Off the grid

Life in the Gates of Heaven

The rustic cabin built by hand at the Frum Farm by Yedida Fink, surrounded by the wintry landscape of Delta County on Colorado’s Western Slope.

AKA
Shaare Shamayim

BY CHRIS LEPPEK
Across the Great Divide, on the far side of the Rocky Mountains from Denver, lie the Gates of Heaven.

More eloquently known by its Hebrew name, Shaare Shamayim, and more colloquially by its nickname, the Frum Farm, its creator wants observant Jews across America to know that those gates are open.

Located atop a high mesa and flanked by majestic mountain ranges, Shaare Shamayim is situated near the small town of Hotchkiss in the wide open spaces of Colorado’s Western Slope, a sunny region known for its ranching, farming and fruit orchards.

It’s about as Western, and as heavenly, a place as one can find, and if Yedida Fink has her way, it’s destined to become a Jewish place as well.

Fink and her husband Yossi, their eight-year-old twins and another family already reside in Shaare Shamayim. A rabbi and his family and a handful of neighboring “incognito Jews” are working out the logistics involved in moving to the fledgling community, and a number of Jews of varying religious affiliations are considering it.

See HEAVEN on Page 58
Autumn gold, pine green and alpine blue compose a colorful palate as seen from Shaare Shamayim.

Tehila Wiesenber
Orthodox persuasions from across the country are giving serious thought to it as well.

If G-d is willing and the creek don't rise, as goes the old saying, Fink hopes that Shaare Shamayim will one day be home to 45 families, living in dwellings of their own choice (and perhaps their own construction), nourished by food raised and grown on their own land, powered by energy from the wind and the sun, their thirst slaked from a natural spring, their souls nurtured and enlightened through Torah Judaism.

It will be, in Fink's words: "A place of peace and serenity."

Having grown up in Los Angeles and spent time in other big cities, peace and serenity have been lifelong goals of the 53-year-old Fink, who describes herself as the driving force behind Shaare Shamayim.

“I am the one who wanted to push it forward — the director, I guess,” she says. “I'm the one with the nail gun who builds things. My husband is more on the learning side.

“When I was a little kid growing up in LA I kept telling my parents, 'I hate being here with all of these crowds and people and the noise and pollution, and when I grow up I want to get out in the country.' Now I'm finally doing it.”

Her vision for the community, however, goes well beyond a desire for peace and quiet and a healthy distance from big cities. Essential to the Finks' vision is that it be a distinctly Jewish place, and not in a casual or nominal sense. The community is today, and is intended to remain in the future, a place where Halachah is not only respected but observed.

A self-described baal teshuvah, Fink says her Jewish observance dates back about a decade and a half.

“I came from a completely secular background,” Fink says of her religious upbringing. Of her ethnic heritage, she says, “I'm an Irish, Native American, Sephardic Jew. I kid you not.”

Her husband, on the other hand, “is frum from birth,” she says, using the Yiddish word for observant. “He’s from Borough Park, Brooklyn, New York.”

There are elements of “yeshivish,” Chabad and other chasidic streams in the Judaism that Yedida and Yossi practice now in Shaare Shamayim, she says. The best overall term for their religiosity — although still inadequate, Fink says — would be modern Orthodox.

See HEAVEN on Page 60
Yael Fink, eight, takes advantage of fresh powder to create a snow angel.
The genesis for Shaare Shamayim came just over five years ago when Fink joined a growing online conversation among Jews who, like her, were longing for a simpler, more natural lifestyle.

“They were saying, ‘We really want to get out in the country, we’re tired of city life, we want to go back to Torah basics and live off the land.’

“Two of my friends in Denver were pushing for the same thing. After a couple of years of that I finally said, ‘You know what? It’s all just talk. Until somebody actually goes and buys a piece of land and does this, it’s going to stay just talk.’

“So Rochel Leah Thompson, my friend from Denver, actually came out here to Delta County with me. We canvassed all over the county to find the right piece of property and bought it and said, OK, now it’s not just talk. Let’s do this.”

Shaare Shamayim, legally set up as a nonprofit, now owns 40 acres of land. Fink is hopeful that a deal might be reached to obtain an adjoining parcel of 380 acres, owned by Bill Koch of Koch Brothers fame, which would allow the community to expand and add grazing land for animals.

The community is still in the early stages. There are a couple of cabin-style family homes, four guest cottages that are rented out to kosher observant visitors or travelers and a building that serves as a synagogue. There is also a small structure that serves as a mikveh.

See HEAVEN on Page 62
Bringing observant Judaism and nature together is the primary goal of the Shaare Shamayim community.

Tehila Wiesenberg
Until the community can go “off-grid” by installing wind and power energy systems, Shaare Shamayim currently draws its power from the local grid. Likewise, until it can dig its own well casing to access a natural spring, it relies on cisterns for water, filled by a neighbor who does have a well.

The property’s previous owners commissioned soil and water tests, Fink says, “and the conclusion is that the water is pristine, as is the soil. There is no contamination. The only issue with the water is that it’s a little bit hard.”

Those interested in joining the community can do so at a relatively low cost, at least by most Colorado standards. Shaare Shamayim charges a one-time joining fee of $2,500, an annual land lease fee of $120 per year and a “community contribution” of no more than $200 per month, which goes toward common infrastructure, the synagogue and the religious day school the community plans to build.

The main expense outside those, Fink says, is whatever money a family or individual wants to spend on the construction of its house. Since Delta County has no building codes, the sky is the limit on what sort of home a resident chooses to build.

The Fink home began as a large military tent which was replaced by a log cabin she built herself, at a cost of some $7,500, she says. She’s planning eventually to replace the cabin with an “earthship” structure, defined by Wikipedia as “a passive solar earth shelter that is made of both natural and upcycled materials such as earth-packed tires.”

Other options include container homes, tiny homes, yurts, cob houses or more traditional — and probably more expensive — structures.

Residents can choose to work on the farm itself, work remotely from home, hold jobs outside the community, or a combination of those options. Fink herself works part-time as a school bus driver for the local school district and delivers US mail.

Everything seems poised for Shaare Shamayim to begin growing. The community has a website and Facebook page — both easily found on Google — loaded with information on both practical and philosophical matters.

It is spreading the word further by hosting holiday gatherings, housing visitors in the guest houses and providing tours of area farms, ranches and places of interest. These gatherings have managed to attract enough Jews to form minyans, a rarity at Shaare Shamayim. The next one is planned for Passover.

While the rabbi’s family and a number of Hotchkiss-area Jews are likely to join the community in the near future, Fink says, she acknowledges that pitching the idea of an agrarian, largely back-to-nature lifestyle to mostly urban Orthodox Jews can be a challenge.

“They ask, ‘Oh, do you have a minyan?’ And we keep trying to tell them in order to have a minyan you’ve got to come out and join us and make a minyan. So they say, ‘Well, we’ll come when you have a minyan.’ So there’s a sort of disconnect.”

Fink adds that she’s doing her best to rectify people’s misconceptions about what sort of community Shaare Shamayim actually aspires to.
The spectacular view from Shaare Shamayim.

Tehila Wiesenberg
to be.

The idea of people living in a community of alternative houses, raising natural crops and livestock, might conjure images of the alternative hippie communes that sprung up in the 60s and 70s, or perhaps the agricultural kibbutzim that were so prevalent in Israel after the War of Independence.

Wrong on both counts, Fink clarifies.

The organic, New Agey communes of a few decades ago “really didn’t have anything to do with Shaare Shamayim,” she says. “I am familiar with the movement. I have three older brothers who were quote-unquote hippies.”

Nor did the kibbutz lifestyle serve as an inspiration. “I have been on a kibbutz and saw the way it works, but let’s just say I’m strongly opposed to the socialism idea. What we’re doing is more of a moshav than a kibbutz. It’s more like an old-fashioned farming community where farmers and rancher help each other in a cooperative effort where everybody has their own space.”

The concept of Jews participating in such a community doesn’t seem at all incongruous to Fink. “It goes right back to our ancestry. Our ancestors were farmers and ranchers and I think that is the way to get back to Torah basics, to really live out Torah in a tangible way.”

Building a physical community from scratch — something very seldom attempted in this country in this century — is obviously an idealistic and ambitious goal.

Some might go so far as to call it chutzpah.

The word inspires Fink to chuckle. “I’ve been told all my life that I’m extremely chutzpadik but that’s kept me going all my life,” she says. “It gets trying at times. I have to go back to what my brother keeps telling me: ‘I know that Hashem is behind this and it’s going to work.’ That keeps spurring me on. We keep putting one foot in front of the other.

“When I started this, my friend Rochel gave me a t-shirt that said: ‘She thought she could, so she did it.’ And that’s me. When I get determined to do something, I’ll do it or die trying.”

Information on Shaare Shamayim: call 425-614-6793 or email shaare_shamaim@yahoo.com.

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