbat came, all the gates swung open. None of us really knew what Shabbat is. And none of us ever forgot it. That one experience at Livnot gave me and many others the reason to search for my true home. Baruch Hashem, I found it. Livnot was there for me every step of the way, all these years. Today, I am still grateful for every Shabbat I keep, for every blessing I say, for every day that I have the merit to be in Israel and to give all I have to the continuation of my people. I owe my very life as a Jew to Livnot.

May the merit of helping us restore our Jewish lives stand for you and your children for generations to come.

Gratefully,
Rachel Nechama Kandel

From: Louie Whitesman
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 11:07 PM
To: Aharon Botzer

Dear Mr Stienhardt,

I'm writing to tell you about my Shabbat experience with Livnot. I first participated in the program in June of 2001.

The Livnot Shabbat experience was the first time I had a positive Shabbat experience in my life. We began with a nice Kabbalat shabbat service on the roof and concluded with Havdala in the same location. It was great, and there was no pressure whatsoever. That probably what I love most about Livnot- NO PRESSURE. I was able to begin learning about Judaism and growing as an individual without any pressure.

Today, I am far from being Shomar Shabbat, but I do love Shabbat dinners with my friends and try to do that almost every week. I really think Livnot is an excellent program and financially support it through the Precious Stones program. Thanks for your help supporting Livnot too.

If you ever want to talk about it, my cell is 734-709-1363. I live in Chicago.

Warmly,

Louie Whitesman
From: Brittany Wasserman
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 2:15 AM
To: Aharon Botzer

Subject: Shabbat experience at Livnot
My Shabbat experience at Livnot was amazing! I remember singing and dancing and having a really great time with all my new friends. I loved doing the Shabbat prep and making the challah. It was very yummy! This Shabbat was the only time I actually kept Shabbat 100% and I will always cherish this. I slept outside on the balcony and felt at one with nature and with G-d. Watching the sun rise was truly unforgettable. Shabbat was the best part of my Livnot experience and I will cherish this memory forever.
Thanks again for allowing me to participate in this amazing program.

Brittany Wasserman

From: Natasha Neal
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 3:33 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Letter for Livnot

Dear Michael,

Livnot was a wonderful experience for many reasons. Firstly, through Livnot, I learned to love Israel. I got to experience not only the physical beauty of the land, but also the incredible spirituality of many who live there. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was part of a majority. I celebrated national holidays with not only my Livnot group, but with the whole city. I look forward to the day when I can visit Israel with my husband and children.

Secondly, my experiences at Livnot helped me to solidify my career aspirations. Before attending Livnot, I wasn't exactly sure what career path I wanted to take. However, the community service experiences at Livnot made it clear to me that I wanted to pursue a career in social work. After Livnot, I completed a master degree in social work and I have loved being a social worker!

I could go on further about all of my great Livnot experiences, but I need to clean my hous :) Thank you Livnot for a wonderful three months!

Natasha Neal
From: Marnee Horesh, 05/11/2013

Dear Michael,

I have enjoyed many, many Livnot Shabbats. From Tzfat to Jerusalem, even in New York. The truth is after my first Livnot Shabbat in Tzfat, in the fall of 1994 (I think!), I was hooked. It's one thing to learn about the traditions and practices that take place from sundown to sundown - it's another thing to prepare, sing, dance and appreciate them as the sun sets late afternoon on that beautiful little artist town. Shabbat as a whole was always a Livnot highlight for me. But I will try to paint a picture of my most vivid memories from many years ago during my first Livnot experience in Tzfat... Making chala with my fellow chevre, smelling the bread baking it as we lit candles together, all of us dressed in white... Then we would dance and sing at the top of our lungs outside... We'd watch as the sun painted the sky red and orange... All of us with sun kissed cheeks from hiking and working all week long, appreciating what we had accomplished with tears of joy in our eyes. That's mostly how I remember it.

With warm regards,

Marnee Horesh T43

Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 2:11 AM

To: botzer@livnot.org

Subject: One Letter for your Stack

Mr. Stienhardt

Back in 1992, I was a 20-something in between jobs and thinking about life. My brother suggested that I go to a Kibbutz in Israel. No offense to those programs, but I didn't have any interest in picking oranges or doing other farm work just to be over there. I had no need to study and speak Hebrew fluently because I did intend to return to the States. I was lucky that someone at the JCC in St. Louis recommended Livnot! It had all of the pieces to a worthwhile experience. There was the Jewish education aspect, the communal living aspect, the physical, hands-on aspect, the charitable aspect and the "getting to experience Israel" aspect. All of these rolled into one program provided a once in a life time experience. My Reform Jewish upbringing was not looked down upon but was enhanced. We spent a Shabbat with an Orthodox family in the community, a Shabbat together as a group and a Shabbat out traveling the country. The class study was thought provoking and the time in Tzfat spiritual. Shabbat was a wonderful time. We stopped our regular routine and prayed together. We sang, laughed, prayed and ate. We got to know the families in Tzfat as we were welcomed into their warm homes. And we got to know each other better as we relaxed together. I presented the first Torah portion that I ever studied to the group. It was about Lashon Hora (evil tongue); a good lesson to learn when living in a community.

As the Jewish people become more polarized with the Orthodox maintaining the traditions and the Reform stepping further and further away, Livnot is a unique program that bridges the gap, puts the two together without judgment and lets the Reform experience the best parts of being Jewish. Some of us came back to the States, some stayed in Israel but we were all changed in some way by this beautiful experience.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions about my experience at Livnot or my conviction that this is an excellent program for Jewish young adults.

Thank you,

Nancy Zafft
1203 River Rd, Apt 8K, Edgewater, NJ 07020, USA
201-886-1294, NancyZt@aol.com
Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I am sending you excerpts from a letter I wrote after a wonderful Shabbat reunion I had last February with several friends whom I met through Livnot U'Lehibanot. Right after the last guests left on Monday morning I plopped down for a bit and took a breather. I inhaled all the love and energy and mamash kavanah that had just filled the house and I settled into great feelings of joy for having had all my deep-soul connected sisters together again. (I think we determined that all of us had not been TOGETHER in one room for about ten years. And some I had not seen since the last wedding which was over four years ago.) It was an amazing weekend to say the very very least. It felt as if no time had passed save for all these new beings now running around....kids of my friends, some of whom I had never met yet!!! Wow. And beautiful great lil' souls bringing joy and love and curiosity and kindness with deeper Jewish connections than any of us had grown up with as was sparked through our initial experiences at Livnot. It truly was an amazingly special and surprisingly easy easy shabbaton to create. Everyone chipped in with preparations and food and cooking and cleaning and sharing of wise words and experiences of the years passed. It was wonderful. A few husbands also joined and they brought with them incredible patience for all our crazy ways and davening and counseling and generosity of spirit and singing!! It was such a special gift to all be together again. I don't think we would have had such a wonderful experience without first having shabbat experiences in Israel with Livnot. Livnot’s style is so special and unique and moving on many levels that it stayed with all of us so deeply that we were able to bring it back so easily.

All of us at the Shabbaton have had our share of experiences from the last many years that even included some true struggles, but I think I can honestly say that because of our deep connections to our Judaism we all managed to get through the hard times. I also think our "good" times were that much more meaningful because of our individual spiritual depths. Our varying faiths/observance levels and our deep passionate souls have kept us literally together (through rituals and daily life needs getting met) to figuratively (individually from the inside-out). I am nearly 100% certain that a part of all our individual strengths grew out of our experiences at Livnot.

It seems the weekend could not have been any better except for the fact that it came to an end. I’m grateful for all things related to this wonderful shabbaton. It was truly a gift beyond belief, which I think for all of us began at Livnot. It certainly has added to my life immensely, beyond words. I look forward to the next one.

Sincerely, Undine Brod
Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

In my life, I have yet to experience anything as spiritually rich as Shabbat with the Livnot community. Indeed, to experience Shabbat on the Livnot campus, inundated with the sights, sounds (and yes, smells) of Tzfat, was experiential Judaism that had nothing less than a transformational impact on both my connection to Judaism and the land of Israel. I know my experiences were certainly not unique, having heard similar recollections from past Livnot chevre over the years. Nearly twenty years later, I find enormous joy and inspiration in my memories of Livnot, and deeply hope that my children will have the opportunity themselves to experience Livnot.

Sam

Sam Sokolove
Executive Director
Jewish Federation of New Mexico
5520 Wyoming Blvd. NE
Albuquerque, NM 87109

Dear Michael,

I would probably not be here - living in Israel and raising a Jewish family - if I hadn't experienced Shabbat through Livnot.

Shabbat in Tzfat at Livnot was always a powerful experience - the sun setting, singing Kabalat Shabbat on the rooftop, hours of deep conversations, and lively meals in the crowded dining hall. But the most compelling part was being part of "Shabbat family time." Through observing Livnot staff and their families, as well as the "host families" they sent us to for meals, I learned what it means to be a Jewish family within a Jewish community.

I am eternally grateful to Livnot for sparking my love of Shabbat and Judaism close to 20 years ago!

Leiba Chaya David (married to Yonah David, also past chevra)
From: Shimon Shore

Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 3:01 PM

To: botzer@livnot.org

Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Dear Michael,

Judaism in its basic core is about infusing our day to day lives with a real connection to Hashem. In order to understand why Judaism is so important one must actually live and experience it. It cannot be gained by theoretical learning or by watching. That is what makes the Livnot experience in general and the Livnot Shabbat experience in particular so special and important. For someone to go through life without ever experiencing a Shabbat would be to never truly experience our incredible heritage.

Kol Tov,
Shimon Shore
Tzfat, Fall 1987

From: Michael Walden

Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 6:48 PM

To: botzer@livnot.org

Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Dear Michael Steinhardt,

I was asked to share a little about the experience I had during Shabbat at Livnot, and it is my pleasure to do so. I fear I will not be able to properly convey in words the magic of this experience; literally, magic - the memory in my mind has an almost fantastical, dreamlike quality to it that only comes from a life-changingly positive experience full of meaning. After off a week of learning, volunteering, and forging strong, STRONG connections with Jews my age, Shabbat at Livnot was an experience that I can never forget; I had never viewed Shabbat as an a day, a gift so filled with spirituality before. How did they do this? Livnot did this with explanations of the deeper meaning of traditions, their inclusive atmosphere, and the environment of friends I keep to this day (indeed, we've traveled as far as New York, Alaska, and back to Israel to meet up).

It changed my life.

-Michael
From: jenny narrod  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 9:58 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

It's hard to me to put a finger on exactly what make Shabbat at Livnot so Special. More than anything, it's a feeling. It's like the song we sing there, "I feel it, in my body, in my spirit, in my soul." No where else do I feel so connected to these three things - body, spirit, and soul, as I do at Livnot. And, I would add a fourth thing - chèvre - the Livnot friends and alumni, because the people are really a huge part of what makes it so special. While Tzfat provides the atmosphere, and the Livnot campus provides the safe space to experience said atmosphere, the people really make it come alive. Never have I met a group of people so accepting and so open to me, and to everyone else.

Shabbat there is special because it really serves what I think are some it's true purposes. It's a time to take a break from the week. To finish your previous week, and start your new one. It's a time to catch up with your family (in this case your new, temporary Tzfat family, who really is a family). It's a time for learning and for resting. It's certainly a time for eating, singing, dancing, staying up late, getting spiritual, and discovering things you didn't know about yourself and those around you.

Now, living in Tel Aviv, I've been invited to come up to Livnot every weekend for Shabbat. Part of me wonders if that would make it less special. But I don't think there's anything that could.

From: Jonathan Pines  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 10:15 AM  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Last week I headed to צפת for a Livnot Shabbat. I was not the only one... there turned out to be visitors from 8 different Livnot programs!... going back up to 5 years! There was no invitation, organization, or purpose - each person independently showed up just to be there for Shabbat. Keep in mind that none of us are Israeli. This was incredible to see.

Actually, there wasn't even a Livnot program going on at the time. It was just us (past chevre) and a small group returning from a 3 day hike. This was amazing, but at the same time, I thought it might make for a less intimate Shabbat considering almost nobody knew each other. Not so! This Shabbat was intimate, open, full of stories, thoughtfulness, dancing, and connection. In short it was a Livnot Shabbat (magical), and the only ingredients to make it so were people who have been there before along with the incredible Livnot staff.

I don't know all the secrets that make Livnot work, but I do know that people keep coming back for more.

Yours,
Jonathan Pines
Shabbat at Livnot harnesses the power of place—Tzvat as one of the most historically significant, spiritual and compelling Jewish locations in the world; along with the power of Jewish singing, stories, and community. It is the time during which participants have the opportunity to stop, rest, and reflect on not only their week, but their experience in Israel, their personal Jewish connection, and what they hope to take away with them. Through offering the opportunity to discuss Jewish values while also enjoying an authentic Jewish experience, Shabbat at Livnot connects participants to Judaism on both intellectual and visceral levels. It inspires them to figure out how to package the beauty, meaning and connection that they have found, in many cases for the first time, and take it with them.

Livnot inspired in me a desire to continue the process of Jewish learning. I experienced my first traditional Shabbat at Livnot, and Shabbat and Jewish life (both personally and professionally—as a Hillel professional, federation professional, Hebrew school teacher, and grant writer for Israel-based non-profit organizations), have been central to my identity ever since.

Dear Michael,

It is said that Shabbat has kept the Jewish people. I have spent several Shabbat’s with my fellow chevre at Livnot events. I could tell you about waking for the only time in my life, completely refreshed, just in time for services Saturday morning in Tzfat. I have never felt more connected to my Judaism davening than that morning.

But the experience that proves the classic saying was during the 25th anniversary retreat Livnot held in Pennsylvania. Over two hundred Jews from Livnot trips spaced over twenty-five years gathered at a camp to celebrate Shabbat and share experiences. Our stories were all linked by common threads that helped to create instant friendships. Friday night, we held a huge Shabbat dinner. At some point, a Livnot song book was pulled out and the singing started. Over two hundred people, most of whom were total strangers only a few hours before, sang and danced as if we had known each other our whole lives. The entire weekend—davening, hiking, discussions, and stories—were filled with common threads that made us truly one people.

This is an experience I have never had at events by any other Jewish organization. Livnot changes lives. My entire life was changed by joining Livnot, and my several thousand chevre from Livnot will all tell you the same thing. Shabbat is our birthright. Livnot is built around that idea, and we are built by Livnot.

Shalom,
David Kahn
Livnot ALL01, July 2006
My name is Talya Ossendryver, I made Aliyah last year in order to join the army! I am the daughter Corinne Ossendryver who had also made Aliyah about 25 years ago! My Moms experience in Israel had been greatly influenced by Livnot.. Livnot had been a very big part of my life growing up! And so because of that when I came on Aliyah I knew that I was also going to come to Livnot and do a seminar before I enlisted into the army! And so I did! Last year around this time exactly I came to Livnot desperate to do some volunteering and some spiritual-upliftment learning activities! I feel like Livnot has been one of the best memories in Israel since my Aliyah. My whole attitude to Judaism changed for the better, I learned so much from the people who came on the seminar with me! I have kept in contact with them! And I know that I will always have Livnot as the special connection with them. They became my best friends.

My Shabbat experience at Livnot was phenomenal.. I don't think I can express through words that well in order to justify the feelings and thoughts that I went through.. One of the most striking moments for me during that Shabbat at Livnot Was when we had to 'go shul hopping' when we went and spent 5 minutes at each shul and then afterwards we had even given about 25 minutes to wonder on our own to follow our heart to get to the shul that we needed to be at.. I remember that I went off wandering.. Just walking without a known destination.. And I started walking and thinking while walking, smiling away.. And my heart was pulling me towards music, music on Shabbat? I thought- I'm walking and walking towards what I thought sounded like loud music ended up being a shul that was jam packed with people, young people, singing loudly and dancing in the little space that they had. I was standing in the doorway because there was no space to actually go into the shul but as I was standing there I couldn't stop being amazing at the happiness that I felt and the energy that I felt that It was shabbos- something that I had never felt before.

Livnot is an incredible and unique getaways break for me when I feel like I am losing my connection to who I am because of the everyday distractions and stress. Livnot is an incredible place which I can easily call home. I love coming there and knowing and feeling that I am welcome.

Talya Ossendryver

Thank you Livnot!
Still humming that Shabbos niggun after all these years!

Seth Merewitz
Partner | Best Best & Krieger LLP
300 South Grand Avenue, 25th Floor | Los Angeles, CA 90071
Hi Aharon,

I think my Shabbat at Livnot might be one of the first shabbats I'd ever celebrated. Growing up in a tiny town in New Mexico as the only Jewish family, community-oriented Judaism wasn't anything I'd experienced. I loved making the Shabbat meal with my friends. I loved baking challah, planning the recipes, cleaning. It really felt special to do these tasks with such intention and to clear my head. When we all dressed in white and traipsed up to the roof of the Tzfat location, I felt moved by the singing and dancing. I felt strong and powerful as a woman and similar admiration for the men. The Livnot Shabbat is a unique memory and exceptional day to experience.

Sincerely,

Nina Rubin

Dear Michael,

It has been many years since I have done Livnot and I am still a Sabbath observer. The impact that Shabbat at Livnot had on me was so profound and so deep that I cannot imagine my life without Shabbat. Livnot gave me an amazing combination of practical lessons about how to cook for Shabbat, how to usher in Shabbat, how to pray on Shabbat and how, sadly, to say goodbye to Shabbat, as well as instilling in me the beauty, spirituality, Godliness and the lofty heights that I could achieve, and that we, as a cohesive group, could achieve together on Shabbat.

My favorite part of Shabbat on Livnot was the singing. Whether it was while watching the sun set over Meron or while at the table eating, the songs brought Shabbat to life for me. It was the first time in my life that I felt I was beginning to discover my purpose on this planet. I revelled in singing and in bringing the spiritual heights of Shabbat to the dinner table and elevating that lunch or dinner to a magical place. I knew then that I wanted Shabbat in my life always.

There is no place in the world that even touches the magnificence of Shabbat in Tzfat. But because of Aharon and Miriam Botzer and because of Livnot, I am able to carry a piece of Shabbat at Livnot with me always. I am so grateful and so humbled by the work of the Botzers and all those involved with Livnot. The flame of Torah that was ignited in my heart by Livnot and by Shabbat on Livnot has been, and will continue to be, one of the most significant and cherished events of my life. I am so glad that I am able to share a bit of what Shabbat on Livnot meant and continues to mean to me each and every day.

Sincerely,

Nancy Yusim Steinberg (T19)
From: Lori Coleman  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 6:24 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael-

I was in the Tzfat 49 program for 3 months in 1996 and believe my experience is directly related to my love of Judaism ever since. I came from a limited background and was embarrassed to ask about what I didn’t know. Livnot opened the spiritual door to learning, questioning, doing, experiencing, and my commitment to continuing that effort the rest of my days. I have supported the program financially ever since because I believe in providing the same experience for other young adults. This program is a vital link to Jewish identity and I believe strongly it should continue.

Sincerely,
Lori Coleman

From: Andrew Fisher  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 7:47 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Supporting Livnot has been a priority since I participated in the program in 1995. Livnot is the only organization I support regularly because of the profound authentic experience the program directly affords its participants. I attended the Jerusalem program when I was twenty one years old, fresh out of college. Currently, our oldest daughter is becoming bat mitzvah this August, and our entire family will be traveling to Israel to celebrate with Livnot in Tzfat. In planning the trip, it was imperative that my children and extended family were able to experience the meaningful organic Jewish experience only Livnot provides.

Andrew Fisher

From: Lauren McCabe  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 2:41 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Livnot was truly life-changing for me, and Shabbat was central to my experience. Livnot opens up participants to how truly sublime and spiritually uplifting Shabbat is and can be, and I experienced Shabbat in Tzfat in a way that I never imagined to be possible. Through Livnot, I feel like I really learned what Shabbat means for myself as a Jew and for the Jewish people.

Now that I am back in the US, my fiancé and I have started lighting candles and saying prayers on Shabbat. It has brought us closer as a couple to consciously set aside time to reconnect and bring light into our home. The gift of Livnot continues to play out in my life, and I am forever grateful for all that Livnot gave me!

Thank you so much for your time, attention, and support of this phenomenal program,

*Lauren
Dear Michael,

The Shabbat I spent at Livnot was a very memorable one. My friend and I hiked up to the citadel, where we searched for an echoey, dark cistern that we had visited our first day at Livnot. We had forgotten how to find it, so a young married couple led us to it. They entered first, while we waited outside the entrance tunnel that led to the cistern. We heard them singing together, their impressive voices blending together and resonating inside the round, deep chamber of the cistern. After a time, my friend and I entered the almost pitch black tunnel in order to take our turn singing in the cistern, perhaps some of the new Livnot songs we had recently learned. Before we reached the couple, we witnessed something amazing at the end of the tunnel, right where it opened up into the tall ceiling of the round cistern chamber. The woman, in a white dress, surrounded by darkness, sang a beautiful, high, swooping note that echoed off the walls around her and nearly took our breath away. Now my friend and I, only partly joking, refer to that moment as the time we saw an angel. How else could that happen besides Shabbat, Tzfat, and Livnot?

Sincerely,
Liana

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Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

Ever since I went on Birthright three summers ago, I have fell in love with the Jewish people, culture, food, traditions, and everything else that falls under the Jewish umbrella. One of the most outstanding experiences in my eye was in Tzfat where I spent a week at Livnot. I'll never forget the Havdalah service we had in the ancient ruins that had been dug out by other Livnot participants. Day-for-day Livnot had one of the most profound impacts on shaping me as a Jew. In particular, it gave me a model of what being Jewish could and should be. Singing, dancing, and smiling, often with no shoes on and dimly lit by only fire, that Havdalah at Livnot was one that I'll try to recreate forever. All young Jews must have a similar experience. Even if not everyone leaves with a mission to recreate the environment of Livnot, they will undoubtedly have a more open and inspired heart for the timeless Jewish traditions. Thank you for everything that you do! Your foundation's multifaceted approach to make Judaism and Israel relatable to modern American Jews is inspiring and more.

Best,
Doug Baltman
From: Rachel Kobey  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 3:25 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

It has been 13 years since my 6 week Livnot program. I traveled all over this world and have had many great experiences since but still I have amazing memories from Livnot and friends. But, it's more than those memories, it's the Jewish experience that was given to me over many Shabbats and all the fall Jewish holidays. Being raised a reform Jew I discovered that my religion had been watered down for me. I loved learning all the meaning behind all the traditions. And I loved how special Shabbat felt celebrating it with other Jews who were celebrating with such ruah and intention. Although, I don't always practice all of Judaism, I have a love of my faith and can't wait to share it with my children that I will have. I would be a different person without Livnot and feel that it's an amazing gift for every Jew to experience.

Thank you Livnot,

Rachel Kobey D'Amour

From: Heather Markowitz  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 5:29 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

My Shabbat experience at Livnot was one of the most lasting and powerful memories created in my entire time spent in Israel. As a participant on the Northern Exposure program I visited Livnot during the week of Channukah. My group and I spent the week discussing light; both physical and figurative. Together we hiked, laughed, cried, explored our fears, discussed our upbringings, and came together in spite of every single difference we had with one another. By the end of the week Shabbat came and I felt so connected with the people around the room in spite of having met nearly all of them just days earlier. Livnot, with its songs, sunsets, stories, and open and warm arms, has a way of connecting people, all chevre, past, present, and future. This connection, to Jews from around the world who share a common thread of experience is what Israel is all about and Livnot hits this nail on the head.

With all my love,

Heather
Dear Michael,

I participated in the Livnot Galilee Fellowship in May-June of 2011, and the experience still continues to affect my life every single day. While the experience as a whole led me to embrace my Judaism in a greater way, observing Shabbat at Livnot was the experience that really resonated with me--an experience that I've never been able to replicate anywhere else.

I've observed many Shabbats in my lifetime, from intimate family gatherings to large dinners at my University Hillel or Chabad. While the routine was usually the same, I had never felt a sense of great depth. I was never inspired by hearing people mumbling through their prayers or half-heartedly singing what should be joyful songs.

And then I experienced a Livnot Shabbat. Everyone was a bit reserved at first, but once the Banot Sharut started banging on the tables in song, everyone else quickly joined in. Nobody was holding back anymore. The air in the room buzzed with excitement. After that first Shabbat, all order went out the window. We were banging on the tables so enthusiastically that cups of water fell over and silverware flew up into the air. I hadn't felt that kind of unrestrained excitement since I was a kid.

Shabbat at Livnot also strengthened my relationship with God. Everyone says that there's something magical in the air in Tzfat. I had been through Tzfat on Birthright previously, but you really miss out on the magic of Tzfat when you're only there for the day. The real magic is standing on the terrace on the Livnot campus, watching the sun set over the mountains and welcoming Shabbat. There's a certain peace that washes over you when the breeze rolls by, and there is an unmistakeable sense of unity in everyone and everything right there in that moment. And in those moments, I felt God.

Now that I'm back home, I think back to these memories and find comfort and know I am never alone. But I also know that I will never have this same experience again. I try to incorporate what I can of this experience into my normal life, but somehow, it doesn't quite compare.

Livnot has shaped my life more than I had ever thought. I can't express my gratitude enough to the people who make such an experience possible and I sincerely hope that the program is able to continue for future generations.

Best Regards,
Netalia Shapse
Galilee Fellowship #246
Dear Michael,

Experiencing Shabbat with Livnot in Tzfat in May 2012 was one of the most memorable experiences I have had. After days of anticipation and working together as a group to prepare Shabbat dinner and wishing ‘Shabbat Shalom’ to people in the streets and in the shops, it was amazing to stand together on the balcony overlooking Tzfat to welcome Shabbat – a beautiful moment which will stay with me forever. The amazing experience continued through singing and dancing in the various synagogues we visited, being welcomed into a home for a traditional Shabbat lunch and walking through the empty streets of Tzfat - normally filled with shoppers and tourists and having a sense of peace and tranquility by witnessing an entire city observing the Day of Rest – something I have never experienced in my life including other trips to Israel and a feeling I have not been able to replicate since. The day after Shabbat, I was also lucky to have also been in Tzfat for Shavuot – a holiday I had never really observed before. I was able to experience the tradition of staying up all night to learn, discuss and be together with the group. I even had my first experience visiting a mizvah as the sun rose – another experience I will never forget. Thanks to Livnot, I was able to experience a true Shabbat and Festival in an incredible setting. I strive to carry a small part of the Shabbat feeling from Tzfat to Shabbat celebrations at home – something I have tried to do on a more regular basis by attending a local organization that hosts Shabbat dinners for young adults. Listening to the Shabbat prayers, if I close my eyes, I can still see the sun setting as a stand on that balcony – one of my favourite places in the world - and feel the infectious joy of the incredible Livnot leaders - ready to welcome the Shabbat; feeling so much pride to be part of the Jewish community. Shabbat in Tzfat with Livnot was a beautiful experience and one that I hope more Jewish young people have the opportunity to experience.

Thank you.

Josh Finn
Ottawa, Canada
Dear Michael,

My Shabbat with Livnot was one of my most meaningful and elevating experiences thus far in Israel. After a week of hiking, working and learning, coming together as a Livnot family to experience the sense of timelessness, rest and joy epitomized the true purpose of Shabbat. The memories of laughter and singing and connecting with each other will be sweet in the future, but more importantly the impact this Shabbat had on my soul will ultimately manifest in what I hope to share with my future family and community. I am so thankful for having had this life-changing opportunity.

Sincerely,
Justin Maio

Tzvi Himmelman

It is now 21 years later- since I ‘did’ Livnot and began a complete makeover on my previous life of 36 years. The Shabbat experience- among many other things that were going on during the 3 month program- was one of the highlights of those 3 months. They were literally my first Shabbats ever- and now after 17 years of Shabbat in my life--- there is no doubt that those were some of the most pleasurable ones I have experienced. The Carlebach dovening comes close- but does not really reach the heights that we reached- all 50-60 of us together after a week of volunteer work, hiking, and learning our first Torah. Those Shabbats helped us build our community and instill in us a sense of Achdut/unity with our fellow Jews on the program- of whom we had never met before. Though it was a new experience for most of us- I believe that even many years later that excitement and newness has never worn off. Arm in arm, singing songs and niggunim of which we had never heard of before, watching the red, orange, purple sunset over the mountains—there could not have been a better place – Tzfat and Livnot – to bring Shabbat into my life. Without Livnot- and those incredible Shabbatons with my chevre- I can’t say where I would be today—but certainly not living in Eretz Yisrael with my wife and 6 kids- bli ayin hara.
It only took a short video of the Livnot Shabbat experience for my body and mind to feel relaxed and uplifted. I am getting married next month and I hope and pray that my future husband and I capture some of the spirit, beauty, awe, gratitude, joy and peacefulness that I felt while helping to prepare the meal and singing, praying, dancing with others on Livnot’s rooftop patio and inside the small synagogues in Tzfat. If I can bring even a touch of this amazing experience into my own home in Cleveland then I believe I will make celebrating Shabbat with friends and family a priority because the Livnot-style Shabbat adds value to my life and connects me to the Jewish people and faith in a meaningful way.

Sheryl Berman, Cleveland, OH

From: Kenny Tarr
Date: Tue, Nov 5, 2013 at 2:19 AM
Subject: Re: A Livnot Shabbat!
To: Meir Paltiel <meir@livnot.org>

Michael,

Shabbaton at Livnot in Tsfat have always been great. They were also very special in Tsfat. It is so great to have the prayers at the Tsfat campus then walk around as the various shuls conduct their Shabbat ceremonies. Though most people have never seen anything like Tsfat, everyone once they experience it have had a wonderful experience. Cooking or preparing the campus for Tsfat is part of the fun and by the end of the experience the peacefulness of the mountains and the campus make it great. Livnot should go on forever and I would do anything to see this happen.

Thanks

Ken Tarr
Dear Michael,

I had never experienced a Shabbat until I went on Livnot. Now when I think of Shabbat I envision a beautiful rooftop sunset. I remember singing and dancing with my newfound yet somehow old friends. I think about the feeling of peace as the rush of the week would end and calm would set in. I think about feeling a part of a community - both those with whom I was sharing a meal as well as a part of Jewish people celebrating throughout the world. Shabbat has a unique way of having you feel completely present in the moment and yet yields a sense of connection to traditions and the past. And now as I reflect upon my experience of Shabbat at Livnot, I think about how that one thing, my Livnot Shabbats, has birthed in me a connection to Judaism, a connection to Israel, and a connection to my chevre. And that feels everlasting.

Grateful for all you do for the Jewish people,
Beth Goldner

From: Gigi Bizar  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 3:06 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear, Michael.

I will never forget the preparations for a beautiful Shabbat in Tsfat. The feeling of getting ready built excitement for what was to come. Walking up the stairs to the dining room and then greeting fellow chèvre was a lovely moment. Once the singing and dancing began, it was easy to get lost in the moment. The spirituality I felt while in Tsfat was very deep, and has provided me a foundation through my life. I loved the feeling of being lost in music and place, together.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this experience.

Livnot truly changed my life.

All the best,
Gigi Diller Bizar
It feels strange saying it, but it has been over 20 years since I participated in Livnot. The fact that I am even writing this now should itself communicate the impact these few weeks a long time ago have had on my life. I have incredible memories of all of my experiences that summer, but celebrating Shabbat is one of the highlights. It was such a great feeling – a combination of warmth and energy. Now I have my own family and I work hard to instill in my children the importance of leading a Jewish life and everything that comes with it. Celebrating Shabbat with my children is such a great part of our week and brings us closer together. Thank you Aharon and Livnot!

Regards,
Ethan

Dear Michael,

My experience of Shabbat at Livnot during my one week Sukkot program was, without doubt, one of the best Shabbat experiences of life. I do not mean it lightly when I say that my overall experience at Livnot has changed the course of my life. Shabbat was the pinnacle of this experience. Being in a supporting and warm environment like Livnot, in Tzfat overlooking the mountains, provided an immense spiritual awakening for me. I will be forever grateful for the experience there and the memories I have of that particular Shabbat will remain with me forever.

The atmosphere that Livnot creates on Shabbat is magical. The dancing, singing, deep discussions – it was incredibly moving. I hope to return and hope even more, that my children get to share the same experience as me in years to come.

Carly

Dear Michael,

Before Livnot Shabbat was just a time of restrictions and rules that had no meaning to me. During my time at Livnot I experienced how profoundly beautiful and moving Shabbat can be with the right kavanah/intention. My view on Judaism was turned on its head and I was gently guided to see the radically amazing Gifts our religion offers those who desire it. I have kept Shabbat for six years since leaving Livnot. I gave birth to my first child last week and look forward to passing on the beautiful and meaningful traditions to her. I could not be more grateful to Livnot.

A.S.
Dear Aharon,

I was one of the few people who attended Livnot from a non-English speaking country from Hungary in 1991 summer. For me the shabat experience at Livnot was particularly interesting because before that I mostly participated at shabbatot which were organised either by non-religious people who had limited knowledge about Jewish tradition (and also limited interest to learn and observe) or by charedi people who are very different from average Hungarian Jews (and many of them not so sensitive to feel this difference and to try to adapt to their audience).

In summary, the 3 shabatot at Livnot made me understand that you can incorporate shabbat experience also to the life of not (so) observant young students:
- I liked the preparation for shabat
- the balance of religious and non-religious activities (there was a kabalat shabat at the roof of the Jerusalem Campus, there was no "obligatory" morning prayer, but the madrichim helped those who wanted to participate to find one)
- the lectures on shabat (I do not remember the topics, but it is thanks to a great extent to my stay in Livnot that I became Jewishly more active as a university student and later as an adult).

Best regards,

Andras (Eliezer)

Aharon,

My Shabbat experience at Livnot was amazing both my Shabbat in Jerusalem and my Shabbat in Tzfat. In fact, my shabbat in Tzfat was wonderful enough that I have brought my husband and children back a few times over the years so that they could share the experience. The singing, the torah, the communal cooking, the view etc. But I'm sure everyone will be writing about these things.

My first shabbat in Israel, we were at the Jerusalem campus. It was Shmita. We had a great time cooking Friday night meal together, learning together, and presenting divrai torah to each other. I had made a very dear friend at Livnot the first few days leading up to Shabbat, Polly Z. and she had gotten permission from Livnot to go to a religious friend of hers for the day meal, rather than a family in the neighborhood like everyone else, and she asked that I go with her. I did, and after getting very lost in Jerusalem, we ended up at the right address. One of the other guests there was my husband Avi. 2 days later, Livnot did a wonderful program in the San Simon Park. While we were there, I saw Avi across the park - he was there at a picnic with his friends. Again we spoke some and I showed him what we were doing at Livnot.

Now, 12.5 years later, we have been married and living in Israel together for almost 12 years and have 5 children. It was an amazing blessing to meet him my first Shabbat in Israel, when I was here on Livnot.

-Rachel
Dear Michael,

I would never be able to count the ways that my Livnot Shabbat experiences had on my life but I want you to know that it would be an understatement to say that they changed my life forever.
I remember feeling a new sense of peace and belonging singing kabbalat shabbat on the roof of Livnot in Tzfat. I remember throughout the prayers and songs during Friday night dinners with my "hevre", banot sherut and program leaders, finding a new sense of pride and excitement in my Judaism.
This was all ten years ago now, but as I sit in my home in central Israel, as a married Shabbat observant woman with two beautiful Israeli kids, I still remember these experiences like they were yesterday.
Chodesh tov,
Lucy Sharf

From: Samin Public Relations
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 3:54 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: RE: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

I am a mother now with three Israeli sabra children ages 23, 21 and 18. They are all involved in Jewish learning and with organizations that promote Jewish identity and help teens in the periphery from underprivileged backgrounds.
This would never have happened without Livnot U’Lehibanot. I did the program 27 years ago, directly after graduating Summa Cum Laude in communications from Boston University. I had absolutely no connection to Israel or to my Jewish identity. Yet I had a spark inside me that wanted to know what Judaism was all about, thus I found Livnot. Celebrating Kabbalat Shabbat as the sun set over the Merom mountains was an incredible experience. As the wind whistled in tune with our singing, we could almost feel our history coming alive. The people I met, the depth and meaning I found in my religion and history, have accompanied me throughout my life in Israel. I also met my husband, an Israeli Yemenite, on the mountains of Tzfat when I returned to Livnot as a madricha. Livnot U’Lehibanot is a magical and transformative program that truly connects young people to their rich heritage.

-Lisa Samin
From: Kyla Sokoll-Ward  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:02 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

Shabbat with Livnot is something that I will never forget. I was in Israel for five months studying at the University of Haifa from January to June of 2013 and spent one short week of my time abroad with Livnot for Passover. For Shabbat, I was kindly placed with a loving couple, Pesach and CoCo, who had invited their friends Ariyeh, Grace, Roberta, and Shmuel to share a delicious Shabbat lunch. Though I was consistently impressed with the hospitality of Israelis, this experience quite overwhelmed me.

It would be impossible for me to accurately describe the energy that was circulating in the room as I shared this lunch. Our conversation during the meal ranged from the Nuremberg Trials to the Dalai Lama to growing up in the sixties. And throughout all of this, there was talk of what it meant to be a good Jew...the million dollar question! While I myself am still searching for the answer to this never-ending inquiry, I am certain that experiences such as these are pushing me towards the type of person and Jew that I want to become. The warmth and kindness that I experienced that Shabbat are qualities that I hope to effuse throughout the rest of my life. I truly felt unified with the Jewish people during this time, and for that I am forever grateful.

Sincerely,

Kyla Sokoll-Ward

From: Puran Grewal  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 5:51 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

My first Shabbat at Livnot was also one of the first Shabbat's of my life. As a 26 year-old Jewish-American from the San Francisco Bay Area, like many others an occasional Hanukkah throughout the years was the extent of my Jewish affiliation. Shabbat at Livnot showed me the meaning behind the rituals of Shabbat and now that I have returned to the U.S. I look forward to celebrating Shabbat and know one day when I have my own children it is something I want to make a part of our home life.

Thank you for helping to make Livnot possible,

- Zechariah
Dear Michael,

There was something extraordinary and powerful - sweet, joyful, connectedness - about the Shabbats I spent at Livnot in Tzfat.

For me, it began with the preparations. Bustling, laughing. Learning how to make cholent the way generations had every week, sweeping the ancient alleys of Tzfat around the Livnot campus, wondering who had swept this stone last month... five years ago... in 1512... Pausing while taking down the laundry to soak in the lovely vignette of the cat nursing her kittens under the grape vine on the roof, as the low sun gave everything a golden glow. Washing, cooking, table setting, bathing, exchanging grubby work clothes for clean skirts and white shirts.

Then the gathering; all the chevre who had been strangers a week before, coming into the courtyard to begin the blessings, to wash, to hum a niggun, and share the meal and boisterous song.

Connectedness.

Standing in a circle overlooking Mt. Meron, or within ancient stone walls, rocking, singing, singing, singing, singing. Sephardi melodies, melodies composed on this hilltop, in harmonies that brought tears to my eyes and caught in my throat. Melodies that surely soared back to their Source.

Spirituality.

I had lit candles and made kiddush and had Shabbat dinner with my family growing up. I was marginally Jewishly involved in America as a teen. But Livnot filled me with a spirituality that I had not experienced before. Livnot connected me in a way I had not been before. More deeply, more spiritually, and and more intellectually as well.

I did Livnot 25 years ago. Today I am very involved in my Jewish community. I work hard on the executive board of our JCC. I run an annual Jewish community festival here that, inspired by Livnot, brings Jews of every stripe together in a welcoming, accepting atmosphere full of positive energy; full of enthusiasm for Judaism and openness toward each other. Most important, my young children are being raised Jewishly, and are asking if this will be the year we can travel to Israel as a family.

Any other type of summer-long trip to Israel would have been meaningful, interesting, a learning experience. I know, because I had two others. But Livnot wasn't really a "trip to Israel;" it was much more. Livnot gave me a home in Israel. When we travel to Israel as a family, I know where we will be spending Shabbat.

Eve Gendron
Dear Michael,

Shabbat in Tzfat was truly an amazing experience. I had never kept Shabbat before, not even lighting candles or anything remotely relevant. There is something magical about Tzfat, and Livnot gave me the ability to experience that. Every Friday I would go to Shul and dance and sing with the local people. I got to know them by name and would say hello throughout the week when I saw them with their families. At Livnot, I was able to share the magical experiences with friends that I had just met, who became family before our time was up. Livnot Shabbat taught me traditions, but it also taught me how much fun Shabbat truly is. Since returning to the U.S. I have attended several Shabbat dinners, some with my Livnot Chevre, some with other friends I made in Israel, and some with new friends in my own Jewish community that I have met since returning. I have become more involved in my local community. This has not only given me opportunity to explore my Judaism, learn Hebrew, and learn who I really am, but make new friends to share those experiences with as I continue on my journey. My experiences with Livnot have truly impacted my life in a positive manner, and I would be in a very different place without it!

Thank you!
Caelynn Grossman

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Dear Michael,

Shabbat in Tzfat at Livnot was what I had always imagined the essence of Shabbat to be: friends, food, singing, dancing, community, and love. As I woke up Friday morning and came out to the general meeting area in the Livnot compound, I was immediately greeted by smiling faces and a lovely aroma of challah baking in the oven. This only began what was to be a sacred 36-hour period. From collective food preparations during the day, to singing American pop tunes and Lecha Dodi as the sun set over the mountains, to inviting strangers off the street who did not have a place to eat, the people of Livnot helped to create and facilitate an atmosphere of presence and love. During this 36-hour period, nobody worried about their lives back at home or what else they could be doing with their time in Israel. During this 36-hour period, people were actually present! When you asked someone a question, he would actually sit with it for a moment instead of immediately responding out of habit. When you shared a story with a new friend, you could tell she was actually listening to you and not thinking of something else. And you could feel this all over Tzfat! People would invite us into their homes if we needed a hot meal or into their synagogues to partake in the dancing, chanting, and prayer. Shabbat at Livnot was truly an experience that epitomized pure joy and love. Even as I was leaving town just after the sun set on Saturday night, a young Hasidic student approached me shouting "MESHIACH NOW!" implying that the Messiah was on his way right at the moment. Without hesitation I replied with a smile and in accordance told him, "that sounds good to me!"

Sincerely,

Joshua Bassarear
Dear Michael,

I grew up with a Jewish conservative upbringing where the history and culture was the main focus. The religious aspect was kept by the way side except for the high-holidays, and we reminded ourselves of our Jewish values every so often. I was always fine with this amount of impact from Judaism in my life, which I now realize for my particular personality is bizarre. I am not one to settle, I am one to question things. I question everything and feel there is always room for improvement and always the ability to learn more. It wasn't until I arrived at Livnot that I realized while I had applied this guideline to all other aspects of my life I had never actually done so with myself. I had never asked myself “Who am I?”

I walked into Livnot not expecting much. I had signed up for the week long program for my boyfriend and I because we were spending the month traveling and were looking to spend some time in the North hiking and hopefully meeting new people. Given that we both come from a similar religious background (or lack thereof) and we heard that Livnot would give us the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone for an extremely low price we thought “why not?”. We assumed it would be rather Taglit-esque and since we both had really good experiences on our respective trips we figured it would be rather enjoyable. I would say those expectations are relatively normal. Not even 24 hours into the program it was evident that the week was going to exceed my expectations, and it did so exponentially.

Every day, maybe every minute at Livnot was life changing for me, and it soon became obvious that is for everyone there as well. Jews from all different backgrounds came together under one roof not knowing a thing about one another and yet within hours felt like they had found a new home. It didn’t matter if a person was normally shy, negative, abrasive, sarcastic or quiet. At Livnot we all felt like we could instantly relax, take off our personality masks and start to reveal our empirical selves. I know this because everyone has explicitly expressed that they felt this way.

By the end of the week at the Closing Circle every single one of us had opened up in ways most of us had never done before in our lives. Livnot, everything about it, promoted true understanding of one’s self. This was taught to us through a Jewish lens, which I now believe to be the best way I could have learned about myself.

While a lot of this can be attributed to the willingness of the participants to share, be optimistic, and open-minded, I cannot stress enough how much of an impact the staff had on our experience. Our coordinator, Doron, along with the three wonderful Bat Sherut, made every one of us question everything we thought we were so sure about and provoked us to learn more and always look further. They created conversations that made us all look deep into ourselves as people, as Jews, and I know not a single person came out the same way as they entered because of it. Not only have people told me this personally, but I know just by the enormous change within me alone that others must have felt the same.

I say this because I believe I am someone who is extremely self aware in comparison to most. I have written a personal diary for 12 years, I studied behavior psychology, I love self
experimentation and exploration, and of course I love to push my limits in doing so. I thought I knew myself pretty well. I had no idea how much there was left to learn about me. I learned about me as a woman, as a Jew, as a student, as a friend, and so much more. Thanks to Doron, the girls, and the willingness of the entire group I was able to positively develop drastically within just a few days. Since then I have also noticed a massive difference in the way I think, feel and behave.

Put simply, Livnot made me a better person and therefore a better Jew. It was hands-down the best and most influential week of my life. I could honestly talk about it forever. It really hurts me to know that most Jews in this world, in fact most people in this world do not see the world the way I do now. If the values and teachings of Livnot became more available, more widespread I truly believe that we could work towards curing the world of its most prominent issue: ignorance.

Ignorance begins with not knowing who you are as an individual, and everything grows from there. The atmosphere that Livnot provided me with is why I am now less ignorant about myself and I will forever work towards learning more about myself every day because of it. Livnot may be advertised as a program with some Jewish classes, some hiking and some community service, but it really is so much more than that. It is what made me who I am today, and for that I am eternally grateful.

I pray that those chevre before me and after me will work toward changing this world through the guidance of their new Jewish lenses. One chevre at a time, one change at a time. That’s where it begins.

Thank you so much,
Eva Reichenberg

From: Jonathan Boltax
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 4:29 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael

Shabbat at Livnot = My life has changed forever!
Sounds dramatic... maybe not. I was a fairly unaffiliated Jew who had never had 2 consecutive Friday Night dinners before in my life until I came to Livnot.
20 years later I celebrate Friday Night every Friday with my 5 children and wife here in Eretz Yisrael!!!
I am forever indebted to Livnot for opening my heart and soul to the beauty of Judaism!

Blessings
Jonathan (J7) Boltax
From: Chava Axelrod  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 6:37 PM  

To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future  

Dear Michael,  

I did a three month Livnot program in the fall of 1993. It completely changed my life. I was totally, 100% secular in my life style at that point. I was in my 20's, finished with college, and had been working at a good job in my profession. I needed a break, and had saved some money, and friends convinced me to spend my "break" in Israel. I'd never been there, but had already traveled a lot in Europe during college. I did not observe anything Jewish then, although I would usual go home for a very short token "seder" with my family at Pesach. I did more for Xmas than Hanukah, and the other holidays weren't even on my radar screen. My boyfriend was not Jewish, and although about a third of my close friends were, they were all completely assimilated too (except the one friend and her husband who convinced me to go to Israel).  

Livnot was not easy for me, but it made me question everything, and it made me want to learn more. After Livnot I moved from San Francisco, back to my home town of LA, so that I could learn more about authentic Judaism. I slowly became involved with the religious community here. After a couple of years of taking classes and observing Shabbos and keeping kosher in LA, I returned to Israel and learned for almost a year in a Seminary for women, geared to English speakers who were not raised observant.  

Well, it's been exactly 20 years. I'm frum, married, have teenage kids (and younger) who are all growing up in a religious community and getting a day school education. I would NEVER have started on this path without Livnot. I had little interest in Judaism, and certainly absolutely no interest in making major life changes, before going to Livnot.  

Livnot has the power to profoundly influence young people from the Diaspora, with no background, to explore Judaism, before rejecting it by marrying out, getting involved with other faiths, etc.  

Assimilation is this generation's "holocaust". Livnot is on the front lines. The classes there are amazing. The involvement with the families, particularly through Shabbos, is life changing. For young people who have never experienced a family Shabbos, it's incredibly powerful. When combined with being in Eretz Yisroel, it's just mind blowing. 20 years later, I still remember so many things about my Shabbosos at Livnot.  

Gotta run and do carpool!  

All the best,  
Chava Axelrod (Nanci Garfinkel), J3  

From: Susan Coopersmith  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 8:38 PM  

To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future  

Dear Michael,  

I loved Shabbat on Livnot, it was always special. Whether it was the ruach I experienced singing Shabbat songs, or lighting the candles with my friends, or meeting new people on "Family Shabbat"; it was always something to look forward to each week.  

Susan (Sneider) Coopersmith  
Program T-19
Dear Michael,

I’m sure that many other letters from hundreds have started with a message along the lines of “Livnot changed my life” to try and relate in one sentence what a special gift Livnot has been. I know it can be easy to overlook such clichés, but I’m asking you not to. I’m asking you to see the beauty and significance of each one, because I too, like my peers, have felt a major positive impact from a mere seven day experience. Last year, I was living in Tel Aviv on a career-oriented Masa program. Overall, that experience was negative; turning me away from Israel and Judaism. On a whim I attended Livnot’s Northern Exposure program over Shavuot, knowing as I did so that nothing could possibly be worse than the experience in which I was currently a participant. I certainly didn’t expect the experience to be so overwhelmingly positive that my negative attitudes towards both Israel and Judaism as a whole would disappear completely. I said as much to fellow Livnot participants on the week-long program over Shabbat, describing in a speech how Livnot was a breath of fresh air from all that I was struggling with. Shabbat certainly was the culmination of a fantastic week of hiking and volunteering, the perfect end to a perfect vacation. I left Livnot more empowered; more able to endure the remainder of my internship, and willing to give Israel another shot. I searched for programs like Livnot that would encourage me to explore my Judaism without pressure. I found my fit at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies, where it is no coincidence that one of my closest friends is a former Livnot intern and my favorite teacher used to hold a director position at Livnot. I can say without a shadow of doubt that Livnot is the only reason I stayed in Israel and the only reason I decided to give Judaism another chance. Thankfully, this year is turning out to be the exact opposite of my experience in Tel Aviv. I love everything about this country, religion, and culture and am proud to say that Livnot sparked such happiness within me. I only hope to give back to other Jews someday as Livnot did for me. I hope this letter finds you well.

Regards,

Alana Bandos

From: Funnygal23
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 10:31 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org

Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

I have such memories of Shabbat at Livnot. Singing Jewish songs at the table, Israeliie dancing. Making new friends. Going to families for Sabbath. Going on different trips, Learning about my Jewish roots. I will never forget this beautiful memories. Thank you.

Pamela Davidson (Tzfat 56)
From: Bernard
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 7:59 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

I am not sure how many participants at livnot had the opportunity to have two generations of the same family participate and experience the program as my daughter and I had. In 1984 after a kibbutz Ulpan experience which was enjoyable but left me with no real spiritual or meaningful connection to Israel I was introduced to and signed up for livnot. I am still feeling the ramifications of that experience today in terms of my attitudes towards Judaism and Israel. Celebrating Shabbat in Tzfat was a profound and moving five senses experience that still lingers in my minds eye. Fast forward to today and my 24 year old daughter recently made her own journey to Israel and was fortunate to also become a livnot program participant and also experienced the programs intimate and infamous rooftop Shabbat phenomena facing mt. Merton as I had decades earlier which also left her with a deeper appreciation and love for the land of Israel, her chèvre, her Jewish heritage and spiritual birthrite. She has recently become engaged to an Israeli and is currently contemplating making Aliyah.

Regards Bernard

From: Ava Madoff
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 8:04 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,
Although I only spent 3 weeks at Livnot, I will always consider it my second home. The Shabbat experience at Livnot is lively, spiritual, warm and meaningful. It taught me to love Shabbat, and feel joy and pride in my Jewish heritage. Since returning home to the states, I have begun keeping Shabbat. Each week, when I light candles, I think about the rooftop at Livnot and remember looking out, watching the sun set behind the mountains while hearing people singing all around Tzfat. This is my "happy place" that I go back to each week to bring me into Shabbat mode. I recently had a chance to come back to Israel, and I made sure to visit Livnot, showing my friends the building and the rooftop that they've heard me talk about so much. It is a very special place. Thank you Livnot!

Ava
Dear Michael,

Like so many other young people exploring their Judaism, I have found Shabbat to be the most meaningful aspect of my religious practice. Inspired by the incredible beauty and holiness on display at Livnot in Tzfat, I became determined to acknowledge Shabbat in any possible way each week. Depending on where I was in the world, that sometimes has meant simply lighting a tin candle and taking a sip of apple juice and a bite of a cracker while saying the blessings to myself, while other times I have been lucky to bring in Shabbat with friends and family over beautiful challot, wine, and wonderful food and songs. No matter where I am, I often think back to the Shabbat I spent in Tzfat, and try to recapture the spiritual essence of the setting and community there. I think back to the joy expressed by both chevre and staff members on that day, and try to channel the same enthusiasm each Shabbat here. To be able to engage in such a celebration—a holiday—each week is incredible. I also feel lucky that I am part of a tradition that values not only celebration, food, wine, and community, but also rest and equality for all. This aspect of Shabbat, the inherent egalitarianism of it, was quite evident in Tzfat. The hardworking artists, chefs, and store owners that I had come to know that week at Livnot got a chance to engage in such a celebration themselves. In this sense, seeing the whole city shut down did not make it feel deserted or lonely, but rather alive, spirited, and completely communal. In the same way, on an individual level, my experience in Tzfat taught me to think of Shabbat not as a set of restrictions, but as a set of guidelines for engaging fully in rest with friends and family. Ultimately, I am incredibly grateful for that 25 hour experience in Tzfat, for teaching me to engage and celebrate Shabbat for every week following it.

Best,
Caroline

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Dear Michael,

Livnot was the place where I met my husband. It got me started on a life of adventure within the Jewish world, marriage and 5 kids. It was the perfect entry point to experience authentic, engaging Judaism and Israel, without pressure, which could have turned me off. My family is actively involved in Jewish causes and our kids are leaders in their own right: a paratrooper, a Jewish educator, etc. Livnot set it in motion.

All the best,
Dear Michael,

I attended Livnot U’lehibanot in 1999, and was permanently changed because of it. At the time I arrived in Tzfat, I was dating and intending to marry a good Christian girl. I had my future planned out: I knew where I wanted to live (the Midwest U.S.), I knew what I wanted to do for a profession (financial professional), I knew who I was going to marry (my good Christian girl), and my closest family and friends supported every bit of it. After the 2nd Shabbat of my program, I knew my choice of professional careers was not the right one. My Livnot experience at the Kotel pointed me to my passion of education, and rekindled my desire to work with students. But I kept fighting to keep my plan. After the 6th Shabbat of my program, I fell in love with Eretz Yisrael, and felt a nationalistic pride for Israel that I could never imagine. I was wondering if I should continue eating pork and my mom’s famous sausage lasagna. But I kept fighting to keep my plan. After the 8th Shabbat of my program, I knew everything I had planned was not what my ancestors intended for me. I knew things had to change...everything had to change. I had to abandon my plan. It would take my family and friends YEARS to accept the decisions I made from this. On the final Shabbat of my Livnot experience, I looked out on the balcony of the campus, saw the sun setting, and I felt the Divine presence. I sang from the pits of my soul, danced with abounding energy, and awakened a Jewish identity I never knew I had. It was the identity I had been fighting the entire time. Don’t get me wrong: I still enjoy my college football Saturday tailgates, chicken wings, steaks, and beer. But I no longer eat the pork and shellfish I grew up on. My last cheeseburger was in Eilat, my last shrimp was in Tel Aviv. And now, on every Shabbat in my house, after my 6 and 4 year old daughters sing the blessing of the candles, after my wife (a good Jewish girl) and I each bless our children, including our 7 month old son, and after we break bread over my home-made challah (that I first learned to braid at Livnot), I am reminded of the old saying: Man plans, and G-d laughs. I think it’s more like “Man plans, and G-d smiles.” I firmly believe nothing can make G-d smile like the Livnot Shabbat experience.

Joshua A. Katz
High School Math Teacher
Orlando, FL
Dear Michael,

Participating in Livnot was a heart-touching and mind-opening experience. For the first time in my life, I was given the opportunity to spend time with Orthodox Jews, women like myself, and understand the world in which they lived. I was able to ask questions without feeling ashamed and get answers without the need to hide my curiosity. Each day with Livnot was like a blessing to me, fulfilling the parts of my soul searching for deeper meaning and learning. I am supplementing my learning from Livnot as a rabbinical student and am happy to say that I carry what I learned at Livnot with me as a constant reminder of the variety and amazing passion that exists in the world. The hikes, conversations, cooking, and simple living I did during my week with Livnot over a year ago have truly informed how I act in my daily life (considering I sing many of the songs I learned that week on a weekly, if not daily basis).

I cannot fully put words the meaning that Livnot had on my life, but I can say that participating and made me consider my religious practice and truly appreciate what I am able to do and strive for more.

Todah,
Elana Nemitoff.

From: Rachel Rosenbaum  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 11:58 AM  
To: Aharon Botzer

Dear Michael,

At the time in my life when I had a Shabbat at Livnot U'lehibanot, I had not experienced many Shabbats. The companionship, singing, group meal preparation and overall friendly Jewish atmosphere altogether provided me with a beautiful Shabbat, which to this day I still have fond memories of.
Sima Sharabi
Summer 1999, Shabbat at Livnot in Jerusalem

From: Robin Muskal  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 11:09 PM  
Subject: Re: Shabbat at Livnot

This program woke me up to Judaism. Since then, 30 years ago, I have been living an increasingly Jewish life.

Robin Muskal
From: Natalie Aloyets Artel  
Sent: Monday, November 04, 2013 11:07 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

Livnot is the best kept secret in stemming the tide of Jewish assimilation. In one week, this incredible program gives individuals an honest glimpse into their soul and they often discover that who they thought they were and what they wanted in life needs a serious reexamination. My own story is not unlike this. I went to Israel to connect to my Judaism. I grew up secular and had no idea what Judaism was, but I had a sense it was important and I wanted to check it out. I went to Livnot because it was a comprehensive program offering service, education, and hiking in a communal environment. What I initially expected to be a good learning experience after which I could go on about my life on its prior trajectory did not take place. Livnot in a soul reaching way move me to question all my assumptions about Judaism and the role I wanted Judaism to play in my life. In a nutshell because of the influence of this amazing program, Judaism went from being a side player in my life to being the focal point against which all other decisions would be judged. I realized through the Shabbat experiences, through the learning, through the talks with other participants on hikes or service projects that Livnot gave me the gift to access the depth of my soul and realize my Jewish self.

Its been more than 13 years since I returned from my Livnot experience. I am now a 40 year old woman with a husband and two kids. Although my life is different than it was when I went on Livnot at 26, the thread of Jewish spirituality has infused everything about my current life. It influences who I married, where we settled, the schools my kids attend, the shul we belong to, and our day to day home practices. I continue to support Livnot both in spirit and financially. Even when my husband was unemployed we continued our support because I believe in Livnot and its power to change the tide of Jewish assimilation. You may ask yourself why does a Jew knowing his soul matter? My response is that connection to ones inner self is our truest essence of God's direction for us. We may decide not to heed it, but at least when we know ourselves we can make an informed choice.

Sincerely,
Natalie Aloyets Artel
Fall, 1999 program
Dear Michael,

I don't think I could ever describe my experience at Livnot with words that could do it justice but I will try. Livnot simply put is a happy place. It doesn't matter what background you come from or where you're going but when you are standing on that balcony on Shabbat singing havdallah with your new friends looking at the sun go down it is IMPOSSIBLE not to smile. It is IMPOSSIBLE not to feel a sense of community, belonging, companionship, and spirituality. Again, as I said these words can only describe the feelings I've experienced there so well.

I had been living in Israel for 5 months doing a Masa internship program when I went to Livnot. My time in Israel had already been spectacular but I was looking for a different experience. I was looking to connect with a different part of the country and a different part of myself. I'm 25 and have gone through numerous Jewish and Israel youth groups/programs etc. I can without a doubt say Livnot is unlike any other program Masa or the like are currently offering. The program affords you the opportunity to volunteer and hike in an area that is in my opinion the most beautiful in Israel. I grew up in Conservative Judaism and remain so however Livnot also gave me the opportunity to be exposed to like-minded individuals of a more religious faith. The conversations began in a relaxed environment and always spawned more questions and more curiosity. We all continued talking on the bus and on the incredible hikes. Hiking to me is the most ideal time for conversation. There is nothing to do but look out onto nature and converse with your new friends around you. Livnot does this better than anyone. Shabbat at Livnot is the culmination of the incredible week. When we all come together to appreciate all we’ve learned and done together.

Warm regards,
Michael Gellis

P.S. I am writing this at work and therefore this letter of love for Livnot is shortened. Please call me 518-429-4885 so I can tell you more about my experience there.
Dear Michael,

I often mention the amazingly touching and spiritual Yom Kippur that I observed while on the program in Tzfat, but I rarely dwell on the Shabbats. They were as varied as the different ways that we observed it, from the cholent and near lockdown of our Shabbat in the West Bank to the laughter over having to learn not to flip the light switch in the “Cave” to the always-awe-inspiring sunset over the mountain that never failed to make my soul feel free.

Shabbat at Livnot was a connection to my Jewish ancestors and the beauty, serenity, and simplicity of our observance of what is, essentially, the grace of God. I will forever be touched by my entire collection of experiences and memories of 3 months in Tzfat, although it is two decades behind me already. Time flies forward, but memories keep us grounded to what has come and gone.

~Rachel

Rachel Lipetz MacAulay
Freelance Writer, Editor & Proofreader
Cranberry Pine Creative Partners

Dear Michael,

I was 27 years old when I experienced my first ‘real’ Shabbat at Livnot U’Lehibanot in 1984. It was a strange and spiritual experience for me, standing on the roof top and watching the beautiful sunset in Tzfat. Being introduced to Shabbat with new friends, new songs, and new food was a whole new cultural experience which started my whole journey of finding out what it meant to be Jewish. I lived the first half of my life not having a strong Jewish identity; however, the second half of my life has been filled with learning about my wondrous heritage and inheritance. This second half has definitely been much more exciting and fulfilling, especially when sitting with my children and grandchildren at the Shabbat table. How amazing they think it is that it all started on a roof top!

LR
Shabbat at Livnot

Tzfat is an incredible town. As I was traveling across Israel after Birthright, person after person I met told me to go to Livnot. I finally took their advice and traveled to the little mountain town.

I quickly fell in love with Tzfat and Livnot. I was planning on flying back to the United States the week after I went to Tzfat. I ended up staying in Tzfat for an entire month and other parts of Israel for another additional month.

I had just come from a yeshiva and I was feeling strange about my Jewish identity. I was being barraged with a lot of unfamiliar information and I did not know how to make sense of it in the context of my Reform Jewish upbringing.

My first Shabbat in Tzfat cemented my positive feelings about Israel and my Jewish identity. The cool air, the singing in the streets, the colors of the sunset over the distant mountains, the freedom and sense of community... this all came together in the cobblestone streets of Tzfat.

Livnot is critically important to my Jewish identity. For every one of these notes, there are hundreds more which will go unwritten, hundreds more Jews who feel the same way I do. The creative unique energy of Tzfat and Livnot is critical to keep alive. It is our best hope at creating a Jewish future and heritage for generations to come.

Dan M.

From: Shimi Savitt
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 1:50 AM
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

I took shelter in a dimly lit cave,
in an ancient city fought over for thousands of years,
handed down from ruler to conqueror,
fortified through stone and spear.
I stood in the places of men,
who have long since passed,
persecuted by tyrants and empires,
that have long since fallen.

As I write this, sitting on a balcony in New York City,
my view of nature distorted by twisting structures of titanium and granite,
I think back to that week I spent in Tzfat.
It's nice to know that the simple pleasures my life once revolved around,
friends who weren't virtual,
exploring that didn't take place on Google Earth; well,
It's nice to know that there are places beyond the Hudson,
filled with people who still see the world with childlike wonder,
and I got to spend an entire week with them.
Thank you again, Livnot.
From: Sheryl Fox Adler  
Date: Thu, Nov 7, 2013 at 6:44 AM  
Subject: Re: Shana Tova  
To: Aharon Botzer <botzer@livnot.org>, Meir Paltiel <meir@livnot.com>  

It's difficult to put in words what Shabbat at Livnot was like for me and the impact it has had on my life over the last 16 years. I did a three month program with Livnot in the fall of 1997 and if Judaism was a black and white canvas prior to Livnot, after Livnot and certainly after Livnot Shabbatot, Judaism became a canvas full of color and vibrancy for me.

I grew up in a pretty traditional Jewish home in Baltimore, MD, went to orthodox Hebrew school (although we were not orthodox), observed holidays and supported Israel. But by the time I was 27, I was seeking out spirituality in all kinds of places other than Judaism, not realizing that spirituality was part of my own religion. I knew I would only marry someone Jewish... and yet I dated non-Jewish men without too much concern. I was connected to Judaism, but it was more of a cultural, familial, respect for my parents kind of connection, versus a deep in my bones understanding of who I was that filled me with joy and an understanding of my heritage as a Jew. Livnot was a Jewish, historical, spiritual, Israel education that truly changed my life and helped me to realize who I was.

I didn't know what Shabbat could be or was until I experienced Shabbat at Livnot. Growing up, celebrating Shabbat meant doing something that wasn't cool. It meant restriction, judgement, separation and not being able to be with friends. I felt so bad for people who celebrated Shabbat. After Livnot, I realized how ridiculous and dangerous those perceptions were. Shabbat at Livnot was the most beautiful Jewish experience I had had in my life to date. Through learning, singing, watching my teachers and being with my chevre Shabbat taught me about who I was, who I wanted to be, what kind of life I wanted to have, and how I wanted to live the rest of my life as a Jew. It connected me to Eretz Israel. It connected me to song and G-d in ways I never knew possible. Sixteen years later, I am married to an amazing Jewish man who has also been deeply impacted through Livnot through my experience as well. We celebrate Shabbat every week and Judaism and Israel are the cornerstones of our life. We are raising our daughter with the Jewish education we each never had. And we are raising our precious daughter to love Judaism. All of this... all of this... is because of Livnot.

Livnot is a unique and special organization. If I were able to fund Livnot with a game changing gift, I would immediately (and one day my husband and I hope to...please G-d...). In my opinion, its the most important, effective organization in existence today for connecting Jews to Judaism (in whatever way works for them), to Israel and to their inner most selves. Other than choosing my husband, attending Livnot was probably the single most important decision of my life. I truly do not know who I'd be or how I'd be living or what kind of Jewish life I would have without this precious, precious program. Every Shabbat, the seeds that were planted during my time at Livnot, flourish and flower. My gratitude to Livnot is boundless.

Sheryl Fox Adler  
Adler Consulting Services
Aharon likes to joke about how I used to sit in the corner in the dining room on Shabbat and look sad and depressed, how this was definitely not for me. That was spring 1984 and things changed just a little bit. Nearly 30 years later, I have celebrated over 1,500 Shabbats together with friends and family (who, as my wife Jody points out, wouldn't be here if the two of us hadn't met at a Shabbat meal at Livnot!) Because of Livnot, I have celebrated Shabbat on four continents - N. America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Some of the more memorable: in the Nepalese Himalayas and on safari in Tanzania. But it all started in Tzfat and I thank Livnot for making it possible!

Brian Blum
Tzfat 11

Philip Linssen
San Diego

Livnot reestablished my life to my Jewish heritage, devastated by the holocaust which placed my parents in a complacent Jewish identity. Livnot re-established the life cycle events that the family I created now celebrates year to year. From weekly Shabbat, to Bar/Bat Mitzvah events, to involvement in Jewish organizations in my community, the foundations were set by a learning experience of my Jewish heritage at Livnot U’Lehabanot so many years ago.

Thanks
Philip Linssen  Livnot T11

Dear Michael,

To experience an authentic Shabbat in Tzfat is a climatic event filled with a unique sense of purpose, friendship, spirituality and joy. The collective energy of shops closing early, meal preparations, rushing to synagogue, and unplugging for a day of festive meals, conversations, sunsets and songs, is unlike any I've experienced before or since. To be a part of this rich tradition, in our ancestral homeland, in the world's only Jewish state where our rituals are freely and proudly practiced by the majority of people in the city and country, is a natural high that will forever and warmly be imprinted in my memory.

-Paul Silberman, 151
From: Vanya Green On Behalf Of Vanya  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 12:05 AM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

I grew up having Shabbat dinners, but it was on Livnot, that I learned the joy of Saturday as Shabbat. Lunches, long conversations, just being together with no agenda. Our family enjoys Shabbat lunches together and spending the day without work, just as family. Thank you for all you do.

From: David Block  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 12:40 AM  
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot was an incredible mix of joy and learning and camaraderie. The whole Livnot spirit came together on Shabbat - the energy, the commitment, and Livnot's unique and wonderful optimism. Those Shabbatot had a positive impact on everyone there, and they were something I'll always remember.

B'vrachah.
David Block
Tzfat fall program, 1988

From: Terissa Schor  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 10:45 PM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I wanted to take a moment to share with you my Livnot Shabbat experiences and the lasting effect they've had on me. Nearly five years ago, when I first arrived in Israel as a Birthright participant, I lacked a personal connection to Israel, Judaism or our greater Jewish community. I thought I was going on an exotic "free" trip that would rank evenly with any other vacation I had previously taken. To be honest, my expectations were low and I didn't expect much.

But my experiences with Livnot, and most especially, Shabbat at Livnot, forever changed me. Never before had I experienced such a joyous, soulful expression of something as simple as welcoming the Sabbath. As a family (and that's what a group becomes when they visit Livnot), we prepared our Shabbat meals and then jammed with acoustic guitars. We sang and danced niggunim as we watched the sunset from Livnot's stunning view of Tzfat. We learned to unplug and truly enjoy each other's company. Most of all, we found that there was a welcoming place for us in Judaism and in Israel.

Thank you for your generosity!

Sincerely,
Terissa Schor
Describe your Livnot experience at Shabbat and how it has influenced you to this day.

We stood on the Livnot rooftop in the Old City of Safed, overlooking the glorious Merom mountains. The sun set with breathtaking colors, and the air was filled with a fresh stillness as the sweet, holy energy of Shabbat embraced the gathering of new lifelong friends. How ready we were to receive the Shabbat Queen!! After the week of REAL work, learning about our incredible Jewish heritage and labouring with joy and vitality, and love. What a powerful sense of connection awakened in us as we worked to rebuild a precious synagogue that had laid in ruins.

How ready we were to receive the Shabbat Queen!! After spending the day, cleaning, and cooking, and laughing, and singing, and preparing, and creating an environment, where Shabbos would be honored, and we would be nourished and revitalized. How did I absorb so many songs, and niggunim, and prayers that have been the connection to the deepest part of my soul, and continue to bring me to the most joyful moments of Shabbat to this day.

How blessed have I been, to have made SO MANY, MANY amazing friends over the years, who had also experienced Shabbat at Livnot, and knew the potential of Shabbat, and of being part of delicious Jewish community. How many Shabbats, since my Livnot program ended almost 30 years ago, have I had the merit to deeply enjoy, including last Shabbat with the Neiburg family, being with incredible past chevre of Livnot.

How grateful I am, to this day, that I have a vision of what Shabbat can really be like, with inspiration from Livnot. That I can share the Livnot Shabbat Spirit with my own family, and Shabbat guests, and Community.

May you continue to go from Strength to Strength!! Thank you for asking the Question!!

Jill Kaplan Shimansky, Director
Manoir Renaissance Senior Residence
5995 Rue Dolbeau
Montreal, Quebec, H3S 2G1

From: Eugene Katz
Date: 2013/11/6
Subject: Re: Fwd: a small request....

A beautiful November afternoon started with Challa making class, and preparations for the Sabbath dinner. Few final touches, the food is ready, tables are set, and the group meets on the balcony to welcome the sunset. We pray together, and sit down for a wonderful meal. We sing, we talk about our lives. The evening comes to an end as we go for a walk through the streets of Tsfat, as one big family.
Summer, 1983 (could be off by a year or two but it really doesn't matter).

The scene is Friday night and the sun setting and a group of Jewish young people are climbing to the rooftop across the way from the Aharon and Miriam's home. We are facing Mt. Meron and humming along with those who know the words to Lecha Dodi. There is an utterly clear sense of connection to this majestic Land, this melody, this People, this particular experience and palpable sense of Shabbat descending into this world. It is somehow mine though I know so little about any of it. These profound moments were the beginning of making the choice to be an active link between the generations that came before me and the generations still to come. My Shabbat experiences at Livnot determined the starting point that was to effect my life and the life of my people.

I will explain. Those Shabbats at Livnot - the communal meals, the foods, the Jewish learning that I had access to for the first time in my life, the long talks into the night, the singing, the words of Torah, the group of Jewish people having space and support for simply exploring what it means to be Jewish and beginning to have the how-tos of living this Judaism - became the foundation of years of on-going study and of living a Jewish life. Without those Shabbats at Livnot and the taste that it provided of what a living, proud, informed Judaism could mean, I don't know where I would be today.

From Livnot, I went on to receive my degree in Jewish Studies with a minor in Education. I married a wonderful Jewish man and together with another couple, founded Beit Midrash Ohr HaChaim - a Jewish learning center in Berkeley, California. Over the course of 13 years, this learning center and shul saw off over 65 people who made Aliyah from Berkeley, where the intermarriage rate is at 75%! I taught Jewish Studies and Hebrew to kindergartners at a local Jewish day school, receiving the honor of the Diller Award for excellence in Jewish Education. In addition, our Shabbat table in the Jewish wasteland of Berkeley, inspired by those early experiences at Livnot, was filled with countless Jewish souls week after week, month after month, year after year, who, like me, thirsted for an authentic experience of Judaism that would connect them to their own essence and history and future. Like Livnot, our door was always open, our hearts were open, and our Shabbat table always accommodated so many Jews of diverse ages and stages with no agenda other than welcoming them back to what is rightfully there's - giving access, a portal, a dip into Shabbat.

The secret of the longevity of the Jewish people is not so much that they kept the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath kept them. I feel this to be so directly true in my life and in the lives of so many, many Jewish people that I have had the honor of coming in contact with throughout my life.

I am forever grateful to and indebted to Aharon and Miriam Botzer and the Livnot U'Lehabanot program for that rooftop and those melodies and their open hearts and their gift of giving me access to the treasure trove of my tradition, my heritage, and my future.

Today, I live with my husband in Amirim, Israel.

Tamar (Reinin) Bittelman
Tsfat Program 9
From: Max Schrutt  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 11:01 PM  
Subject: Fwd: Livnot  
>> Mr Steinhardt  
>>  
>> I believe that Livnot has been given the responsibility for bringing home the America Jew who has lost, forgotten or doesn't have a connection to Judaism and to Israel. Without this program, there's a huge disconnect with the majority of American Jews around the basics of what it means to be Jewish. It brings to the surface why it's so important to continue our tradition, and pass this along to our kids. Livnot gives us a better understanding of not only who we are, but why its so crucial to continue our traditions as well.  
>> I was lucky enough to meet my future wife on Livnot, only to later bring back all 3 of my kids to share with them, the unique Livnot atmosphere. Livnot didn't change me overnight, but more importantly, it planted the seed that is now blossoming with my family today.  
>>  
>> Max Schrutt  
>>  
>> Vice President Sales & Distribution  
>>

From: Sarah Kolker  
Date: Wed, Nov 6, 2013 at 10:56 PM  
Subject: Re: Memories and new Realities  

I almost moved to Tzfat because of Shabbat!  
I had a perfect match of a Family and even snuck out to hang with them later that evening after lunch.  
We hung out in the candle studio and at their house with their family and I was very much welcomed immediately by all of those who fed me.  
It turns out however that I was with child while on Birthright. Her father and I decided it would be best for me to stay in America, even though I was so called to move, by the people and tangible spirit.  
My daughter is almost 5! And it feels like it was just yesterday that I was crawling through underground tunnels, walking through the desert, and streams, and meeting beautiful individuals in art galleries, on the streets and all over Israel!  

Until we meet again,  
Sarah
Shabbat at Livnot started on Thursday, right after supper. We had already learned that MAKING Shabbat was just as important as HAVING Shabbat. (It's good that I learned to start Shabbat as early as possible!) On Thursday night we started cooking - sorting rice, baking challot, peeling potatoes. Making Shabbat at Livnot always involved cake recipes from "The Spice and Spirit of Kosher Jewish Cookery", tripling cake recipes which were meant to feed a family of 10. Did you know that the secret name of the program was "To Build and to Bake"? On Friday there was cleaning, more cooking large pots of food, piling up the plata, and of course, a mad rush to all be showered and dressed on time.
   And then ....SHABBAT SHALOM!!!!

Everyone dressed, and out to the roof for Kabbalat Shabbat as the sky darkened over Mt. Meron and the Valley. Then back into the dining room -our everyday classroom transformed - the whole place clean, those long tables set with those plastic dishes, all of us squeezed into the dining room, all the yummy smells and tastes, of food we worked so hard to prepare, heartfelt Divrei Torah by one of us who had never before spoken Torah thoughts in public, and SINGING, SINGING zemirot that we had learned only last week or the week before, carried away with the ruach, with the gibush, with our whole community of chevrei.

Thank you again Livnot for those Shabbatot and for all the others that I have enjoyed due to your inspiration!!!

Susan Rosen Itzhak

From: Zvika Aloni
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 10:35 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org

Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

I come from a relatively strong Jewish background. I have observed many Shabbatot in different environments. When I went on Birthright a few years ago, I was really excited to really observe my first Shabbat in Israel. Shabbat on Birthright turned out to be very underwhelming for me. I feel like it lacked any sort of community, or real religious education. It was in many ways, the same sort of tedious religious service that turns many people off from Judaism in the first place. Shabbat at Livnot, on the other hand, was probably the best Shabbat I have had in my life. There is an incredible energy brought by the Livnot staff and community. Furthermore, Tzfat is an incredible place to experience Shabbat. I implore you to allow Birthright participants to experience the wonder of Shabbat in Tzfat with Livnot.

Thank you,

Zvika Aloni
Dear Michael,

I recently read your article titled, "Shabbat is our Birthright." I thoroughly enjoyed it. The line that resonated most with me was, "[regarding Shabbat] A community taking a break and celebrating life together."

I set out to travel Israel for 1 month this summer, and wound up feeling such a deep connection to the land and people, that I extended for 3.5 months. In that time, I had the privilege of participating in one of the most inspirational and motivational programs Israel has to offer; Livnot U’Lehibanot. The program, was not only pertinent to my development and sense of belonging as a Jew but also to my development and sense of direction as an individual.

I arrived at Livnot with the intention of staying 1 week, but within a few short hours of being there, I felt so at home, and welcome by the community, that I immediately decided to extend my stay to 3 weeks (I would have stayed all 4 weeks of the month long program, but I had shown up week 2 of 4). Livnot’s atmosphere is the perfect hybrid between a Jewish summer camp and a kibbutz. We live, learn, cook, clean, volunteer and hike together. The everlasting bonds we form, are only reinforced by the sense of community we share, and the support we have for one another. From the top down; the Batsharoot, directors and staff really set the tone for an unforgettable, extraordinary program for past, present and future participants.

Among my most memorable experiences in ISRAEL, was Shabbat in Tzfat. The city alone is mesmerizing enough; with its Kabbalistic art, and wild eccentricities; but coupled with Livnot’s sense of community, friendship, Jewish learning and (especially) Shabbat it is incomparable to anything you will ever be exposed to in the world.

We begin arranging for Shabbat at Livnot before sundown on Friday. Everyone is involved. The energy is palpable as we all sense the comradely preparing the food and campus for the next 24 hours. As the sunsets, we sing songs and bond on the patio, which overlooks an incredible mountainous view of the land. Sometimes Livnoters volunteer to put on absolutely hysterical and (mostly) historically accurate skits. While I was there, I participated in the story of Purim. The cast fed off each other’s energy and put on a skit that became my top 3 favorite experiences in Israel.

After the sun goes down, (before dinner begins) everyone heads out to find their favorite service, and pray and sing with THE WHOLE CITY. Literally, the whole city explodes into the streets; surging through the veins of Tzfat. They are the hemoglobin carrying spiritual oxygen throughout. Every song and prayer strengthens the pulse. The entire city is full of vitality with one rhythmic cadence; the heartbeat; the oneness. I remember going to 2-3 different services, and dancing wildly in circles with friends and locals. Afterwards, while still on our spiritual high, we reconvene at the Livnot campus to eat, sing and continue the festivities in a more intimate setting; with the Livnot family.

Saturday is just as incredible. Livnot pairs us in groups of 2-4 to attend a proper Shabbat meal with the locals of Tzfat. The families are very welcoming and gracious, and we are given the opportunity to break bread and experience local culture. It is an incredible experience. No
matter how different our stories may be, the customs and traditions of Shabbat are fundamentally consistent throughout. There is always a dependable flow to the meal.

 Personally, I got to meet a Russian Jew, whose back story was as interesting as Tzfat itself. He bounced around from religion to religion for years; studying under gurus, masters, teachers, the dalai lama, experts, scientists, and… expert scientists. Finally, he came back to Judaism and said he felt, (paraphrasing his words), “truth, belonging, and oneness.” He was somewhat of a fanatic when it came to diets. We discussed the laws of Kashrut, and the week’s portion. Sounds like some heavy conversation, but it was actually quite light, philosophical and interesting. I met a local 10 year old kid at this dinner, who became like a little brother to the Tzfat family. He was hilarious, and profoundly intellectual for his age… for any age. He came by the Livnot campus once and a while to hang out and feel like one of the guys, and ultimately came to celebrate our last Shabbat.

 I also had the privilege of celebrating Shabbat with one of the local artists, Dan the Potter. He had my friend and me over, as well as another family that had moved to Tzfat, 10 years prior, from New York… specifically, from the SAME town as me. Pretty unbelievable. After the meal, the other family’s 6 and 9 year old girl and boy, put on a play for us. It was absurdly cute. The 9 year old told my friend and I about his passion for parkour. He then proceeded in explaining parkour, which is running through the streets, and using the environment (ie. Lampposts, walls, windowsills etc) to climb, run, and do (gymnastics) tricks. We let him finish his explanation, to which my friend and I laughed. Of all the people they could have invited to Shabbat; my friend from Livnot happened to be a parkour guy himself, and I used to be a gymnast in high school. The kid was floored when my friend brought them all outside, and did a backflip off the wall. My friend gave the kid some pointers, and then I taught the kid and his father how to do a proper back flip, and how to spot a proper back flip, respectively.

 Between Shabbat lunch and dinner, we usually have free time to hang, walk around and explore. The final Shabbat meal is held at the Livnot campus. It’s usually a light dinner. We set up the tables outside, low to the ground, and sit on the ground on couch cushions and mats, for a more intimate setting. The food is served buffet style. Sometimes we have guests, sometimes it’s just the Livnot family. After dinner, People read their WOW speeches, which they prepared before Shabbat. WOW speeches are (usually up to 5 speeches) prepared by participants, on topics of their choice. They share their topic and how they relate personally and spiritually. They also include Judaic views and references on the topic. One girl shocked everyone with her poetry. She wrote a piece on mountains that was extremely well-written, descript, and full of literary elements.

 I’ve been to Shabbat in the States, Europe, and various places in Israel. There really is nowhere in the world you will receive as incredible a Shabbat experience as you do at Livnot in Tzfat. It’s more than just “a community taking a break and celebrating life together.” It’s many communities (the Livnot community, the local community, the yeshiva community etc) coming together as an entire city, taking a break and celebrating life together, in its own unique, spiritual, mystical, nearly inconceivable way.

 Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom!

 Joseph Sherman
Dear Michael,

After reading and reflecting on the article you wrote in Contact I believe that we are in agreement that more can be done to encourage Birthright participants do continue to be actively involved in the Jewish community post-trip, and that encouraging the celebration of Shabbat is one way that can occur.

In December of 2012 I went on a Birthright trip with Canada Israel Experience. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, including the Friday portion of Shabbat. We were at HaKotel to welcome Shabbat and walked back to our hotel for a late dinner, and while our spirits were down due a downpour we all enjoyed the experience. Saturday was a different story, in large part because we were told to stay in the hotel and programming did not start until the afternoon. After Birthright I spent a few days in Tel Aviv and then ended up at Livnot U'Lehibanot in Safed. Shabbat with Livnot was very different then with Birthright and much more meaningful. It involved food preparation, questioning, challah braiding, sharing a meal with a local family on Saturday, Synagogue hopping during Kabbalat Shabbat, but most importantly it involved engaged community.

Transforming Shabbat from being just another ritual to an engaged activity is not an easy task, but one definitely worth perusing. I currently serve as a board member of my university’s Jewish Students Association and local Hillel branch, and we are trying to address this very issue. We normally have very good attendance at our dinners, but we are relying on a very small core group to make the meal happen. This is unsustainable, both for our volunteers (who suffer from burnout) and our community. For our next Shabbat dinner (later this month) we are trying something slightly different, instead of having a free dinner we are giving people a choice. If they actively contribute to the meal (e.g. helping with food preparations, moving furniture and setting up) then that will be there contribution to the meal. If they don’t contribute in that way we are asking, in the spirit of tzedakah, that they either make a small financial donation or bring an item for a local food bank. We don’t know if this will work or not, but we feel that we must try. We (JSA/Hillel) are not viewing Shabbat dinner as a religious event but as more of a cultural one at the heart of our community, and with our actions we hope that the community will continue to thrive after we are gone.

Regards,
Kevin Ziegler
From: Allyson Freedman  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 9:22 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Livnot Letter Campaign

Dear Livnot,

Thank you so much for giving me one of the best weeks of my life. I changed so much as a person in one week. It was one of the highlights of my life. All of my best friends from Israel come from Livnot. We have had so many Livnot reunions. The feeling of love did not end there. Livnot is probably the happiest place on Earth. Whenever I am there, I feel home. I even helped open to confessing about my deepest, darkest secrets to a group of people I barely knew for a week. I would recommend Livnot to anybody. Thanks for the wonderful experience. I love you so much.

And remember, deep inside my heart I have this everlasting love. The everlasting love is for you.

Lots of love,

Allie Freedman

From: Jonathan Amerikaner  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 2:09 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Shabbat with Livnot

Shabbat did not have meaning to me before I experienced Shabbat with Livnot. Growing up reform, my family did not observe Shabbat. After my first Shabbat with Livnot, we now celebrate Shabbat every week. To us, observing Shabbat is what keeps us connected to our Judaism.

Jonathan Amerikaner
Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I'm not really sure how to articulate into words the effect Shabbat at Livnot had on me 16 years ago....other than by using the words life-changing, literally.
I'll start by saying I grew up reform/reconstructionist and had no Judaism in my life post-Bat Mitzvah and until my mom started working at CAGE (Federation), in South Florida, I had no connection with Israel. She was working with a program called Alexander Muss High School in Israel, which she sent my two younger sisters on at aged 16. They came home extremely pro-Israel and had a very positive experience but I believe it was too young of an age with no follow up after the program ended. By the time they went to college, the "effect" wore off and Israel was forgotten. And they both ended up marrying non-Jews and are raising their kids now with "everything" and see Judaism only as their cultural past. I became curious after they came home from Israel and by aged 24, I had done enough research about Israel, was unfulfilled at my job in NYC, and was also searching for a mate. My mom (again :) had heard of a financially affordable program called Livnot for my age group, which sounded a bit rustic, but like a huge challenge as well as an opportunity. I took a leap of faith... Left my job, family and comfortable country I knew... And I left the USA an American, and three months later I became a Jew.
Livnot changed my life. The effect that those three months had on me has still not left me. In fact, if you would have asked me (and asked my future husband, whom I met on Livnot) 16 years ago, if we would ever believe that our future three children were going to attend an Orthodox Day School, and go to Orthodox camps and belong to a Modern Orthodox schul .... And that we'd move houses JUST so we could WALK to schul... And that Shabbat would become a much anticipated weekly tradition... I (and my husband) would never have believed you. But that's our reality. We share our love for Shabbat with all of our unaffiliated, intermarried extended families and friends, whom otherwise would never have the chance to experience it.
We were given a HUGE gift and blessing by being exposed at Livnot to the right non-judgmental, non-proselytizing Jewish experiences at the RIGHT age, where a spark was lit that was too bright to go out.
Shabbat on a rooftop in Tzfat overlooking unreal scenery where our ancestors stood, locking arms with strangers who you've somehow bonded with immediately, singing songs as adults, and just stopping the week to breathe, give thanks, and be present... Was a gift that we never knew before.
Walking in the footsteps of our ancestors connected us permanently with the land promised to our forefathers. Now, when we are buried in debt due to our Jewish Day school commitments, and stretching ourselves beyond reason to bring our kids to visit our Land we love... We know in our hearts it's all worth it. Because B"H, we are molding three Jews in the next generation who will hopefully only know Shabbat as a "given"... And will have that gift to continue passing down onto the generations.
And every Shabbat, when our kids hand out our Livnot benchers to guests at our table, we are reminded of where it all started...

B'Shalom,
Jennifer Schrutt, #T52
Dear Michael,

The following is an excerpt from an historical novel about Israel that I’ve written and hope to soon publish:

Livnot classes and late night discussions about our Jewish heritage, religion, the people and the country opened me to new insights and ideals. Working together with the chevreh and giving to others in the community was rewarding. And with every tiyul, I began to fall more in love with the Land and its beauty.

One thing I hadn’t expected to get from the program was my growing appreciation for the spirit of Shabbat. Dressed in the nicest outfits we had with us, we’d gather together on Friday at sundown to light Shabbat candles. Then, silhouetted against the evening sky atop a wider flat rooftop across the way, we would welcome the Sabbath with prayer and song.

After conducting our own private Shabbat service in the nearby centuries-old Abuhav synagogue, our group would be one step closer to G-d, our Jewish souls and the special, delicious feast waiting for us back at Livnot U'Liihebanot.

Spirited singing always highlighted the three Shabbat festive meals we ate together throughout the day. We often found ourselves enthusiastically pounding the white cloth-covered tabletops with our fists or drumming with our hands to the rhythm of the Shabbat songs. And in between filling our bellies and exercising our vocal cords, we shared with each other an idea or lesson we’d learned from one of our Torah classes. I was impressed with how the ancient writings had messages that were also relevant for our own modern lives.

The most beautiful sunsets I had ever seen were just as Shabbat was coming to an end. Sitting up on the same rooftop where we had greeted the Sabbath the evening before, we would sometimes spend the last few minutes of the day watching the blazing sphere make its descent. Tinting the sky with assorted shades of orange, red and yellow, it would slip slowly behind the mountains until it finally disappeared.

Not long after participating in Livnot U'Liihebanot's three-month program, twenty-nine years ago, I made aliyah, became religious and built a strong and lasting connection to Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael. The above is only one small example of how Livnot contributed to changing my life. Every aspect of the program had a lasting effect on me, as it had, and still has, with the thousands of others who pass through the Botzer's open, revolving door.

The truth is, there really is no other program like Livnot U'Liihebanot. I’m sure the reason it’s still around and still leaving its mark on the Jewish people and our Jewish homeland is because it is a unique and special program run by equally special people who want nothing more than to help build and rebuild Jewish souls and Jewish communities in Eretz Yisrael.

But most importantly, because it succeeds in its goal, time after time, after time, after time...

Please help keep this amazing program going.

Sue Kroopnick

Livnot program 13
Livnot and Shabbat.
Everybody knows that the secret ingredient of Shabbat is oneg/bliss. You can do all the right right rituals, say all the right prayers, follow all the Shabbat laws, and you could G-d forbid miss Shabbat if you don't have oneg. Shabbes at Livnot is filled with song and dance and authentic words of wisdom that come form the heart. The Livnot way is deep and real and Jewish but never felt coercive. It was through my Livnot experiences that I truly fell in Love with Shabliss, and now it is the most important part of my week and my life. I guard and cherish my Shabbat like a precious jewel. Since my Livnot experience I have recen... 

Pesach Dahvid Stadlin

Dear Michael,

Twenty-three years ago, a door opened in my life and a burst of light shone forth, illuminating a pathway forward. That light had as its source a single event, my first Shabbat, celebrated on a serene mountaintop in northern Israel on the Tzfat campus of Livnot U'Lehibanot. It was the single most influential moment of my life; it’s the most precious gift I’ve ever received.
The truth is, the pathway first led backward, toward my ancestors and the beautiful tradition of living a Jewish life of faith and observance. From that first Friday evening spent in festive song and celebration, I felt my connection to the generations of the past and understood my role as a link to future of the Jewish people. I also knew I could abandon my difficult and uncertain efforts to blaze my own path in life. I discovered, instead, I could walk the beautiful path of my ancestors forever more.
This week I turn 52. Every Friday night, I raise a cup and recite the Kiddush and let the wine linger an instant in my mouth, savoring its sweetness and the peace that permeates my home and my soul as I welcome Shabbat.

Yehoshua Halevi
Efrat

Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 12:34 AM
To: Meir Paltiel; Aharon Botzer
Subject: Elana Nemitoff.

Dear Michael,

Participating in Livnot was a heart-touching and mind-opening experience. For the first time in my life, I was given the opportunity to spend time with Orthodox Jews, women like myself, and understand the world in which they lived. I was able to ask questions without feeling ashamed and get answers without the need to hide my curiosity. Each day with Livnot was like a blessing to me, fulfilling the parts of my soul searching for deeper meaning and learning. I am supplementing my learning from Livnot as a rabbinical student and am happy to say that I carry what I learned at Livnot with me as a constant reminder of the variety and amazing passion that exists in the world. The hikes, conversations, cooking, and simple living I did during my week with Livnot over a year ago have truly informed how I act in my daily life (considering I sing many of the songs I learned that week on a weekly, if not daily basis).
I cannot fully put not words the meaning that Livnot had on my life, but I can say that participating and mad eme consider my religious practice and truly appreciate what I am able to do and strive for more.

Todah,
Elana Nemitoff.
From: Mosheh
Date: Wed, Nov 6, 2013 at 2:52 PM
Subject: Re: Letter from Shmuel Bowman-Jewish North America at the crossroads

My letter:
I would say that my interest in Israel post university was weak, and Judaism ambivalent at best. My experiences at Livnot U'Lehibanot transformed my apathy as a very assimilated & cultured Jew into a passion and mission to explore my Jewish identity. This was a direct result of spending a Shabbat meal with a local family, seeing how Judaism is lived and expressed in the unique ways that vary from family to family; hiking the land with a tour guide knowledgeable in flora, fauna, history, modern political issues, and the connections between the geography and Tanach; volunteer work in underprivileged neighborhoods; and basic classes on Judaism, and the history of Israel connected to the stories on the radio in the morning news. I would proudly say that Livnot played a pivotal role in my decision to attach my future to the Jewish People as opposed to chasing my personal ambitions at the expense of my Jewish identity.

-Mosheh Vineberg

From: Serena Goldin
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 2:27 PM
To: Aharon Botzer; Meir Paltiel
Subject: Dear Michael

Dear Michael,

It was during my Birthright trip with Livnot in 2004 that I first experienced Shabbat. It was never something that appeared on my radar during my life that had been, up until that point, fairly disconnected Jewishly. I remember my first Shabbat in Jerusalem, in the old city that I had the epiphany that Shabbat had been integral in the lives of my family for all the generations before me. How had I been so deprived?

It wasn't about religion, it was about connecting with my ancestry, my heritage. It was about learning songs that my great-grandparents (and all the greats before them) had sung at their Shabbat tables. It was about breaking bread (literally) with other Jews and learning how deeply connected we all were by some intangible, invisible thread of being Jewish and having the common experience of being reunited with that feeling.

Looking at the Livnot families (The Botzers, The Shumers, The Paltiels) and seeing the joy and fulfillment that Shabbat brought them was inspiring to me. There is NOTHING more romantic than a man singing Eshet Chayil to his wife on Shabbat. The quiet time away from the hubbub of their busy non-stop week to be with their families, to reconnect, to talk, play with their children and be together that made me appreciate Shabbat and how it applied to my own life and not just my ancestors'.

It was Livnot that first inspired me to fall in love with Shabbat, with Judaism and with Israel. Two years ago I made aliyah, fell in love with and married my soulmate and there is nothing more beautiful than seeing our baby boy light up when we start singing Shalom Aleichem. And there really is nothing more romantic than having my husband sing Eshet Chayil to me at our own Shabbat table.
The most memorable shabbat experience I had at Livnot was in June 1985. I had arrived to the inner courtyard to come and be with the chevre for Seudah Shlishit. I was at the time a volunteer with the City of Sfat, visiting seniors in their homes all over the city. I was planning to move to Jerusalem in the fall to attend the Pardes Institute. Soon after I arrived that late afternoon, an acquaintance said, "Hey, Jody, you should meet Brian. You're both registered to attend Pardes in the fall." Well, 27 years later, Brian and I just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary with our 3 children in our home in Jerusalem! Livnot, and the magical city of Sfat, was the first meeting between me and the love and pillar of my life, Brian, a Livnot alumni.

By having a program like Livnot U'Lehibanot around, my family heritage was able to live on weather I knew about that heritage or not. I had not been told that my father was brought up observant and left it in his teens. Sure, my brother and I were given a Jewish upbringing in the Conservative movement, but as things turned out, out of 9 cousins on both sides of the family, one never married. Another married a Jew but divorced him within a year or two and married a non Jew. Everyone else, my brother included, intermarried without blinking an eye. My family did not quite understand my decision to not only be observant, but to marry an Orthodox Jew. By the end of his life 10 years ago, my father may not have verbalized it to my brother or I, but I later found out that he was actually very proud of me and my decision, contrary to my brothers statements otherwise.
Livnot has been such a huge part of my life and it needs to be around for the others who need or want to find their way back to traditional Judaism.

Yocheved Avia Cohen
Dear Michael,

I would say my experiences with Shabbat with Livnot reads like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. When I first decided to make a trip to Israel, it was with a foundation of traditional Judaism, and grandparents who had simply instilled in me this idea that Israel was "our home". To what depth and extent this meant, I wasn't clear. I just knew this to be true. Traditional Judaism meant we lit candles on Shabbat, (not at any specific time), and observed the Jewish holidays (but did not keep kosher or other mitzvot). Indeed, while I grew up loving my traditions and had a very strong moral compass and belief in G-d, there seemed to be a lot lacking in my fundamental understanding of Torah and Judaism.

So off I went to Israel, having applied to learn in Ulpan and work on a kibbutz. I had innocently assumed that because Israel was a Jewish state, everyone in the country would be upholding a strong sense of what was the "essence of being Jewish". I did say I was innocent, right? On kibbutz, I threw myself into Ulpan and quickly regained Hebrew skills that I had last used in grade 4 and focused on my fluency. I worked hard in the fields, feeling a deep connection to the land; and also was involved in the ganim in order to be close to the kibbutznik families and really use my Hebrew. While it was a wonderful experience; it left me wanting. Many of pre-conceived notions of Israel were quickly burst particularly regarding "Jewish identity". Indeed, I found it quite disturbing that because this Kibbutz hired used a lot of non-Jewish volunteers, there were many inter-marriages or common-law situations. While there was great pride in the unique role kibbutzim had in Israeli history and identity; there appeared to be many contradictions if not a collapse of the concept of Jewish identity--the integrity of Jewish marriage, family and traditions. During my time on kibbutz, I found out about Livnot; however, the program was not in session during the winter. I applied to go to the program in the spring; and in the interim felt I needed to go spend some time in Yerushalayim.

From one extreme to the other, I enrolled in a seminary program. It was there I began the journey of understanding the philosophical fundamentals of Judaism that had always spoken to me--I felt and believed in them implicitly throughout my life--I simply didn't have the concrete sources and knowledge to prove these ideas. The rebbeim, teachers and students were amazing. The experience in Jerusalem truly gave me a sense of the kedusha of Eretz Israel. However, there was still a great disconnect. I felt like I was wearing an ill-fitting coat. On the one hand, I truly identified with wanting to be shomer Shabbos and shomer mitzvot; yet the environment seemed to focus on wanting everyone to be the same--unique, creative, outside-the-box thinkers did not seem to be valued or appreciated. Secondary, while the seminary was in Israel, there wasn't any relationship between that which was learned about Judaism and connecting it to the Land of Israel.

Finally, I landed in Tzfat. The Livnot program focused on two vitally important issues: Jewish identity/values--and just as important, the unequivocal connection of Jewish identity and our ties to Eretz Israel. We worked and dug the holy dirt uncovering the incredible architectural treasures of history; we helped with the sick, the elderly, and Ethiopian immigrants of the community; we learned about Judaism, debated, and discussed everything and anything at length; and finally there was the culmination of our group
preparing for Shabbat. From cooking to cleaning, to preparing dvrei Torah, the excitement building up for the Shabbat experience was palpable. One particular Shabbat, as we were davening outside watching the sunset over Har Meron, I remember as the intensity of our singing and prayers grew, so did the most unusual natural phenomena take place--there wasn't a cloud in the sky, yet, the sun's rays began to spread horizontally in what one could only call a "sunbow"--the prisms and colours spreading and becoming more and more intense that we all watched and had a collective "gasp". This mystical, spiritual and humbling, moment as if G-d was showing His presence, His mastery of the universe, as we greeted the Sabbath queen. There were simply no words to describe what we had witnessed. Livnot Shabbat meals were lively with conversation and dvrei Torah. But the most lasting impact was the zmerot I learned. The numerous niggunim were the gifts I brought home and ultimately have been the most important minhag I was able to bring to my Shabbos table when I got married and had children. You see, my husband has a hearing loss and though he had grown up in a frum family, he had never known nor appreciated music. It was going to be up to me. My children are now young adults; and our Shabbos table has been and continues to be enhanced by the beauty of the Livnot zmerot; as well as the niggunim they have learned in other homes, yeshiva and seminary. Long after the meal is over, the zmerot continue and truly defines the uniqueness of Shabbat in our home.

I would add one more important point about Shabbat with Livnot. Just as important were the Shabbos meals we had on campus, were the ones we had with families in the Tzfat community. I had the opportunity to spend Shabbos and Yom Tov with Chassidim, Lubavitch, Yeminite, Sephardi, Ashkenaz, American modern-orthodox, ...they wore knitted keppahs, black velvet keppahs, streimels and black hats; covered their hair with tichels, sheitls, and hats, wore stockings, or wore sandals. It was here that I truly gained my perspective on what it meant to be Jewish and that Shabbat is unique and Holy to the Jewish people, as is the Land of Israel. Unlike my experience on kibbutz or in Yerushalayim, here I witnessed true achdus--unity. I observed that the Jewish people are rich and diverse in their cultural heritage, particularly depending on what part of the world they may have come from as well as their life experiences. It didn't matter what they used to cover their heads or the garb they wore. Their food and the nusach of the siddurim may differ (as may their politics)--but there is only one G-d and one Torah. This spoke volumes to me.

As I said, my story is like Goldilocks--in the end, Livnot was "just right". The program and most particularly my Shabbat experiences provided me with the foundation of my commitment to being shomer mitzvoth while being true to myself. I didn't have to wear Judaism like an "ill-fitting coat", rather the essence of being Jewish is that which begins from within.

Sincerely, NB
From: Sam Block  
To: botzer@livnot.com  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 2:58 AM  
Subject: Letter to Mr Steinhart

Dear Michael:

Shabbat at Livnot is special. At Livnot, people learn more than just the rituals, they learn how to be enlightened by doing them and how the rituals connect them to the Jewish people, past and present. Livnot makes it easy to connect to. People come without backgrounds in Judaism and immediately become a part of the action. Activities include challah baking, kiddush, food prep, communal meals, singing, learning, and an always special musical havdalla. Traditional songs are sung but so are English songs and nignunim that people without background can really get into. All this at the Livnot campus in Tzfat, one of the most significant places in Israel both religiously and historically. The spirituality in Tzfat on shabbat is almost tangible, but the real genius of Livnot is that it gets people involved. Not just during the community service projects during the week but also on shabbat. This is no sit and be served group. The participants do a lot of the work, and it provides a sense of responsibility and with it ownership. They become a part of it. Livnot is also unique in the openness in Judaism that it presents. It does not have these monoculture religious agendas like some groups. People walk away with a sense of wonderment inspired by what they've learned and armed with ways to bring it home with them. I will always be grateful to Livnot.

Thank you
Sam Block
Livnot 167, 212

From: Rivka Zlatkin  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 10:38 PM  
Subject: Re: Shabbat at Livnot

Bs"d
I Rivka Zlatkin, formerly known as Denise Alweiss really loved the Kabbalat Shabbat Ceremony. I was in the fifth programm which was a very rainy cold winter program from just before Purim until Shavuot. The Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony took place on the roof top of the opposite’s neighbours house an old yemenite couple who very sweetly let us use it. On the backdrop of the sunset overlooking the beka valley with beautiful hues of pinks and orange until the sun dissappeared behind the mountains. Very moving songs all this was a reall unreal experience. Then we went on to the Ma’ariv service in the Abuhav synagogue. Later when I returned to England and in fact until now I always remember fondly those special moments. The whole programme definitely influenced me to become religious and also to come on aliyah.
From: Susan Weizman
To: botzer@livnot.org
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 3:48 AM
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

The mystical city of Tzfat; serene and beautiful. Friday night just after sunset, standing on the roof at Livnot overlooking the most beautiful mountain view in the world. Your friends around you singing, almost meditating and sharing that magical moment when an ordinary Friday turns into Shabbat. Suddenly there is time to think, to read, to sit quietly or discuss fiercely. It is your soul unburdening itself from the week and relaxing into that place where ideas flow and there is nothing but time. Twenty five years later and each Friday night as I light candles a great, deep sigh escapes me and I relax into Shabbat. Now there is space and warmth and light. And Tzfat and Livnot are never very far away. Embrace the gift, embrace Shabbat.

From: Daniele Rietti
To: botzer@livnot.org
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:47 PM
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

I belong to an extremely secular family. My mum is not even Jewish (yeah I know that this means I am not Jewish either, but honestly I don't care, I am what I feel.) The only time we do something Jewish is during the holydays where we meet the rest of the family for nice dinners all together, and I had never celebrated a Shabbat before the summer of 2012. That's why I had never given any deep thought about religion, spirituality and identity before.

At the end of the Taglit trip, more than one year ago now, I decided to extend my staying in Israel for one week at Tsfat, joining Livnot. I must say the whole week has been one of the most intense experiences of my life. Besides awesome activities such as hiking under the moonlight and geopolitics seminars, the highlight of the week was, without doubts, the Shabbat. I remember really well roaming into Tsfat at Dusk going to different synagogues and cheering and dancing with local people. And then the large dinner we consumed. But probably the best part of the whole fest was being invited for lunch at the orthodox house of Rabbi Falk. Here I debated with one of his students for hours and hours about life and religion and other philosophical issues. So I can say I was really enthusiastic about my first Shabbat and way more conscious about my origins and my culture.

Daniele- Italy
From: Naomi Bright Lerman  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:51 PM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Words can not accurately describe Shabbat at Livnot. I actually first did Shabbat at Livnot not as a person of that program but as a visitor with a Meor group. The spirituality that I felt standing on the rooftop and that spectacular sunset left me with the desire to return. I did, two weeks later. Music and singing has always been the way I connect to my Judaism and I felt the power of Shabbat even more when I returned. When I lead services for children, I often recall how a felt and the views of Tzfat to give me more inspiration and ruach as leader. Also, if anyone ever asked about my experience at Livnot, the Shabbat experience is one of the first things I mention!  
Thank you so much for the opportunity to come and spend Shabbat at Livnot!

Naomi Bright Lerman

From: Marlon Gobitz  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:54 PM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Dear Michael

Shabbat in Tzfat is something so unique and so special which I've never been able to reproduce. It's been 20 years but I can't and won't ever forget how special this was for me. It sticks with me my whole life. Standing on the roof with my fellow Chevre, singing Lecha Dodi together (every time another beautiful melody), zmirot at the shabbes table, especially powerful with the loud table bangings (which I tried to copy at home, but it wasn't a big success). And then at the end of the birkat hamazon, the nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai-nai. I still do the nai-nai at the birkat hamazon and then think about Livnot again...

Kol tuv,
Marlon Gobitz  
Modin, Israel (I made aliyah 9 years ago - I was in Tzfat in 1993 - on the 3 month spring program

From: Vanya  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 12:04 AM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

I grew up having Shabbat dinners, but it was on Livnot, that I learned the joy of Saturday as Shabbat. Lunches, long conversations, just being together with no agenda. Our family enjoys Shabbat lunches together and spending the day without work, just as family. Thank you for all you do.
Dear Michael,

My strongest memory of Shabbat at Livnot is actually preparing for Shabbat...My husband, Rick Nachenberg and I were on torunut for Shabbat. We and others were in the kitchen preparing food and my husband started dancing with the chicken before it went into the pot to make chicken soup. It was so funny, and everyone was laughing and having a really good time. That is one of things that made Livnot so meaningful and enjoyable....the participants...the chèvre. Work (whether kitchen duty, cleaning, schlepping buckets of sand from place to place, and painting) was turned into fun because we were all together making it fun!

Linda Nachenberg

From: Laura Reback
To: botzer@livnot.org ; Laura Reback
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:43 PM
Subject: Aharon --Here is My Letter,

Dear Michael,

My name is Laura Korobkin Reback. I am writing to tell you how my experience at Livnot U'Lhibanot changed my life.

To be specific, I am speaking of the Shabbat Experience of the program.

I attended one of the early sessions in Safed-#4--that long ago. I was searching for a spiritual connection to my Jewish heritage. I had finished an AZYF trip that took me travelling through the Israel, but I wanted more.

It was the educational aspects of Livnot, and the experiential, hands on involvement of Shabbat that spoke to my soul.

After Livnot ended I returned to America with the desire to "become" a practicing Orthodox Jew.

To make a long story short, I am now 53 years old. I had an Orthodox wedding, 3 children who all went to Orthodox schools.

My oldest son went to Israel after graduating high school, to study in a Yeshiva for a year. Now he attends Johns Hopkins University and is reads the parsha every week for the Hillel on campus.

My 18 year old daughter is now in Israel studying at a Seminary/MMY. She will attend Yeshiva University/Stern College fall of 2014.

My youngest son is in 7th grade at Seattle Hebrew Academy and will have his Bar Mitzvah in June 2014.

All of this, because of the "Shabbat Experience" that I had at Livnot, so many years ago.

Laura Korobkin Reback
From: Zvi Zavidowsky
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:32 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Shabat with Livnot

Shalom Mr. Steinhardt,

Aharon has asked us to write a note saying something about our experience of Shabat when in the Livnot program. I was there for the first time in Israel in Fall of 1987. I stayed on in Zefat for 3 months afterwards, then moved to Jerusalem where I lived and worked for 6 months. It was through Livnot connections that I found construction work to continue living in Israel. I determined at the end of that year to make aliyah which I eventually did. My background is in education and I also teach Jewish meditation.

Shabat in Zefat is a magical experience. Besides the setting of Zefat itself with its special atmosphere and history, Livnot is so well integrated with the community that the dinners with families and the teachers drawn from the community made for a seamless immersion into a thriving multi-faceted spiritually live Jewish reality. I wanted to live in Zefat after this experience. To be able to encounter so much in such a small place in such a short span of time is surely one of greatest strengths of the Livnot program. The connections are real with real people and the real situations of their lives. Zefat is unique gem among all the places I have been in the Jewish world. Livnot is the open door to its riches. Aharon and Gabi and their families are part of the whole experience. Please accept my gratitude for helping to support their work.

Sincerely,

Zvi Zavidowsky
Moshav Beit Meir, Israel

From: Haley Sonenthal
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 6:24 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

I am studying abroad at Hebrew University for the semester, and I signed up for the Livnot Sukkot Northern Exposure week. Honestly, I did not feel so comfortable when I first arrived in Israel because I was in a new place with totally new people. Livnot made me feel safe and at home in Israel! The welcoming environment and friendly people made me feel like Israel could be a home rather than a distant place where I did not always feel secure. I was inspired by the Livnot staff and the people around me, and the whole experience made the values of Judaism feel a lot more connectable rather than distant! I still keep in touch with many of the people from my trip, and I feel so blessed to have had this experience!
Best,

Haley Sonenthal
Dear Michael,

It is hard to put down the Shabbat experience at Livnot to words. How do you describe a feeling?
Shabbat at Livnot is not just a typical Friday night dinner, served with roast chicken, green beans and rice, and a little singing. Shabbat at Livnot is not only an experience. It is a sense of being.
When entering the gates to Livnot uLehibanot (which is easy, because the door is always open) you are immediately greeted with the feeling of belonging and joy. All your senses are awoken from the music blasting from the speakers and the Chrevre singing along, the smell of the delicious home cooked food, and the sight of beautiful happy people. There is an sparkling energy and a sense of calmness at the same time.
Throughout the course of shabbat there is a constant feeling of being and togetherness. Cooking the food, braiding the challot and all spiritual preperations for shabbat we have done during the week, welcoming of the Shabbat on the balcony overlooking the beautiful hills and Mount Meron, is something indescribable. The joy from singing and dancing continues through the narrow alleyways of Tzfat, hopping from one Synagogue to the next, joining all the celebrations in the old city.

Since Tzfat is a spiritual city, I can allow myself to say that Shabbat at Livnot really allows you to tap into the spiritual energies of Shabbat.
The food is delicious, and the challot are braided beautifully. But the Livnot feeling of being and togetherness is distinctive and impossible to copy a recipe for.

I do hope you get to experience a Shabbat at Livnot u’Lehibanot sometime soon.

Sincerely,

Simone Meron
From: Michael Hessdorf  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 9:44 PM  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Here is my Shabbat memory at Livnot. We are all up on the roof in Zfat, overlooking the mountains. The sun is setting. It is beautiful and quiet. We sing lecha dodi during kabbalat shabbat and it is just a magical experience. Our sounds are sweet and our hearts and minds are totally open. I am 29 years old. What a wonderful time. It brings a smile to my face and warms my heart when I think about it.

Best regards,
Mike Hessdorf

From: Beth Eshel  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 5:33 AM  
Subject: Re: Shabbat at Livnot

I think I was looking for Shabbat all my life. By the time I left Livnot I was lighting candles and taking baby steps towards fully keeping Shabbat. After a few more months, Shabbat was a part of my life for all time. It took me a few years to return to Israel, then back to the U.S., then finally to make aliya. No matter where I live, Shabbat remains with me.

From: Julie Klein  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 9:51 PM  
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Michael Stienhardt,

I wanted to share my fond memories of Shabbat on Livnot.  
I did Livnot in the Spring of 1986, and I can still picture singing with my group on the roof top of Livnot over looking Mount Meron.  
I came from a Conservative back ground, but did not know anything about Shabbat or Judaism when I came to Livnot 26 years ago.  
Those Shabbats on Livnot forever changed my connection to Judaism.  
I enjoyed both our Shabbat together as a group, and when we went to families in Tzfat.  
When we had Shabbat together, we cooked all of the meals ourselves.  
I will always value what that taught me about preparing for Shabbat to make it a special day of the week.  
Being a guest of different families showed me how Shabbat brings families together.  
I then wanted to have that with my own family in the future.  
I have a lot of appreciation for Livnot, because I learned what it meant to be Jewish as a priority rather than possibly intermarry, and leave it all behind as an adult.  
Thank you for this opportunity to share my Shabbat experiences at Livnot.  
Sincerely,  
Julie Klein
From: Danielle Skolnik

Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 3:45 PM

To: botzer

Subject: Shabbat in Tzfat - Danielle Skolnik's Experience

Dear Aharon,

Shabbat in Tzfat was simply magical. The air was consumed by music, laughter, and happiness. I felt a true connection to my fellow chevre, to the land of Israel, and to the city of Tzfat that I have not felt since for any other place. My experience with Livnot deepened my connection with and understanding of Judaism, and helped me realize its importance in my life. Thank you again for such an enlightening experience.

Warmly,

Danielle Skolnik

Chevre of NE8

From: Gail Finkle

Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 2:17 PM

To: Aharon Botzer

Subject: Re: Shabbat at Livnot T10

Hi Aharon,

My experience at Livnot changed my life forever. Standing on the rooftop Fri. night, overlooking Meron and singing Lecha Dodi set me on a spiritual path that I wasn't aware existed. Today, exactly 30 years later, I am a happily married religious woman with 5 kids and living in Jerusalem for the last 28 years. Thank you for opening my eyes to the wonders and truth of Judaism.

All the best,

Gail
What I enjoyed most from all of my Livnot experiences was the non-coercive nature of the program. "Take it or leave it" seemed to be the message. And "here it is for you to choose" was the mantra. So I chose.

Prior to participating on Livnot, I had had positive experiences with Shabbat, Yiddishkeit, and Judaism. Livnot was both the icing on AND the natural fruit filling in the cake.

Livnot answered questions when my childhood Conservative synagogue could not. Livnot instilled a sense of community which I lacked during my years of searching. Livnot, like the decorated delicious cake, made me realize that I can pick the parts I want and live my life Jewishly to whichever degree I choose.

I chose community, Shabbat and kashrut observance, and Israel as my home. This autumn I celebrate my "bar mitzvah" Aliyah of thirteen years.

Thank you Livnot for giving me the option to taste Shabbat and Judaism in a new light.

Rachel F. Wanetik
From: Maya Morgentaler  
Date: Thu, Nov 7, 2013 at 6:04 PM  
Subject: Shabbat letter  
To: Nina Medved <nina@livnot.org>  

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I read your article in Contact, and it really resonated with me. I grew up in a secular household, so although I have gone to friends’ Shabbat dinners, it has always been a foreign concept to me. At the same time, I am a person that thrives on making strong connections and having a sense of community. Livnot’s Shabbat experience provided both in spades.

I had been told that Shabbat in Tzfat was an amazing and unique experience, but I was not told that Livnot would make that experience even better. I was immediately struck by the sense of community at Livnot; there were at least eight Livnot alumni that come for Shabbat, in addition to the eleven of us that had just done the Tzfat L’yam hike. No one felt left out or uncomfortable. This sense of community and connection was also prevalent during the ceremony itself. Although many of Livnot’s staff are Orthodox, program participants come from all kinds of Jewish backgrounds. Yet everyone was able to be involved in every aspect of Shabbat and come out of it having had a truly meaningful experience.

I have been to Shabbats in the past, but I always felt like an outsider, socially and (for lack of a better word) religiously. At Livnot, neither was a problem. If I may quote your article, the last sentence is, “…it is at Shabbat meals…that I feel most profoundly and intimately Jewish.” Livnot is the epitome of that.

Thank you for supporting Livnot.

Sincerely,
Maya Morgentaler

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Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 5:56 PM  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Subject: Re: Livnot needs you! Program J05

When I arrived at Livnot in Jerusalem in February 1994, I knew nothing about Shabbat. I'd been to a couple meals, but I had no idea what was going on, was embarrassed to speak up and ask questions, and I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Livnot gave me the safe space to come to the table and be a part of it all. And though it's been nearly 20 years and my attendance at Shabbat meals is often sporadic, I can sit down comfortably and participate actively in the prayers and the songs because of the exposure and gift Livnot gave me.

- J.R
Shabbat at Livnot changed my life. I know it sounds like a stretch, but it's true. That time I had in Tzfat to reflect on my Judaism and what it meant to me, was the first time I felt like I belonged to something greater than myself. Religion was no longer a burden, but a blessing. Shabbat at Livnot was a time filled with spirit, song, words of wisdom and surrealism. Every time I watched the sun set over Mount Meron, I had to remind myself that this was real.

I was standing in a place with such energy and beauty, surrounded by people who were all searching to connect. It's true what they say, "All who wander are not lost." And I'm so grateful that I wandered to Livnot. It's an opportunity that everyone should be able to experience once in their lives.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Goldner

Livnot was the single most influential reason that I am still living in Israel 32 years later.

Meir Zarovsky

Hi Aaron
It's my pleasure to share my feeling about my first shabbos 31 years ago with you, Miriam and the rest of my livnot group.
How can one describe a life alternating experience? I am forever grateful to have found you and livnot.
Honestly.....at first I thought Shabbat was a REALLY hard and strange day. The teachers at livnot were amazingly caring, thoughtful, patient and loving. They gave over the beauty and meaning of shabbat very profoundly.
After several weeks the day took on a completely different meaning and I looked forward to shabbos at livnot all week. Today I can not image my life without Shabbat.
My 5th child got engaged in Jerusalem last week. 5 of my kids live in Jerusalem. It really all began in Safed with livnot and you and Miriam.
You have a HUGH mitzvah Aaron and generations to thank you.
All the best always,

Shari Kaufman
Dear Michael Stienhardt,

As my husband and I prepare for our oldest daughter’s Bat Mitzvah on January 4th, 2014, we are trying to “recreate” our Friday evening Shabbat experience from Livnot – the peaceful, mystical, serene, and beautiful moment of standing on the rooftop in Tzfat, ushering in the Sabbath Bride. How do we hope to do this? Since our initial plans of going to Israel for our daughter’s Bat Mitzvah could not be a reality, we hoped to bring the cherished feelings to Charlotte, North Carolina. We plan to lead the Kabbalat Shabbat service at our synagogue, using the melodies and tunes that we learned in Tzfat. It brings both Steve and me wonderful memories of one of the best periods our lives.

During the week, the participants in our Livnot program T35 were dispersed and worked in different areas – rebuilding the community playground, painting apartments for resettled Ethiopian Jews, cooking for our peers, etc. We all connected with different individuals and groups of people and “hung out” with them, at the exclusion of others. Shabbat was truly the one and only time that all of us could get together and relax, enjoy one another, and participate as a group praying, singing, and eating together. It gave me a feeling of belonging and being a part of a community. My favorite Shabbat experiences were when we were all together.

Livnot was a very powerful and important experience in my life, as I met my husband Steve on the program. We celebrated 19 years of marriage this past June. Another important reason Livnot was so important to me and to Steve is that it connected us to our Judaism in a manner that we never experienced prior to this; one that has remained with us. When we moved to Charlotte almost 18 years ago, we joined a Conservative Synagogue immediately and joined a young couples group. We attend synagogue regularly. Our children attend religious school. Our children attended the Charlotte Jewish Preschool. Steve is currently on our Temple’s Board of Directors. I run the local Jewish Family Services. Being a part of the Jewish community is important to both of us. Our Livnot experience truly helped influence who we are today.

Stephanie
From: Vera C. Hinsey  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 6:59 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: My Shabbat at Livnot

Shalom Michael Stienhardt,

The most beautiful moment of my trip to Israel last summer was singing Kabbalat Shabbat at the Mayanot shul in Tzfat. As part of the Livnot shul hopping on Friday night we stopped by one packed spiritual haven after another, but when I got to the tiny little Mayanot shul that was barely more than someone’s home with a sheet up for the mechitza I couldn't leave. I joined in the fray singing and singing, swaying, dancing as the men began to circle faster and faster, louder and louder. It’s like I can still hear them jumping and dancing and the prayer song builds and builds until we all start screaming, crying out our praise in a moment of pure, beautiful, soaring love.
If only every person could go to Israel and peak through the fabric of our world. Livnot made that possible for me.

Warm regards,
Vera

From: Andrew Warren  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 5:28 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Thanking Livnot

My last spring of college back in 1989 I was looking for something fun yet "real" for the summer before starting work after 4 long years of engineering. I had never been to Israel and was curious. Occasionally, I visited Hillel. There I came across a variety of glossy Israel program brochures that looked more like vacation tours for kids than anything of substance. I was about to move on and then I found one smaller simple program guide that was different. The program looked much more robust. Work projects to “rebuild” an old city "Tzfat” in the morning and political and historical classes in the afternoon. There were hikes and “shabbaton's” featured. But this long multi-week program looked entirely different.
On a scorching summer day, after the most intense bus ride climbing the hills of Tzfat, I arrived at Livnot - This was entirely different. I enjoyed greatly the morning building projects, running after lunch and then the stimulating classes and discussions with great teachers and staff. The "tiyulim" hikes were also terrific. But entirely unexpected was the Shabbat experience at Livnot and with host families in Tzfat that welcomed us and introduced many of us first-time to our beautiful spiritual heritage. It was authentic and real. Something that most of my "chevre" that summer never knew or felt associated with their experience of Judaism until them.
Livnot was probably one of the most important formative experiences of mine as a young adult. It may have been the most important factor in putting me on a path to a committed Jewish family life with four successful day school kids and commitments to the Jewish community and Israel. I will always be indebted to you and Miriam and the whole Livnot family from those early years.

Warmest wishes,
Andy Warren
Sharon, Mass.
Hello Mr. Stienhardt,

I wanted to share some thoughts with you on my personal experience with Shabbat at Tzfat. I live in New York City, on the Upper West Side, and the Jewish community here is quite visible and active. There is certainly quite a bit of activity here on Friday afternoon and evening, people rushing to finish their work and crowds heading to all the local synagogues. However, since there are also many people living here who are not Jewish or who are secular Jews, it is not a space that is completely immersed in the Shabbat experience. Even when I attend synagogue on Friday (most weeks) and Saturday (once in a while), there is still work events that require me to come in on Saturdays, a large city that cannot be navigated without a subway, and lots of life buzzing around me.

In Tzfat, (and similarly once before in Jerusalem) however, I was able to fully dip into the Shabbat experience. We finished all out shopping, chopping, baking, braiding, and table-setting in our small group. There were only 4 of us visitors at Livnot that week, the three girls who hosted us, and several visitors including Doron and his family. We enjoyed a nice jam session with a guitar our on the balcony as the sun went down and a sweet, peaceful silence set in. We visited several nearby synagogues, and as we walked the streets everyone around us was in the Shabbat spirit! Children in their best clothes, men carrying tallises, women chatting, and everyone on their way to shul.

After synagogue we had a nice, peaceful, relaxed meal, with nowhere to rush to and nothing to get done other than enjoying the evening. In the morning we got to spend the day relaxing together, sitting back and enjoying the experience. The town itself, the buildings, the cobblestone of the streets felt relaxed and immersed in rest.

As the sun set on Saturday, we did Havdallah and made our way to a nearby music venue to hear some guitars. The contrast between the week itself and Shabbat was so clear, all of a sudden everything sped up a little, and life began bustling around us again.

My Shabbat experience in Tzfat was a spectacular moment, and I hope to have the chance to feel this involved and this completely in the Shabbat moment many more times in my life.

Sincerely,
Tatyana Dvorkin

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I participated in a Birthright trip with Livnot in the late spring of 2008. More than 5 years later, I often think of my last Shabbat dinner with my fellow chèvre. Before we began to eat the feast we had prepared together, we each shared a high point of the past week. One of my roommates on the trip recalled another roommate's excitement at learning that there is a strong tradition of mindful, sustainable eating and respect for animals in traditional Judaism. It was wonderful to be reminded of one roommate's grin and shout of joy, and even more wonderful that the highlight of my other roommate's week was a new friend's happiness.

For me Livnot and Shabbat will always be abundant food, learning, and joy.
From: Shemesh, Lilia
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 9:45 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Livnot Shabbat Experience

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I have had the privilege meeting you on several occasions and thank you for your continued support of so many wonderful programs. Your dedication is inspiring.
I attended Livnot 140 about 10 years ago. I will never ever forget the Shabbat in the Old City of Jerusalem. I had been to the Kotel many times, but to see it so alive on Kabbalat Shabbat was something engrained into me for life. The dancing, singing and pure joy was contagious. It wasn't a holiday, a Bar Mitzvah, just the joy of Shabbat. It was followed by a beautiful candlelit ceremony in the Old City w/ Isralight and a long walk back to Katamon.
This Shabbat let so much of an impression on me, that when I go to Israel in two weeks I am making sure we are in Jerusalem during Shabbat JUST SO my husband, children, brother and mother can live this same experience.
Yasher Koach for all that you do.

Lilia Shemesh

Lilia Shemesh, CFP ®
Senior Financial Analyst
Assistant Vice President

From: Jerome Silverman
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 6:50 PM
To: Yonah David
Cc: Aharon Botzer
Subject: Re: quick reminder about 1000 Letters

Shabbat at Livnot showed me the power and meaning of singing together in a group.
Shabbat at Livnot opened me up to a lexicon of feelings, sensations, and visions that simply didn't exist before.
Shabbat at Livnot made the whole enterprise of Judaism seem positive, holistic, integrated.
Shabbat at Livnot illustrated the type of experience I wanted to cultivate within my own family.
Shabbat at Livnot refined my relationship to my fellow Jews and the land of Israel in a way that nothing else has since.

Jerry Silverman (T51)
It is almost midnight Thursday night and it is Livnot's "fault" that I am up this late waiting for my weekly challah to come out of the oven. Sure before Livnot I had an occasional piece of challah, from the gigantic one's you get to partake in at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah which usually the time a piece reaches your table (if it ever does) is usually stale and tasteless.

Growing up I never got to experience challah on Shabbat let alone experience Shabbat at all. It was on Livnot that I got to experience eating REAL challah and REAL Shabbat. Shortly after my program began in the summer of 93' we had a few discussions about Shabbat and what it means and how it is celebrated EVERY week. Then we got thrown in to Shabbat cooking so rather then just showing up for Shabbat like on many programs out there, Livnot actually allows you to participate and be a part of the beautiful preparations that occur weekly in honor of welcoming Shabbat. I had heard and read about people keeping Shabbat, but it seemed to be in a negative light: Can't do this can't do that!!!!!! Well Livnot's attitude was totally different and focused on all the positive things you can do on Shabbat: Spend time with friends and family, rest after a long hard week, connect with your creator, sing, dance, bang on tables, speak about the weekly Torah portion and yes eat REAL challah.

We got to see how we Jews who had never kept Shabbat (and some who had never really known what Shabbat was) could be a part of it by rolling up our sleeves and jumping right in to prepare for Shabbat. Livnot never forced us to do anything or made us feel guilty, although they did request that we keep Shabbat in the public areas out of respect for others. Once you are not forced to do something it makes doing something so much more appealing and most of us on the program without even planning to wound up keeping Shabbat even once once we were out of the public areas.

Livnot is one of the only programs that I know of that genuinely loves and respects ALL Jews regardless of how they decide which path their Judaism will take. As long as they are doing something Jewish or somehow connected to Judaism after Livnot that is a success story. Last summer my husband (who also did Livnot) and I were blessed to take our children back to the Livnot campus in Tzfat. As we danced on the Livnot roof with the current participants, the same exact Livnot roof where we experienced our first Shabbat many years before as we watched the sun go down slowly over Mt. Meron we felt an instant connection to them. I said a prayer thanking G-d for allowing me to return to the place where it all started and for allowing my children to get to experience it as well. I feel so blessed that Livnot connected me back to keeping Shabbat that I know a few generations back my ancestors kept.

Growing up as a child I looked forward to the weekend so I could watch Saturday morning cartoons and now my children look forward to waking up Friday morning to the sweet scent of fresh challah permeating throughout the house which can only mean that Shabbat is on it's way! Speaking of which gotta go take my challah out of the oven before it burns!

If you would like to experience this challah for yourself made fresh in the Nation's capital weekly please come join us some time, the more the merrier! Shabbat Shalom wherever in the world you are!

Jennifer (Herman) Stiber
I came into my Birthright experience through Livnot. I really didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that they (the organizers or propaganda people) weren't going to get in my head, but I was sure to have some interesting conversations. I did not realize that my perceptions of things was not in line with reality. I had little information to go on, so I allowed myself the opportunity to experience things.

I didn't know anything about Israel, not a whole lot about Judaism. I knew that my grandparents' families were killed during the Holocaust being they were Jewish. My father grew up being told that being Jewish was not something to advertise. So my life as a regular American was. I was never allowed to really make a big deal about being Jewish. It was especially difficult to know how to make a big deal since I really knew so little. I just knew that it was a liability somehow. There were always passing Jewish jokes flying around, I never knew why they were said nor what they meant.

It is quite difficult to sum up in words what happened during my 10 day time in Israel. I was challenged with new things, experienced beauty, had deep and meaningful conversations, and found openness. I would say that my Shabbat experiences in Israel changed me. They weren't particularly moving to me at the time. I didn't give them a second thought. I found it difficult to understand why we were doing things. I did not care for the singing nor post-meal prayers. I even wrote about this stuff during my comments sheet right before we departed.

The strangest thing was upon my return. My first Shabbat back in the States I was alone and isolated. I felt like I should be with people, doing something. I didn't want a religious experience because I was not a religious guy. Before Shabbat started, I looked up synagogues because I wanted to get connected to Jewish community. I didn't have time to look into the JCC in my area. I walked 3 miles to a reform synagogue in the sweltering heat of the Washington, DC summer. I walked in and realized it was the same thing I grew up with. I peaked my head in and turned around and walked home. I passed by a home with Shabbat candles in the window. I felt so lonely. I really wanted to knock on the door, but I just kept walking back home.

I returned home, lit a candle I had in my house and cracked open a bottle of wine. That was the beginning of my first back-home Shabbat experience.

Despite my disappointment, I longed for something more real, like I experienced back in Israel with Yifat, Shachar, and Yahonatan. They were open, engaging, caring. So two weeks later, I found myself going the complete opposite direction with my religious try-out. I looked up orthodox synagogues in the area. I found something called Chabad Lubavitch. It was strange name. I had heard of it before, but didn't even realize that it was Jewish. I called them up and before I knew I was scheduled for services and was invited to a Shabbat dinner.

That was the beginning of my journey. After I finished my PhD, I took a sabbatical to do Jewish studies at Shapell's Yeshiva in Jerusalem. Nine years later I am still on the journey. My wife and 3 children are with me. My children attend Jewish schools. My wife and I are actively involved in our synagogue. Our lives revolve around Judaism. My son frequently asks me when we are going to visit Israel. So, we hope to come by and show him where things began. It will be part of his journey.

I am sincerely grateful to Livnot and Birthright. It is extremely difficult to ever fully thank all the people who have allowed me to gain a new perspective on my life. I cannot imagine where and how I would be without my experience for 10 days.

-Jonathan Lefman
From: elayne zf
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 6:15 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: A Livnot Shabbat

A Livnot Shabbat
A life altering experience
An uplifting gathering of soul searching singing
Banging neguns with force and release
A Nourishing and tasty feast created by all for all
A welcoming portal of rest and relaxation
A time of pure wonder
To discover
To delight
A Livnot Shabbat
Shalom

From: Mandy Hacker
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 6:41 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,
Experiencing the true beauty of Shabbat with my recently met but eternally treasured Livnot family was one of the key moments that saved my neshamah. I came into Livnot with little understanding of Judaism, and left with a strong desire to learn more about what it really means to be a Jew. I have been heavily involved in the Jewish community ever since, and I can only hope to experience a Shabbat with Livnot again some time in the future.
Shalom,
Mandy Hacker

From: Robin MohilNer
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 5:54 AM
To: Nili Arbel
Cc: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: Hi chevre - helping Livnot out: please write short letter about your Shabbat at Livnot
I speak about my experience in Israel with Livnot whenever people bring up Israel.
People ask me about all of the places and sites that I saw and what it was like. I realize that trying to describe Israel is like trying to describe the ocean to people.
Instead, I tell people of the moment I felt truly connected to Israel.
It was sunset, Shabbat was beginning. We were in Efrat. I stood on a vibrant green grass covered hill. In front of me were hills and waves of sand. I'd never seen desert like that before. Coming out of the desert, rising up on my left in the distance, was Jerusalem...it truly was the city of Gold. In the distance on my right was Bethlehem. And there I stood in the middle of this vast desert on the greenest moist grass in awe of it all.
I closed my eyes. I felt the wind sweep through my hair and fingers and push against my body. I could not be moved or pushed. I felt as though I had roots growing from my feet deep into the land.
It was in that moment that I knew I belonged to Israel. Israel was home.
From: Lauren Reinfeld  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 2:04 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

I spent my first Shabbat in Tsfat with Livnot in August of 2012. I had celebrated Shabbat many times before, but never like this. This Shabbat was different - not because of the hundreds of people singing and dancing as a family, but because I had never seen so many people *celebrating* Shabbat. I had always observed the Sabbath, but the people of Tsfat celebrate a holiday every week. The pride of being Jewish was contagious on that Friday evening and is something that has stayed with me for over a year. Since this visit to Tsfat, I have been back 3 times and I know there will be many more.

Thank you,
LR

From: Cunningham, Jeffrey J.  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 6:22 PM  
To: 'botzer@livnot.org'  
Subject: Shabbat At Livnot

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

Thank you. The Birthright program was an amazing and life changing experience for me. I did my Birthright trip with Israel Experts (which was incredible) but was able to also be a madrich for a Livnot Birthright trip and take advantage of Livnot’s 5-month program. After reading your article, “Shabbat is our Birthright,” I wanted to specifically plug shabbat at Livnot. Livnot’s shabbat experience is truly a sanctuary of commonality. Shabbat at Livnot built on the entire Birthright experience and directly changed the way I practice Judaism and live my life. My wife and I (we met at Livnot) continue the Livnot shabbat experience in our home every week and it has become such an important and meaningful part of our lives. Thank you for all of your work and generosity and thank you for helping me experience shabbat, Livnot and Israel.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey Cunningham
Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot was my window to the beautiful gift I have. It was not theoretical. It was experiential and transformative. We prepped physically. Each shabbos was planned and prepared for by a group of chevra. The menu, the shopping, the cooking, and the setting the table validated the importance of the coming shabbos. Friday afternoon the whole campus changed to prepping for shabbos mode. We were all cleaning, showering strategically to get some hot water, dressing in our best, slowing down, relaxing, and bonding in this new revelation. That preparation was just a clue. On Shabbos we entered a new realm that had been hidden until then. Some shabboses were spent together at Livnot with the synergy of a group tasting something new and wonderful together. Some were spent with local families. I had never seen a family sing together, tell stories, and sit together because they wanted to. That was about thirty years ago.

Now it's my family that joins at the shabbos table. My kids and grandkids. I could not have foreseen this transformation when I was at Livnot. But I knew that I would not ever again have a boyfriend that was not Jewish. I knew that I would have a Jewish home and join forces with a Jewish community somewhere.

I met a caring Israeli from an Afghani family. We planned a life together with shabbos and mitzvot. All of our children attended Jewish yeshivas. Our three married children are establishing homes dedicated to a Torah way of life. We have instilled a goal of independence in our children - they and their spouses are all at some stage of their professional lives. Each of these families is involved in reaching out to others in their respective communities with acts of kindness and bonding.

How I wish my secular family would share these shabbos' with us. We have found it produces tension and we spend other times together. I believe it is tragic that we part ways for shabbos. I fervently hope that we can share the magic of shabbos together.

Best,
Judy Naamat, Esq.

From: Yonatan Hirsch
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 6:45 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Livnot letter

Shabbat at Livnot lit up my world in ways I never thought Shabbat could. The atmosphere created there was a turning point for my development as a person and my curiosity as a Jew. It is something which I will never forget.

Jon, Philadelphia
Dear Michael,

I came to Israel a month before my 30th birthday knowing that I needed to go someday, but not really understanding why. My sister had been urging me for years. I found Livnot because it seemed a good mix of hiking, community building and Judaism, rather than an adventure trip, a kibbutz or a yeshiva. I could not have imagined at that time what a powerful influence Livnot has been on my life. There is a lot to share, but I will limit this note to my experience with Shabbat at Livnot.

Livnot helped me to understand Shabbat. Some people see it as a religious commandment, but I have come to understand its power in building family and community - which to me is what Judaism is all about. I do not follow the rules of kashrut or wear a kippa, because to me those are commandments from Hashem - something I do not subscribe to. I probably never will. But from sundown on the first Friday evening I spent in Israel, I understood. I understood the power of Jews in a family and in a community coming together to celebrate what Jews have been doing for millennia - lighting candles and blessing the bread and wine, even if it meant a risk of persecution and possibly death. I had attended Shabbat dinners in the US, but none with the energy and ruach of a Livnot Shabbat. The nigguns, the songs, the lessons, the excitement, the joy - all genuine. And then there was Shabbat day - being welcomed into the home of an orthodox family to share their time together. I saw it as a special time for all the children (and there were usually quite a few) to put away their cell phones and video games and spend quality time with their siblings, parents and guests - reading, singing, playing, praying. This is what I felt was the true meaning of Shabbat - an uncluttered day to spend with the family and guests from the community.

Michael, thank you for your continued support to Livnot - an amazing program that has touched my life and many many others and gave us an understanding of what it is to be Jewish. Each chevre leaves with his or her own lesson and understanding, but the common theme is that Judaism is important in our lives. I would not have this without the special Livnot experience.

Larry Rosenthal
T60, T61 (Madrich), J38 (Madrich)
From: Rachelle Butt  
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 5:29 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours  

Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot is an experience and a feeling that is hard to describe in words but I'll give it a try. For me, Shabbat was always a part of my life, but something about standing on the balcony of the Tzfat campus, with the beautiful sunset and view of the mountain across the way, welcoming Shabbat by singing the prayers of Kabbalat Shabbat, and being surrounded by amazing people including participants, Livnot staff, B'not Sherut, and anyone else who may have stopped by for Shabbat, changed my life for the better. My Livnot experience in 2009, reminded me to always allow Shabbat in my life and I left that 2 week program with so many friends in NYC who all still come together for Shabbat dinners at each of our homes whenever we can. Another meaningful aspect of Shabbat at Livnot for me was seeing people on the Livnot program reconnect to Judaism in such a positive way as many of them had grown up with negative experiences in ritzy synagogues. Now they found a way to enjoy Judaism and Shabbat and that was beautiful for me to be a part of. When I returned to Israel for a long-term program, I was honored to bring a group of people to Livnot for a MASA Shabbaton and watch them experience the magic I had experienced when I first came to Livnot. Later, when my mother visited Israel for the first time, I chose Livnot as our location for Shabbat rather than any other place in the country because I wanted her to experience what I had experienced there.

Sincerely,

Rachelle Butt

From: Matthew Ackerman  
Date: Tue, Nov 5, 2013 at 5:02 PM  
Subject: Shabbat  
To: Aharon Botzer <botzer@livnot.org>

Dear Michael,

Despite years of Hebrew school education, a bar mitzvah, and years of Jewish summer camp, I did not know the first thing about what Shabbat really was and could be before I spent two with Livnot on my first trip to Israel with Birthright ten years ago. For years now I have observed Shabbat with my family, and look forward to the peace and meaning it gives to every week. Without Livnot, I doubt that would be the case. Thank you for making that experience possible for me. I am forever in debt to both you and Livnot.

All the best,
Matthew Ackerman
Dear Michael!

Having spent 4 weeks this past June in Israel with Livnot, I have to say it, was an unforgettable experience! Since going on a birthright trip in 2011, I knew I would find myself back in Israel, but never knew how or when. I was feeling a bit empty inside, so I went to Rabbi Google and entered "youth volunteer programs in Israel" and Livnot was one of the first programs to come up. I pondered some different programs, but I immediately realized that Livnot was the only choice!

Birthright planted the seed and Livnot turned it into an olive tree. Birthright was like getting all the pieces to an orange and then Livnot turned those pieces into an orange and showed me how to make orange juice!

From watching the sun set on Mount Meron every night to hikes to learning how to forget about myself and join with everyone as a community, it was all incredible! One of the key things about Livnot is that the "staff" doesn't babysit you or treat you like a kid, you are all treated with respect and valued for the unique person that you are. I was taught, not by words, but truly by example. The folks at Livnot are really living it!

Since Livnot, I have been going to Shul every week for Shabbat, something which I had never done in my life. I don't go because somebody said," Go to Shul every week!" I go because I want to stay connected to my Jewish roots and try to always remember everything I learned and experienced at Livnot!

Lastly, I feel like I am now part of the Livnot family. No matter what happens in my life, I know they will be there to encourage me and point me in the right direction!

Ike
From: David Karen  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 2:05 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: My Shabbat Experience at Livnot

Aharon,

I hope all is well with you, your family and the entire Livnot community.

I am reaching out to give you a quick reminder and acknowledgement that the Livnot program has had a significant impact in my life. I was a member of Livnot 35 way back in 1992 so over 21 years ago. I would at the time consider myself to be a somewhat reformed Jew with little ever meaningful Shabbat experiences. The power and closeness of having over 10 Shabbats at Livnot was incredible. Since I left Livnot in many ways I have gone on to have a Jewish family with our first Bar Mitzvah in Israel and now having the second one this Saturday night after a Havdallah service. My wife and I try to incorporate Shabbat every week into our lives and instill the values to our children. I am not sure if any if this would have been the case without Livnot.

Lastly I would add the challenges facing the secular Jewish community is as great as ever especially with the world of technology we all have at our disposals. Any meaningful way to further embrace more Livnot’s to today’s youth can only enhance a stronger Jewish community going forward.

Regards,

David Jacob

From: Maya Rosenbloom  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 7:05 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

Celebrating shabbat at livnot was very powerful! It was so meaningful to welcome shabbat through song and dance with new friends that I had laughed with, hiked with, and explored Judaism with. As we sang lecha dodi while watching the sun sink behind the mountains, all I could think was that I had truly found a home in Israel

Maya Rosenbloom
Dear Michael,

When I think about Livnot, I'm thinking about Home. I'm thinking about that Jewish space which fed me, loved me, engaged with me, treated me with respect. My Livnot story started about a year before I first stepped on the Livnot campus. A good friend of mine, Simone, kept on bringing up the 'heavenly place' she spent some of her time at over the summer. I guess I thought 'that sounds nice...' But I didn't take her seriously. How can you? When someone tells you about such a 'Disney make believe fairy world of love and peace', you don't take them seriously, and presume there were illegal substances involved.

My plans for that coming summer, was to take up a research position for a few months at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. However, I had a 3 week gap before I started work. After one week of feeling totally 'lost' in Israel I found myself in Tzfat, and then standing on the door steps of Livnot.

I'm not going to go into too much detail about how Livnot has changed my life. I don't think this email will extend that far anyway. But I will tell you this. Every Friday night, I think about the warm, family atmosphere surrounded by food everyone had helped cook with love. Any time I realise I'm having a bad day, I think of the Livnot lounge, Surrounded by friends - the kind you make in a week but last a lifetime. I think of the songs we sung walking from synagogue to synagogue on Friday night, arm in arm with my new friends. And I remember that Livnot will still be there, my Jewish home in the whole world, my only home, waiting for me, when I'm ready to go back.

Michael, In your article 'Shabbat is our Birthright' you said it is at the Shabbat table you feel most profoundly Jewish. After Livnot I know what that feels like, and I never want to forget it. Simple.

On a final note, thank you for everything you have done. Its a rare person who can change one life, but even rarer to have changed thousands of lives and not to have ever met them.

Hope you have a great week, and if not, It's okay...Shabbat is at the end waiting for you....

Kind Regards,
Miriam Rose
London, UK. Livnot July 2013 Chevre
From: Molly's Email
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 5:34 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

My husband and I met on Livnot more than 20 years ago. The program was instrumental in securing our connection to Judaism and to the Jewish community worldwide.

A vital part of the Livnot program is the Shabbat experience. Being together as a group, praying together, eating together and sharing our stories from the week was a new experience for us, and one that proved to be quite powerful and memorable.

After reading your article about Shabbat, I wholeheartedly agree that if the Shabbat experience could be replicated with birthright participants when they return, it could be a natural extension of their birthright experience.

The Jewish people were given the gift of Shabbat, and in my opinion, Livnot allows its participants to fully experience the joy and beauty of Shabbat as it should be.

Shalom,
Molly Jalenak Wexler

From: Aaron
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 7:53 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Letter about Shabbat

Shabbat is a unique and spiritual experience at livnot especially in the city of tzfat. Eating delicious food that we all prepared, conversing, and drinking. What more can you ask for? It's an amazing experience that will stick with me for the rest of my life and now I make sure to celebrate Shabbat every week.

Aaron Glance
I went on Livnot 235 in the Summer of 2009. I ended up staying in Israel for two months afterwards, and had an amazing experience. Shortly after returning to NY, I wrote a lot about my time in Israel. Tzfat in particular, the home of Livnot, was one of the most meaningful places of my journey:

On Birthright there are two Shabbats with Livnot, and they are both run basically the same, though the first is in Jerusalem and the second in Tzfat. One touchstone is that on Friday evening, the group is broken down into four smaller groups, one of which prepares something called “Words of Wisdom” in which, throughout the Shabbat weekend, three or four people will stand up in front of the group and read something they’ve written about a personal experience that ties in with what we are learning. A few weeks after Birthright ended, my friend Kate and I made our way back to Tzfat for Shabbat. Because we were experiencing a Livnot Shabbat, we did words of wisdom that weekend, too, and Shira, one of my b’not sherut, convinced me to do one.

It was strange doing words of wisdom without my Livnoters. But a chevre is a chevre, and I knew I was among chevre being with Livnot. I also had Shira and Tehila, my other b’not sherut, as well as Kate and Phil, another friend from Birthright. I also had Michael, our tour leader, which was extremely comforting. And there were new chevre to be made, as well.

My theme, in the spirit of Kate’s and my travels, was “say yes”. I explained how after Birthright, Kate and I had traveled for ten days with another chevre, David, and didn’t really have a plan. That if we had had one, we would have had a good time, no question, but we wouldn’t have been as open to the immediacy of Israel, and each subsequent experience, and we wouldn’t have gotten to know each other as well as we did, or at least in the depth with which we did. I referenced a passage from the Bible, where it says that Adam and Eve’s sin is not the eating of the apple, but the presumption of “knowing” one another.

“Knowing” in the biblical sense generally means having sex with, but taken another way, the way we use it colloquially, it is a sin to claim to “know” anything, because then you close yourself off to actually learning about it. And by opening ourselves up, and acknowledging what little we knew, Kate, David and I had a series of incredible adventures.

Tzfat being one of them for Kate and me. When we pulled into the bus station, even though it had been several weeks at that point, we knew how to walk to get to our campus. There is something really comforting in having a home away from home, a place small and cozy enough that you feel welcome and like you know your way around, no matter how long it’s been. On the top floor of the main building is a balcony, and stepping out onto it, you look out at the mountains of Tzfat, something I am able to do over and over in my mind at this point, but which was nice to be able to do in person again, to feel that satisfied little lift in my heart at the return of a homecoming.
Dear Michael,

I wanted to write to you about my Shabbat experience at Livnot back in 1998, when I came to Israel for the first time with Birthright. I had no real connection to Israel at the time and was living in Memphis, TN as a secular Jew that maybe did Passover dinner and occasionally went to services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (mostly dated non-Jewish women as well). I worked out at the JCC in Memphis and one day the Jewish Federation in Memphis was there and I filled out my information with no real expectations of anything. About 6 months later, I received an email about going to Israel for three weeks very inexpressively and thought it might be an interesting trip (never heard of Livnot or Birthright).

I went to Livnot with no expectations at all. The experience was amazing and life changing and it mostly stemmed from experiencing my first Shabbat of my life. The Shabbat that really changed the way I view Judaism and family happened at a Shabbat in Tzvat. We had some time to think before dinner and I went outside to enjoy the beautiful night and somehow started thinking of my father (he passed just after my Bar Mitzvah and haven’t really thought about him for years). I really connected with him that evening and felt his presence and guidance (I was never a very spiritual person, so this was extremely weird to me). I then enjoyed a very moving Shabbat with the family of Michael Even-Esh and the Chevre. After dinner, I was sitting on the floor thinking of my father again with my eyes closed. One of the female Chevre was chasing Michael’s little boy around the house and as I was thinking of my father, he came running to me to hide from this person and dug himself into me to hide. At that moment, I knew that I needed to marry a Jewish woman and bring Shabbat into my household going forward.

When returning to the United States, I moved to New York and took part in many outreach programs, took Hebrew reading and Torah classes, and had Shabbat dinners with numerous families in NYC. I did meet my Jewish wife at Hineni with Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis and was married by an Orthodox Rabbi (who started one of the outreach programs I attended regularly). Fifteen years later, I am married to a wonderful Jewish woman and have three children (ages 10, 7, and 5) that know and experience Shabbat dinner every Friday evening in Southeast Florida. They are all now in Hebrew school at the local Chabad and enjoy it. We also celebrate the holidays much more than my wife and I grew up with, so our children know the meaning and significance of the Jewish holidays. We are by no means religious, but we are light years ahead of our upbringing and what I was moving towards 15 years ago. I owe it all to Livnot and the wonderful people there and the Shabbat experience that I had in Tzvat. That was one of the most memorable and special times in my entire life.

Thank you,

Steven Brown
Dear Michael,

Thank you for the gift of Birthright that brought me to Eretz Yisrael, connected me to it, and inspired my extended return. Upon returning, I longed to connect Israel to my Jewish identity. I was lucky—or blessed—enough to find Livnot. When I arrived at Livnot in Tzfat, I was immediately greeted genuinely and immersed in the Livnot community by helping cook Shabbat dinner. Because I felt so welcomed, I was comfortable enough to explore new Jewish concepts and practices as the week went on, such as dancing in shul on Simchas Torah and singing Jewish/Israeli songs through the streets at any time our hearts desired.

Livnot exposed and involved us in a variety of meaningful conversations prepared by guest speakers, modrechim, and even our own participants. Each conversation was so thought provoking and relatable that we found ourselves discussing such things during meals, on hikes, and during downtime on our "family room" couches.

I feel Livnot gave me tangible tools to take away into my life in Israel and to take the next step down my Jewish path. I feel connected every time I meet up with past chevre to have "Livnot-style" Shabbat. I feel fulfilled when I think of all the new perspectives I gained on Jewish concepts. I feel inspired to continue learning, questioning, and experiencing Judaism in all forms, and thanks to Livnot I have had the ability to do just that.

-Megan Garrett,
Livnot Sukkot and Hanukkah 2013

Dear Michael-

I went on Livnot almost 7 years ago now, in January of 2007. It was an inflection point in my life, really. I wrote a few missives home, and thanks to the ever-expanding storage space of Gmail, I've been able to find those missives, and I would like to share with you something I wrote about the second night of our trip:

That night we split into groups to prepare for Shabbat; some people made a skit, some hashed out discussion topics, and I and a bunch of others went along with a wonderful guy called Pesach to practice some songs to sing. It was late, we were all tired, but once the music began, it literally lifted us to new heights. We learned a slew of songs, sang them with joy and passion, and finally, it was almost 12 and we all decided to go to sleep. We headed up to the 6th floor, where all our rooms are, and there were some people still up and around. Before we knew what was happening, we'd formed an impromptu circle of singing, dancing, and joy. None of us should have had any energy left at all, but we belted out our new songs until 1:30 in the morning and slept like logs.

I still hear those songs running in my head.

Jason
Dear Michael,

I'm French, quite religious, and this last summer, Livnot wasn't the first Jewish organization experience I did (in and out of Israel). But it was with no doubt the best one. I enjoyed every day over there, and the three Shabbatot I spent in Tzfat were simply amazing. Tzat is the best city I have been in to spend a real Shabbat, to rest and to see the city resting with you. Even though I like Shabbat in France, New York, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and so forth, there is no possible comparison with what Livnot offered us: prepare Shabbat together, like real family, pray in different shules to do service, and enjoy the meal we cooked for a well-deserved rest. But not just a meal. A meal that means friends, strangers, Kiddush, nice shabbatical songs, Dvar Torah, of course food... and all of this in front of the wonderful view over Har Hameron and the magic starry sky of Tzfat. Well so far, it's just an ordinary Shabbat at Livnot. I won't forget those good memories, and I think everyone should try Livnot at least for that, with the risk to be tempted to stay the whole week until the next Shabbat. Sorry for my English mistakes, I am still learning. As you say, excuse my french.

Best regards,
Josef Bismuth

From: Sogol Somekh
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 5:05 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

I will never forget the shabbat that I experienced with Livnot in the Summer of 2010. Some of the other folks had already been there for a few days but I was welcomed in like a member of the family. We laughed, danced, and shared personal stories and connected on a spiritual level I did not know I had. Thank you so much for making Livnot the amazing place it is and for working so hard to keep it going. I look forward to coming back one day!

Best,

Sogol Somekh
New York, NY
November 5, 2013
From: Michael Alexander  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 5:25 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,
Livnot gave me the confidence to really incorporate Judaism into my life. I realized the importance of Shabbat and I now value taking time to reflect and have Shabbat meal. After my livnot experience I was inspired to return to Israel for a year and taught English to children in Petah Tikvah. I am now very active in the Jewish community in Philadelphia and my local synagogue and I work for State Representative in Pennsylvania.

Dear Michael,
Shalom! I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for enriching my life. I never had an opportunity to visit Israel until I participated on a Birthright Israel Hillel trip as a college freshman. That amazing experience inspired me to return to Israel after graduating college. My Jewish journey then continued when I discovered Livnot U’Lehibanot and eventually made Aliyah.

Over the years, I’ve had memorable Shabbat celebrations, but nothing holds a candle to a Livnot Shabbat experience!
As a past participant of the Galilee Fellowship program, and a Livnot Intern the following year, I have enjoyed many Shabbat celebrations at Livnot. On Friday evenings, the Livnot family lovingly welcomes Shabbat with so much warmth and enthusiasm.

One unforgettable Shabbat, our evening began on the famous balcony overlooking the majestic mountains of Tzfat, and witnessing an unbelievably gorgeous sunset. As we gathered closely together, singing, swaying and rejoicing in the special moment, I couldn’t help but smile as I saw all the beautiful people around me. Everyone was freshly showered, wearing their finest clothing, and best perfume and cologne to greet Shabbat. We sang and danced until the sun went down. After we said the Shabbat prayers, we went shul hopping together, which allowed us to pray with the Tzfat locals and see how our neighbors celebrate the holiday.

After returning to the Livnot campus from shul, we joined together for a terrific Shabbat feast which we had cooked earlier that day. The delicious challah we made from scratch, the scrumptious meal we shared, and the deep sense of spirituality and community, strengthened our bonds with each other and with the Jewish People. During dinner, the participants energetically spoke about how thankful they were to experience such a unique and amazing Shabbat, and I remember feeling the exact same way.

A Shabbat experience at Livnot truly transforms lives and deepens a life-long commitment to Jewish life and learning.
Have a healthy and happy Chanukah!

Sincerely,
Keren Tamara Gordon  
Livnot Alum, August 2012  
Livnot Intern, August 2013
Dear Michael,

I was 27 year old when I experienced my first taste of Shabbat as a participant on the Livnot u'Lehibanot Taglit-Birthright trip in the summer of 2005. It was my last window of opportunity to attend, as I was at the oldest cut-off age. I just wanted a free trip to a new country, another stamp amongst other countries’ stamps in my passport, and to have some fun and meet cute girls. My Jewish identity, the depth of our collective national history over millennia, and the beauty of Shabbat was far off my radar. I was intent on marrying my Catholic Colombian/Peruvian fiancé and to continue to be a nightclub DJ on Friday nights as I had been doing for almost ten years before my trip.

Long story short - God must have had something else in kind for me because the trip that I thought would be a non stop party time was infused with non stop depth, beauty and inspiration. My first Shabbat experience ever set the tone for what is now my eighth year of wing Shomer Shabbat, and I haven't forgotten it until this day.

We worked together and helped prepared food and the ambiance in advance. We brought in Shabbat with song, dance and joy on the balcony of the Livnot campus in Tzfat as the sun set over the mountains of Lebanon. We ate a festive meal and shared stories of inspiration and meaning. We spent Saturday morning and afternoon engaged in interesting, thought provoking, interactive lectures meeting leaders and advocates of Israel and the Jewish people. We split into small groups and sat in peace and I had an interesting conversation with Meir about what being Jewish and what Israel has meant to us in our lives growing up. Finally, we concluded Shabbat with a heartfelt, soulful musical experience led by Livnot's incredible staff, that brought me to overwhelming tears of joy and beauty.

Since my birthright Livnot trip I've changed and grown tremendously as a Jew and advocate for Israel and our people. I've returned to Israel seven times (!!) since then, studying in several yeshivas and traveling through our beautiful Land. I've even met a beautiful Brazilian Jewish girl that made Aliyah, the same summer as my trip, and we eventually got married and had a beautiful daughter that we named Leah Simcha, after the simcha that I learned is of utmost importance to feel while in service to God, our people, our families, our community, and our Land. I tasted that simcha for the first time while dancing on the balcony bringing in Shabbat in Tzfat with Livnot. Now that simcha lives on through a beautiful little Jewish girl as the embodiment of future of our Nation.

Over the years I've given back as a leader and mentor for other young Jewish (and non-Jewish) people in NYC as a public High School teacher and co-founder and administrator for various kiruv projects.

I owe everything to you, Michael, to Livnot, and to Hashem for my blessings I've received so far. I hope that this message reaches you and inspires you to continue to collaborate with Livnot over the upcoming years, so that many, many more young Jewish people like myself can have the opportunity that I did! Thank you!

Roy Baron
From: Henry, Shelley  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 5:43 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

Shabbat in Tzvat, during my time at Livnot U'Lehbanot, was one of the most powerful, impacting experiences of my youth. It still lives with me and affects my life now, 26 years later! The joy and spirit of that experience will never be forgotten. Though I for the most part live a non observant life, I do honor Shabbat with the song and spirit that I learned so deeply and beautifully at Livnot. I am hoping that I can persuade my 21 year old daughter to go to Livnot this summer as she is thinking about going to Israel! I am so overwhelmingly happy that Livnot lives on and am so grateful for my time there! A million thanks to Aharon Botzer, Gabi and Tovah Leah Nachmani, my madricha, Julie, and all the people who make Livnot what it is and who make it possible!

Shelley Jacobs

From: Sarah Kanigsberg  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 6:32 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,

Since 2005, every time I have been asked to think back to a memorable experience, Jewish or not, my mind immediately turns to the times singing and looking out over the mountains of Tzfat welcoming in Shabbat on the mirpeset on the Livnot campus. I hear Yeho singing in my mind, I feel my friend's arm around my shoulder and the warm winds coming in from the direction of the sunset. I carry these sweet sounds, feelings and memories with me every Shabbat. The experience of bringing in Shabbat from the rooftop of Tzfat will forever have a powerful imprint on my soul.

Sarah Kanigsberg Livnot 169
From: Louma Levin  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 8:41 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot puts theory into practice. From the first moments when the sun disappeared behind Mt Meron there was awe, joy, reflection, kindness and holiness amongst us. Singing, dancing, sharing and praying, it felt like the echo and the epitome of all the beautiful, meaningful moments we had experienced during the week. Shabbat was always anticipated and then missed, we all realized how precious it is for each and every Jew. Livnot gave us the ability to give ourselves the gift of Shabbat and for that I am forever grateful.

Louma Levin chevre July 2013

From: jane goldberg  
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 8:07 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

When I applied to Livnot, I actually didn't think I would be accepted. I didn't think I had a limited Jewish background. I grew up in a town with a big JCC, one of each of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox temples. I went to Hebrew School and had a Bat Mitzvah. I also went to a Jewish sleepaway camp from age 7-15 for 2 months every summer. I was a counselor at another camp the summer I was 19. But, when I arrived in Tzfat for my 3-month Livnot program in the Summer of 1995, it opened up a whole new Jewish world to me. I learned Judaism from a more philosophical perspective. I learned the WHY to so many of the things Jews do or think. I also was allowed the space to widen my mind and question - and learned that was OK. I also learned expand my Judaism to actual action - whether it be hiking and enjoying nature or the community service projects we did in the neighborhood. Most importantly, I learned the joy and rhythm of LIVING Judaism week in and week out. I learned the beauty of slowing down for Shabbat. And, of course, even after years of summer camp, I learned more directly what it was like to live communally, cook communally and learn communally. Please continue the great work you and Livnot are doing together!
Dear Michael,

I am honored to have the opportunity to tell you about my Shabbatot spent at Livnot. My first shabbat at Livnot was a transformative, life changing 24 hours. Throughout my childhood I attended a reform synagogue in my hometown. I had a bat mitzvah and even worked at the synagogue as a teacher's assistance. I attended Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. However, as far as I was concerned, I had no personal connection to Judaism, nor was I aware that it was possible to have an inner connection to a higher power, a religion, or a day.

Based on the five days I spent at Livnot leading up to Shabbat, I knew Shabbat would be an eye opening, learning experience, especially after witnessing all of the preparations! I instinctively let out a deep exhale as I stood on the balcony of Livnot to greet Shabbat, singing and dancing and metaphysically embracing the sunset, unaware of the wave of serenity that was about to wash over me. Our meal was filled with laughter and song, blessings and toasts. I was able to share my words of wisdom from the week, exploring the idea of the openness of a broken heart, how sometimes it is okay for the heart to have a fissure because it allows for space to be filled.

The following morning was exuberant. It snowed! It was the first time Tzfat had seen snow in five years. All through the white washed alleys youngsters and families were dancing and singing for joy. I attended a warm lunch at the house of an artist who lives in Tzfat. It was a delightful meal, filled with different people from around the world. After lunch, a friend and I pulled up two chairs next to the heater in Livnot, facing a window that looks out at the valley below. We talked and laughed, lost track of time, and before we knew it three hour had passed!

It was not until the third meal on Saturday evening that I became aware of how I was feeling. I realized I was not worried or tense, anxious or trembling, dark or shut down. In fact, I realized that for the first time since my father passed away five years prior, I felt completely calm. I was present and alert, open and ready to listen to anything anyone had to say, for surely they had something to contribute and I had something to learn from them. I looked around the room at all of the new faces I had learned to love over the past week and noticed how much I trusted them and felt completely at ease. I knew that from then on Livnot would be a second home, a place where I could return and feel accepted no matter what. Moreover, I knew intrinsically that Shabbat took hold of my heart and that it was something that I would continue to learn about and include in my life forever.

My time at Livnot inspired me to continue my journey in Israel. Last year, I was enrolled in the Israel Teaching Fellows program through Masa. I lived in Be'er Sheva and taught English in a local elementary school for ten months. One month ago I made Aliyah. I am living on a farm and in a few weeks I will begin my ulpan program at a kibbutz in the north. I return to Livnot for Shabbatot and holidays, which is always a confirming reminder of the calmness that exists in Shabbat and in Tzfat, at Livnot. All in all, I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for Livnot.

Warmly,
Jess Brecker
Dear Michael,

Every Shabbat in Israel was special, but the last Shabbat at Livnot was unforgettable. Everything came together this time; the sunset views of Tzfat and the Golan Heights, the culmination of a journey. Not to mention that this weekend represented not only another Shabbat, but also Shavuot…

…Shabbat is more than just a day of the week. The Jewish holy day spanning sunset-to-sunset Friday to Saturday is a time for reflection, family, celebration and preparation for the week ahead. The Jewish calendar has many holy days, yet Shabbat is the holiest of days, and we are lucky enough to experience it every week. The Sabbath allows us time to answer the question “What would I be like if I were completely in touch with the world?” In this ultimate expression of Jewish spirituality, we attempt to transcend our selfish nature and fully get in touch with our own souls and connect with the Earth. The Shema, the central Jewish prayer, expresses our oneness with God and the universe.

As someone who has always been attracted to Eastern philosophy and religions, I never thought that my own dogmatic heritage had much to offer. But after nearly three weeks in Israel, I finally have a relationship with Judaism that spans beyond Hebrew School and family gatherings. Christianity has the mass appeal (who can resist the charm of Christmas? Not this girl, that’s for sure), Islam has the political intrigue, and Eastern religions have that spiritual allure. But Judaism has something else entirely, something stronger. We have a long standing history of struggles, resilience and triumph. WE are a people who, all things considered, should not exist today. We are strong, we thrive in our rich traditions and we are united in our culture. A culture that spans beyond outdated Biblical stories and dogmatic practices.

We are spiritual, vibrant and more alive than ever. And now we have a homeland. You don’t have to have a religious epiphany or start going to synagogue every weekend. All you have to do is remember. We are lucky enough to be a part of a strong chain, thousands of years old. We get to tell of this chain as our own. It is our birth right.

here is another piece I wrote about Livnot......

Whether singing, cooking or weeding, the power of our little community here at Livnot is undeniable. Together we can clean up a whole mountainside in one morning, but separately we could only manage a small plot. Together we can cheer up a nursing home of aging Tzfat residents, but individually our presence only reaches few. We live together, we cook together, we eat together, we go out into the community together, we learn together and, most importantly, we grow together. Whether hiking the Syrian border or giving thanks for the people in our lives while doing “l’chayims” after Shabbat dinner, we’re experiencing it together.
Living in Tzfat constantly reinforces the simple joy in focusing on a task. In modern society, it's rare NOT to be multitasking at any given moment; whether it's studying for two tests in one evening or just walking down the street while texting. Here we focus. For an afternoon, your most important duty may be cleaning the dishes. And that's ok. You are the dish cleaner of the world! Silly as it sounds, using all your energy and focus to clean dishes, or weed plants, or chop vegetables or sing a song is extremely satisfying as it brings peace of mind. We ought to focus more on the individual tasks.

“Deep inside my heart I've got this everlasting light, It's shining like the sun, it radiates on everyone. And the more that I give, The more I've got to give. It’s the way that I live, It's what I’m living for”

Corny as it sounds, this is the song of Livnot. It's a really beautiful message. Nothing could be more important than giving your heart endlessly. As a girl who makes a bad habit of falling in love with most everything and every person she encounters, I've often felt that I've scattered my heart in too many places around the world. But maybe that's an okay way to live. Everyone here lives with a completely open heart. The people who run Livnot believe in giving of themselves to teach others, and they sure walk the talk. It's a beautiful example to follow.

From: Lara
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 8:46 PM
To: Aharon Botzer
Subject: Re: Baby girl!

Dear Michael -
I've hesitated the last couple days to write this letter because there are truly no words to describe my experiences with Livnot, especially during Shabbat in Tzfat. I was fortunate enough to join Livnot for one of their last Birthright trips. I chose Livnot in 2008 because they emphasized hiking and an extra few days in Tzfat. As expected, the hikes were amazing, I have pages in my journal of the scenery and the things I learned about myself and my faith while being outdoors. But then there are blank pages - Because the most incredible part of my trip was my second Friday, when we spent Shabbat at the Livnot campus. And, again, there are no words to describe the love and warmth of that evening. Here were people that I had only known for days, some even less, and we danced and sang and loved together that evening. But even though I can't write to you everything that I felt, as always, action speak louder than words. And in 2012, I took my husband with me back to Tzfat and the Livnot campus for a month. This way, after hearing me talk about it for four years, he could finally also experience what I could not explain no matter how hard I tried. This trip was important to us - While we both grew up Jewish and had been a couple for nearly a decade, we were now just starting to make a home together. The Shabbat we shared in Tzfat together and with Livnot has helped us to define ourselves as a Jewish family. We recently welcomed a little girl, Talia Ilana. Not only do I feel like we are welcoming her to our own family, but also to our Livnot family. I am excited for the day that we get to bring her to Israel to meet her great grandparents and her cousins, but it will also be just as important that Talia join us in Tzfat for Shabbat!

With love,

Lara and Jake
Dear Michael,

What can I say about Shabbat at Livnot? I grew up celebrating Shabbat occasionally and thought I knew all about it by the time I arrived in Israel. I wasn't looking for a life-changing, spiritually igniting experience. I had written off Judaism long ago and simply wanted a fun trip. I had no idea what I had signed up for! Being at Livnot challenged everything I thought I knew and provided a safe, communal space to explore my deepest questions about existence - some of which I didn't even know I had. Shabbat was the culmination of a week spent exploring, bonding, falling in love with a culture and a country that I was meeting for the first time. Shabbat opened up my heart and mind in ways I never thought possible. I remember tears streaming down my face as I watched the sunset over Meron and knowing, on some level, that I would never be the same. Years later, on a subsequent Shabbat at Livnot, I met my future husband. Both coming from America, we shared dreams of building new lives together in Israel, raising children to deeply know and feel what it means to be a part of the Jewish people. We spent a summer at Livnot working with others who were on similar journeys while getting to know each other. Months later, on yet another Shabbat spent in Tzfat, we got engaged. Today, we are excitedly awaiting the birth of our first child from our home in Jerusalem. We are living out our dreams cultivated on that very special Livnot balcony.

So, how can I quantify or qualify what Shabbat at Livnot has meant to me? Quite simply, it has been everything.

With my deepest gratitude,
Jenna Rose Alpern

What made my experience with Shabbat exceptional is that it had immeasurable love infused in Jewish teachings of community, song, prayer, and the space to connect with it with no pressure to practice in any particular way. This form has brought me to where I am 8 years later; working as a Jewish educator through the vehicle of health, nature connection, farming, and contemplative Jewish practices that help me, my community, and students to thrive.

Simeon Darwik
From: Mario
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 11:48 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: 

Dear Michael,
I spent one week at the livnot program after my birthright Italy two summers ago. I wasn't really in touch with my heritage and this experience made me discover a lot by myself and about my approach to judaism. Shabbat night was an incredible time, I decided to prepare a little speech (it was a few of us in the group that did so) about some study we did on the scriptures and meant something on our approach to judaism. As regards me I managed thank to it to find a deep connection in spite of my non religious approach to life, and it was amazing. Also it was a great time to spend with open minded people who made me feel connected and in a community. I'll always bring in my heart and my mind those days.

From: Nechama Paltiel
Sent: Tuesday, November 05, 2013 9:55 PM
To: Aharon Botzer
Subject: Re: Saving the Jewish Future-just in case you did not know

Dear Aharon

Before Livnot, Shabbat was something that I was sure had nothing to do with me. My first Shabbat at Livnot, I was skeptical and a little nervous. But when the sun started setting and our voices started singing as we stood on the rooftop overlooking the Jerusalem, and then our feet started dancing and then we sat together at the shabbat table and listened to eachother's words of wisdom and ate the food we made late Thursday night. We shook the tables and learned to eat "garinim" as we reflected on our past week, there was safe space to ask questions and were invited to challenge ourselves. It was our Shabbat. And today it is my Shabbat and the Shabbat of my children. I thank you and Livnot and your amazing staff for that first taste of what Shabbat could be. Keeps me coming back for more.

Nechama Paltiel
(Nikki Jacobs J2)
From: Lily Gamse
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 12:33 AM
To: Rachel Rosenbaum; botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: Livnot needs you!!

Dear Michael,

There are some friends that you know for 10 years, and then there are some people that you meet and two weeks later you feel connect to them better than anyone else. That is the nature of my relationships with my fellow chevre at Livnot. By the time Shabbat rolled around I felt like I had new brothers and sisters. During Shabbat day I had the opportunity of sharing my “Food For Thought,” which I researched and outlined a presentation for. I was talking about the concept of the Chosen People. The question that I brought up was, who does the "choosing," us or God? By the end of my speech, I was confident with knowing that I was choosing to live a Jewish life and choosing my own Jewish path. I loved Shabbat in Tzfat because it was full of learning and just being there filled me with inspiration.

Thanks,
Lily

Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 1:02 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Livnot experience

Dear Michael,

My experience was something I will never forget. The decision to stay in Israel one more week was problem the best decision I have ever made. I met so many more people, explored so many places, and bonded with strangers like I never thought I would. I was able to explore Tzfat more on my own than with an entire group which makes everything more personal. On Shabbat myself and one other person got to go to another persons home and eat lunch in their household. This was a unique experience because we got to bond with a entire family. I was able to learn how they spent their Saturday as compared to how Americans do,( I prefer the relaxing Israeli Saturdays!). Overall it was an amazing experience and it is something I would recommend to a friend.

Thank you to the people who keep Livnot running on a daily basis,

Lisa Landes

From: Mendelson, Guy
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 5:01 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: FW: Message from Adina, past bat sherut at Livnot

Dear Michael,

My lasting Livnot Shabbat memory is standing on the roof watching the Tzfat sunset in a circle of new friends from around the world singing “lekhah dodi”. Whenever I sing “lekhah dodi” in synagogue in Australia I go back to that happy place in my life where something special was awoken within me. I will forever be grateful for that experience and all the experiences’ my time at Livnot afforded me.

Kind regards,

Guy Mendelson
Dear Michael,

When I came to Israel with Livnot I'd had my fair share of profound Shabbat experiences. I thought I was a Shabbat veteran, familiar with and well accustomed to our unique day. Was I ever in for a surprise! As the sun settled over the rolling Galilee and the air cooled on that wonderful balcony in Tzfat, the ruach that began to pour forth and fill my chevre and myself was something supernal, something totally new to me. Rarely have I ever felt so sublimely at home, so surrounded by fellowship. The history of our people and the nature of our unique quality as a nation is hard to pin down, it's so vast and complex that answering the question "What does it mean to be a Jew?" can lead into a philosophical labyrinth. However, on those treasured Sabbaths I spent with my chevre at Livnot, I knew unequivocally what it meant to me, for me, to be a Jew. Livnot is truly unique in it's dedication to simultaneously providing a full, authentic Jewish experience, while promoting a diversity of ideas and approaches to being a part of Am Israel. There are as many paths as there are Jews, and at Livnot we are given the remarkable opportunity to learn and grow together safely, enthusiastically, non-judgmentally. Ahavat yisrael is not reserved to be doled out along dogmatic lines, everyone that walks and works the land becomes a chevre, becomes a new window into the Jewish soul, and a dear friend. I have spent time with many different programs and communities, and Livnot is unparalleled in it's love, it's openness, it's depth and dedication to all Jews.

The Shabbats I spent with Livnot were many, and yet too few, and they will be treasured in my memory always.

Best,
David F. Meldman
Livnot 175/179/2nd Lebanese War Volunteer

Shabbat at livnot was more than just a memory for me but an influencial time that continues to shape me. I had my first proper shabbat at livnot and wow did it set the standard high for me. I remember clearly saying “I had no idea shabat was SO MUCH FUN.” The community cooking, challah baking, and writing of words of wisdom leading up to shabbat was of course fun. The candle lighting experience, music and watching the sun set was remarkable. The shabbat dinner, oneg and sharing of the words of wisdom was unequivocal! I felt happiness radiating from all the people around me as we laughed, sang, ate, and shared our ideas on jewish past, present and future. Saturday was an ultimate form of relaxation, leading up to a joyous havdalah, reminding us that our shabbat has always and will continuously enhance jewish community.
Shabbat at Livnot... What is there not to say about it?! I met an amazing group of people all curious about exploring the mystical/kabalistic land that is known as Tzfat. The three amazing leaders (Tifferet, Namaa and Leora) were so incredibly sweet and easy to talk to! By the time Shabbat came around we all had such an amazing vibe and connection that it made the experience of disconnecting from the world even that much better!!

We all split up jobs, they found out I could cook so I was in charge of seasoning lots! Haha. We all cooked and sang, prepared and really bonded in a way that if everyone I've ever met would have, they would be very blessed!!

Earlier in the day we made homemade challah. It was my first experience in doing this and it was pretty cool!
We made the tables beautiful, we were brought around and shown all the different shuls for service and if we wanted to- we stayed to daven.
We stopped in the square with some of the yeshivas and started a dance off with them! It was so much fun!!! We came back to the house to a beautifully prepared meal and set up we all worked so hard on! You could really feel the love that was poured in to making it perfect!

We sat around a large table and had amazing guests who came with their children. We were asked if we had any favorite songs and pretty much ate, laughed and sang the entire night! Just when you thought the meal was done, wine and cakes were brought out and we had optional learning.

After all this was said and done you step outside on the balcony to a breathtaking view. A view you've had this entire time but, that combined with the holy feeling of Shabbat and the moving feeling of the night was an experience I will never ever forget!

As if Friday night wasn't enough of a life changing meal- we were then placed for second meal on Saturday with local families. The ladies placed us with people they felt we could really connect with. I shared a meal and many many amazing conversations with David Friedman (a very popular and talented Kabbalistic artist) and his warm and friendly wife and family friend. They really opened my eyes to different ways of loving g-d and showed me how you can still be true to you while keeping g-d in your heart.

We decided since it was a gorgeous night out that we were going to do havdalah (closing out Shabbat with songs, dancing, a few prayers and third meal) on the balcony. Needless to say, I have pictures both visually (after Shabbat ended) and internally for the rest of my life!!

Since getting back from Israel I have told EVERYONE I know about Livnot and my Shabbat there. I suggest it to everyone and will always be a HUGE supporter of them and what they do for the younger Jewish generation!!!

Thank you Livnot for all the amazing things you do.

Always in my heart,

Sabrina Muldoon
Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had. I do not consider myself a spiritual person by any means and have a very hard time connecting with any form of spirituality (whether it be faith based or just general spirituality). On that cool Shabbos evening in Tzfat surrounded by my new friends and confidants, I felt the spirituality of Shabbat. I felt my connection to Judaism, and overall I felt my Jewish spirit come alive. To this day, I'm really not sure what it was exactly about Livnot that allowed me to feel this way but I am so grateful to this program for allowing me to experience it. My time at Livnot inspired me so much that now I am currently participating in a Masa 10 month program in Beer Sheva; Israel Teaching Fellows. I have encouraged many people on my program of all backgrounds and upbringings to participate in a Livnot program while in Israel because of how valuable it was to me. Livnot was truely one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

Thank you,
Mollie Marcus

Dear Michael,

There's no question in my mind or that of my husband's that Shabbat at Livnot is unique among birthright Shabbat experiences. Before being participants on Livnot, neither my husband nor I were particularly connected to Judaism. In 2005, my husband attended his birthright trip and came home completely fired up about being Jewish. I went on my birthright trip two years later, and we now live a life with Judaism as its center and observe Shabbat every week. Livnot staff know how to show participants the beauty and specialness of Shabbat in a low-pressure, laid back environment to people from all kinds of backgrounds. It would be nothing short of a tragedy if Livnot could no longer host birthright trips for young Jews hungry to learn more about their roots. We have an incredible amount of gratitude to Livnot for helping us along the path to being closer to our Jewish tradition and practices for Shabbat and beyond.

Sincerely,
Rachel Luria
Dear Michael,

Shabbat at livnot was really quite extraordinary. This is to a large extent down to Tsafat. The town is really special. An energy about the place that proves difficult to articulate - entirely unique.

The program is engineered in such a way to be entirely people-oriented. The overlaying of the week-long northern exposure programs and the month-long galilee fellowships ensure cliches aren't allowed to form. There is a large focus on the individual and their take on what it is to be 'Jewish'.

There is a real unity with fellow chèvre. Shabbat therefore is the culmination of these very intimate relationships in sharing the very pure joy of the occasion.

Crucially Shabbat at livnot promotes the idea that Shabbat needn't be a chore, that Judaism needn't be a chore. This disparages this sort of paralysis spreading throughout the diaspora that Judaism is something to be downplayed.

Shabbat in Tsafat is just fun.

On Behalf Of Chana Frazin

As I walk through the city of Tzfat, I see all the different doorways, some blue, some purple, some with flowers, others more simple. This is so much a reflection of Livnot's approach, a sampling of Jewish life, a hike, or a class, an amazing Shabbat experience, without pressure, each participant can connect to his or her Judaism, in their own way. Each participant is allowed and encouraged, to enter the doorway they chose.

The Shabbat the stands out the most for me is the Shabbat we celebrated our bat mitzvahs at Livnot. I had never had a bat mitzvah growing up, so myself and 2 other women on the program were excited to have our bat mitzvah at Livnot the last Shabbat of our program. Finding connections in my life, at 23 years old with the Torah portion from when I was born, thinking about how I fit in to all this, and doing it with 2 other women on my program was quite an experience! One I never could have dreamed of. We each prepared our devar Torah, all the participants helped to make special foods for that Shabbat, we shared, we ate, we danced and we cried. We cried tears of our journeys, we cried tears that we were home- while thousands of miles away from our families and birth places.

Although this was the one that stands out most for me, each Shabbat at Livnot, each day at Livnot, was so special, and filled with so many amazing things and amazing people. Thank you for helping Livnot allow more people to experience the magic.

All the best,

chana frazin
Thanks to you, I've been to Israel many times. My visits to Israel was first introduced by Birthright Israel.

I want to share my Livnot fellowship experience with you. Spending time and Shabbat in Tzfat and Jerusalem for the first time with Livnot has been INCREDIBLE! I will never forget how we welcomed the "bride" overlooking the mountain. That image will be in my mind and heart til I part this world. The songs, dances, the hikes and many meaningful conversation will be forever remembered and shared with other fellow Jews. I hope that Livnot will have the ability to expand and welcome many other Jews to such wonderful life changing experience.

Thank you,

Tamara Isakharov

2007 year participant.

Shabbat in Tzfat, can there be anything more spiritually uplifting? I have only been there for a total of 3, but the first and third are nights I will never forget.

**The first Shabbat; no idea what to expect.** Growing up reform, I was expecting something tame....I was very far off. Seeing the streets littered with kids dancing, screaming, hugging, davening, was a beautiful sight. I felt such a serious Shabbat high, that I will never forget. All I could think of was how I wished this was my every Friday night (and Saturday). I finally got a true feeling for why we leave our cell phones behind, and pause for a moment to celebrate a time where we don't have to change a thing!

**The third Shabbat; meeting an old friend.** My 3rd Shabbat, and one that made me feel like a pro by now, I went to services at one of the local spots I had been to the other 2 times. This time, a local Tzfatian was staring at me for a long time. After a bit of a stare off, he came right up to me and said "Ryan Silverman? Do you know who I am?" Of course I did, albeit I had not seen him the better part of a decade, and he was now sporting peyas and a long beard. What a beautiful place to give the gift of rekindling an old friendship. I was re-introduced to my friend Lee, now Ariel, after living in Israel for two years.

Every Shabbat at Livnot is magnificent. The teamwork for preparations, the singing, the dancing, the "beer pong" (of throwing good vibes not ping pongs), and the beautiful people involved make me want to return every year!
Dear Michael,

My first Shabbos at Livnot U'hibanot was something I will never forget. The preparation lasted all week with introductory classes about what Shabbat is all about, to food prep for 70 people, to wearing our best clothes and meeting for candle lighting. Kabbalos Shabbos up on the roof overlooking Meron was awe inspiring and beautiful. Davening in the magnificent Aubuhov synagogue with a Sephardic chazzan singing melodic, gorgeous melodies. Meals with 70 or so young people so enthusiastic and proud to be Jewish celebrating Shabbat together. An experience that changed the rest of my life and the lives of all my children and those to follow. Thank you.

Aharon Faiman, livnot #19

Dear Michael,

My first time at Livnot was for a Shabbat organized for a group of Masa participants and Israelis who had met at a Masa mifgashim seminar. This was my favorite Shabbat I spent in Israel during my 10 months of living in Israel. For this reason, when I returned to Israel this past summer, I participated on the Northern Exposure, week-long program, along with my brother who had just finished Birthright. Livnot is a tremendously special place to spend Shabbat, especially after an entire week of volunteering, Jewish learning, and hiking. Shabbat at Livnot is one of my most spiritual and moving Shabbat memories—which says a lot coming from someone who grew up celebrating Shabbat every week, with family, at camp, all over Israel, etc. The Shabbatot I spent at Livnot are etched in my memory and my heart, and I can't wait to be able to visit and spend another Shabbat at Livnot. Livnot U'Lehbanot provides a unique opportunity which every Jew would be lucky to experience. Thank you for supporting Livnot U'Lehbanot programs!

Sincerely,
Ariel E. Biel

Very few programs instill in young adults a sense of vibrancy and enthusiasm about Judaism in a way that connects with with young unaffiliated or secular Jews like Livnot. It deserves support.
Sincerely,
Marc Grossman
Dear Michael,
My fondest memory of Shabbat at Livnot was the very first Shabbat when the group was singing "Yom Ze". I felt excited and rejuvenated spiritually. I still try to sing it every Friday night and a piece of me is back in Tzfat in the Chader Ochel.

Rick Nachenberg T34

Dear Michael,
My strongest memory of Shabbat at Livnot is actually preparing for Shabbat...My husband, Rick Nachenberg and I were on torunut for Shabbat. We and others were in the kitchen preparing food and my husband started dancing with a chicken!

-----Original Message-----

Dear Michael,
I have had the privilege of spending shabbat at Livnot in Tzfat over four consecutive weeks. It was an important part of the Israel experience in my opinion. I fondly remember having lunch with local families. While the food was delicious, it was not the focus. There is nothing quite like being welcomed into a stranger's home like you were family. Taking time out to spend playing with children, singing songs, and other activities which we can feel too busy for in our everyday lives helps to put what is really important in perspective.

Sincerely,
Linden Wolf
Dear Michael,

Thanks for your support of Livnot U'Lehibanot. I participated in Livnot during the summer of 1994 and it was critical for my development as a person and a Jew. I'm sure that you are familiar with the famous statement:

"More than the Jew has kept Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jew."

The timeless message in this statement captures all that that surveys and studies try to convey. As a people, Shabbat is our anchor. It defines us and describes us. It provides us with direction and stability. Through Shabbat observance, in its many facets and forms, we are connected to Jews across space and time. It unifies us physically and spiritually. When one observes Shabbat, s/he is doing both what G-d wants for the body and for the soul. It is that unification of the physical and spiritual that makes Shabbat so satisfying for the whole person.

This message can only be transmitted by experience. Shabbat can not merely be studied, it must be lived. It is though this experience of Shabbat that Livnot has its most profound affect on participants. Livnot is able to teach Shabbat by imbuing every participant with the light and Shabbat and giving the desire to repeat that experience and make it personal.

After Livnot, I was excited to repeat that experience of Shabbat. Wherever I was in the world, I could then feel connected to Jews past, present, and future across the whole planet. And by doing so, I could then be most connected to myself and my G-d.

I hope that we can find new ways to promote Livnot and Shabbat experiences for all Jews.

Kol tuv,
Neil Stiber, Ph.D.
Silver Spring, Maryland
nstiber@gmail.com

Shabbat with Livnot is timeless, blissful, enriching and peaceful.
Dear Michael,

You are so right about Shabbat! I have long said that Shabbat is Judaism's best marketing tool. When I think about my first exposure to a real Shabbat at Livnot in 1997, I am instantly transported back to the cheder ochel, the singing, the Torah talk, the warm and comfy food, and the laughter. Livnot Shabbat drew me in. It was Shabbat that kept me in after I left. I hooked up with a group of alums from Baltimore, and as I slowly, slowly, became more observant, there was always Shabbat to remind me why I was doing these crazy things.

After my mother died, Shabbat became even more important to me. After a long, hard week, I'd have the refuge of Shabbat. Over time I saw my frazzled friends arrive on my doorstep, strung out from the week. Slowly but surely, Shabbat would calm them too. When I explain to people that it's a day of no phones, no email, no errands - just friends and family and food and G-d, they often get a wistful expression and say how they'd love to do that too. I just smile. And I tell them they can.

I'm typing this letter from my father's house - my husband, son, and I are crashing here for a week before making aliyah. Shabbat drew me in, and now it's drawing me up. I can't thank Livnot enough.

Sincerely,
Amy (Rubin) Berkowitz - T52

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Dear Michael,

While it has been nearly 18 years since I first stepped onto the Livnot campus and experienced my first Shabbat, I still am infused with the energy and beauty of sitting around the table with my Livnot family, singing Zimmerot and enjoying the delicious food we made together. My time with Livnot and celebrating Shabbat in the beauty of the Meron mountains put my foot on the path of a wonderful journey - connecting my heart and soul to Judaism. I am rooted in the inspiration I gained during my three months with Livnot. Eighteen years later, my children attend Jewish Day School, we keep the Sabbath, and we still sing Zimmerot from the Livnot bencher at our Shabbos table. For this, I am truly grateful.

Marc Avner
Dear Michael,

I am writing to you because I care about the future of the Jewish community. I know that despite the results of the Pew survey that say my generation is unengaged and likely to assimilate, I often see young adults searching for and finding meaningful connections to Judaism.

Last year, I spent 6 months living in Israel. During my trip I struggled to find a Judaism that spoke to me. Growing up going to as a member of an egalitarian synagogue, I attended Jewish summer camp and would seek out Hillel shabbat dinners as a college student. Coming to Israel, I knew Judaism was important to me, I was already engaged. But I know that is not the case for many Jews.

It was at Livnot where I met several birthright participants extending their trip, that I began to think more about this. I had experienced the joy and rest of Shabbat, I knew the melodies to L’cha Dodi, but many of these Jews were suddenly in a foreign land and were discovering this for the first time.

At Livnot, we celebrated Shabbat in a beautiful, non-judgmental and welcoming way. The Shabbat atmosphere in Tzfat is incredibly unique. After spending a week getting to know the other participants on my Livnot trip, we welcomed Shabbat singing on the balcony, watching the sunset over the beautiful mountains. I remember going into a shul that Friday night, the women separate in their own area. The women danced and sang and the men enthusiastically did the same on their side, beautiful melodies echoing in the streets as we hopped to different shuls.

Coming back to Livnot to eat dinner, I listened to one young man, who had grown up Jewish but had not visited synagogue since his childhood. He said in awe, “I have never seen people actually enjoying services”. This statement in itself really stuck with me, because at 25 years old, a man was finally able to find beauty in his own tradition. Shouldn’t we be offering this excitement and engagement to more young Jews? Shouldn’t all Jews have a chance to hear those melodies fill city streets, to recognize the joy that comes with Shabbat?

Livnot created a Shabbat atmosphere where we paused and listened to peers “words of wisdom” our own D’var Torahs. The staff at Livnot connected us to wonderful, welcoming local families for Shabbat lunch and we spent our day relaxing, reflecting and enjoying one another. The community at Livnot created one of my favorite Shabbat experiences in Israel. I hope to return to Israel and spend another Shabbat at Livnot and I hope many young adults have the opportunity to do the same.

I truly believe that programs like Livnot are needed to expand upon Birthright and offer young adults more opportunities to connect to their Jewish identities on a deeper level. I would like to thank you for reading this and for investing in meaningful Jewish experiences for young adults, I believe it is very important work and I am hopeful for my generation and their continued commitment to Judaism.

Thank you,
Becca Habalow
Dear Michael,

As discussed in your article, I have always found the idea of Shabbat to be completely daunting. Having moved further and further away from the Judaic path set forth to me by my parents, I started to fear the implications of celebrating the Jewish holidays. I would feel conflicted about observing certain rituals, as I was - and still am - unsure of my Jewish beliefs. It's difficult to avoid corniness when discussing such a profound experience, but my few weeks at Livnot truly changed my feelings about my own Judaism and how it can be applied to my everyday life back in the "real world". Shabbat at Livnot can only be described as a near-magical experience. And what made it truly magical is its ability to push my outside of my comfort zone. Your article speaks mostly to the relaxing effect of Shabbat (which I whole-heartedly agree with), but I also noted that Shabbat had the ability to push me to be my better self. No longer relying on your cell phone as a crutch, you are forced to truly face this concept of "peoplehood". Moreover, I was most apprehensive about being set up with host families for Saturday lunch. I was worried about what I would talk about with my host families, if I would have anything in common with these more observant families. However, I think that these were quite possibly amongst my favourite moments at Livnot. Again, forcing you to see beyond religion and into personhood, this experience drew my attention to the extensive openness and kindness offered up to strangers by the residents of Tzfat - which is often quite difficult to find in our lives back at home. I think that most people would agree that Shabbat chats were the deepest, most spiritual and most satisfying conversations throughout the trip - and helped us to get to know the other Chevre, the staff and the residents of Tzfat on a deeper level than we would have thought possible. Again, I have found that observance of the Jewish holidays to be somewhat of an internal conflict. However, Livnot helped to remind me that observance goes beyond religiosity and rules. It is so much more.

Marley Tratner

Shabbat at Livnot was so full of joy and singing and family. In such a short time I felt a part of a family with Jewish values at its core, and an openness of what it means to be a Jew in today's world. Such memories!

Jonathan Dubinsky
2007
Dear Michael,

Although my trip ended short of Shabat in Livnot, I don't feel I missed out on anything less of the amazing experience the mystical city had to offer. Before coming on Birthright I would describe myself as just an ordinary reformed Jew. I observed Shabat probably up until I was 6 years old but never understood the meaning. Just being in Tzaft was an awesome experience, exploring the galleries, connecting with local artists, and new people was something special. I learned about a whole new side of Judaism, the Kaballah. I never knew this existed, and now I can't get enough of it. I've learned to value the people around me and live in the now. To cherish the moments and take in as much as possible. I was given the gift to travel to my Holyland of Israel and blessed enough to make connections with people I'll never forget. Go places and do things I would have never done. I didn't have access to my phone - or a good wifi connection most of the time I was there so I'd say I was in observance of Shabat throughout my whole time in Israel, but this mainly pertains to Livnot. So although in Tzfat I didn't get to light the candles, say the prayers, and see the empty artist quarter, we sang together, laughed together, cooked together. I learned what it meant to 'wop wop' while BBQ'n on the balcony. If that doesn't count as a life changing experience, I don't know what does.

With love,
Melissa Avrick

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I remember my two Shabbats at Livnot to have been warm, communal, peaceful experiences. Tzfat takes on a particularly spiritual feel during Shabbat -- something this secular American Jew will never forget! Livnot deserves much praise for sharing its wonder with Jews the world over!

-Noah Zepelin
Denver, CO
Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot was one of the most powerful experiences I’ve ever had. Friday was spent preparing for Shabbat as a group. Everyone was running around, cleaning, cooking, setting up, changing into our Shabbat clothes. Then, as the sun started to set, we all went downstairs to light candles. For me, lighting candles was not a tradition I had incorporated into my practice…until I went to Livnot. For the first time I truly connected to candle lighting and to this day ever week when I light candles I think of Livnot. Afterwards we all went onto the balcony and watched the sun start to set. We held hands, sang songs, danced, and just took in the sights of Tzfat as the whole town went quiet in preparation for the night ahead. The rest of the night was spent touring various shuls, walking the city, and finally dinner and an oneg. Without the distractions of our phones or computers we spent the meal sharing our appreciation for each other and connecting on a personal level that most of us had never experienced before…and with people we had only known a week (although it felt like we’d known each other our whole lives!).

Saturday we went to host families around Tzfat. I did Livnot a few times last year and each time the host families taught me something new about Jewish life and Jewish identity. Getting to know real people in the city was one of my favorite parts of the week! The rest of the day was spent relaxing and bonding with our group. Finally, it was time for havdallah which we did in a cave while Doron played guitar. It was so sad to see Shabbat end!

Livnot was a life changing experience for me. I would not be the Jew I am today without the Shabbatot experiences I had in Tzfat with this incredible program. When I make aliyah, G-d willing, next month, I know that Livnot is one of the first places I am going back to in order to show my appreciation.

Sincerely,
Heather Leinen

Hi Shmuel,

It has been fun catching up with you on rare occasions we are both someplace at the same time for a brief moment. Wishing you and your family lots of love.

I wanted to share a memory of my time in Jerusalem on the program (I think it was J10?) winter of 1996.

I’m not sure if the gathering of a few participants and a fellow teacher (the name Arye…gingy...comes to mind but not completely sure) was on purpose or we were just hanging around waiting on something else, but the conversation turned to experiencing a tangible existence of God. We were sharing ideas and I was on the skeptical side of things…but when Arye spoke about the intricate beauty found in nature and specifically flowers something clicked for me. Just observing nature and knowing I found profound beauty in nature, something clearly outside the hands of man, became my connection to God. Now that I have a son who loves nature, the opportunities to experience God happen on a daily level in a very tangible way and having that moment in Livnot helped me gain that awareness.

Best wishes,
Yosh Schulman
Many many years ago, 26 to be precise, I had my first Shabbat with Livnot and their families, the Botzers, and the Nachmanis, the Shabbat and program which imbued my life with purpose, light, beauty of heritage that belongs to me. I know that I am one of the lucky ones, I came to this Shabbat with an open heart, willing to experience something I had rejected as a kid growing up in Colorado. And Zfat was a magical place to have that Shabbat, together with warm and young idealistic staff who gave the participants knowledge, song, home hospitality, I could go on and on. I found that my search didn't have to further than my backyard, figuratively. My dream for a life with meaning as a jew was accessible to me. I mark my first Shabbat as the fundamental cornerstone for my life following the program of Livnot U'lehibanot. I never left Israel, after that. I was able to build, create a Jewish family, work and have been blessed to do so here in the land of my people.

Suzy (Zerobnick) Pilcer
Program 22

Dear Michael,
My name is Judy Lieberman, and I'm another of those lucky enough to have experienced the beauty of Shabbat at Livnot. You wrote in your article about the special atmosphere created at Shabbat meals. That is a memory that was a turning point in my decision to make Shabbat observance a permanent part of my life.

On Livnot, we had "Family Shabbat" where we were invited to eat with members of the Tzfat community. I remember that the family we were invited to had a mother and daughter sick with the flu, and so the father and other children were manning the table. I was impressed with how the family(even without the mother present) sat together and enjoyed each other's company and how welcoming they were of myself and my fellow Livnoter. What really stood out was the singing of Shabbat Zemirot. The teenage big sister singing along with her younger siblings and father. I couldn't believe that on her one day off from school, this teenager could seem so happy sitting around and singing songs with her family. "Wow", I remember thinking to myself, "this is the power of Shabbat!"

This is only of many memorable moments from my long ago Livnot time(27 years ago, which of course, makes me about 30 now!) I've tried to infuse in my family's Shabbat the beauty and appreciation for the sanctity of time that is but one of the many gifts of Shabbat.

Sincerely,
Judy Lieberman(Judy Cohen, Tzfat program 19, 1986)
Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot is like none other. In most of my previous experiences, davening is what has made certain Shabbatot so special for me. At Livnot, however, it was the incredible community and the ruach, kindness, and amazingness that filled the room.

There are two memories from the Shabbat I spent at Livnot in particular, each from Erev Shabbat, that will forever be in my heart. The first was after dinner as we joyfully sang songs and danced. I've literally never been in a room with so much positive energy. Every person in the room was up on their feet dancing like crazy and singing their hearts out. Even though there weren't many conversations going on during that time, time (because everyone was singing!), I felt such a connection to everyone in the room.

The second memory is from later on in the night. Daron led us in a game in which we had the opportunity to tell a story and give a L’Chaim to somebody or something in our lives. The game progressed into a beautiful round of compliments. Each person told the person sitting to their right what made them special. We all sat in the room for several hours as we listened to each person’s compliments. I had never done an activity like this before. When I first heard how we would be spending those couple hours, I thought to myself that there was no way this activity was going to work flawlessly. I was certainly proved wrong, though! It takes a truly special group of young adults to make such an activity work.

The Shabbat that I spent at Livnot is one that I will never forget. I cannot find words to express my gratitude and love toward Livnot, but I can say that the memories that I made at Livnot and the friends that I met there will forever have a special place in my heart.

B'Shalom,
Allie Fox

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From: Aviva Curran
Date: Wed, Nov 6, 2013 at 7:06 PM
Subject: To: Tifferet Weinberg tifferet@livnot.org

I don't know where to start writing about how Livnot has changed my Shabbat experience (as well as my life), all I can say is that before Livnot I called Shabbat “Shabbat Prison” and had a completely skewed and westernized perception of what Shabbat is. Now, just over a year later, I keep Shabbat completely and it is the highlight of my week. Needless to say I no longer call it Shabbat Prison, I have found a new freedom and peace of mind that I did not have before becoming shomer Shabbat and it is all thanks to Livnot for lifting the veil of ignorance and helping me take steps forward in my Jewish journey.

Aviva Curran
Dear Michael, Mr. Steinhardt,

I am writing to you to express my sense of gratitude to Livnot U'Lehabanot, for what I consider nothing less than if not saving my life, giving me my life. I was I think a very typical unaffiliated, reform synagogue drop out who got a masters from Harvard, lived with a non-Jewish woman I was dating, and had no involvement with Jewish life. Until I went to Israel for the first time, and more specifically until I made Shabbat at Livnot. I actually think it was the first time I ever really experienced Shabbat. While my time at Livnot was now maybe 15 years ago, it brings tears to my eyes as it was no less than a feeling of being welcomed home. The experience of making Shabbat together with my new found chevre/friends at Livnot provided me with the experience of community, fun, playfulness, participation, intellectual stimulation, friendships, family, and the all encompassing feeling of being a part of something. Shabbat at Livnot not only helped me experience the sense of tradition, but also the sense of peoplehood. We cooked, we sang, we learned, we discussed, we ate, we danced, we prayed, we rested, we experienced happiness and joy. I know of no other experience nor Jewish program that not only helped me feel like chevre – one of the friends – while not only on the program, but afterwards. My connection as a Livnot chevre furthered my sense of ahavat yisrael.

My work and my life became intertwined with my new found Jewish identity thanks to Livnot, and namely the Shabbat experience at Livnot. I returned to California and spent 6 years as a Director at Jewish Family Services of Los Angeles, then a Director at Jewish Big Brothers of Los Angeles, and a retreat leader for Los Angeles Hebrew High (a school for Jewish teenagers in public school), and later worked as a social worker at a Jewish day school. After I got married, I took my wife on our honeymoon on her first trip to Israel, to spend Shabbat with a Livnot program. She was as affected by Livnot as I was, and too now feels like chevre. We named our son Amichai, so that he should always know something I did not know before experiencing the gift of Livnot, and a Shabbat experience at Livnot, that my people live.

I know that you support Jewish causes. On behalf of those of us who you have benefited from any support you have given to Livnot, I thank you for helping me find myself and my sense of family, peoplehood, and community. And for your on-going support of Livnot, I thank you on behalf of a future cheaver, friend, that I look forward to welcoming back to Los Angeles as a friend and family member, as my wife and I now host Livnot alumni Shabbat dinners. You are welcome to join us anytime you are in LA.

With gratitude,
William (Ze'ev) Korn
310-488-1492
bkorn@gmail.com
Letter on Facebook: 06/11/2013

Livnot Shabbat in tzfat was absolutely beautiful, a one in a lifetime never forgettable experience. Elegantly bound by singing, good food, dance, and laughter. It was truly one of the most spiritual Shabbats I have ever had, paving an influential path for my future plans here in Israel. Having the opportunity to share words of wisdom with my fellow peers and celebrate my birthday, it is even fair to say that spending Shabbat at Livnot was one of the happiest weekends of my life.

A very special program that must be shared by Jews all around the world!

Max b. Polisky

From: Mandy Siegel
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 4:44 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Shabbat at Livnot 1988

Hi There
I was on the program in 1988 a very long time ago indeed! It was a wonderful opportunity to spend time with people in a sacred, ancient environment such as Sefat. It was beautiful and a very nurturing environment a far cry from city life and one i will always cherish having shabbat in such a magnificent place!
Thank you Aaron, Miriam and the team
Warmest Wishes
Mandy Siegel

From: chip kogan
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 4:36 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael Stienhardt,

I had the good fortune to experience Livnot Shabbats in March 2012 and March 2013. Experiencing Shabbat in Tzfat is special. However, experiencing a Livnot Shabbat in Tzfat is unforgettable.

There are a number of variables that contribute to this experience. The eclectic group of chavre who somehow find their way to Livnot provide enthusiasm, passion, and much love. In a short time, bonds are made and the chavre become family. Then, there is the breathtaking view of the Upper Galilee, from the second floor deck, during the setting sun, while we are singing and dancing together. From here, we visit several synagogues and join their services to get a local taste of Tzfat Shabbat. We reassemble for a delicious dinner that was prepared by our own hands. While we eat, we sing, chat, and listen to several chavre's thoughts on preselected topics that they have researched. This evening drifts into more singing and informal conversations.

Even though the celebration of Shabbat occurs each Friday night, each Livnot Shabbat has the feeling of something uniquely special and different from any other shabbat previously celebrated. Each of us is content, fulfilled, and feeling blessed to be with friends on this special night and glad to be Jewish. Miraculously, this magical experience is recreated each shabbat at Livnot, in Tzfat.

Although I have tried to recreate a similar shabbat in Cleveland, Ohio, it is not Tzfat and certainly not Livnot. I am grateful for these memories.

Chip Kogan
Letter on Facebook: 07/11/2013

It is one of the most meaningful experiences of your life. Every Friday I wish I were back there in Tzfat, cooking and decorating and singing and dancing and lighting candles and taking in the extraordinary sunset and shul-hoping and laughing and eating and feeling simultaneously exhilarated and peaceful. There is only one thing seriously wrong with LIVNOT Shabbat-- and I feel that I must warn others about it: Nothing else can compare to the love and joy you will experience there. If you are anywhere in Israel (anywhere in the world, for that matter!), GO to Tzfat, find LIVNOT and prepare to have your heart and soul reshaped forever.

-Marianna S

From: Adina Spiller [mailto:adinaspiller@gmail.com]
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 3:59 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: My letter

Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

My life was changed on a rooftop in Tzfat that Friday night in January of 2003. As I watched the sun set between two mountains, a new feeling descended upon me. It was a feeling I didn't recognize and one I never knew existed. It was the feeling of peaceful happiness, closeness to the Jewish people and to G-d and so much more that words can't explain. I feel so lucky to have chosen Livnot for my Birthright trip because it changed my life forever.

One of my favorite experiences was Shabbat in the Beirav shul. Never had I seen such pure happiness. In the joyful light that shone in the people's faces, I saw who I was and what a beautiful gift it is to be Jewish. I really wanted to see what it was like to truly keep Shabbat. For me, that meant losing a whole day of writing in the journal I was keeping about the trip. I was falling behind already but I did not write all of Shabbat. Instead, I connected with people, with the land and with who I am as a Jewish person. All of the pieces that were missing from my Hebrew school education were discovered and put back into place.

The Livnot experience is not one where you stay in 5-star hotels and ride camels in the desert. It is an experience where you walk in the ancient footsteps of history and leave your own footsteps to make a difference in the future. Those two weeks of connecting to the land of Israel, and learning her story and the story of my people made me who I am today and I am forever grateful.

Sincerely,

Adina Spiller
From: Aviva Janus
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 3:58 AM
To: Aharon Botzer
Subject: RE: Livnot needs you! program T32

As I sit across the dining room table from my 14 year old daughter who is studying Navi, I can’t help but think about my experience as Livnot so many years ago - was it 22? It was one of my first exposures to Shabbat - beautifully dressed kids, a table full of food, guests, singing. Where do I sign up? That started me on my path to finding out more about my Jewish self and how to make being Jewish a major focus of my life. Until that point it was a not relevant to everyday living. I rarely went into the Hillel at my university - I couldn't connect with Jewish people doing Jewish things - they all seemed to belong in a way that I did not. I suppose looking back it was lack of understanding. How does one participate in all these rituals? What if I make a mistake? Why don’t I know "the basics"? I wanted to make sure my kids would have a firm knowledge base to lead actively Jewish lives. Today I work in Jewish Education and my five children are all leading engaged, enriching Jewish lives. My dining room is the center of my house where each Shabbat there is a table full of food, lots of guests and well dressed children sometimes singing, making brachot, and being an active part of the Jewish future. Thank you Livnot for providing the foundation.

Best, Aviva

From: Bryan Schwartzman
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 5:03 PM
To: Aharon Botzer
Subject: Shabbat Note

Mr. Steinhardt,

First, thank you for all the work you've done on behalf of the American and global Jewish community. I participated in Livnot back in 1999 and went on to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary and later became a reporter for the Jewish Exponent in Philadelphia. I grew up in a loving home where I always taught to be proud to be Jewish. But we never lit a shabbat candle or had a shabbat dinner. There wasn't a Hebrew book to be found. It's years later and I'm about to be a father for the second time and I still figuring out how exactly Judaism fits into my life. But the Shabbat experience, the concept of Shabbat time, the idea of slowing down to pray, to converse with others, to study, to stop and look around, would never be with me were it not for the mystical shabbats I spent in Tsfat with Livnot. It is difficult for any American experience to compare with kabbalat shabbat while overlooking Mount Meron. But the fact that such an experience inspire so many people to look to recreate those sparks and connections in their home communities is proof of its value. I've provided a link to a recent piece I wrote about young adults struggling to take their next Jewish steps after Israel. If we go back to the archetype of the four sons, many young American Jews don't even know what questions to ask. Livnot helps people learn how to ask questions.

Thanks so much for your time,
Bryan Schwartzman
Dear Michael,

Every time I light candles on Shabbat I am reminded of my experience with Livnot U'Lehibanot. I can clearly remember gathering as a group to light our little tea-lights one Friday in Tzvat. But first our ever-thoughtful bat sherut said a few words. She explained that the Shabbat candles are valued because their flame is a shared benefit. Kindling the lights taps into the very Jewish appreciation for family and community. And there was no denying that we had found community with each other as we proceeded to eat, sing, and dance that night and the following day. Four years later this experience still affects me. It taught me to love that moment when I finish blessing the Shabbat candles, open my eyes, and appreciate the individuals with whom I share the Shabbat flames. Suddenly the world seems to have gained a special glow.

Maya

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Dear Michael,

I just wanted thank you for your lovely article, "Shabbat Is Our Birthright." Although I grew up Jewish, like so many Jews, Shabbat was merely a list of do's and don'ts, hardly a compelling idea or experience. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties and at Livnot U'lehibanot in Tzrat that I truly discovered the magic of Shabbat. It was there that I was given an opportunity to have a traditional Shabbat experience within a comfortable, welcoming and tolerant framework. Those early experiences in many ways shaped my Judaism and set me on a path to become the rabbi and Jew that I am today. Michael, I can't thank you enough for your ongoing leadership within our religion and unwavering support of Livnot. You have made Livnot possible and Livnot helped me return to a living, vibrant and meaningful Judaism which I have been sharing within thousands of re-invigorated Jews for the past 15 years.

Todah Rabah,
Rabbi Dr. Baruch HaLevi
Congregation Shirat Hayam,
Swampscott, MA
www.RabbiB.com

Author of "Revolution of the Jewish Spirit: How to Revive Ruakh in Your Spiritual Life, Transform Your Synagogue & Inspire Your Jewish Community," 2012, Jewish Lights

P.S. I actually wrote quite a bit about this Shabbat experience within my book.
My Shabbat experience at Livnot.
As the culmination of an intensive week-long experience of Israel and Judaism, Shabbat at Livnot was unique and unforgettable. I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to celebrate Shabbat in a place as spiritual as Tzfat with people as incredible as the ones I met at Livnot. Visiting Israel and participating in Livnot has given me context to further explore my Jewish heritage.
~ Lisa

From: Mallory Serebrin - Studio ArtWorks
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 6:49 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: RE: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Dear Livnot and Michael,
Writing about my Shabbat experience is nothing short of knowing it changed my life. Who knew that being Jewish included singing, friendship, sharing, dancing and learning from each other in a joyful 24 hours. I think also because we were so involved in the preparations for it, it took on a more personal meaning. We cooked and cleaned up for each other and that bonded us as a community.
For me personally, the singing was something that unified us all and brought us to "oneness". I sit around a Shabbat table today – 20 years later, and know all the songs and it is a way of connecting and celebrating with my family and new and old friends. I am grateful for all that Livnot gave me which translated into a more meaningful and more celebratory Jewish life, and for sure the Shabbat experience was one of the most powerful experiences I have integrated into my life.

Mallory Serebrin

From: Lisa Friedman
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 6:25 AM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters: Saving the Jewish Future

Dear Michael,
My experience in Tzfat with Livnot in 1985 was the very beginning of my Jewish journey. Every Friday here in Nashville, Tennessee, when we sing to welcome the Shabbat bride, I am reminded of walking through the streets of Tzfat singing the very same tune. Now a mother of a post-confirmation child who is teaching in religious school and a child preparing for his bar mitzvah this winter, I am convinced that, without my 3 months in Tzfat, my entire life would have been more secular and my participation in (and raising my children as participants in) synagogue life would not have happened. The Livnot program was enormously significant in my life...even almost 30 years later.

LF
It’s hard to comprehend the passage of time, 20 years to be exact, since I participated in a 3-month program at Livnot U'Lehibanot. Despite the passage of time, there are few days that pass that the experience does not enter my conscious mind. Sometimes it’s the leadership and teachers, sometimes it’s the friends made and sometimes it’s the experiences. Taken together and despite the passage of time, distance and contact, Livnot has had a profound positive impact on my life.

A particular Shabbat experience at Livnot stands out in my mind. Prior to joining the program I met some young Chabadniks on an Egged bus trip to Tzfat. They were on their way back to their Yeshiva and I was going to meet with the Livnot staff to find out more about their program.

I parted ways with the young men with no expectation of ever seeing them again. This was not the case. About a month after our meeting and just before my first Shabbat at Livnot, I heard a knock on the door just before Shabbat. They had tracked me down and insisted that I join them at the Ari Mikva. As time was short, we sprinted down the hill and entered the Mikva. It was my first experience in a mikva; one that I’ll never forget. This became our weekly activity and as I close my eyes, I remember it as if it were yesterday. As a student of anthropology, I had learned about rites of intensification and how such an experience can transform a person from the mundane to the sacred. This was just the experience that I was seeking. To bookend this first Shabbat experience at Livnot, the rooftop Havdalah service provided an opportunity to learn about my fellow participants as we celebrated the waning hours of Shabbat before we descended back to the mundane.

I carry this first Shabbat experience at Livnot with me today and always. While my level of observance ebbs and flows, the knowledge gained and spirituality felt while at Livnot endures. The experience has made me at ease in my observance of laws, customs and events regardless of the level of religiosity of those around me. I thank Livnot for providing the safe and nurturing environment to explore my heritage and religion and for the positive influence that helped shaped me as a Jew.
Dear Michael and all of Livnot,

It was my Shabbos experience with you all in Tzfat during my T-52 program that introduced to me to the concept of a JOYOUS SHABBAT! Since my time with you all, I have done everything I can to replicate this type of ruach and light! I have brought the story I remember learning during candle lighting (about 3 sons filling 3 different rooms, and the room that filled the most was the one with the candle) and I have taken Kabbalat Shabbat and Zmirot and I have run with this all.
I am blessed to be married to a past chevre, so together we know what it is that we want to recreate with our families and within the community. It has not been that easy, but we are certainly getting there.
We were so excited to have children that we could pass this type of Joyous Shabbat on to.
I push Livnot to anyone I can find. Hands down, it goes down as the pinnacle life changing experience of my days!

Thank you,
Shelley Dean

From: Nancy Meyer
Sent: Wednesday, November 06, 2013 8:56 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

I had a tremendous experience on Livnot - It was really the during the three months that I was there that I decided to keep Shabbat.
I came to Israel with a lot of questions about my own level of observance and about what it meant to be a Jew. Through my exposure to the wonderful people who run the Livnot Program and through my experience of Shabbat during Livnot - I was arrived at a whole new level of my own observance and commitment as a Jew.
After Livnot, I was committed to keeping Shabbat and decided I wanted to even learn more about Judaism. I stayed in Israel the rest of the year and learned Torah and experienced more about our precious heritage. After that I came back to the US to attend Law school. I continued to keep Shabbat during law school and got engaged after my first year. I then got married and both my husband and I decided to be committed to keeping Shabbat and the halacha that hashem gave the Jews to live a life filled with holiness.
Skip ahead - 23 years. We have been married for 22 years and have five beautiful Jewish Children ranging in age from 19 to 7. All of our kids have gone through or are going though Jewish Day School and Jewish Camp and Yeshivas. Currently our oldest is attending Touro College in Manhatten.
It all started at Livnot - the sunsets the people the experience. Have Shabbat at Livnot was life transforming and made a significant contribution to my growth as a Jew.

Nancy Meyer
I was introduced to practice of shabbat during my time at Livnot. It has been the
ABSOLUTE GREATEST LIFELONG GIFT that anyone has ever given to me. I am the kind
of person who is deeply nourished by "being", and so it is a challenge to live in a culture
dominated by "doing". When I discovered shabbat, this island of being once every 7 days,
my life was transformed on the deepest of levels, brought more into into balance. It has
been 20 years since I did Livnot. I have celebrated shabbat every week since then. My
experience of it changes and deepens with time. Now I have the honor of sharing it with my
husband and my children. I can't imagine my life without it. I am forever grateful.

Warmest wishes,
Ilana Margalit (a.k.a Heidi Fleisher)

On Behalf Of Lissy

First of all I would like to thank the sponsors and the staff at Livnot for giving me a memorable
life experience that I still talk about to this day nearly 2 years after being at Livnot. After the land
was without rain for a couple of weeks, there was fear that the crops were not going to grow well
that year. People were beginning to become worried as the land of Israel relied so heavily on its
agriculture. During my Shabbat, half of us were cooking in the kitchen while the other half of us
were singing while someone else played the guitar. As the delicious aromas spread throughout
the house (as it was my home for the week), we suddenly heard thunder coming from the
mountains in the distant. To our surprise and pleasure, rain was on its way. In New York, I
usually do not necessarily welcome the rain rather I bundle up in a rain jacket, throw on some
rain boots, and grab an umbrella before I head out the door. However, in Israel when there was
no rain for weeks and suddenly there was evidence of rain on its way especially on Shabbat this
was a moment that I was ready to embrace. Eventually, the clouds and the rain moved from the
mountains to our home in Livnot. It started pouring. As it poured, we continued singing with the
music from the guitar while others continued cooking. So overjoyed by the rain, we decided to
bring our music out into the streets of Tzfat. Barefoot and without any rain jackets or umbrellas,
we brought our voices and the guitar out into the streets while continuing to sing. This moment
during Shabbat was spontaneous, unique, and incredible. It was a moment that I will never
forget. Shabbat to me about family including those that became a part of mine in one week and
my sister who had come to visit for Shabbat and feelings of gratefulness and happiness.
Shabbat is about momentarily forgetting about the work week to look within and without and
appreciate what you have. Dancing and singing in the rain on Shabbat encompassed what I
believe Shabbat should be about. It was a time of happiness, joy, community, and appreciation
for the rain and for the new family that I had made as we carelessly got wet while barefoot in the
streets.

Thanks again,
Lissy Szalkiewicz
Dear Michael

My experience of Shabbat through the Livnot U'Lehibanot program was of a really loving, sharing community.

Beforehand, the meal that we had prepared as a group on Thursday for Shabbat dinner had given us a reason to talk with one another in the kitchen. The atmosphere was full of energy. We were encouraged to share responsibilities with others who we may not have spoken with much until that point. Everybody was wishing to share recipes or learn them and take part in making the meals.

On Friday morning we made challah. Ushering in Shabbat, we first lit the candles and then walked to several of the Synagogues in Tzfat before dinner. Some travelers had come to Tzfat that day unaware of Shabbat and were lost as to what they’d do for dinner as everything had shut. We invited them to join us and they joined in conversations with us at Livnot and with the local families and friends that had also been invited to Shabbat dinner. Kiddush was recited and after the hamotzi blessing, we ate the challah we’d made. For each of the courses, one of us would present our "food for thought". All of us had prepared something and throughout each meal there was discussion of these ideas that were being shared. We sang from song books during and after the meal. A lot of us stayed in the dining room after dinner where we rearranged the tables and played a few games designed to get us to talk about ourselves and what we knew of the people around us in the room.

Saturday morning we all split into groups of twos or threes and spent our morning meal with a local family. They welcomed us into their homes and the activities were much the same as they were during the meal the night before, except now we had a chance to ask the families we were visiting about their lives and the lives of their children, with fewer distractions. That afternoon we had our third Shabbat meal on top of the citadel, then we came back and went up to the Balcony to take in one of the beautiful sunsets of Tzfat whilst we sang and danced. When the stars came out, we lit the candles and had havdallah, then we danced some more.

I will never forget my Livnot Shabbats.

Shalom,

David Matthews
I experienced a great contrast between the first and second Shabbats with Livnot on both of my visits to Israel. The first Shabbat arrived while the groups were still coalescing. As someone who didn't grow up observing Shabbat, it felt foreign and a bit clandestine (even though it still felt comfortable and safe). The second Shabbat, however, felt like a celebration among good friends and family, like a natural part in the progression of our time together. I was awed by how quickly and readily this change occurred, and saw that change reflected in the dynamics of the group. Livnot gave us the extra time to bond with one another, and our Shabbat celebrations in Tzfat cemented those bonds.

I have long appreciated the thoughtful planning that went into creating those moments, and I thank you for inviting us to reflect on (and voice our appreciation for) them.

Thank you!
Peter Rothbart

Shabbat at Livnot must be experienced. The warmth, beauty, atmosphere are all unique to the program, the setting, and the interaction of the staff with the program participants. After working hard all week, encompassed by the land and the learning, and one’s new role in having a hand in building and transforming the land, everyone shifts gears into Shabbat preparation mode – a big thing to pull together, but made memorable by the fact that everyone plays a part in the preparation. And then, the gears shift further, as Shabbat rolls in. There is nothing like Kabbalat Shabbat at Livnot, the view envelopes you and you are taken into Shabbat, just like that. For someone who never observed Shabbat until my Livnot experience, everything about Shabbat was new and special - from the moment of candle lighting until Havdallah. The biggest challenge was how to balance the natural flow of things – friendships developing, conversations – light and probing, the ebb and flow of Shabbat (tefillah – such a choice of synagogues, meals – the whole group together or with local families, etc.) with trying to teach everything there is to know about Shabbat and all of the songs – in just a few Shabbatot. Fortunately, Livnot was able to provide just the right balance. I truly treasure the memory of my Shabbatot in Tsfat along with the entire Livnot experience.
Shabbat Sholom!

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Robin Levy-Stevenson
From: Gili Mentel  
Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2013 10:36 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Shabbat at Livnot is like nothing you have ever experienced. The amazing energy emanating from Livnot itself, the great food and above all the amazing company of the people who come to Livnot make Shabbat at Livnot an unbelievable experience. For people to truly understand the magic that occurs during a Shabbat at Livnot they really have to go to experience it. I can go on and on talking about the great food, the awesome experience of synagogue hopping, majestic view from the Livnot balcony and the incredible people which Livnot brings together but until you experiences all these components yourself you can not even begin to imagine what a Livnot Shabbat is all about.

~ Gili

On Behalf Of Zahava Lipton  
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 1:14 AM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters - Day 3: Have You Sent in Yours?

Hello,

I learned about the unique beauty of Shabbat from my parents beginning in my childhood. I've been fortunate to have had many special Shabbat experiences over the years. However, welcoming in the Shabbat while watching the sunset over Tzfat from the Livnot balcony was a breathtaking and unparalleled opportunity. It was as if I could actually see the Shabbat bride as we greeted her in Lecha Dodi. After all, what better visual can there be for this image than the literally watching Shabbat enter a beautiful and ancient Israel city that is so full of history and neshama? To this day, whenever I sing Lecha Dodi to welcome Shabbat, that is the image in my mind. Livnot helped me connect to the joy of welcoming Shabbat on a deeper level than I had previously imagined possible.

Zahava

From: Robb Nanus  
Sent: Sunday, November 10, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Hello Michael!

Shabbat at Livnot was an incredible time to join hands with those that I had grown close to and sing and dance to celebrate the week that had passed. It was a time to share food, ideas and love. It was certainly one of the most memorable parts of my time at Livnot.

Robb
Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I went to summer camp, like so many Jewish kids do, and when Shabbat was coming we would scurry excitedly and scrub ourselves clean and sing at the top of our lungs and bang on the dining hall tables and stamp our feet. The Birkat was the best. But then I got too old for camp, and I didn't go to Israel because I started working to save for college. As time went on, I still went to Shabbat services, you know, sometimes ... rarely ... when I wasn't tired or studying or working late or going to a happy hour or a birthday dinner. When I did mark Shabbat, it was never with the same joy.

Then I found Livnot. Suddenly, in Israel for the first time in my life at age 24, I was spinning in an ecstatic circle at the Wall. I was dancing on the rooftops of Tzfat, watching the sun go down. Pure joy. I felt what it was like to sit and visit with friends deliberately, reflectively. No routine, no distractions. Not just talking, but really talking. Not "How are you?" but "No, really, how are you?"

Another day on that first trip, we were hiking in the Golan. The trail was rocky and steep, and we were all watching our footing on the descent. A young woman serving as our guide asked the few people around her to stop for a second. We did, and as we looked up, we saw a beautiful view of the lush valley below us. "When you're hiking, that's the regular week," our friend said. "When you stop for a second and look around you, that's Shabbat."

It's a concept I've turned over again and again -- still, eight years later -- as I try to carve out space for Shabbat in my mostly secular life. And lately, as a handful of friends in Washington have expressed similar thoughts, we've started spending Friday nights together, cooking and talking and laughing in somebody's apartment or house. I always think of Livnot and our nai nais as we stood in line to wash our hands, smiling, smiling, smiling at everybody.

Sara L.

Shabbat at Livnot,
Inspirational, educational and spiritual. Those are some of the words to describe my shabbat experience at Livnot. There was no pressure to participate or conform, but the atmosphere was so inviting and the food so tasty and the Tzfat are so clean... you were just enveloped in the moment, a 24 hour moment. I must say now 30 years later I am still influenced by those shabbats and hope that I have been successful in bringing some of that shabbat ruach into my home and family. Thank you Livnot

Mitchell Coopersmith
Program One
My first Shabbat in Israel was spent dancing on the rooftop of a building in Old Jerusalem, with people I just met, singing songs we had only just learned. But I didn't feel awkward or out of place... It just felt right. It was such a magical experience to be out under the stars, with this family of strangers. The next day, we split into groups and navigated the streets to find the shuls to which we had been assigned. Again, as strangers we were welcomed into the congregation, and into the home as family to share a wonderful meal. Later that evening our chevre took a walking tour of Old Jerusalem, and finished the night with Havdallah at the hostel, lighting the multi-wick candle, sharing a blessed cup of wine, and smelling sweet herbs and spices. Although I was born and raised in a Jewish household, this was my first time participating in the Havdalah practice. While the Shabbat in Jerusalem was an experience I'll never forget, the Shabbat we spent in Tzfat changed my understanding of the celebration. The Livnot campus provided a setting that helped transform me back to a time long ago. The celebration began watching the beautiful sunset over the mountains, singing and swaying together as one. The next day we were once again welcomed by multiple families into their homes. The evening ended with a huge bonfire. We sang and danced under the open sky, celebrating the separation that we had just completed, preparing ourselves for the new week ahead.

--

Jamie R. Forrest

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Dear Michael,

Shabbat at the end of my week participating on a Livnot program was not my first. Before coming to Livnot, I had experienced more Shabbatot than the typical Livnot-er. But what made my Shabbat at Livnot special was that I had the privilege of being with my peers as they experienced what was some of their firsts, and the beauty of Shabbat, the legacy and longevity of the Jewish heritage, it's ability to unify the Jewish people through shared motions and words expressed all across the world, was renewed in my own eyes. I ate Shabbat lunch with a local Tzfat family that weekend, and with me came a young man from my group who had never experienced Shabbat before. I saw him wash his hands, for the first time with the intent of purifying them, not cleaning them; heard him say the blessing for netilat yadayim; heard him reply "amen" after our hosts said HaMotzi over the challah. And I felt suddenly refreshed in the millennia-old tradition of the Jewish people, in having the privilege of seeing Shabbat for the first time through the eyes of someone who himself was experiencing it for his own first time. While the fact of Shabbat was not new for me, the experience of Shabbat at Livnot brought with it a sense of renewal in my own Jewish practice and tradition that I had not, and likely will not, experience anywhere else.

Shabbat shalom,
A.H.
Dear Michael Stienhardt,

I wanted to take a few moments to tell you about my Shabbat experience at Livnot. It is very hard to put into words, but I will try. I attended Birthright Israel in the summer of 2007. It was a wonderful experience where I saw so many sights and learned so much about the land of Israel. When I decided to attend a Livnot program in the summer of 2009, I wasn’t sure what to expect. What I found was something incredibly magical and wonderful and like nothing I had ever experienced. My entire Livnot experience and Shabbat specifically, connected me to Judaism in a way my Birthright trip had not. There is such a communal aspect to the Livnot Shabbat. My chevre and I prepared the food together, baked challah together and set our Shabbat table together. We gathered to sing together as we watched the most gorgeous Israeli sunset on the balcony of the Livnot building in Tsfat. The staff at Livnot is so knowledgeable and provided so much additional information on the traditions of Shabbat that I never learned when on Birthright. I am forever grateful for my Livnot experience and fortunately I have been able to continue many of those Shabbat traditions with fellow chevre since we returned from our trip. The friendships I formed and things I learned stay with me to this day. I hope more young people can experience the magic that is Livnot.

Sincerely,
Laura Belkin
New York City

Aaron,
Every Friday as I sing Kabbalat Shabbat to usher in the Shabbat bride, I am transported to that roof overlooking the hills as the sun would set. Every time I make my parve chocolate cake I remember learning the recipe (from one of the worker's wife) and making frequently (by popular demand) for our Shabbat dinners at Livnot. Every time I have the opportunity to teach Yiddishkeit of any kind to Jews of all levels of knowledge (but especially the ones who are like I was - "the one who did not even know how to ask") I think of all you and the incredible influence you had on my life, personally and professionally. The president of my shul (Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel in Philadelphia) asked those of us who attended the United Synagogue Convention this past October in Baltimore to share our impressions. After reading your request for letters about how Livnot influenced our lives I thought I would share what I shared with my community during Kiddush a few weeks ago. I thank HaShem for Livnot. You truly changed my life.

Shabbat Shalom! (Cantor) Sharon Grainer T41
Dear Michael-

Shabbat at Livnot

In the summer of 1986 I was invited to spend Shabbat at Livnot. I resisted going. My great friend Linda Berkowitz was doing the summer programme and she kept on inviting me. My resistance was about me - I was living in Israel at the time, going through a tumultuous time in my life and not really sure which way to go. I was lost. I resisted coming to Tsfat because I didn't feel like anything “religious”. Linda was gently persistent in her invitation and so I arrived one Friday afternoon on one of the last buses to Tsfat. I was immediately embraced by everyone on the programme in such a deep and wholesome way that I never left. I joined the group and then stayed on to assist with the following programme, the fall programme of that year. At the end of the programme I won an award for being the best Shabbat visitor – only because I was the only Shabbat visitor (at that point) who had ever come for Shabbat and never left!

This story has nourished me through the last 27 years and continues to nourish me. I can still feel the ruach around the Friday night table, I still sing the songs I learnt, I still remember the lessons I learnt, the conversations I had with Aharon, the lessons I learnt from Miriam (“Always boil eggs before Shabbat. You never know, you might need them.”) Gabi’s laughter, Tovah Leah’s quiet wisdom, the sharing of the chevre, the books I read in the quiet solitude of Livnot. Shabbat at Livnot touched me deeply. It has been one of the most profound experiences of my life. And it has touched my family as well as I have been able me to pass on the lessons, the songs, the wisdom, the insights, the love to my husband and my three sons, and so nourish them as well.

27 years later (is it really that long ago?) I still feel nourished by my Shabbat experiences at Livnot. I have vivid memories of us girls preparing for Shabbat while the boys went off to the mikvah; the tension and energy in the kitchen, the quietness that descended as we lit the Shabbat candles.

At Livnot we were never forced to keep Shabbat in our own rooms. Initially, after our Friday night dinner, I would go back to my room and switch my light on. One Shabbat, after a particularly special dinner, an evening filled with singing, laughing, table banging and wise “deva’ar torahs”, I went back to my room and my hand went automatically to the light switch. But this time my hand stopped – I had this profound sense that as soon as I switched on the light I would lose the feelings, the beauty, the depth and joy of what I had just experienced, the feelings I had brought with me from the Shabbat table. That was how I learnt the significance and magic of Shabbat at Livnot. I learnt to hold on to that feeling, and always ensure that I am nourished by it.

Shabbat at Livnot enabled me to embrace my heritage in a profound and long-lasting way. It has been one of the privileges of my life to have experienced Shabbat at Livnot. While my friends speak of the joys and growth they experienced travelling the world, I always have memories of the joy and growth I experienced at Livnot. The depth, the simplicity and authenticity of what Livnot offers will feed me forever.

Warm regards

Sue Buchalter
Dear Michael and Aharon,

You have solicited from me to share some thoughts on the impact of the Livnot Shabbat experience. Thank you - the very process of doing so feels emotional for me. I’m not sure why. I participated in the full 3 month program in Tzfat in the fall of 1993. I was 28 years old and was in a transition period of my life, having recently taken a leave of absence from my position as an actuarial analyst for an insurance company. I started dabbling in Jewish observance and decided that a needed a break from the rat race to spend some time in Israel. Livnot was exactly the type of experience that I had been yearning for. The Shabbat experience was the pinnacle of everything that we did. The air of Tzfat, the sunset over Meron, the quite yet passionate leadership of Michael, and the camaraderie of the chevre combined for an experience that was just that – an experience. By attempting to articulate the experience in mere words is an intellectual exercise that at best can only present to the reader a hollow shadow of the real thing.

Yes, that’s what the Livnot Shabbat means to me. Since that sweet time 20 years, I have chosen to observe Shabbat as best I can. I learned from my Rabbi’s in yeshiva much of the minutiae of honoring Shabbat both with “shamor v’zachor”, which is to refrain from forbidden work activities as well as honor the day with special honor. From Livnot, I learned the special place that Shabbat can and must occupy in the depths of my heart. To be frank and honest, I don’t merit touching that place every week. Often, Shabbat for me is simply a time to relax, eat good food, and hopefully spend some time with my children. I nonetheless carry a place in my memory and in my heart of what Shabbat can and should be.

Thank you for that special gift. May you and the Livnot family merit to spread the gift of Shabbat to many many generations of chevre to come.

Sincerely,

David
Dear Aharon and Livnot,

Way back in 1985, Livnot was a formative experience for me, as I started on a path of discovery of my Jewishness. Shabbat was especially powerful, as the chevre became unified by the ruach, the breezes, mixing the air of Tvat, of Shabbat, and of our own singing voices. It was definitely the best time for us as a group. And it was the time we most felt how important we were to Aharon, as he waited for us to return from our experiences in the community, asking each one of us, "Nu, how was it?" All these years later, my closest friendships are with past chevrei, who have continued on that path Livnot helped to set us on. And amazingly, this influence carries on, as our children form friendships as if they're family. It's hard for me to believe it, but now we're even dancing at our kids weddings together! I feel immeasurable gratitude to the Botzers, Livnot, and all the people who subsidized my experience.

Wishes for Continued Success,
Karen Pear

From: Josh Brandoff
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 7:39 PM
To: botzer@livnot.org
Subject: Shabbat Experience

Dear Ahron,

Aviva asked me to write a short note about my Shabbat experience at Livnot:

My Birthright experience would not have been nearly as meaningful had I not stayed with Livnot. One of the most poignant experiences was the Shabbat dinner and evening that Alon and his family graciously shared with me and other visitors. Coming from the hectic world of the US, it's easy to lose touch with your humanity. It's also easy to get caught up in custom and repetition and forget the underlying meaning of actions you are performing. Shabbat with Alon's family was all about taking time to re-engage that humanity, fully engage each other in conversation, and truly listen. We were asked to write short essays to bring and discuss during the evening as well. Mine was about how, rather than keeping technology as a tool, we've begun to let it dominate us and interfere with our humanity. Thinking about this topic in the context of Shabbat and with Alon's family made it all the more poignant. It showed me that Shabbat is a time to "disconnect" ourselves from the constructs of the physical world that are pushed upon us by society and re-engage with the humanity within ourselves and those we care about. Shabbat is as much about honoring your humanity as it is about Judaism (though, perhaps the biggest lesson that I received from Livnot was that Judaism can/should be primarily about honoring your humanity).

Best,

Josh
From: Jennifer Tinianow  
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 7:53 PM  
To: botzer@livnot.org  
Subject: Re: 1000 Letters in 72 Hours

Dear Aharon,

My apologies that I could not send this sooner. My Shabbat with Livnot in Tzfat was a Shabbat unlike I have ever had. The week I attended happened to be the week that the month-long group left for their free weekend, so my small week-long group was joined by several others who came just to spend Shabbat with us. At sundown, we did the traditional Livnot synagogue-hop. It was amazing to rush through town with all of the residents to get to shul for Friday night Shabbat services. It was the least stressful rush that I have ever experienced, and I could get a similar feeling off of everyone around me.

After services, we returned to the Livnot campus to eat our Friday night Shabbat meal, which we had prepared earlier in the day. We all became very fast friends through dinner, though some of us had only met mere hours before. In the morning, we set off for our lunches with Tzfat residents. They opened our homes to us with such welcome that it felt like we were family. The rest of the was spent in traditional Shabbat relaxation fashion until we said goodbye with a dinner and breath-taking sunset on the Livnot porch.

This was my last evening in Tzfat and Israel; my flight was early the next morning. I couldn't possibly have thought of a better send-off from the country. Thank you to Livnot and all of my Chevre for completely exceeding my expectations and giving me one of my most memorable Shabbats.

All the best,  
Jennifer Tinianow

From: Ashleigh Whelan  
Sent: Friday, November 08, 2013 10:35 PM  
To: Aharon Botzer  
Subject: Re: Shabbat letter

Dear Michael,

My time at Livnot seemed so far away when I first thought of it...but thinking about Shabbat in Tzfat brings it all right back. Singing niggunim on the terrace, making challah, watching a bar mitzvah during Friday night services...from start to finish Shabbat was absolutely incredible.

I feel so fortunate to have spent time in Israel with Livnot was the best decision I could have made.

Todah rabah,  
Ashleigh Whelan
Livnot changed my life.

Having met on a UJC Singles mission in 1996, my wife and I wanted to return to Israel and have an authentic Jewish/Israel experience. We wanted to immerse ourselves in our culture and Israel, but really did not know what we were getting ourselves into. We both grew up in Jewish homes, in my case primarily "High Holiday Jews" in my wife's family they at least lit candles on Friday night. Livnot embraced us. For the first time in my life I celebrated Shabbat with joy and love. Much different than the formality that I associated with attending services on the High Holy days.

Viewing sunset from the balcony of the Livnot Tzfat campus with my chevre I began to understand the beauty of Shabbat and my soul became open. We learned about our heritage. We tried new experiences and worked the land. We had long hikes and deep discussions into the night. My love for my wife became stronger and my love for Judaism began.

Today I am the father of two wonderful children. We light candles most Friday nights and attend Saturday morning services regularly. My children attend day school where I serve as the first Vice President. My wife studies regularly with our Rabbi. My family and it's relationship with the community is stronger because we attended Livnot.

-Gregg Russo

Greetings! Apologies for the late reply. Hope this letter still has some use! I just wanted to say how amazing and touching my journey with Livnot was. I travelled to Israel in 2008 and 5 years later, the memories and lessons and sense of gratefulness are still crystal clear. From climbing Masada, to singing and dancing on a rooftop in the Jewish Quarter, to debating with Israeli soldiers, to praying at the Wall, to singing EVERYWHERE - my trip was full of intense, unique moment that made me engage with my religion and past in a way I never had. I felt so ALIVE on this trip, so AMAZABLE (to use a word that one of our leaders introduced to us). I didn't walk away with easy answers - the experience at Livnot is not about an open-and-closed 'sales pitch'...it's about reawakening the dialogue, and making sure it continues. I have spoken with many other birthright travellers, and feel so incredibly glad I chose Livnot...with its focus on hiking and volunteering, it connects you with the LAND and the PEOPLE of Israel in a way that few others do, and it's clear to me that I experienced a uniquely special birthright trip. I'm a travel writer by profession, which means I have many wonderful memories of inspiring trips to exotic places, but none have moved me, and continue to inspire me, like my time in Israel with Livnot. If I could, I'd re-do that trip a hundred times over.

Many many many thanks,
Amalia McGibbon
The Influence of Livnot’s Shabbat 30 years later

Shelley and I arrived from Boston straight to Safed to join Livnot in the summer of 1983 – the first boyfriend and girlfriend to do the program, if I recall correctly. While we lit Shabbat candles and occasionally attended Friday night services in Boston, we weren’t prepared for the warm, inviting experience of a Livnot Shabbat and the whole program. It helped expose us to the beauty and joy of Shabbat and Judaism. When we made aliyah two years later and established our home in Jerusalem, and later in Ma’aleh Adumim, our Livnot experience stayed with us as we raised our four children. We can’t say that any of them have become observant Jews, but they have absorbed the Shabbat dinner experience. And no matter where they are, even as adults themselves, they make every attempt to come home – to light the candles, to embrace their other family members, to taste the challah and the wine and to take a timeout from their busy lives to appreciate the quiet, the togetherness and the love that emits around the Shabbat table. We can thank Livnot for teaching us that and helping us pass it down to our children.

Livnot was an absolute turning point in my life as a Jewish woman and a citizen of the world. I came to Livnot to deepen my connection to Judaism, to clarify what our tradition had to offer and how it was relevant to me, to walk the paths of our homeland, and to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Israelis in need. I accomplished all these things and more. Through programs, informal education, casual conversations, and experience I gained a sense of what it means to be Jewish and connected to Israel. Since I participated in Livnot (1999) I have worked as a Jewish professional for UJC, I married a Jewish man (and past Livnot participant, 1992, we met at an alumni event in Los Angeles), and we are raising two children who attend Jewish day school. Our family and our day to day lives are intertwined with the values and traditions of Judaism and we are blessed beyond measure.

With heartfelt gratitude,
Rachel Ann Miller
Dear Michael,

Really enjoyed reading and completely agree with your article. I think Ahad Ha'am, founder of cultural Zionism, would agree as well. As he wrote: "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." My Birthright Israel experience took place at Livnot U'Lehibanot. To say that my experience at Livnot was profound or transformative or a Jewish awakening or any other superlative would be a vast understatement. I'm happy to discuss in detail at any time, but here I'm focusing on the Livnot Shabbat experience. I grew up in a largely secular family. Observed the major holidays most conservative and reform American Jews observe: High Holidays, Passover, Sukkot and Purim (during Hebrew school years), Hanukkah and Shabbat (when there's a bar/bat mitzvah). My mom would typically light the Shabbat candles by herself. I'd always just at some point Friday night notice there were candles burning; that was the extent of it.

At Livnot, all of the participants (us, the chevre), would prep the campus in Jerusalem and in Safed on Fridays. We cleaned, we cooked, we were preparing for something special. We were intensely aware of Shabbat's approach and were excited for its arrival. These feeling on Fridays were brand new to me: anticipation, togetherness, joy, purpose beyond school, work, the mundane. We were wholly immersed in a traditional Shabbat from candle lighting to Havdalah. This time was not focused in any perceivable way on what not to do, on restrictions, but solely on meaning, community, happiness, learning, discussion, participation, inclusiveness. And you're absolutely correct that finding or replicating this feeling and Shabbat atmosphere outside of the Birthright bubble is challenging to say the least. Since the trip, I've lived in Chicago, New York, LA and now in Denver and got together with alumni from Livnot107 in each city for Shabbat dinners, Passover seders, secular events. One fellow Livnot participant in particular: Serena Wolf. We were engaged three years after returning from Israel and now live in Denver with our two children.

We would absolutely participate in Birthright Shabbat dinners. We know people locally who would jump at the chance to help organize this or would even want to be hired to run the local branch. Serena and I would be more than happy to discuss these ideas with you or your staff at any time. We're also more than happy to discuss the importance of Livnot to our lives and the lives of the alumni from Livnot107 (April 2000).

All the best,
Walt Landy
303-808-0454
walttlandy@gmail.com
"A nice Jewish boy and I've never been to Israel"
Little did I know where this thought would lead me. I had been working for Ernst & Young in
NYC with a successful career, but feeling something was missing and was looking for a change.
This thought led me to seek out a program in Israel where I would learn about Judaism and
Israel and do lots of hiking. The Zionist Organization of America recommended I check out
Livnot. I took a furlough from work, hopped on a plane and ended up in Livnot's Tzfat campus.
Growing up I knew little about Judaism and never met any inspiring role models who were into
Judaism. It was only at Livnot I met for the first time observant Jews that were cool, fun, and
thoughtful, people I could look up to and want to be like them. I spent a wonderful three months
in Tzfat T39 and then was a madrich in Jerusalem on the J4 program. When I left, my I had
enough of a taste of Judaism and Shabbos that I wanted to keep learning more. I moved to the
Upper West Side of NYC and got involved in with the Jewish community, then made my way to
several learning programs in Israel. Fast forward 20 years later, I am an observant Jew, happily
married with four kids (bli ayin hara), gainfully employed in my chosen profession and living
Eretz Yisrael. Some of my closest friends are part of my Livnot family. Livnot is a wonderful
program that exposes unaffiliated Jews to the wonderful tradition of Judaism in a way this is
sweet, fun and interesting. Aharon, Miriam and all the entire Livnot family should have continued
success in their very important work.

Avraham Nadell (Ramat Beit Shemesh) T39 and J4

From: Martha Kruger  
Sent: Sunday, November 10, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Hello Jill and Hello Aharon -

How nice to get your emails. It is funny but I was just telling a fellow I work with that I once
traveled to Cairo -- and that was with Judy, on our trip after Livnot!

I moved to Israel in 95, and now live in Zichron Yaacov, together with my husband and kids. I
work as a film editor, and also as an archivist in a large film library.

I think my time at Livnot helped cement my decision to live in Israel. It was an experience that
showed me that living here meant being part of something larger than myself. I am not
especially observant, not especially political, not especially anything -- but I am now Israeli.
And I have a kid in the IDF...

I am grateful that I was part of Livnot -- The chevre was so fun, and I met teachers who were
devoted to the chevre. It was a real communal experience and yet it allowed for a great deal of
independent thinking.

I wish Aharon all the best, and hope that all the chevre of T-13 are doing well - where ever
they are!
Martha
Dear Ahron,

I think we may have found a cure for Alzheimers.

Memories fade; taken away by old age, disease, and the ever greater pressures of hectic lives. In the dark vessel of our minds they swirl, tangle together, fade, and slowly dissipate. Stop! Listen! Out of the corner of your eye is a glow. Look closer. Shining and warm; a kernel. It pulses slowly; it glows; it grows stronger. It touches the dark around it. It brings solidity, connection, meaning, light.

Scientists will one day undoubtedly be able to examine, document, and fully understand that core. Until those papers are published in peer reviewed scholarly journals though, let me tell you about it: It is the memory of shabbat at Livnot in Tsfat.

But it is not that at all. Oh no. That is the name we give it, but it is much more. Yes, much more than that. It is more than the muffled steps you take, walking the streets of Tsfat, song pouring from the stones around you, the sun’s parting leaving a comforting and joyous darkness. It is more than the feeling of belonging; that deep down feeling that all is right. Hine ma tov uma nayim. As long as this exists, all will be right.

Each step is one of anticipation as that familiar door looms before you. I belong here. I am wanted and needed, and a part of something. Light shines through the crack as the door swings slowly open. Voices raised in friendship steal the comforting blanket of hymns and prayers suffusing the night; tossing it high, and twirling it in a flurry of preparation and celebration. Friends, kindred spirits, Jews, all around you. A common purpose. Being Jewish. Being Jewish together. As Jews. There is a power in what we do. Each cut of the knife. Each stir of the pot. Each sift of the flower. We talk, we learn, we grow, we celebrate.


Shabbat at Livnot is not about teaching us to be Jewish. It is the essence of what it is to be Jewish. It is that core inside that stays with you, that touches everything else, and that will never be extinguished.

I have no fear of getting Alzheimers. I know who I am. I have a core that keeps me safe. One day, when you read about it in the journal “Nature,” just remember, you heard it here long before.

Sincerely,

Jacques Katz

Toronto, Canada
Dear Livnot,

Before I jump into describing Shabbat at Livnot, I think we need to pose the question: “How is this program different from all other programs?”

The whole idea of Livnot U’Lehibanot, “to build and to be built,” is that when you invest something of yourself, when you give, when help to create something, the love and appreciation you have for that thing, the connection you have with it, is worlds greater than if it was handed to you pre-made and pre-packaged. At Livnot, we put our hearts and souls – and elbow grease – into projects for the wider community, and also into our own internal community, the group of participants we call our “chevre.”

And that giving and investment of energy is especially true for the Livnot Shabbat experience. Together, the chevre share in cleaning before Shabbat, preparing the Shabbat meals, setting up the tables, serving the meals, clearing and washing up. The food is that much tastier when you know the love and effort you and your friends put into it. The space is that much more bright and beautiful when you know the attention the group put into making everything look nice. The melodies of Kabbalat Shabbat, Z’mirot and Bentching are all the more sweeter when we’re singing them together as a chevre who made that Shabbat happen. The divrei Torah are all the more meaningful when they’re prepared by our friends, drawing from our learning and experience.

That’s not to say you can’t have a meaningful Shabbat as a “guest.” There’s a place for that too, and we met some wonderful families that way at Livnot. But too often, Judaism is colored by a kind of “spiritual consumerism,” as in “What can I get out of it?” At Livnot, we build Shabbat, and we’re built by it. It’s a spirituality that we develop through giving, sharing, and enjoying the fruits of our labor together as a group. Not only does that make Shabbat more meaningful, not only does it prepare us as individuals for what it’s like to actually create a Shabbat for ourselves and our friends and families after Livnot, but it teaches – by actually living it – what Judaism is really all about. Which makes Shabbat at Livnot just about the greatest “Jewish learning experience” I can think of.

So, thank you Livnot – and thank you chevre!

Best regards,

“David B.” (David Bar-Cohn, Tzfat 39)
From: Audrey Adler Rosner
Sent: Sunday, November 10, 2013
To: botzer@livnot.org

Michael Stienhardt-

I was 28 when I decided to go to Israel. At that time of my life, I was empty, my life was painful, meaningless, it made no sense. The Livnot program attracted me because of its unique location in Tzfat and its openness to secular Jewish people, its educational program and the attachment to the land. There was something inside of me burning, needing to connect, an inner knowing of where I wanted to be and a thirst and will to find out.

There has been no single life experience that had such a profound effect on my life. I was able to discover what a gold mine was out there for Jewish souls.

Shabbat evening, with its candles and sensual setting was a profound experience of peace and belonging, connection and fulfillment.

My life has been forever transformed.

Thank you to Livnot, the Botzer's, the Nachmani's and all chevre I met along the way.

Audrey Adler Rosner

From: Daniel Moscovitch
Sent: Sunday, November 10, 2013
To: botzer@livnot.org

Michael Stienhardt,

As you already know all so well by now, spending a Shabbat @ Livnot can be a very magical and meaningful life experience. The average Jewish tourist visiting Israel on birthright will usually talk about the amazing shabbat that they spent in Jerusalem and its incredible old city. I know I enjoyed/continue to enjoy every Shabbat I get to spend there. However, it wasn't until having an amazing shabbat weekend at Livnot that I really felt the good ol' shabbes spirit.

From preparing the meal all together, to collaborating during a unique and beautiful shabbat service, or from playing silly shabbat games after the meal to roaming the quiet streets of Tzfat during the day....all aspects were simply spiritually awakening and soul refreshing. I hope that every Jew visiting Israel gets to experience what so many of us have now been blessed with at Livnot!

Daniel Moscovitch
Livnot Alumni March 2012
Dear Mr. Steinhardt,

I was lucky enough to spend 2 Shabbats with Livnot U'lehibanot in Tzfat. Two Shabbats, on different holidays, a year apart, and two Shabbats that I will never forget. I spent the first one, during Passover, with the bat sherut who was working at Livnot at the time, discussing Judaism, a woman's role in the Jewish home and the world at large, and the ways that I as a secular Jew could infuse my life with the spirituality that was so present in Tzfat on Shabbat. The following year I returned to Livnot having made aliyah about 6 months before, to spend Succot in the place that I had such a fond memory of. Again, I found myself surrounded by Jewish young adults from all walks of life, from Israel and around the world, who had come together to ask questions, define their own Judaism, and take a piece of Tzfat and Livnot wherever they would go. Some of us were alum, who had come back knowing what a special experience was in store. Some of us were first timers, who were caught off-guard by just how meaningful a Shabbat could be.

A shared meal, invigorating discussions, open staff willing to discuss the ins and outs of what it means to be Jewish in today's world and how we could take some piece of Livnot with us forward, made these Shabbats unforgettable. My two times at Livnot were not the first or only Jewish programming I have taken part of, but they remain some of my dearest Jewish memories. From lighting the candles on Friday evening, and feeling safe and supported to go up and say the prayer even if you never had before, to the next day's Havdallah on the same balcony where so many great Jews had found inspiration, there is nothing like a Livnot Shabbat.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, and thank you for all of the opportunities that you have given me and so many of my friends to experience Israel.

Mara Friedman

I will never forget Gabi entering shabbos and emitting a sigh of delight, saying "'Ahh Shabbos." There was such a sense of pleasure in his voice, like he was savoring an exquisite meal. I also remember the ruach of the group singing shabbos songs together, banging the tables along with music. And kabalat shabbat on the roof, looking at the beautiful sunset, filling us with the mysteries of this intensely spiritual place. Shabbos there meant many things to me: group unity, learning and growing, discovering with it means to be a Jew, connecting to the past and discovering a bright future that awaited me. Now, 29 years later, my 17-year-old son, leins from the Torah and leads services, my eldest daughter leads girls group in our shul, the middle daughter writes poems about Hashem's works to be found in nature and my 8-year-old daughter is starting to read Rashi in school. Michael you have come a long way! Thanks Livnot.

Michael
Dear Michael Steinhardt,

During June of 2012, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in Livnot in Tzfat, Israel. My time at Livnot was an incredible and unique life experience. I reflect upon these memories with great nostalgia especially my Shabbat experience. The events leading up to Shabbat were new and exciting for me as we braided challah, prepared food, and learned songs to sing. During the dinner, I remember sitting with familiar and unfamiliar faces as we all came together to celebrate Shabbat. After the dinner, everyone gathered on the balcony to enjoy songs and the picturesque view of the mountains. I remember walking around Tzfat; it was completely inspiring to be in such a spiritual place. Coming from a neighborhood in New York where there is a sparse population of Jews, I never felt more connected with Judaism before. This experience really moved me and made me more in touch with Judaism and the desire to continue these meaningful traditions.

Sincerely,

Melissa Kishlansky

Hi Avital,

Of course I remember you. I am doing fine. I remember Tzfat, the livnot campus, and the unique experiences we had together. I wish you a good month too and success in your studies.

One of the most memorable experience was the celebration of the Shabbat. This day was special because of the honor and respect given to it by livnot. This day was celebrated by singing Shabbat songs together, playing instruments such as the guitar and the drum, lighting the Shabbat candles, praying in the synagogue together with the Jews of Tzfat, and cooking fabulous meals such as chicken, vegetables, meat, etc. Preparing the challah was one of the most memorable experience in Tzfat. Challas were prepared by all of us, and each was different. They were cooked before Shabbat and they were eaten by all of us. They were delicious and each reflected our love for the Shabbat day. Then, during the Shabbat, we would sing Shabbat songs together, dance, and be happy. We would recite the blessings over the wine and the challah. We would eat the food we prepared and we would rejoice over our accomplishments.

Jonathan Bohbot
From: Brett Anders  
Sent: Monday, November 11, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

I traveled to Israel with Birthright, but I am so glad I stayed after Birthright. While those first 10 days were a great experience, my understanding of Israel broadened a lot when that trip ended. My time with Livnot helped me grow close with a small international group (several Israelis, several Americans, and a few people from other countries). The combination of learning and exploration in the Northern Exposure program was wonderful. Having had those experiences, I have continued to seek out various learning opportunities back home in the US (at school, at my home synagogue, and in the local community). I also have a much better understanding of more observant communities — I was raised in a reform congregation, and being in Israel was my first time in contact with much more observant communities, and my experience with Livnot helped me to understand that lifestyle much better, something I’ve appreciated since returning to the US.

From: Daniel Stein  
Sent: Monday, November 11, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael Stienhardt,

The day after my Birthright trip ended, I got on a bus and went straight to Livnot. Upon arrival, all fears and doubts about making the right choice had left my being, and I was engulfed in a world of familial love and inspiring possibility. The week was filled with learning, exploring, soul-searching and soul-reaffirming experiences, with a grand finale shabbat which sealed the deal in a celebrational way. Sharing my thoughts and feelings ("Words of Wisdom") in front of 75 visiting guests/investors from Florida, I realized that the experiences I was having (with the graceful guidance of Livnot) were the building blocks to the future of my relationship with Judaism. Livnot helped me integrate all that I learned in birthright and enabled me to envision a life full of learning and embracing my Jewish heritage ahead of me. It was the gateway between Birthright and the rest of my life, and I am eternally grateful for the blessing that is Livnot.

Sincerely,
Daniel Stein
Dear Michael Steinhardt,

This is my shabbat story.

After birthright I decided to backpack Israel for a month. I had chosen the New York trip despite attending school in the bay area; I wanted to maximize the risk, reward, challenge, and entropy driven learning experience that would be my vacation after finishing my junior year at Berkeley. Post birthright with Israel Outdoors, I arrived at the home of my first Couchsurfing.com host. Justin had converted after his relationship with his Jewish girlfriend had ended, and came to Israel for grad school. Within 2 hours of arriving, he mentioned Livnot, how it changed his life, and that I should go.

I was scheduled to meet a friend later in the month, the only Livnot program I could attend started that night (in some number of hours from when I arrived at Justin's place.) Sweating, delirious, and sleep deprived from birthright, I traded my 2012 birthright t shirt for his 1990 something birthright sweater since i had no warm clothes, hopped on a bus, and arrived in Tzfat after sunset. My Livnot experience began.

A few days later we were scheduled to attend shabbat with a host family. That day, I lost my smartphone. I placed it on the hood of a car while fumbling with something else and forgot to pick it up. Later that day, I could not find my wallet. I have only lost my wallet once in my life before this, and never my phone. All I had left was my passport, a backpack, and a little cash. I recognize the privilege of having these material objects to lose in the first place, and the opportunity that allowed me to be in Israel, nevertheless, I was pissed off, stressed out, and the wear and tear of traveling alone was getting to me. I spent the remaining time until sunset figuring out what I would do about money, cancelling accounts, passwords, etc.all in a rush before places I might need to access, like the post office or bank, closed for the sabbath.

Then shabbat began. I still remember walking down stone streets to my room. A sweet coolness in temperature. Time slowing, everyone saying Shabbat Shalom. I had exhausted my emotions, I couldn't think about that which i had lost anymore.

Relevant ideas danced in the architecture of my overworked neurons, 'divine happiness', 'receiving so you may give', things the rabbi at Livnot talked about yesterday. My Bar Mitzvah, seemed like more and more of a joke, my rediscovered Judaism more and more relevant to my present situation. My worn mind began to settle in a calm after the storm, it entered the present moment, freed from the possessions of the past and free from planning for the next few days.

And then my friend, who I still keep in touch with, and I were welcomed into the home of a family of 4. A break. Finally, a tangible, powerful, ordained break. Shabbat, time specifically allotted for the purpose of appreciating freedom! What an incredible concept! How relevant! I get it now! After traveling alone, losing all the material objects I clenched with white knuckles, freaking out for the entire day, not sleeping for the past 2 weeks, and knowing I
would have no ability to do anything about it for the next 24 hours or more because the town would shut down, I was thrown into a realm of appreciation, of enlightenment, of recognition: it is time for a break. The time had come to appreciate my freedom, freedom from all communication beyond the 5 foot radius of a beautiful dinner table.

My Shabbat with the host family was freedom. What perfect timing. I took more from that experience than I could have had I spent the whole weekend seeking that which I had lost.

Warmly,

Joshua Lavian

From: Joanne Davis  
Sent: Wednesday, November 13, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

Here goes....
Shabbat at Livnot was a very spiritual experience. I still remember singing L’cha Dodi on the rooftop facing the setting sun over Sfat as being one of the most moving experiences of my life. While we were bringing in Shabbat, the IDF helicopters flew overhead. It was a very real combination of the spiritual and the current existence. The coming together of all these Jewish souls from all over the world was a really amazing experience. I loved every moment of it.

Joanne Davis  
Melbourne Australia

From: Chanah Forster  
Sent: Wednesday, November 13, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Aaron, and Mr. Steinhardt,

A short note about Shabbat...
Eighteen years after livnot, I curl up on a chair on my balcony with our seven kids. I try to tell them about Kabbalat Shabbat on the roof in Tsfat. I try to connect as I did during livnot, at that magical time of licht-bentchen. My children are not Baalai Teshuba, they were born into a life which presented Shabbous as the norm. It is their birth rite. At the Shabbous table, I sometimes sing the songs I can remember from Livnot, they love these songs, they are filled with the wonderful vibrant spark that drew me in to become religious. They teach me new songs- which are also old songs, and yet I can still recall my first encounters with Shabbous. Thank You Livnot!

Sincerely,
Chanah Forster

( Amanita Gardner, Tsfat 48, 1993)
To whom it may concern,
Learning and living at Livnot in 1993, was one of the most impactful experiences of my life. Spending time living in community learning about our heritage, offering community service projects, hiking the land of Israel, and then solidifying it all at the end of the week with a joyous shabbat celebration; inspired how I live my adult life. The shabbats I experienced there sparked my desire to share celebratory shabbats filled with song and kavannah regularly.

Currently, I celebrate shabbat every week with my family, and rejoice in having a day of rest. It feels so important in the business that fills my weekdays. The sparks at Livnot have inspired me to create a Jewish Intentional community in America, which is in process.

Thank you Aaron! Thank you Michael and Tzurit! Thank you to all those at Livnot and the beautiful campus in Tzfat. Livnot changed influenced my life forever, and I am so appreciative.

B’shalom,
Stacey London-Oshkello, T40

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Dear Michael,

I can hardly remember my first real Shabbat experience of my life, but I can tell you with certainty that it was with Livnot in Tzfat, a little over 17 years ago, and it changed my life. Only a few short years later, I married my "Bat Sherut" (national service girl) even though it was against the rules of the program (of course I waited until the program was well over!) and made Aliyah to Israel. Of course my story is not typical, but there it is nonetheless. And I know that it all goes back to that first magical and breathtaking Shabbat in Tzfat.
From: Kathy Judah  
Sent: Thursday, November 14, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org  

Aharon,

Not only did I have to share that my first shabbat experience was at Livnot with you, but I had to express my deep gratitude to you and Livnot for providing me with the positive Jewish identity I have today, and the one that I am passing on to my 3 Jewish children.

The anti-semitism that has been reported by the Jewish families in the article is the same anti-semitism I endured in this small "upstate" New York town 27 years ago. Within the first weeks of moving from Westchester to Orange County, NY, a swastika was spray painted on our driveway. In middle and high school, kids would throw pennies at me, call me a "cheap Jew," and make other derogatory comments and slurs about Jews. And unbelievably, on many occasions, parents of my friends, would tell anti-semitic jokes in front of me. I am not proud, but in order to draw less attention to myself, if asked, "Kathy, are you Jewish?" (and I was asked this question a lot), I would tell classmates "no, I'm not really Jewish." And in a way I wasn't. I didn't want to be different, to stick out, to draw the ridicule of classmates, friends, and the prejudiced adults that were their parents. It sickens me that the prejudice and ignorance of the past is being passed down to yet another generation.

After reading this article, all those awful memories came flooding back and I realized, It is kind of a miracle that I got to Israel at all. I had no positive connection to Judaism, but thanks to timing, a bad job market for new teachers, and a tri-folded Livnot pamphlet I happened upon; I went to Israel for the Livnot 3 month program in Tzfat.

My first weeks at Livnot were incredible. The shame and denial that were my Jewish identity fell away and for the first time in my life I was grateful and proud to be Jewish.

I hope Livnot continues with its mission to give young Jews a positive Jewish education and experience in Israel because there is still very much a need.

Please let me know what I can do to help Livnot keep doing what you do so well.

Kathy Juda T39
I just wanted to take a moment to share with you my Shabbat experience with Livnot on Shabbat, in Tzfat. The tone is set before Shabbos even begins. The transition from the end of the week to the preparation and songs that we sung as the sun was setting, watching the clouds merge into the hills was such a powerful experience.

It truly is fantastic to be able to unite with so many different peers and celebrate the oneness of eachother on Shabbat. I was raised and currently still consider myself in the ‘reform’ category of Judaism, but the Livnot and Shabbat experience has had much meaning. It encouraged me to further explore ways to integrate the true spirit of Shabbat into my weekly observance. I often drift back to fond memories of our group around the table, the vibrant energy of the blessing, the tisch, and the commradery.

I actually once organized a Livnot Shabbat here in Seattle, and still have and use the Siddurs (based on our Livnot Shabbos dinner) when we host friends over. I also make sure to take time out on Saturdays to just relax, and build my ‘temple in time’ as described by R. Heschel (The Sabbath). The staff is so welcoming and caring, the entire experience through Havdalah is incredibly meaningful, and it real does help solidify the bonds of us as ‘Chevraim’

I hope to be able to make it back to replicate and participate in another (or many more) Livnot Shabbos in Tzfat as I age and mature. Livnot holds a special place in my heart, and I am proud to be a small piece of the larger picture.

With warm regards and much gratitude

Joshua M. Donion
Josh.donion@bankofamerica.com
206.498.1040

Dear Aharon,

During my short Otzma options track with Livnot, I was fortunate enough to have spent a Shabbat in Tzfat, and a Shabbat in Jerusalem. The peace, beauty, and community of those Shabbatot at Livnot lit a spark in me to connect deeper with Jewish tradition and ritual. Indeed, looking back I now realize that I embarked on a journey that I’m still on. Only now part of the Jewish future is in my hands as my three daughters are along for the ride. We participate vigorously in our local Jewish community, and that includes Jewish day school and synagogue membership and attendance every single week as a family. It all connects to our weekly Shabbat experience connecting as a family, and this journey initiated one Friday night on a rooftop in Tzfat over 20 years ago.

Thanks,
Vlad
From: Zaq Harrison  
Sent: Monday, November 18, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Shabbat in Tzfat:

I will never forget sitting in a discussion during my program (#10-Fall '83) with one of our Teachers Yisrael Shalem. Yisrael was a very interesting guy who made his way to Israel from the States in the early 70’s and had found himself in the Paratroops during the Yom Kippur War. Tzfat was his home, he was a tour guide and was a special teacher even by Livnot standards. I even had the pleasure of being invited to share a Shabbat dinner with his family during the program.

One day my life was to take a sudden turn I just didn’t know it yet. In the middle one of our conversations during his class a voice spoke up “Yisrael: How do we know that Shabbat is on Saturday, why not Tuesday or any other day of the week?” You can imagine the silence as all eyes and I mean all eyes turned to Yisrael who contemplated for as long as he needed and said the following “I don’t know. I can tell you though that I fall asleep every Saturday afternoon. I don’t fall asleep Tuesday afternoons or any other day of the week. I fall asleep every Saturday afternoon that’s how I know it’s Shabbat.”

For over thirty years I fall asleep every Saturday afternoon, that is how I know it is Shabbat. I am thankful to have learned in Tzfat that day that sometimes there are simple answers to complicated questions.

Thank you Yisrael - may your memory be a blessing to us all.

Zaq Harrison

From: Sherri Mandell  
Sent: Sunday, November 24, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,
I had never kept Shabbat before I attended Livnot in 1984, and even during Livnot I did not keep Shabbat. Every week I felt that keeping Shabbat was too much for me, and every week I went downstairs, back to my room and broke Shabbat in some way: writing, washing clothes, or tearing toilet paper. But it was the taste of Shabbat—without pressure—that led me to become more interested in exploring Judaism. I’d had no Jewish education and this encounter with sacred time and space I am sure helped launch me on my path toward—eventually—living in Israel. My children are now Shabbat observant. I can truly say that there is nothing better for a Jewish family than keeping the Sabbath.

My children are studying in university, my son was a commander in the army. But the thing I am most proud about is that my children love the Torah, Israel, and most important, the Sabbath. Anybody who comes to Israel is missing out if he or she does not taste the sacred time of the Jewish Sabbath.

Sherri Mandell
Dear Michael,

During a trek to Israel some 32 years ago, I opted into the third semester of a then relatively unknown, feisty little study/work program in Tzfat, Livnot U’Lehibanot.

Coming from a religiously and culturally assimilated Jewish American background, the bid to try out an new initiative delving into an Israel and Jewishly-suffused realm was a quixotic move. But I was young and willing to try anything new at least once.

For three months I and the other students dormed in Aaron and Miriam Botzer’s extended stone home, set amid ancient Old City alleyways. We gratefully enveloped ourselves in their gracious hospitality, and gradually adapted to a traditional Jewish environment that was holistically instructive, supportive, yet deftly non-coercive.

As the weeks passed, we learned about the living nexus of the People, Land, and Torah of the House of Israel, from the head down, and from the feet up - the mental and muscular meeting amid the heart and neshama.

The daily regimen of striving with modern reads of ancient texts in the classroom in the morning, and afternoons spent struggling to physically - literally - help rebuild Tzfat, heavy stone-by-stone and bucket-of-earth by bucket-of-earth, reanimated a decimated and dormant Jewish and Israeli identity in me.

And then there was Shabbat with the Botzers and their then young family. The weekly immersive and revivifying spiritual experience was light-years away from my secular background and near non-existent Jewish cultural awareness.

Coming from an impoverished childhood in Florida and Texas, I had no awareness of a Jewishly mandated day of rest, learning, and light - let alone one lived, joyously, in the heart of the Jewish world.

Friday’s all-encompassing rounds of shopping, cooking and cleaning; the rooftop Kabbalat Shabbat prayers at sunset; the exotic meals, flavors and fragrances; the camaraderie, study, laughter, singing, joy and sheer fun - what a liberating revelation!

The intense Livnot days passed quickly. At the course’s conclusion some of us went back to life, college and careers in the US and elsewhere. But many of us stayed on or later returned to Israel, with most eventually settling here, as I did.

The wall-to-wall “to build and be rebuilt,” experience would prove a profound turning point in my life, leading to Aliyah and a fuller observance.

Personal circles in life sometimes gyre, spin off and close, while others spiral around the years and decades, gaining strength, ever rising.

Over three decades after taking part in a then-nascent Livnot, and making a life, family and home elsewhere in Israel, I ended up back in Tzfat.
In March, my wife Miri and I married and settled down - ironically - just a few lanes away from the Livnot campus. And we now often host new Livnoters for Shabbat dinners and lunch.

Michael, as an early program alumni I respectfully ask your assistance in helping Aaron and Livnot V'Lehibanot spark more Jews towards regaining their ancient birthright and rejoin the sacred braid of a rich and unifying Jewish life.

Sincerely,
Dave Bender

From: Kimberly Rosenthal
Sent: Tuesday, November 19, 2013
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

Nothing is like Shabbat in Tzfat, just in the same way that nothing tastes as sweet as on Shabbat. Rabbi Nachman tells a story about a king who ate at a peasants house on Shabbat and tasted the best soup, even with it's minimal ingredients. The king had many try to replicate the taste of the soup, but nothing came close. The peasant realized it was because the holiness of Shabbat is what made the soup so delicious.

Everything was delicious in taste and spirit during my Livnot trip. The food tasted sweeter because we all had a hand in cooking as a group. My favorite part was braiding challah that the whole group shared. When we were learning to braid, songs were sung and stories shared about our spiritual journey and what Livnot was doing for our lives. The songs continued long after challah braiding; we sung long into the Shabbat night, which brought a sweetness to our spirit that was already in us from the week.

Since Livnot, I have been trying to capture the essence of what I felt, saw, and did, but nothing can replicate Shabbat in Tzfat. It is true that it is our birthright to come to Israel, but it is just as true that it is our birthright to experience Shabbat in Israel with the company of amazing Jewish leaders and friends.

My blessing for Livnot is that it continues to have many future successful Shabbats in Tzfat!

Kimberly

--
Kimberly Rosenthal
Israel Teaching Fellow 2013-2014
krosenthal2188@gmail.com
LinkedIn: http://www.linkedin.com/pub/kimberly-rosenthal/51/b19/ab6"
Dear Michael,

On a late Friday night in Israel, with my new found friends and family, I fell in love. My new desire was not a woman, it was not a team, it was a city of light, music and joy. It was Tzfat. Spending Shabbat in Tzfat was an experience I will never forget. It opened up my eyes to a whole new way of looking at the day of rest. It helped me understand that Shabbat was not just about being in a synagogue and saying prayers, but it was about singing, dancing, and celebrating with family.

My experience on Shabbat, as well all of the other amazing experiences, was a springboard for me and my Jewish education. Since that moment, I have taught in Jewish Day Schools, taught in three Jewish high schools, and worked as an assistant director at a Jewish overnight camp. At camp, I take those moments of ruach and love from Tzfat and transfer them to my new experiences on Friday night.

Thank you for helping me experience that and changing my life forever.

Sincerely,
Barnett Goldman

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Shabbat at Livnot to me was one of cohesiveness, warmth and friendship. We learnt on a level which spoke to those of us who hadn’t fully kept Shabbat previously and opened a door to ones Jewish heritage which laid dormant. The Livnot teachers taught with passion and patience. The residents who opened their doors in hospitality and delicious Shabbat meals showed their love of Shabbat, family and Chessed.

Being at Livnot on the 2nd program, staying through the 3rd as ‘house mother’ and staying in touch with the directors contributed to my decision to finally make aliyah, meet my husband, and raise 3 sabra children in an observant home as we continue our legacy of Torah, mitzvot and the love of Israel. My two sons have studied in the Yeshiva Hesder programs, serving in the IDF and my daughter in Sherut Leumi.

-Carole Kremer
From: Judith Almog  
Sent: Monday, November 25, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

Hello! I was on the very first Livnot program. In fact I got there from Kibbutz Mizra a few days early so I was helping lay the floor.
I can't write to you about my amazing Sabot’s because I thought they we just ok. I am a Reform Jew. I have been living on Kibbutz Gezer for the last 24 years. I think keeping Shabbat is lovely and very relaxing, but I very seldom do it.
I do remember other things that really struck me. I really enjoyed Succot. I never went Succa hopping before. Everyone welcomed us into their Succa’s which I thought was amazing and great fun.
I loved living in the old city. Just like I like running up to Tel Gezer where I live. I couldn't believe that I was in a place Rabbi Yosef Caro lived. Walking in the place that The Arie lived. The city is magical and I loved working and digging there.
I came to Livnot looking for my Jewishness. I went to a high school that had six Jews, myself included. People used to wish me a Happy Yom Kipper. I went to High school in Bath Maine. I would go over to the Jews who lived in town for the holidays.
I strongly recommend Livnot for any Jew that is looking to find out what it means to be Jewish. I go to Shul every Friday night and light candles.
The Botzer’s took us all into the house and made me feel very much a part of their family.
I want back with my daughter and cousin around five years ago. I told them about the program and they were very happy to know that after all these years Livnot was still going on.
Good Luck!

Sincerely,
Judith Almog

From: Polly Zakadivker  
Sent: Wednesday, November 27, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Livnot offered an experience that helped turn my Jewish identity from a passive and shallow one into an active, and meaningful way of life. The celebration of Shabbat was one highlight, though part of an intense and engaging week. In the decade that passed since I attended Livnot's program in Jerusalem and Safed, I have completed a Master's degree in Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, and this past June, finished my Ph.D. in Jewish History at the University of California.
Livnot was a transforming experience!

Polly
Dear Michael,

It's my joy to share with you what a Livnot Shabbat meant to me.

It opened my eyes and soul to a beauty I had never known before. A coming together of family with wonderful songs and words of Torah, the likes of which I had never experienced.

It made me realize: This is how I want to live my life and raise my--G-d-Willing--children.

And, Hashem has answered my prayers by bringing me to settle in Shilo. Not a day passes that I don't thank Him for giving me the privilege of living here in Eretz Yisrael, in the loving, caring community of Shilo and raise my children and now my grand-children here, Baruch Hashem.

And, it all started with my Livnot Shabbat experience!

You're invited to come and visit--and bring friends--any time you'd like.

B'vracha,
Ariela ben-Eliezer

Singing.
It started first going out to a Shabbas dinner and our host singing Shalom Aleichem beseechingly -- longing for the blessing of peace.

Then, with the Chevre on that rooftop, starting to feel like something out of a Chagall painting rising with the songs above Mount Meron.

On Saturday morning singing with the Breslov in a basement room, hands clasped with the davaner in front and behind, dancing and chanting around that spaces, an unbearable lightness of being.

So enamored of Friday night Shabbas songs, so beautiful were they, that one Shabbas, three of our group snuck a tape recorder in to capture the singing.

After Shabbas we hastened off to listen and the recording sounded – awful.

What I didn’t realize at the time, was that my working memory -- working soul -- would still able to pitch perfectly call up all that singing 25 years later. And how, every Shabbas the songs float and embrace my family with all the love and timelessness learned in Tsfat.
From: Gary Wernick  
Sent: Wednesday, November 27, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

I remember coming into the Livnot Cheder Ochel from a walk in the wadi beneath Zefat, a long meditative affair, just as Seudah Slishit was underway. The singing was so loud, that I could join in without embarrassment despite my completely out of tune voice, and the group atmosphere so intense that it was hard to bear after the solitude of my ramble.

About a year after Livnot, I missed Shabbat so much that I started to keep it, even though I must confess that I waited until immediately after I had used the tickets for the Live Aid concert. It was easy keeping Shabbat in the orthodox atmosphere of Cambridge (UK) University Jewish Society, where many of my fellow students went on to become rabbis and pillars of their communities. Less so, in some of the other cities that I have found myself studying and working in throughout the last thirty years. In one town I suspect that it might have been just me and the rabbi who were shomer Shabbat, in another I am sure that it was just me.

Shabbat is now such an integral part of me that I do not think that I could break it without breaking myself. Most of the time it is full of company, there is nothing that gives me more pleasure than holding the hands of my three and five year girls whilst walking along the road together to shul on a Saturday morning. But sometimes shabbat is a solitary affair, and then it nourishes, giving me the perspective to reflect and recover from the week, to count my blessings and to marvel.

Wishing you a very good chanukah

Kol tov

Gary

From: Rob Rosenberg  
Sent: Friday, November 29, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

My name is Rob Rosenberg. I am honored to say that I was a part of program 25 in 1988 @ Livnot. As you all know, when you light a candle, its burns it way through and winks out. In 1988 I experienced the light of Shabbat for the first time @ Livnot. Ahh, the memories of singing Kabbalat Shabbat on the rooftop, viewing Har Marone as the sun set in a sea of color enveloping the Tzafat skies. The meals, the singing, and the learning the ruach were simply outstanding. Those 3 short months at Livnot ignited a light, a flame, a warmth, a connection, a candle. Unlike a candle, the light that was lit in 1988 did not wink out. It lit my spiritual flame that burns stronger now more than ever. Shabbat Shalom

Love

Rob
From: Rob Salter  
Sent: Wednesday, November 27, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

One thing I could not work out when, in my first week on J9, I met Shmuel, Leah and Aryeh was how these amazing people, who were in every respect 'just like me' had come to orthodox Judaism. Orthodoxy was, in my 29 year old mind, the stuffy and restrictive preserve of my parents and my old, guilt inducing Lubavitch RS teacher, whose Shabbat invites used to fill me with dread.

How on earth had they managed to recognise Judaism as the ultimate tool of the kind of self-actualization that no personal development book had ever shown me?

When I arrived at Livnot aged 29, I was simply looking for a positive Jewish experience. I knew that I couldn’t go through with marrying my non-Jewish girlfriend but I simply could not live with the idea that this was simply a negative; there had to be something positive about Judaism that I hadn’t seen. Something relevant. Something to pass on.

The Shabbat experience at Livnot is like seeing a 3D movie when all you know is the silent screen. Colours, smells, songs and tastes leap out at you. If you want someone to value something, make them work for it. We worked for our Shabbat. We cooked, cleaned, planned and baked and then gave it all away to our guests.

My diary from that time has a ‘to do’ list with point one being: ‘make giving a direction in your life’. Our shabbats and chagim were so focused on others, as was our voluntary work that it literally expanded our sense of selves to include a deep connection with and love for our people.

I left Livnot in 1996, only to return for Shabbat in 2000 and 2001. Each Shabbat that I spent there ‘plugged me back in’, like an iPhone with a low battery. By 2012, I was fully charged and have been keeping Shabbat myself ever since.

It took me 17 years to fulfil a dream of life that I merely glimpsed on J9. I am still in touch with those teachers and madrichim and have shared my growth with all of them. It is no exaggeration to say that shabbat at Livnot actually powered me on my own Jewish journey and has become a model for me to replicate in my own life, on a weekly basis. As I grow, I can see more clearly how, in its profound silence, tranquility and connection it answers all of life’s questions and helps me to grow.

Rob Salter  
J9 1995-96
From: Todd Delman  
Sent: Wednesday, November 27, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

I want to let you know the profound impact Livnot has had on my life. I went to Israel without much understanding of how to live a Jewish life. I chose to attend Livnot because I love the outdoors and hiking.

The hikes and the friends were among the best I've ever had and ever will. I still remember the classes in Jewish and Israel history, and think about them frequently. Whenever I pick up a new siddur, I vividly remember the "how use the siddur" class at Livnot. As a result, I have been comfortable on many occasions and been able to help others find their way through the siddur during the holidays and Shabbos. While at Livnot, we repaired a dilapidated cemetery near Tzfat and painted a mural on a nursery school. I even went whitewater rafting with you. I think about that trip frequently about how great it was to have the opportunity to go rafting on the Jordan river!

I loved the 3 month Tzfat program so much, that I decided to stay to be madrich for the next 3 month program. During those 6 months I met many great friends at Livnot and we still keep in touch!

I was lucky enough to meet my wife on an alumni Shabbaton. We have three amazing kids who go to the Jewish day school in Columbus, and we will be returning to Israel for Pesach for my daughter's bat mitzvah. The Livnot experience inspired me to be a donor for causes in Israel and feel obligated to be active in my community in Columbus, OH. I serve on boards at the JCC and my synagogue.

Thanks to donations I was able to attend Livnot, I could not afford to pay the full tuition at the time. Since Livnot, my life experiences have shown me that I chose the best Jewish path possible. Over the years, the positive Jewish experience I had at Livnot, has helped me identify the lack of balance in many Jewish lifestyles and viewpoints. Livnot gave me the tools to live a sensible, meaningful, balanced and productive Jewish life. My family is living proof and we will always be grateful.

Thanks for all that you do.  
-Todd Delman and family
Dear Michael,

Although it has been almost 14 years since I first attended Livnot I can remember my experiences clearly. One of the most memorable times at Livnot was Shabbat. Here is a list of things that I learned at Livnot about Shabbat:

1. It's totally more fun when you're cooking in a big kitchen with a group of people for a special Shabbat meal!
2. It's weird to make cholent for dinner but it's delicious for lunch
3. Welcoming Shabbat in prayer with a community is the greatest way for me to feel connected to others and something bigger than themselves
4. It is so fun to sing for hours with friends, especially if you get to bang on the tables when you sing
5. Dancing!
6. How to write a dvar torah
7. How to truly listen to someone else giving over a dvar torah
8. A whole afternoon just to play games, read, and sleep! Whoah!
9. I can't believe that I ever lived without Shabbat
10. The beauty of havdallah
11. How to elevate the seemingly mundane
12. That most of us are yearning for connection but we need the space and time that Shabbat provides to get there
13. Abraham Joshua Heschel
14. Kabbalat Shabbat on the mirpesset in Tzfat can take ones breath away
15. To play shesh-besh from the man that would become my husband four years later
16. You don't need to sing words, there are always niggunim
17. Mizmor L'David
18. That I wanted Shabbat to be a part of my life

Thanks Livnot!

Love,

Rachel Israel Rosenfeld (L105 and madricha L107)
From: Tom Koritschan  
Sent: Monday, December 2, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Aharon,

thank you for your updates about the current campaign of Livnot. I sincerely hope that you will reach the goal.

What is special about Livnot’s Shabbat? First, never since was I blessed with such a wonderful, joyful and inspiring Shabbat. The preparations before not only gave me a big appetite, but made me appreciate the rest after far more.

When I was asked to present my thoughts on a jewish topic of my choice on friday night, I felt like a small schoolboy. Was my insight going to be interesting enough? Why should I of all people tell the others something new, since I don't know anything at all myself? Yet the support of very knowledgable chevre and the friendly atmosphere of the group made it simple for me to understand and appreciate the unique mixture of Shabbat that is learning and enjoying. In fact, Livnot made me realise that spiritual learning is very much a part of enjoying and vice versa.

Livnot was a place of many premiers: my first Challah baking, my first participation in singing Shabbat zemirot, … These parts of Shabbat have become more common for me now, but they are also dear to me because they remind me of the first time I experienced them in Tzfat - unforgettable!

I keep recommending Livnot to everyone I encounter, but given that I live in Switzerland and travel mostly to russian-speaking countries, my loyalty for and enthusiasm about Livnot might not be reflected in your enrollment lists. Be that as it may, you can always count on my support to the best of my abilities, and I would like to thank you and the whole team again with all my heart.

I am writing you in the time of Hanukkah, and if there is one thing I am sure about, it's that your Shabbat brought lots and lots of light into my life.

Tom
Dear Michael, I recently read your article “Shabbat is our Birthright” and it brought a smile to my face as I recalled my Shabbat experiences several years ago in Israel on the Livnot U’Lehibanot program. While my program was pre-birthright, even then it embodied many of the ideals you espouse - the nonhierarchical learning, the community connections, the food, and above all the singing. It was a wonderful opportunity for people across the spectrum of spirituality to come together and simply enjoy each other. My program ended nearly 20 years ago and I can still recall many of the songs we sang, the stories we told, the meals we prepared, the hours sitting up talking long after the meal was done, even the setup and cleanup for these weekly gatherings that at times numbered in the hundreds. Of all my experiences on Livnot, Shabbat was by far the most profound, not because of its uniqueness, but its ubiquity - its recurrence week after week.

When I returned to the US there was a group of Livnot alumni with me in Boston and for several years we had a strong movement here of bringing the Livnot Shabbat experience back with us. It can be done here too and the experiences can be just as profound.

Thank you for your support of Livnot U’Lehibanot and programs like it, and I look forward to the fruits of your Shabbat program.

— Jason

Jason Glass Livnot U’Lehibanot class of 1996-97 J11 and T50

Dear Michael,

Shabbat at Livnot, although it was twelve years ago, was very memorable for me. The singing and dancing and feeling like part of the community is something that I've never felt anywhere else in the world. It connected me with Israel, being Jewish, and feeling like I was a small part of the picture. Although it was long ago, I think part of that experience inspired me to do new and creative things that bring Jews together. Currently, I'm on the board of my local synagogue, and I sometimes think back to our Livnot Shabbats. If we could only capture some of that energy, it would inspire so many others.

Sincerely,

Darrin Goldman
From: Anne Tellan Nedivi  
Sent: Tuesday, December 3, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

It's been a long time since my Livnot U'Lehibanot experience, back in the fall of 1996 - T49. Shabbat in Tzfat was magical. There is something in the air there. Even though it's been 17 (!) years, I can picture the hustle-bustle of showering, dressing-up and preparing to sit down with the group for our Sabbath meal.

Not only was the food delicious, the company was energizing and invigorating. The prayers, songs and niggunim were uplifting and therapeutic.

As different as each of us is individual, we have our own ways of celebrating Shabbat. My husband, my three children, and I have our own hustle-bustle on Friday nights. We sit down as a family, after a long week of work, school, after school activities and other commitments. It's time that is set aside to focus on sharing our experiences that week, spending quality time together, and taking a break from all the distractions that occupy us constantly.

I thank Livnot, Aharon, Michael and all the other wonderful educators, mentors and friends that taught me many valuable lessons.

Sincerely,
Anne Tellan Nedivi, T49  
Alfe Menashe, ISRAEL

From: Michael Doniger  
Sent: Wednesday, December 4, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Mr. Steinhardt:

I wanted to write to you about my experience at Livnot back in the summer of 1983. I grew up in Berkeley, Calif as a reform Jew with a strong Zionist background and a love of Israel. Unfortunatly, we were not sabbath observers. When I arrived in Israel I wasn't religious but I felt the strong shabbat feeling permeate the land when that holy day did arrive. I still didn't really understand the deeper meaning till I started learning at Livnot in Safed.

Since my Hebrew was better than many of my fellow students (even though it wasn't that great to begin with) I would be hosted by Israelis. I was so moved by their family life, how the parents and children related to each other with respect and love. The shabbat atmosphere enveloped me so much that I wanted to learn more about what made this day special.

The high point was the friday night kabbalat shabbat services on the roof overlooking Mt. Meron, when we like the kabbalists of old would welcome the Shabbath queen. That image is one that I can't ever forget and enriched my life forever. I think the Birthright program could use the Livnot experience to stem the tide of assimilation and alienation amongst Jewish youth. The shabbat experience is the powerful tool to help Jews connect with their heritage.

Chanuka Samach, Michael Doniger
From: Lisa Krochmal  
Sent: Wednesday, December 4, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

My favorite memory of shabbat at Livnot occurred actually during the first free shabbat that Livnot schedules during the 3 month programs. I had recently started the Livnot program in Jerusalem, and was unsure about what the commitment meant and not at all comfortable with the formality of Jewish customs I had not lived before. A few people from J5 and I decided to go camping in Tzfat for the free shabbat. At the beginning of the hike to the campsite, I fell and twisted my ankle and there was no way I could continue. My new friends took me back to Tzfat and after enquiring in the town of places I could stay for Shabbat, we ended up at the Tzfat campus, where the Tzfat Livnot group was having kabbalat shabbat on the rooftops overlooking the mountains and sun setting in the distance. Even though brand new to Livnot, and a stranger to the Tzfat group, I was welcomed with smiles and singing and joined the praying in the fresh pure air of the mountains. I could have been any stranger and would have been similarly welcomed to share in the joyful singing and dancing on the rooftops! Even though I was wounded, abandoned by my original group and feeling awkward for showing up uninvited, I found a home for Shabbat and experienced the beauty of celebrating shabbat where it actually made the most sense. outside singing and dancing on the rooftops under the setting sun, feeling like you were on top of the entire world!

I thank you Aharon for welcoming me to that shabbat, which set the tone for the rest of my very special Livnot experience. Let me know when you start a Livnot experience for families, and I will bring my daughters!

Shalom! Lisa Krochmal (J4 and J5)

From: Paul Loschak  
Sent: Wednesday, December 11, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Hello, I took my 2nd trip to Israel back in summer 2008 with Livnot. It was my first real experience having shabbat and it was very memorable for all of the reasons that Shira listed in her email above. Dancing and singing on the balcony felt so free looking out at the hills and it was one of the most beautiful experiences I've ever had. Certainly a memorable one. I'll also never forget making the challah because I accidentally used yeast that was expired (I didn't know!). Our baked challah was so dense that one piece made our bellies full immediately. The conversations that we had together as a group really brought to life all of the hopes I had about visiting Israel and I would be happy to go back and visit Livnot again.

Thanks for the memories,

~Paul
Dear Michael,

I would like to take the opportunity to share with you my experiences of Shabbos at Livnot those many years ago. Back in 2001 (I think it was 2001), I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to Israel through Birthright Israel and Livnot. While my time there was short and many of the memories have faded; one which has left an indelible mark in my memory was the wonderful Shabbos in Tzfat.

Spending Shabbos, in Tzfat with Livnot, is unlike any other experience I have had since. Whether it was singing the Zimrot, preparing the Challah, or just taking in the fresh clean mountain air; it was a truly magical experience. The staff at Livnot taught us that Shabbos was more than just a day off, it was place in time to recharge your neshama. This concept of creating that place in time for Shabbos has continued on with me in my journeys since. Today, now married to a wonderful Jewish woman with a beautiful son, we create our own place in time for Shabbos. Friday nights always mean a wonderful Shabbos dinner, freshly made Challah from the night before, and of course those wonderful zimrot by the Shabbos candlelight. Often during shabbos we also try to attend shul. To us, this time for family is very important and for which the foundation was laid down back in both Yerushalim and Tzfat. And those experiences still drive our desire to make Aliyah in the coming years, which we will eventually do.

Thank you Michael, Aharon, and Laurie for that wonderful experience those many years ago. Shabbos in Livnot truly is a wonderful experience that every Jewish person should have at least once in their lives.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Bloomenthal
Acton, Massachusetts

From: Kyle Place
Letter on Facebook

Shabbat at livnot was more than just a memory for me but an influencial time that continues to shape me. I had my first proper shabbat at livnot and wow did it set the standard high for me. I remember clearly saying “I had no idea shabat was SO MUCH FUN.” The community cooking, challah baking, and writing of words of wisdom leading up to shabbat was of course fun. The candle lighting experience, music and watching the sun set was remarkable. The shabbat dinner, oneg and sharing of the words of wisdom was unequivocal! I felt happiness radiating from all the people around me as we laughed, sang, ate, and shared our ideas on jewish past, present and future. Saturday was an ultimate form of relaxation, leading up to a joyous havdalah, reminding us that our shabbat has always and will continuously enhance jewish community.
From: Joshua Mikofsky  
Sent: Sunday, November 10, 2013  
To: botzer@livnot.org

To all my Livnot friends,

I can hardly begin to describe how amazing my experience was is Tzfat! The people who I met in the short time I was in Livnot truly impacted my life. I had some of the best and most eye opening experiences of my life.

The first kosher meal I ever cooked was at Livnot. We baked our own challah, and everyone had a blast. It was incredible to be in a town with so make different kinds of Jews and different ways of davening. The Carlebach Shul was definitely my favorite, full of singing, dancing, and pure joy!

I was so inspired by my time at Livnot, I ended up staying in Israel for seven months! I guess I couldn’t get enough of those old stone walkways and sunsets (and moon rises) over Mount Meron. I can never forget the warm feeling in my heart when I think back to my times there.

Here’s hoping to see you all again!

Joshua Yoel Mikofsky

From: Russel Oren  
To: botzer@livnot.org

To Whom It May Concern;

I had been a member of a Zionist Youth Group as a child in Australia, I had friends in a Chabad Yeshiva, these two things taught me that Israel was special because it is the promised Land. My father survived three death camps, and a death march, which taught me to always have options.

When I visited Israel in 1983, the Kibbutz I went to took the Ulpan group on trips, opened a Bible and the guide would read a passage about how Israel was the land of our forefathers. The Ulpan was a memorable experience but they left out the reason our forefathers lived there. Like during Passover the Kibbutz had machine Matzoh out front, but had bread in a back room for any who wanted it.

So when I joined Livnot, the message rang true, that for thousands of years we Jews have been praying for Israel, that Jews have lived in Israel since the days of Joshua. That it was possible to live in the 21 century and be an observant Jew, that Judaism and Zionism are not diametrically opposed. That being Jewish was like being a musician, we can not all be conductors, that each of us has an instrument and together the band makes beautiful music. Before Livnot, Israel was like another place to visit, after I had a real connection to the land, the culture. I truly say that working on ancient Jewish homes/homeland really binds you to the land, a great thing to do, I can even foresee children of the group wanting to do the same program their parents did.

Yours Truly  
Rueven (Russell) Oren  
Program #9 Summer ’83
From: Jessica Ravitz  
To: botzer@livnot.org

When I arrived at Livnot in Jerusalem in February 1994, I knew nothing about Shabbat. I'd been to a couple meals, but I had no idea what was going on, was embarrassed to speak up and ask questions, and I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Livnot gave me the safe space to come to the table and be a part of it all. And though it's been nearly 20 years and my attendance at Shabbat meals is often sporadic, I can sit down comfortably and participate actively in the prayers and the songs because of the exposure and gift Livnot gave me.

- Jessica Ravitz, Atlanta, Georgia, J '05

From: Nikki Bank  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Shabbat at Livnot was an incredibly moving experience. I grew up at a Jewish Day School where Fridays felt palpably different from the rest of the week, but as I continued on to a secular high school and then moved away from home for college, Shabbat became just another day of the week. Welcoming in Shabbat on the roof of Livnot, surrounded by the warmth of the Livnot community, reconnected me to an important part of my heritage in a way that felt both familiar and fresh. I felt invigorated by the compassion and joy emanating from the people around me, both strangers and close friends. My Shabbat experiences at Livnot inspired me to make Shabbat a part of my life again in a way that felt feasible and comfortable for me and my relationship with Judaism.

-Nikki Bank

From: Carl Aschkenasi  
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael--

In response to your recent article entitled "Shabbat is Our Birthright," I wanted to tell you briefly my story as a former Livnot U'lehibanot participant. I spent three months at Livnot in 1997, which I think could be fairly described as fundamentally life-changing. I grew up in a home so unconnected with Jewishness that I remember asking my mother "Why are those Jewish guys walking to synagogue on Friday night?" After experiencing the tranquility of a shabbat in Tzfat at Livnot, I was quite quickly transformed, although naturally the full realization of that change took many more years. To this day I still remember standing on a Tzfat rooftop, looking at the sun setting over Har Meron on a Friday night, and actually feeling something click into place. Nearly 17 years later, I am a husband, a father, and an oleh. Although the degree of halachic observance was never an agenda item at Livnot (which is a very healthy idea), I did eventually become mainstream orthodox in my observance, and of course we are raising our children in the same vein. I have a tremendous debt of gratitude to Livnot for helping set me on this path, and my kids do, too. Shabbat is unquestionably their birthright, and Livnot helped them claim it.

Regards  
Carl (Yosef) Aschkenasi  
Yad Binyamin, Israel
To: botzer@livnot.org

Dear Michael,

I would say my experiences with Shabbat with Livnot reads like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. When I first decided to make a trip to Israel, it was with a foundation of traditional Judaism, and grandparents who had simply instilled in me this idea that Israel was "our home". To what depth and extent this meant, I wasn't clear. I just knew this to be true. Traditional Judaism meant we lit candles on Shabbat, (not at any specific time), and observed the Jewish holidays (but did not keep kosher or other mitzvot). Indeed, while I grew up loving my traditions and had a very strong moral compass and belief in G-d, there seemed to be a lot lacking in my fundamental understanding of Torah and Judaism.

So off I went to Israel, having applied to learn in Ulpan and work on a kibbutz. I had innocently assumed that because Israel was a Jewish state, everyone in the country would be upholding a strong sense of what was the "essence of being Jewish". I did say I was innocent, right? On kibbutz, I threw myself into Ulpan and quickly regained Hebrew skills that I had last used in grade 4 and focused on my fluency. I worked hard in the fields, feeling a deep connection to the land; and also was involved in the ganim in order to be close to the kibbutznik families and really use my Hebrew. While it was a wonderful experience; it left me wanting. Many of pre-conceived notions of Israel were quickly burst particularly regarding "Jewish identity". Indeed, I found it quite disturbing that because this Kibbutz hired used a lot of non-Jewish volunteers, there were many inter-marriages or common-law situations. While there was great pride in the unique role kibbutzim had in Israeli history and identity; there appeared to be many contradictions if not a collapse of the concept of Jewish identity--the integrity of Jewish marriage, family and traditions.

During my time on kibbutz, I found out about Livnot; however, the program was not in session during the winter. I applied to go to the program in the spring; and in the interim felt I needed to go spend some time in Yerushalayim.

From one extreme to the other, I enrolled in a seminary program. It was there I began the journey of understanding the philosophical fundamentals of Judaism that had always spoken to me--I felt and believed in them implicitly throughout my life--I simply didn't have the concrete sources and knowledge to prove these ideas. The rebbeim, teachers and students were amazing. The experience in Jerusalem truly gave me a sense of the kedusha of Eretz Israel. However, there was still a great disconnect. I felt like I was wearing an ill-fitting coat. On the one hand, I truly identified with wanting to be shomer Shabbos and shomer mitzvot; yet the environment seemed to focus on wanting everyone to be the same--unique, creative, outside-the-box thinkers did not seem to be valued or appreciated. Secondarily, while the seminary was in Israel, there wasn't any relationship between that which was learned about Judaism and connecting it to the Land of Israel.

Finally, I landed in Tzfat. The Livnot program focused on two vitally important issues: Jewish identity/values--and just as important, the unequivocal connection of Jewish identity and our ties to Eretz Israel. We worked and dug the holy dirt uncovering the incredible architectural treasures of history; we helped with the sick, the elderly, and Ethiopian immigrants of the community; we learned about Judaism, debated, and discussed everything and anything at length; and finally there was the culmination of our group preparing for Shabbat. From cooking to cleaning, to preparing dvrei Torah, the excitement building up for the Shabbat experience was palpable. One particular Shabbat, as we were davening outside watching the sunset over Har Meron, I remember as the intensity of our singing and prayers grew, so did the most unusual natural phenomena take place--there wasn't a cloud in the sky, yet, the sun's rays
began to spread horizontally in what one could only call a "sunbow"--the prisms and colours spreading and becoming more and more intense that we all watched and had a collective "gasp". This mystical, spiritual and humbling, moment as if G-d was showing His presence, His mastery of the universe, as we greeted the Sabbath queen. There were simply no words to describe what we had witnessed. Livnot Shabbat meals were lively with conversation and dvrei Torah. But the most lasting impact was the zmerot I learned. The numerous niggunim were the gifts I brought home and ultimately have been the most important minhag I was able to bring to my Shabbos table when I got married and had children. You see, my husband has a hearing loss and though he had grown up in a frum family, he had never known nor appreciated music. It was going to be up to me. My children are now young adults; and our Shabbos table has been and continues to be enhanced by the beauty of the Livnot zmerot; as well as the niggunim they have learned in other homes, yeshiva and seminary. Long after the meal is over, the zmerot continue and truly defines the uniqueness of Shabbat in our home.

I would add one more important point about Shabbat with Livnot. Just as important were the Shabbos meals we had on campus, were the ones we had with families in the Tzfat community. I had the opportunity to spend Shabbos and Yom Tov with Chassidim, Lubavitch, Yeminite, Sephardi, Ashkenaz, American modern-orthodox, ...they wore knitted keepahs, black velvet keepahs, streimels and black hats; covered their hair with tichels, sheitls, and hats, wore stockings, or wore sandals. It was here that I truly gained my perspective on what it meant to be Jewish and that Shabbat is unique and Holy to the Jewish people, as is the Land of Israel. Unlike my experience on kibbutz or in Yerushalayim, here I witnessed true achdus--unity. I observed that the Jewish people are rich and diverse in their cultural heritage, particularly depending on what part of the world they may have come from as well as their life experiences. It didn't matter what they used to cover their heads or the garb they wore. Their food and the nusach of the siddurim may differ (as may their politics)--but there is only one G-d and one Torah. This spoke volumes to me.

As I said, my story is like Goldililocks--in the end, Livnot was "just right". The program and most particularly my Shabbat experiences provided me with the foundation of my commitment to being shomer mitzvot while being true to myself. I didn't have to wear Judaism like an "ill-fitting coat", rather the essence of being Jewish is that which begins from within.

From: Sid Tavss
To: botzer@livnot.org

Sun going down over Marone from the roof on campus is still(30 yrs later) imbedded in my mind.whenever I think of Shabbot ,that view with that chavrae is what I see and feel.absolutely the best.kolakovode Aron and Miriam for having the vision.
Dear Michael,

I had the amazing opportunity of spending 4 weeks at Livnot in June of 2013. Prior to my arrival in Tzfat, Shabbat was not very high up on my list of activities that I was looking forward to. My past experiences with Shabbat had been spent in a synagogue, bored out of my mind and wondering what all the fuss was about. My time at Livnot showed me what a truly amazing and eye opening experience Shabbat can be. It is a time for friends and family to spend quality time together on a deeper and more emotional level than what we experience on a daily basis. Shabbat is full of music, laughter, food and drink. It is time that we take to relax and re-connect with our inner selves and with others. Celebrating Shabbat in this way made me feel more connected to those around me and to Judaism as a whole. Shabbat isn't about prayer books and synagogues, it's about people being together and sharing in the joys each one of us brings to the world. Taking time at the end of the week to reflect and spend time with others was way more enjoyable than I thought it could ever be. I wish everyone could take time to come together in this way, whether it is for Shabbat or just to spend quality time with others. I believe it would make the world a much better and much happier place. Thank you, Livnot, for providing such an amazing Shabbat experience. It is something I will never forget and that I hope to one day experience again.

Megan Dichter
Bensalem, PA
Galilee Fellowship, June 2013

Dear Michael,

Have you ever been to a restaurant and eaten the most delicious, perfectly prepared dish in a stunning setting, only to dream about the dish later and spend your days trying to replicate it at home, ingredient by savory ingredient? It inspires you. You might come close, but it's never really as incredible as the original. You tell your friends and family. Strangers too. They must visit THIS place and order THiS dish. You can't keep it to yourself. It's too incredible. Too special. This place is Livnot u'Lehibanot and the dish is Shabbat. 16 years later and I'm still trying to get the recipe down.

Stephanie Hertzman