

2005-01-28**Drugs? NIMBY***by Amy Klein, Managing Editor*

Two drug-related incidents occurred in the American yeshiva community in Israel last week, which may give all parents pause.

A 19-year-old American boy from Encino who was studying at a yeshiva in Israel died from a heroin overdose (see story, page 15). Also, four American yeshiva students in Israel were arrested on suspicion of selling drugs to other American yeshiva students.

Most people who have been to yeshiva for a year in Israel in the last decade or so were not surprised by the news. A lot of people were surprised this hasn't happened sooner. When 18-year-olds raised in somewhat strict environments are on their own in Israel for the first time, many of them will use this opportunity to party — at least at first. The hope is that after a few raucous weeks the students will settle down to their learning and experiencing of Israel, and will return home model students and upstanding members of their communities. Tragically, at least one student will not.

Upon learning the names of the yeshivas in Israel that the five boys attended, many people will say, "Well, of course, it happened there. X Yeshiva is known for troubled students." True, true. Even I — who attended Machon Gold 15 years ago but have been out of touch with year-in-Israel programs for a while — know the reputation of some of these schools. But this Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) attitude is what has let the problems go on for so long in the first place.

On Internet postings following the boy's death, some writers castigated these last-resort schools for accepting the so-called high-risk Orthodox youth and blamed the schools themselves. But others wrote in to defend these schools and credited them with saving their lives.

"I am currently 22 years old and I am a recent college graduate. I myself ... was once considered one of these 'high-risk' students," Dave Serano wrote on the Jerusalem Post Web Site. "I wonder in amazement at the look of surprise on our Jewish communities' faces as they read and talk about what awful yeshivot these are, and how these boys should not have gone to Israel to solve their drug problems. How wrong and sadly misled these people are."

He wrote that the yeshivas and its rabbis have saved "hundreds, if not thousands" of lives, like his own, in a way that a drug counselor could not.

No question that these "high-risk" schools do more good than harm, and that the kids who end up there are probably better off there than in some college in the middle of America — without parental or rabbinical supervision.

But to name the schools is beside the point. The real point is: there's a problem and it has to be dealt with. Now.