



Florida Opens First Hebrew Public School

At a meeting in South Florida, Ben Gamla School principal Rabbi Adam Siegel explains aspects of the new charter school's program to parents and their children.

Jewish Parents Need Financial Assistance

Margaret Schorr, a marketing and public-relations consultant, wanted her 5-year-old daughter Hannah to learn Hebrew, but she wasn't willing to pay the \$8,000 to \$13,000 annual tuition that Jewish day schools in South Florida typically charge for kindergarten.



Other Parents

For attorney David Barnett, price wasn't the issue -- he wanted his daughter in a more diverse environment.

Both families are set to take advantage of a groundbreaking option: the nation's first Jewish-oriented charter school.

Small Nurturing Environment

When the school year starts on Aug. 20, Schorr's daughter and Barnett's daughter will be among the 430 or so students attending the new Ben Gamla Charter School in this city. The taxpayer-funded institution says that it will offer two hours of instruction a day in Jewish-related topics, but not religion.



Biggest Group Of Israeli Jews In America

Not a single class has yet been taught, but the school is generating controversy among the estimated 240,000 Jews living in Broward County, which also has one of the nation's largest concentrations of Israelis.



Congressman Says Israelis Need Help

Ben Gamla's charter was approved in March, but the school was still the hot topic. Supporters of the school -- the brainchild of the area's former U.S. congressman, Peter Deutsch -- say it could serve as a national model, providing families with a financially accessible option at a time when most non-Orthodox households are opting not to send their children to Jewish day schools.



Rabbi Siegel

By definition, charter schools are publicly financed elementary or secondary schools that are managed privately, with minimal input from local school boards, and whose innovative teaching methods are expected to produce higher academic results.

Ben Gamla's director, an Orthodox rabbi named Adam Siegel, said that students will learn Hebrew, Jewish culture and Jewish history for two hours a day; faculty will be forbidden from teaching Torah or prayer. Siegel, 37, added that the school will serve kosher meals, and students will be permitted to organize their own worship services.



Broward School Board

Susan Onori, the charter-school coordinator for the Broward school board, noted that her agency rejected Ben Gamla's original curriculum, which utilized textbooks replete with menorahs, Stars of David and other religious symbols. "We felt that was inappropriate for a public school," she said, adding that the school made changes, and is now in compliance with the law.

Onori vowed that the school would be monitored, and have its charter revoked if it was found to be teaching Judaism.





Israeli Mother Will Save \$48,000 A Year

Tzipora Nurieli, an Israeli-born Hallandale woman, said that she registered her three children -- ages 11, 9 and 7 -- at Ben Gamla, thereby saving a combined \$48,000 in annual tuition fees that she would have been spending over the course of the year.

"I was supposed to send them to Hillel in North Miami Beach, but this school is the most amazing miracle that's ever happened," she said. "It's a combination of teaching my kids Hebrew, but also taking advantage of the public-school system. This is like having the best of both worlds."

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