

Fruit of the Tree of Life*

(Hebrew: "Peri" of the Tree of "Chaim")

This article was translated from Hebrew.

For over fifty years Chaim Peri has been treading the paths of education. He is considered one of the most prominent educators in Israel. Not many are as inspirational, charismatic and knowledgeable, possessing such a crystalized, methodical world view. But do tall trees allow saplings to grow in their shadow?

*Natan Odenheimer,
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During the fall of 1996, a time of protest and demonstrations evoked by the rejection of blood donations from Ethiopian immigrants, one of the students at Yemin Orde Youth Village climbed on the water tower. He was convinced that the acne covering his face is a symptom of AIDS, and decided to end his life. The fall from the tower resulted in two broken legs, but he remained alive. Chaim Peri, then director of Yemin Orde Youth Village, understood that something else was broken, not only the legs. He grabbed the youngster by the ears, and with his tongue licked his student's cheek. "If you had AIDS, do you think I would do that?" he asked.

Chaim Peri has been educating at-risk youth in unconventional ways for over five decades. In this

anecdote lie the key elements of his opulent educational philosophy: the child must feel secure of his identity and abilities, and the educator and educational environment must provide him the room to grow and become independent. If the goings-on in the country make a kid feel that he is ill because his skin is brown, Peri will show him just how loved and esteemed he naturally is, and not just with pretty words or fiery speeches.

Peri has been dealing with the hardships of youths who struggle to survive in a difficult reality, and there is no doubt in his success. Among the list of the village's graduates, men and women, are mayors, high officers in the army and in the police, a former member of Knesset, educators, business owners, artists and academicians. Each one of them has their own timbre, identity and set of opinions, but they all share the inspiration they



Chaim Peri, Founder, Village Way Educational Initiatives

absorbed from Peri – which manifests as a belief in their abilities. In the forward to the book "The Village Way", which lays out his educational methodology, Peri writes: "the Village Way offers an 'inner grammar' for the educational environment, which creates the blueprint of that essential homeland, into which the child needs and deserves to grow. [...] If today's world is a global village whose boundaries are undefined, and which is constantly bombarded by an influx of undifferentiated information, the Village Way seeks to reinstate in childhood, or homeland landscapes, attributes that have been in existence since the days of the primeval village of humanity [...] attributes whose existential value has never expired [...] by creating educational environments structurally imprinted with wholeness and meaning."



How is it that Chaim Peri was able to attract and inspire not only youth villages, but an ever-growing number of educators and educational institutes throughout Israel?

Chaim Peri: biographical outline

Chaim Peri's liveliness is almost inconceivable when you consider he is 75 years old. He lives in Zichron Yacov, not far from Yemin Orde and the Village Way's hub of activity. He picks me up from the central station in Binyamina, sporting a blue cap and an energetic smile. During the ride he tells me about a film which documents for over a decade an at-risk boy growing up. "The movie ends", says Peri, "in the moment when the boy, who is by now a teen, is sitting with his friend and she tells him, 'You know how everyone's always saying seize the moment? I think it's the other way around, like the moment seizes us.' And this is what I always tell teachers, again and again: the moment seizes you. The present moment is the key!"

Can you explain what this means?

"Educators must feel, they must believe in education, and the word 'education' – like 'inauguration' – stems from 'renewal' (translator's note: in Hebrew, these three words are linguistically related). They must experience this moment, the present, as the critical point in time in which things happen. If teachers stop feeling renewal in their work, they cannot fill this need for the



child, who is in the midst of the most critical years of his development. Moreover, a daily routine devoid of renewal desensitizes the children, puts them on auto-pilot."

Peri himself is like a fountainhead. Vehemently he passes from giving a concrete example of a kid's personal journey, to analyzing an academic research, and then, making a sharp turn, he quotes Maimonides and the Maharal of Prague. In his home the bookshelves are packed with religious and secular literature, as well as photographs with kids, graduates, and even the Dalai Lama. I pause before one of the numerous photos of Peri surrounded by dozens of kids, and wonder how many of them know that many years ago, Peri himself could have been in a similar group photo, himself an abandoned kid who needed someone to believe in him. In order to understand how Peri recharges with inspiration, we must acquaint ourselves with a chapter in his life story, which explains the personal connection to his life mission.

Peri was born in Tel Aviv in 1941. His mother arrived to Palestina "one moment before WWII erupted". She earned her bread mainly from cleaning jobs, while making

every effort to procure from the British officials immigration certificates for her parents and younger brother, at the time in a refugee camp in Germany, so they could join her. By and by she underwent a psychotic breakdown, from which she never totally recovered. Peri was sent to a WIZO day care center for orphans in Tel Aviv. Two years later, his father, appalled from the rough conditions – which he described as "life threatening, diseases and dysentery" – extricated him from there, and placed him under the care of his mother, Peri's grandmother.

Until he was seven, Peri stayed with his grandmother, and would only occasionally visit his father and mother. His parents divorced when he was four, but returned to living together a few years later, despite the fact that his mother would periodically lapse into long periods of hospitalization. Peri shares that although his father was not present in his childhood as a parent in every sense of the word, he respects his brave decision to live with his mother despite her mental illness. In the War of Independence his father fought in Acco. Like other combat soldiers,

he settled in a deserted home of an Arab family, moving in with his small family. Peri received good education in Acco's Weizman elementary school: "They had great teachers, new immigrants from Poland with wonderful Hebrew, exemplary men". Right next to the school stood the Acco fortress, which was the first mental hospital in Israel. There, says Peri, his mother was imprisoned. From his seat in the classroom he could see the deep ditch which surrounded the fortress, insinuating that although the physical distance between him and his mother is short, it is in fact impassable.

Menachem Offen – an Inspiring Figure

The summer vacations he would spend with his grandmother and grandfather in Bnei Brak, where he befriended children his age that would change the course of his life. One of the families took him and his friends to a visit in Kfar HaRoeh for Shavout holiday. Peri was deeply impressed by one of the rabbis there, Rabbi Nerya, and especially recalls how he would wake the sleeping in the middle of the night with calls of "O holy people of Israel, wake up to worship HaShem!". When he returned to his home in Acco he stood before his father, declaring that he wants to move to Kfar HaRoeh. That was his first independent decision. His father disapproved, but Peri insisted, and at 15 he moved to Kfar HaRoeh.

The move was not easy. The school did not go out of its way to help him bridge scholastic gaps for studying Gemara. One afternoon, a desperate Peri decided to escape. The



educator Rabbi Menachem Offen, whom Peri describes as a "rabbi without a beard, a humble man who was also versed in science, not only Torah", ran after him to the bus stop where he was waiting, grabbed his suitcase and thus forced him to return to the village. "Can you see what one teacher's devotion can accomplish? This rabbi survived 13 concentration camps in his life, but he didn't let it affect his ability to be an educator". Over the years, even when Peri was no longer his student, Rabbi Offen would still receive his in his home, helping him prepare for the matriculation exams. Many years later, Peri turned to him to consult about taking in "infiltrating" children, or, as he calls them, "African genocide survivors", to Yemin Orde youth village. The rabbi was unequivocal: "It is our moral duty to accept them!"

It is no accident that Peri's story takes him back to that bus stop. Rabbi Offen's behavior would continue to inspire him for years to come. Peri repeatedly states that every child, and especially at-risk children and youth, need an adult who believes in them, and this

belief must be expressed in action – running after a desperate pupil to a bus station, making contact with the skin of a kid who is mortified from the fear of being HIV positive.

From Sderot to Yemin Orde

Peri enlisted in the early 60's and became a "soldier teacher" in the town of Sderot. He taught at a school which was then run by Shimon Ben Pazi, a Jerusalemite educator. The teachers resided in a type of commune, and invested the greater part of their salaries in the children they educated. They created a club for the children, which was active from 7am to 7pm. During most the evenings, Peri would sit with his students, spinning fast paced, soap-opera type tales. Seemingly, he was telling stories about a distant land, but in actuality, he was trying to help them deal with the day-to-day hardships and challenges of the community of new immigrants, most of whom came from Morocco.

Under these circumstances, Peri realized the importance of connecting with the families when educating children, and this was true even when the family no longer existed. He used to spend long hours with the families of his students, learning from the parents, and on Sabbaths he would daven with the community, absorbing the tremendous cultural wealth it has brought to Israel.

Peri taught humanistic subjects at the Yeshiva – Bible, Jewish thought and grammar – while, at the same, studying for a degree in Bar Ilan University. Afterwards, he traveled to the United States, representing Bnei Akiva, to study for a com-

bined master's program of Columbia University and the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Seminar. Upon his return, he became director of Or Etzion Yeshiva's junior high school, of Chazon Ovadia school in Be'er Sheva, and the high-school in Givat Washington. In 1975 he set out to New York again, to complete a doctorate in education.

In 1979 he began running Yemin Orde Youth Village. A few years later, many youths from the Ethiopian Beta Israel community began arriving to the village. Along with the ensuing waves of immigration from Ethiopia, arrived many youths from the former Soviet Union.

It's difficult to cover the expanse of educational initiatives that Peri has advanced and developed. He established, for example, accommodations [at Yemin Orde] for enlisted graduates who had no "home" to go back to; a pre-military preparatory program that broke the glass ceiling of such existent programs, which would mostly accept only the social elite; and also founded the "Village Way" non-profit organization, to preserve and further develop his unique world view.

"The Village Way": User Experience

Dotan Levy, 47, is head of the Village Way Institute. His father came from Egypt and his mother from Morocco, and they resided in a transit neighborhood for immigrants in Bat Yam. From a very young age, it was clear to Levy that he wanted to become an educator. "The first year at Yemin Orde," he says, "was challenging, meaning



Dotan Levy, Director, Village Way Educational Institute

that it was very difficult". Levy and his newlywed wife decided to leave. "I wanted to carve my own path. Not to end up a contractor, even if it was for a great educator."

In a private conversation before his leaving, Peri told him: "I mis-explained. The fault is mine. If you got the impression that you should be a contractor, it means that my explanations have failed. Authenticity is the most important [aspect] in the educational process." Levy did a U-turn. "I realized that I am here to stay".

To fully understand this, we should pause and reflect on Peri and Levy's usage of the word "authentic". When Levy arrived to the youth village, he already had experience, and intuitive confidence in his identity as an educator. He worked with Ethiopian-born youth, and even before he met Peri identified with their difficult transition to a new country – which he knew from personal experience. That is why he created a deep bond not only with the kids, but also with the parents' generation. Although he then

lacked Peri's vocabulary, Levy had also realized that a child's educational development is intrinsically linked with having a concrete identity, along with the ability to feel a sense of belonging to something that is continuous, not fragmented or one-time, and that his role as educator was to give the child anchors in their culture of origin. Even before he became an educator at Yemin Orde, Levy worked with youths who underwent traumatic experiences of immigration, abandonment and violence. These youngsters had to reconstruct a continuous, independent identity in the face of chaotic realities. Thus, when Peri or Levy say "authentic", they mean – integrating the educator's ability to be true to his or herself, pave his own way, while nurturing similar independence for the child.

Teachers and educators of the highest rank, per Peri, are those who raise disciples who are independent, innovators in their own right – not impersonators. Plato surpassed his teacher Socrates, because his own disciple, Aristotle, so thoroughly adopted Plato's critical approach, that he rebelled against him. The educators that Chaim Peri has initiated did not become blind followers of the Village Way methodology. They absorbed inspiration from him, yet have taken free rein. They changed and renewed it. Educators, like at-risk youth, need to feel they have room for growth and self-expression. That is why in the eighties, at twenty plus, Levy decided not to leave his position as educator at Yemin Orde although he had already packed his bags. As head of the Village Way Educational Institute, Levy inputs ideas that continue

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Peri's line of thought, while imbuing it with new meaning.

Storm and Stress

Peri had spent almost all of his life in institutions – from the orphanage, as a baby, to the boarding school when he became head of a youth village. Maybe that is why he isn't especially fond of them. "Institution' (Heb.: 'Mossad') as in 'Sodom'", he stresses. To him, institutions are static entities that tend to rot quickly, and the best institution is the least 'institutional' one. Therefore, one of the educators' tasks is to ceaselessly seek out the failures in the institution and the system. Even today he has much to say about educational institutions in Israel - that focus, as he says, only on quantifiable factors, on test scores, ignoring the process that

the child needs in order to fit into society as an adult. For Peri, this is a burning issue many times over, "Since these are the youngsters' formative years, the years of rebellion, the period of 'storm and stress'. To become adults that can work and love and find themselves a community, they need to develop an independent identity with meaning and continuity. Otherwise, schools will only produce troops upon troops of uprooted individuals".

Sometimes it seems as if Peri is looking to repair the entire world. There is a youth village in Rwanda, a school in California and another school in Acco, close to [his childhood] home, that rely on the Village Way methods. The Village Way organization operates dozens of schools in Israel, with more on the way. From where does Peri

draw his own inspiration?

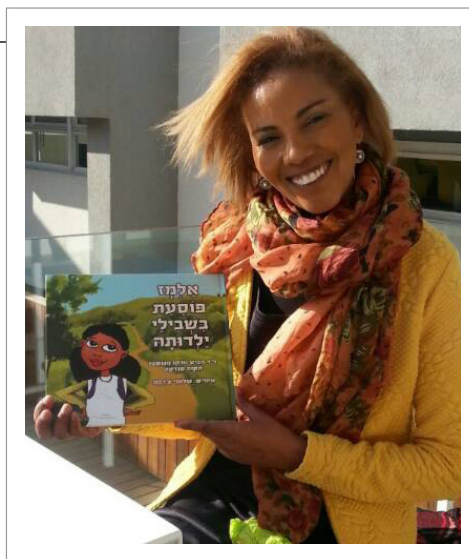
"The answer is banal", he says. "From the feedback. My contacts with people energize me. If someone comes up to me and says: 'I drew strength from you', this tremendously affects me. I can see people continuing the way. Dotan was the first of them. They are making it better and more profound. This is proof that what you are doing is relevant, that once you believe in someone, he can grow in wonderful directions. That same kid who, exactly twenty years ago, almost put an end to his life by jumping from the water tower, now spearheads a far-reaching reform in the Ministry of Culture for preserving and encouraging Ethiopian arts. Is there anything more inspiring than that?" ■

From Student to Colleague

One of Levy's colleagues in the research institute is Dr. Wovite Worko Mangistu. Wovite Worko arrived at Yemin Orde in 1989, at the age of 15. Just before that, her mother passed away, leaving her an orphan. Today, she is part of a unit that works on developing the Village Way's educational methods, and this year she will be teaching about the methodology at the Hebrew University. Dr. Wovite Worko is, as Chaim puts it, "an unstoppable natural force". At eleven, she reached Israel after a long, exhausting and treacherous journey on foot via Sudan: "At night we would march through hills and mountains, and in the terrible heat under the sun we would try to rest". After long months of coping with diseases, deprivation, wild animals, bandits and intense heat, the family arrived in Israel. At the Ministry of Absorption, Wovite Worko was told she would have to change her name. She refused; she didn't cross the deserts of Africa so that an administrator would order her to give up her name, a pivotal part of her identity.

At Yemin Orde she discovered the reverse approach. "The framework knew how to absorb any incoming immigrant", she tells. "The educators were familiar with the culture from which each boy and girl arrived. The people of Yemin Orde encouraged the youth to know their own culture, to be proud of it. The entire framework was geared to make that happen; it was all interconnected so that nothing would fall through".

Wovite Worko: "I'll tell you exactly what Chaim Peri would say to us: the sky is the limit. It's all in your hands. Each one of you will take from here only what is right for you. Those who



Dr. Wovite Worko Mangistu, Yemin Orde Graduate, and Professor at Hebrew University teaching the Village Way.

want will reach the Haifa Technion. But it's not that everyone must excel in their studies. Each one of you should obtain the tools to succeed in real life. That is our job at the village, of every one of us, from the director to each educator". The physical conditions were homey: the wardrobe, the food, the bed, "and I could compare, because I was already familiar with boarding schools", she adds.

"For example," Wovite Worko continues, "the educators knew our holiday, the Sigd. We felt there is room for our customs – for our prayers and traditional food and activities. We were taught that our culture and language are assets. Whoever wanted could speak Amharic, and could even study for a matriculation in Amharic". Levy, for his part, points out the wealth amassed by teachers and students, when they are encouraged to relate to the youths' culture of origin: "Once, during Bible class, we paused to discuss a fresh, feminist take on the story of Abraham and Sarah. One of the students suggested an alternative explanation for the Biblical emphasis on Sarah's laughter. She felt that the laughter was

especially highlighted since there are cultures in which women are not allowed to laugh in public, as was the case in her own tradition". This is an example of independent thinking, which thrives in an atmosphere of cultural sensitivity.

When Wovite Worko finished high school, she joined the National Service, at a school in Samed. She was to be in charge of a class of immigrants who had just arrived, in 1991, as part of Operation Solomon. "For me, it was coming a full circle, because I too had been a new immigrant, and now I had a chance to do something good". On the day of her arrival, the manager asked her to come early the next morning: "I have a list of sixteen students who need to change their names. They are too difficult to pronounce". Wovite Worko, armed with her firm sense of identity and self-assurance - after all, she was also a Chaim Peri disciple – responded with: "It is just as difficult for them! This is a red line. I won't have any part of this. They will be able to change their names in the future, if they like, but we can't do this for them." The manager was, in her words, "shocked", but the names remained unchanged.

"Chaim Peri is an inspirational figure. He inspires in his authenticity, his world view and inclusiveness, but at the same time, for being critical, for always asking 'Why?'. His curiosity swept us away. His knowledge fascinated us. He is a polymath and a mentor. I use his sayings even to this day, things I learned when I was a pupil. Following his example, I constantly ask myself, am I doing the right thing? How can I do better? Always asking, learning, meeting people. Different people".