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Israel Education: Thinking Out of the Box Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz

There's a wonderful scene in the classic Israeli movie, *Sallah Shabbati*, that spoofs a timeless American connection to Israel — philanthropy. A group of new immigrants is planting trees under the supervision of a healthy-looking kibbutznik when a big black car drives up. Out pops an Israeli guide and two very American looking tourists. An Israeli official who has been waiting for them gestures grandly to a sign and says, "Meester and Meeses Birnbaum, thees is your forest!" The Americans enjoy the moment, take pictures and leave. A few minutes later, an Israeli official changes the sign, just in time for another big black car to drive up. The Israeli opens the door for two different American-looking tourists, gestures grandly to the new sign and says, "Meester and Meeses Sonnenschein, thees is your forest!"

Most American Jewish educators are as concerned as their Israeli colleagues about the issues surrounding Israel education. Israeli educators understand the concern among parents who do not wish to put their teens on airplanes to an unstable region at an unstable time in Jewish and world history. And American Jewish educators are concerned about the struggles of students on college campuses who cannot articulately respond to anti-Israel attacks. They also worry about the 92 percent drop in teen travel to Israel. If such numbers continue for four years, one full "high school generation" (and its corresponding college generation) will not have been to Israel, thus missing personal connections to the Land, State and People of Israel.

This discussion paper is an attempt to frame the issues surrounding the "teaching of Israel" for Jews in the United States, whether by educators in the U.S., or in Israel. It was developed in response to the increase in efforts of Israeli educators to develop educational materials for Jews living *hutz la'aretz* (outside of Israel), and the concern that many of these resources miss the mark for their intended audience. Hopefully, this discussion will prod educators on both sides of the ocean to develop some philosophical direction and strategies. This article informally examines the stance toward Israel education taken by non-Orthodox Jewish educators in the United States, as well as the stance of Israel educators based in Israel. Finally, suggestions are offered to help focus a vision for Israel education that fits with the sociological reality of America's liberal Jews.

Israel Education: A View From The United States

While Jewish schools of the United States consistently teach about Israel, the programs and courses (especially in supplementary schools) are often built around textbooks or low-level objectives. Young school children take "trips to Israel," beginning their journey on chairs lined up in an auditorium to replicate an El Al airplane; their Hebrew speaking teachers offer orange juice while students watch an inflight travelogue movie. In older grades, paper bags stuffed with newspapers become The Kotel, and students place notes to God in the cracks between the bags. Many classes spend time drawing maps of Israel with attention to the geographical location of key cities and water sources. Yom Ha'atzmaut programs offer falafel and camel rides.

While each of these programs move beyond teacher lecture toward the experiential, none offer an image of Israel that is a good representation of "real life" today. Nor do they attempt to address why Israel is critically

Israel that is a good representation of “real life” today. Nor do they attempt to address why Israel is critically important to Jews, create strong Jew-to-Jew connections across the ocean, or place in some context the struggles in Israel that hit our evening news.

Other educational issues stem from the stance of American Jews to Zionist ideology. Rabbi Nathan Laufer of the Wexner Heritage Foundation states, “Zionism is somewhat countercultural. American Jews, like Americans generally, are increasingly self- and individually-centered. They also pride themselves on being universal — inclusive of all people, etc. In this sense, being Zionist— supporting a Jewish State — runs somewhat against the grain of American life both because it connotes a communal identity and because it is not consonant with the inclusive universalism that is part and parcel of being an American.” Thus, the starting point of Israel education for American Jews must be different from that of Jews living elsewhere.

American textbooks from previous decades focused on the story of mythical Israel — pioneers draining malaria-infested swamps by day and dancing the horah around campfires at night and heroic soldiers rescuing hijacked Jews from the depths of Africa. The American textbooks published after the Six-Day War justified the importance of learning about Israel. Behold the Land (UAHC, 1968) stated, “The Jewish people has special qualities and so does the Jewish State. Our problems are like no other people’s problems. Neither are our solutions...” Speaking of this era, educator Walter Ackerman wrote, “... A deep belief in the promise of America has led Jews in the United States to view Zionism and Israel as a philanthropic effort on behalf of their less fortunate brethren in other parts of the world, rather than as an instance of personal and national redemption.” The tree-planting scene from Sallah Shabbati, might not have been that far off the mark!

The emotional ties of older generations — who either lived through Israel’s “glory years,” or who were educated to view Israel’s values as a mirror of American democracy — have a different connection to and understanding of Israel than today’s youth who absorb Israel through evening news and morning newspaper accounts of suicide bombers and the Intifada. Today’s students study about Israel from more recent textbooks, most of which focus on the similarities between the lives of children in the U. S. and the lives of children in Israel, adding some historical and geographical perspectives. These texts are more social studies in nature, addressing lifestyles in Israel (both Jewish and non-Jewish), and the potential bridges between Israelis and Jews elsewhere. While they might build positive images of Israel, many of these books do not help students uncover important understandings that connect them deeply to the people of Israel, nor to the nuances of life in the Jewish State. Nor do they acknowledge the Arab-Israeli conflict in a serious age-appropriate way.

If we measure the goals of lessons that are based on “orange juice and paper bags,” as well as “living in like-circumstances,” we see that students do not absorb the images or make the connections to Israel that will sustain our People into the future. Perhaps this is one reason why the Israel experiences became so important to the American Jewish educational process. There is no doubt that early Jewish history is best taught “where it all began” and that Jewish ritual practice is more natural in the Place where certain mitzvot are based (e.g., those commanded to be observed in The Land, as well as those that are more easily observed in a place where Jews are the majority). And yet, there are those who would assert that Israel trips can be problematic in their conceptualization and content. Rabbi Dov Lerea, of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School (New York), asserts that “American Zionism has transformed Israel into a theme park. The educational trips have become standardized and modular. Israel is a place for bar mitzvah celebrations and family vacations. It is the capital of American Jewish leisure time, rather than a fulfilling spiritual yearning, burning deeply within the Jew’s soul, to

feel the soil under one's feet, and to root oneself in the soil of Jewish memories and experiences, from which a vision for the future of the world can be projected." If one agrees with Lanau, then one can see a golden opportunity to reconceptualize the place of Israel in American Jewish life. It is clear that the normative ways American Jews have been educated on Israel do not always help shape understandings of army incursions into Gaza, or of suicide bombers within the broader place of Israel, in the lives of the Jews, and the place of the Jewish People in Israel.

Israel Education: A View From Israel

To the credit of Israel educators whose businesses have plummeted since the start of the second Intifada, creative approaches to the issues of Israel education have been explored. One large-scale response to the huge drop in American tourism was launched by the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), with the help and support of the United Jewish Communities. Known as Israel Education Month (IEM), the four week period that immediately followed Tu B'Shvat in 5763 (2003), became a time of Israel education and celebration. Activities and programs were available on the Internet for use by schools, teachers, and families as desired. Educators from Israel traveled to communities across the world for "house calls," presenting programs for a wide variety of ages.

Just as mathematicians help shape math education, and scientists help shape science education, it would make sense for Israel's educators to shape Israel education beyond its borders. Yet, there are a number of American educators who take issue with programs developed "there" for "here," citing a mismatch between Israeli assumptions about American education and culture. But deeper problems may stem from Israel's stance on Zionist philosophy and educational approaches that do not integrate well with the broader goals of American Jewish education.

Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, Director of Research for the Department of Jewish-Zionist Education of the Jewish Agency for Israel, offers an analysis of three conceptual frameworks for understanding the approach of Israelis to Israel education. The first two are historical, and the third represents a recent paradigm shift. Kopelowitz is clear about the power of working within a paradigm and being true to it, and the likely failure that ensues when the "claims of one paradigm are mixed with the practices of another." He posits that Israel educators are doing just that — talking about a "new Zionism" but creating programs based on classical Zionism.

1. Classical Zionism focuses on the nation-state, classifying Jews as either living in the nation-state (Israel) or outside of it (Diaspora). According to Kopelowitz, the goal of education for classical Zionists is to encourage full commitment to the Jewish State via aliyah. If that goal is out-of-reach, then bringing Jews to visit Israel is pursued, and barring achievement of that, Israelis going out (shlichut) is the last acceptable model. Dr. Elan Ezrachi, in an article offering credence to this model, states that "the aim of Israel education is to bring American Jews to an active engagement with Israeli culture, people, and day-to-day life." It is clear that Israel Education Month was established to fulfill the classical Zionist paradigm: As participation in teen programs to Israel dropped, Israeli educators worked to bring themselves and their programs to the United States, providing world Jewry with information about Israeli life.

Dr. Kopelowitz makes an interesting observation about classical Zionist education:

The common assumption of both Israeli and Diaspora educators who draw on the paradigm is that a meeting of Israeli and Diaspora Jews is a situation in which the Israeli Jew represents the State of Israel

meeting of Israeli and Diaspora Jews is a situation in which the Israeli Jew represents the State of Israel to Diaspora Jewry. From the Israeli perspective, the “shaliach” [emissary] perceives him or herself as an ambassador whose role it is to educate the Diaspora Jew about Israel. There is no expectation on the part of the Israeli that he or she will learn about what it means to be Jewish from the Jews they meet during their time abroad. Likewise, Diaspora educators who use the classical Zionist paradigm are not interested in learning how to be Jewish from Israelis. Rather than learning about Jewish life in Israel, the Diaspora educator wants to receive a representation from Israelis of mythical and heroic Israel.

The rapid decline in teen trips to Israel threatens educational programs of the classical Zionist mode, for the on-site opportunity for the study of Israel in Israel, has disappeared at least temporarily.

2. Education for Jewish Peoplehood is the second paradigm explored by Kopelowitz. In this, the focus shifts from the Diaspora to the individual, with the goal of strengthening personal Jewish identity by connecting individuals to other Jews. While each Jew may enter a program with a narrow identity (American, Israeli, Russian, Reform, Conservative), s/he leaves with a sense of belonging to Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. For more than a decade, Israel educators have tapped into this paradigm though the use of mifgashim (meetings between individuals or groups of Israelis and Diaspora Jews), as well as through shutfut (partnerships between institutions).

In its purest form, the paradigm of Jewish Peoplehood “deemphasize(s) the centrality of Israel and Israeli Jews in favor of a more egalitarian conception of cooperation between individual Jews the world over.” For it to be fully operational, Israelis, for whom issues of Jewish identity have long been ignored, must also be the target of the educational program.

Yet, Kopelowitz claims that Israeli educators have stood at arm’s distance from the Peoplehood paradigm, because it is hard for them not to “preserve the centrality of Israel within the Jewish experience;” Israelis cannot engage in mifgashim as true give-and-take partners. Rather, they have been able to represent Israel to others, but not reciprocally strengthen their own Judaism and sense of peoplehood during their encounters with non-Israelis. American Jews traveling to Israel appreciate the possibility of getting beyond their tour bus into the living rooms of Israelis. But it is in the hands of those arranging these meetings (the Israeli educators), whether these mifgashim only open a one-way mirror onto Israeli society, or more deeply build connections Jew-to-Jew.

3. New Zionism is the final paradigm explored by Kopelowitz. It is a blending of the classical Zionist and Jewish Peoplehood paradigms and responds to the idea of “Israel as Center.” It is through this model that Israel educators can find coherence in their work – Israel can be central, and partnership can be emphasized. Kopelowitz states, “What is new is a discourse about the need for Israeli-Jews to take seriously the nature of Jewish life outside of Israel and to actively debate the nature of Israel’s place in the Jewish world . . .” Indeed, this is not a completely new model of Zionist philosophy, for Ahad Ha’am promoted the idea of Israel as spiritual center (a partnership model), rather than national homeland (which places Israel at the center). The twist for Kopelowitz is that those shaping Israeli educational policy are taking seriously the coalescence of these two ideological stances.

Synthesizing the Two Views

The issues are clear:

- Americans are in need of an ideological focus to their teaching of Israel, and a plethora of high quality curricular materials and textbooks to scaffold their educational efforts.

- Israeli educators are unconsciously blending paradigms, and the lack of conscious targeting to the context and needs of American Jews make their efforts less than effective.

We live in a postmodern global world, in which boundaries of nation-states are fast disappearing through technologies of communication, transportation, and even the cross-country bonds of family. This drastically shifts the classical relationship of Israel (developed as the nation-state that came into existence to protect and “ingather” world Jewry) and the Diaspora (the area defined in contradistinction to Israel, as being dispersed outside the boundaries of the nation-state special to Jews). In other words, classical Zionism talks of “Israel” (the “right place to be”) and “not-Israel” (the “not-right place to be”). Thus, any form of education using the terms Israel and the Diaspora, approaches “mifgash” as an oxymoron.

The “us” and “them” of Israelis and the Diaspora Jews does not build toward the “we-ness” of Am Yisrael (the People of Israel), and in today’s global society, perhaps it should. While there is no argument about the centrality of Israel to Jewish life and religion, there is a philosophical difference between “Israel is the Center,” and “Israel is one of the Centers of modern Jewish life.”

While Kopelowitz’ vision of a new Zionism blends the classical (Israel – Diaspora) and the new (Jewish Peoplehood), perhaps a completely different paradigm is appropriate. Israeli educators educate “for Israel.” But American educators have a broader mandate, educating “for Judaism.” For American liberal Jewish educators, Israel is a part of that conceptualization, but not the center. In fact, when looking at the textbook and curricular approaches commonly used in North America, Israel often becomes a vehicle for connecting children to Am Yisrael (peoplehood), for reinforcing understandings about Jewish holidays, and for teaching Jewish history.

It is time to refocus Jewish education both in the United States and Israel. If Israel educators’ efforts to help shape Israel education in the U.S. are to be taken seriously, then they need to think beyond their desires to “sell” Israel or to make American Jews “literate in every aspect of Israeli culture.” And if Jewish education is to have impact in the U.S., then American educators must begin to think in terms of the big ideas of Jewish education and the role of Israel within it. Perhaps both communities of educators need to begin

1. Thinking about the end-goals of Israel education, for it is not meaningful to postmodern Jews searching for meaning to simply “achieve literacy in every aspect of Israeli culture.” Do we want to:
2. Educate for philanthropy, making sure that American Jewry is primed to be supportive of Israel in hours of need?
3. Educate for partnership, bringing together Israelis and American Jews on behalf of Jewish continuity worldwide?
4. Educate for civic responsibility, ensuring Israel’s future as a homeland and haven for Jews?
5. Educate for advocacy and hasbarah, providing a foundation for American Jews to understand and explain the political issues faced by the Jewish State by virtue of its history and location on the world map?
6. Educate for aliyah, encouraging Jews to join in the building of the Jewish homeland?
7. Educate for deeper religious connections to Israel, making explicit the centrality of Zion in our Jewish texts and prayers?
8. Thinking about the end-goals of education in Israel for American Jews (especially teens and young adults). Note the difference between this statement and the previous one, for it expands the possibilities

adults). Note the difference between this statement and the previous one, for it expands the possibilities beyond education about Israel per se, to experiences that build positive Jewish attitudes and behaviors. This means considering the many facets of Jewish identity and capitalizing on the unique place of Israel to shape the Jewish self and create commitments to Jewish belief, practice and peoplehood.

9. Thinking about the issues created by the societal differences between Israelis and American Jews. Israelis live and breathe the Land, Jewish Peoplehood, and Statehood. On the other hand, Americans are greatly influenced by their minority status within a large diverse society.
10. Thinking beyond the nation-state to a global conceptualization of Jewish peoplehood. We are a worldwide covenantal community, with a shared destiny and a promised land. Israelis live in the promised land, but do not hold sole rights to its destiny or promise. For their part, American Jews traditionally have not sought out partnerships with Jews worldwide, but rather kept their sights on the needs and issues of their own Jewish community. Working in partnership, Israelis, American Jews, and other Jews worldwide can realize the potential of kol Yisrael arevin zeh la-zeh (all Jews are responsible for one another).
11. Thinking about the search for meaning in which postmoderns engage. If today's non-Orthodox Jews make choices about their Jewish practices based upon what is meaningful, then Israel education needs to be shaped to answer the questions of today's Jews. This may need to start with the dissonance felt in relation to the warm and fuzzy feelings Jews would like to have toward Israel, and the harsh reality of nightly news reports.
12. Thinking about ways to open Jews outside of Israel to the struggles of Israeli individuals, issue-specific groups, society and government to base decisions on Jewish values and mitzvot. To be successful, Israeli educators cannot simply translate "values clarification exercises" originally developed for Israeli students into English. Full consideration for the American milieu, for the background of American students, and the concomitant development of appropriate support materials, are a must.
13. Thinking about how to complement current trends in American Jewish education. In terms of content, this includes studying classical texts, focusing on middot and ethics, and building toward the big ideas. In terms of format, this includes greater emphasis on family education, adult education, and early childhood education (the latter as a bridge to young parents).
14. Thinking about the educational foci for our youngest students. The images and representations of Israel we give them should create foundations for later studies and build deeper connections as Jews to Israel; Israel education is also about creating memories and sacred connections.
15. Thinking about the developmental level of students. There is a tendency in American Jewish education to cram "all" of Jewish content into the pre-bar and bat mitzvah years because of the large dropout rate after age thirteen. But certain Jewish topics and conceptual foci do not mesh with the general studies scope and sequence in our public and private schools. One good example of this issue is teaching Israeli and/or Jewish history prior to the learning of general studies history, which for most American students does not happen in a coherent way until late middle or high school years. The attempts of Jewish educators to "do this anyway" leads to non-effective learning. Jewish educators need to seriously consider where and how Israel should fit into a Jewish educational scope and sequence.
16. Thinking about the shaping of mifgashim (meetings/connections) between Israelis and Americans, creating structures that open each to the ideas of the other, with the end goal of working in shutfut (partnership) toward building a strong Jewish people worldwide.

[Next Steps](#)

These ruminations and suggestions are designed to open discussion between Israelis and Americans on the continuing issues of Israel education for Jews in the United States. Neither the American nor Israeli educators can do this on their own. The bias of this author is that American Jewish educators should take the lead, on behalf of their own students; they know the culture and issues of American liberal Jewish society. But note the choice of the words, “take the lead,” for Israeli educators who live on The Land in The State, bring to the table a wealth of background, information, and potential conceptualizations. The article’s assumptions, as well as conclusions, can be argued and turned on their head. But they offer a starting point for out-of-the-box thinking at a time when those in the U.S. and Israel need to connect a future generation to our land, state and people, moving beyond the stereotypes of Israelis as suntanned kibbutzniks and Americans as philanthropists who own the trees.

Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz is Director of Curriculum Resources at the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland. NMoskowitz@JECC.org