



Friends of Yemin Orde



Yemin Orde Educational Initiatives



Israel's Educators Learn from the Past to Help Build A Future for At-Risk Youth

By Rotem Starkman

Yemin Orde Educational Initiatives lays out a vision and path for approximately 30 high schools and youth villages that provide educational support and resources to educators in order to help transform the lives of at-risk youth—Jews, Arabs, secular, observant, all cultural backgrounds.

Dotan Levi is the director of the Village Way Educational Institute, which provides the resources to implement YOEI's methodology. This article is excerpted and translated from the original Hebrew version of Markerweek Magazine, Haaretz, September 5, 2015.



Dotan Levi, Director, Village Way Educational Institute

Markerweek: Dotan Levi, after 30 years of working with Israelis of Ethiopian descent, can you identify parallels with your childhood?

I wasn't raised on feelings of discrimination. My mother made aliyah from Egypt and my father from Morocco; they met in the Bat Yam transit camp. I never heard from them that we were mistreated. Only after I was discharged from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and began seeing injustices in regard to those of Ethiopian descent, did it take me back. When I spoke about it with my father, he admitted that we encountered similar difficulties. I told him: "How come I never heard this sort of thing from you in the past?"

Really, how come?

He asked me: "Would this have helped you integrate in Israeli society, being exposed to all this as a child?" He thought it would only give rise to anger and frustration on my part. There were things that shouldn't have happened, he said, but he did not want me to be in that position as a youngster. It's not that my father chose to ignore the discrimination, but he didn't want us to be talking all day about Ashkenazis or Moroccans.

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And what do you think about his decision?

That's a question I encounter among educators today: is it right to dwell on the discrimination, and is there a "responsible adult" who knows how to navigate it into the right places. Yet, certainly we must learn from the past failures.

Maybe you felt it anyway, on a subconscious level?

I felt it for sure, but chose to devote myself to reaching integration.

How did this help connect you with your own past?

I suddenly recalled the lively noisiness of our music and family events, and started asking my dad to tell stories about Marrakesh. Mizrahi music (combines elements of Arabic, Turkish and Greek music) never really appealed to me, and I always tried to avoid being seen dancing to its sounds. My encounter with the Jewish-Ethiopian immigrants in 1985 allowed me to reconnect with my roots.

Describe this encounter.

After Operation Moses, a group of Jewish Ethiopians arrived in Bat Yam, and while I was passing through on my way to lead a group activity, I noticed these happy people disembarking from a bus. We somehow we managed to understand each another.

I tried to help them with stuff like assembling pieces of furniture. Through this encounter good connections were formed with children and their parents, and I invited them to Bnei Akiva. However, at the same time, the Rabbinate insisted that they undergo a type of conversion process, and there was a great struggle around that. This led the parents to suspect that anyone wearing a kippah (skullcap) that befriends them might be someone who wishes to immerse their children in the mikveh (ritual bath), and they told the children not to meet with me.

But later on you continued to work with them.

After serving in the "Nachal" military unit, I went to work as a youth group coordinator at Bnei Akiva in Bat Yam, and then a very deep connection was forged and there was understanding and even longing. By then it was also possible to speak Hebrew with the parents as well, and I could explain to them that I am not in the game, and that as far as I was concerned they are not less Jewish than me. At that time I was also able to put together value-laden social activities, establishing a group of 40 kids who would join the daily activity of doing homework with counselors that I managed to recruit.

If we look at the data, 20% of Israelis of Ethiopian descent do not complete their national service, and about 50% of them become incarcerated.

The data about incarceration is problematic because it tallies up the number of entrances into prison and the quantity of people. We have two pre-military preparatory programs, a "Mechina" for young men in Hatzor of the Upper Galilee – the first prep program to open its gates to youth outside Israel's social elite – and a "Mechina" program for young women in Migdal HaEmek.



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These programs are tremendously successful. Out of 600 graduates, I don't think we even reach 10% who don't complete their national service. The previous Head of Manpower Division in the IDF, who sought to replicate this success, turned to us, asking what are we doing that is not being accomplished in the IDF.

What did you tell her?

We said that the reason we have success with Israelis of Ethiopian descent is not because we are "Ethiopists" or anthropologists. We are just educators, who see each one of them as a human being. We try to find out what they have to offer us, and not only what we can offer them. We connect with their past.

What's your educational vision?

The fact that I was blessed with students, boys and girls from various origins, is a challenge, but to me it's an asset and not a fault. Diversity refines the outcome. Additionally, every child needs at least one adult who believes in him, and who would make him believe in himself – otherwise he will not be able to break through the glass ceiling. And the more the social gaps in Israel increase, the glass ceiling becomes lower.

The third basic assumption is taken from the book "Man in Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl. Every man wants to be good, to be meaningful, and is seeking the way to express this. People want to be effective; no one wakes up in the morning wishing to be a burden. And so if a kid is unsuccessful this is a sign that something in the system or in his personal life is disrupting and bringing about a negative manifestation. The educators encountering (these kids) must get to know them, and to follow the assumption that even if this kid is the most violent and most troublesome and having most problems with his studies – he is an asset. He is part of the dream and part of the opportunity of living in a multi-cultural fabric.

Who are you referring to when saying "us"?

Yemin Orde Educational Initiatives is a non-profit organization which lays out a vision and path for 30 high-schools and youth villages which deal with at-risk youth – Jews, Arabs, secular, observant, of all cultural backgrounds. We spearhead an educational methodology that leads to an inner change and a shift in self-perception among adolescents. Our "clients" are the staff members (the educators), and we guide them through an educational program, trying to instigate questions.

For example?

The connection with the children's parents. We believe this must be a joint journey with parents, educator and child. I know many educators who step heavy footed into this zone and take the place of the already weakened parent, missing the point that the goal is to empower the parent's position.

How did you get there?

In the past I taught at Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, and when I moved to Yemin Orde Youth Village, I met Dr. Chaim Peri, who is the thinker and founder of this methodology. He was the head of the youth village, where an educational method began to develop, reaching back as far as the founding fathers of the Youth Aliyah movement. The youth village was created for youths, boys and girls,

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who survived the Holocaust, but then no one would set for them the minimalist goal that we mark today – that first and foremost they should be functioning people, let's bring them to basic participation in Israeli society and that in itself will be an accomplishment.

When I came to Yemin Orde, I heard Peri saying “We are training the leaders of tomorrow” – and these are youths from Ethiopia and the FSU. Slowly, gradually, we developed a relevant method that draws on the writings of the founding fathers of the Youth Aliyah movement. The motto is an African proverb – “It takes a whole village to raise a child”.

Meaning?

If I go back to my childhood in Bat-Yam, if there was a kid who wanted to smoke he would have to hide from all the adults in the block, not only from mom and dad, because the perception of responsibility was similar to that of a village. Every adult in a youth village bears responsibility for the children, and it doesn't matter if it's the secretary or the guard (at the gate).

There's a school that we work with in Acco, where the House Father saw the children going to the beach on Remembrance Day. A year later, he called them, saying “I'm going to distribute water bottles to bereaved families in the cemeteries, want to join?” And so these kids went to graveyards instead of going swimming in the Kinneret. This is worth much more than going over lesson plans. To us, this is an embodiment of “a whole village”.

How is this being tackled by the Ministry of Education?

I was part of a meeting with the CEO, and I feel positive winds of change blowing in terms of integrating those of Ethiopian descent in (the mainstream of our) society. The issue is whether to dare and make changes in teachers' training, preparing them for work in a multi-cultural environment, and for handling the racism which permeates all the sectors in our society.

In the schools where we are involved it is quite a tough job, but those magical moments of seeing the youngsters going to distribute water on Remembrance Day, or taking out patients from the Sha'ar Menashe Hospital for a trip to the Wailing Wall – these are founding moments. And that's why I have chosen to be optimistic.