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Kicking Ourselves in the Foot: Guide to Choosing a Religious Elementary School in Israel

January 23, 2007 by [Hannah Katsman](#) [14 Comments](#)

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It's that time of year, when parents are running around applying to elementary school. Most families only make the decision with their oldest, so they must consider carefully.

In the religious Zionist school system, grade school options generally include:

- Government-sponsored, public "mamlachti dati" school**, known as "mamad" for short.
- "Mamad torani."** The main differences between mamad and mamad torani are that a torani school has more leeway in selection, which they use to avoid admitting children from non-sabbath-observant families, and they charge an additional fee for enriched religious studies (in my local school this comes to NIS 70/month for an extra five hours per week).
- Private.** All private schools are heavily subsidized by the government. The way the system works, any registered school can apply for official status and receive the amount per child that the government would have paid to the public school. (This is why Safranit refers to her choices as "semi-private.") This hurts public schools because they receive less funding, and the minimal monthly fee of NIS 400-500 (\$100) makes private schools very competitive with the public system. The municipality may grant extra funds to both public and private institutions.

More details of the costs for all age levels [here](#).

So what are the advantages and disadvantages of the various systems? Well, in most communities you won't have the option of choosing between a mamad and a mamad/torani; you are limited to what you have in the neighborhood. Keep in mind that the "torani" label was not always implemented in order to foster a stronger religious environment; it's used to keep out "undesirables" such as sefaradim, some of whom want a religious education despite not wearing a kippah and even driving on Shabbat. Extremely modern Orthodox, Ashkenazi families who are minimally observant are never excluded. The excuses used for this policy are usually along the lines of, "But what if one of these children invites my child to a birthday party?" At any rate, the torani school my children attended used the funds for enrichment only loosely based on Torah i.e. Jewish music, Jewish art, etc. Boys in upper grades received extra hours of gemara, to prepare them for yeshiva high school, but the parents were uninterested in religious enrichment for their daughters (to say the least, and I tried).

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[Hannah Katsman](#)

Mother of six, lactation consultant,

In most cases, parents must choose between a mamad/mamad torani and one or more private schools. This post was prompted by a conversation with a distressed mother of a five-year-old girl from my son's gan. She is torn between the mamad torani and a private "chardal" (charedi/dati-leumi i.e. right-wing religious Zionist) school. Most people from my shul and my social circle send to the private school, but in all the years I have lived here I have never heard one of them say that it is a good school. Not one. (Update: I met one.) If you ask them why they send there they will all say that it is because of the "chevrah," or social circle. The mother in question said that the local mamad was unquestionably superior, and the only thing she was worried about was who would be her daughter's friends.

Why pay more for inferior education? Exclusivity, of course. Each school has its own criteria. However, it depends on the year. If registration is high, the school can be more selective. When starting out, or in years with a small pool of applicants, the standards get lower. The schools often have admission exams and/or interviews as well, but they are much more lenient regarding subsequent children. The chardal school in question wants mothers with a hair covering, but there are quite a few mothers without because their older children were accepted in a year with lower admission standards. And because they charge a fee and scholarships are unavailable, there is also a default socioeconomic self-selection. Unfortunately, affluence and stricter observance don't always translate into good middot and healthy friendships, but I understand the attraction.

If the only reason parents are sending to private school is social, they are kicking themselves in the foot. Why pay for inferior schools, when good public schools exist? Especially if they are torani and in your own neighborhood? If the parents would all get together and send to the mamad (admittedly, they would not all go to the same mamad as the private school draws families from various neighborhoods) the problem would be solved.

A very wise woman once told me: We all want our kids to go to exclusive schools. But then the day comes when such a school rejects our children. We rant and rave against the system, but we have only ourselves to blame for supporting it. Now, the private school can kick out a violent, uncontrollable child more easily. However, I have seen many cases where kids were asked to leave for all kinds of reasons. Usually it has more to do with who the parents are (or aren't) than anything else. I know of one case where a vindictive child's parents conducted a campaign to remove the child's classmate, and it worked. I also know of problematic children from "good families" who stayed. If there are serious problems with a particular child private schools generally don't have the resources or the desire to work them out. I have seen children neglected and mistreated in the public school system as well. But there the parents have recourse. The principal has a boss, the "mefakachat," (supervisor) whose job it is to ensure that standards are met. And the mefakachat has a boss too, all the way up to the Minister of Education. You can't always get around the bureaucracy, but the channels are in place.

The main advantage of the public school is pikuach, or supervision. The teachers get better salaries and working conditions. Not surprisingly, the more talented ones prefer to work through the Education Ministry and not in the private system. They get better training and supervision, too. They have more resources. The school counselor and psychologist work longer hours. In my experience, the classes are not necessarily larger than in the private schools although this varies widely from year to year. The municipality keeps class size small so that the public school will stay competitive. In a private school, your children are more likely to need a ride to visit their friends.

The cost of tuition seems minimal when your oldest is starting first grade, especially when just two years earlier at age four you were paying about NIS 800 for public preschool. But when you have, say, two kids in private elementary school and two in yeshiva high school where the cheapest options about about NIS 800/month and your food bill has doubled or tripled, you

writes social commentary on parenting and women's issues at A Mother in Israel. Helps home cooks save time and money at CookingManager.Com. Author of Cook Smart: Learn the Secrets of Your Kitchen Appliances, available via Amazon Kindle. Speaker at local and online parenting conferences.

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really have to ask yourself whether it was worth it. As one mother told me, "Any money I might have put away to buy my kids apartments went to their elementary school tuition instead."

Important note: Parents can learn a lot about a school by closely comparing the curriculum of boys and girls throughout elementary school, if they learn separately.

May Hashem grant all parents the wisdom to make the right choices for their children.

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RaggedyMom says:

[January 23, 2007 at 8:30 PM](#)



This was very informative, but also a little scary. I get the sense that so many of the rules of Israeli society are unwritten, but crucial to just "know" somehow.

Would you say the "type" of family who could fit in at a torani-type private school is usually equally happy in a mamad school?

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[January 23, 2007 at 8:35 PM](#)



Yes, and not only that, the hashkafa of most of the parents in that type of school is usually closer to the mamad's hashkafa.

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[January 23, 2007 at 11:06 PM](#)

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SephardiLady says:

[January 24, 2007 at 4:39 AM](#)

Fascinating. I really get a kick out of this whole "interview" process for kindergardeners and 1st graders. A number of my friends are taking their kids to interviews for the kindergarden year and personally I find the whole idea of interviews for little kids distasteful (but I'd be more than happy to interview the school, or better yet review the budget!). But, that is me. Seems everyone else thinks it is cute.

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Safranit says:

[January 24, 2007 at 7:02 AM](#)

Well written...it isn't an easy process. The local mamlachti dati school would have been also a good option, but I picked the private one because I like the smaller class sizes.

The only requirement for the mamlachti dati school was shomrei shabbat. Truthfully, nobody interviewed us (the parents) at the private school, and we don't have any connections, so we aren't sure how it worked out.

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Shoshana says:

[January 24, 2007 at 7:05 AM](#)

And in smaller locales, the 'elite' go sending their kids out of town on a bus for 30-45 minutes each way so they can attend a chardal school without the undue influence of the 'lower classes'.

Personally I'm thrilled by the fact that my 2nd grader has a class with a mixed population – religiously at least (given he's one of 2 ashkenazim, we've got a

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definitely homogenous agreement on nusach for tefilla). He's well aware that many of his classmates don't wear kippot out of the classroom, knows full well that he might not eat cooked food in some of his friend's homes (and the nice thing is that the parents in these cases all know not to offer it – once when he went to such a friend, the mother informed me at drop off that she'll serve them sandwiches with humous since she assumes that would be ok), etc. I think its a far healthier way to be raised – he's aware that just because a family isn't from like us, they can be good people and vice versa. (The biggest problem child, in terms of not being a particularly nice kid, in his class is from one of the other homes that actually is 'torani' – go figure!)

And I agree completely about the education levels – while all the privates here have 'better' limudei kodesh, in many cases its at the expense of no art, music, etc. And I think for my 7.5 year old, the latter matters a lot – its easy enough for me to learn a bit more chumash at night with him than for him to lose out on all the other things that make for a well rounded child.

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Jerusalem Joe says:

[January 24, 2007 at 9:23 AM](#)



Interesting post.

I can assure you from firsthand experience that teacher training is so bad that it doesn't really matter what school you send him to.

Actually, the most important thing I would be looking for in a school, as far as the educational and moral level goes would be the quality of the principle. He or she will be the main person to determine the quality of the teachers, and the general atmosphere in the school.

Of course if you're mainly concerned with your social status – as reflected by where your child is studying – then you don't really care about the quality of education your child gets.

also, you are not fit to be a parent...

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[January 24, 2007 at 10:14 AM](#)



RM–you're welcome

SL–My oldest son was completely misread in an interview/iq exam for first grade, and that was a big factor in our deciding not to send him to that school.

Safranit–good luck!

Shoshana–A situation like that presents a lot of challenges and it sounds like you are dealing well with them.

JJ–The principal is stuck with the teachers who were there before, but I agree that s/he sets the tone for the school. I think your last sentence is a little harsh!!

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[Mother in Israel](#) says:

[January 27, 2007 at 9:54 PM](#)



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[January 27, 2007 at 9:57 PM](#)



Shoshana's comment continued:

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January 24, 2007 10:59 PM

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RR says:

[January 28, 2007 at 4:07 PM](#)



I'm with you, I don't know WHY anyone would want to pay for a private school if the free (well, almost free!) public school is just as good or even better. And even if the private school isn't THAT expensive, you're right, it does add up!

BTW, in my kids' mamlachti dati school, there are a few sephardim who don't come from a very religious home- but their parents know the score, and would never serve milk and meat together or anything else non-kosher if a religious kid visited their home. I don't it's right to exclude kids such as these(I'm not saying you think it's right, but I know a lot of people feel that way) whose parents truly want them to have a religious education and are willing to follow

the rules. Though I imagine things can get very dicey when those parents don't want to follow the rules...

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Yosefa

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[August 9, 2010 at 2:23 PM](#)



Wow. This is so much information, and I think we have to sign my five year old daughter up in about seven months.

Shoshana – I would really like to hear more about how your kid(s) feel about Mamad. I would like to put my kids in the public school system, but I am very torn. I have the opposite issue where I don't have the background to teach my kids Torah at home. I am a BT (not raised religious, but Torah observant now). I do have a strong background in the arts and would have no trouble exposing them and educating them in the arts. I believe that parents should be the made educators in middot and we can't rely on the school, and I like the idea of teaching kids torah at home, but the reality in our home is that I would like the outside help. I like the diversity, but I was picturing the majority of kids being Torah observant. I would like my kids to also have some classmates they can look up to in terms of observance and middot. However, I am not so nieve as to think long sleeves, long socks, and strict hekshers (kasher certification) turn children into better human beings. I just don't know if my kids are strong enough to be the most observant kids in their class. And, as I'm learning, it's never too early to consider how our actions will effect our children's ease in finding a shiduch.

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Shoshana says:

[August 9, 2010 at 3:23 PM](#)



I think that the observance issue varies greatly from place to place within the mamlachti dati system – every town is very different and even within the same larger cities there can be differences in schools.

I come from a very far 'out of town' community where 85% or more of the observant community is sfaradi with a single mamad school. Therefore the entire 'traditional' element in our mamad school is far more prominent than they are in more central israeli cities and towns.

I should also note that my younger son entered the elementary school 2 years

ago and his class is far more observant than that of my older son (who I think I wrote about in the original post) – where in my older son’s class, I was the only mother who covers her hair at all times (there is now another), in my younger son’s class its far more than 1/3 of the women who are full time hair coverers and over 50% of the kids are from shomrei shabbat homes.

And in another note, my older son had a boy transfer into his class when his family moved from yerushali’im. I had the chance to speak with this boy’s mom once and she commented that the overall level of the limudei kodesh did not really vary much – she felt our school may be doing better in Navei than her kids previous school but be slightly weaker in mishnah for the boys in 5th grade and they were doing the same work in torah though our school pushed less in 1st grade they had completely closed the gap in 5th grade compared to the mamad her kids attended there (I don’t recall which one). The kids all take nation wide standardized tests (Meitzavim) so I think that also ensures a level of evenness in curriculum amongst ma’madim though i’m not sure what happens in Noam and other private schools.

shoshana

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