

PROFILE

No Contest

Rabbi Reeve Brenner's plea for inclusive, non-competitive recreation

"YOU WONDER WHAT KIND OF CULTURE WE HAVE," Rabbi Reeve Brenner muses as he gestures at the multi-sports playing field at Mattie Stepanek Park in Rockville, Maryland. "You've got football, soccer. Okay, I'm not against it; it's a good thing to have in society. But that doesn't hack it. It's only 10 percent of the population at best, maybe even 5 percent where their needs are being met."

As a former college basketball player who continued to play the game until he was well into his 70s, Rabbi Brenner does not seem like someone who would be inclined to find fault with competitive sports. However, it was basketball itself that prompted him to rethink the nature of play.

"It was the very fact that basketball was so aggressive and exclusionary, and how they always play against each other and you always have winners and losers," he recalls. "It was this that triggered me into thinking that we could modify all our sports in a way that we could have both aggression as an option and also non-aggressive sports—sports where you play against each other but also sports you could play alongside one other to gain civility and companionability. Playmates, not opponents."

Major sports foster aggression and combat, he argues, which need to be balanced against other alternatives that nurture inclusion and socialization. He describes sports such as bowling, disc golf, archery, and his own game of Bankshot as "play without contest," because players confront only the parameters of the game and not each other directly.

Inspired by a cousin who uses a wheelchair, Brenner invented the Bankshot basketball game in 1981 while living in Israel. The courts have since spread to more than 200 locations in the United States and 50 abroad, including parks, schools, and summer camps. Often compared to mini-golf, the game involves banking basketballs into baskets off a variety of contorted backboards. Bankshot can be played by people of a wide range of ages, heights, and abilities; in fact, a lightly thrown shot often will careen into the basket more easily than one that is thrown too hard.

On this day, Brenner is showing the Bankshot court at Mattie Stepanek Park to Gila Baruh, an educator from Istanbul who is considering whether the game would be a good fit for an elementary school. "When I first saw Bankshot, I was not sure what to expect,"

she says. "But after seeing different aged kids playing alongside in a friendly environment helping each other, I thought it is an amazing opportunity for integration. In my native country, Turkey, children from a special population either stay home or socialize with other peers from the same population. This game creates an equal environment for both abled and differently abled people while developing positive interaction between them."

Brenner says the game is a reflection of his theology, which he describes as a total mix based on universal design. "My religion is a polydox religion, which allows all people in the tent," he says. As a retired Jewish chaplain for the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, he has written books on the sociology of both religion and recreation.

Brenner strongly believes that the parks and recreation field is neglecting a large proportion of children—those who have outgrown the playground but are not able to join organized sports, either due to their lack of athleticism, disabilities, or inability to put in the hours of practice required.

"You go from the playgrounds all the way up to the play fields...where is the middle ground?" he asks. "You go to a recreation center and you don't see anything for them. They're sitting on the sidelines. We don't



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provide anything for them....The non-athlete is not going to stick around long at that because you've got to play against somebody. Always against somebody and never alongside together in friendship."

He also notes that athletic leagues are broken out into different age groups, and often into boys and girls teams, so there is no opportunity for mixed groups to play sports. He becomes incensed when describing sports that he says promote exclusion while promising inclusion. It's hard to ignore the added weight these statements have when made at a place like Mattie Stepanek Park, named in honor of a severely disabled boy made famous by his message of peace. A statue of him in his wheelchair forms the centerpiece of a memorial garden on the opposite side of the park from the Bankshot court.

"There is no balance; it is all skewed toward the very young or the very athletic later. That's what we have now," Brenner says. "Let's turn the ship a little bit around so we don't have all that aggression and lack of civility and beating each other....Someone goes home always having lost." 🌟

—Interview by Elizabeth Beard