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Kesher L'Yisrael: **Building Connections to Israel**

by SHEILA SILVERBERG

Kesher L'Yisrael, administered by the Helene and A.B. Wiener Early Childhood Department at the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education in Miami (CAJE-Miami), is the first Israel experience geared totally to young children, their teachers, and families in Jewish early childhood programs. Thus far it has been a resounding success! We know that children learn best by “doing” and the *Kesher L'Yisrael* children “did it all” in Israel! From camel rides down the long path to Abraham’s tent, to herding sheep in the desert; from dressing as “*kibbutzniks*” at Kibbutz Yifat, to creating mosaics while visiting Zippori, the children were engaged in a “child at the center” experience almost every step of their journey. The very young “*shlichim*” and their families have paved the way for *Kesher L'Yisrael II*.

It is not unusual for educators teaching in Jewish education to be funded to go to Israel. Educators are most effective when they are passionate about what they teach, and visiting Israel is an almost guaranteed way of enabling teachers to passionately embrace Israel and influence what takes place in the classroom. The *Kesher L'Yisrael* initiative provided that piece and so much more! Research has proven that the early childhood years are critical in the development of identity and vital to shaping who the child will become. We know that what happens “Jewishly” in both the home

and the Jewish early childhood classroom plays an important role in Jewish identity building. *Kesher L'Yisrael* was designed to bring early childhood educators, families, and their young children together into a personal encounter with Israel that would ultimately cultivate and shape their lifelong Jewish cultural behaviors and beliefs.

Funded by *Makom*, the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), and the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, *Kesher L'Yisrael* began the formal grant period in January 2006. Early childhood programs were selected to participate based on a strong commitment to a two-year Israel engagement process. Directors mindfully recruited teachers and families to participate. The first of many planned, informal, educational Sunday morning gatherings began with a “kick-off” retreat on Miami Beach. Designed as a three-part program, *Kesher L'Yisrael* included pre-trip educational meetings, the “centerpiece” trip to Israel, and the all important post-trip encounters.

Creating a Kesher L'Yisrael Family
Sunday morning monthly programming brought teachers, parents, and young children together for a brunch and educational



component. Time spent together set the stage for what was to become a closely bonded *Kesher L'Yisrael* “family.” Early sessions, including opportunities to study in *chevrutah*, found the teachers and families from each school clustered within the security of their own school community. Sensitive guidance from the program directors and creative programming empowered the participants and led to the development of a single community of learners at ease with one another and invested in the viewpoints of all. Topics explored throughout the eleven sessions of the pre-trip experience incorporated timely and creative holiday celebration programming. Along the way, participants became familiar with the geography and topography of Israel through the use of many mapping



activities, including the use of the attractive land map. The study of ancient Israel and its evolution to modern day Israel was ongoing

Our young children were very much a part of each Sunday meeting. Following the opening brunch, children happily gathered together across the hall with an early childhood Israel specialist. She provided parallel programming that connected the children to the topic areas explored by the adults. For example, when the adults were studying Israel archeology, the children were engaged in a “dig” of their own in a large sandbox uncovering and discovering objects, such as a *mezuzah* and a *hanukiyah*. Interestingly, on our very first day in Israel we visited Bet

Guvrin and participated in a dig in a cave. One of the “little ones” was heard to exclaim, “This is just like our dig at home only it’s a *really real dig* and we can’t keep any of the pieces we find!” And she was right! The “pieces” were numbered and filed in a crate for later study by student archeologists working in Israel for the summer. Another example of parallel studies took place during the post-trip phase of the project directly following the trip to Israel. Rabbi Efrat Zarren-Zohar, one of the CAJE-Miami program creators, led the adults in a reflective session followed by a discussion about Yehuda Halevi’s poem, “My Heart is in the East.” Parallel studies for the children involved reflections of the trip provoked by large photographs of the children in

different places in Israel. The children created a “*mizrach*” for their homes so that they would always know in which direction to look when they wanted to remember Israel!

Traveling with a Family Itinerary

Shira Ackerman Simchovitch at the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), together with the program creators in Miami, developed an interactive itinerary designed to meet the goals set for the teachers, parents, and young children during the two-week long visit to Israel. Shira also enlisted the services of Sally Klein Katz and Shari Robins, both well-versed in early childhood and family education, not only to plan the trip, but also to be active participants in our journey. According to Shira, “The *Keshet L’Yisrael* Teachers and Families in Israel experience was unique in the JAFI educational tourism landscape and was the first time teachers and families participated in one program together. *Keshet L’Yisrael* is a *Makom* initiative unlike anything that has been done in any of the other *Makom* communities.”

Everything about our trip was both unique and amazing, beginning with the child-friendly and easily identifiable big blue bus with the colorful fish exterior that met us at the airport! To eliminate the need to pack and unpack too often, two



family-minded *kibbutz* hotels were selected in centralized areas. On our first *Shabbat* at Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, the children prepared the *challah* and joined their teachers and families in small group dramatizations portraying the welcoming of the *Shabbat* bride.

The “child at the center” thrust was evidenced at almost every stop along the way. Perhaps most memorable was the activity that took place on our initial visit to the Old City following a viewing of the movie at the Davidson Museum containing wonderful visuals of the Temple and the pilgrims bringing offerings. Sitting in a shaded courtyard, the children and adults worked side-by-side as each created an “ancient costume” for a pilgrimage to the Temple. Led by Shira, Sally, and Shari, and with special “offerings” in hand, they paraded through the Old City. Playing tambourines and singing loudly, they climbed the ancient steps that led to what was once the entrance used by our ancestors as they brought their offerings to the Temple. Noted Rabbi Zarren-Zohar, “I have brought tour groups to this site and taught about its importance many times in the past. This experience was extremely emotional for me. I found myself in tears when I reached the top of the steps. Perhaps experiential components of this



nature need to be built into our adult trips to bring what we teach to a new level of meaning.” Reflective gatherings with either a teacher focus or family focus took place with frequency throughout the remainder of the trip.

Making Israel a Natural Part of Home and Classroom Life

Returning to Miami signaled the beginning of the third and final “funded” phase of the project. Each of the Sunday meetings included time to reflect on aspects of the trip. That information was used to inform the development of guidelines for both teachers and families as they move forward in the process of making Israel a natural part of home and classroom life. In Shira’s evaluation summary of the trip she stated, “There is no question that the

mission statement of JAFI’s education department — ‘to intensify the unique and multi-dimensional significance of Israel in connecting the next generation to its heritage, people, and homeland’ — gained new meaning through this program and it is our feeling that this kind of trip, especially for young families, creates a special relationship for the family with Israel – one that will last. This was also evidenced by the participants’ comments. In addition, this group of parents now will serve as advocates for the inclusion of Israel education in their children’s schools.”

The “seed” for this unique program was planted in the mind of its creator, Margie Zeskind, former Director of the Early Childhood Department at CAJE-Miami, at the



Jewish network meeting at a National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference several years ago. Family education had been a focus of the morning meeting and one director highlighted the excitement of young children viewing photographs of a classmate who had recently returned from a family trip to Israel. Of course! Teachers can definitely bring their passion about Israel to the children, but children can relate best to the experiences of their contemporaries! The impetus for a whole new Israel engagement initiative called *Kesher L'Yisrael* was born!

Note: Visit the CAJE-Miami website, www.caje-miami.org, for pictures and more information regarding the pre-trip and post-trip meetings. On the website, you also may view pictures from the Israel experience.

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