



STUDENTS AND pupils participate in a large-scale bridge competition.

A bridge family

Israelis, old and young, have been playing the 'card sport' since 1949

• SHULY WASSERSTROM
Photos Courtesy ISRAELI BRIDGE FEDERATION

Tel Aviv resident Ron Segev is on a mission to inform the Israeli public that the game of bridge, despite its reputation, is in fact not a game strictly for the elderly.

Segev spreads his message through bridge clubs, national and international competitions, and playing with friends of all ages throughout Israel. This is not to say he doesn't play with those 60 and over; in fact, it's how he earns the majority of his income.

In Israel, the trick-taking card game – which usually consists of four players in two competing partnerships – has an impressive number of player clubs, which host games on a regular basis. The clubs are often members of the Israeli Bridge Federation, which was established in 1949 and funds programming and brings bridge players together – as many players stay within a small circle of friends and aren't exposed to the social aspect

of the game that clubs can offer.

The 80 clubs throughout the country are working on engaging a new audience to join the sport. School clubs are showing the younger generation that the game is an exciting and stimulating activity for kids as well.

Segev, 29, was first introduced to bridge in an after-school program. "The program head really pushed us to succeed in the game," he explains. "I was mainly attracted to it at first because I am a very competitive person. I couldn't just stop playing."

After excelling at his after-school club, with the encouragement of his mentor and teacher, Segev began competing in national competitions. "It wasn't that I would always win or anything, but I was very dedicated."

In 2006, Segev was part of the Israeli team that won the distinction of World Schools Team at the 11th World Youth Team Championship in Bangkok, Thailand. "I was actually a soldier at the time," Segev recounts. "The championship was during the Second Lebanon War, but the IDF gave us special permission to go and represent Israel at the games."

He and various partners and groups have since competed and placed high in other international and national championships.

Today, Segev is active in teaching both young and old groups, in schools and clubs; he also gives private lessons and is a member of the Israeli Bridge Federation.

Israeli Bridge Federation chairman Modi Kenigsberg notes that Israel is world-renowned for its strong bridge players; younger players like Segev are not all that rare. "Israel is considered to have some of the strongest teams in the world, which have won many championships," Kenigsberg says. "Our federation consists of talented players of all ages."

In October, the Israeli team won a gold medal at the 14th Red Bull World Bridge Series in Sanya, China; in December, an Israeli pair won a gold medal at the Sportaccord World Mind Games in Beijing, as well as a gold in the team event.

Segev and Kenigsberg agree that it is the Israeli spirit which makes the Israeli teams so successful.

"It's the warrior in us... our passion, our hotheadedness... that makes us great in competitive sports," Segev says.

He adds that in the many competitions in which he represented Israel abroad, he could see the difference between the Israeli teams and those of the other countries. "Israelis are much more energetic, to say the least," Segev says with a smile.

Bridge has many advantages when taught to the younger generation, and there are currently about 1,000 students learning it in schools throughout the country. The game is encouraged for youth because it improves memory and logic; is helpful in team-building; and equips them with tools to make strides in other



EIGHTY BRIDGE clubs operate around the country, with four players in competitive teams of two.



ISRAELI COMPETITIVE bridge players celebrate a win at an international competition.

er subjects as well – with pupils evincing a 20-percent improvement in grades and test scores after taking up bridge, according to the federation.

Segev says that in his experience, teaching 60-and-overs is easier, as it isn't necessary to spend half the lesson reminding them to sit down or be quiet. But children also provide an interesting teaching experience, due to the abilities of a younger mind.

"Kids learn differently than the older crowd, and it is amazing to see how much playing helps a student who faces learning challenges," Segev enthuses.

Kenigsberg concurs. "The students have to be cooperative because it's a team. They have to be polite, they have to sit down and concentrate, and that gives them tools to do other things as well. It's even more challenging than chess, because playing chess you are alone – one against one. In bridge, you play team against a team, and have to be much more considerate and cooperative."

Kenigsberg, who has been playing for 40 years, says he and his wife enjoy playing, as do his children and grandchildren; they love being part of the "Israeli bridge family."

"There are 6,500 members of the federation in Israel, with about 80 branches throughout the country," details Kenigsberg, noting that the federation charges a fee to become a member, used strictly to fund programming. An estimated 1,000 others play at home and not in clubs, but he encourages those people to reach out to the federation and get involved. The game's social aspect is what draws in many players, especially the elderly.

In February, the Israeli Bridge Federation will host the 49th annual Israel Bridge Festival, with 10,000 participants from around the world. The six-day event will take place at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds and is open to both new and experienced players.

A personal reflection

On memories from bridge club

• DVORA SHURMAN

Living in a retirement home, one has time to be observant and philosophical. Watching people and life from this vantage point, one thing that sticks out is our penchant to play bridge.

My maiden aunts used to have bridge parties, but I was not interested. To me, they were just ladies sitting about chatting, drinking coffee and eating candy while looking at playing cards. Still, in college I was dragged into a foursome without knowing either the rules or the principles.

I eventually married my partner, who played better than me. Through our married life we played, though I was at a very mediocre level. I enjoyed it as a social activity with friends, mostly. I had no idea of the bridge business: clubs, rules and "conventions," international organizations, cruises and worldwide meetings.

Time passed. Members of our bridge groups moved on. My husband and I moved to Israel, where we divorced; I passed the age of 60 and joined a senior center.

What's the connection to bridge? At the center, I became a gymnastics instructor and was rewarded – not with money, but with an invitation to join the bridge club. At last I began to learn the basic and more advanced rules, so I began to enjoy the game and improve my playing. I played there for some years until I moved to a retirement home, where bridge became a necessity for social, cognitive and total survival.

In fact, bridge is not simply a game played with cards, four suits or colors, and four players. More than a game, it is a social activity, even a bond. Bridge creates a strong connection between the players in a foursome, though it's sometimes not pleasant! You have to communicate with your partner. You have to speak the same vocabulary of rules and responses.

Besides, in this retirement home, it's become a chronicle of friends with whom I played over eight years. Some remain good friends, occasionally one has left in a huff! Others have become ill, and either died or were hospitalized.

It has even led to romance. While I could not play at my friend's level, we continued a friendship over the years. He has passed his 94th birthday and still continues to play very well; participating in a weekly bridge game with three groups of friends.

As I do a roll call of bridge partners, I think of Sue, an immigrant from Bulgaria, who was my first partner in the retirement home. We quickly became friends, but she had a serious stroke seven years ago and has been lying in a hospital bed ever since, unable to function or communicate. I gave up keeping in touch. After all, I had known her altogether one year. Her son is very disappointed in me and all of us, for not continuing to visit his mother.

My present partner, E., fondly recalls a very special bridge partner, Vera. She was an immigrant from Russia, a grande dame, Russian "nobility." We played in her flat, as she had limited mobility. We celebrated her 100th birthday, and her only limitation was physical weakness. Her mind was sharp to the last day we played, which was close to the day she died.

Mimi replaced her, and we played in her small flat as she had trouble walking. She and two of her longtime friends (who don't play bridge) came together to live here. So often the mind holds up, but not the body.

Y. joined us after one of our members, Harriet, died. Y. played with us until we noticed he was losing weight and becoming weak. My partner reported he had a lady friend, but I discovered the lady was really a helper – for he could no longer handle daily tasks like shopping. When he died, we missed him despite never knowing what his illness was. For us, bridge was a sort of business relationship.

After I got involved in this merry-go-round (or is it "London Bridge is falling down"?), I was reminded of my Aunt Lee. In my hometown of Milwaukee, she was the one who had organized those bridge parties. When I was told she was dying of cancer, I came from Israel to visit her. I had limited income but it was very important to go, for she was a second mother to me for much of my life. (She also gave me totally misguided sex information just before I married.)

To my surprise, with my intuition and knowledge of the effects of radiation, I realized she was not dying of cancer, but rather of malnutrition – for the chemotherapy had killed her appetite. So I began feeding her tablespoons of warm milk with honey every hour. Two weeks later, before I left for home, my aunt got out of bed, dressed, made us breakfast, sat with us and told me her plans: "I have to get back to playing bridge. I play with three foursomes but we are losing members through illness and death, so I have to fill in. I will start again this week, though it hurts me to sit."

She lived four more years, carrying a pillow to the weekly bridge games so she would not disappoint her friends.

Today I play at least once or twice a week, but conditions and players change. One player is having serious vision problems. One had a spell of being unpleasant, as she wanted to be the leader. That is to say, the games go on as the players change.

I now play with a partner who is a good bridge strategist. However, she has serious memory problems and forgets to come, so I have to fetch her. It's not clear that she will be able to play much longer.

Bridge, therefore, is not just a game at any time or age, per se. It's a microcosm of life, and for me, an aspect of an aging society.

Some wins, some losses and some dropouts. But we still go on, from week to week.

The author has collected stories about her life with her deaf parents in her book, Between Two Worlds.