

Riding High

BY *Gershon Burstyn*
PHOTOS *Eli Cobin*



In an Israeli town that's acquired a reputation for division and strife, one man is using mountain biking to teach kids how to push their limits — and get along with each other, no matter what kind of yarmulke is under the helmet



We're out in the Judean Hills, a ten-minute walk from the nearest road, but we might as well have been transported back centuries.

Ten kids are sitting on a low stone wall built during the Second Temple period. Around them, the spring's first red anemone and purple cyclamen are sprouting and wild sage crawls along the wall's weathered bricks.

Before them stands a middle-aged man with a long, bushy, red beard. His calves are the size of most men's thighs. His name is Nachum Wasosky and the kids affectionately call him the Biking Rebbe.

They have stopped midway through an hour-plus bike ride for a lesson on life. Today's subject is diligence, one of a score of subjects that Wasosky will teach the kids over a yearlong course. The kids sit patiently, their bike helmets strapped snugly to their heads as their *peyos* peek out from underneath the polystyrene foam.

Nachum notes the difference between perseverance and diligence. Perseverance, he explains to the ten-year-olds, is fighting to climb up the hill on your bike, giving it every ounce of your energy, and not stopping until you reach the crest of the hill. Diligence is doing it over and over again, making persistence a habit.

"Look at my legs," Wasosky advises the kids. "They are all beat up from rides over the years. That is persevering through difficult rides. Diligence means that you're going to put your mind to something and work at it until it's finished."

And so it goes for Wasosky, who has put his mind to creating

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something a little bit bigger than just a biking club. Geerz, the organization he founded in 2012, aims not only to bring kids out into nature and give them the chance to sweat out their energy and connect to G-d's country. It also gives them a chance to learn important life lessons and bond with kids slightly different from themselves, a golden opportunity in sometimes-divided Beit Shemesh.

Nachum points to a boy, Yosef, sitting on the stone fence, perhaps where another Jewish boy might have sat centuries ago learning a similar lesson. He tells the group that Yosef worked hard last month trying to get up a steep hill we had just climbed. He failed once and then again, but eventually he made it.

"Is it an option to walk your bike instead?" Wasosky asks the group. "No, it's not an option. You put your mind to it and focus until you get to the top. In school, with parents, and with friends, there are many things we have to be diligent about. When you're studying Mishnah, you're diligent and persevere and have patience. And that's why you're successful."


Into the Hills Wasosky, 38 and a father of five, started Geerz by accident. He was working as a program director for an at-risk youth organization in Ramat Beit Shemesh called Hakshiva and wanted to give the kids a good reason not to go out drinking or smoking on Thursday nights. So he persuaded a small group of kids to come with him on a Friday morning bike ride in the hills. The rides were topped off with a bagel breakfast and quickly grew in popularity. Eventually, the kids figured out that if they wanted to perform well on the bike ride, if they wanted to push themselves and navigate the rocky course, they had better not indulge themselves the night before.

In the beginning, Wasosky saw the bike ride as a diversion: Give the kids something to do and they won't do something they shouldn't. But then encouraging reports started trickling back to him.

"I started to hear from kids and parents how much the biking was having a positive effect on their lives," he says. "When the kids are out in nature, it's very soothing and gives them time to get in touch with themselves. I saw kids stop smoking on the spot."



TOUGH TERRAIN Nachum Wasosky is helping 10-year-olds grow up. "Kids today need tools to become successful in life."



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Mountain biking is no stroll in the park. An extreme sport, it involves riding over rough terrain on a specialized bike, often at high speed. A rider can mountain bike in the desert, down narrow paths called single tracks, or up and down the side of a mountain. It can be perilous. Mountain bikers take scratches, abrasions, and bruises for granted, and broken bones are not uncommon. Paradoxically, the best way not to fall is to have the confidence that you won't. The bike becomes an extension of your will, an expression of your spirit. Yes, there are real dangers in mountain biking, but there's also the thrill of leaning deep into a curve at high speed and pulling your bike up at just the right moment when you fly off a tall rock.

And that's just the point, Wasosky explains. The challenge of the ride tends to focus the mind. When you are barreling down a single track about a foot wide, with trees on either side of you and a half-ton rock coming up in just about a millisecond that you somehow have to figure out how to traverse, there's no time for laziness or doubt or anger. If you don't hit the rock at the right angle, it could mean a humiliating fall at the least or a broken arm or collarbone at the most. That challenge snapped the initial Hakshiva kids out of their ennui. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, they were faced with an exciting challenge that they wanted to overcome,

and that made all the difference.

"I saw that these kids were much more open on the rides," Wasosky says, remembering those first excursions. "Something about being together as a group in an extreme-type of activity and being out in nature made the kids want to open up and talk about life and change. There was something about the biking that bred being successful in other areas of life."

I Had to Learn to Live Wasosky walked his own winding path in teaching kids about leadership, self-reliance, and Jewish unity in the hills of Ramat Beit Shemesh. Raised in Pittsburgh, Nachum's parents divorced when he was six. His mother, a *baalas teshuvah*, worked as a bookkeeper and electrologist and enrolled Wasosky in a Jewish day school from first grade. He studied business at Yeshiva University, but by his own admission wasn't the most focused student. In 1996, a mentor at YU suggested a short trip to Jerusalem to recharge his spiritual batteries.

"I went for ten days and ended up staying six years," says Wasosky. "I didn't really know what it meant to be Jewish, what it meant to be a Torah-observant Jew." His motto in those days was: "I have to learn how to live before I learn how to make a living."



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Having earned *semichah* from Rav Noach Weinberg and an undergraduate degree in Talmudic law, Wasosky was dispatched by Aish International in 2002 to Denver. There, he and his wife Shana — who holds a master's degree in education — started the Jewish Family Institute, a *kiruv* center that attracted local public school youth. He and Shana ran seminars and built a Hebrew school, and it was in Denver that a friend introduced Nachum — at the time a snowboarder — to the joys of mountain biking.

After making aliyah in 2008 and taking a job with Hakshiva as director of the Anglo teen program, Wasosky began to notice that the Orthodox teenagers he was working with needed an outlet. Throughout much of the *frum* educational system, physical activity is deemphasized and leadership skills (as a subject) are not a priority. Rather than offer yet another class, Nachum combined his love of mountain biking with his skills as an educator.

Wasosky left Hakshiva to focus on Geerz

full time last year and the organization now has 120 kids on its rosters, ranging in age from 7 to 19 years old. They ride out in the open *shetach* (wilderness) once a week for an hour and a half, following a curriculum that is geared toward strengthening the mental (clearing the mind while in nature), emotional (learning leadership lessons), physical (pushing beyond limits) and spiritual (connecting with Eretz Yisrael) aspects of a child's life.

A nonprofit organization, Geerz caters programs to different populations. There are programs for kids who attend mainstream chadarim and schools, at-risk kids, and those who can't afford to pay. In addition to community programs like the one in Ramat Beit Shemesh, there are also Geerz activities for yeshivos and American summer camps. The organization recently opened its second branch in Chashmonaim, near Modiin.

"In all my youth experience in both Denver and Ramat Beit Shemesh, I saw time and again that kids today need tools to become

successful in life," Wasosky says. "There are various reasons why kids in each demographic are not getting the necessary tools they need to become successful leaders of tomorrow, so I built a curriculum."

Leadership skills are particularly important, he says, because those are the characteristics that allow kids to "take their G-d-given tools and be successful with them."

Don't Look Down Avi Kamionski, a lawyer and father of five who made aliyah with his family from Chicago in 2011, is a member of the Geerz board. While living in Chicago, Kamionski, 33, would hop on his bike in West Rogers Park and ride 13 miles to his job downtown. When he arrived in Israel, the hills beckoned and he was quickly hooked.

He has two kids in Geerz, 11-year-old Zevi and 9-year-old Shaya, and says his boys return from the rides with a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

"They come back and say, 'Abba, I went



down the hill. I did this and I did that.' It's more than just riding a bicycle. In mountain biking, a kid is always working and accomplishing a task at hand."

Kamionski, who has volunteered to be one of the *madrichim* (there are 14 in total) accompanying Geerz groups, witnessed up close how Wasosky combines biking lessons and life lessons.

There was a boy who complained that he was scared to go over rocks. (At times, the distance from the top of a rock to the ground can be a foot or more, so ascending and descending requires equal parts daring and the skill to know where best to place your tires and how to balance your weight.) To assess the situation, Nachum got off his bike and asked if he could watch the boy ride. He diagnosed the problem in an instant, Kamionski recalls. Instead of looking forward, the boy was looking down.

"He taught the kid two things, how to navigate rocks and how to look at life. You have to look forward."

Beyond building *middos*, Kamionski says that Geerz allows his boys the opportunity to spend a little time with kids who aren't exactly like them. While his two boys are enrolled in a cheder in Ramat Beit Shemesh, the kids in the program range from chassidim living in Ramat Beit Shemesh Beit to local *dati-leumi* kids. One of the beauties of Geerz, Kamionski says, is that you never know what kind of *kippah* a boy might wear at home, because out in the hills, everyone is wearing the same headgear.

Out in the *shetach*, he says, the ethic is "we went into the hills together, we're going out of the hills together."

That striving for unity is especially important in Beit Shemesh, a city that has become an unfortunate symbol in the Jewish world for division among brothers.

Wasosky is sensitive to these divisions and has made it part of Geerz's mandate to promote unity.

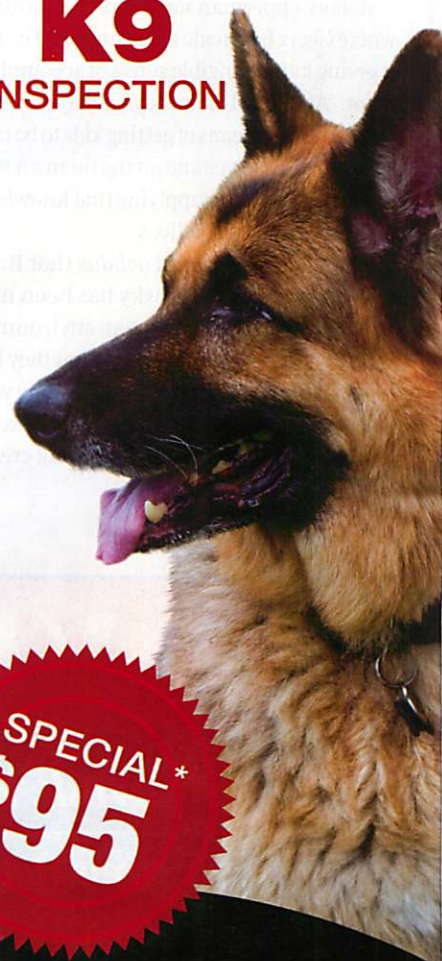
A case in point was the building of a "single track" mountain biking trail not far from Ramat Beit Shemesh Alef. Working with Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael (Jewish National Fund) and local volunteers, Wasosky enticed KKL to build a 14-kilometer trail that snakes through untouched forest, down and around fertile valleys, and hugs the sides of limestone hills. KKL brought heavy machinery in to clear the main parts of the path, but Wasosky encouraged Geerz kids to work together to clear the smaller brush. At the inaugural ceremony in November 2013, he invited a deputy director of KKL, the vice mayor of Beit Shemesh, and a member of Knesset to speak.

"I chose those three as they are respected men in their fields yet all different in their political and philosophical outlook," Wasosky explains. "That is one of Geerz's major leadership lessons constantly reinforced: In order to be successful in life and in the overall Jewish mission of *tikkun olam*, we need to love each other and get along, despite our differences."

Toward that end, Nachum received the *haskamah* of two *rabbanim* from different sides of the Ramat Beit Shemesh religious

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spectrum: Rabbi Chaim Malinowitz, who leads Beis Tefillah Yonah Avraham, a large shul of American chareidim, and Rabbi Menachem Copperman, the leader of Ahavat Tzion, a *dati-leumi kehillah*.

Rabbi Copperman says there are two areas where Geerz has made a real impact. The first is giving kids a tangible sense of accomplishment. "At the end of the day," he says, "mountain biking is a means of getting kids to be more aware of themselves and giving them a feeling of success" and then applying that knowledge to other areas of their lives.

But it is in the area of *achdus* that Rabbi Copperman feels Wasosky has been most effective. "Nachum creates an environment where you judge people not by what they look like, but by who they really are. Not by what color shirt they wear, or what kind of jacket, or what kind of *kippah*." And that's what creates

real *achdus*, he says, especially in a place like Beit Shemesh where external differences have taken on such a public role.

Lower the Pressure Out in the *shetach*, the kids are ready for the final leg of their ride. They rise from that old stone wall where they've been sitting and one of them, a conscientious fifth-grader, picks up a plastic candy wrapper from the ground. They lift up their bikes and hop on. For the smaller kids, the bike is a massive apparatus — it's a wonder that they can operate the thing at all. But soon enough they are dashing down an embankment, picking up speed, and skipping along the rocks like the deer that populate the hills.

Five minutes on, one kid's tire needs repair and Nachum stops the group to give them a mini-talk about pressure. It's best to lower

the tire pressure a bit so that the tires grip the ground and rocks better. Just like in life: Calm yourself down — lower the pressure — and you'll react to challenges more effectively.

More lessons quickly follow: Watch the protected flowers (but not so much that you'll endanger yourself); when passing another rider, let him know that you're coming.

We go down a series of small drops — shift your body weight back and take it slow — and then up a long, steep uphill. Nearing the end of the ride, the kids are gathered around an old tree providing some afternoon shade. They're from every corner of Beit Shemesh, the tangible products of their Anglo parents' dreams of aliyah. They are sweating, happy, and tested. And just beyond the next outcropping, they're ready to ascend the next hill. ●

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