

TEACHER FOR LIFE

Makor Rishon "Portrait" | By Yair Sheleg, January 2015

Excerpts

His students participate in leadership team meetings, graduates come back to visit him again and again, and he believes that the janitor and security guard play an educational role no less significant than that of the teachers. Chaim Peri, mythological director of the Yemin Orde Youth Village and a recent winner of the most important children's rights award in the world, takes time out to reflect on fifty years of groundbreaking educational work

What is regarded by some to be "the Nobel Prize for Children's Rights," was awarded several weeks ago to an Israeli educator, at a festive ceremony held in New York City.

The recipient is Dr. Chaim Peri (73), who headed Yemin Orde, a youth village on Mt. Carmel. Later on, he initiated the Village Way Educational Initiatives, an organization which aims at spreading the insights that he acquired throughout his educational journey to as many institutions as possible.

Yemin Orde is one of many youth villages established by Youth Aliya for immigrant children who came to Israel without their families, which later also accepted many native-born Israelis who were referred to boarding schools as their families could not provide education and a supportive environment. With Peri at the helm, Yemin Orde became one of the leading youth villages in Israel:



accepting severely difficult populations, and bringing the youngsters that learned there – immigrants from Ethiopia and the FSU, and youth from disadvantaged homes – to impressive achievements.

Peri loves telling about one of his graduates, the first Ethiopian regiment commander in the IDF, Lieutenant Colonel Zion Shenkor, who recently said: "I might have graduated from the

village without a matriculation certificate, but what I received there gave me the strength to obtain two academic degrees and become a lieutenant colonel."

AN ENTIRE VILLAGE FOR ONE CHILD

So, what is Peri's educational recipe? He immediately emphasizes that he did not invent the educational wheel. "My greatest pleasure is to hear people tell me: 'you have not invented anything, you have just organized what we already knew.' That is exactly what I intended." As part of the supportive atmosphere, Peri invites educator Dotan Levy to join the interview. He regards Levy, with whom he has worked side by side for many years and who is currently the head of the Educational Institute at Yemin Orde Educational Initiatives, as his natural successor.

Peri's educational approach draws on two educational models from the past: the classical yeshiva model, on the one hand, and that of the Israeli Youth Village, on the other. From the yeshiva model he adopts the status of the yeshiva head: a captain who enjoys total identification. While he does not necessarily "contain" his students, he, Peri says must "'surround' them – give the student a sense of being hugged, always wanted, and never alone, but also give him his own living space."

From the founding fathers and mothers of the Israeli youth village movement, Peri takes with him a commitment that the village "must build a microcosm of an ideal society for each student." Therefore, the educational experience at Yemin Orde, and in high school education at large, "must be very intense, so that every

moment and every individual has significance, because during these fleeting years of adolescence we have a short-lived opportunity to influence the future world of our students."

These two models also symbolize the two key phrases in Peri's approach to education: on the one hand, the African proverb "it takes a whole village to raise a child," emphasizing the importance of the community. On the other hand, he also believes in the crucial input of the individual educator, and quotes, in this regard, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who said "every child needs at least one adult to believe in him."

What does this mean in actual fact? For example, that the entire staff at Yemin Orde, and today at other educational institutions that adopted this approach, are considered educators. The secretaries, the security guards, the janitors – they are all partners, at least partially, in the educational training that the staff undergoes: "from our point of view, the security guard standing at the gate is also an educator, and the question of how he says his "good morning" has educational significance. It is important to us that also he behaves according to our joint educational philosophy," says Peri.

"It is true that members of staff who are not educators are generally not involved in educational decision making, but when we identify a case where someone, the janitor for example, is the most significant person

in a certain student's life, we will most certainly want him to sit in on the meeting discussing the future of that child," adds Levy. "We had a case of an Ethiopian house mother at the Branco-Weiss School in Hadera, which works with us. When we held the first workshop with the staff and asked for stories of significant experiences, she spoke in the most impressive way and we saw that the homeroom teachers asked her to join them in class for specific discussion periods. The immediate result was that she had no problem asking the students to pick up their chairs at the end of the day – and even more so, some students even choose on their own initiative to stay after school to help her clean."

A HOME EVEN AFTER SCHOOL

The pastoral views surrounding Yemin Orde create an impression of an ideal environment for youngsters, but Peri is meticulous about emphasizing that "a boarding school is not a place to raise children. This is a default option for those who have no better alternative. When our students graduate and ask me to give them a blessing for the future, I always say the same sentence: that you should not have to send your children here."

In this spirit, Peri has tried to build Yemin Orde in a way that will fulfill, as much as possible, the responsibilities of a family. So, for example, he ensured that the school building and sleeping compounds are as far as possible from each other: "A child must experience the feeling of leaving home and going to school, and coming home. He has to know that if he has a bad experience in school, there is a place for him to go and find

a place to console himself. The total merge that exists in many boarding schools is extremely problematic."

Like in a family, Peri tries to give his students the feeling that the "village" is a home for life, and not only for the years of high school. Many educators say this, but Peri has put it into action: One of the residential buildings is earmarked for graduates who wish to continue living at Yemin Orde during their military service or university studies, and Peri continues to be part of their lives not only during major milestones, such as weddings or funerals, but also throughout their studies and during marital crises.

The close ties throughout life might also create an unhealthy sense of dependency, and many educators have criticized him for this, but Peri stands his ground: "true, there is a risk of pathological dependency, but statistically, only one in twenty is going to want to stay at Yemin Orde, and one in a hundred might develop a pathological dependency. All the others will feel that they have got a security network in case they need it. "

Like a family, or at least a healthy family, Peri tries to involve his students in all areas of life at the Village, also those that at other schools are within the sole responsibility of the staff. For example, since its outset, Peri has been including student representatives at staff meetings: "from the moment I came to Yemin Orde, I told the leadership team that I want students at all meetings. People will be different knowing that the children are observing them."

It being *their* village, Peri has always involved the children in matters that concerned, and even threatened Yemin Orde: "In the adjacent village of Ein Hod they wanted to construct a cemetery right next to our fence. We put an announcement about this on the notice board and initiated discussions with the students: Do they have a right to construct this cemetery? Will the proximity to the cemetery increase the concern for suicidal tendencies that already exist amongst teenagers, and especially teenagers at risk? Such a discussion also arouses the sense of belonging amongst the youth: This is "my" village, I don't want anyone to harm it. We went with the students to court and they were present at all sessions: from the magistrates' court, to the district and supreme. In the end we lost in the supreme but there was no sense of mourning, but rather a feeling of 'Oh well, how many people die every year in Ein Hod, one or two?' but the educational gains were tremendous. They learned about themselves, about their neighbors, about the legal system and their place in the world, and together we created the feeling that nourished the original village of the human race – that people unite when faced with an external threat."

The way to give each family member a sense of self-worth, explains Peri, is to create opportunities where each one can highlight his outstanding skills: "Every person has strengths, but it is important that these can be expressed

and are recognized. We have to create opportunities to enable this."

"If I get a new smartphone, I will ask a boy who understands technology to teach me how to use it," explains Levy. "He is not only being recognized for his skills, but he is also internalizing the ability to ask for help, because one of the problems with youth at risk is that they do not recognize the need to ask for help. It is true that sometimes it might seem artificial, and we have to be careful to avoid it. But if we organize a challenging trek, at the end of which Chaim has to climb a steep hill, it is clear that he is going to need the help of a 19-year-old. My responsibility as an educator is to create situations where the relative advantage of the boys is realized."

WHERE MOSCOW MEETS ADDIS ABABA

Peri guarantees to balance the nurturing of a relationship with the educational staff with the nurturing of the students' relationship with their biological families. He is concerned that there is two-way pride – both of the student in his family and of the family in the student. In the same vein, the educational staff maintain ongoing contact with the children's families: they don't phone only when problems arise, but call already at the beginning of the year. "Then," says Levy, "even when we call the parents to tell them about the problems, there is a totally different atmosphere. In the same token, when a student receives a certificate of excellence, we make sure

to also write his parent's names on the certificate, to make it clear where he comes from, and that his outstanding achievements were obtained also with credit to them."

As a rule, Peri adds, one of the Village Way's principles is that the educational activity relates also the student's past. The importance that Peri gives to the students' past is expressed in several other of his unique decisions: for example, he encourages the students to celebrate all ethnic holidays that they bring with them: from the civil new year, popular with immigrants from the FSU, to the Sigd of Ethiopian Jews. Because of the great complexity in running a village with large groups of immigrants from Ethiopia and the FSU, two communities sharing high levels of animosity and suspicion, Peri has also created a special holiday at Yemin Orde: Pushkin's birthday. Alexander Pushkin, the great Russian poet, was a descendant of an Ethiopian slave who, thanks to his personality and education, became an aristocrat. Because of his ethnic background Pushkin had dark skin and when he visited the USA was nicknamed "the black Russian poet." His birthday is celebrated in Yemin Orde as a joint day of pride for both prominent cultures in the village.

The fact that many Yemin Orde students have to undergo conversion led Peri to design a special approach to the procedure. "Alongside the traditional learning of religious *halacha*, we have constructed a process of emotional development, symbolized within the Five Books of Moses. Genesis – principle acceptance

of the lifestyle, the wish to be Jewish; Exodus – learning one's family roots; Leviticus – purity, readiness to serve society; Numbers – becoming acquainted with various types of Jewish existence; Deuteronomy – project summarizing the previous stages. When these youngsters came to the religious court and could not answer a certain question in Jewish law (*halacha*), their emotional status enabled them to stand up and say: 'I don't know the answer, but I know that the most important mitzvah is learning Torah; so give me a chance, I am only sixteen and I have another 104 years to learn.' This way the Rabbis understood that even if the youngsters did not know something, they were in."

Not only is the past present in these students' lives: "We don't believe that the goal for youth at risk should be 'just to be good human beings.' We want them to dream big, and therefore we arrange many meetings with graduates who started in a similar place to them and achieved great heights in life," says Peri. "During our internal meetings the same questions always come up: maybe I am raising false hopes, maybe I am coloring the future in a too bright pink, and he might fall flat if he does not succeed? There is another fundamental question: Are we allowed to dream for them about a future that they are not yet mature enough to dream themselves? And we say 'Yes!' if he is not mature enough to dream for himself, then we will start dreaming for him."

Along the paths of Yemin Orde we chance to meet Isma'il, a member of the small group of refugees from Darfur who was lucky enough to also learn at Yemin Orde. Isma'il has completed his studies at the village, but still lives at the "graduates' house" set up by Peri. He is currently studying for the Amir test [an abridged version of the psychometric exam, testing English skills for acceptance to academic studies]. Isma'il insisted on completing the same educational obligations as his peers, including advanced studies in Jewish Oral Law, without forfeiting his Muslim identity. "Yemin Orde is my home," he explains. "At the moment I don't have another home to go to. I want to study at the University of Haifa, maybe education, and I plan to continue living here during my studies.."

Shmuli Bing, the current director of the village, claims that Isma'il's true dream is to be a politician – and for that he plans to study international relations – but as a politician in the making, he tells each one what he thinks that that person wants to hear. "This is a characteristic that depicts survivors in general," says Peri.

I insist on finding out what happens when the idyllic atmosphere is violated. Every family and every educational institution has diversions from the norm, and occasional real delinquency as well. It is only natural that a place like Yemin Orde will have to cope with even more difficult situations. Levy explains that the educational focus is put on the group coping with the crime, and not on the criminal himself. "If a window was broken, will we leave it broken until we find the boy who broke it? Many will

say yes, we say no. The broken window will encourage graffiti, or vandalism, and will only exacerbate the problems. During the short period of grace that we have with these kids, we cannot waste time on living in a derelict environment. So we will fix the window immediately, but we will photograph it and open a discussion with the group on the significance of the action."

Are there no extreme situations that demand immediate and strong reactions that are not suited to long-term processing?

"We also have protocol for crisis situations," says Levy. "The first thing we call Silence, that is, to stop routine. If a violent event occurs, first of all you stop social activities. Once there was fighting between a group of Ethiopians and a group from the FSU. The next morning was Thursday; the day we remove the Torah scroll from the Ark. Suddenly Chaim stood up and said, 'it does not deem fit to bring a Torah scroll into a community where there is violence.' The students were in quite shock and some of the teachers did not know why he said that. But at the end of the morning prayers two students came over to him and said that they wanted to organize a 'reconciliation ceremony', and when he confirmed that they were sincere, we helped them arrange this. During an afternoon prayer, we took the scroll out of the Ark again."

ONE CAN SEE FAR

Peri himself is the product of a difficult life story. His mother came to Israel from Germany shortly before the

Holocaust. "She married young. Keeping her parents constantly in mind, she stood in the endless queue day after day to receive the "certificates," (entrance permits from the British authorities) which would enable her to bring her family to Israel," says Peri. "In the meanwhile, she contracted typhus, and just around the time I was born, she realized she could not rescue her family. She suffered a mental crisis which she never recovered from. I remember myself as a child visiting her in institutions. My father was engaged in the security of Israel, and after the State was established he had a senior position in the Mossad. He was hardly ever at home and I got my first hug from him as an adult at my mother's graveside. "

The most significant person in young Peri's life was his teacher Rabbi Menachem Ofan. "He was a Holocaust survivor who endured thirteen camps; including keeping the Yom Kippur fast while the Germans tried to force feed him. He took me home over the weekend to spend Shabbat with him. I was very close to him and his family until they passed away. He always told me that I should become an educator. He was the one who convinced me to take this road."

At age twenty-plus Peri was appointed school principal in Be'er Sheva, from where he went on to teach in Netivot and at Or Etzion, and later headed the high school in Givat Washington. "Throughout my career I looked for a framework that would enable me to put my educational model into effect from A to Z," he says. His opportunity came when the former principal of

Yemin Orde, Yitzhak Meir, transferred to the Foreign Services and was appointed Israel's ambassador to Switzerland. Peri was appointed as his replacement and headed Yemin Orde for almost three decades.

To date Peri's educational approach has been adopted by over twenty educational institutions, the vast majority of them in Israel. E.g., TOM Youth Village in Herev Le'Et, an Arab School in Jaffa, a school in Dalyat el-Carmel, the Branco Weiss School in Hadera, Hadassah Ne'urim next to Beit Yanai, and more. The Village Way even has a presence in Africa. "Eight years ago an amazing woman, Anne Heyman z"l, approached me. She was moved to action by a belief that the Jewish people cannot be indifferent to the consequences of the genocide in Rwanda. She did not want to deal with these children's mere survival, but with making a better future for them – not only on a material level, but also emotionally. She came to us after reading about our approach, and reached the conclusion that this is what she wants. Dotan and I traveled there and also delegations of their educational leaders came to Israel, including a group of architects, and they were inspired to adopt many of our ideas. For example, Yemin Orde is located on a hilltop, and the kids' slogan is that "from Yemin Orde you can see far". "See far" is also the logo of the village in Rwanda.

As we come to the end of our interview I ask Peri to analyze the main

problems facing the education system in Israel.

"The education system does not put the child's welfare and sense of value at the center of attention," he says. "If you want to provide significant education, you must give the child a environment characterized by meaning. The aim of education is to create a miniature version of society as we would like to see it, and that is definitely what is not happening in the system today.."

"The system must create standards of an educational environment. The thinker Michel Foucault maintained that the mainstream of society can be affected by successful models emerging from the margins. Therefore the margins are the right place to set up an ideal model. Then you copy it further on. I sincerely believe in this."

The outgoing Minister of Education, Shai Piron, speaks in a very similar tone to you: an atmosphere that puts the emphasis back on values rather than on grades. Do you identify with the message that he wishes to instill in the system?

S. Yizhar, the great Israeli writer has said that "there cannot be education **of** values, there can only be education **within** values. Do not preach for values, but create an environment where these values will be lived and

practices, and from there it will trickle through."

If one day you are appointed to Minister of Education, what will you do first?

"First and foremost, I would work to create a joint horizon for all the sectors and divisions in Israeli civil society. Education can provide such a horizon. It is not a matter of ideology, politics of religion; it is the welfare of our children that binds us all together. The common denominator must be humaneness. And the Village Way, on a grassroots level, is already heading there."

Would you prefer an educational lingo that disconnects the system from Jewish and Zionist values, in favor of joint values of "the child's best interests"?

"No, but I would create a platform where every human being feels self-worth. A platform that emphasizes coherence in the face of brokenness; our common experience as human beings rather than our differences. This will manifest in developing sensitivity to one another, a connection with the sublime which transcends religious denominations, upholding an aesthetic growing-up environment. To me, that is where Jewish and Zionist values are one with the universal."