

Light at the end of the darkness

By Ronit Roccas

The exhibition 'Dialogue in the Dark' opened for what was to be six months. Now in its fifth year, it's still going strong. What is the secret of its success?

If there is any consensus in Israel, it can be found at the Children's Museum in Holon. It's perhaps an unexpected place to look for unanimity. However, for some four years now, ever since the exhibition "Dialogue in the Dark" opened, I have been hearing enthusiastic reports from people who visited the exhibition and emerged convinced they had undergone a unique experience.

A survey undertaken a few months ago confirmed this impression, after it found that 96 percent of visitors believe that the exhibition is "of great importance to the State of Israel." Ninety-eight percent noted that they would warmly recommend to friends a visit to the exhibition.

"Dialogue in the Dark," which is set in total darkness and is visited with the help of blind guides, was initially supposed to be open for only half a year, with an anticipated audience of some 30,000 visitors. Its success was immediate, and over the past four years, it has received more than 10 times that number of visitors, both adults and children. The project was the brainchild of Dr. Andreas Heinecke of Germany, who conceived of it after he accompanied a blind journalist through his everyday life. Similar exhibitions are held elsewhere in the world, with the same aim of improving people's attitudes regarding the blind and other populations with disabilities.

In Israel, it emerges, the project has enjoyed an extraordinary success. Is it indeed the case that Israeli society evinces tolerance toward the other, or does the explanation lie in the exhibition itself, which succeeds in touching everyone, of nearly every age, at the deepest level? The latter seems to be the key.

Visits to "Dialogue in the Dark" are conducted in groups of only 10 people. We showed up on an especially cold and rainy day, but nevertheless the groups that set out on the tour every 15 minutes were full. Among those present: a family that came from a moshav near Ashkelon, a couple in their 20s and ourselves - a woman and two girls a bit over the age of 9. First we were asked to leave all our possessions in a personal locker and not to keep glowing watches and certainly not mobile phones with us.

We were allowed to take money with us, something that would be of use later on, at the museum's Dark Bar. While we were still in the illuminated part of the building, each of us was given a walking stick for the blind and then sent onward - into the darkness. Inside, our guide, Shai, was waiting, and as was explained to us, until the end of the tour we would not know whether he is totally blind or

"nearly blind." This detail, it emerged, worried the children, and it is the first question they asked Shai at the end of the tour.

But we are still at the beginning, at one moment still standing in the light, and with the next step plunged into total darkness so heavy that it seemed like a new presence. The feeling: pressure. Almost vertigo. At the museum they explain that adults rely mainly on their sense of sight, much more than their other senses; among children up to the age of 13 the situation is a bit more balanced, and therefore it is relatively easier for them to get used to this threatening "presence" that descended on us all at once.

From here until the end of the tour we have a walking stick to rely on, one hand stretched forward to feel - whatever comes, and above all Shai's pleasant voice. At first this voice is like a salvation; later, as the anxiety is dispelled a bit, we also begin to rely somewhat on our other senses. This comes gradually, somewhere between the virtual sail of a boat that is one of the rooms of the exhibition and the small market laden with many different vegetables that is located in another of the rooms, not at all far from there.

The area of the exhibition is small, and altogether we did not walk very far. I am nearly certain of this, but in truth time passes differently in the darkness, and all the senses are tinted in different colors, mainly black, that's true, but also with the sounds to which we had time to pay attention. These included people's voices, in a room that replicates a busy city street; metal touching metal, and music. How wonderful was the music that we listened to, in the room intended only for this. For 10 minutes, said Shai, we'll sit here and listen to music and recordings of an announcer from the radio. This may sound almost like an eternity in the dark, in a crowded room. But in fact the time passed in an instant, in a kind of attentive listening that had been long forgotten.

The tour through the different spaces lasted for a total of about an hour and a half, and at its end, all of those present, I am nearly certain, including the children, felt a bit different. Thanks to the exhibition, we discovered not only other senses besides vision - that is after all expected - but also fear and strength, and the need to ask for help and to accept it, pleasantly. In a conversation with Shai, still in the dark, in the bar, a moment before we saw his face, he spoke about himself and said we could ask him anything we wanted.

The children wanted to know what he is able to see, and mostly found it difficult to understand his response: "What a blind person sees." Think, he said, about what you see with your back. Nothing, simply nothing, not black, not white, not opacity. Nothing at all. There wasn't anything pessimistic in this. On the contrary. This amazing person gave us all a kind of optimism that I had not encountered for a long time, if ever.

Optimism, overcoming fear, the need to ask for help and of course the ability to listen are only some of the tools that Merav Agam- Gvriel tries to give parents in a new workshop she leads, in cooperation with the Children's Museum. The workshop, which consists of five meetings for parents of children ages 4 to 7, will get under way on January 13, and it will include visits to other exhibitions at the

museum, among them "An Invitation to Silence," which is guided by deaf people.

At first glance, this connection between a workshop for parents and a museum seems a bit like a gimmick, a kind of forced conjunction. But Agam-Gvriel, who initiated the project, explains that "it is possible to transfer the acute perceptions from the activities in the museum to the area of parenting. A visit to 'Dialogue in the Dark,' for example, helps us see things a bit differently. It sharpens the need to listen to the child, to what he really wants to say to us when he behaves in a certain way. We will use these tours in order to afford new options for parents, new tools."

The price of the workshop for a couple is NIS 825; for details, call 03-650-3005.