

From Failure to Excellence in Two Years: The Story of a School in Lod

Everyone who knew of the Maxim Levy High School in Lod wanted nothing to do with it. ■ Principals were replaced at a dizzying rate, teachers stayed their distance, students stood around with nothing to do and violence ran amok. ■ That is, until two years ago, when a major change occurred, transforming the school into an embracing educational institution that encourages excellence.

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03.04.2015 12:43

The road to Darca Maxim Levy High School in Lod transverses winding roads, some of which are full of potholes, while others are littered with trash at the side of the road. Upon entering the neighborhood of Ganei Aviv, where the school is located, the view switches to high-rise buildings, relatively new, and well-manicured traffic roundabouts. Two gates welcome us at the school's entrance: "Good Morning," a young man greets us with somewhat surprising manners. Within a few moments, it becomes clear to us that this is Max Kutob, 12th grade student and bass player for the rock-metal band Black Pampers. He explains to us how to get to the principal's office, and continues to class.

The school is comprised of two buildings: one old and slightly dilapidated, which recalls Israeli schools of the 1970s, and the second new, polished and inviting. The gap between them reflects the revolution that this high school has undergone over the last two years. From a school that made a bad name for itself in the city and went through three principals over four years, to a point where its students feel that they belong to it, and are no longer ashamed to say that they study there.

Ganei Aviv is considered a relatively good neighborhood, although it is located a few minutes' walk from the Rakevet (railway) neighborhood, known as a faltering neighborhood where drug dealers operate and more than a few murders have occurred. Because of its rough state, the municipal services are not able to provide care for people who need it. The entire city, which has 70,000 residents, suffers from problems that have been created over decades of neglect, Jewish-Arab tension and high crime rates. Whoever was able to leave has left, and those who remained in the city are families from a low socio-economic status.

"Many factors turned this into a volatile geographic location, and the school needs to operate amid this," says Guy Zoabi, language arts teacher. "The students grew up with a feeling of a city that is not a city, a place with a negative image, feeling exposed to harm. When their basic needs are not met, learning is really a privilege."



Photographer: Eyal Toeg

Today Lod is undergoing a process of change: the appointed council has been replaced by Mayor Yair Revivo. The percentage of students entitled to a matriculation certificate has increased and today stands at 44% — still low, but an improvement. In the city, the NGO Ayalim set up a student village that operates a volunteer corps of young families. Real estate projects that were established there have attracted young couples who benefit from low cost of living relative to that of the affluent communities and from easy access to the metropolitan city of Tel Aviv. Many of them have joined the residents' council, which advances social issues before the municipality and other authorities.

We encountered Mali Elias, principal of the high school for the last one and a half years, surrounded by students. She refers to them by their first names and it seems like she knows all of them: she tells one to go to class, asks another how she is doing and inquires why one of them did not come to school last week. In the previous high school in which she worked, Blich in Ramat Gan, that was almost impossible: There were 400 students in each grade. But at Darca there are a total of 300 students.

That is not the only difference between Blich, the cloth from which Elias was cut, and the high school that she now runs. Blich is an elite school and economically stable, whose students mostly come from Ramat Gan. It is well known for its mock election event that takes place before national elections, for its major investment in sports and science and also to its graduates' high enlistment rates in combat units.



In contrast, Darca High School in Lod was nearly the complete opposite for many years: a weak school in terms of studies, which struggled to contend with the difficult challenges that came with its location. Limited resources and problematic management left it behind, with violence, intergroup tension and a low rate of matriculation in the national matriculation exams. "If a stranger were to have entered the school, he would not have been able to tell if it were class time or recess, because all the students were roaming around outside," said one of the teachers.

The revolution for Darca began two and a half years ago, when the school went from being under the auspices of the municipality to the Darca Schools network. In the first stage it went from a 6-year school to a 4-year high school, from grades 9-12. After that, the network tapped Elias, who arrived in July 2013, just two months before the start of the school year.

"The primary goal was to stabilize the school and to restore the confidence of parents and students in the system," she says. "I sat here each day and spoke with the teachers, parents and students. Darca did not leave me alone; managing a school is a lonely task, but here I have a support network.



Mali Elias

Photographer: Eyal Toeg

Elias arrived at Darca after 17 years as an economics teacher, educator, community organizer, grade principal and assistant principal at Blich, and after Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca Schools and former Blich principal, approached her. "I saw a challenge here," she says, explaining why she left her calm workplace. "I came into education out of love and belief and I am convinced

that every student is able to reach their potential if given the right resources. Apart from that, I felt that if I left Blich I would not be missed there, but here there is a sense that I am needed. I came for a visit and someone told me that there was a lot that could be done here.

Fifty percent of the students are categorized as at-risk-youth: "Students who need to care for their younger siblings, children whose fathers are in prison," Elias offers as examples. This dictates policies that aren't common in other schools: There are students who receive regular phone calls every morning from their teacher and if they do not come to class, someone drives to pick them up.

Every morning about 40 students come to the education counselor to receive sandwiches because they did not get breakfast at home. Sometimes Darca Schools is obligated to provide assistance for families and students, for example with electrical appliances. "If a family needs a refrigerator, Darca will arrange for them to get a refrigerator," says Elias.

Elias refuses to foster an atmosphere of victimhood, and students are therefore required to give back to the community, according to her "in order to show them that there are people worse off than them." "We aren't prepared to allow them to become dependent on welfare, and we want them to have a sense of equality; that they are capable and able. On the other hand, they are much more appreciative than other youths from stable neighborhoods.

The high school is open to any student in Lod, irrespective of his grade-point-average or which elementary school he attended. Despite the basic differences that are likely to be created as a result of this decision, Elias is convinced that this will not harm the targets of excellence of the high school, "because every student is capable of succeeding." As proof of success, she offers the percentage of those entitled to matriculation certificates from the school: three years ago it was 48%, now it is 65% and she hopes that it will hit 75% this year. By comparison, the national matriculation rate in Israel is 53.4%.



Photographer: Gil Cohen-Magan

In order to make this possible, every student entering ninth grade is charted, and is given a tailor-made personal program: courses in strategic learning, emotional enrichment programs and more. The learning is differentiated or adapted for each student: If one of them is not focusing in class, the teacher will sit with him on the grass outside. If the teachers notice that

he is going through emotional difficulties, he will get support in this area. There are three classes in each grade for students with learning disabilities, who receive resources in the form of additional hours from the Ministry of Education, from the municipality and from Darca; a theory class, and a science class. The objective is a full matriculation certificate, although for some students, completing 12 years of education is a fitting enough goal.

In order to demonstrate the extent of the school's diversity in terms of student demographics, we are introduced to Anwar Hasnin, a 12th grade student, who chose biology as her course of study and is debating whether to pursue psychology or education for her undergraduate degree. "The school has changed," she says. "They have ingrained a respect for intellectual pursuits in us, explaining why it is so important. My parents insisted that I study here, because it is considered a good school."

Amid all of this, how does the school deal with the wide gaps between students? "We do not give up on them," says Adi Diamant, educator and psychology teacher. "Many of them do not believe in themselves, and we explain that there's always a chance and push each of them to do realize their full potential. Even a small step forward gets a positive reaction."

Also learning with Hosnin are Max Kotub – the well-mannered youth from the entrance – and Eli Sitman, who plays with him in the band. "A few years ago the gap between well-off students and students from weaker families was very palpable," says Sitman. "Since then it has changed. Today there is no difference between students and all of us share a common goal – to graduate with a matriculation certificate and to advance."

"The rate of violence in the school has plummeted", adds Kotub. "Now there is more attention to discipline, the teachers are not interested only in our grades, but also in exactly what we are doing. Right now the teachers are more focused on discipline; they are not just concerned with our grades, but also with what we are actually doing at any given moment. They are much closer to us and also spend time on our social activities. This school is like a melting pot; there's no racism on any side."

Abed al-Naqib, a ninth grade student, is from a generation that does not know the school's earlier incarnation, but he is heard plenty about it. "In the past, they said in Lod that this was a weak high school in terms of studies," he said. "Today they do not give up on a single student, and this is very noticeable."

Most of the students are Jewish and only about 15% are Arab. Even the Jewish students constitute a heterogeneous group: Most of them are children of Russian immigrants and a minority of them are Ethiopian immigrants. The result is a mixture of Muslim, Christian and Jewish students. "Nobody here pays attention to the ethnic background of his fellow student," says Elias. "They see each other as people with a common language, and beyond that, it does not really matter

to them. It is important to us that everyone expresses himself and therefore when a Muslim student approached me and said she wanted to walk around with a veil – I told her there is no problem with that."

Attempting to establish the Israeli Identity

As the recent elections approached, Elias decided to introduce into the high school a custom that originated in Blich: A mini election system. For three weeks the students heard the platforms of the parties, hosted politicians, prepared campaigns and finally, voted at a colorful event that hosted the students of grades 9 through 12 from across the city. "The students are quite distanced, not just here but in general. They did not know which politician led which party, and it was important for us to bring them closer to the political experience." Says Elias, "It is important for us to provide the basis for the Israeli identity so that they feel they belong to the State."

But not only knowledge was missing here. A tour of some of the schools shows that the greatest challenge facing the teachers is to persuade the students that they can dream and that they can replace despondency with hope. "When I was a young girl, it was clear to me that you were given a goal and went about achieving it" says Hadass Farhi, tutor and language teacher. "But when I ask my students what their dream is, they answer me 'to have my own home'. They do not mean a home that they own, but simply that they will have a place to live. I explain to them that the matriculation certificate is not the objective, but the means through which they will achieve the greater objective – and we are helping them to put that together."

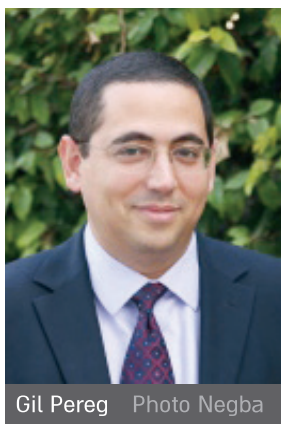
Where do you see the school in ten years from now?

Elias: "I want to prove that even a school on the city's community periphery that has a bad name, can, when given strong leadership and a supportive network, attain excellence."

Despite the many difficulties that the education system faces today?

"The people here are not the education system or the Minister for Education, but the teachers, and the moment they push ahead with a formulated agenda, where everyone is participating in the building of a dream and is recruited to the cause – it is possible."

"With the addition of minimal resources and excellent management – we can narrow the gaps in education"



Gil Pereg Photo Negba

Darca (Aramaic for 'The Path') Schools was established five years ago by the Rashi Foundation and KIAH (Kol Israel Haverim), with the support of the Ministry of Education, and last July the American YRF (Youth Renewal Fund) joined as a strategic partner. Currently, the network includes 25 high schools throughout the country with 14,000 students and 1,500 teachers.

"Our agenda is simple: To bring excellent education to the schools on the geo-social periphery, says Darca's CEO, Dr. Gil Pereg, who was previously the principal of the Blich High School, where he met Mali Elias. "We are looking for high schools in need of change so we are not selecting places where it is easy to work, but communities that are facing a challenge: The absorption of Aliyah, poverty, a high rate of unemployment and especially communities experiencing an educational crisis and that are interested in change. You could say that we are making an extreme makeover to the schools."

Darca invests 10-15% in addition to the budget that is allocated by the Ministry of Education in each high school and Pereg notes that to date, the Maxim Levy High School has had some NIS 1.5 million invested in it every year. "We wanted to enable the children of Lod to learn in a school that offers opportunities such as those of the strongest municipalities", he says. Happily for us, it has been quickly proven that when you give children the same conditions – they attain achievements. True, they come to us with considerably greater gaps that are found in the major municipalities, but when there is a teaching team committed to the task and an educational management to back the required resources, the sky's the limit. It encourages me as an Israeli citizen, because this tells us that with the right investment – which is not astronomical, we are not talking about unreasonable sums at national level – it is possible to decrease the gaps in the education system. With a slight increase of resources and especially with the right management, we can offer every student in Israel all the possibilities and not to close children off in a system that will steer their path towards a particular status."

In fact, the Rashi Foundation has entered the vacuum left by the State in the education system.

The Ministry of Education and the local authorities have done much in recent years. We see ourselves as an empowering body, that does not operate in place of the Ministry of Education

but rather, alongside it. Just as the Rashi Foundation has shown in other projects with which it has been involved, so with the promotion of educational institutions in the periphery, the leadership effort that we are making in schools will eventually affect many other places in the country."

The Maxim Levy High School has undergone some difficult aftershocks during recent years. How did they receive you there?

"In the third sector there are many bodies with good intentions and many intervention programs, but sometimes they do not succeed. We, in contrast to others, are not working like other external programs but take full responsibility for the school and by doing so help the staff to rebuild the community faith and trust in the school. There is no doubt that everywhere we go, there is some initial skepticism as to whether we are just another body that will be around for a year or two or whether this is a sustainable fundamental change. Currently, after a period in Lod, where what we are doing there can be seen, it is easier to bring about the changes that need to happen and this means not just transferring resources but changing the paradigms in people's minds. This is the most important thing for the periphery: To transform the term excellence into a legitimate ambition that is not reserved only for such places as Ramat Gan and Kfar Saba. ■