

The following article is part of the cover story of the Jerusalem Post magazine of March 21, 2014: *Learning Together: schools that explore both religious and secular thought are creating a more open dialogue among children.*

Note: The number 146,000 is a misprint, and should read 46,000.

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Connecting children with their heritage:

An innovative approach to Jewish education

• RIVKAH GINAT

Israeli society has long been wary of broaching Judaism in the secular school system. But Rabbi Dr. Eitan Chikli, executive director of the pluralistic TALI school network, asserts that "more and more people in the secular community are beginning to believe that such an approach is possible."

TALI – a Hebrew acronym for "enriched Jewish studies" – was established in 1976 with the belief that every Jewish child in Israel deserves a Jewish education. While the public school system is typically separated into religious and secular schools, it was found in 2010 that 25 percent of Jewish Israelis self-identify as "traditional" and don't fit easily into either of those categories. As a means of addressing that problem, TALI aims to integrate pluralistic Jewish learning into the secular classroom.

Under the umbrella of the Education Ministry-supported TALI Education Fund (TEF), there are 246 TALI schools across the country, together serving over 146,000 children. The TALI syllabus, which has ministry approval, provides lesson plans for all Judaic subjects from first through seventh grade, as well as training for teachers on how best to implement the TALI curriculum with their pupils.

Many teachers, Chikli says, often view Judaism and Jewish tradition as "old or not relevant. They threw out Judaism with the Jews who observe it. The way we present it, [teachers] realize that there is something for them to connect to."

And he is not alone in his assessment. In surveys conducted last year among participating early-childhood educators, feedback was encouraging.

One teacher said that coming from a "secular-traditional background, it was easy for me to connect.... I feel that [TALI] has made me a better person, with a deeper spiritual level, and this directly impacts my professionalism as a kindergarten teacher."

Another secular teacher says the system "increased my awareness of the distinction between Judaism and certain sects of religious Jews. Our religion is so beautiful, and its teachings are smart and so important; I enjoy learning them, even though initially I was a



PUPILS ATTEND morning prayers at a TALI Masorti high school in Jerusalem. (Courtesy TALI)



LEAD STAFF and principals from TALI schools participate in the Educational Leadership Training program at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. (Courtesy TALI)

bit hesitant to do so."

Three years ago, the Education Ministry opened a program that focused on Jewish education in the secular system, called the Tarbut Yisrael (Jewish Culture) Initiative. Chikli credits this initiative with the growth his organization has seen in the last couple of years.

"Now that the Education Ministry has opened the topic of Jewish education, schools, principals, parents and children seem to want to as well. [Dozens] of schools have contacted us, which resulted in 25 early childhood schools being opened this year – a number that is unprecedented," he says.

He feels that the public as a whole is more open to approaching Jewish education. "Looking at Israeli culture, where the focus is indeed culture, and

seeing Judaism as part of that, makes Judaism itself more approachable."

Another of TALI's focal projects is Neshama Yetera, which began in the fall of 2012 under the auspices of the newly formed Institute for Applied Research and Advancement of Spiritual Education in TALI Schools. Neshama Yetera – which means "extra soul" – started as a three-semester laboratory for exploring Jewish spirituality. Its 28 participants – TALI teachers, principals and rabbis – assembled each week for an intensive symposium to research spiritual education. Along with traditional, frontal-style classes, the program involved a heavy experiential learning component. Its director, Rabbi Elisha Wolfin, says that the group "went and visited any organization that was involved with education and spirituality, even if they didn't touch

Judaism." In addition, participants spent time studying different kinds of meditation. In conjunction with TEF, Neshama Yetera plans to implement some of its findings in the TALI school system.

"This whole process was about trying to answer a few central questions," Wolfin explains, "one of which was, how do you approach spirituality in the secular Israeli school system – a question no one else was asking."

The last year and a half of study has inspired several initiatives, which also range from traditional lectures to forms of experiential learning. These initiatives are set to launch in a number of TALI schools in the 2014-15 academic year.

Like Chikli, Wolfin – who grew up on a secular Anglo kibbutz – describes a change in Israelis' impressions of Judaism: "It's perceived as something worth knowing, and in secular schools... We're not talking about Jewish law, but rather tradition, without any agenda."

Aside from its curriculum development and Neshama Yetera, TALI began a joint project between TEF and Leket Israel, the national food bank. After an evening in which parents, children and teachers study the laws of *leket* and *pe'ea*, which pertain to leaving some of one's crop for the poor, families go into the field and pick fruits and vegetables. Leket later distributes the collected food to families in need.

Another extracurricular initiative connects TALI schools in Israel with schools abroad, so that children can get to know each other as both individuals and as fellow Jews. This year there are 15 participating schools, in the Upper Galilee and Canada.

"We try to engage the children in conversations that are not solely focused on their favorite singers or football teams, but questions such as what do we, as people, have in common? Why do we care about each other? Why does the State of Israel exist?" explains Chikli.

"For a child to grow up in a Jewish country, as an individual who is aware and proud to be Jewish and has a strong commitment to his people... it's not enough to be Israeli," he continues. "Israel is a chapter in the Jewish story. We hope to change children's perspective, and help them realize how much each of them can give to their nation." ■