



By
Irina
Khavinson

From Russia with math

Have you seen the new documentary “Waiting for Superman”? It was directed by Davis Guggenheim, famed for his Al Gore film “An Inconvenient Truth.” The premise of “Waiting for Superman” is the negative state, or rather the utmost failure, of the American system of public education. The story is told through the eyes of a few families trapped in a dysfunctional system.

When I was watching the movie I could barely hold back tears. The sight of children desperate for an education but unable to get one they deserve was difficult to bear. In a way, I was surprised by the depth of my reaction. After all, I am an educator, and the problems addressed in this film have long been familiar to me. I co-founded and continue to run Russian School of Mathematics, an after-school program created to deal with some of the issues portrayed in the documentary.

A colleague of mine, who like me is a Russian immigrant, recently observed: “Most people in the United States have their own place to live and most drive their own cars. In the former Soviet Union, a great majority had to share their living space with other families in so-called communal apartments; for most, a car was an impossible dream. Nevertheless, we had access to excellent public education.”

Math and science were an integral part of our education. There was a well-developed curriculum that made students less dependent on a particular school, region or teacher. Each year, every subject built upon what was taught the previous year. Children learned to think and to understand, not to rely solely on memorization. Last, but probably most important, we had teachers who felt responsible for their students’ knowledge and who inspired

them to learn math.

When I immigrated to the United States, I left behind a job that I had loved as a math teacher in St. Petersburg. Fourteen years ago, Inessa Rifkin approached me about helping her found a small after-school math program. I jumped at the opportunity. Inessa’s passion to start the school was ignited after she tested the math skills of her teenage son, Ilya, and his best friend. She discovered that they knew a lot less about math than they thought they did. Concerned about the gaps in public education, we started the Russian School of Mathematics for these two boys, and a few of their friends, in Inessa’s basement 13 years ago. We set a goal for our students: to attain the same level of achievement as their counterparts in the best Russian mathematics schools.

The most shocking statistic that I learned in “Waiting for Superman” was that the top five percent of America’s students rank only 21st in math and science in the world. At RSM, we show that doesn’t have to be so.

What is our secret? As we see it, the problem with public education in America is that children are not taught the necessary skills to solve math problems. Just a few know how to solve problems intuitively, but even they are neither accustomed nor willing to learn the tools that will advance logical thinking. If the children come to us at an early age, we can help them think creatively. We spend enough time covering each topic, that when a student progresses to topic B, he truly knows topic A. We do not try to cram as many topics as possible into the heads of our students during one academic year. Instead, we insist on teaching them a few fundamental topics really well.

This approach enables us to start out by teaching abstract concepts, even with young students. Our core belief is that all students can master math, provided they grasp its fundamental abstract concepts. In addition, the topics we teach are all interconnected. We do not spoon-feed our students with rationed knowledge; rather, we teach them how to approach problem-solving so they can do the work on their own. Our students learn the meaning of

hard-earned success, acquiring confidence with knowledge. They relish winning a math competition or solving a challenging problem as much as they do winning a basketball game.

Many of our graduates achieve perfect scores in math on their SATs and go on to attend Ivy League schools and pursue successful careers in business and academia. The most satisfying result of our work is seeing these young men and women applying their problem-solving capabilities to all areas of their lives.

Despite the title of Guggenheim’s film, “Waiting for Superman,” I felt that Superman had already rescued some of America’s children. I watched with admiration how dedicated administrators and teachers built successful schools for children from under-privileged backgrounds.

Through our non-profit branch, we sponsor and run a math program in the Israeli city of Sderot, where immigrant families from the former Soviet Union face chronic unemployment, poverty and missile scares. We teach our American students that success has multiple dimensions, and that giving back is as important as taking. Every summer, about 10 students from our school spend part of their vacation on a Peace Corps-like mission to help children in Sderot. What do our students do? They teach math.

After graduating from RSM, Ilya Rifkin attended Cornell and then worked seven years at one of the largest American hedge funds. This year, he quit his job and took a pay cut to help us run RSM, which is surely a different place than the school he had attended in his mother’s basement. We teach over 4,000 students – with six sites in Massachusetts and branches in California and Kentucky – making us the largest after-school math program in the country.

I do not think we should wait for Superman, because Superman is already here and is busy working in the inner city and suburbia alike. He just can’t do the job all by himself.

Irina Khavinson is vice president of education for the Russian School of Mathematics.



By
Charles A.
Radin

Why Yossi likes Jeremy

I have an Israeli pal named Yossi. Actually, like most of us who’ve lived and worked in the Land, I have at least four or five Israeli pals named Yossi.

My Yossis cover much of the political spectrum, though my Yossi who is farthest Right is more extreme in his views than my Yossi who is furthest Left. And – another sign of the times, in America and in Israel – there is no Yossi of the Center.

Never mind. This piece is about my Yossi of the moderate Right, a very nice fella, an IDF veteran who does not shirk reserve duty, a scientist, a family man whose eldest children have recently completed their own military service.

This Yossi is equipped with most of today’s standard Israeli radars. He can hear apologists for the Palestinians coming a mile away, and disdains them. He is often tempted to fall into the “whole world’s against us” mindset. But he’s spent enough time on and near the firing line to believe it’s right to take risks for resolution of the conflict. He calls it the Ariel Sharon perspective.

What make this worth delving into at the moment is the effort of some in the American Jewish community to circumscribe discussion of the Middle East situation by denying a podium to J Street leader Jeremy Ben-Ami and others of the self-described “pro-Israel, pro-peace” movement.

I figured my Yossi of the moderate Right could not care less what Ben-Ami might have to say, and would not care one way or another about what happened in the controversy that attended the decision of Temple Beth Avodah in Newton to withdraw its invitation for him to speak there.

I was pretty close to shocked when he told me he had gone to hear Ben-Ami speak in one of the Newton public schools after anonymous behind-the-scenes political assassins arranged for J Street’s ouster from Beth Avodah. And I was truly shocked when Yossi told me his reactions to the evening.

His comments are reported here so that the folks who say it is disloyal – maybe even traitorous – to even listen to what J Street has to say will know how one of the Israelis whom these more-patriotic-than-thou Americans purport to be advocating for really thinks.

“I couldn’t understand what all this [controversy] was about,” Yossi said after listening to Ben-Ami at the school. “I agreed with almost everything he said.”

“What I heard, I liked. It was wonderful,” Yossi said. “He [Ben-Ami] said J Street believes in a two-state solution, creation of a

homeland for the Palestinians and a real Jewish state.”

This Yossi is, by the way, a three or four day a year synagogue attendee; exactly what kind of Jewish state he means, he would have a hard time specifying. But without question he will know it when he sees it.

He said he liked that Ben-Ami’s “father was in the Irgun, which became the Likud. His story is similar to Ariel Sharon’s. People’s vision changes over time and becomes more realistic” – a progression Yossi sees in the evolution of the politics of Sharon, of Kadima chief Tsipi Livni and others.

“This gives legitimacy to people in the eyes of Israelis,” he said. “We like to see this.”

The most important issue, according to Ben-Ami, is creation of final borders, and Yossi is pretty much in agreement because “we don’t want to control another nation. That is what he said, and that is what I think. I don’t want to control the Palestinians.”

So Yossi is willing to take risks for peace, as Ben-Ami urges. The critical issue for him is having the negotiations take place in a calm environment.

“The West Bank is not Sinai. Neither is it Gaza,” Yossi says. “We cannot have a Gaza in the West Bank. You cannot make concessions except in calm. You can’t give when

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there are attacks every day....

“I regard myself as a right-winger, but also as logical, looking at facts and making conclusions,” he said. “I am not happy with Benjamin Netanyahu’s leadership of the peace process. He should act like an adult, not a child.”

Yossi’s hope, coming off the J Street meeting, is that a Palestinian counterpart – it could be called P Street, he says, not entirely tongue in cheek – also will arise. “With J Street on one side and P Street on the other, they can create pressure on both sides to act like adults.”

He came away from the Newton meeting “with a very positive impression of J Street,” at least in part because, in his very-Israeli-sounding words, “I am not locked into an opinion. I am locked into the process of seeking a solution.”

Yossi also liked the flap over Beth Avodah’s refusal to host J Street. Because of this, he said, “so many hundreds of American Jews came [to the school] and got excited about Israel. It is a good thing.”

And as for Ben-Ami, “what he said is pretty mainstream; I didn’t hear or see anything alarming.”

So, now, what is it that so alarms the political assassins of our community that they deny this guy the chance to speak? I don’t get it, nor does my pal Yossi.

Will Bibi do what Obama won't?

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of fighting in desert terrain, just like in Iran. As the sheiks see it, half of the US military is already here, so why not use it to attack Iran?

At this point the Arab leaders have probably given up on Barack Hussein Obama anyway – evidently unimpressed by the Hussein part. What they see in the American president is a wavering, naïve pacifist in a world of villains intent on mayhem. Like the Iranian villains next door. To them, Obama is too timid.

Despite overwhelming evidence that Iran has been waging a proxy war in Iraq and Afghanistan, killing American soldiers at will, the president does nothing. Iran scoffs at US demands and continues to build nuclear weapons, then, to rub it in, enlists the help of America’s arch enemy North Korea.

The Arab leaders hope Benjamin Netanyahu is a different breed altogether. He hints at attacking Iran. He talks of the necessity to eliminate the Iranian nuclear threat. So the sheiks wait and

watch, hoping that at least this Israeli prime minister isn’t all talk, hoping that he’ll have the nerve to do what the American president won’t do and bomb Iran back to the Stone Age.

It is indeed a strange turn of events when the Arab king looks to the Jewish king to defeat the Persian king. But right now that is what the situation demands. It’s time to “cut off the head of the snake.” Just ask King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.