

“All of a Sudden, Everyone Wants to Revert to Childhood”

*A magical world that enriches young ultra-Orthodox children is revealed during an exciting tour at the Bernard van Leer Foundation Early Childhood Enrichment Center, Pirchei Rivka Leah, which was recently established by Mercaz Beth Jacob.*

There is something enchanting about childhood and infancy, about a world that knows only goodness. It is not for naught that the sages compared childhood to a garland of roses, as opposed to old age, which is likened to a headdress made of thorns.

Upon entering the Early Childhood Enrichment Center, one is drawn to a world of childhood, for in fact, there is at least one small child hidden in the heart of every adult! The center is ever so enchanting, so carefully planned, and so perfect that it is difficult to utter any word other than that which expresses amazement.

The multi-faceted Enrichment Center’s mission is to enrich the world of small children through a wealth of subjects with a Jewish tone, in the best and most exciting way possible. The center is meant to host little boys and girls (ages three to eight) as well as children from the special education system and those with special needs.

The center speaks for itself. It seems that its engineer/contractor, Mr. Motti Lewenstein of Petach Tikva, invested in it much of his heart, his thoughts, and his creativity, all of which are apparent immediately as one enters the center’s entranceway. It is difficult to believe that the floor, which resembles the fresh, green foliage of a sweet forest of trees surrounded by lakes and animals, is not genuine.

In this entrance hall, children gather for a short session where they hear about the day’s program, which will lead them from room to room as they enjoy every moment of creative activity. Through interaction and enrichment, they will be experiencing success interwoven with tremendous excitement and satisfaction.

After the initial discussion, the children are led through the hallway. This small corridor was not left at that alone, but rather transformed into a wooden bridge lit up by wonderful background lighting. Drawings of flowing rivers grace each side of the bridge, as the children stream past the “water” on their way to the activities.

Each activity center was custom-made for the children’s height, designed in color and content with children in mind. The equipment is interactive and meant to be used. Everything at the center is to be touched and used, encouraging the learning process.

The center’s program broadens horizons as it promotes the development of social, cognitive, emotional and fine motor skills. The small groups of children visit each center for forty minutes at a time.

Quietly, we enter the science mini-center. We see an authentic lab with science equipment. Most of this is new to the children; some is unknown even to adults! A

number of genuine microscopes allow the children to view a microscopic world. With the guidance of staff members, the children get involved in observation and experimentation in the realm of sound production. Waves are created in a container of water using a series of tuning forks of various sizes, and vibrations are recorded with a pencil. Sound is heard through a pipe, and the decibel level is measured. When the children see the new machines recently installed by a new law at wedding halls to measure loudness of bands and orchestras, they can now understand their function.

A popular experiment (is conducted): Many bottles of varying sizes are filled with water. Children learn how to play music using them. Alternatively, they view experiments done using electrical circuits. Optical effects are discovered through mirrors, lenses and other systems that create amazing optical illusions such as filters and prisms. There are experiments in the most interesting subjects, such as zoology, botanics, the environment, communication, optics, electricity, magnetism, sound, meteorology, chemical geology, mechanics, etc.

At the music mini-center, the children are exposed to many instruments that are novel to them, and which they now learn to identify. They are introduced to categories of instruments: wind, percussion, and string. The children can then use them to play music. One youngster expressed his delight; "What? I can play this big drum all by myself?!" Yes, the child can try out the drum, darvuka, xylophone, bells, trumpets, pianos, violin etc. He can learn about playing and hearing music, to identify various rhythms, and even to compose a melody.

Children love action. Which child does not dream of a jamboree center, filled with exciting, strong equipment!? At the jamboree mini-center, kids can jump, bounce and swing on firm yet soft wheels, trampolines and swings. They can climb up an eye-catching wall and play with instruments that teach balance. Other activities include a bead stringing session, which develops gross and fine motor skills. The guided activities assist in the development of the following motor skills: grasping, catching, throwing, climbing, jumping, landing, skipping and maintaining balance.

The well-designed kitchen mini-center, dubbed "the hearty appetite center," transforms the kindergarten students into real-life chefs. Upon entering, one notices immediately the scent of freshly baked cookies. A special kitchen built at the children's eye level includes a worktable and chairs that welcomes the children. Using up-to-date appliances, children learn about mixing and rolling dough. They cook and bake by following recipes, and watch their very own pastries bake in the on-site oven.

The drama mini-center provides an intense and exiting experience that promotes self-expression and group skills. Along with an attractive stage bearing a host of adorable variable backgrounds, the drama center boasts a miniature theater/auditorium and changing rooms full of costumes. The children act out roles as they put on a play for their friends, after which they change places and view their classmates on stage.

All of this is but some of the experiences that can be enjoyed at the new center. Rabbi Yeshayahu Lieberman, director general of Mercaz Beth Jacob explains that this initiative, which is a joint effort of the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Early Childhood Didactic Course at Mercaz Beth Jacob, fills a void in a community where no other such enrichment center exists for the ultra-Orthodox child. “Where there is none, we must create and build with G-d’s help.” Rabbi Lieberman adds that no effort or expense was spared in order to give the children the very best – only the finest machinery and equipment were acquired for the center. The children arrive as a class and are divided into groups that take turns visiting each mini-center. Rabbi Lieberman praises the Center’s staff: Mrs. Michan Ruchomkin, Mrs. Mira Kelty, and Mrs. Sarah Katzenelbogen (who launched the project of establishing the Center).

The name Pirchei Rivka Leah (Rivka Leah’s Blossoms), explains Rabbi Lieberman, was chosen in memory of his esteemed mother, Mrs. Rivka Leah Lieberman o.b.m., who was an educational leader in Jerusalem and throughout Israel for close to 70 years. She stood at the side of her distinguished husband Rabbi Hillel Lieberman o.b.m., who was a renowned educator and community activist.

The Center also serves as an educational model for students at Mercaz Beth Jacob’s Early Childhood Didactic Course.

This wonderful Early Childhood Enrichment Center is located in the Zahav Jerusalem building, adjacent to Angel’s Bakery and the neighboring Gutnick wedding hall.

One can imagine that long lines will soon be forming to book a date...