



Gratz Insider, November 2013 - Story Continuation

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### Trailblazing in the Field of Jewish Early Childhood Education

Shelley Alexander is an observant Jew, who made *aliyah* in 1999 with her husband, Rabbi Hanan Alexander, a professor at the University of Haifa, and their three children. Ironically, Alexander's paternal grandfather made the reverse trip at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in the Old City of Jerusalem, he responded to his family's extreme religiosity by immigrating to the United States, and ultimately, providing his own son - Alexander's father - with a secular upbringing.

Alexander's mother, on the other hand, was not born or raised Jewish. However, when Alexander was a child, her parents joined a Reform synagogue, and over the years, the family gradually became more connected to Judaism, so much so that on her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, Alexander underwent an Orthodox conversion. Her mother followed with her own conversion three weeks later. After college and graduate school, Alexander worked in the field of Jewish education. Before making *aliyah*, she also operated a Jewish day care center in her home in Los Angeles for 17 years.

About ten years after moving to Israel, Alexander and her husband decided that it was time to address a nagging void in education research. While there was substantial research being conducted independently in both early childhood education and Jewish education, there was an utter dearth of scholarly work in the field of Jewish early childhood education. Explaining her determination to contribute to this field, Alexander says, "When children are young, there is a window of opportunity for families to connect to the Jewish community and to forge religious and cultural identity."

As a result, in 2010, she and her husband founded the International Research Group on Jewish Education in the Early Years, as a project of the Center for Jewish Education, University of Haifa and in conjunction with the International Forum on Jewish Education of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. The group is funded by the Ziegler Family Trust and the Ellie and Mark Lainer Family Foundation. The members of the group are respected and selectively chosen academicians, including department

heads and doctoral students. Among this elite group is Lyndall Miller, another student in the Gratz Ed.D. program.

The impact of Alexander's research group has been enormous: it has put Jewish early childhood education on the scholarly map. For example, for its 2012 annual conference, the Network for Research in Jewish Education ((NRJE) accepted four papers from Alexander's group, and invited the authors to form the organization's first panel on early childhood education. This was quite a coup, considering that the NRJE had accepted no more than a handful of papers on early childhood education at all its annual conferences during the prior 25 years combined.

Then, just this fall, through the impetus of Alexander and her group, the NRJE put out its first-ever issue of the Journal of Jewish Education that was devoted entirely to the subject of Jewish early childhood education. Alexander authored the lead article, "Children of the Book: Parents, Bedtime & Jewish Identity," which analyzes how the bedtime-story ritual can impact the development of a child's cultural and religious identity. More than half of the members of Alexander's group also had articles published in this issue, comprising three quarters of the articles featured.

In addition to leading the international research group, Alexander is, of course, a doctoral student. In fact, it was within months of founding the group that Alexander transferred from an Israeli doctoral program to Gratz College. Given the primarily online format of the Gratz Ed.D. program, Alexander is able to actively participate despite her location across the globe. She has also become a strong proponent of online learning - even with monthly doctoral seminars that take place at midnight Israel time. She credits Gratz for her enhanced research skills and for the training that has better positioned her to lead the international research group. In particular, she is grateful to Dr. Wachs, whom she describes as "one of the great Jewish educators of our time." Referring to her fellow students in the Ed.D. program, she says, "Dr. Wachs' mark is on all of us."