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Learning from the *Kibbutz*

by SHIRA ACKERMAN SIMCHOVITCH

Recently, I ran a training seminar for young Israeli adults about to go off for a year of volunteer service in small Jewish communities around the world. Half of the *shlichim* in the group were born and still live on *kibbutzim* all over Israel. All of the participants would be spending part of each week in early childhood programs. The seminar was designed to provide them with an introduction to early childhood development and learning and to give them some tools for working with young children on Hebrew, Israel, and the Jewish festival cycle.

The first thing I asked the participants to do was to take a few moments to write down their memories from *gan hayeladim* (early childhood programs). The purpose of the exercise was to explore what types of experiences stay firmly rooted in our memory and what elements of their own early childhood experiences might serve as an inspiration for some of the things they might do with young children in the Diaspora. Almost all of the memories shared by the *kibbutznikim* related to three activities: the daily *tiyul* (field trip), playing in the junkyard playground, and the communal festival celebrations. Each of the three is unique to early childhood education on the *kibbutz* and I believe that each has something to offer Jewish early childhood education in other places.

The *kibbutz* (Hebrew word for “communal settlement”) is an Israeli



invention, a 20th century utopia that was actually realized. The *kibbutz* is a unique rural community that, at its inception, was dedicated to mutual aid and social justice; a socioeconomic system based on the principle of joint ownership of property, equality, and cooperation of production, consumption, and education. It was the fulfillment of the idea “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” It also was a home for those who chose it.

The first *kibbutzim* (plural of “*kibbutz*”) were established in the beginning of the 20th century. The founders of the early *kibbutzim* were young men and women, mainly from Eastern Europe. They came to create a new way of life and a new Jew -- a Jew whose primary role was to re-connect physically with the land and reclaim the ancient homeland. Many of these Jewish pioneers were in their late teens, with no experience in agriculture,

hard physical labor or being away from home. Disease, drought, and a lack of funds were only a few of the challenges they faced. Their role models were slightly older peers who were “making it up as they went along.” Despite all of the hardships, many *kibbutzim* were built and their contribution to the State of Israel is far greater than the percentage of the population they represent (in the past and in the present).

Today’s *kibbutz* is the accomplishment of three generations. The founders, ideologically motivated, created a society with a unique communal way of life. Their children consolidated the economic, social, and administrative structures of the *kibbutz*. The *kibbutznikim* of today are applying their energy and talent to meeting the challenges presented by contemporary life in an age of technology and changing some of the basic assumptions that guided the movement for many years.¹

A New Way of Educating Children

Just as the founders of the *kibbutz* created a new way of living, they also created a new way of educating their children. For many years, one of the hallmarks of *kibbutz* childrearing was the communal children's houses. Another was the connection to the physical environment and the notion that the immediate community, everything and everyone in it, was the generative source of children's learning. Unlike the early days of the *kibbutz*, children in *kibbutzim* today sleep at their parents' home until they reach high school age. However, most of their waking hours are still spent with their peers in children's houses adapted specifically for each age group. The starting point of learning is still their experience in the immediate environment. As *kibbutzim* change, there are often fewer young children, and many *kibbutzim* have opened the doors of their early childhood programs to outsiders from nearby towns and cities who are eager for their children to experience "*kibbutz* education," often at great expense.

So what is it about *kibbutz* early childhood education that is so special? I'll refer back to the memories of my young colleagues in training -- the daily *tiyul*, the junkyard playground, and the *kibbutz* celebration of the Jewish festivals.

The Tiyul

Each day, *kibbutz* children, from babies to kindergartners, go for a walk around the *kibbutz*. The youngest children go for shorter *tiyulim* in wagons designed to hold several infants at once and the older children walk. On the *tiyul*, they will observe the natural environment and changes in the environment, the work of the various branches of the *kibbutz* in all its stages, and life on the *kibbutz* in general. The adults, who themselves were educated in this fashion, welcome the children into their world and share their

experiences. When the children return to the *bet yeladim* (children's house) from outside, they bring all the raw material they need to construct their understanding of their world through play with what is available to them inside. In the most natural manner, the agricultural aspects of a festival and the connection between the festival cycle and the land of Israel will become something to explore, discuss, revisit, recreate, and connect to prior learning. Similarly, the concepts of form and function, process and product, and the role of people in transforming their physical reality are "unpacked" by the children through play. The fact that the *tiyul* is a daily feature of classroom life enables ongoing projects to emerge and allows children to check their hypothesis about things that will happen. This learning unfolds itself in the classroom, and also in the junkyard playgrounds.

The Chatzar Grutaot

The *chatzar grutaot* (junkyard playground) gives new meaning to the outdoor space in which children play. The Hebrew word "*grutaa*" (plural, *grutaot*) means "junk"; things that man made for his use that are no longer needed. The junkyard playgrounds are filled with objects from the life and environment of children on the *kibbutz*. It is a unique, original, idea that was born in Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu in the Bet Shean Valley. Malka Haas,² the woman who created the first junkyard playgrounds, made *aliyah* to Israel from Berlin in the 1930s at the age of fifteen. She was one of the founders of Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu. In the introduction to her soon-to-be-published book, she writes: "I had two aspirations in my life: The first, to be an active partner in the rebuilding of *Eretz Yisrael* both physically and spiritually, and the second, to understand the creative activity of young children. From these two, the *Chatzar Grutaot* was born."

For her, the children's activity in the junkyard was the way in which they could participate in the building of the land. By bringing no-longer-needed pieces of equipment and building materials into the playground, the children, in their spontaneous play, were partners in the work of the adults in the community. Malka has devoted her life to studying the children in their play and developing the educational philosophy underlying the *chatzar grutaot*. "In the junkyard playground, filled with objects from real life that are no longer being used, generations of children have responded to the invitation provided by the yard to explore the significance of the world they live in, in a safe, rich environment," she writes.

To the eye of the North American observer looking at old tractor parts, huge wooden spools, and all manner of pipes and poles, as well as household items, pieces of fabric, and other unidentified bits and pieces of things, the yard is often perceived as unaesthetic, dangerous, and something "we could never get away with." A closer look reveals that something much, much deeper is going on.

Often, playgrounds are viewed as places where children go to run around and release energy or as a space that offers a break from indoor activity. On the *kibbutz*, the yard is a continuation of the classroom and the learning experience and NOT a separate space. It is separate from the world of the adults and is intended for the children only -- an area in which the children's needs always come first and where a different set of rules apply. What is in the yard belongs to grownups and this is the real world that the child has to understand and give meaning to. It is the world into which he or she has to grow. This is the practice of real life with real objects. The child is totally free to give any

meaning he or she wishes to what is in the environment and to manipulate the objects in the environment -- including taking apart and destroying objects with no sanctions. In the yard, the child can engage in types of activity that are not possible inside and that encourage using the entire body and all of the senses.

The yard presents numerous challenges to the child. The child's attempts to contend with these challenges are mediated by the teacher. If the *tiyul* brings the outside in, the junkyard playground goes one step further and takes it back out, to be revisited in new and different ways.

Kibbutz Festival Celebrations

At their core, the *kibbutz* festival celebrations are the same as those celebrated around the Jewish world. What is so special on the *kibbutz* is the way in which the ethos and lifestyle of these communities is interpreted and woven into the communal celebrations throughout the Jewish year.

One example is *Shavuot*, when in a modern day version of the ancient bringing of the first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem, the "first fruits" of all the branches of the *kibbutz* are gathered together in a special ceremony -- the first agricultural fruits, new equipment, new animals, and new humans. Whether religious or non-religious, aspects of the life lived on the *kibbutz* in current time will be blended into the ages-old traditions. Ancient texts will be added to and sometimes changed to reflect events in the life of the *kvutza* (group).

And always, the children will be full participants in the celebration, learning from their participation in the authentic events in the adult world in which they live. This participation, as well as the anticipation of the celebration (of



both the yearly cycle and the life cycle) is a part of the children's everyday lives. Aspects of these experiences will almost always find their way into the *bayit* (house) and the *chatzer* (courtyard), creating a dynamic reciprocal relationship between the child and his or her environment.

The Kibbutz Approach to Early Childhood Education

All of the above and many other aspects of *kibbutz* early childhood education not touched upon in this article are rooted in an image of the child who is competent and able. A child who can and does fully participate in the life that goes on around him, but in ways that are suited to his needs and development. In the *kibbutz* approach to early childhood education, there is a constant dialogue and relationship between inside and outside.

Can any of this way of thinking and being be adapted to a Diaspora early childhood setting, far from the rhythms and seasons of *Eretz Yisrael*, limited in the possibilities for going out into the world with young children, and influenced by cultural norms that are so different from those in Israel, not to mention the *kibbutz*? I think so.

What would happen if we viewed the Jewish institution and building we live in -- day school, synagogue or JCC - as our *kibbutz*? Jewish things go on there all the time, and many people who work in our institutions are often busy with a Jewish agenda (not to mention all the other very interesting things that go on in a building, including everything that is done to keep everything in good running order)? What Jewish visual messages would our environment offer us if we only took the time to look? How are the values of Judaism played out in the network of relationships that exist and in the ongoing activity of our workplaces? What would the children bring to the classroom if a *tiyul* around "our *kibbutz*" was a regular part of the schedule, not necessarily daily, but regular?

Inside and Outside Linked

If we stop to contemplate the philosophy of the junkyard playground we might ask, "What would be the 'junk from life' that could enrich the children's play and learning where we live?" and "What would be the Jewish objects no longer needed by adults that could find their way into the playground?" It wouldn't look like the *kibbutz*, but what the theory has to say about children's needs is really timeless and placeless. How can we create a

dialogue and relationship between the inside of our classrooms and the outside presented by our large institution and the real community outside our doors?

Finally, what if, when we think about how to celebrate our holidays with the children and their families, we challenged ourselves to find aspects of our lives, wherever we happen to be, that can be brought to the celebration?

What if we asked the question, “How

do we create authentic festival celebrations for our families that truly mirror both Judaism and the culture in which they live?”

I don’t have all the answers yet; I am still working on it. But I do know that the *kibbutz* approach to early childhood education has much to offer the greater early childhood Jewish education field.

Endnotes:

1. Based on material from The Jewish Virtual Library at

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org.

2. To learn more about Malka Haas, you can read “Don’t Call Them Scribbles,” in the *Ha’Aretz* newspaper online.

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