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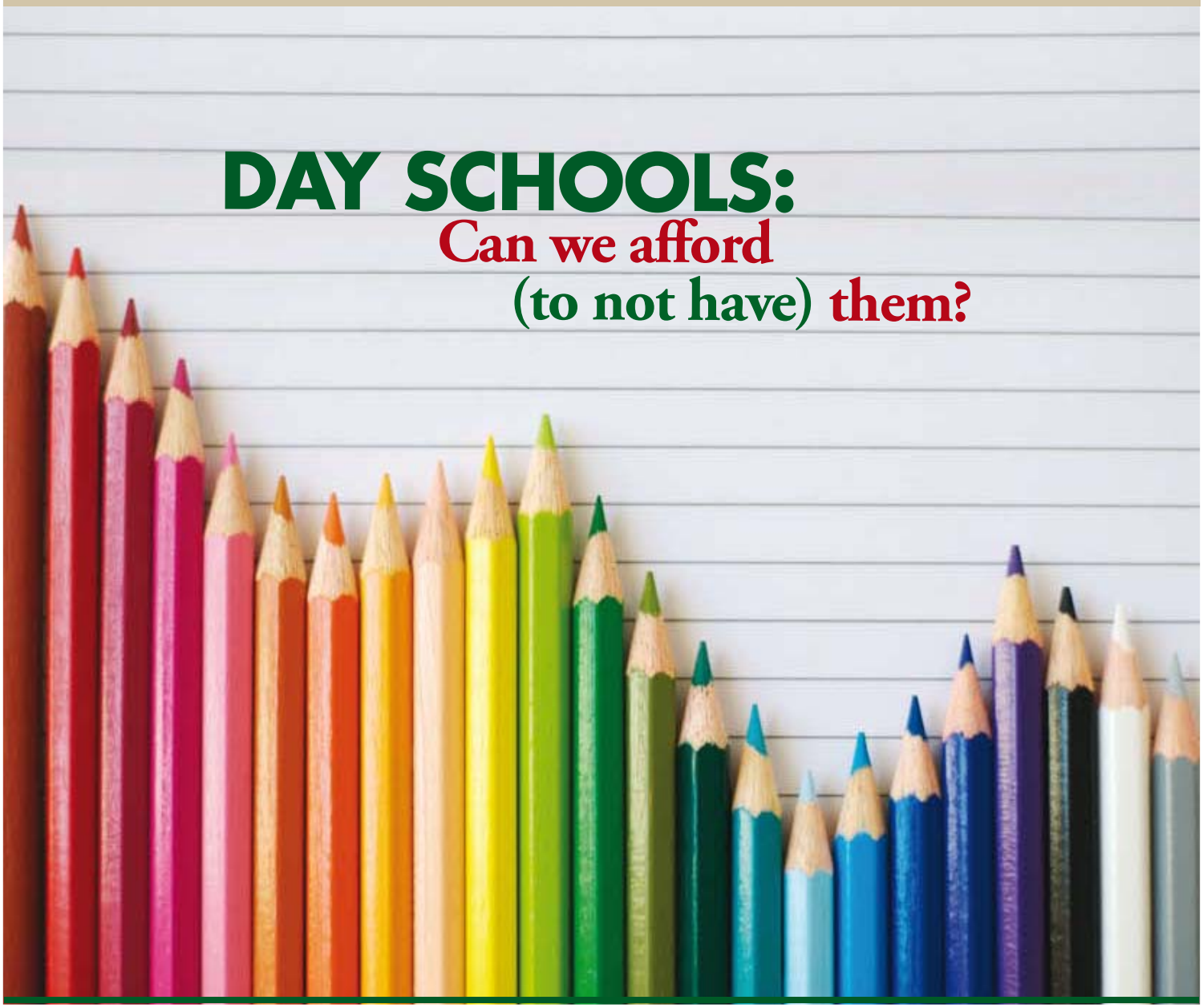
DAY SCHOOLS:
Can we afford (to not have) them?



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Ben-Gamla School: **An inside look**

Linda K. Schaffzin

Linda Schaffzin visited the Ben-Gamla charter school and shares some observations.

What follows is the result of a brief examination of the history and nature of American charters, as well as a glimpse at the first Hebrew charter school, the Ben-Gamla School in Broward County, Florida, which opened in 2007. This very limited case study is based on a visit to the school, an interview with its principal, and interviews with one former day school family that switched to the charter school.

Charter schools – background

The calls for reform of 'failing' American schools that led to the creation of charter schools were raised after the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*, followed by the formation of groups like the Governors Associations (Cohen, in Elmore, 1991). In these Governors meetings, restructuring and outcomes based reforms became cause célèbres. Democrats and Republicans called for less bureaucracy, more local control, which admittedly would cost more. The *quid pro quo* for autonomy and funding was accountability (Cohen, in Elmore, 1991).

This is, of course, the familiar mantra of the charter school movement.

The term *charter* was new, but alternative schools, magnet schools, schools within schools had been operating all over America since the 1960s (Raywid, in Elmore, 1991; Nathan, 1996). Ray Budde first used the term "charter" in his book *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*. It stayed buried there until Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, mentioned it in a speech to the National Press Club in 1988 (Mulholland & Amsler, 1992). Budde's charters were innovative teacher-created programs *within* existing schools. Philadelphia's six year experimental charter program, which met with some success, was a school within a school in a comprehensive high school, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Fine, 1988; McMullan, Sipe & Wolf, 1994).

In 1991, Minnesota passed the first state-wide charter law (Nathan, 1996). Charter schools became the darlings of advocates of market forces as the best way to bring excellence into the public sphere. In fact, in the case of charter schools, some sponsoring agencies are for-profit businesses, educational management organizations, in which the culture and vocabulary of the market is ubiquitous in the conversation about education. Parents are 'consumers' and school boards view their jobs as giving 'customer service' (Gold, et. al. 2007). Often the market driven policies and the structure they spawn are not borne of pedagogical research, but rather research on organizational change.

Nationwide, charter schools have certain characteristics in common. They are independent public schools, subject to federal laws on safety and discrimination. They are organized and sponsored by groups as defined by each state. The school is free of district regulations (inputs – usually financial, union-related, staffing, curricular, organization), but is accountable to its sponsor for outcomes, usually defined by academic assessment and fulfillment of mission. As each state adopted its laws, the variations were great in terms of what Mulholland (1996) terms 'expansive' laws (more autonomy) and 'restrictive' laws (less autonomy, fewer opportunities to form).

Florida's charter law was passed in 1996 and is considered one of the "strongest" in terms of its accountability/autonomy relationship. In Florida, individuals, groups, municipal or legal entities, including educational management businesses, may apply for a charter. Charter schools must be non-sectarian and abide by all federal and state health, safety and civil rights laws.

The definition of accountability/autonomy in Florida is one of process rather than content. That is, financial decisions are left up to the governing board of the charter school, but those decisions are subject to review by the state which will audit the school's books since state funds are involved. Charter schools may innovate in terms of curricula and methodology, but they must also adhere to the Sunshine State standards; all students must take the state's high stakes standardized tests, the FCATs. (Schools in Florida are graded based on FCAT scores.)

Ben-Gamla charter school

Autonomy in practice means that although the school has to meet the curricular goals set by the state, the individual school can decide what texts to use and how much time to teach each subject. Of course, that includes the decision of when and how to teach Hebrew.

Ben-Gamla's first principals were former day school principals. They have been replaced by Sharon Miller, an experienced public school administrator who understands and abides by all Sunshine State standards. From our first conversation, Miller emphasized that Ben-Gamla was a public school; indeed, she seemed puzzled by my interest in the school. As she said, "It takes public school experience to run a charter – charters *are* public schools after all." She sees the school's mission, as a Hebrew language and culture charter, as its innovation. Our tour was just before *Rosh haShanah* and she pointed out that there were no indications anywhere in the school that the major holiday was coming – no symbols, no greetings, and no plans to close school.

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Interestingly, her assistant principal has day school background.

The six hundred K-8 student body was clearly diverse. There were *kippot* and girls dressed modestly, but there were also African-American students as well as Asians and many whose ethnic, religious or national origins could not be determined. The names on desks and displays seemed reflective of Miami's polyglot population.

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On Florida's standardized FCAT scores, Ben-Gamla received a B for 2008, but earned an A in 2009.

One family's story

Mrs. Davis decided to provide day school education for her children relatively late. Her older daughter, who is now in college, did not attend day school. Her middle child is autistic, and because the public schools did not meet his needs, she turned to a specials needs Jewish day school for him. Her twists and turns along this road were actually tortuous, but along the way, her own personal relationship with her Judaism changed; when her youngest son was ready for kindergarten, she was determined that he attend day school.

The entire Davis family benefited from having the two boys in day school. "I was in day school heaven," she said. They discussed the *parashah* at their Shabbat table and she felt her children were blossoming Jewishly. Her son was, in her words, benefitting from the integration of the general and Jewish sides of his life and his education.

When they could no longer afford day school, Davis turned to Ben-Gamla. "I decided that some Hebrew education was better than public school and supplementary schools," which she called "bar mitzvah factories." Davis, a certified elementary school teacher who had also pursued a degree in Jewish education, had taught in synagogue schools.

Davis was concerned about what her son would face in a supplementary school. "He knew so much more than most of the kids and … the time is so limited. Those kids are smart – they know their parents don't really care. And besides, it is just not the same as the integrated program you get at a day school." And so Davis chose Ben-Gamla. In stark contrast to the principal, who insists that Ben-Gamla is a specialized public school, Davis interestingly commented that, "It ***is*** better than a public school."

She believes that the Hebrew conversational level her son has attained is about right. That instruction, she insists, is devoid of any religion. And the school also teaches Israeli history and culture, which would include holidays celebrated in Israel, those are also taught from a secular perspective. For example, they learned about *Tu Bi-Shevat* as Israeli Arbor Day, a holiday that "Israeli Jews celebrate." Davis believes that the large majority of the students, as many as 80%, are Jewish.

As to her son Micah's religious instruction, she has mixed feelings. Davis pays extra for the religious instruction run by Chabad and held after school hours in an adjacent building to Ben-Gamla. Davis feels that Micah does not see a separation between the two parts of his day – the general studies and the religious, so that in her understanding, his experience is a bit more like day school. As a result, she believes that he values his religious studies more than he would were he attending a different supplementary school. She is, however, concerned that Micah loves these classes so much that he is becoming a "Little Chabadnik," and she would have preferred he be exposed to a broader vision of Judaism. As an educator, she can temper what is presented to him, but Davis wonders what the secular kids who attend the classes are thinking.

Micah, however, sees things somewhat differently. He does like his religious studies, but he does see the after-care as separate. Although he does not say it directly, he is aware that classroom management is a major issue for the Jewish, after-care teachers. He described a complicated reward system the teacher has employed to keep students engaged and attentive. He describes some aspects of the curriculum, which includes a *minhah* service (his mother does not know they have a prayer service – they once had one before school, which was stopped, and since then she has not heard anything about prayer), *parashat hashavua* and *mitzvot*.

Micah's Ben-Gamla school day begins at 7:45 and ends at 2:15. The Chabad after-care begins when Ben-Gamla ends, and continues until 3:30.

Hebrew charter vs day school

One of the points that mother and son agree on is their vigorous approval of the handling of discipline issues in public schools. They feel that there is a clear, written policy at Ben-Gamla. "My kid is going to be treated fairly (in public school). I have recourse to complain, to go higher if I am not satisfied." Micah uses almost identical wording as his mom when he says "Teachers can suspend, expel… anything" to punish bullies and other kids who do bad things. Davis contends that, in her experience, day schools turn the other cheek when faced with discipline problems because they are afraid to lose students (though she feels this is not as true in Orthodox schools). In explaining some of the advantages of being in Ben-Gamla she states, "I would rather my kid be a *mentch* than he know everything Jewish."

Still, Micah would prefer to return to his day school. He has questions about some of his teachers in public school – "we have to earn recess" – and one teacher was dismissive of the students' "holy Sabbath" when a homework issue arose. Paramount for him, however, is the Jewish education. "I want to learn the prayers and more about being Jewish, the way I did before."

His mother also concedes that she knows that the rhythm of the day school day, as well as the integrated atmosphere in the day school, is missing at Ben-Gamla. In the day school, admits Davis, a child sees the world through a Jewish lens. And this is not the case at Ben-Gamla, a point with which principal Miller emphatically agrees.

Additional observations

Two additional significant observations emerge from our visit to Ben-Gamla.

First is Miller's emphasis on fund raising. Miller points to equipment and new paperbacks, on half-filled library shelves, purchased through donations and fund raising by parents and supporters. All parents must volunteer and/or contribute to the school. Ben-Gamla is run by an educational management organization, and although the state gives funds on a per capita basis, it is not nearly sufficient to meet their needs.

Second relates to the Hebrew curriculum. Although Miller's tour is thorough, it does not include any of the four levels of Hebrew instruction in each grade. Ben-Gamla struggled to find a Hebrew curriculum that met the church and state separation standards, since popular curricula like Tal Am and NETA use Biblical and Midrashic texts. Miller said they have created their own curriculum with the help of experts, but we were not able to see it in action. Micah is in the top Hebrew level in his grade because of his day school background. There is no textbook for his class. He says that his class revolves around learning stories. His teacher writes a story on the board and asks students to copy it. She teaches the story, telling the students what it means, after which she teaches the grammar and vocabulary associated with the story. There is homework, which may include writing sentences, and students are tested before they move on to a new story.

Reflection

As an admissions director of a Jewish day school, I need to be able to explain to a family that comes to me and asks: "Why shouldn't I go to the charter school down the street – it is free, isn't it?" After my visit to Ben-Gamla that distinction became to me very clear. It is not an issue of comparing apples and apples with the primary distinction being affordability. Day schools and charter are clearly two different products; families must decide which one is most appropriate for their educational values and goals and only then broach the affordability question. Significant questions lie at the core of family choices.

- Do they want a public school or an independent one?
- Do they want an integrated Jewish environment for their child, one in which Judaism will pervade throughout the school environment – in the cafeteria and the hallways, and in the very rhythm of the day, the week and the year – or do they want a public school with classes on Hebrew language and culture?
- Do they want to have their child in an environment designed to develop Jewish identity, in which the language they hear is infused with "us" and "we" and "you" in the hope that there will be an "I" in his or her Jewish life, or is it sufficient that they learn about Hebrew culture as "outsiders?"

Parents must examine the content of the knowledge taught to their children, as well as the teachers who teach them, the facilities in which they are taught, and the methodologies that are used. The hidden curriculum is as important as all of these and should be part of their equation in making their decision for their children's education.

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