

Adlerians at Work in Israel — An Interview with Achi Yotam



Achi Yotam

With Harold V. McAbee

McAbee: How did you first become interested in Adlerian Psychology?

Yotam: In 1950 I was discharged from the Army in Israel, the country in which I was born. At that time there was a shortage of teachers and I was provided one year of intensive teacher training. I never thought of being a teacher before, and I think that my decision to go to the teacher seminar was a response to the needs of the country, much more than a fulfillment of a personal wish. When I finished the seminar, I started to work and I got interested in special education. I became a teacher in an institution for young juvenile delinquents, where I worked for five years. At the same time, I went to the School of Social Work and when I graduated in 1956 became a school social worker. In 1959 Dr. Dreikurs visited our country and I was invited by a friend to listen to one of his lectures. I must say that I wasn't impressed at the beginning and my friend had to ask me to come again and again until I could really appreciate and understand what Dr. Dreikurs was doing. At the end of his visit, the students who were studying with him formed a study group to continue to discuss what we had learned. But we were confronted with lots of questions and problems of theory and practice that we could not understand. We felt that we needed to meet with this man again to learn more from him. In 1960, we decided to invite him to meet with us for a longer time and give us special training. He was willing to do so

Editor's Note: Achi Yotam was one of the original leaders in developing Adlerian activities in Israel. Achi has become a major international Adlerian leader since his initial exposure to Individual Psychology resulting from a visit to Israel by the late Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs. He teaches at various colleges and universities each summer in America and at the annual summer institute sponsored by the International Committee for Adlerian Summer Schools and Institutes. This interview was conducted by Hal McAbee in July 1976, while Yotam was visiting professor at The Adler-Dreikurs Institute of Human Relations, Bowie State College. Achi Yotam resides in and conducts most of his activities in Tel Aviv, Israel.

and at the end of 1960 Dr. D. and his wife came to Israel. For eight months he gave us (this group of 15 people) an intensive course in Adlerian Psychology, theory and practical application. He gave demonstrations, supervised us and worked out all our life styles. We had our own group therapy — everything was included in this eight months — very intensive training. When he was ready to go home he did something that was typical of Dreikurs. At the last session, he told us that if we didn't start an institute and continue to teach other people what we had learned from him, he would consider the time he spent with us a complete waste! As a result, very reluctantly at the beginning, we started our institute right after his departure in 1961. I was in the original group. Since then we have developed our institute into what is now a pretty large, well established and accepted national institution. In 1965, after corresponding with Dr. D. for a long time and under his guidance, I went to Chicago for my Master's degree in Counseling and Psychology. At the same time, I studied at the (Chicago) Institute and worked in the private clinic with Dreikurs for three years.

McAbee: Where did you take your Master's degree?

Yotam: At Roosevelt University in Chicago. At the same time I studied I worked with Dr. D. and his staff. I got involved in individual counseling, psychotherapy, child guidance centers, and had my first training in working with families and children. In 1968, after my graduation, I went back to Israel and became active in three areas. The first was developing a project for juvenile delinquents that were not under any care (treatment). Those kids who refused to come, who felt too proud to come and ask for help. The social agencies didn't know what to do with them and how to reach them. So we reached out to these people who refused to have anything to do with us, we made contact with them and established a relationship and engaged them in the rehabilitation program. It was a very intriguing thing. The second thing was the establishment of the Family Education Center — the beginning of what later became the School for Parents in Israel. The third field of activity was in the school system, especially training teachers in democratic methods. How to deal with children more effectively and how to create an atmosphere of cooperation and social interest within the classes and the schools. These three things I undertook when I came back from the states.

McAbee: By this time, how large was the scope of your overall operation? How many staff, group leaders, and parents were involved?

Yotam: Actually, when I started, I was alone. Immediately three or four people joined me and the first group consisted of 20 parents. But it grew rapidly and I remember how we moved from one location to another because we always needed a larger hall. It grew all the time and I think after the second or third year, I realized that to work in a large center and just meet parents is not enough. We lost personal contact with the people.

McAbee: At that time then, they only came to the Center to participate in counseling and were not involved in study groups or discussion groups?

Yotam: Right. The first three years we had only the Centers and people came once a week and they paid per session. Not all of them came consecutively or regularly. It took us some time to see that this was not enough, although we still believe in the concept of the large Center as a way to reach out to people in the community. As far as I am concerned the Center is the big attraction for people. They like to come and see demonstrations of family counseling and this is a wonderful way to reach out to people.

McAbee: Do you feel then that the demonstrations in the Family Education Center are the greatest drawing card to get parents to come and enter into other activities?

Yotam: Right. Not only the demonstrations, but the feedback sessions in which parents come and report to the audience about significant and meaningful changes that they have in their family relationship and in the behavior of their children. This is very interesting for the parents.

McAbee: This would be feedback some weeks after the family had been counseled?

Yotam: Exactly. Nevertheless, we grew and grew and had several hundred people attending our Centers regularly, but we lost contact with the people, and we got feedback of some misinterpretations of the principles that we had taught, etc. We had to find a way to solve this problem. We went back to the small group concept and really started to make it a school rather than a clinic. To make it a school, parents would have to attend two meetings a week; one in the large Center to see demonstrations of family counseling in order to learn from feedback, and to learn from counselors the general principles of child raising in the democratic society with practical applications to the everyday life routine. And then they also went to a small group to discuss principles — to clarify them and make sure they

understood — to learn the specifics of how to apply them to their own home situation and discuss emergencies and other problems. Of course, immediately we realized we would need staff in order to organize such a school. We would need a group of group leaders, which we did not have. The Institute of Tel Aviv undertook the assignment of training staff for this purpose. At the beginning, we chose mainly mothers that attended the Center for a long time and that we knew and considered as having good potential as group leaders. We started with a short term course plus continued supervision. Now every year we prepare more and more group leaders and we have a pretty good program. Two years training for lay people to become instructors of parents' groups. Our parents' groups are different from the ones you have in the States. The groups in the States, as far as I understand, depend to a large extent on the book *Children: The Challenge* (or other books) and are limited in time. You have a session for ten or fifteen meetings and then the parents go home. Our school is ongoing and the groups do not depend on the book, although we recommend it and people can buy it and ask questions about it. But the main work is based on the situations that they bring and discuss. They learn what to do from the demonstrations and from the experiences of other parents. This is the main difference.

McAbee: You don't take enrollments for short periods?

Yotam: No. No.

McAbee: What is the minimum time?

Yotam: Five months. Two sessions a week. Five months is a semester and most of the parents go on to the second semester, and they come back a second year. Some even come a third year. So we have a pretty steady group. There are parents that come for a short time and then go, but it is very common to have them attending a long time.

McAbee: How many parents do you place in one group?

Yotam: Not more than ten families. We enroll families, not single parents. Enrollment includes participation in the small groups, so if the parents come in couples we have 20 or more sometimes if they bring children. We have changed names — we called them group leaders, instructors, and now we are going to call them teachers.

McAbee: Are these people volunteers or do they get paid for their work?

Yotam: They work voluntarily for one year. After they finish their two years training, they get a group of their own and they work

voluntarily the first year and from the second year on they get paid for their time. This is in the Family Education Centers. Now we have nice beginnings of similar centers for teen-agers and teachers. The school for parents is very well established. We are going to put great efforts into a similar organization for teachers. In one major city in our country we are getting the support of the teachers' union — teachers' federation. They are going to sponsor a Center for parents. We did it before and we are going to continue to experiment with our methods — the Adlerian methods — for teachers in Centers rather than in courses or the school itself and see what happens.

McAbee: Do you have a model design? How will you go about it with teachers?

Yotam: We want to use the same model. The teachers register for counseling and bring up the problems. We will invite the student or group of students with whom she is having difficulties and discuss it in the same session. Now what we do is ask the students who come with their teacher for counseling to attend the Center. One of the byproducts of a Center like that is that teachers and students — all ages from 10 to 18 — learn how to sit down together and discuss educational issues and specific situations in school as well as problem solving. They have the opportunity to discuss it together as equals rather than the traditional teacher/student discussions which have pretty much a superior/inferior type of relationship.

McAbee: Your institute has a number of other activities?

Yotam: Yes. I am talking now about the department — the division — that I am involved in which is the division that gives service to the community. We have two other departments — the training division (which gives courses) and the clinic. The training division is growing. It started with a few courses for people who were interested in getting Adlerian training. The school now offers classes on many topics for both professionals and lay people at different levels. However, our Institute is not a degree granting institution, therefore we have mostly people who are lay people or who have already received degrees from formal universities, but are interested in learning the Adlerian approach.

McAbee: Do most of the students in the training division come from social work and teacher ranks?

Yotam: Many are teachers, social workers, school counselors but we have also psychologists, pediatricians, and lay people that are active in the community in various capacities.

McAbee: Tell me a little about the third division, the Clinic.

Yotam: I think the justification for having a Clinic and seeing patients for fees, in an institution like ours, is that we present a new model of clinical work. That is to say, we get out of the traditional principle that clinicians see patients privately and nobody knows what is going on in the room — no one has any control over the situation. The therapists in the Institute work as a group and they get supervision — they bring up their cases for discussion. They have workshops — therapists and patients meet together for long hours and work together. This is a new concept that takes therapy out of the small room — the eye to eye situation — and puts it under the control and responsibility of the larger group of both clients and therapists. Theoretically the Institute is run by a committee that is elected by the entire membership. We have, I think, about 35 members. So the whole Institute is actually an association. The general assembly of all the members elects the committee — what you call the Board, that runs the Institute.

McAbee: How do the members become members of the Institute or Association?

Yotam: They apply and are accepted by vote. If two thirds of the members vote for them they are accepted. Usually people who apply are either students or workers of the Institute.

McAbee: Most of your members are long time workers who have been in the movement for some time?

Yotam: Yes.

McAbee: So then they elect a committee — a governing committee, sort of an executive committee. Each member of that committee is responsible for a particular division of the Institute?

Yotam: For a long time, the three people who were the head of the divisions formed the committee, but in the last years some new members came in. For instance, I am not on the committee now, even though I am still head of the division for community services. But I am not on the board this year. We changed the concept that we believed in before, that the head of the divisions should also be on the board of the Institute. Now we try different things.

McAbee: Do you have an administrator?

- Yotam:** We have an administrator and an accountant. The administrator is responsible for the coordination of all activities of the Institute. We have the accountant to take care of all finances. In addition, we have a secretarial staff.
- McAbee:** Does governing by committee work?
- Yotam:** Well, in theory it should, but sometimes decisions are made on the division level. Actually, I am not sure what is better. Sometimes it is more effective to make decisions on the division level rather than on the Institute level. Theoretically all the decisions should be made on the Institute level. But practically, due to lack of time and lack of ability to schedule meetings where all members can attend, we make decisions on the division level. At least once a year we have a general meeting at which each member (not only heads of divisions) reports about his work and any comments he has and etc. This is usually a long session.
- McAbee:** Annually?
- Yotam:** Yes, that is right.
- McAbee:** Do you have plans to expand the work to several centers?
- Yotam:** We already did. We now have six centers — six major cities in the country.
- McAbee:** Do you have more than one center in a city?
- Yotam:** No.
- McAbee:** One Center in Tel Aviv?
- Yotam:** Right. Maybe Tel Aviv can have two centers. Jerusalem could also have two and will probably have more than one in the future.
- McAbee:** What factors did you consider when you decided to stay with one Center in Tel Aviv?
- Yotam:** The main thing was that we didn't have staff to run another center. People are reluctant to run centers. We have many very good people for small groups and very few for centers. This is the main reason, it is a difficulty we have not been able to overcome. We have now, two or three people who are willing to take a chance. Two have already started and next year we will have a third person. This I think is something that is an obstacle to the progress of the centers. If we had enough people we would probably have about 20 centers now. Our ambition is to cover the entire population of Israel.

McAbee: When you establish a center in another city do they have their own governing mechanism or do you continue to govern them?

Yotam: It differs. For instance, in one city we have the municipality in charge. They are paying the money. We have a local body of parents that are working with us. In another city we do it in cooperation with a woman's organization. So this is a cooperation between the Institute and another organization. In a third city it is strictly an Institute project. We made an agreement with a school and we rented the space, but we are independent. Another arrangement we have is running a center in cooperation with the community center. We use any opportunity, any open door, to start a center.

McAbee: You have an ambitious goal — reaching all the families in Israel. What is the population of Israel?

Yotam: Yes it is ambitious. There are about three million people in Israel of which a little over two thirds are Jewish families and the rest are Arab families.

McAbee: Are you working with any Arab families?

Yotam: I did as a matter of fact, in 1971. A Canadian group donated a certain amount of money to the Institute for the purpose of involving Arabs in our program, and I worked for one year with Arab teachers. It is kind of difficult to work with families — especially Moslem families — because the wife is not allowed to come to a public place and they have to overcome strong religious beliefs in order to be able to attend. Fathers are very autocratic and believe in autocracy. We decided the best place to break through was the teacher. I must say that the work with the teachers was very fruitful. They were very attentive and open to Adlerian ideas. Some of them did very interesting things to create a democratic atmosphere in their classrooms. If we have a chance with the Arabs, it is through the Arab teachers. But they too think it is too early to do family counseling with the traditional Arab family.

McAbee: Philosophically, the principles of Individual Psychology seem most applicable in a changing situation from autocracy to democracy.

Yotam: We see the beginnings of change in the Arab community as well, especially among youngsters. We see now the first generation to rebel against the autocratic scheme of the traditional Arab society that has prevailed for hundreds of years. But these

people are still young and they do not have families of their own. The older generation is still pretty much unchanged — static. Changes are very slow — barely visible — in the Arab community. I can foresee that the youngsters that are now 16, 18, and 20 will be different when they marry. But we will have to wait and see what form it will take.

McAbee: You come to this country (United States) once a year or more and you attend international meetings, would you care to make any assessment or give us your opinion of the progress of the Adlerian movement in North America and Western Europe?

Yotam: Well, I can see tremendous growth since I came to this country for the first time in 1965. In the last ten years it is unbelievable how it has grown. I think the peak of the growth is The Adler-Dreikurs Institute at Bowie, which is something that was unbelievable ten years ago. A formal college having such an Institute and providing Adlerian studies openly as you are doing. Another thing is that the Alfred Adler Institute of Chicago has become a degree granting institute. This shows how much more we are accepted now in the United States. The number of publications has also grown. When I first became interested the number of Adlerian books was very few, we had lots of mimeographed papers, but now we have many books. I think the attendance at conferences, meetings, and ICASSI shows a growth of interest and willingness of people to commit themselves to Adlerian principles. This is really wonderful.

McAbee: Is there any thing else you would like to add to what you have said or to sum up the points you wish to make today?

Yotam: For me, the most important thing (I don't know if I have said it or not, but it bears repeating time and time again) is that we should find ways to penetrate into the school system. The school is the most important thing in our society. Educating children in Social Interest and to Adlerian values — maybe we should call them humanistic values — in preschool, elementary school, and high school. Unless we do that, I think we will find ourselves in pretty much the same situation a decade from now.

McAbee: Probably the best strategy for reaching the schools is to increase the number of training programs in the various colleges and universities. Would you agree?

Yotam: Right. Use all possible means to impress the teacher that we have something very unique to offer them, through writings, demonstrations, lectures, and what not — we should make every

effort. We should approach them not only in terms of value systems but in their practical everyday work. We can make a very useful contribution to them. It is a little difficult because the school system is so conservative and closed to new ideas, but it is possible. If we could present a model pilot project in one of the school systems in the United States, this would be the beginning and from this point it would reach out more and more.

McAbee: Thank you very much, Achi Yotam!