
School vacations, Shabbat and thinking within the box

by

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Israelis are not particularly good at distinguishing between the ability to improvise and find unique solutions as a result of out-of-the-box thinking, and the ability to devise machinations to bury oneself as deeply as possible within the box. The current ruckus revolves around a desire to reduce the number of school vacation days in order to lessen the burden on working parents. It embodies the national culture of reliance on partial information and turning simple challenges into excruciating ones.

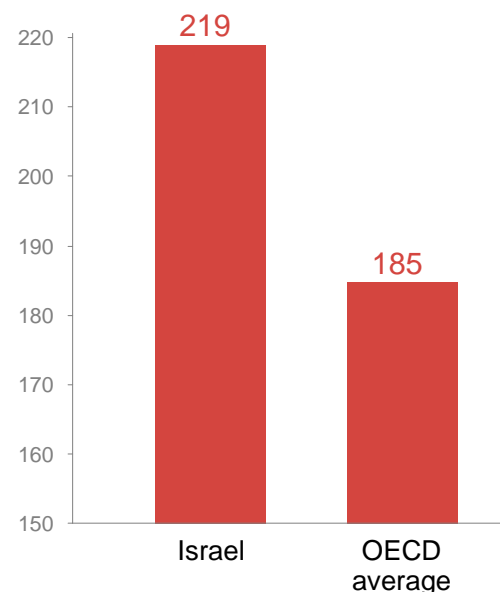
The Education Ministry has suggested a number of options, causing the teachers' unions to man the barricades. Neither side is taking into account one simple fact – which they may not have even bothered to check before launching into the dispute about solutions: already today, the Israeli children spend more days in school than the children of every other developed country.

The 219 primary school days per year in Israel is 18 more than the number of school days in second-place Japan, and 34 more than the OECD average number of school days. Israeli pupils spend more time in school than do pupils in every other developed country because they study six days a week – and this is the original sin. You want to shorten vacations? Then move the education system to a five day week and gain a “bank” of 20 to 30 school days a year to use for shortening vacations without batting an eye. After all, teachers work just five days a week – like most parents. Such a policy change will make it possible to finally move the country to a formal five-day work and school week with a Friday-Saturday weekend. Simple and elegant. For me personally, this is sufficient.

But it turns out this isn't everyone's dream weekend. Hence, a second problem appears that we excel in thinking about within the box: Most Israelis want Sunday to be a part of their weekend – like abroad – for shopping, leisure and all the other things that are not available on Saturday daytime or much of Friday. Thus, because of Shabbat (and a good doze of mental freeze), we want Sunday in addition to – rather than instead of – Friday in our weekends. But with Israeli living standards already below much of the developed world, working four days a week and producing less would invariably lead to even lower incomes. This need not be the only solution.

In this debate, it is easy to forget that religious Jews live in London, Paris and New York, and that Shabbat is important to them as well. Their workdays are Monday through Friday. There is no problem with Shabbat in the summer, because the days are long and Shabbat begins

Average annual number of primary school days, 2016



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institute and Tel-Aviv University
Data: OECD

long after the workday ends. And in winter? Living closer to the equator has its benefits. On December 21, the shortest day of the year, there are two additional hours of sunlight in Israel than in London and Paris, and three more than in New York. The only thing we need to do in Israel is to move to daylight saving time in the winter and the sun will set at 5:39 P.M. on the shortest day of the year – and later on every other day (if necessary, we can even move to DST +1 hour). If religious Jews can deal with this abroad, they can certainly do so when there are more hours of sunlight at their disposal in Israel.

The bottom line is that there is no problem adjusting school days to parents' workdays without quarreling with the teachers and there should be no obstacles that preclude a full day of open stores for those who do not want it to be on Shabbat. We just need to open our eyes and not just see, but actively look at what is in front of our noses.