

Related Sources:

Avnery, Judy and Annette Koren, *Re-Engagement with Israel through Education: The BJE 2002-2004 Project Final Report*, (Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education, 2004).

Margolis, Daniel, *Re-Engagement with Israel*, (Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education, 2003).

Margolis, Daniel and Naomi Towvim, *A Call for An Educational Re-Engagement with Israel*, in *Jewish Education News*, (New York: CAJE, 2004) Volume 25, Number 1, pp. 52-53.

Miller-Jacobs, Sandy and Annette Koren, *Teaching About Israel in Boston Area Jewish Schools: Implications for the Community*, (Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education, 2002).

Towvim, Naomi, *The Teaching of Israel Network, et. al., Are We One? Issues in Israel-Diaspora Relations* (High-School-Adult unit of *The Israel Connection*), (New York: JESNA, 1993).

See also:

Eisen, Arnold and Michael Rosenak, *Israel in our lives, Teaching Israel: Basic issues and Philosophical Guidelines* (Jerusalem: The CRB Foundation, JAFI Department of Jewish and Zionist Education, and JESNA, 1997).

Margolis, Daniel and Shlomo Shimon, *Israel in our lives, Teaching Israel: Israel in Bureaus of Jewish Education* (Jerusalem: The CRB Foundation, JAFI Department of Jewish and Zionist Education, and JESNA, 1997).

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Do you agree with Margolis that ‘too much of our North American Jewish identity has been predicated on Israel?’ What alternative views (e.g., from other articles in this issue of *Agenda: Jewish Education*) counter this view?
- What is your stance regarding the centrality of Israel to Jewish identity? How does that influence the way that you view or educate about Israel?
- Margolis claims that our communal leaders have educated us to view Israel in ‘response to crisis’ rather than educate about Israel in her own right. Do you agree? How does his perspective relate to those presented in articles by Chazan and Ezrachi in this issue of *Agenda*?
- Margolis calls for each synagogue, school and community to develop a clear statement of its commitment to Israel. How could such discussions be stimulated? Who are the stakeholders who need to be at the table for such conversations? What would be needed to implement the ensuing decisions programmatically?

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Elan Ezrachi envisions an ‘open global village’ with Israel at its center as the focus for Israel education and Jewish education in the United States. Beginning with a review of the history of the Jewish community in the United States, Ezrachi explains why he believes Israel education has been a problem in our communities and proposes ways that lay and professional leadership can confront this challenge, both philosophically and practically.

Re-Imagine Israel Education

ELAN EZRACHI

Since the eruption of violence in Israel in October 2001, the relations of North American Jews to Israel are tainted by a sense of crisis. One expression of this “so called” crisis is the absence of a proper educational response to the new reality. Two indica-

tors are often mentioned. First, the dramatic drop in educational travel to Israel (92% drop in participation in *Israel Experience* programs between 2001 and 2002),¹ and second, the vulnerability of Jewish students on the North American university campus. Educators and

community leaders are concerned that Jewish university students are ill prepared to face the attacks on Israel's policy, as the campus has become an increasingly hostile environment. Most of the institutional efforts in recent years have been directed toward responding to these alarming symptoms in a variety of educational and communal campaigns. Little has been done to confront the real problem of Israel education.

As I see it, the *matzav* (the "situation," a technical term that was used in the American Jewish discourse at the beginning of the 2001 *intifada* to describe the state of crisis in Israel) is not the cause of the crisis in Israel education. If anything, the crisis in Israel's security and well being served as a trigger for intensification of trends that existed prior to these developments.

Before any discussion on the pragmatics of Israel education in the United States, it is important to assess the place of Israel in Jewish life in the United States. Such an assessment will demonstrate that the role of Israel in the life of Jews in the United States has been problematic from the outset.

The American Jewish experience evolved on a parallel track to the Zionist "project." The majority of American Jews immigrated to the New World with the expectation to settle and flourish in the land of opportunity. Zionism, in the American Jewish imagination, was a venture worthy of support, a source of pride and compassion, but not a prescribed goal for personal fulfillment. Jonathan Sarna points out that American Jews were particularly fascinated by the components that were lacking in American Jewish life: a high moral character, the pioneering spirit and the socially just society.² But this fascination was not regarded as a call for a direct engagement with Israel's day-to-day reality. Breaking away from classical Zionism, American Jews regard the *American experience* as the fulfillment of contemporary Jewish life. Many American Jews feel that Israel is a solution for Jews who cannot exercise the freedom and the opportunities that American

Jews enjoy. In essence, Israel is a refuge for *other* Jews. Jews in America, as part of their communal responsibility, should support this refuge with generosity and dedication. This basic American Jewish position is, in my mind, the core of the problem that American Jewish education has to face.

The problem does not end with the clash between the two narratives. Looking at this issue from a sociological perspective we are confronted with another dimension of difficulty. The problem lies in the fact that American Jews lack the basic characteristics of a Diaspora community. The term Diaspora (or *Galut*, exile) is commonly used to characterize the experience of Jews throughout history in the context of exile, homelessness and dispersion from the historical homeland.³ The term Diaspora does not fit nicely with the American Jewish narrative of successful Americanization. American Jews rejected the classical Jewish narrative of Diaspora as well as rejecting the notion of Israel as the "homeland," thus resorting to regard Israel in symbolic properties. In today's sociological analysis, the concept of Diaspora is part of the sociology of immigration. Namely, it is a *one-way* process of displacement, relocation and acculturation. James Clifford describes the main features of the typical diasporic identity: "a history of dispersal, myth/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship."⁴ Clifford acknowledges that the application of this definition to specific groups requires flexibility since no community can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history. Indeed, the American Jewish experience does not share in that part of the definition that talks about alienation from the host country and a desire to return to the homeland.

The organized American Jewish community has been functioning as a Diaspora for decades, working on behalf of Israel and other international Jewish affairs. However, the politics of the American Jewish Diaspora were limited to

the protection of Israel's interests in the international arena and rescue and relief for Jews in distress. This highly effective performance stopped short of an American Jewish communal and educational effort to engage young Americans with Israeli society and culture. American Jews chose to keep Israel on the symbolic level and refrain from direct engagement with the evolving Israeli experience. Steven M. Cohen framed this pattern of holding back from a greater involvement. He argued that Israel is: "virtually absent from the private sphere. For American Jews pro-Israelism is all political, it is neither cultural not spiritual; ...American Jewish involvement with Israel is far more bound up with fear and danger than with hope and opportunity."⁵ American Jewish identity did not develop as a transnational identity that invites individuals to engage in active relationships with Jewish communities outside the United States, and particularly with Israel.

As time goes by, most American Jews will not have personal memories of displacement and immigration to be used in constructing their identities. Nor will they be able to relate to the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel as concrete and personal memories. Jewish education will continue to do its best to reproduce more *American* Jews as the struggle to retain meaning and structure continues.

It is here where the challenge to Jewish Education lies. What are the properties of American Jewish education that can be conducive to the development of a global Jewish identity, with Israel in its center?

The answer is both ideological and pragmatic. On the ideological level American Judaism has to formulate a position that fits well with today's American Jewish set of values and lifestyles. American Jewish theology and ideology needs to come up with a persuasive argument regarding Israel. A call for the defense of Israel will not suffice. Israel has to be presented to American Jews as a source of spiritual nourishment, as a celebration of Jewish revival, as a reference point for revitalization of Jewish

life in America, and as possible place for American Jews to settle. (Yes, *aliya* should be part of the lexicon.) Israeli culture, in all its manifestations needs to be present in both the private and the public Jewish spheres. Modern Hebrew should be regarded as an essential tool for contemporary Jewish identity. These are challenging demands that American Jewish educators need to undertake. There must be a strong value-based articulation of Israel's place in American Jewish life.

Once there is a true ideological transformation toward Israel, we will find that there are multiple ways to engage the next generation with Israel. The task is actually quite simple. What is needed is an intervention system that will instill relationships and memories into the identity construction of young Jews.

Anthropological literature offers us a direction through the works that examine the effect of globalization on identity development. The reality of globalization creates the flow of cultural objects, images and meanings, resulting in back-and-forth transferences, mutual influences, negotiations, relationships and constant transformations."⁶ This new reality provides a rich set of tools for Israel educators.

The lack of personal memories of Israel as the homeland needs to be replaced by breeding an imagined identity, which is a hybrid of the American and the Israeli experiences. Aside from Israeli immigrants in America, American Jews do not have these memories and the hybrid identity needs to be invented from the start.⁷ Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen use the concept that came out of their research on moderately affiliated baby boomers: "tribalism." They argue that: "most moderately affiliated Jews also continue to think of their relationship to other Jews as a matter of belonging to a group that extends 'vertically' through time and 'horizontally' through space." They coin the term "transcended belonging," which is a "feeling of deep connection to previous generations and future generations as well as to Jews of today who are scattered around the globe."⁸ They cite various examples in which their sub-

jects reflect on the connection to the Jewish people as a significant element in their lives. Looking at their findings, there seem to be more references to the vertical (historical) dimension of Jewish Peoplehood than to the horizontal (contemporary Jewry and Israel). And most of the horizontal references pertain to issues relating to the choice of friends, neighborhoods and romantic relationships, all within the American construct. While the vertical connection can be negotiated through rich assortment of symbolic rituals and religious practices, the options for expressions of the horizontal connection are more limited. Typically, American Jews are attuned to helping Jews in distress in places associated with crisis and need and thus often the category of 'helping Jews in need' serves as the American expression of Jewish Peoplehood.

A hybrid identity needs to be shaped by agents, as opposed to a natural process of identity development. Though historically diasporic identity tends to be reactive or situational, it is the task of Jewish education to influence identity development of such a type.

What kinds of "agents" are available to American Jews? Jewish education needs to be able to develop awareness to the multi-locality of Jewish life as part of the identity development process. This awareness has to be multi-dimensional; inviting young American Jews to negotiate their American identities with the "otherhood" of Jewish life. This requires an appropriate educational strategy, currently missing from the Jewish educational agenda.

An educational strategy for Israel Education has to be divided into two main parts. First is the educational work that needs to be done *locally*, within ones own community and second, the actual experiences that expose the next generation to the "otherness" of the Jewish people. In the process of education there is a need to socialize toward Jewish Peoplehood in a way that would lay the foundation to the life experiences that will follow. A deliberate effort has to take place in order to incorporate a "global" motif to all aspects of

American Jewish education. This is a broad-based discussion that covers the gamut of curriculum, implicit and explicit teaching, cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of education as well as communal support, ability to train educators as role models and providing appropriate resources. The ultimate goal of this educational process is to create a readiness for a global Jewish identity that will later be reinforced by a set of life experiences.

In this particular area of identity development "learning about" is not enough. The most effective agents of Jewish Peoplehood education are to be found within the non-formal educational process. As was mentioned earlier, the cultural effects of globalization open up new possibilities for experience and growth. This is a great window of opportunity for Jewish education. In terms of Israel education, the flow of cultural elements that can serve the educational process is achieved through two main (modern) activities: Travel and Contact.

Historically, travel was associated with either mass migration or with the ability of elite individuals to move around. The common folk did not have an opportunity to see the world for the purpose of learning and growth. Only in recent decades did travel become one of the most popular forms of experience and learning. Travel has become a growth opportunity as "it combines the pleasure of displacement with the enjoyable role of ethnographer/consumer and the position of heightened authority which accompany the power to totalize and appropriate, engaged in an outsiderly process of judgment and comparison."⁸ Travel can be a transformative experience, and is recognized as an important tool in human development. Respectively, the western world developed a wide range "industry" of tourism; study abroad; exploration; service corps; etc.

The Jewish community has been quick to discover the power of travel and created a variety of educational Jewish travel models, mostly to Israel. Young Jews are encouraged to travel to Israel for brief pilgrimages or long-term immersion and study programs. It is an estab-

lished fact that travel experience to Israel is an effective form of Jewish identity development.⁹ The communal leadership of the North American Jewish community embraced the idea of travel to Israel and gave it a very high profile, through resources and leadership. Most notable is the *birthright israel* initiative that enables thousands of American Jewish young adults to travel to Israel for free 10-day programs.¹⁰ Still, most American Jews do not choose to travel to Israel altogether. Organized Jewish travel to Israel covers only around a quarter of American Jews by the age of 26.¹¹ It is therefore important to invest a significant planning effort in developing a paradigm that will get every young American Jew to construct a set of travel schemes to Israel in the course of their personal development. The educational discourse needs to position the Israel travel as “normative,” a pre-requisite for a full Jewish life in America that provides a growth experience critical for the future of the Jewish community.

But travel is not only about moving from one locale to the other. This movement involves contact with people of other cultures. Clifford argues that while the world still employs boundaries and passages the reality is that “cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones.”¹² Contact with other cultures is another feature of the modern world, and particularly in the second half of the 20th century. Individuals are exposed to meeting with people of other cultures through multiple venues. Intercultural contact is a common feature of today’s human growth experience. Encounters with people of other cultures are a useful tool for self-discovery and identity development. All this should be applied to today’s Israel education.

The combination of travel to Israel and contact with Israel’s culture and society is the most powerful agency for Jewish Peoplehood education. A strategy for Jewish Peoplehood that begins at home should lead to the development of life experiences that will exemplify the notion of Jewish Peoplehood. Travel and

Contact are headings for a broad range of educational and communal interventions that need to be further developed, beyond existing models. Most American Jews do not have sufficient exposure to educational moments that might breed this kind of global Jewish identity.

The American Jewish community is *sui generis* in its evolution as a Diaspora. Compared to other ethnic groups, both old and new, Jews are split between their memories of their countries of origin and their symbolic identification with modern Israel. At the same time, the American Jewish experience is a remarkable story of success and cultural integration. As time passes, the gap between the ancestral and symbolic homelands is narrowing and the Americanization of Jewish identity is intensifying.

Jewish identity is at a crossroads and proponents of the idea of Jewish Peoplehood should be concerned. The identity of American Jews should reflect the changes in the imagery of the homeland; as memory fades and a new imagination can emerge. This process will be supported by the opportunities of the open global village. We live in an era that enables us to renew the idea of Jewish Peoplehood, using the properties of an open world, with instant communication and diminishing boundaries. Israel Education can marvel at the possibilities that the new world offers.

Elan Ezrachi is the Director of the Division for Educational Programs and Experiences at the JAFI Education Department in Jerusalem. His doctoral dissertation from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America was on the dynamics of interaction between American Jews and Israelis.

- ¹ According to reports issued by the Jewish Agency for Israel's Education Department.
- ² Sarna, Jonathan D., (1996) "A Projection of America as it ought to be: Zion in the Mind's Eye of American Jews, in Gal Alon, *Envisioning Israel – The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews.*" Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
- ³ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin go out further and characterize the "Diaspora" as the essence of Judaism and the State of Israel as the deviation from it." Boyarin, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin. 1993. "Diaspora: Generational Ground of Jewish Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 19 (4) 693-725.
- ⁴ Clifford, James. 1994. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3) P. 305. See also Safran, William. 1991 "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1(1) 83-99.
- ⁵ Cohen, Steven M., 1991. "Israel in the Jewish Identity of American Jews: A Study of Dualities and Contrasts". In Gordis, David and Ben Horin, Yoav (eds) *Jewish Identity in America*. Los Angeles: University of Judaism.
- ⁶ Vertovec, Steven. 1997. "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora' Exemplified among South Asian Religions" *Diaspora* 6:3, p. 281. The play of word, "roots" and "routes" is found in the literature in several places and it exemplifies the dynamism of migration in our times, see Weil, Shalva (ed.) 1999. *Roots and Routes: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.
- ⁷ Cohen, Steven M. and Arnold M. Eisen. 2000. *The Jews Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 114.
- ⁸ Curtis Barry and Claire Pajaczowska. 1992. "Getting There: Travel, Time and Narrative" in *Travelers Tales*.
- ⁹ Chazan, Barry. 1997. *What Do We Know about the Israel Experience?* New York: Israel Experience Inc. Chazan, Barry. Fall 1992 "The Israel Trip as Jewish Education., *Agenda Jewish Education* Vol No.1. Cohen, Erik H. and Eynath Cohen. 2000. The "Israel Experience" The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.
- ¹⁰ *birthright israel* is a large-scale initiative led by philanthropists, the government of Israel and Jewish communities around the world. It began in the year 2000 and has managed to bring thousands of Jewish youth to Israel.
- ¹¹ Chazan, Barry and Steven M. Cohen. 2000. "What We Know about American Jewish Youth and Young Adults: Some Implications for *birthright israel.*" *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. Vol. 77 Winter 2000.
- ¹² Clifford, James. 1997. *Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 7.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- According to Ezrachi, the fact that American Jews see Israel as a place of refuge for 'other Jews' is at the core of the problem for Israel education in the United States. What do you think about this view? Do you agree that the Jewish community in the United States is not a 'diaspora' community according to the traditional definition, and that this has influenced the relationship of American Jews to Israel?
- Ezrachi feels that Israel can be a source of spiritual engagement, cultural inspiration and a connection to the Hebrew language for Jews in the United States. What do you see as the primary benefits of connection to Israel for American Jews?
- Ezrachi argues that travel and contact be employed to develop a "hybrid Jewish identity." Is the notion of a "hybrid Jewish identity" realistic? What would it take on the community and institutional level to implement this idea?
- Ezrachi points to the positive impact of globalization on educational programs and ventures. How might educational programs in your community integrate globalization to enhance Jewish education?