Whose Table Is It, Anyway? Building Welcoming Spaces

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Education as a career path and life goal began for me in 1992 with my graduation with a BS in Psychology from Binghamton University. That fall, I entered my master's program in Early Childhood Education at the same university, different school and I never looked back! With many relevant degrees, over 3 decades of hands-on experience, Early Childhood Education is my passion, my raison d'etre, my tachlit, my reason for being.

I received news that landed heavily in the early childhood world, or at least it should, in my opinion. About 100 Jewish early childhood educators from the US and Israel canceled a planned study trip to Reggio Emilia, Italy, after they were told to sign a statement condemning Israel and its actions in Gaza. They had planned to study the Reggio Emilia Approach, a method long embraced by Jewish preschools, and bring what they learned back to their classrooms. The city's mayor has rejected the accusations of antisemitism, and the story is still unfolding. The Times of IsraelJewish Insider

I'm not going to use this space to argue politics. I'm going to talk about what I know best: **what it means to welcome people, and what that looks like when your students are three feet tall.**

The Question Behind the Headlines

Teachers who wanted to learn how to listen better to children were asked to pass a test of belief before they could walk through the door. Whatever your views on the world, I hope we can agree that a learning space shouldn't work that way. Children, families, and teachers should be welcomed *as they are*.

What Judaism Teaches Us About Welcome

- ***Hachnasat orchim*** (welcoming guests): Our tradition's model is Avraham's tent, open on every side so that no one has to hunt for the entrance.
- ***B'tzelem Elohim*** (created in the image of G-d): We started the Torah over just this week with this idea. Every person has inherent dignity, no exceptions, no litmus tests.
- ***Kavod*** (honor and respect): We honor a person first, and we can disagree with them second.
- ***Kehillah*** (community): A community is strong because of its differences, not in spite of them.

What This Looks Like in Our Classrooms

- **The environment as a "third teacher."** Our rooms say "you belong here" before a teacher says a word: family photos, greetings in Hebrew, English, and the home languages of our families, and learning materials at a height small hands can reach.
- **Questions are welcomed, encouraged, supported.** Judaism has been celebrating children's questions since the Four Questions (shoutout to Passover!). When a child asks "why?", we get curious *with* them, not defensive.

- ***Chevruta* (learning partners).** Our children learn to listen to a friend and teacher whose ideas might be different from theirs, and to say “tell me more” before “that’s wrong.”
- ***Hakarat HaTov*** (recognizing the good). We name kindness when we see it: “I noticed you made room for a friend at the table.”
- **Every family’s story has a place.** We celebrate the holidays that are ours, and we make room for the traditions of the families who join us. Our door is always open.

A Note on Reggio

Many of us have loved what Reggio teaches us about seeing children as capable, curious, and full of ideas. Those ideas didn’t stop being true this week, and they were never foreign to us. Respect for the child, for questions, and for community is part of our tradition too, and it has been for thousands of years. We don’t need **anyone’s permission** to live them.

This Week’s Challenge

Look at your own table, at home or at work. Who might be hesitating at the door? What small thing could you do to open it wider?

Wishing you a peaceful, open-tented Shabbat.

#ShabbatShalom