

# Noah's Notes

March 4, 2022

Ahead of our March 10 parent event on Learning & Curriculum at the Gan, I'm taking a "learning tour" of the preschool this morning (I write these notes on Thursday!). In a preschool classroom the air is thick with learning, almost as if you can see lightbulbs flashing above children's heads, muscles growing and strengthening, conceptual understanding solidifying. [You can register for our March 10 event here.](#) Over Zoom, we will be discussing how children learn, how we handle curriculum at the Gan, and how you can extend that learning into your home.

At 10:35am I find Sigalot and Oranim, our youngest full day classrooms, on the playground. I sit down in the sandbox to watch as Alma fills her sand pail up and then dumps it upside down. She turns to Tate, her teacher, to proclaim: "I made a castle", and then repeats to me, "I made a castle." She says to no one in particular, "by myself", and then repeats the whole thing to herself: "I made a castle, by myself." Alma is putting her reps in, like an athlete in the gym – practicing her now-mature sentence structure to a variety of adults and herself. This is a preschool child's ceaseless work, moving towards mature speech. Next to her, just as Abby places her bucket down, a friend knocks it over. She grabs it and declares, "That's mine!", only to have another friend attempt to remove it from her hand. Abby retorts: "I hold it!" Like her classmate Alma, Abby is at the gym – working on different phrases and how to use them in these tense moments. Her verbal workout is successful – she retains possession of the bucket.

I move over to the climbing wall, where the children are non-metaphorically working out: Yona has scaled the top of the wall, and just as she reaches for the tallest grab, she falls off. She lands on the wood mulch, engineered for a safe landing, and I chuckle as I hear her say, "Whoa" and then giggle. She dusts herself off and climbs up again. Her friends Ava, Sam, and Josie are inspired and scamper up the wall as well. Our preschool spaces are designed for the motor development of the young body, begging children to safely run, climb, and jump.

By 10:45am I'm in Ya'arot, a part day three year old room. I watch Lior place a baby doll on the stove top in their play kitchen as he tells me, "We're baking a baby so we can eat this baby cake. I'm gonna cut off the big tushy." Children use dramatic play and fantasy play to explore their wildest imagination; these are the counterfactuals [that I wrote about earlier this year](#). By exploring the fantastical, our students learn more about what is possible within the constraints of reality. Behind Lior, Kai is working with his teacher Ellen on what looks like Purim costume material. Ellen holds up a piece of burlap and asks that most treasured question of preschool teachers: "So, what do you want to do?" By literally presenting him with a blank canvas and inviting him to create, she has provided Kai with the cognitive challenge of ideating – coming up with something from scratch. There are no lines to color in between, no dots to connect, no pattern to follow. "I want it to be a decoration", Kai replies after contemplating. He works with Ellen to diligently cut the fabric into a long rectangular strip, a fine motor feat that takes him

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several minutes of determined, focused work.

I move downstairs to Arazim at 10:55am, our full day three and four year old class. I'm drawn in as Hannah plays with a plastic figurine of a "dad" (she tells me), banging him into a cash register and chanting out the numbers as he hits them: "...six, seven, eight." She pauses, struck by a plastic whale sitting next to the cash register, from someone else's play. She shows me the whale and I am struck by the eloquence in her description and reasoning: "This type of whale needs heat to breathe – not water, that would make them water whales." This is [Piaget's theory of assimilation](#), in which children intentionally transform their understanding of what they see in order to place it within their preexisting cognitive structure. Hannah knows that whales swim; this whale is not swimming; therefore, this must be a different kind of whale.

I leave Hannah as she continues to explore the whale and see that all the other classrooms in the Lower Level are empty. I walk outside and head to the woods – having spent last year exclusively outside, our teaching staff has committed to retaining this as part of our school's educational approach. We know that learning is not confined to the four walls of a classroom. I find T'marim, our oldest full day class, in the meadows surrounding the Pierce-Klinge estate, about a half mile from the school. I am remembering Alma and Abby's verbal workout in the sandbox, and I marvel at how children's speech settles in during the preschool years:

Leah: Did you see the missing dog? On Rock Creek we saw that there was a missing dog. (There was a flyer posted on a few trees about a missing dog)

Beila: We're looking for a missing doggie. Do you know, the missing doggie is really little and won't hurt anyone and we're trying to find the doggie to take him home.

Gabi: There's a dog that we need to find! Ouch, I touched a thorn. My daddy touched a thorn one time and his fingers turned red. The dog is very scared, he has spots, and he loves new people.

Eleanor: The note said in Rock Creek you can pick him up if you find him.

Izzie: His name was Rozzie.

Eleanor: No, that's not right...

Izzie: Don't write that down, it's not Rozzie (they both go to their teacher Erin to check about the name).

Eleanor and Izzie: It's Shahay-lynn.

Izzie: The poster says he loves sniffing too.

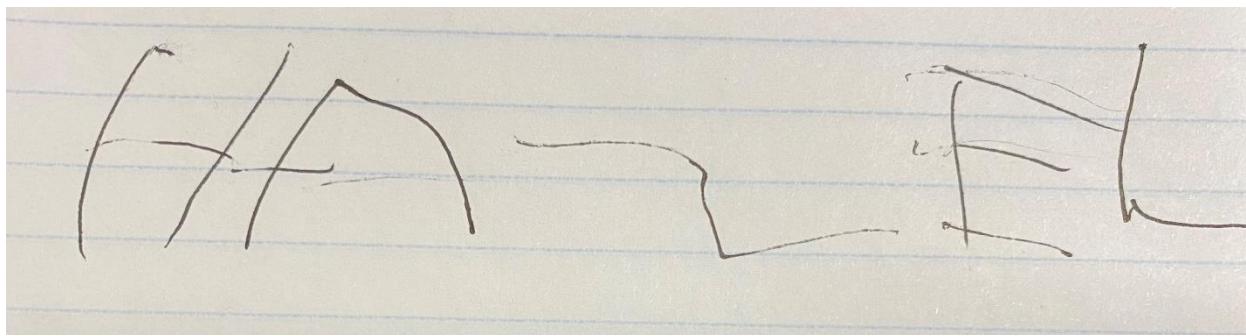
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Eleanor: And I think that's it, about the dog.

On my way out of the meadow I check the sign: "Very scared foster dog, good at hiding. She's gentle with people and can be picked up." The picture of the dog shows his spots as well and confirms the name. The T'marim children are learning the power of literacy – to broadcast important information, to communicate details, to aid in enlisting the help of others. And along the way they're learning about the possibilities for adventure that live outside of the institutionalized setting of a classroom.

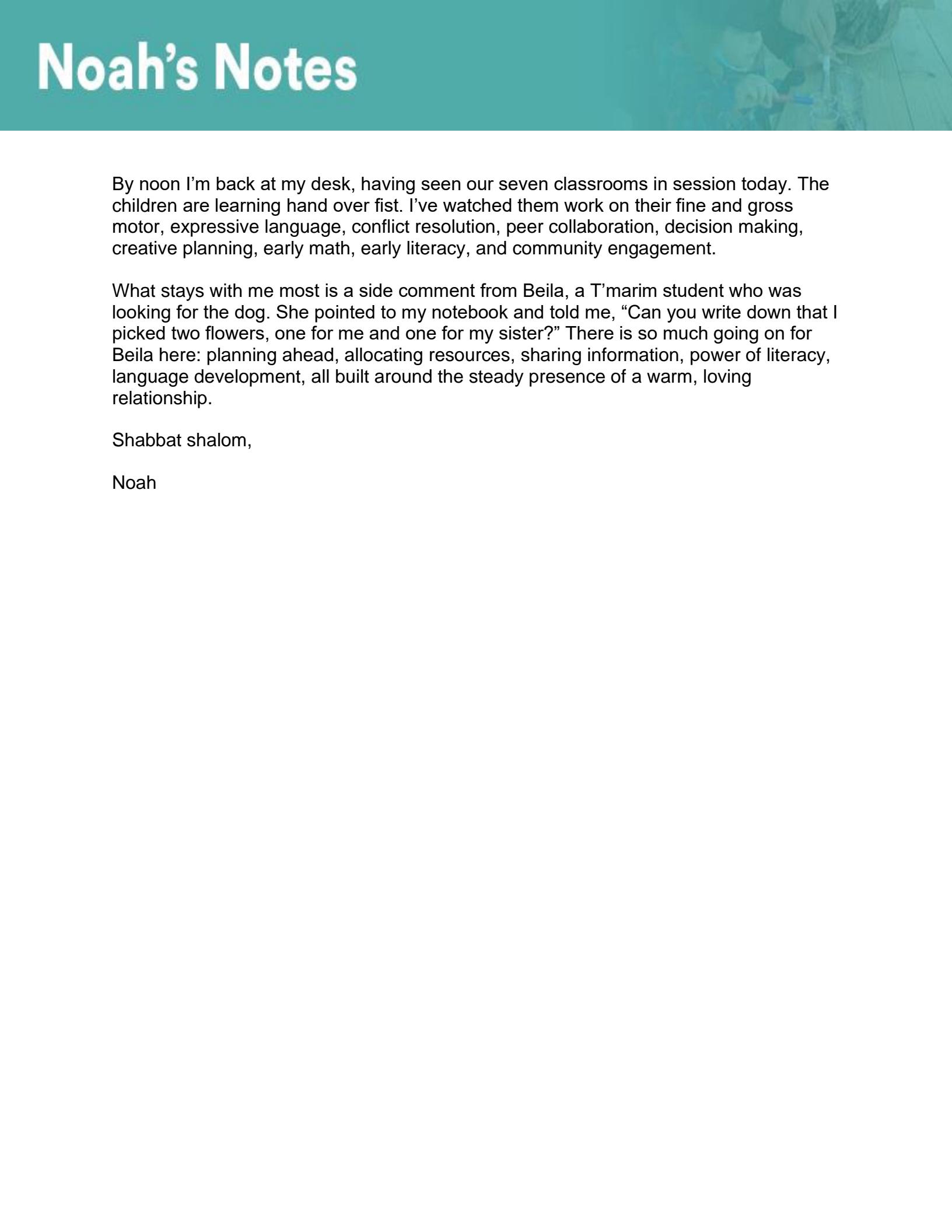
I leave T'marim and head further into the park, to find Shoshanim all the way down by the river at 11:30am. Our oldest part day class is over a mile from school and they are learning about risk taking, judgement, and decision making. Hazel is sitting next to her teacher Carolyn, gazing at the river together. Hazel inches forward, enough for Carolyn to gently embrace her shoulders and mention, "I think we're getting a little too close to the river, we don't want to slide down." They scoot back a half foot and continue to watch the water flow by. I walk to the next group of children, as Nathan is bouncing on a low tree branch, the thrill of movement akin to a roller coaster ride. I sit down next to him only to have Max tell me, "I think we should really get out of the leaves, there might be poison ivy here." Jacob then announces, "I found a secret path!" so we all clamber through to follow him. Max finds a long bamboo stick and reaches it upward, proclaiming, "I can reach very high with this!" All these rich experiences – how far is too far when sitting next to a river, what is safe in the woods, how high can things go, where do secret paths lead – are inaccessible within the confines of the classroom. We spend time in the woods to learn from a broader world of stimulants and curiosities.

Hazel is now watching me instead of the river, so I hand her my notebook and pen, to see what happens. She says the letters of her name out loud as she writes them:



She hands me the notebook back and so I walk back uphill. I find our last class in session today, Alonim, entering the woods. They are in pairs, each child holding another's hand. They've been working on peer collaboration and partnership in class recently and have extended this lesson into the woods: we are each responsible for each other. Into the woods they go, hand in hand.

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By noon I'm back at my desk, having seen our seven classrooms in session today. The children are learning hand over fist. I've watched them work on their fine and gross motor, expressive language, conflict resolution, peer collaboration, decision making, creative planning, early math, early literacy, and community engagement.

What stays with me most is a side comment from Beila, a T'marim student who was looking for the dog. She pointed to my notebook and told me, "Can you write down that I picked two flowers, one for me and one for my sister?" There is so much going on for Beila here: planning ahead, allocating resources, sharing information, power of literacy, language development, all built around the steady presence of a warm, loving relationship.

Shabbat shalom,

Noah