

Prejudice is starting to yield to inclusion

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Staff Reporter

About two per cent of the Israeli population – an estimated 200,000 people – are “mentally challenged,” according to Haim Gurfinkel, general manager of Ami, an organization in Be’er Sheva that serves adults with developmental disabilities.

Ami’s Beit Cohen (named for Montreal funder Leonard Cohen – not the poet) serves 74 adults with Down Syndrome and other developmental disabilities.

They live in six buildings that are arranged in a circle. “It’s like a neighbourhood,” Gurfinkel told *The CJN* on a visit to Toronto in November.

Beit Cohen shares some aspects of the to-be-built Rimon Village.

Although there is no Jewish component on site, residents have jobs like gardening or animal care, or they do kitchen work in the army. The compound has outdoor adult-sized playground equipment, and a typical day includes exercise as well as work.



Haim Gurfinkel (Frances Kraft photo)

Some of Ami’s 350 clients are housed at Beit Cohen; others are in apartments that the organization rents for them.

Beit Cohen – like the proposed Rimon Village – is unusual in Israel because,

typically, high functioning developmentally disabled adults live in apartments, and those who are lower functioning live in institutions or with elderly parents, Gurfinkel said.

“They’re warm people,” he said of the clients, all of whom he said he knows personally. But they sometimes face prejudice and isolation. “It’s also part of our work to change this mentality,” Gurfinkel said. “We fight in court... if a hotel doesn’t want to take us [for example]. The law is good, but the people don’t understand. It’s not a ‘sexy’ cause.”

Rabbi Judith Edelman-Green has seen prejudice, but only rarely. “I think there is a change going on in society. I do hear parents talking about prejudice, but I also hear a lot about inclusion.”

More information is available at rimonvillage.com and, in Hebrew, at agudatami.com.