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By Rob Eshman, Editor-in-Chief

Life at Agahozo Shalom

If I wanted the kind of office where visitors shut the door and cry, I'd have become a rabbi. Or a therapist. Or an agent.

That's why it caught me off guard when a woman named Anne Heyman sat down across from me and started, well, crying.

Heyman was in town last week to raise money and awareness for the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village in Rwanda. Moved to ease the plight of 1.2 million children left orphaned by the 1994 Rwandan genocide, she came up with the idea of emulating the Yemin Orde Youth Village in Israel, the model by which Israel absorbed, raised and educated hundreds of post-Holocaust Jewish orphans.

Agahozo Shalom is scheduled to open its doors in September 2008 on 140 acres. The counselors will be mainly Ethiopian Jews who themselves were raised at Yemin Orde.

Using funds provided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and private donors, the village will provide 500 Rwandan children with community, family, an education and a vocation.

Heyman is a slim, blonde 40-something attorney, a native of South Africa who lives in New York and manages the Heyman-Merrin Family Foundation. Her husband, Seth Merrin, is a successful Internet entrepreneur.

She hopes the concept will eventually take off and more villages will arise.

"There's no hope for the country unless you can figure out what to do with these kids," she said.

And, as she is prone to do when talking about some of the most beleaguered humans on the planet, Heyman began to cry.

There's a new mitzvah in the Jewish world, and its name is Africa. It is hard not to notice the increased money and energy Jews and Jewish organizations are putting into the continent.

This week, three leaders of Jewish World Watch are traveling to Chad to witness the use of solar cookers, most of which were bought and brought to refugee camps with Jewish donations so that women there will not have to leave the relative safety of the

camps and risk getting raped while gathering firewood. In two years, the Encino-based Jewish World Watch has gone from an idea to an organization with a \$2 million annual budget and dozens of member synagogues (though, frankly, not enough Orthodox ones).

American Jewish World Service, based in New York, has put the Darfur genocide on the world Jewish agenda and inspired thousands of college-age Jewish youth to serve in Africa and the developing world.

Among established organizations, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) launched its Africa Institute in 2006 to spread awareness of African issues and foster better civil and philanthropic ties between Israel, Africa and the Jewish world.

Several local members of the entertainment industry helped the AJC produce a documentary, "Darfur Now" (see story, page 22).

In Israel, Hebrew University's Institute for Public Health brings Israelis together with students from developing countries, including the Palestinian Authority, to study (in English) ways to improve medical care in Africa.

"Now you have Jewish money being used in Israel for the whole world," Carmi Gillon, the former head of the Shin Bet and currently a Hebrew University vice president, told me. "It's three birds in one shot."

There is a longer history here than most of us realize. In his 1902 book "Altneuland," Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, wrote, "Once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans."

Herzl, wrote scholar Haim Divan, saw parallels between the African struggle for national independence from foreign domination and the struggle of the Jewish people for a homeland after centuries of exile.

Less than a decade after independence, Israel created MASHAV, a program of development cooperation that continues to bring Israeli agricultural and technical expertise to Africa.

But now, it seems to me, the continent is capturing the Jewish philanthropic imagination as never before. Part of this reflects the broader media attention being paid to Africa, the genocide in Darfur and the awareness of the exponential growth of the AIDS plague.

But there is also a sense that Israel, as troubled as it is, is just fine compared to much of Africa. "We've built our house," Gillon said, "and now we can help build the world."

The philosophy of the Yemin Orde Youth Village, created by Dr. Chaim Peri, is based on inculcating in youth the twin principles of tikkun halev – fixing one's "heart" through education and therapy – and tikkun olam fixing the world through good works. The lesson is that as bad as you may have it, someone else in the world has it worse.

That idea, writ large, is what's at play in the new African involvement. And it's why people like Heyman fully expect a new generation of American Jewish youth to come help and volunteer at Agahozo Shalom once the project is ready.

Of course, there are those Jews who still wonder why they shouldn't just focus on the many unmet needs in Israel and at home. Valley Beth Shalom's Rabbi Harold Schulweis addressed them in a poem he delivered from the pulpit over the High Holy Days last month.

"Do you know of any Jewish prayer," his poem read, "that concludes with the words 'Sorry, but they are not ours' ...?"

It continues: The noblest vindication of our dead is that their children and children's children will staunch the wounds of innocent men, women and children."

For some, such connections between the Jewish past and the African present are a leap; for Anne Heyman they are a mere step.

"The Hutus called the Tutsis 'Jews,'" she told me, describing the Rwandan factions involved in the genocide. "They said, 'We'll kill you and send your bodies down the river to Ethiopia.'"

I asked Heyman what the word, "Agahozo," means.

"It's a Kinyarwanda word," she said. "It means, 'The place where tears are dried.'"

And she started tearing up again – and so did I.

For more information, visit <http://www.agahozo-shalom.org/>.

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