

# The 100 Languages of Children Meet the 70 Faces of Torah

Preparing the Encounter of Jewish and Reggio Emilia-Style Approaches to Early Childhood

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The writing of this article catches us busily at work creating a professional development opportunity for Jewish Early Childhood Educators in Cleveland through a class offered this summer at the Laura and Alvin Siegal College of Judaic Studies. We have been complimented numerous times for the engaging title we have created for this class: The 100 Languages of Children Meet the 70 Faces of Torah. The title often evokes broad smiles of recognition. Occasionally, a furrowed brow is the response. Rarely, are people indifferent.

Such responses are almost always followed by questions. What does the title really mean? What is an encounter between the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, developed in Italy after World War II, and traditional Jewish attitudes towards study, developed over several millennia in Israel and across the World Jewish community, really like? How does all this connect to Jewish Early Childhood professional teacher development?

In this article we will begin to answer some of these questions as we

1. Explore some of the grounding assumptions that need to be in place for a productive exploration of the relationship between Judaism and Reggio Emilia philosophy;
2. Share something of our unfinished search for a metaphor that captures the relationship between Judaism and Reggio Emilia philosophy;
3. Use a combined Jewish and Reggio Emilia set of lenses to look at Jewish Early Childhood Professional Development/Teacher as Researcher.

## GROUNDING ASSUMPTIONS

Our fundamental assumption is that Reggio philosophy and traditional Jewish attitudes towards learning should not be equated. They have entirely different cultural contexts. Maxine Segal Handelman suggests in her book *Jewish Every Day: The Complete Handbook For Early Childhood Teachers* that the key is to appreciate the process and underlying principles of developmentally appropriate practice embedded in Reggio philosophy that can also guide Jewish early childhood theory. Steve Seidel, architect of the ongoing collaboration between Reggio Emilia and Project Zero of Harvard University, suggests that there is an intellectually demanding process of translation that we need to engage in to bring Reggio Emilia to North American education. *Al achat cama v'chama* (how much the more so) for North American Jewish education.

Another perspective here comes from the work of the Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim. Fackenheim would remind us that any time Judaism meets another cultural value system (his greatest interest being western philosophy) the purpose is not to vindicate one or the other of the value systems involved in the encounter as superior or unique. Rather, the goal is to become “mutually critical.” By comparing and contrasting the underlying assumptions of each value system, we come to appreciate both commonalities and the characteristic strengths of each value system. With this process in mind we can utilize both Jewish and Reggio perspectives to strengthen the professionalism of the Jewish early childhood educator.

Additionally, when we go through the process recommended by Fackenheim, we most often return to a remarkable commonality in the way both Reggio and traditional Jewish texts conceive of the

learning process. **Both Judaism and Reggio Emilia philosophy conceive of learning as being dynamic in nature, powered by questions and dialogue, characterized by metaphoric and associational rather than purely rational modes of thought, and emergent within the life of a community of learners.**

We also see the commonality of a deep commitment to the involvement of parents in the education of their children. This is a classical ideal of Judaism and a contemporary reality in Reggio Emilia, Italy. In our judgment, it remains a largely unrealized aspiration of the field of Jewish family education.

### IN SEARCH OF A METAPHOR

We begin this search for a metaphor, in true Jewish and Reggio Emilia fashion, with a few important questions. Why are we taking time to describe our endeavor in metaphorical terms? What metaphor best describes this dialogue? Why so many questions?

The first question pertaining to metaphor is easy to answer. In his book titled, [The Art of Changing the Brain](#), James Zull explains that, “A physical brain means a physical mind; meaning itself is physical. This is why we need metaphors. Without reference to physical objects and events, there is no meaning.” Add to this the fact that a large number of individuals are either visual or kinesthetic learners and metaphor becomes not only necessary, but mandatory.

What metaphor then, best describes the relationship between North American Jewish Early Childhood Education and Reggio Emilia philosophy? First we thought of streams that flow and cross into each other making varying sizes of lakes. This did not work well for us, because as we drove back to Cleveland from Washington DC we thought of how small and unimportant a tributary can become and how muddy the waters can be when two rivers come together. Next we thought of roads or paths as found in Robert Frost’s poem *The Road Less Traveled*. This too didn’t work, because we believe in being able to take many paths and even overlapping paths. This discussion of paths led us to a metaphor of “worlds” which initially appeared to be quite promising.

Both Jewish Education and Reggio Emilia philosophy originate from clear distinct cultural worlds. The problem here was that this metaphor led to the visualization of two round spheres (worlds) overlapping into what instantly became an image of a Venn diagram. However, while the metaphor of overlapping worlds captured one aspect of the relationship in the end it seemed superficial.

For now we have settled on the metaphor of Judaism and Reggio we have are both lenses for seeing the world. Each value system provides a lens that allows us to highlight various dimensions of the educational world of children, parents, and teachers. Placing the two lenses in front of each other has the potential of helping us see the world of Jewish Early Childhood education with greater attention to its challenges and potentials, vividness, context, and texture. It becomes three dimensional rather than a flatter portrait.

### USING A COMBINED JEWISH AND REGGIO EMILIA LENS TO LOOK AT JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Jewish educators in a variety of settings (CAJE, the Teacher Educators Institute, etc.) have become very fond of analyzing a particular Talmudic text that contrasts the teaching/learning styles of Rabbis Hanina and Hiyya.

Whenever R. Hanina and R. Hiyya were in a dispute, R. Hanina would say to R. Hiyya, “Do you presume to dispute with me? If, God forbid!, the Torah were forgotten in Israel, I could restore it by my dialectical power.” R. Hiyya would reply, “But I see to it that the Torah is not forgotten in Israel. What do I do? I go and sow flax, make nets (from the flax cords), and trap deer, whose flesh I give to orphans and out of whose skin I prepare scrolls, upon which I write the Five Books [of Moses]. Then I go to a town that has no teachers for the young and teach the Five Books to five children and the six divisions (of Mishnah) to six young people. And I say to them, ‘Until I return, read scripture to one another and recite Mishnah to one another.’ Thus I see to it that the Torah is not forgotten in Israel.” (Talmud, as retold in Bialik and Ravnitsky’s *Book of Legends*). Whenever we have taught this text to mixed groups of rabbis and Jewish educators we ask these basic questions:

1. How would you characterize the educational approaches of Hanina and Hiyya?
2. If you personally were given the gift of six months devoted exclusively to Jewish study would you rather study in Beit Sefer Hanina or Beit Sefer Hiyya? Why?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these methodologies (given your understanding of children or adults and how they learn)?

When we study this text with Early Childhood Educators, we ask one more question: In whose tzelem (image) do you think most early childhood educators are fashioned (or mint themselves)? The answer is always Hiyya. The natural affinity with hands-on, whole-bodied, multi-sensory learning so critical for good early childhood practice creates an immediate sympathy with the Hiyya character.

But here is where we believe that a too exclusive reliance on a Hiyya mode of educational functioning can end up limiting the early childhood educator. We gently challenge ourselves and teachers by asking what might be missing from what we would call educational shlemut (fullness, wholeness) when we are kulo Hiyya (entirely Hiyya).

Many early childhood educators use both observational and reflective techniques in their work while working with children, parents, and class dynamics. Yet, they typically do not reflect on their own abilities to use abstract and theoretical thinking (an act of meta-cognition). They underestimate how much of the Hanina type intellect is involved in their own work. They typically do not think of themselves as “smart” or “intellectual” if by smart we mean abstract or theoretical. They underestimate how much of the Hanina type intellect is involved in their own work. They fall prey to a cultural bias that confuses reflectivity with abstract thinking that often makes the Jewish early childhood educator appear less sophisticated and less abstract than they in fact are.

Here is where we think Reggio Emilia philosophy and a Jewish inspired challenge of cultivating both the Hiyya and Hanina sides of our pedagogic personalities converge importantly. Reggio Emilia philosophy provides a model of using reflective thinking as a tool for developing the intellectual and analytic powers of early childhood educators. Through Reggio Emilia’s emphasis on observation and documentation of the world of the child the Jewish early childhood educator stretches his/her reflective/analytic abilities. It offers the early childhood educator the opportunity to become a teacher/researcher in exciting and important ways.

The key goes back to the importance of questions. One of the major emphases of Reggio Emilia philosophy is inviting not only the children to ask and research questions, but also the teacher. In *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners*, Carla Rinaldi shares that

The work of the teachers — provided they are not left on their own without rules or collegial support — not only produces daily experience and action, but can also become the object of critical reappraisal and theory building. In this way, practice is not only a field of action necessary for the success of the theory, but is an active part of the theory itself: it contains it, generates it, and is generated by it.

Therefore, it is our belief that this emphasis on using questions, observation and reflection bridge the Hiyya and Hanina sides of the Jewish early childhood educator. Looking at Reggio Emilia philosophy with a Jewish lens and Judaism through a Reggio Emilia lens can only strengthen our Jewish early childhood educators’ awareness of the importance of hands-on exploration and theoretical understanding that jointly guide behavior, growth and learning for everyone in the entire learning community (parent, child, and teacher).

With teachers properly challenged and supported, one can only marvel at what growth in Jewish identity that will occur for Jewish children in such creative and nurturing environments.