

ISRAEL FOR JEWISH EDUCATION AND JEWISH EDUCATION FOR ISRAEL

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MODERN REALITIES

The issues facing the Jewish people today are unprecedented. Barely three generations ago, Jews throughout the world, most of whom were new immigrants, whether in the United States, Europe, South America, the Soviet Union, or Australia, struggled for basic economic and sometimes physical security. These external threats, certainly in the first half of the 20th century, but even later as well, prevented the Jewish community from truly confronting modernity and its impact on Jewish life. Today, although 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 has achieved unparalleled success in a very short period of time. When top educational and commercial bodies opened their doors fully and removed quotas, the Jewish community finally gained access to the ultimate ladders to 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. Although some anti-Semitism certainly still exists, it does not pose 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, and 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 (National Jewish Population Study (NJPS; 2000). On campuses today, over half of the Jewish students only have one Jewish parent (Sax, 2002). Among global Jewish communities, only Israel has a birthrate high enough to generate population growth (NJPS, 2000).

In addition to 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 decreasing rapidly, 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 (Greenberg, 2005). At the same time, there is also a marked decline in the connection to Israel, particularly among younger people. In Professor Steven Cohen's (2005) latest study, every indicator shows a marked distancing between world Jewry and Israel. This growing gap threatens to ultimately create two separate Jewish peoples.

Thus, modernity, with all of its advantages, has created a problem that threatens the future of the Jewish people. Being Jewish today is voluntary. Young Jews today need

motivation to *be* Jewish; no longer does society force it on them, and no longer is having Jewish parents enough to ensure that the children will remain committed Jews. We know that the old model of Jewish communities, centered around synagogues, is not enough to attract the next generation. The concept of Jewish peoplehood, which encompasses all aspects of the culture, including history, homeland, religion, and spirituality, offers a fresh and exciting entry point for many young people. It is also a concept around which Jews around the world can unite. 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 (1976), 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." This transmission of culture across generations provides the broadest definition of education, expanding its borders beyond classrooms filled with children. Adults touring old synagogues in Prague, teenagers creating a mock Knesset, and children learning Zionist songs from the 1930s are all examples of the transmission of 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 both to provide knowledge and to inspire, motivate, and generate passion. Jewish education, especially with Israel at its center, is not only about the transmission of substance but also about the deep experiences of culture. Education can enhance the feeling of Jewish peoplehood and allow a young person to develop his or her own personal passion for Judaism and answer to the question, "Why be Jewish?"

THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

If education holds the key to reversing the worrying trends mentioned above, then per-

haps 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 are 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. Yet, 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 also in fact centered around the very idea that Cremin (1976) 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 even to 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 the ultra-Orthodox world, children are instead 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. The salaries of day school teachers, Hebrew school teachers, and informal educators 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

Although inspiring educators are one important ingredient in exciting young people, they need compelling content to use as they teach in various settings. Curriculum development, in tune with modern reality and suited to address increasingly individualized needs, is sorely lacking. Traditional text study, although appealing to many, is not the answer for everyone. At the same time, today's young people yearn for meaning and substance. The Jewish tradition and culture are rich with a multitude of deep and important ideas. It is a tragedy that so few know how to gain access to and enter into dialogue with these texts and traditions.

The Jewish educational world has not kept up with modern advances that allow for the easy and efficient sharing of creative resources. The advent of technology provides a unique solution to the global nature of the Jewish people. With e-mail, videoconferencing, and Web logs, it is easy to forge technological bridges among Jewish communities and to share expertise. In addition, 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 Web sites like Heeb or Jewcy to see that counter-cultural Jews have already found a home on the Internet. There is a huge unrealized potential here, and we must begin to take advantage of it.

Experiences

Stimulating educators and exciting materials, however, are not enough. Without the motivation to explore their roots, young people can easily tune out the most interesting content. We need to create educational backdrops that 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 wake young people from their self-centered reverie and stimulate the deep need to connect.

Educators, materials, and experiences—these are three ingredients necessary to engage young people with their Jewish identity but that are often lacking in today's Jewish communities. Israel can play a key role in providing all three ingredients.

THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF ISRAEL

In the face of this crisis and these obstacles, Israel has a unique role to play in unleashing the potential of Jewish education to secure the Jewish future through building the concept of Jewish peoplehood. As we rapidly approach 2010, an absolute majority of Jewish youth under the ages 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 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 is 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 effect 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. Although Israel still faces many challenges to its identity and Jewish nature, the vibrant, dynamic, and growing Israel of 2005 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, inculcating young Jews with a strong connection to Israel has 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 develop 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 15 years since the Mandel Commission sounded the alarm in *A Time to Act* (1991), much attention has been paid to this challenge, and huge achievements have been made. Nonetheless, there are still major shortages of educators, even in large Jewish communities.

At any one time, more than 200 Israelis are living in Diaspora communities and teaching in local day schools; these teachers spend an average of 5 years in Diaspora communities. This is a number that could and should grow. Just under 2,000 young Israelis serve each year 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 500 young Israelis served as volunteer emissaries in countries around the world through a program called Areivim.

Not only do these Israeli representatives have a powerful impact on Diaspora Jews but they also learn a tremendous amount about other models of Jewish life that may have a potential 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 can deeply affect his or 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 there 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 that Israel can offer, strengthen ties between Israel and Diaspora Jewry while also helping communities overcome one of the major barriers to Jewish education, the shortage of teachers.

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 curricula, 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 resources that are 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 best able to affect 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 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 affects young and old alike and provides a unique anchor for the concept of Jewish peoplehood. Extensive research has shown 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 young people, precisely at the key identity-formation stages of their lives. Indeed, the Jewish community must strive to send no less than 50 percent of Jewish young people to Israel for short periods of time. Yet, 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 Judaea's Year Course with those who applied to the program but ultimately did not attend, a year in Israel has a transformative effect. Of those who partici-

pated 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 did not come to Israel. Over 70% of Young Judaea graduates have been back to visit Israel more than two times, compared to 20% of the other group. Those who spent a year in Israel were also more far likely to send their children to day school, volunteer in a Jewish framework, and to contribute to federation campaigns (Cohen, 1999).

It is in fact, these statistics, combined with the growing concern for the Jewish future, that led to an historic policy shift by the Government of Israel. For the first time, the Prime Minister of Israel has decided to invest in the future of the Jewish people through a joint initiative with the Jewish Agency's Department for Jewish Zionist Education. This program 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 this year and serves as a gateway and platform for all semester and year-long programs for Diaspora Jewry.

Not only will MASA ultimately 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 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.

Israel and Jewish Peoplehood

In addition to 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.

The major challenge facing the Jewish people today is the openness of modernity and the newly voluntary nature of Judaism. 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 that 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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