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Lies in the Library

Libraries have become the latest battleground in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Israelis are getting bibliographically battered.

by *Andrea Rapp*

A few months ago, I ordered a collection of recently published children's books on Israel for our temple library. Much to my dismay, after reviewing the works I discovered that many books contained flat-out incorrect information reported as fact, demonstrated a blatant anti-Israel bias, or sometimes both. These are the library books on Israel that students across the country will be consulting for reports and class assignments. It's frightening.

Here are a few examples of the falsehoods and errors I found:

- In *The Six-Day War* by Matthew Broyles (2004), one of The Rosen Publishing Group's new series of books on the Middle East wars, Broyles states that the 1917 Balfour Declaration proposed to divide Palestine between Jews and Arabs and make Jerusalem an international city. Actually, these proposals were not in the Balfour Declaration, but in the UN partition resolution of twenty years later; the Balfour Declaration declared that the British government favors "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Broyles goes on to say that the Jews "boldly" declared their state in May of 1948, then "war began." The author makes no mention of the UN partition resolution; instead, he writes, "the home of the Palestinians was now the home of the Jews," and so the homeless Palestinians fled. Here, as in many other books, the entire Arab-Israeli conflict is portrayed as one long frustrated Palestinian attempt to achieve statehood, rather than as Arab resistance to the State of Israel.
- In *A Historical Atlas of Israel* (Rosen Publishing Group, 2003), Amy Romano does mention the 1947 UN partition resolution but editorializes: "Although the Jews accepted the decree, they had no intention of honoring it."
- In Virginia Brackett's biography, *Menachem Begin* (Chelsea House, 2003), Brackett relates how the Arab-Israeli conflict came before the UN in 1947, but she omits the fact that the UN passed a partition resolution calling for a Jewish and an Arab state, which the Jews accepted and the Arabs rejected. By her account, the sequence was as follows: In April of 1948, Jews killed Arabs at Deir Yassin, Arabs fled the land, David Ben Gurion declared the new State of Israel in May, and the British departed immediately. Thus was the State of Israel born.
- In *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Abdo and Daughters, 2004), Cory Gunderson asserts that "the Israeli military killed hundreds of Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon." In fact, it was Lebanese Christian militiamen who committed the killings in the camps.
- In Tracey Boraas' generally accurate book *Israel* (Capstone Press, 2003), she asserts that the 2000 Camp David talks collapsed because "both Israel and the Palestinian Authority insisted on control of East Jerusalem." In fact, the Israelis agreed to cede control of Arab East Jerusalem to the Palestinian side. Since the Palestinian delegation walked out of Camp David without presenting a counterproposal, it is impossible to pin the collapse of the talks on any one issue.

Sometimes a single word was enough for me to consider a book inappropriate for our temple library. In an otherwise lovely book for middle-grade students, *Welcome to Israel* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), Meredith Costain and Paul Collins write: "A group of Jews known as Zionists wanted Palestine to become a state where only Jews could live." The use of the word "only" presents an entirely false and sinister picture of Israel's founders.

Aside from factual errors, something else is afoot in books on the Arab-Israeli conflict: the acceptance of creeping historical revisionism promulgated by Palestinian media sources. The most common untruths are the assertions that the Palestinian Arabs are the inheritors of the ancient Canaanites (or the Philistines) and that Jews and Arabs (now reborn as "Canaanites") have been at war with each other for millennia--both fictions seeking to show that Arab ties to the land are deeper than those of the Jews.

Consider these two examples:

- In the introduction to *I Remember Palestine* (Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1995), Anita Ganeri writes that "Palestine is the historical name...A country called Israel is now in this area," and that "Palestine was taken over by the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans." In fact, it was in the 2nd century CE that the Romans, in retribution against the Jews for their revolt against Rome, cynically dubbed the Jewish land "Palestine," after the Jews' historic nemesis, the Philistines. The Philistines were an

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Aegean people, not Arabs. The Babylonians never inhabited "Palestine," although they did conquer ancient Judah. And "Palestine" did not exist at the time of the Greek conquest in the 4th century BCE.

- Donald J. Zeigler's *Israel* (Chelsea House, 2003) reports that while modern Israelis trace their roots back to the ancient Israelites, the Palestinians' "namesakes appeared on the map as residents of Canaan." Here too we have the Palestinians-as-Philistines. A full-page illustration of David brandishing the severed head of the Philistine Goliath appears to demonstrate the supposed three-thousand-year old conflict between Jews and Arabs.

Many books put forth a sinister image of Israel. Israel's former Prime Minister Menachem Begin is frequently labeled a "terrorist," while Yassir Arafat is described as "moderate" or "mild-mannered." Photographs depict Israelis as gun-toting soldiers and Palestinians as hard-working farmers or fearful-looking women and children. The photo caption in *I Remember Palestine* by Anita Ganeri is typical: "Palestinians demonstrate for the right to rule themselves in the Occupied Territories, free from the daily restrictions imposed by Israeli soldiers, barricades, and barbed wire fences." The caption fails to explain that barricades are measures to protect Israelis from Palestinian terrorist attacks.

This reluctance to identify Israelis as victims is evident even in *Murder at the 1972 Olympics in Munich* by Liz Sonneborn (Rosen, 2003). One of the killers is said to have felt proud that for the first time his life had meaning. Sonneborn "explains" that at the birth of Israel, Israeli soldiers had forced hundreds of thousands of Arabs into camps, living in tin huts that did little to protect them from scorching heat and harsh winds, and this led them to vow to "liberate" Palestine.

How It Happens

How can reputable American publishers routinely release children's books replete with factual and insidious errors?

Sometimes it happens unintentionally. With rare exceptions, these books are not written by scholars or historians, but by writers who are not necessarily experts in their published area. Publishers commission writers to compose one or more titles for their nonfiction "series," such as a series on holidays, on zoo animals, or on nations of the world. A single author might be called upon to write one book on Mother's Day customs for the holiday series, a second book on polar bears for the zoo animals series, and a third on the Arab-Israeli conflict for a world history series. Indeed, in 2002 Boraas wrote books on Australia, Columbia, Sweden, England, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Sam Houston in addition to her book on Israel. Similarly, in 2003 Sonneborn wrote books on German Americans, the Cherokee, and *Miranda v. Arizona*.

As some authors are less rigorous than others in their research, publishers sometimes engage academic experts to oversee the content of series books, but this additional step does not guarantee correction of errors and/or bias. Of the twenty-five books on Israel I considered, four cited on their title pages the names of university academic advisers or consultants, yet I rejected three for my library because of major factual errors.

In certain cases, biases in educational materials appear to be intentional. In her examination of high school social studies textbooks for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, New York University professor and Brookings Institution fellow Diane Ravitch found that most of the textbooks she researched were replete with half-truths, distortions, and double standards. When slavery was discussed in a Western context (the enslavement of Africans by the West) it was condemned as evil, but when reported on in the context of non-Western cultures, it was described euphemistically as a path to upward career mobility or as a chance to join a new family. Ravitch also discovered disparities in textbook attitudes towards dictators of fallen and current repressive regimes; authors were quick to criticize Hitler and Stalin, but showed deference to 21st-century tyrannical regimes, such as those in Communist China and present-day Iran. In addition, her review of textbooks reporting on the September 11 attacks yielded not a single account of the history of Islamic fundamentalism or other background information to provide a context for the acts of terror. The forward to her Fordham Institute report notes that textbook readers will scarcely discern that someone had actually organized these attacks. In the textbooks Ravitch examined, as in the books I reviewed, there is a startling lack of exploration as to the causality of current world events. Wars "break out," peace conferences "fail"--all rather mysteriously, without historical context.

Ravitch concluded that the simplified, sanitized, dumbed-down, poorly written, and often inaccurate material in today's textbooks reflect a culture that has suffused American textbook publishing. The bias and sensitivity review panels employed by publishers and by state education agencies (i.e. the purchasers of textbooks) issue guidelines for the purpose of ensuring that textbook writers do not inadvertently use "politically unacceptable language" or language that would offend feminists or advocates for conservative religious interests, disability groups, or ethnic activist organizations. Such guidelines mandate the excision of many hundreds of words and concepts that have been deemed "biased" or potentially offensive such as "fireman," "actress," "landlord," "brotherhood," and "cowboy," and publishers willingly submit to this censorship. Ravitch did not say whether Israel's enemies have won a slot on the not-to-be offended list, but it is clear from the books I have seen that Israel has no such favored spot in the world of educational publishing.

The American Textbook Council (ATC), an independent research organization which examines textbooks and seeks to promote civic education, came to conclusions similar to those of Ravitch. Its 2003 report,

"Islam and the Textbooks," compared history textbooks' treatment of Islamic history and culture with the scholarly writings of historians such as Bernard Lewis and concluded that world history texts mislead students about the nature of important Muslim concepts and issues such as *jihad*, *sharia* (Muslim law), slavery, and the role of women. The textbooks, they discovered, did not inform students of the traditional meaning of *jihad* (an obligation to bring the world under Islamic law) or that, according to *sharia*, the state is the agent of the Muslim faith. Consequently, from these books, students would not be able to discern the large gap separating American jurisprudence from the system of Islamic law. A California-based advocacy group called The Council on Islamic Education, self-proclaimed to act as Islam's liaison to the nation's public schools, has worked with publishers "to ensure that they meet a certain standard of sensitivity," the ATC reports. As textbook editors are doing the Council's bidding, "history textbooks accommodate Islam on terms that Islamists demand."

After the authors, consultants, and publishers come the final "schoolbook gatekeepers"--the reviewers in library journals. Librarians rely on reviews published in their professional journals as a basis for acquisitions. Reviewers, however, may be lacking in expertise in the area of review or may have their own biases. *School Library Journal* (SLJ), a very popular selection source for children's materials, found Abdo's series on *World in Conflict*, which includes Gunderson's books, to be "politically balanced" in presenting the historical and political factors "contributing to the separate identities of Israel and Palestine." Never mind that there is no nation of Palestine. *SLJ* also recommended Cath Senker's new book, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, describing it as "nonjudgmental." In contrast, the Association of Jewish Libraries' children's books reviewer Linda Silver found that the book "reflects the anti-Israeli sentiment that is prevalent in Europe [where this book was originally published]...The format is attractive until one notices the preponderance of armed and menacing Israeli soldiers juxtaposed with poor, peaceful looking Palestinian Arabs, mostly old people or children.... The text's point of view is entirely pro-Palestinian as well. On the very first page, it is stated that 'Israel is an enemy of the Arab states. Israel was established through war.' " Silver has offered to write a column for *School Library Journal* that would discuss the reviewing of books on Israel. At the time of this writing, *SLJ*'s editors have not responded.

Changing the Status Quo

What can be done to change this culture of censorship and bias?

First, we need to become better informed. Good sources include Diane Ravitch's book, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); the American Textbook Council's report on "Islam in the Textbooks," accessible at www.historytextbooks.org; and websites such as www.memri.org, which posts translations from the Middle East media outlets, and www.pmw.org.il, the Palestinian Media Watch, not to be confused with the pro-Palestinian Palestine Media Watch.

Second, we need to become involved with organizations that are committed to correcting anti-Israel bias in library books and other media--organizations such as CAMERA (www.camera.org) and the recently established Librarians for Fairness (www.librariansforfairness.org).

Third, we as a community need to call for transparency in the educational publishing business. Book publishers should publicly release their sensitivity guidelines, along with the names and credentials of the members of their bias and sensitivity review panels. Diane Ravitch believes that "many things that are done surreptitiously cannot withstand the light of day."

Bernard Lewis warns that we live in times when "great efforts are being made to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda." We can see this process at work in our children's library books and textbooks about Israel and the Middle East, and it's time we act to stop it.

Andrea Rapp is temple librarian at the Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio. A Judaica librarian for more than twenty years, she holds a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in History from Northwestern University and a Master's in Library Science from the University of Minnesota.