n India, one third of the population is below the poverty line, earning under $1.25 a day. It is home to an estimated 42% of the world’s malnourished children, though this often exists behind the scenes. Yet for the nearly 60,000 Israeli backpackers that make their way to India, it is a place for adventure and excitement, exploration and experiment.

Lev Olam (Heart of the World) aims at tapping into this human resource by reining in Israeli enthusiasm and spirit to use as a force for good and change for India. In doing so, they are redefining Indian tourism for many young Israelis.

In major backpacking centers such as Hampi, Pushkar, Rishkesh and Dharamasala, Lev Olam’s Head of Indian Team Bradley Cohen is hard at work spreading their message of LOVE (Lev Olam Volunteer Experience) by putting posters around town and in guest-houses, challenging Israelis to change their lives by volunteering to participate in a ten day program aimed at bringing much needed aid to some of India’s most vulnerable. The volunteers are required to commit to a ten day program and the organization provides training, transportation shelter and food.

Lev Olam teaches the Israeli backpacking volunteers the basics of cultural awareness and then places them in projects throughout the country, where they have an opportunity to work hands-on with locals. Volunteers see the real India as they hand
out food to hungry children, help fit children with a new pair of shoes, rebuild schools, improve sanitation and help provide clean drinking water supplies. Lev Olam also focuses on education and women’s empowerment and stresses the direct correlation between the literacy of women and child mortality.

Working with India’s neediest gives the backpackers a new appreciation for what they have. The experience also germinates the seed of the spirit of volunteerism and humanitarianism that they will carry and spread throughout their lives. Jacob from Bnei Brak says of his experience, “I never really thought about volunteering before I came across Lev Olam – now I want to make it a major part of my travels in the future.”

Lev Olam also works to help Israelis gain an understanding that the organization’s core beliefs were not grown in India nor were they borrowed from Buddhism – these values are Jewish values that run to the core of Jewish belief. Lev Olam connects the personal desire that compelled the volunteers to seek out this type of experience to Judaism as well. As Assaf, a program participant explains, “I didn’t think I’d come all the way to India to find the meaning and spirituality of Judaism.”

It is clear that not only the recipients gain from Lev Olam, but the personal gain to volunteers is certainly not ‘incidental’. As Cohen explains, “for me Tikkun Olam means not only improving the world around us but improving ourselves as well.” He continues, “it’s about identifying an area of need and then rectifying the problem in the most effective and efficient way. Tikkun Olam involves humility and being able to learn and grow. It means serving people in the way they need, not in the way you think is best. It’s about creating self-sufficiency, not reliance.”

Whether intended or not, Lev Olam is also helping to change the image Indians have of Israelis by countering some of the negative stereotypes that backpackers have earned for themselves.

The question, though, is what difference can be made in just ten days. Cohen explains that even a single day in a school, providing much needed materials, shoes and sports equipment, painting the walls, teaching English, running workshops in
music and creative art and interacting with the kids has a very real impact. That being said, they are also looking towards creating 3-4 month volunteer experiences.

Likewise, the basic infrastructure development work they are involved in does have lasting impacts. Lev Olam is partnering with local NGOs to better target the projects where need is the greatest and to insure the long term feasibility of their efforts. As Cohen explains, “Lev Olam offers the manpower, funding and inspiration they need to make a huge difference in the lives of the poorest and weakest in society.” Lev Olam often gives money directly to locals to complete the work themselves, creating a feeling of self-reliance. Projects like collaboration with I-india to fund the building of dormitories and schools for street kids have helped open access to education, in turn breaking cycles of poverty, drug abuse and illiteracy.

For his personal wish list, Cohen says, “ultimately I would like to have a world-wide network of drop-in volunteer centres where any tourist could get involved in giving back to the local community and learn more about the real lives and culture of the locals – creating conscious, meaningful tourism... The centres would be places to come to find meaning and empowerment and direction in life as well.” Not a small goal but a definite start at repairing the world through Jewish values, belief in basic human rights, the desire for personal growth, the spirit of volunteerism and an individual's power to become a force for change.

For more information, please see the Lev Olam website: www.levolam.org. Lev Olam can also be reached by email at office@levolam.org (Israel) or levolam@ymail.com (India).