



Friday, January 11, 2008

LOCAL VOICES: A Lesson In Pluralism

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Editor

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A Detroit native whose family roots extend deep into Jewish Detroit is at the forefront of a fragile experiment spanning Israel's divide between state-supported schools that are religious and those that are secular.

Daniel "Dani" Elazar is executive director of the Yachad Modiin non-profit organization, which supports Yachad Modiin's preschools, elementary school, high school, informal parent education and community activities. The organization was founded in 2000 by parents seeking an inclusive approach based on Jewish values. The 570 families represent a diversity of Jewish and socioeconomic backgrounds. Yachad Modiin's 950-student public schools have become a significant force in Modiin, a modern city that's midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Israeli
educator

Dani
Elazar

In many ways, Dani, 40, is trying to achieve the same educational objectives as his grandfather, Albert Elazar, who was involved with Detroit's old United Hebrew Schools/Midrasha from 1948 to 1971. Albert was superintendent for 19 of those years.

Albert built a reputation for developing partnerships with local synagogues and Yiddish schools to create a pluralistic educational network tied to the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. UHS, organized in 1919, was a founding constituent agency of Federation in 1926. It dissolved in 1988 when Federation's Agency for Jewish Education was formed.

By the 1960s, UHS had become the nation's largest communal-based Hebrew school system with its own buildings as well as partner-run branches. It also had a College of Jewish Studies, a renowned Jewish library and a Hebrew-speaking summer camp. At its peak, UHS served 4,000 students in its various programs.

"My father Albert's leadership in the Jewish educational system in Detroit was highlighted by his ability to bring various Jewish ideologies together under one educational roof," says Dani's father, David, who lives in Rishon L'Zion. "It is a great pleasure for us to see Dani following in his grandfather's footsteps."

At Yachad Experimental School, some students wear kippot and others don't, but all play and learn together. In the evening, parents of different religious backgrounds assemble at the school for a variety of activities, including Jewish learning classes, a choir, basketball, a drama group, yoga and a Shabbat minyan.

While such school scenes might not sound special to American Jews, they are a rarity in Israel. That's because the Israeli education system divides religious and secular families. "Unfortunately, over the decades, each sector has become more entrenched in its beliefs and lifestyles," Dani says. "And Israel society has become rife with religious/secular division on numerous issues."

The Formative Years

Dani's parents, Ruthi and David Elazar, made aliyah in 1970, when Dani was 3. About a year later, Albert followed. In 1972, Albert received the Jewish Agency for Israel's Zalman Shazar Award for his contribution to Zionist education and culture in the diaspora, especially Detroit.

Dani and his two siblings attended secular schools and took part in secular youth groups while growing up in Rishon L'Zion. At times, the religious/secular divide was confounding. Dani tells how upset his father was when he heard that Dani's Scout troop scheduled a "work day" on Shabbat. "It was the only time he ever talked about moving back to America," Dani says.

As an adult, Dani worked in finance in the high-tech industry for nine years before deciding to change careers. From 2002 to 2004,

he was enrolled at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem. MLI aims to develop influential leaders to foster educational advancement in Israel. Dani has headed the Yachad Modiin community since graduating from Mandel.

"I came to the career decision, in part, due to my grandfather's influence and after many discussions we had before he passed away in 1993," Dani says. "He always impressed upon me the value of Jewish unity in Israeli society - and that we should base this unity on our shared Jewish heritage."

Community Driven

The Israeli Ministry of Education designated Yachad Experimental School as "experimental." Throughout the year, there is a conscious effort to bring parents into the experiment. Adults can enjoy weekly activities as well as Shabbat weekends away, a hiking club and holiday celebrations. There also are discussion groups that explore what it means to be part of a community striving for unity but not infringing or passing judgment on the individual choices of its members.

Every day, Dani sees examples of Yachad Modiin's pursuit: to inspire a more unified, tolerant Israeli society through a community of students, parents and teachers from a variety of Jewish backgrounds. The parents fuel the engine of opportunity.

"The kids are growing up with very positive messages about what it means to be living in a Jewish state and how to accept Jews from all backgrounds," Dani says.

Yachad Modiin works in close cooperation with Meitarim Network, an organization dedicated to promoting Jewish education in an environment that integrates Israeli children from different Jewish backgrounds. In addition to the financial and ideological support that Meitarim provides Yachad, Meitarim helps develop the innovative curriculum needed by this new type of Israeli school.

Yachad currently is home to preschool through junior high classes. A grant of more than \$1 million from the Legacy Heritage Fund will go toward expanding the campus to include a high school and a special needs school. Future plans call for a Judaic and general enrichment center. A pedagogic center will provide support and counsel for similarly modeled school communities.

The impact could be striking.

"Groups of parents from many communities in Israel have approached us to start similar initiatives in their towns, and we try to give them as much help and support as we can," says Dani, who lives in Modiin with his wife, Yael, and their three daughters.

The legacy of his grandfather, Albert, is never far from mind.

As Dani puts it: "I think that just about everyone involved in the Yachad community is very committed to building a more tolerant and open society in Israel. And I feel very fortunate to be a part of it.

"I know my grandfather would be proud."

Dani Elazar has every reason to feel that way.

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