

Kibbutz Lavi: Pew M

By Hillel Kuttler

Factory workers in kipprot and blue Kibbutz Lavi Furniture Industries t-shirts wear tarmac-like earphones to muffle the incessant roar of woodworking machinery. They seem immune to the caustic aroma of glue and lacquer.

“It gives me a good feeling to be doing this and to know that people will pray and, with God’s help, bring the Messiah,” Isaachar Elmalem shouts to a visitor over the din of the machine he operates to compress bundles of glued-together beechwood boards, which will eventually become worship pews.

Carpenters, contractors and furniture factories abound throughout Israel and the Diaspora, but many synagogues look to Kibbutz Lavi, an observant community of 700 people in the hills west of the Sea of Galilee.

From Lavi, the synagogues order pews, lecterns, shelving, bimot (stands where the Torah is chanted), tables for chapel study, mechitzot (male-female section dividers)—nearly any custom-made wood product that brings functionality and beauty to a house of worship. Synagogue clients of Lavi (Biblical Hebrew for lion) span the Jewish world, in a rainbow of denominations and membership sizes.

In its half century, according to Shalom Ashkenazi, Lavi Furniture’s marketing manager, the company has furnished approximately 4,700 synagogues, 683 outside Israel. In 2011, it served approximately 150 synagogues in Israel and 30 in the Diaspora, constructing pews and benches for 22,000 worshippers, and earning \$9 million in revenue.

Who is the supplier of choice for Jerusalem’s Belz Synagogue—at 5,000 seats, reportedly the world’s largest? Lavi. Who provides pews for the 40-seat shul at Moshav Amirim near Tzfat? Lavi.

Synagogues in Melbourne, Berlin, Miami, Caracas, Toronto, Milan and other metropolises; in such reviving, Soviet-repressed communities as Lvov, Tallinn, Minsk, Moscow, Riga; in confined places, as at a Toulouse nursing home and at New York’s Albert Einstein College of Medicine; in exotic ones, like Tahiti and Curacao; even in the coal-mining center of remote Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan—all Lavi.

makers to the World

“It’s great to know that I’m making things used for a shul, for Torah, for God, as opposed to manufacturing kitchen cabinets,” says Elmalem.

The plank-and-glue sandwich he has created sits overnight to dry. It goes next to a buffering station for sanding, then to another area for lacquering and assembly. This set of pews is bound for the renovated chapel at Rachel’s Tomb, one of Judaism’s holiest sites located on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

Clients say they select Lavi Furniture for its workmanship and durability, and the staff’s expertise. Prices are higher, they say, but ordering from an Israeli company pulls strongly.

“From a business point of view, they made sure the project worked out and that they’d have a satisfied customer,” says Danny Hartman, who chaired the building committee of Young Israel of New Rochelle, in Westchester County, N.Y. The synagogue hired Lavi to furnish its new structure.

“I do construction litigation,” Hartman continues, “so having contractors, subcontractors and trades people you could rely on was no small matter.”

Some sales stories are heartwarming, like the Reform synagogue near New Orleans, ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, that arranged for Lavi to provide a hefty discount to simultaneously replace the ruined interior of a nearby Conservative house of worship.

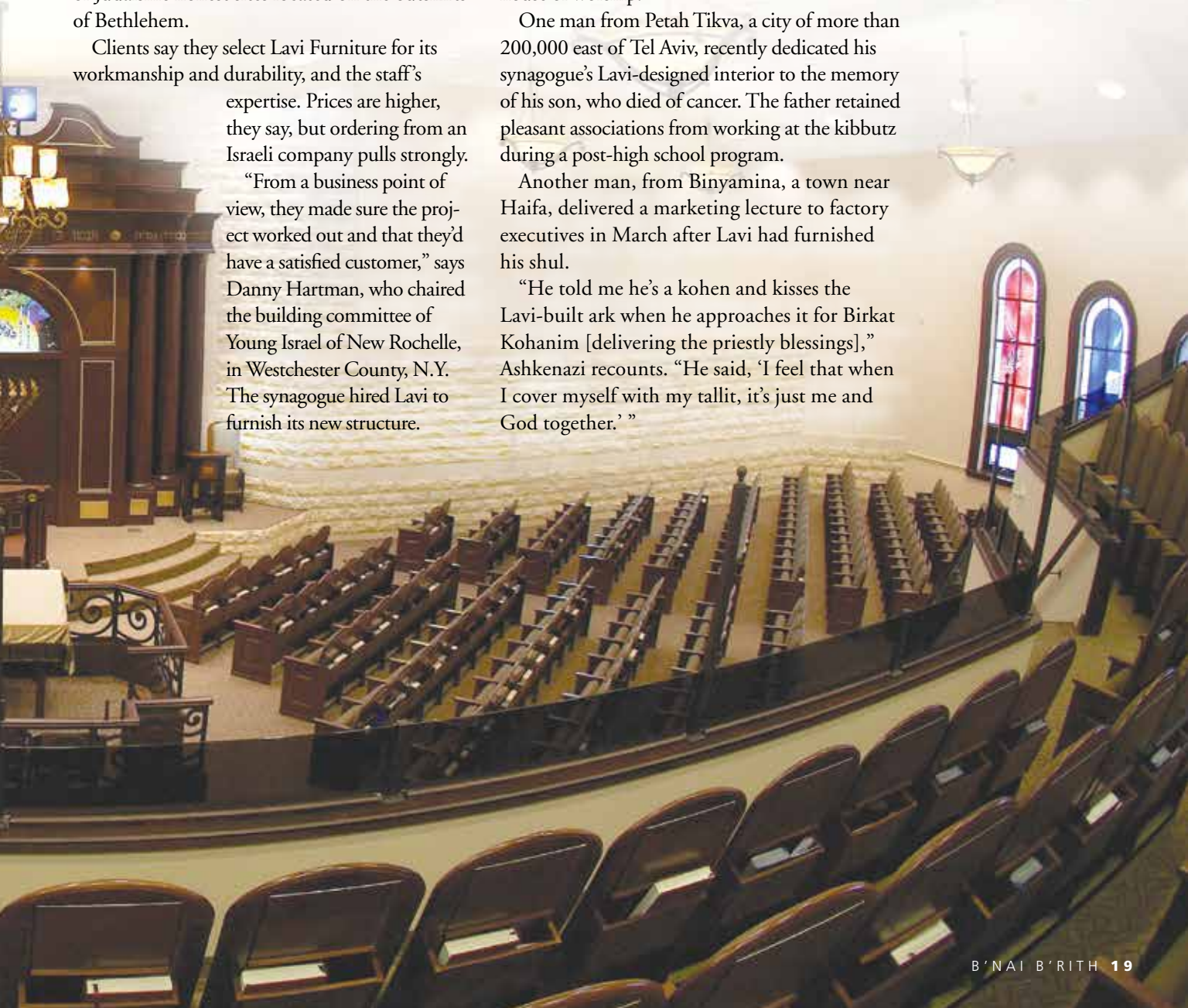
One man from Petah Tikva, a city of more than 200,000 east of Tel Aviv, recently dedicated his synagogue’s Lavi-designed interior to the memory of his son, who died of cancer. The father retained pleasant associations from working at the kibbutz during a post-high school program.

Another man, from Binyamina, a town near Haifa, delivered a marketing lecture to factory executives in March after Lavi had furnished his shul.

“He told me he’s a kohen and kisses the Lavi-built ark when he approaches it for Birkat Kohanim [delivering the priestly blessings],” Ashkenazi recounts. “He said, ‘I feel that when I cover myself with my tallit, it’s just me and God together.’”

Chabad at Flamingo, the Ernest Manson Lubavitch Center, in Thornhill, Ontario. Kibbutz Lavi built all the pews (a total of 680 seats) for the new sanctuary in 2009.

Photos courtesy of Kibbutz Lavi





Above: Kibbutz Lavi built the pews in this synagogue in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2002.

Below: The side of one of the pews at the Israeli Air Force base synagogue. The symbol is the Israeli Air Force unit tag.



When renovating its building in 2005, Baltimore's Congregation Beit Yaakov cast its eyes east. The 125-family congregation, which its president, Elliott Sharaby, describes as "one big cholent [stew] of the Middle East"—worshippers hail from Iran, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Israel—settled on a handsome array of custom-made sanctuary furnishings. For \$50,000, the synagogue got 31 pews to seat 200 congregants, with a Star of David carved into each end cap; a lectern, etched with the synagogue's name, fronting the ark; and special seat-bookstand units for the rabbi and an honored guest that flank the lectern.

The money was well spent, Sharaby says of an order that also included chairs and portable lecterns for a study hall and an upstairs chapel. "We decided on Kibbutz Lavi because [its products are] made in Israel, it's a Jewish company, it's a dati [observant] place, it's a kibbutz—so we support lots of people," he explains. "Plus, it's quality furniture."

Because Lavi did not manufacture arks then, Beit Yaakov ordered one from noted Jerusalem craftsman Avraham Fried. Two years ago, Lavi bought Fried's studio, which specializes in arks. The partnership enables Lavi to offer clients "one-stop shopping," Ashkenazi says.

The Lavi phenomenon evolved serendipitously. Since the kibbutz's founding in 1949, its own synagogue was a lowly storage shack—"like an improvised barn," says Aryeh Shiran, Lavi Furniture's international marketing director. Kibbutz leaders built a proper facility in 1962. To furnish the interior comfortably, they searched Israel for a contractor—settling on themselves.

Residents of Moshav Sde-Ilan, located nearby, liked what they saw and hired Lavi to furnish its shul. Word spread, and a kibbutz industry was born. The first overseas contract was with Sydney's Bondi Mizrachi Synagogue in 1970. Lavi entered the U.S. market in 1982 with Los Angeles' Young Israel of Century City. Some synagogues became repeat clients, including Moshav Ganai Tal, which Lavi outfitted in 1981. The Gaza Strip settlement was abandoned when Israel withdrew in 2005, and residents built a new settlement near Gedera, in south-central Israel. Lavi again filled Ganai Tal's order.

The factory is an economic cornerstone of the kibbutz, which also includes a thriving hotel; a robust farming operation, growing oranges, almonds, lychees and organic avocados; and raising cows and chickens for milk and slaughter.

World Jewry's furniture giant occupies an unassuming, two-story building off Kibbutz Lavi's main interior road, down a path passing cattle pens. Its management and technological approaches, like most of corporate Israel today, are cutting edge, though.

"Our guiding principle is that we will be meticulous about being on time, on schedule and on budget—davka [most especially] because in America, Israelis have a reputation" for being less professional, Shiran explains over a steaming-hot lunch of meat, rice and chicken soup in the kibbutz's communal dining hall.

The economic bubble that burst 20 years ago and rocked Israel's more than 250 kibbutzim compelled a painful transition from socialism to capitalism. Lavi has adapted, while trying to remain loyal to the kibbutz ideal. Its factory's 100 employees include 50 who, like, Elmalem, do not live on the kibbutz.

Expanding abroad, Lavi added sales representatives in London, Paris, Philadelphia and Brooklyn's Borough Park. But, Ashkenazi remains the public face of the company. He spends two months annually away from his wife and six children (including two sets of twins), represent-

ing Lavi Furniture at major Diaspora gatherings like last fall's Reform and Orthodox conferences in America. Just before meeting with B'nai B'rith Magazine in March, Ashkenazi had flown straight from Los Angeles.

Ashkenazi says that he has derived much satisfaction from his 15 years at Lavi.

"I want to sell something of value that connects people to Israel. But, I don't want them to buy from Israel because they pity me, but, rather, because it's good," he explains. "I say to customers, 'Tell me what you like.' For example, Amirim—the shul near Tzfat—wanted seats for 40 people. What, I'm not going to sell to them because it's not 100 or 400 seats? No, I want everyone who wants Lavi to get Lavi."

Ashkenazi has three domestic competitors but estimates that Lavi commands 60 percent of the Israeli market. Overseas, the Ohio-based Sauder Manufacturing Company is a giant, but it specializes in churches. Furnishing a synagogue, he says, demands a different mindset because communal Jewish prayer requires far more rising and sitting.

The economic recession hurt Lavi Furniture's sales in 2009, but they rebounded the past two years, Ashkenazi says.

A recent internal review has Shiran more sanguine. The company concluded that it should further expand abroad—just as synagogue construction and renovation may be plateauing.

"We must keep working on the American-Jewish market, which is not taken for granted," Shiran states as he walks toward the furniture factory after lunch, five horses clapping by with young people out for an afternoon ride. "With the American Jewish community shrinking and with a certain percentage not interested in coming to synagogue at all, this is not such a bright future.

"When we did our strategic analysis, I said that we must, must, must look for other products, other venues. We can't totally rely on houses of worship. [But] if Muslims were to sit instead of stand when they pray, we might be able to do some business!" ☺



Temple Reyim in Newton, Mass. Kibbutz Lavi built the seats in the sanctuary in 1998 and in the beit midrash, a room for study, in 2003.

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