

# Israel in Jewish Peoplehood Education

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## INTRODUCTION

The Second War in Lebanon – A Watershed Event

Last summer's war in Lebanon was a watershed event in terms of Israeli-Diaspora relations. Whereas five years ago Jews all but stopped visiting Israel during the height of the intifada, tens of thousands of Jewish tourists remained in Israel last summer, despite the war raging in the Northern region of the country. Out of the approximately 9,700 youngsters on short-term programs in Israel at the outbreak of the war in July, the vast majority stayed in Israel for the full duration of their programs. This represented an unprecedented vote of confidence on the part of world Jewry in Israel and in Israel's commitment to guaranteeing the well-being of Jewish children and securing the Jewish future. At the very same time, however, the traumatic events of this summer also demonstrated a sharp divergence in the life paths of young Jews living in Israel and the Diaspora. While young Israeli Jews were battling Hezbollah guerillas, their Diaspora-based counterparts spent lazy summer days at the beach or in the mall. More than anything, this summer proved that, even when Diaspora Jews feel close to Israel, their lifestyle and frame of reference is radically different from that of their Israeli cousins. In this piece, I will explore the complex relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jews in light of this new reality and argue that Israel must play a central role in Jewish Peoplehood education if such education is to have meaning.

## Modern Realities

The issues facing the Jewish people today are unprecedented. Barely three generations ago, Jews throughout the world, most of whom new immigrants, whether in the United States, Europe, South America, the U.S.S.R. or Australia, struggled for basic economic and sometimes physical security. These external threats, certainly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but even later as

well, prevented the Jewish community from truly confronting modernity and its impact on Jewish life. Today, however, while Jews throughout the world have achieved the basic economic and physical security they once lacked, an entirely new set of threats has emerged.

The Jewish community today has achieved unparalleled freedom and success in a very short period of time. When top educational institutions and commercial bodies opened their doors fully and removed quotas, the Jewish community finally gained access to the ultimate ladders of success. This mobility allowed Jews to occupy nearly every segment of the social hierarchy. In the United States, the Jews became one of the most politically powerful minority groups. In the economic arena, Jews have achieved the highest positions in a wide variety of professions, ranging from media to politics to business. The kinds of social barriers that existed just 50 years ago have fallen, and Jews today belong to some of the most prestigious private clubs, museum boards, and other elite institutions. While some anti-Semitism certainly still exists, one cannot argue that it poses the same existential threat that it did 100 years ago.

In under a century, the modern Jewish community has managed to realize many of its grandparents' dreams. In the wake of these incredible successes, however, new threats to the survival of the Jewish people have emerged. For the first time in history, Jews have the opportunity to choose to be Jewish. Whereas in the past, Jews were still identified and labeled as Jews by the outside society even if they chose not to affiliate with Judaism in any way, Jews today can "opt-out" of Jewish affiliation and identification completely. Being Jewish today is completely voluntary; as nearly every demographic study undertaken in the last decade has shown, many young Jews are choosing not to affiliate.

Over the last 30 years, intermarriage rates in the United States have soared, and today are well over the 50% mark.<sup>1</sup> On campuses today, over half of the Jewish students only have one Jewish parent.<sup>2</sup> Among global Jewish communities, only Israel has a birthrate high enough to lead to generate population growth.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the shrinking number of Jews in the world, we are also witnessing a growing detachment, especially of young people, from the organized Jewish community. Communal involvement is rapidly decreasing, and recent studies show that although young Jews are often concerned with spirituality and their Jewish identities, the modern emphasis on individuality has weakened their interest in participating in organized religion.<sup>4</sup> Whereas their parents and grandparents primarily formed their Jewish identities in the institutional and/or public arena, nowadays young Jews perceive of their identities as being far more individualized and fluid. Jonathan Sarna predicted this trend when, more than ten years ago in a lecture to the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, he intimated that the current institutions of Jewish life – created at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to the conditions of those times – may no longer be equipped to deal with emerging realities of American Jewish life.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, over ten years later, contemporary Jewish sociological literature is rife with terms such as porousness, dispersal, detachment, religious individualism, secularism, voluntarism, autonomy, personalism and non-judgmentalism.

At the very same time, there is also a marked disconnect between Jews living in Israel and those abroad, particularly among the younger generation. In a recent study

conducted by Professor Steven Cohen, every indicator shows clear distancing between Jews living abroad and Israel.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, data from the Guttman/AVI CHAI report, a comprehensive survey investigating the Jewish identity of Israelis, demonstrates that Jews living in Israel have become increasingly distant from their Diaspora-based cousins. Between 1991, when the first Guttman/AVI CHAI report was published, and 2000, when an updated version of the study was completed, the number of Israelis who "feel part of the Jewish people" dropped five percentage points, from 67% to 62%. Similarly, the percentage of those who believe that Israeli and Diaspora Jews have a common fate declined from 76% to 70%.<sup>7</sup>

This growing gap exposes the great danger that Jews, who have always held the notion of "One People" to be paramount, will grow into two separate nations – Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews – possessing little in common. Indeed, the events of this past summer demonstrated that the life paths of young Jews in Israel and the Diaspora could not be starker. While young Israelis were engaged in intense confrontations with Hezbollah on the battlefields of Lebanon, their Jewish peers abroad enjoyed the delights of summer vacation.

Thus modernity, with all of its advantages, has created several problems that threaten the future of the Jewish people. Being Jewish today is voluntary. Being Jewish is but one option among many. Nowadays, young Jews need motivation to be Jewish; no longer does society force it upon them, and no longer is having Jewish parents enough to ensure that children will remain committed Jews. We know that the old model of Jewish communities, centered on synagogue affiliation, is not enough to attract the next generation.

The concept of Jewish Peoplehood – the instinctive feeling that one is a member of

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<sup>1</sup> National Jewish Population Study 2000-1

<sup>2</sup> *America's Jewish Freshmen: Current Characteristics and Recent Trends Among Students Entering College*, a UCLA study sponsored by Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, 2002

<sup>3</sup> NJPS 2000-1

<sup>4</sup> *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era*, a study commissioned by Reboot, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Sarna, Jonathan D. *A Great Awakening: The Transformation that Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and its implications for Today*. New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1995.

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Steven M., *The 2004 National Study of American Jews*, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Levy, Shlomit and Hanna Levinson and Elihu Katz. *A Portrait of Israeli Jewry - Beliefs, Observances and Values among Israeli Jews 2000*. Conducted by the Guttman Center of the Israel Democracy Institute for the AVI CHAI Foundation, 2002.

one Jewish People present around the world, a concept which encompasses all aspects of Jewish culture, including history, homeland, religion, spirituality, etc. – offers a fresh and exciting entry point for many young people. Not only that, but it is a concept around which Jews globally can unify. Jewish education has the potential to revolutionize and reinvigorate Judaism in today's modern world and build this idea of Jewish Peoplehood.

Education, in all societies, has the unique ability to shape future developments. Lawrence Cremin, former president of Teachers College in New York defines education as "the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, values, skills, or sensibilities."<sup>8</sup> This transmission of culture across generations provides the broadest definition of education, expanding the borders beyond classrooms filled with children. Adults touring old synagogues in Prague, teenagers creating a mock Knesset, children learning Zionist songs from the 1930s are all examples of "transmitting culture." The Jewish community's belief in education stems from this expanded understanding of the word.

The transformative power of education lies in its ability to both provide knowledge, but also in its ability to inspire, motivate, and generate passion. Jewish education, especially, I will argue, with Israel at its center, is about the transmission of substance but also the deep experiences of culture. Education can enhance the feeling of Jewish Peoplehood and allow a young person to develop her own personal passion for Judaism and answer to the question of why be Jewish.

## **THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION**

If education holds the key to reversing the worrying trends mentioned above, then perhaps the risks are not as serious as I have posited. Yet education, of all types, in all segments of society, faces a number of serious obstacles. Particularly in the Jewish

world, these barriers threaten the viability of education as a long-term solution. For education to have the desired impact on shaping the future, three major elements are necessary: inspiring educators, compelling content and transformative experiences. These three ingredients are not only necessary, but interdependent as well.

### **Educators**

Educators are entrusted with transmitting culture across generations, as well as knowledge of and passion for one's roots. Once a highly-valued profession in the Jewish community, education now occupies a low-rung on the occupational ladder. Education, formal and informal, plays an enormously important role in Jewish culture and tradition. The Biblical instruction to teach one's children, the annual telling of the Passover tale and the revered status of rabbinic leaders in our tradition all paint a picture of a society that not only valued education, but was in fact centered on the very idea that Cremin emphasizes - the transmission of culture across generations.

The modern world, however, has largely rejected the centrality of education, if not in theory, then in practice. In the United States, for example, teachers are severely underpaid, meaning that top-notch potential educators cannot afford to even consider the profession. Unfortunately, following the trend of the world at large, the Jewish world, "the people of the book," has steadily devalued the importance of teachers, in the broadest sense of the word. In fact, outside of the ultra-Orthodox world, children are rather encouraged to apply to medical schools, law schools, and business schools. Rarely do we hear of Jewish parents pushing their children to get a teaching degree. The Jewish world invests too little resources in educators. Day school teachers, Hebrew school teachers, and informal educators' salaries are not commensurate with the burden we place on them of ensuring the Jewish future. Moreover, there are not nearly enough quality institutions to train and develop formal and informal educators.

### **Materials**

While inspiring educators are one important ingredient in exciting young people, they need compelling content to use in their

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<sup>8</sup> Cremin, Lawrence A., Traditions of American Education, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1976.

teaching in various settings. Curriculum development, in tune with modern reality and suited to address increasingly individualized needs, is sorely lacking. Traditional text study, while appealing to many, is not the answer for everyone. At the same time, today's youth yearns for meaning and substance. The Jewish tradition and culture is rich with a multitude of deep and important ideas. It is a tragedy that so few know how to access and enter into dialogue with these texts and traditions.

The Jewish educational world has not kept up with modern advances that allow for easy and efficient sharing of creative resources. The advent of technology provides a unique solution to the demographics of the Jewish people. With e-mail, videoconferencing, web logs, it is easy to forge technological bridges between Jewish communities and to share expertise. Beyond that, these emerging technologies form the language of young people today. If we want to reach unaffiliated teenagers and college students, we must look for them online. One needs only to look at the popularity of websites like Heeb Magazine or "Jewcy" to see that counter-culture Jews have already found a home. There is a huge unrealized potential here of which we must begin to take advantage.

### **Experiences**

Stimulating educators and exciting materials, however, are not enough. Without the motivation to explore one's roots, young people can easily tune out the most interesting content. We need to create educational backdrops which engender passion and enthusiasm in all sectors of Jewish society. In a voluntary world, where one must choose to be Jewish, motivation is key. Without providing a compelling answer to the question of "why be Jewish," educators will be unable to fulfill their mission. Transformative experiences create the moments that waken young people from their self-centered reverie and stimulate the deep need to connect.

Educators, materials, and experiences: three ingredients necessary to engage young people with their identity; three ingredients which are often lacking in today's Jewish communities. I believe that

Israel can provide an answer in providing these critical resources.

### **THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF ISRAEL**

I want to suggest that in the face of this crisis and these obstacles that Israel has a unique role to play in unleashing the potential of Jewish education in securing the Jewish future through building the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. As we rapidly approach 2010, an absolute majority of Jewish youth under the age of 25 will be living in Israel. No longer do we need to talk about the centrality of Israel in the Jewish world, for in just a few years it will be reality. Nor is aliyah the main issue. Young Jews can feel connected to the Jewish People and be inspired to lead Jewish lives wherever they may choose to live. The central issue facing the future of Jewish education from my point of view is in connecting the multiple benefits of Israel to the identity formation process of young Jews around the world.

First, Israel is a powerhouse of educational resources. With over 120,000 educators, universities, research institutions, think tanks, yeshivot, and experts in Jewish history, Hebrew language, Talmud and many more areas of Jewish content, Israel has the ability to have a dynamic and sustained influence, via these resources, on the quality of Jewish education around the world.

Second, Israel exemplifies the very idea of Peoplehood. It is in Israel that one can see the true diversity of the Jewish people and what it means to live as part of a nation. The experience of Jewish sovereignty, especially for prolonged periods of time, has a dramatic affect on many indicators of Jewish identity, behavior and belief.

Since the founding of the State, Jewish communities around the world have cast Israel as the victim, primarily for fundraising purposes. While Israel still faces many challenges to its identity and Jewish nature, the vibrant dynamic and growing Israel of 2007 now has the potential to provide much needed help to world Jewry. The connection to Israel is of utilitarian value in addressing

the challenges of Jewish life around the world. At the same time, educating young Jews towards a strong connection to Israel has its own intrinsic value as well.

### **Israel and Educators**

The shortage of educators is a problem that must be solved both in the long and short-term. Ultimately, of course, the answer is for communities to grow their own quality educators who are sensitive to local needs and cultural issues. Globally, some regions have been more successful in this endeavor than others. In fact, in the fifteen years, since the Mandel Commission sounded the alarm in *A Time to Act*<sup>9</sup> much attention has been paid to this challenge, and huge achievements have been made. Nonetheless, there are still major shortages even in large Jewish communities. Israel can provide an answer for the short-term.

Today over 200 Israeli teachers spend an average of five years in Diaspora communities teaching in local day schools. This is a number that could and should grow. Just under 1,800 young Israelis serve as counselors in Jewish camps—1,500 of them in North America. These counselors, who serve as informal educators about Judaism and Israel, touch over 150,000 young people every year. World Jewish education can also take advantage of the growing volunteer spirit among Israelis. This year, nearly 400 young Israelis served as volunteer emissaries through a program called "Areivim."

Not only do these Israeli representatives have a powerful impact on Diaspora Jews, but it is a two-way street by which they learn a tremendous amount about other models for Jewish life with the potential to impact on life in Israel. When a secular Israeli spends a summer at a Reform camp and is exposed to a form of liberal, religious Judaism that is relatively undeveloped in Israel, that experience deeply impacts her identity and world-view. In addition to the educators Israel can provide to other Jewish communities, world educators have the

opportunity to come to Israel and receive superior training here as well. Not only do they gain essential tools for their work, but they too get a dose of excitement and passion that will recharge them and allow them to return newly motivated to educate. These exchanges, something unique which Israel can offer, strengthen ties between Israel and Diaspora Jewry while also helping communities overcome one of the major barriers to Jewish education.

### **Israel and Materials**

Jewish educators often talk about an asymmetry in the world of content. Israel has unparalleled educational resources ranging from books, ancient documents, artifacts, and creative curriculums, yet Jewish communities, large and small, find themselves lacking compelling content. As noted above, technology can deliver these materials straight to students, or allow educators to take resources and mold them to local needs.

To borrow an image from the world of technology, Israel has the potential to be a "server" for the rest of the world. Not only can global Jewish communities now gain access to the resources that reside thousands of miles away, but educators in Israel can also guide the use of this content and provide ongoing support from the comfort of their own homes. Imagine the world expert on Hebrew poetry leading a seminar on Yehuda Amichai for university students around the world. Cameras linked to the web can show Jewish teenagers the wonders of archeology in Israel while they sit in their classrooms in Buenos Aires or Berlin. Inspiring content can network the Jewish world.

### **Israel and Experiences**

It is particularly in the domain of creating passion that Israel is uniquely able to impact the next generation. From 1948, unmediated engagement with Israel has had the power to motivate and inspire Jews. It is in Israel that Diaspora Jewry can sense for the first time this notion of Jewish Peoplehood and what it means to be part of the broader narrative of Jewish history. Exposure to the startling diversity, the rich tapestry of Israeli

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<sup>9</sup> The Commission on Jewish Education in North America, *A Time to Act: The Report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America*, 1991

society, the modern Hebrew language and the use of Jewish time has a profound effect and provides an answer to the all important question of why be Jewish. Israel offers multiple "gateways" to Jewish Peoplehood and as such is the single most powerful resource we have in ensuring the Jewish future.

The transformative power of an Israel experience impacts young and old alike and provides a unique anchor for the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. Extensive research has been done to show that spending time in Israel can change people. Jewish education has to consider this transformative potential on all possible levels. Short-term programs including birthright Israel and summer seminars for high school students can have a tremendous impact on youth, precisely at key identity formation stages of their lives. Indeed, the Jewish community must strive to send no less than 50% of Jewish young people to Israel for short period of times. But this is not enough. Long stays in Israel have been proven to definitively strengthen Jewish identity and generate a long-term connection to Jewish Peoplehood.

According to a study that compared alumni of Young Judea's Year Course with those who applied to the program but ultimately did not attend, a year in Israel has a transformative effect on young people. Of those who participated in the program, 91% percent went on to marry fellow Jews, in contrast to the control group where only 48% did so. Synagogue membership is 79% among alumni, and only 43% among those who didn't come to Israel. Over 70% of Young Judea graduates have been back to visit Israel more than two times, compared to 20%. Those who spent a year in Israel were also far more likely to send their children to day school, volunteer in a Jewish framework, and to contribute to Federation campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

It is in fact, these statistics, combined with the growing concern for the Jewish future, which led to an historic policy shift by the

Government of Israel. For the first time, the Prime Minister of Israel decided to invest in the future of the Jewish people through a joint initiative with the Jewish Agency's Department for Jewish Zionist Education that will ultimately bring one in every five young Jews to Israel on semester or year long-programs. MASA: The Gateway to Long-Term Programs was launched in 2005 and serves as a gateway and platform for all semester and year-long programs for Diaspora Jewry.

Not only will MASA eventually bring 20,000 people between the ages of 18-30 to Israel for a long period of time and help countless individuals embark on their Jewish journeys, but it will help shift the cultural norm among Diaspora Jewry. Spending time in Israel will become as commonplace as synagogue membership once was. After completing high school, thousands of Jewish youth, from all denominations and backgrounds will come participate in a MASA program. Israel will become a core part of Jewish identity for a significant percentage of the Jewish world, uniting diverse Jewish communities around the world and inspiring young people to explore and own their rich heritage. By providing young Jews from the Diaspora with the opportunity to experience Israel as "insiders," rather than as outsiders looking in, MASA bridges the widening gap between Diaspora Jews and Israel, thus forging a true sense of Jewish Peoplehood.

Interestingly enough, however, the concept of Israel as a "gateway" into Jewish Peoplehood contains an inherent paradox. For Diaspora Jews, Israel is indeed a wonderful adventure in Jewish Peoplehood, evoking feelings of familial connection and pride. For Israelis, jaded by the cultural diversity in their midst, Israel does not automatically guarantee a greater sense of affiliation with other Jews around the world. On the contrary, raising young people who would more readily label themselves as Israelis than as Jews, Israel appears to increasingly isolate and insulate its own sons and daughters from the rest of the Jewish world. It is imperative that we develop concrete ways of translating the experience of "Israel as a gateway into Jewish Peoplehood" – perceived intuitively

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen, *The 1998 Young Judea Jewish Continuity Study*, 1999/ Cohen, *International Survey of Israel Programs Graduates- Preliminary Findings*, 2003

by Jews worldwide – into something that can inspire and motivate young Israelis as well.

### **Israel and Jewish Peoplehood**

Beyond the ways in which Israel can serve as a resource for overcoming the serious barriers facing contemporary Jewish education, Israel has its own important, intrinsic value as well. If the pursuit of Jewish meaning is the core process of contemporary Jewish education, it has to be located within an intensified sense of Jewish Peoplehood. "I am a Jew because of my connections to my extended family." In this overarching concept of Peoplehood, Israel in its multitude of dimensions is not only a means, but also an end.

Those who remember the spirit of volunteerism inspired within the Jewish community immediately after the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars know that these experiences helped shape an entire generation of Jews around the world and Israel. Last summer, we once again witnessed the power of Israel to ignite the passion and imagination of an entire generation of Jews, as young Jews from all four corners of the earth participated in

emergency fundraising drives to rehabilitate Israel's Northern region, initiated advocacy efforts on Israel's behalf and chose to stay on summer tours of the country despite the barrage of missiles which rained down from Lebanon. The traumatic events of the second Lebanese War reminded us that, even in an era often disparagingly called "post-Zionist," Israel retains the unique ability to light a "fire" in the next generation of Jewish leadership and forge indestructible bonds between Jews in Israel and Jews around the world.

By placing the engagement with Israel at the center of Jewish education, both as a source of resources and as a locus of intrinsic and unique value, Israel has the potential to provide much needed inspiration and motivation for young people to commit themselves to seeking Jewish meaning. Israel education, however, is just one piece of the broader struggle to deal with issues modernity has imposed on the Jewish community. Peoplehood is a unifying concept that can encompass all aspects of Judaism, and Israel education is the ideal "gateway" to Jewish Peoplehood.

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