

2005-01-28**Encino Boy ODs In Israeli Yeshiva****His death highlights drug problem in schools for Americans.***by Julie Gruenbaum Fax, Education Editor*

Friends and family gathered on Sunday, Jan. 23, at Eden Memorial Park in Mission Hills to bury 19-year-old Eric Siegel, who died last week at a yeshiva in Israel after he overdosed on heroin.

Siegel's death on Jan. 18 came just two days before four American yeshiva boys were arrested in Israel for selling marijuana to an undercover policeman, and the confluence of events has shined a spotlight on drug use among American youth in Israel.

While Siegel was at Neveh Zion, a yeshiva for at-risk youth, some of the other four boys were in more mainstream schools that serve American post-high school boys.

"In recent years, it has become even more difficult. It starts now in eighth grade, not senior year in yeshiva high school," Rabbi Chaim Yisroel Blumenfeld, head of Neveh Zion, wrote about drug use in a letter to his supporters after Siegel's death. "By the time they reach Neveh, many are already living on the street."

While the American yeshiva system works well for a majority of students, it doesn't work for everyone, said Rabbi Avi Leibovic, founder and executive director of Aish Tamid, a Los Angeles organization that serves as a spiritual and social safety net for many of these types of young men, who often end up turning to drugs.

"The mainstream yeshivas have a very specific, cookie-cutter image of how every student should ideally turn out, and there has to be a greater appreciation of looking into the specific skills and talents and needs of each child to realize he has so much to offer to the community, even if he doesn't fit the mold exactly," he said. "Aish Tamid presents an opportunity for them to blossom and develop and flourish and play a meaningful role in Clal Yisrael."

Leibovic, an attorney who was raised in Los Angeles and is an alumnus of Neveh, proactively seeks out boys — he does not yet have the resources to handle girls — who are at-risk of or have already left their family and community and offers them customized chizuk, or reinforcement, through personal guidance, job opportunities, referrals to mental health professional or drug rehabilitation and a warm place for rediscovering Judaism. He has seen a rotation of 330 boys since he began a few years ago, using in part the techniques and approaches he picked up at Neveh.

Siegel, who was raised as a member of the Conservative Valley Beth Shalom (VBS) in Encino, did not fit the typical profile of the mostly Orthodox Neveh students, but he found a warm niche there.

Neveh has an impressive record for helping kids who had turned to drugs or other forms of delinquency to get back on track. At Neveh, Siegel had found a staff and student body that