

Veteran

Gaila Cohen Morrison, 56

From Montreal to Jerusalem, 1981

By Abigail Klein Leichman

On their second date in Jerusalem, future spouses Gaila Cohen and Chanan Morrison had a disagreement about what language they would speak with their respective future children. Both had been raised North America, but he envisioned a Hebrew-speaking home – while she felt that English would be an invaluable second language for her children.

Not only did her viewpoint prevail in how they communicate with one another and with their five daughters, but Gaila went on to make a career of helping Israeli schoolchildren of all backgrounds sharpen their English skills as a tool for greater academic and professional success.

Founded in 2000, A.H.A.V.A. (“Anglit Hanilmedet B’Shita Hativit,” or English Learned in a Natural Method) is the only nonprofit in Israel dedicated solely to promoting English literacy for children. The goal is to make learning English as fun, relevant and simple as possible. Gaila says that standard English-language instruction in Israeli schools is often insufficient, yet few children can afford a private tutor.

“In our curriculum and book and programs, I try to make everything as simple as possible, so children can go step by step without big gaps of knowledge between one lesson and the next. It has to make sense and follow a smooth progression.” says Gaila, who has lived in Mitzpe Yeriho in the Judean Desert since 1994 and organizes the bottles and can recycling program in her town as a source of funds for A.H.A.V.A.

The annual read-a-thon for first- through eighth-graders in Maale Adumim, Mitzpe Yeriho and Kfar Adumim typically draws several hundred participants hoping to win prizes provided by local businesses. Parents and teachers tell her that the concentrated reading time makes a difference. “Whether they read Dr. Seuss or Harry Potter, after they’ve read 10 or 20 books in five weeks they jump up a level,” says Gaila.

Morrison’s easy-reading series, Reading Rocks, is used by English teachers and tutors for third-graders to adults all over Israel.

Everyone knows her

Gaila Morrison's face is quite familiar to Maale Adumim schoolchildren because she visits classrooms to encourage participation in her classes and Readathon. "Every child in the city, from fourth grade and up, probably knows me. When I started introducing A.H.A.V.A. in the high schools, the new vice principal said she'd introduce me. I went into the first classroom with her, and I said, 'Is there anyone here who does not know me?' Two girls raised their hands; they were new to Maale Adumim," she recalls with a laugh.

Gaila is proud of the success stories her efforts have spawned. For example, one girl from an Amharic speaking home participated in A.H.A.V.A. from fourth to seventh grade, and switched to the native English speakers' class early in seventh grade. The girl wants to be a doctor, says Gaila, and proficient English will help her achieve her dreams.

Rabbi Chanan Morrison also found a gratifying way to use his English skills. Though his career is in software, his cherished avocation is translating, organizing and explaining the prolific works of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook for the English-speaking world (www.ravkooktorah.org) through books, columns and weekly emails sent to thousands of followers across the world.

During the Morrisons' first "date," in the Jerusalem living room of the mutual friends who introduced them to each other, Chanan – then a student at Mercaz HaRav Kook yeshiva – pulled out a booklet and learned some Kook wisdom with Gaila. They've been sharing it ever since.

Aliya was a given

Gaila says she didn't really decide to make aliya; rather, it was a given.

"My father always said he would have liked to come and raise a family here but it didn't work out for various reasons, and his plan was for his kids to make aliya and he would follow -- and that's what happened."

Her parents, Faith and Stephen Cohen, and her sisters, Toby Pomerantz and Rachel Yeshurun, live in Maale Adumim.

The three Cohen sisters were active in the Montreal chapter of the Zionist youth group B'nei Akiva, and after high school Gaila Cohen spent a year in Israel on a B'nei Akiva program.

"That year was absolutely phenomenal," she recalls. "I found the place I wanted to live and the Zionist way I wanted to live my life."

To prepare herself for earning a living in Israel as a teacher, she went to the Bais

Yaakov Teachers Seminary in Montreal and then to McGill University as an English major, all the while teaching Hebrew and Jewish studies a couple of afternoons a week.

“After college I worked in my father’s office and in various Jewish day schools and earned enough to build a nest egg and make aliya.”

She arrived in August 1981 and began a six-month retraining course but didn’t finish because she was needed to start teaching in Beit Sefer Maimon in Jerusalem’s Kiryat Moshe neighborhood. This is where she met the fellow teacher whose husband was Chanan Morrison’s study partner. Gaila and Chanan wed in February 1984.

To Pennsylvania and back

About five years into their marriage, the Morrisons and their two baby daughters went on shlihut to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. For four years, they taught Hebrew and Judaic studies and helped shore up the small Jewish community to which many Russian Jews were immigrating.

When the time came to go back to Israel – now with three daughters – Gaila was hesitant to return because she was concerned about finances. Chanan therefore made her a promise: If he still had not found a job after a year, they would pack up for America. “Seven days after we got back he was working, and hasn’t been unemployed since,” Gaila reports.

At first they lived in Dolev in Samaria, but after visiting a friend in Mitzpe Yeriho they decided to move there as it was close to Gaila’s Maale Adumim family yet less expensive. For several years she taught English in schools and afternoon clubs, until founding A.H.A.V.A.

The Morrisons’ eldest daughter, Segulah, 29, lives in Katzrin with her husband and children. She practices family therapy and is studying to be an English teacher. Hemda, 27, is a special-education teacher and works with A.H.A.V.A. in Mitzpeh Yeriho, where she lives with her husband and two sons. Temima, 25, lives in Kiryat Ono with her husband and son, and is earning a master’s degree in linguistics while handling A.H.A.V.A.’s social media. Shalva Esther, 21, is doing National Service in Tel Aviv, while Zimra, 17, is in her final year of high school in Maale Adumim.

When asked if she has a favorite aphorism, Gaila mentions two sayings attributed to Rabbi Tarfon in the second chapter of the Mishnaic compilation *Ethics of the Fathers*: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it" and "The day is short, the labor is vast, the workers are idle, the reward is great and the Master of the house is insistent."

For this hard worker, the reward truly is great.