

## Inside Teaching Israel

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**H**ow do we teach honestly and fully about the Jewish State – a place so sanctified by some, so vilified by others, and so sketchily understood by even those Jews who say they care about it deeply? This issue of *Sh'ma* explores the pedagogical and philosophical underpinnings of teaching about Israel – in day schools, university classrooms, on Israel trips, and elsewhere – and it asks tough questions about how informal and formal educational programs might rethink their assumptions about educating a new generation to more deeply understand the complexity of the State of Israel. – SB

## Connecting Israel to Jewish Life

*Lisa D. Grant*

**F**or centuries, Israel has been embedded in the hearts and minds of Jews as a spiritual homeland, an idealized place where dreams are fulfilled. The language of prayer is saturated with references to the ingathering of the exiles from the four corners of the earth, the realization of a “rebuilt” Jerusalem to herald the Messianic age and, more recently, the actualization of statehood as the “first flowering of our redemption.” Yet, the powerful spiritual and symbolic force of this idealized Israel has lost a great deal of its resonance for many American Jews in light of the complex political, social, cultural, and religious realities of Israel today. As a result, Israel does not figure greatly into the way American Jews make personal meaning from being Jewish today.

Teaching Israel is certainly one of the greatest challenges of Jewish education in American communities. Indeed, for decades educational researchers and thinkers have observed that few Jewish educators are truly reflective about why, what, or how they teach Israel. Even among those individuals and institutions at the forefront of Jewish educational innovation, few are able to articulate a clear vision or their reason for teaching Israel that extends beyond vague and implicit expressions of Israel being a core component of Jewish identity formation.

At least in part, our inability to develop a compelling vision for Israel education lies in our inability to define why Israel should matter to American Jews comfortably at home in American society. We also are ambivalent about which Israel to teach. Is it a political narrative about the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Is it a romantic portrait of a land flowing with milk and honey? Is it a story about rescue and refuge for Jews in danger around the world? Is it about a society of modern miracles and technological marvels, or a society of corruption, dysfunction, and tension among rich and poor, religious and secular, Arabs and Jews? Or is it all of the above?

Basically, the content and experiences of Israel through formal and informal educational experiences (including trips) remain largely on a symbolic or even “mythic” level for most American Jews. And we seem comfortable with this approach. Anything more would conflict with the not-so-hidden curriculum of American Jewish education, which is how to function as an American Jew. Inasmuch as Israel education can be used as a way to reinforce