BOCA RATON

Ten teenage Israeli scouts are performing song and dance in South Florida this week, one of four Friendship Caravans — Rakiya Caravan — touring the United States this summer.

But while these young people display musical talents and entertain, their primary focus is to educate.

"Psychologically, it's important to let the world know what Israel is going through," said Middle Eastern expert Robert Rabil of Florida Atlantic University. The fact that these scouts are communicating through the arts and music helps deliver the message, especially because they are their country's next generation, he said.

The scouts, all 17 years old, are eager to share their emotional connection with their homeland.

Yair Smolyanov spoke about his experience at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest place. His face lit up.

"You put a note in a wall. But there is an energy that overcomes you, and it's the most amazing feeling," he said. It is such a simple concept, and yet it also is a place loaded with emotions, he said.

"Israel has a lot of good things, but it is not heaven," Smolyanov said with a sense of realism.

Shelly Weil, of Delray Beach, has been hosting Israeli scout troops for more than 35 years as a member of the Israeli Scout International Board. When they come to the U.S., he said, they are excited and welcome political questions because as youngsters, they believe it's all about their future.

Weil, who hosts the caravan for one week, said, "They're like 17 going on 37."

It is important for groups like the scouts to come to the United States, said Rabil, since the U.S. is Israel's biggest ally.

"Any message for peace is a good message for this land," Rabil said.
The scouts' 14 South Florida shows aren't limited to temples and synagogues. Their schedule includes venues such as King's Point west of Delray Beach, Morse Geriatric Center in West Palm Beach, Boomers in Boca Raton and area churches.

"I want them to take something home other than just singing and dancing," Weil said.

After South Florida, the troop is off to other Florida cities, then to Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Kentucky, New York and Canada.

Smolyanov, who reads newspapers and is saddened by the negative light sometimes shined on Israel, said he already misses his parents and friends, "but when the airplane lands back in Israel, I'll know it's home."