Playing with Purpose: Discovering Jewish Values in the Great Outdoors

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

It is that time of year when we as Arizonans (or more accurately, southern Arizonans) say, “Wow! If it was only like this year-round (when referring to the weather).” In our bustling, modern world, it's easy to see outdoor play as just "downtime" – a moment for children to burn off energy before diving back into structured learning. But for preschool children, time spent outside is far more than a break; it's the open-ended classroom where some of life's most profound lessons are learned. At the ELC, we believe this is especially true when viewed through the lens of Jewish values, where the natural world offers a rich tapestry for spiritual and developmental growth.

Judaism teaches us to see the divine in all aspects of creation. *Modeh Ani* begins our day with gratitude for being alive, and *Birkat HaMazon (*the after meal prayer) thanks G-d for sustaining us with food from the earth. When children step onto the playground, they are not just entering a physical space; they are entering G-d's magnificent world, a *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden) in miniature.

Outdoor play naturally fosters:

- **Gross Motor Skills & Physical Development:** Running, jumping, climbing, and balancing are essential for developing strong bodies. This aligns with *shmirat ha'guf* (guarding the body), recognizing it as a vessel for our *neshamah* (soul) and a gift to be cared for. Active play helps children develop the physical capabilities they'll need throughout their lives. It’s a natural area to help children develop independence, relying on what they can do and enjoying opportunities to branch out and try the next activity they want to learn.
- **Social-Emotional Growth:** The sandbox and slide become fertile ground for developing crucial *middot* (character traits). Sharing toys, negotiating turns on the slide, offering a hand to a friend, or resolving a small conflict over a fallen tower – these are all organic opportunities to practice *chesed* (kindness), *rachamim* (compassion), and *savlanut* (patience). This last one is **huge!**. Children learn the art of *shalom bayit* (peace in the home/community) on the playground, figuring out how to coexist and thrive together.
- **Cognitive Development & Sensory Exploration:** The outdoor environment is a multi-sensory wonderland. The feel of rough bark, the scent of damp earth, the sound of rustling leaves, the sight of a busy ant trail – these experiences awaken curiosity and critical thinking. Children observe, hypothesize, and discover. This engagement mirrors the Jewish emphasis on *talmud Torah* (study of Torah), not just as texts, but as understanding of the world around us. Each discovery can be a moment of *hoda'ah* (gratitude) for the complexity and beauty of creation.
- **Imagination & Creativity:** A stick can become a magic wand, a pile of leaves, a cozy home, a puddle becomes an ocean. Outdoor spaces are unbound by four walls, encouraging boundless imagination and creative problem-solving. This resonates with the idea of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), as children creatively envision and construct new worlds, developing the innovative spirit needed to improve our own.

Beyond the immediate developmental benefits, outdoor play offers subtle yet powerful connections to Jewish thought:

- **Patience and Perseverance:** Building a sandcastle that keeps falling or learning to pump on a swing requires persistence. These small struggles teach *endurance* and the value of continued effort, important lessons for all of life's challenges.
- **Wonder and Awe:** A child captivated by a caterpillar, a budding flower, or the vastness of the sky is experiencing *yirah*, a sense of awe and reverence for creation. These moments are spiritual awakenings, helping them feel a connection to something larger than themselves.

At the ELC, our outdoor play spaces are not just areas for recess; they are extensions of our classrooms, vibrant laboratories for growth, and sacred grounds where children connect with themselves, each other, and the wonders of the world. We see every jump, every shared shovel, and every curious gaze at a ladybug as an opportunity to nurture not just a child, but a *neshamah* – a beautiful soul growing in strength, kindness, and wonder.

So, let them climb, let them dig, let them explore. For in these seemingly simple acts of outdoor play, they are building foundations that will serve them physically, emotionally, and spiritually for a lifetime.

#ShabbatShalom