

## To Touch the Material

**A person wakes up one morning and suddenly feels a burning desire to create a social project that combines art and community. Livnat Kutz from Kfar Aza decided on a change of direction in her life, and now she dedicates heart and soul to 'Bet-Melacha' – an open studio for the creative community.**

### Dikla Kay

It's late at night, and it's dark and quiet all around. Aviv Kutz and his students sit outside and look upwards to the sky, cameras ready, as they remain quiet and watchful. Earlier that same evening the group had traveled to Shivta for the applied segment of the workshop Kutz was leading – photographing stars. On the following day, the internet is filled with breathtaking photos of stars, and the enthusiastic responses only prod the participants to continue.

Aviv's workshop was delivered in the framework of Bet-Melacha, a social project established by Livnat Kutz, a member of Kibbutz Kfar Aza and—by total coincidence—the wife of the workshop's leader. Another such workshop is planned for the near future. In the meantime, activity's in the project is gaining momentum: On the last Friday of August a creative gathering was held to which the entire Sha'ar HaNegev community was invited. The families that showed up, worked together to build wooden window planters, painted them, and even managed to fill them with plants, kindly donated by the "Shorashim" Plant Nursery on Moshav Ein HaBesor. Also there was a Rosh Hashanah workshop, which the participants prepared artistic holiday greetings, The workshop was led by Liora Bokobza, the newspaper's graphic artist and a friend of Livnat's. And at Sukkoth: workshop in preparing cloth Sukkah decorations was take place and be led by Livnat and Yael Regev.

### So just what is Beit-Melacha?

Livnat: "It's a studio that allows anyone from the Sha'ar HaNegev community and the surrounding region to come in and create. It's a social-artistic venue, the result of a joint undertaking with 'Eshkol'—the Regional Council's umbrella department that advances education, leisure and employment. The goals of the project are threefold, depending on the time of day: In the morning hours, it's to enable children to learn by giving them the opportunity to use materials creatively and thereby deepen their understanding of core subjects. For instance, by preparing a wooden box, a child learns the concept of 'volume'; by knitting, a child experiences firsthand the notion of math. In the afternoon hours Beit-Melacha turns into an extracurricular arts center for children and teens. And in the evening,

it becomes a community-art incubator. All are invited to come in, meet, experience, lay their hands on different materials and use them to create."

Livnat, a graphic artist by profession worked for ten years at Intel. About a year ago she quit her job in order to fulfill a dream and establish this project. "I thought it would be so simple," she says, laughing. "All I had to do was arrange my time so I could set up everything on my own. But a project like this can't get off the ground without help." So Livnat came in to 'Beit Beita – Present Tense', an incubator that advances social projects and that enables social entrepreneurs to collaborate and connect with other projects and organizations. Through such collaboration, social entrepreneurs can receive assistance and accompaniment, learn from each other and trade best practices. "Over There, they helped me refine my product," she says, "I prepared a business plan and worked on presenting it to bodies that I'd like to cooperate with."

The Beit-Melacha site is located on the Sha'ar HaNegev education campus, in the elementary school section. Anyone who has been there can find their way easily. "I contacted the Community Center and the Regional Council, and they allowed me to use the site," Livnat says. "Naturally I had to present a business and feasibility plan as well as a description of how my project contributes to the community. This is a social and nonprofit project; the only ones who 'profit' from it are the children who are able to place their hands on different materials, and adults, who are invited to come in and create. Beit-Melacha will serve as a platform for artists and for community-artistic collaboration."

### **Therapy through the hands**

The idea came into being last summer. Livnat describes how it started: "During Operation 'Protective Edge', (July – august 2014) they provided us with emergency accommodations in Nir HaEmek, kibbutz near Afula, where we stayed for nearly a month. My children were exposed to a variety of tension-releasing activities. One of them was mud art under the guidance of a mud artist who worked with the children. Over the course of three hours I witnessed a group of children handling the material and working as a team. It was amazing to see. I saw in the children a thirst to touch materials and work with them. Remember, these were children who had been traumatized and were far away from home and filled with fears. And here, they had forgotten everything as they poured their hearts and souls into their mud creations."

Another experience that motivated Livnat taken place in Kibbutz Nir David. "While we were hosted there," she says, "all of us mothers and children, went to the kindergarten and saw that they had a carpentry corner for the children. I viewed their creations and what they had produced, and it was just lovely. I saw that there was something therapeutic in all this. It makes children feel good touching and working with materials, and the same goes for us."

Livnat returned home and the idea continued to germinate. "I wanted to build a place that children could come to and lay their hands on all sorts of materials and make their own creations. I wanted to hold workshops for artists in whom they could interact and enrich themselves and each other."

Beit-Melacha plans to integrate local artists' and artisans' (blacksmiths, carpenters, painters, sculptors) wealth of knowledge with school and Community Center activity. Young people and adults alike will learn and gain firsthand experience in art. There will be an open area for presenting rotating exhibitions, which will serve as a showcase for all artists in the region. All of the workshops at Beit-Melacha will contribute to enriching the venue with equipment and materials. Planned extracurricular art classes for children include: carpentry, functional art, embroidery, needlework and more. Adults are invited to come in, pay a token fee, and create whatever works they please. "This is an incubator," Livnat explains. "Each person can come in whenever they please and engage in his or her artistic craft."



### **And are people showing interest?**

"Mainly it's parents who come in to check out our extracurricular activities for children. I admit that quite a few people find it difficult to understand the concept. This is something that's truly innovative—there are no lessons here, nobody tells you what to do; you're free to create what you want and find your own direction and path. I don't view myself as an artist, but I do love to work with materials, to touch them and create. Actually, the ones who do understand and connect with the concept easily are the children: They see that there's artistic freedom here, and it amazes them. It's something that I believe in: As the children create, no instructions are given. Later, when a child grabs onto something and develops it, we can help and direct him or her."

And as is typical for a community, people help each other. Most of the equipment in the studio comes from donations, but it's not enough. At Beit-Melacha we need all sorts of equipment and materials, the more the better. "I call on anyone who has old equipment related to carpentry, ceramics, knitting needles, wool, cloth, or anything else that can be used to create: Before you consider throwing them away, contact me and I'll come and collect the material. In addition, any artist who wants to lead a workshop here is welcomed with open arms: carpenters, blacksmiths, glass blowers, etc. Whatever equipment they need, we'll get it. My desire is for all of us together to create something special here."