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## **In war-torn Africa, a Jewish home emerges**

### **New York woman tells JCF of youth program in Rwanda**

**by stacey palevsky**  
**staff writer**

More than 1 million children in Rwanda are orphans.

The magnitude size of that statistic — equal to 15 percent of the nation's population — took Anne Heyman's breath away.

She wondered: Could she help? And if she did, could she weave Jewish values into her efforts?

Yes and yes.

Last year, Heyman founded the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, which is slated to open its doors to Rwanda's teenage orphans in 2008.

The youth village will be a home for about 125 teenagers, all of whom have lost their parents to the Rwandan genocide or AIDS. Eventually, the village's population could swell to 500.

But Heyman's project is not simply international aid work. She has put a Jewish face on the project, modeling it after a similar, successful program in Israel.

"I want people to look at Israel and say: What do they do that is of value to the world?" she said during a presentation at the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation on Monday, June 11. It was the first stop on her cross-country campaign, the goal of which is to raise \$10 million by next year.

"There is a campaign to demonize Israel. And we can fight that in a really positive way," Heyman said.

Heyman's eyes welled with tears throughout her presentation. Her motivation to help Rwanda comes from deep within.

"Zionism was never just about Israel. It's about creating a better life for all," she said.

Heyman, who was born in South Africa and lives in New York City, emailed Chaim Peri in 2006 after a friend recommended they connect. Peri spent 30 years directing Yemin Orde, an Israeli youth village started in 1953 to accommodate Holocaust orphans and immigrant children. The village, near Haifa, serves as a home and school for teens, and empowers them to become "change-makers" by connecting them with volunteer opportunities in the surrounding community. Heyman thought Yemin Orde would make for a perfect blueprint for a project in Rwanda.

Not only did Peri think Heyman's idea could succeed, he also suggested enlisting the help of Yemin Orde's Ethiopian Israeli graduates.

A team of four Ethiopian Jews are working with the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village and numerous Rwandan partners, including social workers, educators, architects and government officials.

Meanwhile, back in New York, Heyman needed organizational support for her idea. She connected with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and they agreed to serve as an umbrella agency for the project.

Heyman has spent the past year traveling between her home on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Israel and Rwanda. She recently secured land in Rwamagana, a small town just east of Kigali, Rwanda's capital. She found a team of local architects who agreed to work within the budget she outlined. They spent a week in Israel observing Yemin Orde's culture and structure, and will apply those principles to the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village.

The village will be built on a hill in Rwamagana, "because children need to see far to go far," Heyman said, quoting Peri's common catchphrase. Students will live in homes with one or two adult staff, leaving for the day to attend high school, which will be on-site. Health workers will be available to deal with the students' unique needs.

Heyman hopes that once the project gets off the ground, the Rwandan government will take it over and make it their own, perhaps even building more youth villages in other parts of the country.

Agahozo means "a place where tears are dry" in Kinyarwanda, while shalom, of course, means "peace" in Hebrew.

Heyman thinks the name is appropriate for a place she hopes will dry an orphan's tears, and help them live in peace.