



Adir and His Transition

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Dear Friends,

Last December, when I came to Jerusalem, part of my journey was earmarked for an educational reconnaissance mission. Where would we be sending our nine-year-old son, Adir, to school in Jerusalem? The decision was anything but simple. To begin, as parents, Miriam and I were concerned about Adir's transition from the exceptional, intimate, and personally tailored education that he had enjoyed for four years at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Palm Beach County (not to mention that, this last year, he was in a class of four students with plenty of peace and quiet and time to progress at his own pace).

From everything we had heard about the Israeli schools, it was bound to be a huge culture shock for Adir, with large classes (an average of thirty kids with one teacher), lots of noise, and, perhaps, rowdier, more independent kids. On my short-list of schools to investigate were two religious public schools (known in Hebrew as *mamlachti-dati*), and an experimental school that seeks to bring together religious and secular populations under one roof. Although our clear preference would have been a TALI school (the equivalent of a Solomon Schechter Day School), there were two issues that concerned us: the first was that there was no TALI school in the immediate area where we would be living and we were not keen on bussing Adir to school. The second was that we were most interested in Adir being in a community school. On Shabbat, we wanted him to see the kids that he would be going to school with and be able to play with them after shul and in the park.

My first stop was a *mamlachti-dati* school in the Baka neighborhood. My meeting with the principal was brief, cold, and to the point- there was no room in the school. The principal simply could not add one more student as a result of severe overcrowding. She explained that classes were approaching forty students and the situation was problematic. And so I turned to another *mamlachti-dati* school, known for its excellent reputation, and received the same story: physically, there was simply no space in the school to accommodate additional students. When I visited with the principal of the experimental school, the principal was very professional and receptive, and the atmosphere in the school seemed warm and supportive. However, the school was moving and we thought it would be too far to walk, especially on rainy, cold winter days.

By a great stroke of luck, call it *bashert* if you wish, we ended up finding an apartment in the

German Colony, which was very close to all the shuls we like but in another school district. The *mamlachti-dati* school there, Yehuda Halevi, named after the medieval Spanish poet, seemed to be a down-to-earth mix of neighborhood kids and others from the more working class neighborhood of Katamonim; a ten-minute walk from us down tree-lined, quiet streets; and a matter-of-fact religious but not overly judgmental atmosphere. Our friends and colleagues who had spent previous years in Israel and also had kids were thrilled with the family atmosphere and warmth of the teachers and families, so we decided to go for it. The school had been improving consistently over the past years and there was plenty of room- no test or anything. We just needed to send a report card from Schechter and a copy of our passports. When we arrived during the summer, they gave us a tour and book list, decided which class Adir would be in, and that was that.

It's three weeks since school began and so far, so good. Adir was not excited to go, but was a good sport, trundling off with heavy backpack, water bottle, lunch box, and *Bucharan kippah*. Every day he gets a little less resistant and more positive. There are no bullies, only one boy who cuts in line when playing basket- ball. Adir averted that conflict by bringing his own ball and playing with a smaller group. The teachers gave out their phone numbers so parents could stay in touch, but it was hard to get a sense of what really went on each day and how things worked. Miriam offered to teach English to the English speakers (two small groups) during the week the school was looking for a replacement for a teacher who had become ill over the summer. In addition to teaching the children cursive and doing some creative writing, reading, and discussion, Miriam got to meet more of the teachers, experience the rhythm of the day, and observe how Adir played basketball with a friend at recess; she found out where the homework assignments were written down and when they needed to be returned, and sat in on one Gemara (Talmud) class. Miriam's brave journey as an Israeli teacher for a week made us all feel much more connected.

Some things are very different: the davening (prayer), for example, is Sephardic style, according to the majority of students. There are many hours of Judaica, including separate classes for Torah, Prophets (Book of Judges), Laws (*dinim*), Mishnah, Intro to Gemara, Parashah and life skills, and Hebrew (literature, grammar, and expression). They have separate teachers for math (lots of hours dedicated to this), English (special class of four students for English speakers), science, geography, computers, art, music, sports, library, and road safety (*zehirut bedrachim*). Instead of having a school bell, they have a recording of the Israeli folk song *Od lo ahavti dai*, and there are recesses after every two classes. On Tuesdays, classes run until 12:45 p.m. and on Fridays till 11:45 a.m. On the remaining days, school closes at 2:45 p.m. On Rosh Hodesh (the beginning of each new month), the students get out early and on the day before holidays, there is no school so that teachers can prepare.

If you walk past the school at recess or lunchtime, the cacophony of sounds emanating from the grilled windows will convince you there is a madhouse inside. Adir seems to understand a good bit, though he is not so confident about speaking up in class or in complete sentences. The homeroom teacher is an angel; a young, encouraging woman with five kids of her own, who is a good listener. She told Adir, "I want you to succeed," and that he should just do what he could of the homework in the beginning. This meant a lot to him. She has a *machberet keshet* (communication booklet) in which each child can write her a note on Friday: questions, ideas,

and thoughts that they are too shy to say out loud, and she writes back to each one of them by the next week. They can keep their booklet and see their path unfold throughout the year. Adir says the math and science teachers are tough, but he loves the school rabbi who teaches Gemara and Mishnah. The rabbi is young, dynamic, and a great storyteller (and magician!), and Adir can tell from his tone and body language that he is funny, even when Adir does not understand the super fast paced talking.

To Miriam's frustration, there is no extra help with Hebrew; all seem to advocate the hands-off approach, learning by osmosis. We agreed to try this till after the holidays (everything important here is delayed until *acharei hachagim*) and will try to review the material after school. I cannot imagine how a family of immigrants who speak no Hebrew can help their kids adjust, but everyone says kids are amazingly resilient.

Last night there was a parents' orientation (*aseifat horim*) with lots of prayers for a good year, poems about working together and having a positive attitude, and an outline of the year ahead. What was most impressive was the tone struck by the principal and rabbi- one of tolerance and appreciation for the traditions and beliefs that each family brings to the table. In addition to the regular classes (in hot, non-air-conditioned rooms with khaki desks, two kids to a desk- actually a flat table with nowhere to store the books), there are swimming lessons, a class trip, cultural events, a school garden, and nature area. The fifth grade will learn about archaeology and have a corner of a real dig site to explore and preserve. There are seven new kids in the class, six from other schools, and a handful with Anglo parents. The social element here is really important-- the teacher emphasized that the goals for the year are *gibush hevrat* (social coalescence) of the class and learning. We have always put the learning first, but are interested to see how this new approach will play out, and we hope that Adir will make some friends for life. The parents also seemed very friendly, quite a mix of ages, backgrounds, and religious outlooks. We are proud of Adir for jumping right in and look forward to a good year ahead.

Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.