

## Howard Tevlowitz: Embracing our differences, here and in Israel



The students who attended the opening of the "Different Together" exhibit in Israel are, from left, Chasiti Morgan of North Port High; Dalton John Drummond, Isabelle Mathiasson Ball, Casey Kabobel and Cody Vega, all of Riverview High; Ambar Lynn Morales-Diaz of North Port High; and Calli Habermehl and Kaya Faith Cornejo-D'oyen, both of Booker High.

*PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF SARASOTA-MANATEE*

**By HOWARD TEVLOWITZ, Guest Columnist**

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The Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee recently provided the funding for eight Sarasota County high school students, all members of the Sarasota-based Embracing Our Differences' Co-Existence Clubs, to attend the opening of the inaugural "Different Together" exhibit in Israel. It was a transformational trip where they witnessed, firsthand, Israel's diverse multicultural reality. Inspired by Embracing Our Differences, the Different Together program centers around an outdoor exhibit of art celebrating the diversity of human experience.

The artists, students from a multiplicity of backgrounds, created powerful statements of respect and empathy. Humanity cannot be homogenized, after all. Their artwork showed that we come in many different flavors of gender, religion, race, sexual orientation and preferences of conscience. It was a cause for celebration -- especially in Israel.

Throughout Jewish history, art has been used as a form of remembrance, dedication and inspiration. From colorful mosaics in Masada, to intricately carved synagogues in Morocco, to children's drawings created during the Holocaust, art has helped define us as a people and capture our history. Many of these works celebrate themes of love, friendship and personhood. It is the dream of the Jewish people to live in a safe, welcoming and peaceful world.

During a conversation with EOD leaders, we proposed bringing the concept of EOD to Israel. What could be better than to celebrate the core values of art and diversity shared by EOD and JFSM in Israel, a land of diversity? The answer was an unqualified yes.

We then found a partner in Israel: The Daniel Centers for Progressive Judaism. Its mission is to build an Israel that is tolerant, just and welcoming of multiple expressions of religious and spiritual practices. As the project grew, it received support from the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality, its mayor, Ron Huldai, its deputy mayor, Asaf Zamir (who grew up in Sarasota), the mayor's adviser for foreign affairs, Eitan Schwartz, and the education department of the municipality.

Thanks to that support, and funding from The Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee and its generous donors, a beautiful dream was about to become a reality.

More than 20 schools and community centers throughout Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Holon and Tel Mond participated in this inaugural project. Students from every facet of Israeli society, including Muslims, Christians and Jews, submitted hundreds of artworks. A panel of leading Israeli artists selected 35 of the most meaningful images. These were then enlarged to billboard size and presented at the "Different Together" exhibit, which opened March 19 in Jaffa.

The powerful images of "Different Together" have been in the public eye for only a short time. But their impact has been profound. To date, the exhibition has received a commendation from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and visits from multiple members of the Israeli Knesset, along with Jewish, Muslim and Christian clergy. An estimated 250,000 Israelis will experience the project.

We believe that this year's Different Together project will mark the beginning of a long-standing tradition. In the years to come, we intend to expand this outreach to other regions throughout Israel. We also hope to accompany the exhibition's artwork with a curriculum focused on the values of coexistence and acceptance. We also know that the Sarasota students who attended this monumental event will energize our own community with the insights and inspiration that they bring back with them.

Jewish mystics have taught that our world and everything in it is God's work of art. After viewing the "Different Together" exhibition, it is difficult to disagree. The experience was truly transformational -- a celebration of the family of humanity where everyone is welcome.

The joy and understanding it created was a divine work of art in its own right -- a living tableaux of what a peaceful world would look like.

Howard Tevlowitz is executive director of the Jewish Federation of Sarasota- Manatee.

The 12th Annual "Embracing Our Differences" exhibit is up through May 22 in Sarasota's Island Park and on Bradenton's Riverwalk.