

Scientology: Is it a college or a cult?

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Have you ever been stopped on Dizengoff by a friendly, earnest young person inviting you to take a free personality test? Did he or she mention the possibility of learning more about yourself at a special "college?"

If the answer is yes, you may well have been stopped by one of Israel's Scientologists.

"Osnat" and "Yaron" (not their real names) are two youngsters who did decide to take the test.

Osnat, the daughter of an observant Jewish family, was 17 when she discovered Scientology. Persuaded by a friend that it would be "fun" to go to a meeting, Osnat quickly became involved. When her parents inquired, she told them that she was going to lectures. They believed her until she began asking them for large amounts of money to pay for her new "educational" interest. After her parents became anxious and concerned, Osnat severed connections with them. Five years later, her parents have no idea what has become of her.

Yaron was raised on a kibbutz. He attained the rank of officer during his army service. After the army he took a job to earn money. He spent it on Scientology. In three years, Scientology cost him some NIS 25,000. Today, at age 28, he flits from job to job and is described by friends as a man with "serious problems."

Tel Aviv, with its cafe society and cosmopolitan pretensions, has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for a number of self-help, or "self-actualization" groups which often are nothing more than harmless (if somewhat expensive) social clubs.

Scientology, with an academic-sounding and seemingly inoffensive name, however, was defined by the Knesset's 1987 Tassa Glazer inter-departmental report as a cult.

"Once you're caught, you're like a fish in their net," claims R, a former employee of Yad L'Achim, an organization which works to counter missionary and cult activity in Israel.

R has helped many desperate families try to disengage their chil-

"church/college" described by *Time* magazine on May 6, 1991 as "a ruthless global scam."

Scientology attracts prospective members through courses designed to "audit" personality flaws that are created by so-called "engrams." This costs money. In the United States, reports *Time*, courses for recruits range from \$250 to \$11,000 plus. *City Lights* was told by a staff member of the TA College of Scientology that in Israel, each initial personality improvement course costs between NIS 90 - 190, plus the cost of the appropriate textbooks. And there are many more advanced courses.

Time claims that "auditing" in the U.S. has ruined many financially. In a London High Court decision in July 1984, Mr. Justice Lacey concluded that Scientology "has as its real objective money and power for Mr. Hubbard [the founder], his wife and those close to him at the top."

Lacey also condemned auditing as "a process of conditioning, brain-washing and indoctrination," a view echoed this month, almost seven years later, by the international weekly. Like Lacey, the psychiatrists *Time* cited, contend that Scientology sessions can produce a drug-like, mind-controlled euphoria that keeps customers coming back for more.

Here in Israel, Scientology runs two centers, the larger in Tel Aviv, on the corner of Dizengoff/Gordon, and another in Beersheba. A Yad L'Achim employee, Y, points out that there's a third "un-accredited" center in Herzliya run by a former Scientologist/Ben Gurion University academic who split from the official movement after it declared him "a bad personality."

Experts estimate some several hundred to 1,500 Israelis have been recruited. They claim it appeals particularly to impressionable young people at a transitional stage in their lives.

The same could be said of a number of missionary organizations. Scientology's critics claim however, that the difference between the Scientologists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, is that the latter are only after "your soul" - money doesn't come into it.

The patriarch of Scientology is L. Ron Hubbard, a former science fic-

Modern Science of Mental Health, in 1950, which became the ideological basis for Scientology. Over the years, Hubbard added progressive levels to the program, and recruits were encouraged to take more courses in order to advance to higher and higher levels of self-awareness at ever increasing fees.

Even after Hubbard's death in 1986, Scientology continues to prosper. According to *Time*, today there are 700 Scientology "colleges" in 65 countries and has an estimated \$400-million stash away in bank accounts in Lichtenstein, Switzerland and Cyprus. Scientology itself claims some 50,000 active members worldwide.

What attracts an Israeli to Scientology?

The answer, according to informed sources, lies in a combination of pseudo-psychology, science and hard sell. Scientology offers firm answers for people who are looking for meaning in their life.

"Everyone needs to believe in something," asserts R, the former Yad L'Achim employee. "It may be religion, or it may simply be family, but we are all searching for values and a path through life. Scientology feeds on that need."

Another need Scientology feeds on is hunger for love and approval.

According to a former anti-cult information and counselling director from New York, currently living in Jerusalem, many Israeli Scientologists now work in the U.S. trying to rope in others.

"It attracts Jews because it has an intellectual appeal," the former counsellor told *City Lights*. "In New York, I used to present myself as a potential candidate just to see how they operate. It was just amazing. These nice Israeli girls would ask me if I were Jewish and come on very strong - but subtly - speaking in terms of 'relationships'."

"For someone who might have been experiencing stress or a change in his life like divorce, or a family death or even just finishing college and not knowing what to do next, the offer of a firm structure is very appealing."

A former employee of an organ of the Kibbutz Movement which helps parents of cult members come to terms with their situation explains it thus: "Scientology offers quick solu-

ises a better world. It's so far-fetched, people believe it."

One way people in Tel Aviv are introduced to Scientology is via flyers - either passed by hand in the street or in mailboxes - offering a free personality test.

Your problem may be like this ... or different.

It is possible to do something about it.

Come and receive a free personality test!

Counselling by a talented staff!

According to our sources, those who come in and take the test are invariably told they need Scientology.

Yad L'Achim tries to counter Scientology's recruitment program as well as deprogram people that have been knowingly or unknowingly 'caught in the net.' According to Y, his organization fights a constant battle with a number of cults, trying to warn the public of their true nature, either through newspaper articles or flyers.

"The first step we take is to approach the individuals involved in the cult. Parents generally call us about their children. They start to

detect that there is a problem when their child begins relating to them as people on a lower level, lacking the cult's 'knowledge,'" Y explains. "Then they come to us and ask us to try and influence their son or daughter. In some cases we manage to convince them to leave but usually we're not so successful."

Scientology, like any other cult, is extremely difficult to leave once you're a part of it. "All of a sudden, a confused or lost teenager will find that he has an instant clique of friends. If he leaves, he is certain he'll lose them," he explains.

Time alleges that in the U.S., people who leave or take negative action against Scientology are harassed and threatened. *City Lights* has found no concrete evidence of similar behavior in Israel. *City Lights* also has been unable to find any source, whether inside or outside the movement, willing to be identified in this article. All claim that those who try to break free here in Israel are emotionally blackmailed by "those who know exactly how to hit home."

"It takes a great deal of willpower and personal strength to leave," they say.

Searching for answers: One person's experience

"A few years ago, I had time to kill and was walking by myself in Tel Aviv and happened to see their office. I was curious. I had heard something about Scientology.

It was a difficult time in my life. I had only been in the country for a year, had just broken up with a girlfriend, and was about to be drafted into the army. I was kind of down.

They gave me a test which was supposed to evaluate my personality and find out my strengths and weaknesses. It seemed to be scientifically based, with lots of numbers and charts. I remember answering questions such as: Do you feel sad in movies? Do other people tell you what to do? Do you speak less than your friends? Do you eat slowly? There were about 200 questions.

I tried to answer honestly. It reminded me of a personality test I once took in a psychology course in college.

Then, I was taken into a back room and my results were charted and analyzed. A very nice guy told me that my results showed I was easily influenced by my environment, though other areas of my personality were strong. It seemed to make sense.

He offered me a course to improve this one weak area. He had obviously studied human relations and knew how to talk to people.

I had no money at the time, so taking the course was out of the question for me. I heard later that it was possible to work hours at the center or bring in other people to Scientology to pay for courses.

When they saw I wasn't interested in the course, they tried to persuade me to buy the book. I'm not sure I wouldn't have been more tempted if I'd had the money at the time."