

Jewish Early Childhood Education: Diversity - A Jewish Concept by Janet Harris

As a director of large center for Early Childhood Education, I receive many calls about our program. I recently had a lovely conversation with a parent who had just moved into our area. He has two children and would like them to be in a Jewish Preschool. His parents were both Jewish communal workers and he is committed to Jewish education. We set up a time to meet and I was just about to close the conversation when the "d" word, "diversity," slipped into our conversation. "How are you with diversity?" he queried. I told him I thought we were fine. He then proceeded to tell me about his family. "I am gay. My partner is not Jewish and our adopted children are African-American. We are raising our children Jewish. How does this sit with you?" My reply was simple: "Welcome to our school."

We have a strong Jewish curriculum, identity, and culture. Judaism is wafting through the air. We cook Jewish foods, from both Ashkenazi and Sephardi cuisines. We listen to music in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino. The Alef-Bet decorates our walls. Hebrew is spoken and heard. We learn about Israel, Pirkei Avot, Jewish holidays, and rituals.

One of the mishnayot that our faculty has studied is Hu (Rav Akiva) haya omer: "Chaviv adam sheneevra v'tzelem..." Rabbi Akiva used to say: "Beloved is Man (humankind), for he/she was created in God's image." We, as a community of teachers and learners, are continually discovering what this means for our school. We have many differences. Some of our teachers are practicing, observant Jews. Others are secular Jews and still others adhere to different faiths. Many of our children are of European descent, with one or two Jewish parents. Other children are of Asian descent, Latino or African-American. Some of our Asian, Latino or African-American children are also Jewish. Many of our children are part of two-parent families. Others are part of single-parent homes. We have families with gay parents, children who live with grandparents, and those who live within an extended family. As in every school, we have children with varying learning abilities.

We consider all of these differences to be an asset to our learning environment. One of the ways children learn about their world is by figuring out what's the same and what is different. Children's antennae are always seeking out difference and sameness.

Our jobs as Jewish early childhood educators is to not "cover up" differences, but to acknowledge diversity and to foster appreciation for human diversity. This has many implications for the classroom. It means that we have conversations about Max's skin being a different color than Sophia's. We talk about all the different kinds of families that children are part of. We address disabilities. Young children are often curious and sometimes fearful about people with disabilities. We are sensitive to their feelings and assist them in learning about varying abilities. We take care in how we present gender images and we strive to avoid gender stereotypes.

The first step in honoring differences in others is to look within and continually examine our own attitudes and biases. These are sometimes painful and difficult discussions.

Our goal, as teachers, is not to be bias-free, as we learn from Maxine Segal Handelman in her book, *Jewish Everyday*. She states, "The goal is to become aware of biases and to understand how these affect your work"

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Everyday. She states, "The goal is to become aware of biases and to understand how these affect your work with children." Our goal is to be inclusive of children's and parents' differences and, thereby, strengthen our Jewish content and environment.

We learn from our rabbis that kedushah, defined as "holiness," connotes something that is distinct or set apart. When we are able to distinguish differences and look closely at them, rather than avoid them, we have the opportunity to experience kedushah for ourselves and present it to our children as well. Honoring and celebrating diversity goes hand in hand with our being a Jewish school immersed in Jewish values.

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