

# A smart cookie

*David Ehrlich, formerly of Yonkers and White Plains, is founder of the popular Gili's Goodies*

By SARAH BRONSON

**W**herever David Ehrlich expected 20 or even 10 years ago that he would be now, it certainly was not here, in the middle of his own cookie factory in Efrat on the West Bank in Israel.

Amid stacks of plastic containers, rolls of labels and vat upon vat of dough, several workers are creating batches and batches of confectionary creations. Four industrial ovens and a mixer big enough to hide a third-grader are turning and humming, while trays of almond cookies, muffins, marangues and delicious chocolate krinkles cool and await packaging.

In the office of this converted kibbutz laundry room, David's wife, Gail, is busily updating orders for gift packages, taking care of the payroll and inspecting the cookies. It is for her that their product — Gili's

Goodies — are named.

Just a few years ago, Gail was working as a pre-school teacher and David was a filmmaker.

Seemingly overnight, Gili's Goodies has become a household word among English-speaking immigrants to Israel, and the Hebrew labels under which the cookies are sold are

similarly popular among native Israelis. Their brownies and the softly powdered krinkles are a regular staple at Shabbat tables in Jerusalem; parents call from the United States to have care packages delivered to their children; and travel agents arrange for Gili's Goodies gift baskets to be placed in hotel rooms.

Deliveries to students were David's favorite part of the job until he began focusing on marketing instead.

"A mom would call and say 'my daughter just got to seminary and she's homesick and

depressed. Deliver some cookies and tell her I love her,'" David remembered. "Not once, not twice, but many times I'd meet those yeshiva and seminary kids, take one look at their faces, and invite them for Shabbos."

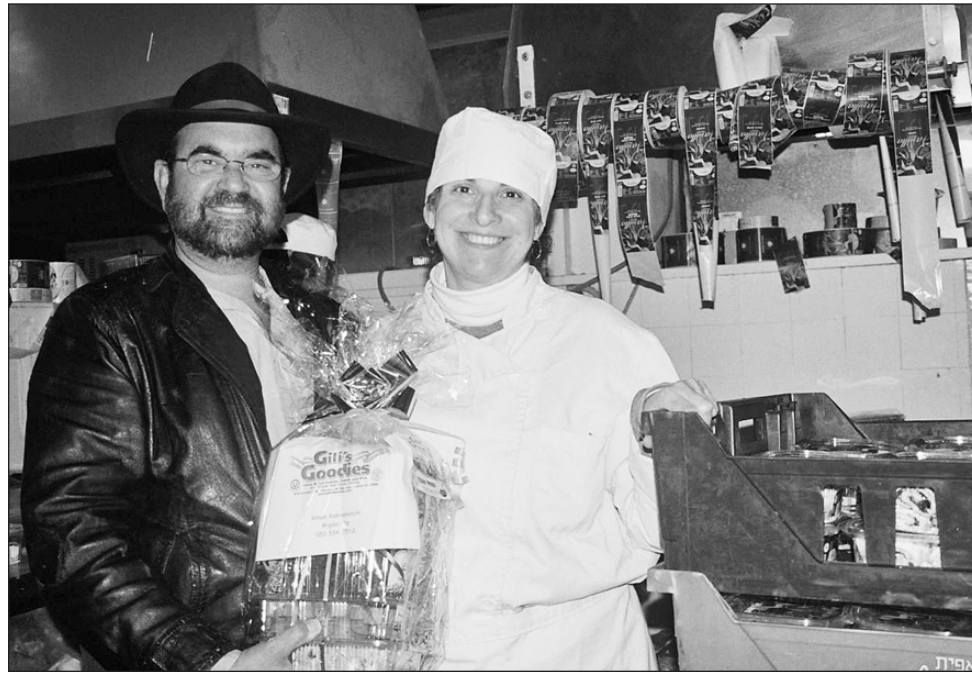


Photo by Sarah Bronson

David Ehrlich handles the marketing to Americans and internet sales while Gail Ehrlich oversees the cookie production for Gili's Goodies.

The fact that he is Sabbath observant is also a change from Ehrlich's early life.

Born in Yonkers 51 years ago and raised there and in White Plains, David grew up "eating lobster and shrimp at home," but attended Westchester Day School because an uncle offered to foot the tuition. A rabbi

there convinced him to attend MTA for high school, an experience that was, for him, almost completely negative.

The first and only bright light during his years in day schools was, he said, a Torah Leadership Seminar during which he met Rabbis Avi Weiss and Shlomo Riskin, an experience he described as "my first encounter with positive aspects of Orthodox Judaism."

Ehrlich started becoming more observant and, after spending a weekend at the

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synagogue of the Bostoner Rebbe, chose to attend Boston University where he got close to the Rebbe.

He was "wild and crazy" during the week and went to the Rebbe's home on Shabbat.

"The Rebbe knew it," David said. "After one year, the Rebbe said 'David, Boston is not for you. Go to Israel.' I went to the yeshiva now known as Yeshivat Hamivtar under the leadership of Rabbi Chaim Brovender for one year, which became two years."

Pausing, Ehrlich kisses a picture of the Rebbe hanging on his living room wall and said "it's all thanks to him."

"I'm still a Deadhead today and wear my leather jacket and cowboy hat," Ehrlich continued. "I'm not your typical frum person, but I am mitzvah-observant."

After his life-transforming time in Israel, Ehrlich returned to New York, studied television repair and married Gail Sinowitz, a native of Far Rockaway, in 1978.

The couple made aliyah two years later, lived in Jerusalem for 14 years and had four children: Tali, now 24 and a social work student; Noam, 22, who recently finished his army service; Navah, 20, who is performing her national service; and Elana, a senior in high school.

Meanwhile, after working as a producer at an Israeli television studio, Ehrlich started out on his own as an independent filmmaker, and for several years he created promotional films for clients such as Bar Ilan and Hebrew Universities, and Hadasah and Shaarei Tzedek hospitals.

After Israel built tunnel roads between Jerusalem and the Gush Etzion communities in the West Bank, the Ehrlichs bought a spacious home in suburban Efrat.

But the latest intifada and events of September 11, combined with his clients' abilities to create simple movies with their own computer software, crippled David's business. For a full year, he had no work at all, and was feeling desperate about his ability to put food on the table.

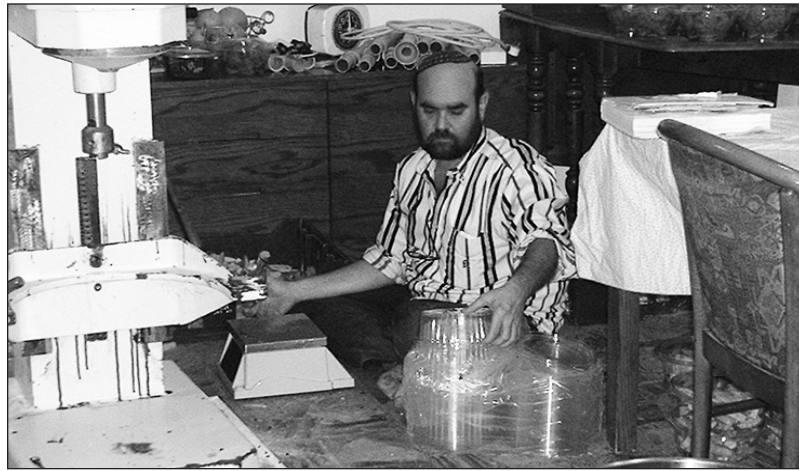
Their lives turned around when the women of Gush Etzion, seeking a way to lift morale during the height of the intifada, staged a homegrown production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." The Raise Your Spirits Theater Company, knowing that Gail was an excellent baker, asked her to sell cookies during intermission.

Gail was skeptical of the idea, but David convinced her to do the baking and he would do the selling.

The cookies were so popular that customers started asking for boxed packages for Shabbat.

Then, the owner of a local take-out establishment offered to let the Ehrlichs sell cookies in her store. David, realizing that they had a business, invested in a five-shelf industrial oven and abandoned his film career to distribute brochures, network and make deliveries of Gili's Goodies.

Soon, the cookies took over the house. The Ehrlich home, with its backyard citrus trees, collection of indoor plants, and arched windows, is considered large by Israeli standards, but it is certainly not large enough to house both a family and a bakery. They kept a large freezer on the front terrace, stored ingredients in the den, mixed dough in the dining room, baked in



the kitchen and lined up boxes of cookies on their living room floor. The carpet, David remembered, was constantly powdered with white flour.

After eight months, the company moved from the Ehrlich home into the converted laundry room at Kibbutz Rosh Tzurim. They now employ between seven and 15 employees at a time, including three full-

time drivers and a manager who has alleviated much of the grueling physical work for Gail, who is now able to spend about five hours per day at work rather than 12.

"Delegating is very hard for me," she said. "I've learned to do it. I was drowning in the physical labor."

Now, all the baking is done at Kibbutz Rosh Tzurim; Gail oversees the cookie pro-

In the early days, cookies were produced in the Ehrlichs' home.

duction and David is in charge of marketing to the American tourist and internet markets.

Fully half of the orders come through their internet site, [www.gilisgoodies.com](http://www.gilisgoodies.com), where they specialize in sending gift baskets and baked goods from people all over the world to family and friends living or studying in Israel.

The best development for the Ehrlichs is simply that they now have a way of putting money in the bank and food on their table, as well as the cookies and cakes they supply for other people's tables.

"I don't see us being gazillionaires," David said, "but if we can have a little financial security, that's not a bad thing."

*This is the first in a series of articles about former Westchester residents who have made aliyah. If you know anyone who has moved to Israel and would make an interesting profile for the Westchester Jewish Chronicle, call Steve Schloss at (914) 381-4311 or e-mail him at [editor@wjchronicle.com](mailto:editor@wjchronicle.com).*

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