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**LEARNING FROM
THE CUTTING EDGE
IN EDUCATION**



WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM REGGIO EMILIA

by ANN LEWIN-BENHAM

Over 1500 miles from Jerusalem's hills in verdant northern Italy is a city, Reggio Emilia, known for the world's "best preschools." Of the fifty preschools, one third have babies and toddlers three months to three years; the rest have three- to six-year-olds. Although Reggio is far from the spiritual center of Judaism, there are parallels between the philosophy of these 65-year-old Italian schools and the ethical precepts of the first monotheistic religion. As we try to find ways of implementing best practices in education, there is much that Jewish early childhood education centers can learn from the Reggio Approach. The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) has recognized that the Reggio philosophy can strengthen and revitalize Jewish education among children and their families.

JECEI's most relevant application of Reggio ideas involves the deep involvement of the family. Drawing families into the school philosophically, practically and spiritually is a paramount goal of both Reggio schools and JECEI. Both programs broadly construe the idea of family — the ancient sense of protector of one's own and the current theoretical sense of the force that makes us human. In both school systems, evidence of family is pervasive: symbolically, in objects

Educator Ann Lewin-Benham's two recent books, Possible Schools and Powerful Children, describe a school she founded that is renowned for its success with the Reggio Approach. This article is copyright © Ann Lewin-Benham 2009.

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contributed by families — Jewish artifacts or, in Reggio, objects typical of the region; figuratively, in photos, drawings, and other images of family that appear throughout a classroom; and literally, in the frequent presence of family members in the classroom, both formally and informally.

How does the philosophy of JECEI mesh with that of Reggio schools? The Reggio philosophy is well suited to the Jewish experience and teaching. Both are reflective, as in Talmudic tradition, seeking layers of meaning in experiences: Judaism in the teachings of sages, Reggio in the forays of children. Both are collaborative, emphasizing the importance of group participation: Jewish tradition in a congregation bedecking a Sukkah or a community caring for its needy; Reggio practice in small groups of children elaborating each other's ideas in their projects. Both are concerned with the emotional well-being of each individual: JECEI schools through the respect that is given to each person; Reggio schools by emphasizing the rights of others. The coincidence of Judaism and Reggio is embedded in a shared belief in the dignity and importance of every person.

JECEI was founded in 2004 to engage the families of very young children in life-long Jewish life and learning through exceptional early childhood education. Conceived by Michael Steinhardt and a group of other funders, JECEI's driving idea is that by offering the best preschool education steeped in Jewish precepts, families could be drawn closer to Judaism. Jewish ideas are elaborated through what JECEI has defined as seven lenses, including *masa* (journey), *b'rit* (belonging) and *k'dusha* (presence and intentionality). While beyond the scope of this article, the lenses and Reggio practices have direct parallels. As a mark of quality, JECEI strives to embed its philosophy in Reggio practices.

The Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia began in 1945 when mothers, surveying the ravages of World War II, sold war detritus — abandoned tanks, guns, helmets — to raise funds for a preschool. They built it on values of respect and collaboration, hoping to avoid future wars. Impressed by reports, Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), a young teacher, bicycled from his neighboring town to see the school for himself. He ended up staying for the rest of his life. Malaguzzi was a brilliant leader, philosopher and educator who forged what today is a community committed to its founders' values. They believe that from birth every child is rich, strong, and powerful, and has the *right* to early childhood experiences that respect the

individual, develop his or her multi-faceted potential, and expand the joy of living and love of learning that are the birthright of humans. These commitments are similar to Jewish teaching traditions that have developed over millennia.

Usually we speak of children's *needs*, a perspective that puts power in adult hands. Reggio educators recognize children's *rights*: to have a voice in what goes on around them, to be in beautiful environments, to work in small groups and to use tools and materials of professional quality. Imagine schools with clutter-free rooms, natural materials, soft colors, generous amounts of daylight, a variety of thriving plants, museum-like apparatus, plentiful and varied supplies, provocative use of mirrors, climb-

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ing/tumbling apparatus in every classroom, and no commercially produced graphics but rather walls covered with huge panels that tell the stories of children's experiences and reveal the life of the classroom.

Individually or collaboratively, young children in Reggio Schools do work of exceptional quality, far beyond what is expected from them. By eight months babies paint, at age three they mix their own paints, by age five they create huge, detailed murals. Academics occur naturally, not through table-work assignments "pushed down" from grade school, but from the "bottom up," stimulated by children's interests. It is similar to a Seder that, designed to inform children, meanders in response to their inquisitive minds. Reggio work is not identical "paper plate" art; in fact, it is not art as some think of it but rather is an indication of how children are thinking about a project or problem. Children learn reading, writing and math concepts not to become "kindergarten ready," but because these skills help them solve problems they themselves pose. The kindergarten year, spent in preschool, is when prior experiences come to fruition in complex projects which children conceive or their teachers pose.

Reggio schools are based on socio-cultural theory proposed by the brilliant Jewish prodigy Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who died of tuberculosis at age 37, his ideas imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain

for decades. Alex Kozulin, an authority on Vygotsky, wrote (personal email): "Vygotsky's concept of psychological tools may have been inspired by the wide use in Jewish culture of different symbolic devices, such as *mezuzah* or *tsisit*, for the organization of a person's memory." Socio-cultural theory accords an important role to symbols in the development of language and thought. In the words of another brilliant Jewish psychologist, Reuven Feuerstein (1920-), the theory posits that "mediation is the factor that makes us human." In the hands of Reggio teachers, who are masters in knowing just when and how to intervene, mediation is a new art form.

Because the Reggio Approach is content neutral — there is no mandate to cover specific material — Jewish content can per-

meate a classroom, embedded, as in JECEI classrooms, in materials on shelves, books in the classroom library, topics of conversation and themes of projects. The following story will help illuminate: A JECEI leader had recently made one's relationship with God the topic of an inspiring, soul-searching teacher enrichment session. A young JECEI teacher could not fathom talking to children about God, a relationship she was struggling to define for herself. Shortly after, on a glorious fall day, she and the children were in the park. Ginkgoes and maples filtered the sunlight in a spectrum of reds, yellows and oranges. The world shimmered, enveloped in the colors of Joseph's coat. Suddenly the teacher "saw" God in the children's joy as they played amid crisp smells, a bounty of leaves, shafts of sunlight. Noticing how awed they were by the leaves swirling gently around them, she said: "Tell me what you think God is." "God," said a child almost five, "makes all the beauty come down." The spontaneity, the openness, the group's relationships, the poetry, the spirituality epitomize Reggio practices infused with Jewish ideas.

A unique opportunity exists for the 1300 or so Jewish early childhood centers throughout North America: To foster ever greater bonds among children, families and community through the powerful duo of Reggio philosophy and the JECEI mission. Were this to occur, it would provide a new vision for Jew-

ish early childhood education. ■