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*"The human heart has hidden treasures, In secret kept, in silence sealed;
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures, Whose charms were broken if revealed."
Charlotte Brontë*

Project TEN:

An Israeli-Mexican Partnership in Oaxaca – Part 1

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

Our visit to Project TEN, high in the hills of Pluma Hidalgo, a bit over an hour's drive from Huatulco, was one of the most memorable of our many experiences in Mexico. We arrived as outsiders and within a few hours were made to feel at home and welcome to ask as many questions and observe as many activities as we needed to understand the goals, objectives, and processes of the TEN project. Since the TEN volunteers are almost always on the move or participating in meaningful discussions when not on the go, we were totally immersed in TEN life both in the villages they visit five or more days a week and at the isolated, jungle-surrounded TEN Center.

The adventure began when *The Eye* editor, Jane Bauer, asked us, "Would you like to write an article about TEN - an Israeli project in Pluma?" Our amazed response was, "Israelis in Pluma? Who are they and what are they doing?" Jane replied, "I just know they're working in the communities up there, and I think it's exciting. The rest is for you to find out!" We were intrigued in part because we had frequently driven through the isolated high hills of Pluma Hidalgo as a shortcut between Huatulco and the city of Oaxaca, and in part because we like to write about Judaism in Mexico. We already had a subtle hint, since "TEN" is a Hebrew word meaning "give."

TEN was launched by The Jewish Agency for Israel, an organization based in Jerusalem that has a long history of outreach to Jewish non-Israelis with the goal of bringing Jews to live in Israel or at least visit. We were curious why TEN was sending young volunteers to Mexico and four other countries: Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa and Ghana. We contacted the Jerusalem office for permission to visit the Oaxaca Center and spoke with Daniel Aschheim, Director of Marketing and Public Relations.

Daniel made it clear that, far from being a departure from the mission of The Jewish Agency for Israel, the goal of TEN is integral to that mission: strengthening Jewish identity and values among young Jewish adults. More specifically, TEN involves Jewish volunteers ages 19 through 35 from Israel and around the world in actively working for a core Jewish value – *tikkun olam* – loosely translated as "repairing the world." The volunteers commit three or four months to the program, while others at the Center are permanent staff, leaders who remain in Oaxaca for a year or more. Occasional pre-arranged groups of college-age students from the US or elsewhere arrive at the centers and work for only a week or two. TEN centers are all located in areas where people are living in economic poverty and are receiving scant essential services (including one site in Israel).



Rather than TEN staff defining what problems communities are facing and telling the communities what TEN is going to do to help them (a traditional approach of do-gooders but antithetical to true *tikkun olam*), members of communities where TEN operates identify and prioritize the barriers to improving their own lives and developing the innate potential of children and youth. Professionals in the fields of medicine, health, education and agriculture work with community members to select activities that potentially can break down those barriers and improve lives. In accordance with the Hebrew word "TEN," the project experience is meant to teach the volunteers the means and joys of reaching out to people with very different cultural backgrounds, coming to understand how to give assistance that communities want and value, and, in turn, how to receive the gift from community members of learning about their language and ways of life as well as acceptance, cooperation, and partnership.

We questioned how TEN centers are selected, given there are so many places in the world where people are living in poverty. First, since it is important to keep Project staff and volunteers safe, TEN operates only in countries with Israeli embassies that can advise and respond to security needs. Second, TEN partners with established Jewish organizations in Mexico that are already actively providing funding and other assistance to communities with critical needs. For example, for over ten years, the organization Cadena, based in Mexico City, has been responding to communities hit by earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. Cadena, now partnered with TEN, had provided relief to communities in Pluma Hidalgo after hurricane Carlotta ravished the area in 2012. The community network established by Cadena enabled TEN to identify Pluma as a prime site.

Some of the same factors that led to the choice of Pluma as a TEN site made it difficult for us to coordinate with Sivan, the Director of the Center. The Center is located high on a hill covered by coffee plantations and jungle and is reached by a nearly unnavigable road. Phone service is nonexistent and internet service is spotty at best.

We left early for our drive to Pluma, followed directions to the local school where we would meet someone from TEN who would take us to the center. As we waited, mothers appeared at picnic tables carrying tortillas and horchata (a rice-cinnamon drink) for their children to have during recess. When we told the mothers that we were expecting people from TEN, they enthusiastically told us that their children were learning English from the Project people.

We asked how much English the children had learned, and after some consideration they agreed, “Bastante” (a lot). The commitment to self-development through learning English appeared to us to be very strong among the community's students and parents. When Project TEN arrived in Oaxaca, they did not have a predetermined notion that their education program would entail teaching English, but they learned this was the community's desire.

The children from the school appeared to be very excited when the white truck filled with the Center Director, Education Coordinator and 8 volunteers pulled up at the base of the driveway. The teachers and TEN volunteers quickly organized the children into groups according to age and English proficiency level. One table, in a hidden area outside the school building, was exclusively reserved for one TEN member and a special-needs child. A small group of relatively advanced students discussed photos showing people demonstrating various emotions, “just in English in complete sentences, please.” Since most of the volunteers are not native English speakers, and only a few are native Spanish speakers, the lessons can best be described as a shared learning experience between the teachers and students, with the students being the Spanish experts. The parents who were present also appeared to follow closely what was happening. Among the emotions shown in the handout photos were “angry” and “frightened.” When the students provided English sentences or pantomimes saying what made them angry or frightened, the volunteers were clearly learning about this community so remote from their home towns.

The class with the youngest children at first glance appeared to be utter chaos with music blaring, the kids racing around and the volunteers ensuring nobody was standing still. But when the music stopped, each child raced to a picture of a fruit or vegetable on the floor. They then took turns saying the English name of the pictured item and the color. Each mistake was greeted with a hint and each success was roundly applauded by all. Then the music started again. – An hour flew by with enthusiastic participation of all.

As the lessons came to an end, we realized we had witnessed an example of the globalization of English. These students had picked up English expressions that might be heard in London or elsewhere, and their accents had slight overtones of France or the Middle East.

We followed the TEN truck to another school in another village. They were there for two purposes: A book fair and a computer check-up. Jewish organizations in Mexico City ship down cartons of books to sell for 10 pesos (about 50 cents US) to children in over 30 villages all over the Pluma area. TEN decided to sell the books rather than give them away in order to promote understanding of the value of books; the money collected is used to buy more books. Initially, most of the books sent from Mexico and purchased by the Project were storybooks or entertaining reading. Based on the selections made by the students, the TEN staff realized that many children preferred science books and other informational volumes. One of the Jewish day schools in Mexico City is helping to meet this need, and the income from sales is also directed toward replacing the nonfiction volumes that the children like to buy.



TEN volunteers organized the books on a blanket by age appropriateness and also set up word games before the children arrived. The children came racing out, some immediately diving into the books on the blanket. One little girl completely read three thin books by herself before she selected one to buy. Several boys excitedly explored informational books together for about twenty minutes before making individual selections. Other children were totally engaged in the volunteer-led word games and only turned their attention to the book sale after the games were ended.

Jewish organizations in Mexico City also collect and repair computers that are provided to TEN for distribution in the schools. Recognizing that a computer is useless without support, TEN provides software, lessons in computer use and periodic check-ups to make sure the hardware and software are functioning as designed. The computers in the classroom passed the technical checkup while the children were engaged in the book fair.

We were sorry we couldn't clone ourselves to be with the public health/medical team that had simultaneously travelled to other outlining villages with their portable clinic. The coordinators, who are recent medical school graduates from Mexico City completing their required year of national service before final certification, are involving the volunteers in two forms of *tikkun olam*: community-based preventive medicine and individual medical consultation and treatment. The latter also costs 10 pesos and includes an examination, necessary medical tests, and medications.

The coordinators and volunteers know about lab tests and medications that are available year-round for free in Oaxaca, but local residents may not be aware of them. During our visit, the public health team was focusing on a campaign to prevent diabetes, which has become the primary cause of death among adults in Mexico. The team provides information about habits that cause the disease, such as drinking the ubiquitous sodas and other beverages with high sugar content. Realizing that poor water quality is one of the reasons these beverages become the staple drink, TEN has provided many villages with small water filters that are easy to connect to water sources and can be used to continuously filter enough water for a whole small village. Judging from our own health after drinking nothing but the same water during our Pluma stay, the filters appear to be effective.

An important corollary to the public health campaigns for disease prevention and health promotion is the experimental farm located at the TEN center. Part 2 of this article, which will appear in the March issue of *The Eye*, will describe the farm and other activities at the Center.

In this era of global strife and international terror, it was encouraging to see the Project TEN leaders and volunteers, the participating community members, and their partner organizations giving hope that the world can be a gentler, happier and more productive place.

Contributions to Project TEN can be made at <https://goo.gl/JoeEiS>
Donations from Mexico will be directed to the Oaxaca Center.