



25.61x27.15	1	4 עמוד	haaretz-front	16/11/2020	75145269-9
הכפר הירוק בית הסף - 90290					

Zoom was fun for awhile, but it has taken a lonely turn

Haaretz catches up with four students, from sixth to the 10th grades, to see how they cope with remote instruction

Shira Kadari-Ovadia

In mid-September, eighth-grader Michal Har-Zahav wasn't upset about the move to distance learning when the second coronavirus lockdown shuttered Israel's schools.

Other than technical glitches here and there, her school – Beit Hinuch in Jerusalem – was prepared and the transition was smooth. “The first lockdown was a mess. This year, we got organized on time and they explained how the distance learning would work before the lockdown came,” Michal told Haaretz in September.

Like the rest of the kids her age, two weeks into the school year, Michal had to switch to remote learning from home – and she's been doing that ever since. When she was first interviewed two months ago, she called distance learning “cool, actually.” Last week, however, she'd changed her mind. “The truth is, I want to go back to school,” she said, adding: It's hard now – it's difficult to understand the material. At school, if you have a problem, you can go to the teacher for a moment and ask, then it's easier to learn.”

Three other kids, from sixth to 10th grade, also spoke to Haaretz at two separate times: at the beginning of the second lockdown and last week. In the ensuing months, they've more or less grown used to the situation. But they've also become aware of the loneliness and hardship of it.

While a return to school seems on the horizon for kids in grades five, six, 11 and 12, seventh- to 10th-graders will be learning from home at least until December.

The kids say technical issues were resolved, but the biggest problem now is the study load and sitting in front of a computer screen. The schools are trying to help.

“Lots of kids complained, so they changed the schedule,” Michal says. Among the changes, every day a tutoring session is offered for



Distance learning at the home of the Har Zahav family in Tel Aviv.

Ofer Vaknin

kids who need extra help. Participation is optional.

That helped, she says, but it wasn't enough. “I join the tutoring session in math with a friend, and it's easier to understand,” she says. But in the rest of the classes, it's too easy to get distracted after long hours in front of the screen. “I'm on the phone at the same time, and sometimes I watch TV,” she admits.

Sometimes, Michal meets friends at a park near her home while her phone is still in a Zoom session but the camera is turned off. “Anyhow, I know I'll understand the material only after my mother sits with me in the evening,” she says. “I feel like it's really hard for me to understand on Zoom – in class, you can ask questions and the teachers really help. That isn't working this year.”

Fading optimism

Michal's younger sister, Ya'ara, is a sixth-grader at Geulim School, also in Jerusalem. They built the schedule differently at Geulim: Every day is devoted to just one subject, to simplify things for both teachers and students. Like her sister, Ya'ara was optimistic at the beginning of the lockdown and said it was “nice.” But unlike Michal, Ya'ara has

been able to retain her positive attitude, even two months on.

This might be due to the different approach at Geulim. “The teacher knows it's hard to concentrate on Zoom, so she gives us games and tasks throughout the day,” Ya'ara says. “I like it; it's a lot easier to concentrate.”

Since the lockdown was eased, Ya'ara has been able to meet her friends face to face, and she's been studying with two good friends from her class every day, each time at a different girl's house.

The school has also divided classes into groups of five and asked the students to meet once a week to study together. According to Ya'ara, things are going well.

Still, she concedes that not everything is perfect. “This period is isolating us. There's really nowhere to go. I was supposed to sign up for the school choir and other activities, but everything's been postponed or canceled.” Like Michal, Ya'ara can't wait to get back to school, where she says learning is easier.

She'll finally get her wish this week, at least partially. The health and education ministries have approved open-air sessions, and now one outdoors class is

planned per week, in small groups, until classes resume.

Gigi, an eighth-grader at Hakfar Hayarok, finally met up with her classmates outdoors at school, which is located on a spacious campus just north of Tel Aviv. “Everybody missed each other,” she says. And though it wasn't an official class session, teachers stopped by to say hello more than to teach. It was about “being together,” Gigi notes.

Gigi: ‘Lots of schools think they can have classes on Zoom like they do in classrooms. But the truth is you can't take one form of learning and apply it to a completely different situation.’

In her first conversation with Haaretz at the start of lockdown, Gigi said she didn't mind the long hours in front of a computer screen, but said it was the “lack of a framework” that bothered her. At her school, like many others, teachers require the kids to have their cameras turned on, “but there are classes at the end of the day where I just can't do it anymore, so I get in bed with the computer and turn off the camera.”

‘Room for improvement’

Two months on, Gigi says that sitting in front of the computer for so long has become much harder. “At first it was still new and cool, but it's been for a long time. I didn't expect it to go on so long,” she says.

Gigi's school has also tried to make things easier for the kids: lessons are 30 minutes instead of the usual 45, and 90-minute lessons have been cut to an hour. And since the beginning of the lockdown, teachers have learned to listen more closely to the students, she says. “They know when it's too hard, when they have to let us work on our own or to give less homework,” she relays.

But they could do more, according to Gigi. “There's lots of room for improvement. Lots of schools think they can have classes on Zoom like they do in classrooms. But the truth is you can't take one form of learning and apply it to a completely different situation,” she says.

For Gigi, the highlight of the school day was the extracurricular lessons: open-air sessions in Hakfar Hayarok's green spaces and a dog-training class at a kennel on campus. At the begin-

ning of lockdown, she was curious how these lessons would work on Zoom. Now she knows.

“It's the biggest bummer of this whole year,” she observes. The lesson at the kennel became a regular lecture about dogs. In the outdoor lesson, instead of picking watermelons and learning about wildflowers, “we just hear lectures.” Even the scout troop near her home in Givatayim has moved to Zoom. “It's just lame; it's no fun,” she says.

She dropped out and hasn't seen any of her friends from scouts, bar one, for about two months now.

Daniel Friedman, a 10th-grader at Bar-Ilan Yeshiva in Tel Aviv, said at the beginning of the lockdown that his teachers were grappling with the technical side of things. “They work hard, but some of them just don't understand Zoom,” he said at the time.

His class schedule is very intense, he says now. “After a long while, you get a headache and it's very hard to study,” he recounts, adding that “sometimes Zoom gets stuck and there's noise that makes it hard to understand.”

Friedman is also currently having to deal with a new challenge: tests on Zoom. The kids have to turn the Zoom camera on, then open the exam form on their phones and write their answers on a piece of paper. At the end of the test, they scan the answers and send them to their teacher.

“There are teachers who realize that sometimes you can't have the camera on because not everyone has a computer and a phone,” he says. “Others, in spite of that, threaten: ‘If you don't turn your camera on, you'll get a zero.’”

According to Friedman, the study load hasn't altered over the two months. “The schedule hasn't changed, but the teachers are improving in their understanding of Zoom and we the students are as well,” he reflects.

But the main frustration is actually the music courses he's studying. He's managing with his music history and theory courses, but he's supposed to be part of an ensemble – and that isn't really working. “You can't play together on Zoom because the computer can only hear one voice at a time,” he told Haaretz at the start of lockdown.

Two weeks ago, Friedman was supposed to finally meet with his ensemble and play outdoors. “They said we had permission, but then it rained and we couldn't play. We'll do it later, I guess. I can hardly wait,” he says.