**The Tzohar Marriage Department**

**General Background**

**Goals of the Marriage Department**

The marriage department is the largest and oldest department in Tzohar. The marriage department responds to an important need in Israeli society.

1. The disconnect between the religious public and the general public has significant implications for the social fabric of the State of Israel. The unmediated meetings between a couple and the Tzohar rabbi and counselor are a unique encounter that breaks down barriers and constitutes a different - and better - way for the different publics to interact.

2. Many couples do not choose to marry according to Jewish law, which means that their children will not be recognized as Jews when they marry, or that the process will be complex and difficult.

3. The way that the religious establishment conducts itself often leads to a distaste towards the Rabbinate and, as a result, aversion to religion. A dignified marriage registration process enables couples to experience Judaism in an inclusive and respectful manner, inviting them to investigate and develop their Jewish identity.

4. Couples who experience marriage through our program view Tzohar as the Jewish place for them. They will continue to interact with Judaism by means of our unique approach in the future, including Brit Milah (circumcision), Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Jewish Holidays.

**Marriage Department Activity**

The marriage department consists of three divisions: Marriage registration, rabbis who perform weddings, and counselors for brides.

**A. Midyear results:**

From the beginning of the year through August 2017, Tzohar's marriage department - including all of its branches - dealt with 2866 couples.

Feedback surveys indicate extremely positive results.

Average feedback survey responses in various fields in the above period were:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Email interactions | Telephone conversations | Handling of problems | Courtesy | Response speed |
| 9.77 | 9.33 | 9.60 | 9.83 | 9.53 |

These figures are out of 10 points. The average was calculated on the basis of 1,275 feedback surveys received.

In verbal feedback, couples discussed the quality of service they received in greater detail, as well as the significance of their experience throughout the process. For example, Eden and Miroslava, who married in January 19, wrote: "We were really excited about each step we took - we felt like we were climbing the stairs to the wedding canopy. Following the formal introductory meetings, and as the wedding day neared, there was a more spiritual emphasis. The meetings with the bride counselor and the rabbi made the experience more tangible for us."

**B. Teamwork**

Until a few years ago, each department operated independently, but in coordination with other departments. A strategic decision was taken to move from departmental work to divisional activity. The process took place in three stages:

1. Transition to a portfolio management system, so that all communication with each couple became the responsibility of the portfolio manager, while integrating these work processes into the SF information program that was introduced.

2. Physical connection of all the departments into a single office compound, which was made possible by the transfer of the offices to a new location at the beginning of September 2016.

3. This year we have advanced to the third stage of the "Learning Division" program, which aims to improve inter-departmental communication, flow of relevant information about the couples, understanding mutual processes, and creating space for retrieval. The program included two full days of "role swapping" among departmental staff, the establishment of team department heads who meet on a regular basis in order to implement the program, and beginning the process of writing a departmental algorithm.

**Marriage registration**

**Marriage registration is designed to respond to several needs:**

1. Those couples who choose not to marry according to Jewish law because of their concern regarding interaction with the Rabbinate will register for marriage through Tzohar. The Tzohar organization has made a name for itself as an inviting and inclusive organization. Many couples feel comfortable signing up for marriage through Tzohar despite their concerns about the Rabbinate.

2. The experience of registration with Tzohar leaves a pleasant and positive feeling that replaces many couples’ concerns regarding the religious establishment in particular and Judaism in general.

3. Ongoing relationships with these couples will enable us to maintain contact with them over the course of time and remain a supportive place for them to turn to in the future.

**The status of marriage registration in Tzohar with the introduction of the Tzohar Law**

For many years now, thousands of couples have come to register for marriage at Tzohar and have completed the entire marriage process through our organization. The introduction of the Tzohar Law effectively opened the market to competition, and many couples choose to marry in the closest or most convenient place, even if the quality of their religious services are lacking. In response, we have taken a number of steps this year in an attempt to raise the number of couples choosing to get married through Tzohar.

**A. A new marriage registration branch in Tel Aviv**

After a lengthy process, we have reached a cooperation agreement with the Tel Aviv Religious Council to operate a registration center in Tel Aviv, which began to function in September. We anticipate about 1,800 couples annually. This is part of our continued efforts to improve accessibility of marriage services throughout Israel. Couples can now register in Lod, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Cooperation with the Religious Council in Tel Aviv has added value. For many years, the Chief Rabbinate has viewed Tzohar as a threat, inasmuch as it serves as an alternative organization that provides religious services. Working cooperatively with the largest religious council in Israel gives us recognition as a significant and relevant body that offers value that the Religious Council is unable to offer to couples. We are certain that other branches of the Rabbinate will ultimately realize that they must turn to responsible bodies that are capable of making Judaism attractive and beloved to the public.

**B. Access to marriage registration services**

1. In order to improve our services, we created a special standard for telephone response, and we clarified the best means of communications with couples several times. Since these changes have been introduced, this index has shown a significant upward trend.

2. Expanding hours of operation: In the past year, we have added hours that we are open to the public on Fridays and in the evening at all of our branches.

3. Simplifying the process for couples: The information available online has been reworked and its appearance has been improved spectacularly. The web forms have been shortened and have received a facelift making it easier to contact us.

**Performing weddings**

The challenge of connecting Jews to their Jewish identity is no simple matter. Tzohar has a precious and unusual resource in its group of outstanding rabbis. Most of the rabbis have academic degrees, are army veterans, and have a sense of mission – to volunteer on behalf of the Jewish people. These rabbis can reverse the negative view held by many about rabbis and show a more sensitive aspect of the rabbinate. Over the years, some 600 rabbis have volunteered in various positions at Tzohar.

After many years of challenging work, we came to the conclusion that it is necessary to expand and deepen the content that they share in their encounters with couples who are getting married. In some cases, the couples report a special significance that they found in the course of their meetings with the rabbi. In these cases, it was clear that the source of the special relationship was the personal connection that developed between the rabbi and the couple. This year, we have begun a process that aims to intensify the activities of the rabbi in order to ensure that more meetings between the rabbi and the couple serve as meaningful encounters rather than simply providing a service.

After a long and complicated process, it was decided to launch the Partnership Program, at whose core is a program offering three areas of support for rabbis performing weddings:

• Group support: Rabbis will meet twice a year in small groups (about 25 in each group) for an empowerment meeting focusing on how to improve their effectiveness. These meetings will be led by a professional mentor.

• Individual support: Each rabbi will be matched with a personal mentor. The meetings will include: personal professional assessment, identification of areas in need of strengthening, and suggestions and tools for further development.

• Systematic support: New materials relevant to rabbinic activities will be developed; there will be heightened response to needs expressed by rabbis that come up in practice; the personal evaluation and compensation system will be improved.

After six months, we can report the following:

• 52 rabbis have participated in group meetings that have taken place from Beersheba in the south to Haifa in the north.

• 21 rabbis have taken part in personal conversations with the rabbis of the "Partners" team in conversations lasting more than 30 minutes on average.

• A unique booklet on "Asking Questions" was produced especially for the rabbis.

In addition, from the beginning of the year through August, 1740 marriage ceremonies were organized and performed by Tzohar rabbis.

**Preparing non-religious brides: *Ahoti Kallah* (My Sister is the Bride)**

A very significant part of the marriage process at Tzohar is the process of preparing non-religious brides for their marriages. About 400 volunteer counselors have been trained by Tzohar. These counselors were chosen by means of a very rigorous process and they include women from a wide range of professions, all of whom hold academic degrees. These women succeed in creating a strong connection with the couples, since they are women who are committed to the principles of Jewish law, while also possessing deep knowledge of Israeli society and sensitivity to the situation of the couples.

These women undergo comprehensive courses in which they are prepared in a variety of different areas: Psychological, marital, halachic and so forth. Tzohar's brides arrive at the counselors' homes and for a few hours, in accordance with the dynamics that they create, talk with them about Judaism, relationships, family and love. For many couples, this is the only time that they have the opportunity to engage in a process of empowerment with an eye towards the establishment of their families.

By August 2017, Tzohar had trained 2201 women as counselors to brides.

The results of these meeting are nothing short of amazing. Survey responses give an average of 9.54 to these meetings.

We also receive exceptional written feedback. One bride, Gila Diamandi, wrote: "The meeting began with almost trivial minutia that prepared me properly for the *mikvah* in a very detailed, yet pleasant and caring way, giving me a positive feeling and understanding why the *mikveh* is valuable and important in my life. But then there was another conversation that I did not expect. We discussed our relationship in a manner that gave us the opportunity to communicate and discuss the personal connection that we had developed."

In a process that began in 2016, a number of steps have been taken in an attempt to improve the inter-departmental work processes and help cope with the department's challenges (burnout, couples who neglect to cancel meetings, etc.). Most of the program has already been put into place, and this year an important component has been implemented: training conversations for individual retention in the *Ahoti Kallah* department, and an improvement in the quality of training in the *Tovim HaShnayim* program - "Mentoring Program".

**The department of guidance for religious brides and grooms: *Tovim HaShnayim* (Two is Better)**

One of our most difficult challenges is the *Tovim HaShnayim* effort. The target audience of *Tovim HaShnayim* is religiously observant couples who do not see themselves turning to rabbis or female religious figures in preparation for their wedding. These couples find themselves in a difficult situation because it is important to them that they act in accordance with Jewish law, but they find it difficult to find a religious figure with whom they are comfortable, who will understand their complex inner world.

In *Tovim HaShnayim* we have prepared 35 religious couples who have undergone extensive training. They meet with the couple for seven sessions prior to the weddings, with another meeting that takes place afterwards. About half of the meetings are dedicated to developing a relationship as a couple, as a family, how to resolve conflicts, and the challenges of the emerging family. The other half of the time is devoted to religious life and principles applicable to a religious couple.

In the past year, 285 religious couples have completed the unique experience of *Tovim HaShnayim* instruction. There is a consistent and impressive increase in the number of couples who approach us for guidance in this area.

**Training additional volunteers**

The moving force behind all the activities of Tzohar has been - and remains - our volunteers. Recognizing this, we are constantly working to expand the number of volunteers and to keep them invigorated.

In the first half of the year, we worked to identify volunteers so that immediately after the holidays we could start with the training courses.

The training course for counselors of non-religious brides will take place during the week after Sukkot. 30 counselors will begin the course.

The training course for counselors of religious brides begins at the same time, but it is divided into two stages. The first stage, in which the women counselors will be trained, will begin after Sukkot. Their husbands’ training sessions will begin before Passover. Nearly 20 couples have been found who will participate in this course.

The training course for rabbis performing weddings begins the week after Sukkot, when we will begin training 30 new rabbis.