

during the Shoah.

Falafelman's rotund persona came to life during the three years Maya-Gur studied comic book art at the prestigious Joe Kubert School of Comics and Graphic Art in New Jersey. Her time abroad changed her perspective on Israel.

"In America, I saw Israel from the point of view of an outsider, and I felt so proud of this country," she relates.

Now, Falafelman is even helping Diaspora Jews understand Israel – in Chicago, schools are using the comics to teach Jewish kids Hebrew.

HOW HAS the ROI Community helped Maya-Gur in her endeavors? Like Shwitz, Maya-Gur is keen to express her excitement at being part of this initiative. ROI, she enthuses, empowers people like herself – young, creative, talented, brimming with ideas – to get the support and resources they need to turn their dreams into reality.

"At ROI people are creating community projects that are not just for Israel or the Jewish world, but for everyone," she says.

Jeremy Hulsh is a third ROI community member whose work is benefiting the wider community as well as Israel and the Jewish world.

Hulsh, who worked for Sony Records and Columbia Records before his aliya from the US eight years ago, is the founder and executive director of Oleh! Records, an independent, non-religious, non-profit record label. Its mission is to help Israel's young and talented musicians succeed in the cutthroat world of the global music industry.



Hulsh explains that ROI helped him to get his idea off the ground. ROI members can apply for small grants to give new projects a boost. Oleh! Records benefited from this seed funding.

"I had an idea about what I'd like to change," he relates. "I want to promote alternative and new music, to showcase Israeli artists abroad. I was so inspired, I poured my time, money and heart into the venture."

For Hulsh, running a non-profit organization was a new experience. Oleh! Records is a true labor of love. "There's no profit for us in this," Hulsh points out. "We're a registered charity. It's a purely cultural venture."

Musicians signed with Oleh! Records include hardcore rockers Midnight Peacocks, punk band Useless ID, hip-hop, jazz and funk stars Coolooloosh, reggae, trip-hop and nu-soul artist Karolina, and urban-pop diva Onili. All these musicians have non-exclusive contracts with Oleh! Records so they can collaborate with multiple labels and distributors and reach the widest possible global audience.

These musicians don't play traditional "Jewish" music – and, in fact, not all of them are Jewish.

"We represent Arab artists too," adds Hulsh. "We're challenging people's ideas about Israeli music. Instead of klezmer, we're giving them hip-hop."

In promoting Israel's hottest new talent, Oleh! Records is showing the world a different face of Israel, that of a young, cool and talented country that is part of a global music culture.

"It's a huge dream for Israeli bands to succeed internationally, and we're making progress in leaps and bounds," says Hulsh.

Young Israeli artists are now playing at venues across Europe and the US – mainly to mainstream audiences. This month, for example, young crowds at Slovakia's Pohoda music festival greeted Israeli pop singer Onili with great enthusiasm.

"These artists are living, breathing ways that people can connect with 'cool' Israel," concludes Hulsh. "Everybody wins – the artists get international exposure, Israel gets to show the world a cool image, and audiences abroad get to rock to totally awesome music."

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Our fourth ROI community member is also building bridges between young Israelis and the wider world. Maya Abarbanel is executive director of Parallel Lives, a non-profit that connects Israelis with Diaspora Jews.

"We want Israelis to see how Jewish people live in other parts of the world," says Abarbanel, "and how it affects their Jewish identity." Like Maya-Gur, Abarbanel's perceptions of Israel changed when she spent an extended period abroad. Abarbanel and her husband worked as Jewish Agency emissaries in the small Jewish communities of Akron and Canton, Ohio.

"In Ohio, I learned about myself, about Judaism, how the Diaspora community sees Israel, about being a minority," recalls Abarbanel.

Returning home, Abarbanel decided she wanted to spread the ideas she had learned. She began working for a charity that brought American Jews to Israel and quickly realized there was a real need for Israelis to understand Jewish life abroad, too. Thus Parallel Lives was born.

Parallel Lives organizes a yearlong series of personal meetings between small groups of Israelis and Jews from overseas. The Israeli participants are IDF soldiers from elite units.

"These people will really influence Israel in the future," explains Abarbanel. "We match them with young Jewish adults in Israel on long-term volunteer programs."

Through these meetings, Israeli and Diaspora Jews explore differences in Jewish identity. "The Israeli soldiers are very patriotic, lots believe all Jews ought to live in Israel," she explains. "Some feel that Jews in America just donate money and that's the end of their connection with Israel."

DIASPORA JEWS have many questions about Jewish identity in Israel. "Pluralism is a big issue for them, they ask why Israelis don't understand that there's more than one stream of Judaism," Abarbanel adds.

The Israeli soldiers also spend time in a Jewish community in the US – a very powerful experience, says Abarbanel.

"It changes their lives forever," she smiles. "One soldier wept when he saw how people prayed for the IDF in the synagogue. He saw that these people care deeply for Israel."

Diaspora participants in Parallel Lives have included rabbinical students from the US Reform Movement's Hebrew Union College. "They spend a year in Israel as part of their studies," Abarbanel explains. "Parallel Lives helps them ask tough ques-

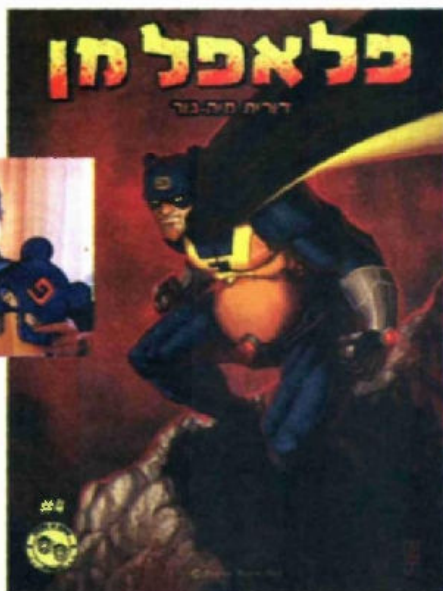
tions about pluralism in this country."

ROI has played an essential role in supporting Parallel Lives. Recently, Abarbanel received a seed grant to help facilitate a new project – a community program for Parallel Lives alumni. Interaction with ROI community members has also been instrumental in providing incredible motivation and encouragement, she believes.

Abarbanel, Shwitz, Maya-Gur and Hulsh represent just a fraction of the ROI Community's deep well of talent and enthusiasm, and the huge diversity of projects and enterprises these community members are undertaking. But everyone in this rich network of talented young people has at heart the same goal – to change, inspire, improve and advance Israel, the Jewish world and beyond.

"ROI brings together people from all over the world and helps them transform their ideas into action," concludes Abarbanel. "This is our fifth summit, and I really believe that in the next five years, ROI will change the Jewish world."

JACOB SHWITZ'S latest start-up, Tweetbookz, combines trendy microblogging service Twitter with that far older form of written communication – the printed book. (Joanna Paraszczuk)



DORIT MAYA-GUR is the creator of Falafelman, a superhero armed with nothing but falafel. (Joanna Paraszczuk)



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