

ידיעות אחרונות

GIVING THEM A LESSON

For years it was regarded a "Red School" (below average ranking), with an especially low matriculation rate, and a schoolyard littered each night with discarded vodka bottles and syringes. Following its major transformation, matriculation rates at the Maxim Levy Darca High School in Lod, are up to 93% (!), and it is ranked among the nation's leading educational institutions. Merav Batito went there to learn a lesson, see first hand how such miracles happen – and what needs to be done for this to happen in all Israeli schools

Merav Batito | August 2, 2019

Ilan Shapira, Photographer

Up until a decade ago, the Maxim Levy high school in Lod was considered a "Red School" – with especially low matriculation grades, on the verge of closure and bankruptcy, and tagged as the last option for the youth of Lod who were rejected by every other school in the city. The schoolyard was littered with vodka bottles and syringes left by shady characters by night, and with unwanted visitors by day.

If you studied at Maxim Levy, it was nothing to be proud of. And if you taught there, you prayed each day that you'd make it home safely at the end of each school day. Those who could, preferred to transfer to a boarding school, rather than wake up every morning to the reality of another day at that school. Some of its students were the usual suspects, the underdogs, the outcasts – those who the school



Students at the Darca Maxim Levy high school in Lod. Achievements, diplomas and tests are just one way of showing students they are worthy. Photographed by Ilan Sapira

principal points an angry finger at, those who are constantly under threat of suspension, expulsion, and exclusion. No one wanted to be in their vicinity. They, too, began disengaging from others, as the negative encounters they were involved in mounted.

The huge trees that shade the walkway leading to the new and meticulously kept building no longer tell the story of those students, who waited in the scorching sun in front of the principal's office, knowing they will be reprimanded and punished yet again.

Those trees, the new piano in the lobby, the light-colored wide corridors, and the shaded benches, all represent a new reality in which vision and reality unite into an educational tale that has nothing to do with the school's past.

In the 2011/12 school year, when the Darca Network first took over, matriculation rates were at about 40 percent, well below average. By 2014, the school turnaround was clear, with matriculation rates rising to 63 percent. In 2018, matriculation rates sky-rocketed to 93 percent. The turnaround made possible by years of hard work is not over, but at the Darca high school, which is situated between the isolated Ganey Aviv neighborhood, and the meandering passageways of the notorious train

neighborhood, grades and numbers tell only part of the story. The achievements, diplomas and test scores are only one way of proving to a kid that he/she is worthy.

In years past, most of this school's ninth graders would not have allowed a single string of hope to be exposed, to give the impression that they may be interested in learning, exams and grades. For years nothing awoke in them a simple and basic desire to succeed. "I didn't have much confidence, nor did I feel that I belonged in elementary or middle school", reminisces Ami Beaya who recently completed twelfth grade at Darca high school with a full matriculation diploma, "I was bored in class, never did my homework, or studied for an exam. I had zero learning habits, regularly arrived late, and ditched class all the time. My "fuse" was short, which meant many punishments – suspensions, expulsions, confinements. Studying for me was inconvenient and unnecessary. I could somehow tolerate English and science classes. English class was difficult, and the science teacher liked me, but the most I could do was be present in class, listen, and not interrupt, and that's not enough for someone who really wants to learn."

What hurt you the most in school?

"When my parents were asked to come to school. They both work steady jobs so every time they were summoned to school to hear 'your son did this, or your son did that', that hurt the most. I'd think, 'leave them alone, and let them work.' For years they came to parent-teacher meetings to hear bad news about



Maxim Levy Darca High School in Lod. From outside. Today, 55% of the students are enrolled in 4 and 5 unit mathematics tracks.

Photographed by Ilan Sapira

me, and in between they'd be called in to hear about one inappropriate event or another. Instead of bringing them pride and satisfaction, I was constantly disappointing them. That hurt."

How often have you been punished since you started studying at Darca?

"Let me think. Never."

It doesn't make sense. We both know there's no magic wand, and that a child that didn't embrace boundaries will not adopt them overnight.

"Clearly, there are no magic tricks. It was a long and deep process, during which there were no punishments. That's all."

How many times have your parents been invited to school for negative reasons since you started studying at Darca?

"Never. From the very start, it was my responsibility to update

them. I was told that I was in charge of dealing with my parents and sharing the information with them. It was clear that this was my task, not the school's task."

How did that work out?

"The story begins with how I arrived at Darca. When I was in the eighth grade, I knew that no high school would accept me with my current grades and behavior record, but for the most part I didn't dwell on it. Then one day we were taken to a mock election event at Darca high school, ahead of the 2015 national elections. All the city's eighth graders

and twelfth graders were invited to the event, students introduced the different political parties, and ministers and Knesset members were invited to speak. The highlight for me was when we received the mock identity cards and were asked to vote. I can't tell you how important this experience was to me, perhaps because it was the first time that I felt that my voice and presence counted for something, or because it was such an interesting day. When I returned home and shared with my mom what I experienced, we went online and read about the school, reviews by students, and general information about the scholastic and social aspects.

Yarden Malka, 17 years old, entering twelfth grade: "When we had difficulty in chemistry class, we spoke with the teacher and school principal, and together we understood that the current way of teaching is not appropriate for us. The teacher tried alternative teaching methods, using presentations instead, and stayed after class to tutor those of us who needed more attention. It is things like this that give you the drive to excel."

For me, that's where the change started. I really wanted to study there. Until then, I couldn't envision myself succeeding and belonging, but that visit made me really want to study there. This was the turning point, even before the first day of the school year."

And when you arrived at

school for the first day of ninth grade?

"I arrived to find out that I was placed in the science track. That's all well and good, because I enjoy science, but I also knew that my accomplishments up to that time were not compatible with the requirements of that class, and that according to my placement exams, I was slated for the intermediate track. The teacher also thought that my grades were not adequate, but said the school was willing to give me a chance if I'd give it my all. I know that in a different school, I would have been shown the door to the other class, but in this place I was dealing with something totally different. I said that I really wanted to give it a try, and that science was my



"No, I improved a lot but not enough to bridge the gap, so we reached a joint decision, the school team and I, that I will move to the intermediate track, specializing in photography. This was the first time in my life that I was a full partner in the decision about my life. When you reach a decision in this way, no one needs to call your parents in or punish you. You understand which tracks are right for you and which are not."

Yarden Malka, who is entering twelfth grade, shares: "Here we have a voice. When we had difficulty in chemistry, we spoke with the teacher and the school principal, together we understood that the current way of teaching is not right for us, because we found it difficult to comprehend and write notes at the same time. In another school we would have been told that this is the system, and we need to make do like everyone else. But here, they are open to think of other ways that will work better for us, the students. The teacher started teaching using special presentations, and stayed after class to tutor those of us who needed more

So did you stay in the sciences track?

attention. It is things like this that give you the drive to excel."

No short cuts

The Darca high school in Lod is named for Maxim Levy z"l, the legendary mayor of Lod and younger brother of the retired minister David Levy. The school was established sixteen years ago in the Ganey Aviv neighborhood, which was mostly populated by immigrant families from the Former Soviet Union. Nine years later, Darca began to manage the school, and by the end of the first year, the matriculation rates had already increased to 60 percent and have been climbing ever since.

In the 2018/19 school year, Darca Lod's student body numbered 384. In the 2019/20 school year which is about to begin, 460 students will start the school year, with the number of classes growing from 19 to 21. Most of the students come from the nearby neighborhood, but quite a few come from other parts of the city to study in the school that for the past seven years has shown

dramatic achievements, not only in terms of the percentage of students eligible for full matriculation. The quality of matriculation also matters; whereas previously most students took the three-unit English track, and the five-unit math track was not even available, now most of the school's students are tested for four- and five-unit English tracks, and about 55 percent of the students are tested in the four- and five unit mathematics tracks. In addition, a new physics track recently opened with 30 students already enrolled.

Only those who are unfamiliar with education processes may think that there is a secret sauce or short-cut for success. Improved achievements is just one dimension of the process that the students experience at Darca, the same students who already have a grim eight year track record in schools that did not know how to cope with them, and with who did not perceive the matriculation as an incentive for them. Those students who start high school set in their ways of not studying, being bored, causing interruptions and being expelled, will find it difficult to shed their old patterns of behavior.

"I was a serious trouble maker, to the point that the teachers gave up on me", says Lichi Saban, a twelfth grade

graduate. "I would say good morning to the teacher, and wham, I'd be suspended. I realized that I was tagged and didn't stand a chance, even when I gave my all. There were times that I resolved to change my behavior and make an effort, but it didn't go well for me. No one acknowledged this effort or encouraged it. I have a twin brother who has the reputation of being the good student, the type that teachers never complain about. I was already accustomed to my role as the bad guy,



Yarden (on the right) and Sonia: "The homeroom teacher here is also a counselor and coach who is there day in and day out."

and he the good guy."

Was there a subject which you liked, that you were attracted to?

"I did pretty well in math in elementary school. I didn't do well in English, and didn't care much about all the other subjects. In general, my focus was soccer. I played in the HaPoel Tel Aviv little league until sixth grade, and then had to quit due to a medical problem. As a result, I was absent a lot, and I felt that everyone gave up on me, except for the math

teacher who came to visit me at home and helped me catch up on material that I missed. It was in that same year that I had another bad experience, which shook me up and frightened me."

"In the seventh grade I was quite miserable, and got into fights with other kids. At year end, my report card evaluation was 'inadequate behavior'. I realized I was losing it, and was headed in a bad direction, but had no idea how to turn my behavior around."

Did you want to pull yourself up by the bootstraps?

"Yes, very much so. In the eighth grade I made an enormous effort to behave well and be attentive in class. Things did improve a little, but the feedback from the teacher continued to be 'this is not good enough' or 'this is a fail'. I was expecting a 'well done' or a 'what an impressive effort', but instead was told 'needs to improve'. I felt that most teachers gave up on me."

What happened when you arrived at Darca?

"I pretty much behaved in the manner I was used to. Things got a bit better in ninth grade but in tenth grade I was back to disrupting and being the kid who was always guilty, back to the role of the trouble maker. Every little thing got me off track and I needed tons of good words from the staff. At some point it felt like they were really trying hard to find the good, to give me the strength not to give up on myself."

When did you understand that you are going to be matriculated?

"It was only in the eleventh grade that I began to believe I was capable. It started to happen when Alon, the new homeroom teacher, to whom I owe my life and thanks to whom I now I have a matriculation diploma, said 'we are going to fight for you, and you are going to do a full matriculation track'. Suddenly there was an adult who believes you can ace it. I had never received a certificate of merit from school, neither for scholastic nor for behavioral achievements. The first time I was acknowledged was here, at the end of the first semester of eleventh grade. And you know for what? For 'Improvement Excellence'. Yes, that is how they call it. I was so surprised, but then I realized that I'm being recognized for my effort, regardless of the results. When every day a different teacher comes

up to you and says 'wow', that someone from the staff high fives you, and other students come up to you, excited, then you go all out in school."



The city of Lod. Most of the school's students are from Ganey Aviv, but quite a few arrive from other parts of the city.

Photographed by Kobi Kuaneks

Can you give an example?

"I was very sick one day, with a fever of 40 degrees, and I still got up and came to school. Don't misunderstand me. I hit rough spots in eleventh grade as well, and things didn't get easy. But you just cannot stop when there are teachers around you that applaud your efforts, even when you receive a grade of forty in an exam. It was the first time that I had teachers who believed in me and didn't only care about the exam score. It was my improved behavior that brought about the improvement in my studying, because it was only then that I began to understand that I respect myself."

Sonia Marie Ripp,

seventeen years old, who recently completed eleventh grade, explains: "The homeroom teacher here is also a counselor and a coach that is with

you day in and day out, constantly with his finger on the pulse, knowing what's going on with you, so there's no way that you are overlooked. In moments that you are low, he picks you up and helps you overcome whatever obstacle there is and helps you move on."

Another classmate is Daniel Bismut, seventeen and a half years old, and moving up to twelfth grade. He says: "It is here that I learned for the first time how to study for a test. My homeroom teacher sat with me a few days before the history exam. I hinted that I had never studied for an exam, and I just don't know how. It took her no time to recognize that when I write things down I remember them

well. That is when I started to receive good grades. I am not the perfect student, but today I know how to deal with the material that needs to be covered and prepare effectively for an exam."

Moving from Red to Green

Two years after she took the principal position at Darca Lod, Maly Alias could show a marked improvement in the school's atmosphere metrics and matriculation rates, which moved the school ranking for the first time in its history from red to green. When she took on the position, the school suffered from many problems, and although she had seventeen years of experience as deputy principal at the prestigious Blich high school in Ramat Gan, it didn't take her long to realize that in Lod things work somewhat differently: "There was mostly a feeling of neglect", Alias reminisces, who completed her tenure at Lod and now serves as a supervisor at the Darca network. "We had to deal with issues of violence and vandalism, which included uprooting of doors and thrashing of flowerpots. Shady characters lurked outside the school compound, so for the first two years we hired a securityguard to be present 24 hours a day, keeping the schoolyard from turning into a drug dealer zone by night. When I used to go to city hall on school

business, there were those clerks who gently hinted that we shouldn't bother since the school was about to be shut down. The community itself was not supportive either. The school had a bad reputation, given its history, poor location, and mostly immigrant population. Parents from the city center were reluctant to send their kids to this area, and to be honest, I too had my doubts up until the first day of classes."

What happened in the first day?

"I stood at the entrance with the teachers, and we saw wonderful students that are excited about the first day of school, youth who did not believe in themselves and were not accustomed to dreaming about their future."

The change that you brought about is huge. Could you have done that without Darca's budgets?

"I would have somewhat succeeded in bringing up the achievements, but not to this level. The success has many factors, and it will be simplistic to say it is all about the money. The Darca network made available to me an organizational consultant, who met with the management team and with me once every two weeks, in addition to a psychologist that worked with us, went into the classrooms, observed the teachers in action, and offered them constructive

feedback. None of this was introduced top-down, but as part of weekly collaboration meetings, referred to as 'a teacher learning community.'

"An organizational consultant and psychologist cost money, that's exactly the money that weak local authorities do not have."

"Without those resources, I believe I would have been worn down much earlier, or I would have had to spend much of my time in search of additional resources. I believe I would have been quite frustrated, and I may not have persisted in the position for as long as I did. Schools that wish to have excellent students, require excellent teachers."

Ayala Klein, the current principal of Darca Lod, replaced Alias in the beginning of last year. She brings to the position twenty years of education and teaching experience in the Shazar high school in Bat Yam and the Ben Gurion high school in Nes Ziona. "The resources and tools available to me are similar to those available to other school principals", she says, "but I have a real possibility to chart a new path. For example, the linguistics teacher came to me, and said, 'let's do a week-long activity, focused on Hebrew Day. In partnership with the students we will transform the entire school into one large learning center, with escape rooms and activity stations'. Such good ideas require supplemental

budgets. As a Darca school principal, I can approve the additional expense, and receive from the Darca network accompaniment and guidance of relevant professionals that will work with us to develop the idea and put it into motion. The additional funds are a major factor, but the main driver is the backing from the network, which allows us to dream and be creative."

A million shekels a year

Darca is a nonprofit organization that relies on gifts from foundations, corporations and individual donors from Israel and overseas. The donations supplement the basic budget that its high schools receive from the Ministry of Education, just like any other high school. Darca's network of high schools are dispersed throughout Israel's geographic and social periphery. It was founded in 2010 by the Rashi Foundation and Kiah-Alliance, later joined by Adelis Foundation, Youth Renewal Fund, Azrieli Foundation and other generous donors. The network now includes forty educational institutions, with more than twenty thousand students and about three thousand teachers. It continues to exhibit success in places where other educational systems have failed.

The idea was to reach

areas such as Yarca, Kiryat Shmona, Um-El-Fahem or Elad, all of which are relatively weaker cities and municipalities, and infuse those areas with the best available professional standards and enhanced resources. Every Darca high school receives, in addition to the Ministry of Education budget, another 15 percent from the Darca network – an infusion of one million shekels per school per year on average, psychological guidance for the teachers, an organizational consultant for the principal, and pedagogical guidance for the entire teaching staff. The Lod teachers join the "teachers community" once every two weeks throughout the year, during which time they share their difficulties and receive moral and professional support from their peers.

It is difficult not to compare between the grim position of the Israeli school system, which are published every year, and Darca's results. According to



Maxim Levy Darca High School in Lod. From inside. Today, 55% of the students are enrolled in 4 and 5 unit mathematics tracks.

Photographed by Ilan Sapira

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) most recent report published this past October, Israel has the highest gap between high achieving and low achieving students among developed countries. According to the "Equity in Education" report, 51 percent of Israeli children from households of low socio-economic standing attend schools in which standards are below average, compared to about 48 percent on average in other OECD countries. The report asserts that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are integrated into better-off schools have a greater likelihood to achieve scholastic success. In Finland, Norway and Sweden, less than 43 percent of disadvantaged students study in disadvantaged schools. In Israel, only 5.4 percent of disadvantaged students succeed in integrating in schools with students from better established backgrounds.

Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of the Darca Network, served as principal of Blich high school in Ramat Gan between 2004 and 2011, and principal of Amit high school at Bar-Ilan University. He has a B.A. in law and philosophy, an M.A. in public administration from Harvard University and an Ed.D. from Northeastern University. He says that the difference has to do with the teachers: "It all begins and ends with the question of who enrolls in the teaching colleges. When the day will come when all parents wish their kids to be educators, the change will come about. The country must invest in changing the social status of the teaching profession. In those countries that teacher training is considered a choice of the elite and there is high demand among students, the face of the education system is markedly different. Having said that, please do not misunderstand my criticism to be directed at Israel's teachers, some of whom are among the most devoted and caring teachers that I know. Unfortunately, the system does not always know how to assist them. Teaching is a less desired profession, associated with rather low pay, high burn-out rates, and many hours of work with adolescents. It is not easy to make teaching under such circumstances a dream to be fulfilled by the best of breed."

"There is a wonderful book I read many years

ago when I studied in the United States, called "If You Don't Feed the Teachers They Eat the Students", a sort of how to succeed guide for teachers and school principals. The book addresses the importance of having a gratified teacher. A teacher that has his/her needs addressed, receives professional assistance and the backing of the system, will be a teacher that can be there for the students, see their needs, recognize their difficulties and able to help them succeed."

So the story is additional funding? Money?

"That is part of the story. First and foremost, we pay teacher salaries with respect and on time. Without being critical of others, even the way you compensate your employees needs to be done in a respectful way. Many teachers get lost in the bureaucratic maze, and as a result do not receive their pay on time or are fully compensated for their time. At Darca, we work the other way around. We let the teachers know that it is our responsibility. In addition, we have set aside a welfare fund for teachers and staff, which provides loans and direct assistance on a need basis, in a respectful and discrete manner. We ensure that the budgets from the Ministry of Education are allocated to the schools on schedule, an undertaking that is especially critical in weak and financially troubled municipalities that have difficulties which may

affect how and when funds are transferred to the schools."

So the solution is primarily economic?

"There has been quite a bit of talk about differential budgets, a reasonable division of resources such that the State compensates weak municipalities for socio-economic disadvantage. Unfortunately, we are not there quite yet. Until such time, it is important to work from an education-based perspective. When visiting a high school that we had recently started to manage, I conversed with an eleventh grade student, of Ethiopian descent, who shared with me that she was placed in the mechanics track because her grades were not sufficient for any other track. I asked her 'what would you like to be when you grow up?' to which she replied 'a psychologist'. I said to her right there 'and that is what you will be. We will shut down the irrelevant tracks and open new ones, the most state-of-the-art tracks'. And that is what we did. I am approached regularly by industrialists who tempt us to open welding and mechanics tracks in our schools. I say to them, 'when you will approach the principals in Raanana and Ramat Gan about such tracks, that is when you should approach us too'."

The number of staff members at Darca high schools is a good predictor of the attention that each child



Ayala Klein, Darca Lod High School Principal

School principal Ayala Klein's five tips for successful school management:

1. View the school as a place that helps people grow.
2. Physical presence of the principal at every event validates the event's importance.
3. Good management is manifested by open dialogue which combines attentiveness and clear boundaries.
4. The entire school community (teachers and students alike) need to know they matter to the principal.
5. Good school management includes enjoyment from the educational process and from the path itself.



and 13 staff members that are not teachers – school psychologist, four teaching aids for the two communication classes (students on the autism spectrum), two trainers for the Ometz class, two school secretaries, an administrator, a superintendent, and a housemother. Students with emotional difficulties receive special attention from a psychotherapist or social worker, and the communication classes receive additional attention from art therapists, psychologists, speech therapists and professional moderators, provided by the regional center for special education. In general, they attempt to address the unique needs of each student.

Matan Madelsi, who completed twelfth grade with a full matriculation diploma, shares: *"In my previous school, I held the school's top record for suspensions. Every week they would call my mother to school, sit me down in front of the homeroom teacher, counselor, grade level coordinator, and sometimes the school supervisor. You feel like they are closing in on you, so you become aggressive. I thought I was hot-headed, incorrigible. I used to sit there and listen, agree to everything they said in hopes that the session will end as quickly as possible. The only subject I was good at was literature. The literature teacher kind of liked me, but other than that, nothing interested me. My only motivation*

was my mother, I did not want to continue hurting her."

Madelsi's twin sister was accepted to the high school for sciences in Lod, but he was channeled to a vocational school outside of the city, due to his low grades: *"I did not want to study there, I felt short-changed and I could do better. My mother begged and promised that I would make an effort, so they agreed to transfer me to a regular school. I did want to change my ways, at the very least complete the mandatory years of schooling. But then the problems started again, and in the middle of ninth grade I left, and transferred to Darca."*

From the very start he realized that in spite of his misfortunes in other schools, here was a sight he had not yet seen: *"I promised my mother that I would behave well, and when I returned after the first day, I said to her 'mom, there are weird kids at that school, no hooligans whatsoever.' I'll be honest with you, I did not think that one day I would befriend those nerds."*

How did you learn to behave differently?

"In reality, I am the type of guy that always knew how to fit in. I understood that at this school there are no quarrels, no fist fights, no dirty talking, so I matched my behavior to this new environment. In the beginning I still chose to be part of the 'problematic' crowd - a

bunch of guys like me that were not accepted into any other school, but I noticed that the staff never gave me the feeling that I was problematic. On the contrary, we received tons of help. I met with the school psychologist regularly, I received lots of attention and also private tutoring."

"One time my friend and I were monkeying around, throwing chairs at each other. Just as I was lifting the chair, the school principal walked in and caught me red handed. I said to myself, 'I'm done, no doubt that now I will be expelled.' So I got summoned to the principal's office, who was joined by the grade level coordinator and homeroom teacher, and they begin to speak with me and explain why such behavior is wrong, that we crossed a red line that is unacceptable in this school. They spoke and all I could do was wait for looming punishment, but at the end of the meeting I was only warned not to do that again."

And that was enough for that Matan Madelsi, the guy who did not hesitate before lifting a chair?

Unequivocally yes. You are speaking about the punishment that didn't happen, I am speaking with you about what they did give me: for starters, clear boundaries of do's and don'ts, and secondly, I was listened to and received personal attention."

If you would have been asked at that

time, would you have believed that you will complete high school with a matriculation diploma?

"Of course not. It was only in the eleventh grade that I began to believe it is really happening, that I'm on the ball. I started understanding that the disruptions were not external, they were internal, within me."

Mahmood Abed Al-Kadar, who is entering the twelfth grade, had a similar experience: *"In elementary school I did not like going to school, but was forced to go. Today I love coming to school, to meet friends and study with them. I have opened up to new friends who I also meet after school, they come to my home and I go to theirs. For the first time I feel welcome at school and that I belong. I no longer keep to myself, and instead I open up in class and in the seminars we recently had about planning and time management. I now know how to improve my achievements. But what kept me going most of all was the personal attention, the conversations with my homeroom teacher and the knowledge that I am given a chance to succeed, if I would only accept their outstretched hand." ■*

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