

### ***Big Ideas for Little People***

*Teacher: "Where does God live? In the Ark? In the sky?"*

*Ezra (age 5): "In here" (pointing to heart).*

This preschooler, and the insight he shares about God, is actually not atypical. From my fifteen years of experience as a preschool teacher and administrator, it is clear that with an innate thirst for knowledge combined with brains like sponges, most young children are capable of exploring and hungry for *big Jewish ideas*. Dr. Susan Landry, a developmental psychologist and professor of pediatrics, notes that, "By age 3, the number of synapses reaches a peak of about one quadrillion, or twice that of the adult brain. This developmentally unique peak in available synapses makes the brains of preschool children more active, connected, and flexible than those of adults."<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has spent time with them has heard a constant cacophony of why's, how's, and what's. Expert learners, children possess the curiosity, skills and wonder that allow them to dive into life's big questions and ideas.

During my years working in Jewish early childhood education, however, I noticed all too often, particularly in the liberal Jewish world, that preschools and the curriculum they used relied too heavily on rote art projects, superficial approaches to holidays, and the Jewish calendar. There is nothing inherently harmful with these things. However, neither are they probing nor do they lead to big ideas. Tamar Andrews, a thoughtful leader and director of a large Jewish early learning center in Los Angeles concurs, and laments a

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan H. Landry, *Effective Early Childhood Programs: Turning Knowledge into Action* (The University of Texas Houston: Health Science Center, 2005), 1

preponderance of activity-based curriculum in schools that consists largely of art projects, devoid of any serious questions and provocations about big Jewish ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Big ideas are not beyond the cognitive or emotional reach of these preschoolers. On the contrary, children discuss big ideas naturally, with depth and ease. This notion of “big ideas”<sup>3</sup> is actually a technical term from curriculum theorists, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. They define big ideas as topics that require lots of probing in order to get to the heart of their meaning and are therefore, ideally matched for preschool curriculum. Findings have shown that prolonged, intense investigations are well-suited as a theoretical foundation for Jewish early childhood programs. Psychologist and scholar of education Jerome Bruner summed it up most succinctly when he said, “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (Jerome Bruner, 1960, 491 of 1099 in Kindle reader).

In the context of Jewish preschool, such big ideas include God, Death, Justice, Holiness, and Wonder discussed with honesty and without reserve. Without prompting, children can make profound and truthful statements about the mundane and extraordinary. It is no surprise, then, that early childhood specialists<sup>4</sup> are increasingly turning to more rigorous *and* developmentally appropriate curriculum for their little people who have rich potential and appetites for engaging with big ideas.

In fact, there are many early childhood centers (ECCs) that provide this type of education and are characterized by a stellar responsive style and thoughtful, challenging

---

<sup>2</sup> Tamar Andrews, Ed. D., Preschool Director at Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA;(Personal Communication, October 2013, Los Angeles)

<sup>3</sup> Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, (Pearson, Ohio, 2005) 67.

<sup>4</sup> The Paradigm Project - <https://www.facebook.com/ParadigmProjectECE>

content.<sup>5</sup> Informed by the Reggio Emilia Approach,<sup>6</sup> Project Approach,<sup>7</sup> and other developmentally appropriate practices, there are secular and a some Jewish ECCs (Temple Israel of Hollywood<sup>8</sup> and Temple Isaiah<sup>9</sup> are two fine examples) who are meeting young children’s social-emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical needs in efficient and successful ways.

Sadly, however, too many Jewish preschoolers are still not receiving this care. Chair of the Education Department at Gratz College, Dr. Saul Wachs says, “With respect to the specifically Jewish aspects of Jewish early childhood education, we often ignore the great potential for learning.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, some children only get a glimpse of an array of topics, instead of really diving deeply into fewer. Preschools could be fanning the flames of these curious minds *Jewishly* precisely at the most optimal time. But formal instruction is not matching children’s innate abilities and readiness for it, and perhaps even worse, missing the opportunity to expose their parent learners to those big ideas so relevant to Jewish life and life in general.

Compromising the quality of Jewish education, right out of the gate, by focusing on art projects and activities instead of big Jewish ideas, sends the message to preschoolers and their families that they are only capable and deserving of something like a fisher price Judaism. The aim can and must be to cultivate engaged Jews living and exploring big ideas

---

<sup>5</sup> Susan H. Landry, *Effective Early Childhood Programs: Turning Knowledge into Action* (The University of Texas Houston: Health Science Center, 2005), 43

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.reggioalliance.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.projectapproach.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tiohnurseryschool.org/philosophyvision.php>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.templeisaiah.com/ecec-philosophy-education>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 12

about Judaism in all aspects of their lives. For that, educational leaders must grant the same rigor and respect to those at the earliest stage of their development.

Jewish preschools, in order to address this problem, will have to fundamentally change their approach to curriculum and the culture of their programs. Curriculum should strive to cover less content in more depth. Instead, intentional “uncoverage,” the constant digging into an idea for depth and meaning by the *learners*, should be built into the program and culture of the school. At the same time, the school culture also needs to embrace a more meaningful bridge between home and school; that is, parents need a chance to delve into the big ideas, too.<sup>11</sup> In short, early childhood learning should offer big ideas for little people.

What the field needs is no less than a paradigm shift in order to bring more awareness and support to early childhood education. As Dr. Wachs put it, the field needs to think systemically about early childhood education as a larger coherent ecosystem of learning:

Let us think systematically. Let us regard the early childhood classroom and school as integral parts of a system of Jewish education that can contribute significantly to the strengthening of individual growth and Jewish identity.<sup>12</sup>

Early childhood education, therefore, deserves to be recognized for what it is; namely, the foundation of future learning. Preschool teachers are among the most dedicated teachers I have ever met and worked with. Not only do they provide inspiring, engaging work, and caring environments, but also profound love and support to children and families.

---

<sup>11</sup> Pearl Beck, Ph.D., *Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life: A Survey of Jewish Preschool Parents in Three Cities*; The Journal of Jewish Life Network; volume 5, number 1, pp. 7

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 12

Unfortunately, contemporary American culture still places too little value on early childhood education, which has historically been the poor relation of the educative years. Regrettably, but consistent with the whole picture, this profession lacks significant financial stability and prestige. Early years practitioners are the least qualified, lowest paid, and have the least status among educators.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, there are many potential obstacles to face, both real and perceived, in order to shift the paradigm of the field. Real obstacles include a lack of funding to early childhood programs as well as an inability and unwillingness from teachers and administrators to engage in this type of learning. Teachers also may feel they lack the professional skills and knowledge required to facilitate the exploration of big ideas. Perceived fears may be easier to address. For example, among liberal Jewish schools there is often a fear that engaging in deep Jewish thought will scare off congregants for fear of being seen as “too Jewish” and therefore too conservative or orthodox for their tastes. Parental involvement, though, is a critical component for children’s success in school.

Ezra, our theologically savvy five-year-old, is engaging in a millennial old Jewish endeavor: wrestling with God. But that teacher-student interaction ended abruptly. Ezra’s chance to explore his big idea is missed. It should have been the beginning, not the end, of a conversation. Indeed, it should be the beginning of a life long conversation. When Ezra’s insights regularly become the beginning and not the end of the Jewish early childhood curriculum, a paradigm shift will genuinely be underway. Our children and their families deserve no less.

---

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/50942\\_Hallet\\_ch1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/50942_Hallet_ch1.pdf)