



Global opportunities. Businessmen who don't live in Jerusalem, or even in Israel, are still encouraged to post their profiles. (Courtesy)



JBNF founders hope to increase the forum to 5,000 members. (Courtesy)

Helping business people blossom

The Jerusalem Business Networking Forum has chalked up impressive results over four years: 1,000 members aiding each other to the tune of \$25 million in deals and 100 job placements

• By ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Entrepreneur and inventor Uzi Mor of Rehovot decided to launch a financial-social network matching lenders to Israeli projects through a peer-to-peer system, and in January 2010 he presented his idea to a meeting of the Jerusalem Business Networking Forum.

JBNF's 1,000 members have aided each other over the past four years to the tune of \$25 million in deals and 100 job placements.

"About a year later, I got an e-mail from a JBNF member saying that someone in Seattle was looking for me based on that lecture," says Mor. "His teenage daughter wanted to invest via financial social networking in Israel.

"She was looking for such a network, and her father got in contact with someone who had heard me speak at JBNF. I told him we were still looking for technology to make it happen, and he got some Americans involved."

As a result, Mor found a website developer to launch www.mimun4u.com, and the dream is that much closer to reality.

"The chain of connections started at the JBNF," he stresses. "This didn't happen to me at any of the other groups I attend each month, and I am a member of at least five similar meet-ups."

Mor is one of the few native Israeli members of JBNF, which caters heavily to both long-standing and off-the-boat English-speaking immigrants in

business, hi-tech and investment fields. However, his experience is not unusual.

"I've helped a lot of people find the right place to go," says Avigail Frij, one of the volunteer leaders of JBNF. "I see olim try to make it in Israel and often fail. Making a living is one of the most important paths to success."

Frij, a 1977 immigrant from Los Angeles, is a veteran technical writer who branched out into web development and Internet promotion.

"I once recommended that someone come to JBNF, and at the very first meeting she attended, she found a job. She's been working at that same place ever since."

There is usually no charge to attend meetings, which have featured tutorials on marketing and business development, meetings with foreign businesspeople, and short keynote addresses by corporate leaders such as Dr. Orna Be'eri of Gemini Capital; Prof. Ya'acov Zerem, CEO and founder of Ophir; Jonathan Medved, founder of Israseed and CEO of Vringo; Nir Barkat (who shared his economic vision for Jerusalem before he became mayor); Dahlia Meggido from 7 Health Ventures; Barbara Shaw, CEO of the Women's Business Development Network; Ayala Matalon of the MIT Forum; and executives in the alternative energy and search engine optimization worlds.

The formal presentations are kept short to allow ample time for networking among attendees.

Joe van Zwaren, vice president of business devel-

opment at Leviathan Energy, started attending JBNF events when the organization was founded four years ago by Joel Bainerman, who is no longer involved. Van Zwaren picked up where Bainerman left off. Finance-administration executive and business mentor Michael Horesh helps manage the group and arrange monthly speakers, along with Frij.

"We used a relatively new program, Meetup.com, which runs the registration and Internet site for our group. Everyone who comes pre-registers, and you can see who's coming. Many times, who's coming is more important than the actual speakers," says van Zwaren, a Dutchman who immigrated from Belgium in 1977. He spent 25 years at the Science Ministry, helped get the Internet going in Israel and worked in venture capital.

"Most of those activities, though I was based in Jerusalem, ended up benefiting the central or Haifa areas. I was surprised that despite all the resources available in Jerusalem, we do badly in terms of hi-tech and business. I was looking for a way to help business in Jerusalem using my skills and connections, and this forum was ideal."

"There is clearly a need for people to get together on a semiformal basis and speak," says Horesh, originally from London and in Israel nearly 30 years.

The volunteers have ambitious plans to grow JBNF to 5,000 members. One avenue to that goal is the group's close working relationship with Nefesh B'Nefesh (NBN), the organization that facilitates

North American and British aliya. Often, JBNF meetings are held at NBN's Jerusalem headquarters in Givat Shaul.

"I've worked with our olim to integrate them into JBNF because of several elements it offers," says Rachel Berger, NBN's director of employment. "The speakers are senior-management, exciting, creative people who've impacted on the Israeli business community, so this is incredibly helpful in the integration of new olim."

Berger remembers one newly arrived lawyer who attended a meeting even though he already had a job.

"Through JBNF, he landed two clients and was able to go out on his own, making a higher income and leading to more opportunities. I know of a graphic artist who also landed several clients just by going to an event.

"The mixed population of older olim and a smattering of Israelis really makes business happen, for all ages and demographics."

London native Debi Zylbermann attended her first JBNF meeting in February 2008, after working in hi-tech in Israel for 25 years. She had just completed a course in search engine optimization and brought along her freshly printed business cards.

"I had no idea how to go about finding customers," she recalls. But she prepared an "elevator pitch," a brief description of the service she was offering at Debi-z.com, and during the networking portion of the meeting she booked her first client.

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Avigail Frij
JBNF volunteer leader

"Since then, I go to probably 80 percent of the meetings, and have spoken at them two or three times," she says. "It's a friendly environment that gave me the confidence to promote myself, and my business has been going ever since."

One of Zylbermann's two current employees is a woman she met at a JBNF meeting focused on how haredi women could be integrated into the workforce. At another meeting, she met a business coach whom she hired and has found to be "amazingly helpful." Zylbermann is based in the capital, but it's not just Jerusalemites who come to the forum's meetings. People like Mor travel monthly from more distant points, including Tel Aviv and Kfar Saba.

"Even if you don't live in Jerusalem, or even in Israel, or never come to the lectures, it is still worthwhile to post your profile," suggests van Zwaren.

The May meeting, held at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center as a joint session with the Movement for Greater Jerusalem, focused on "Hi-tech in Jerusalem: From Dream to Reality" and featured a panel session with three veteran entrepreneurs and two first-time entrepreneurs.

The following month, the Jerusalem College of Technology hosted a JBNF meeting headlined by business development executives from Microsoft, Intel and IBM.

"They talked about how startups should be linking up with the big guys," says Horesh. "As a result of that key meeting, at least two [startup] energy companies have been asked to make presentations to two of those partners."

The forum recently ran a "speed dating"-type event, where participants received coaching from business development experts and then got two minutes to try their elevator pitch on every individual in the room. "It was amazing how many contacts were made," says Horesh.

"One of the hardest things to do is to close the first deal," says van Zwaren. "Many JBNFers have reported that their first business deal was made through our JBNF networking activities. We have seen many people blossom." •