

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

The challenge of maintaining passion for a “chronic” crisis can be draining. Barry Chazan’s provocative opening article challenges us to confront why, after all these years, we have still not solved the dilemma of teaching Israel in American Jewish education.

Schechter’s Lament: Israel and Jewish Education Once Again

BARRY CHAZAN

Some topics seem to never go away: What is love? What matters more – nature or nurture? Will the Cubs and the Red Sox¹ ever win a World Series? The joy of life and the frustration of life is that these topics are forever with us – and likely will stay with us for decades and centuries to come.

Jewish education has its “never go away topics” too. One of the candidates for the most long lasting, exasperating, critical, and confounding is “the problem” of Israel in Jewish education.

Based on my long, intense, and ongoing engagement with this subject over many decades, I have come to five definitive conclusions.

First, a review of the history of American Jewish education from the 1920s clearly indicates that “the problem” has accompanied formal Jewish education since the 1930s, in almost all its forms (day school, supplementary school, Sunday school, adult learning) in every decade, and every period in the life of American Jewish education. The “problem” has been indigenous to the story of American Jewish education for almost a century.

Second, contrary to popular opinion, the problem is not rooted in the Six Day War, Israeli occupation of the territories, Lebanon 1982, the *intifada*, or bad Israeli public relations. The “problem” has been there in good times in Israel or in bad; in ups or in downs. Attaching the problem to this Israeli policy or that, to this government or that, to this era or that, is an excuse that camouflages the core of the problem.

The “core problem” is ultimately related to a basic inherent dilemma of the non-Orthodox sec-

tor of American Jewry and Jewish education vis a vis the State of Israel. It is a uniquely non-Orthodox, United States, Jewish dilemma. Most other Diaspora Jewish communities – Canada, Argentina, Chile, France, Australia, and even the FSU – do not have the same “problem of teaching Israel” that non-Orthodox American Jewish education has faced for almost a century.

Despite articles written in decades of issues of Jewish education journals and heard annually at CAJE conferences, international seminars, university workshops, and endless one-day local BJE seminars, the core of the problem is not about instructional materials, pedagogy or didactics. Indeed, the opposite is the case: there is no subject that has more potential instructional materials and teaching strategies than Israel. Granted, there is always room to upgrade methods, materials, and contents – but that is not the essence of the problem – although it has been convenient for non-Orthodox American Jewish education to “pin the tail” on this particular “donkey.”

So, what is the core of the “problem” of teaching Israel in American Jewish education? There are three “causes” that have plagued teaching Israel in non-Orthodox American Jewish education and will continue to cripple this subject *ad infinitum*, unless they are remedied. We can create all the new curriculum projects we want, and we can create all the new “Teaching Israel” frameworks we want; they are all doomed to fail unless three issues are faced and rectified.

First, non-Orthodox American Jewish education has never taken the definitive stance that Israel is central (*a sine qua non*) to Jewish collective

survival and to personal Jewish meaning making. Instead, it elected to adapt Justice Brandeis' "Zionism" of collective and philanthropic responsibility for Israel as its bedrock. It never mandated that Israel is a central, definitive, and content-full dimension of the Judaism that Jewish education should teach. Thus, rabbis, principals, and teachers outside the Orthodox world were either doomed – or consciously chose – to portray Israel as a society of fellow Jews in need, rather than a source of positive content – like Bible, the Siddur, and Jewish thought – that has direct meaning for the life of each child as a Jew and a human being.

You cannot “do” Jewish education very well without clear content and stances. Education generally – and certainly Jewish education – demands normative content, values, and “meaning making.” In no way have these requirements been met with regard to teaching Israel. Until this is changed, we are doomed to decades more of one-day pedagogic seminars on “how to teach about the kibbutz” or the like.

Second. American Jewish education, again with the exception of Orthodoxy, never made a high quality educational experience in Israel a primary priority. It was only in the 1990s that the subject became part of the communal agenda, and it was only with the *birthright israel* project (and potentially with the new long-term Jewish Agency study in Israel program) that educational travel to Israel has any prospect of becoming statistically significant in the non-Orthodox sector. Orthodoxy in the United States made going to Israel one of its highest priorities – its young have gone to Israel through thick and thin and Israel is imbedded in their hearts and souls. Non-Orthodox Jewish education never took that definitive stance and never engaged in “Israel embedding.”

Finally all denominations of American Jewry and Jewish education gave up on Hebrew. It rejected Solomon Schechter's early 20th century warning that a Diaspora that wasn't bi-lingual endangered its survival. The Hebraist vision was promulgated in its most vocal forms in the 1930s to 50s by some of the Benderly boys and girls and by some

of the great Hebrew camps (Massad and the Ramah camps of that period), but these warriors lost the battle for a Hebraic Jewish education.

Hebrew and *Eretz Yisrael* are intimately connected, and in losing the Hebrew battle, American Jewish education seriously weakened its *Eretz Yisrael* dimension. Hebrew would have been an organic and primordial link to *Eretz Yisrael*, but by rejecting Hebrew, American Jewish education seriously crippled the development of that inherent organic and primordial link to *Eretz Yisrael* that we see in some other Jewish Diasporas.

The three ultimate causes of the “core problem” then are:

1. Non-Orthodox American Jewish education has not made the State of Israel an organic part of individual Meaning Making.
2. Non-Orthodox American Jewish education has not made the trip to Israel a mandatory part of being Jewish.
3. American Jewish education has given up on Hebrew.

To this a fourth cause might be added: no new generation of champions of these three values has come forth on the American Jewish educational scene. There are a few scattered veterans of past wars and some isolated new young Turks. But the 21st century “army” of Hebrew, Israel experience and *Eretz Yisrael* doesn't exist.

So these are the reasons why yet another issue of *Agenda* is devoted to “Teaching Israel,” why the Jewish Agency had been compelled to establish a project such as NACIE, and why I am likely guaranteed opportunities to write more articles on this subject in the years to come.

I do have hope this might be the last article I would have to write on the subject – and any new recruits are invited to email me to join the cause. We can still win!

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¹ This article was submitted prior to the 2004 World Series, in which the Boston Red Sox won the title.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Chazan argues that the “problem” of Israel education is not linked to current events in Israel, and has always been a challenge for American Jewish education. Do you agree? Will there ever be a time when Israel education will not be viewed as a ‘problem’ for American Jewish education?
- Chazan argues that lack of emphasis on Hebrew, Israel experience and *Eretz Yisrael*, as core values are at the crux of the “Israel Education problem” in America. Do you agree that these three issues are at the core of the problem? If not, what do you see as the defining issues? What are the necessary and appropriate forums for debating and addressing these issues? How can they get on the appropriate agendas?
- Chazan ends his article with a call for a new generation of leaders to champion the values of Israel education. What must the Jewish community do to generate, support, and to nurture this new leadership?

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Daniel Margolis feels that too much of North American's Jewish identity has been predicated on Israel. He further asserts that Israel (and our relationship with her) has changed so much that it is now necessary to articulate a new ideological stance in our efforts to foster educational re-engagement with her.

Towards a Vision of Educational Re-engagement with Israel

DANIEL J. MARGOLIS

Being committed to Israel is a central component of my Jewish identity. It is not, however, all there is to my Jewishness. True, I cannot teach others about Judaism or what it means to be Jewish without teaching them about Israel and to love her. But if I teach them only Israel, I will not succeed in “making” them whole Jews either.

Sounds obvious? Possibly. But for too long, too much of our North American collective, civil, political and communal Jewishness has been predicated on our relationship to Israel. Though we hope and pray daily that it were otherwise, we know that too often our relationship with Israel is defined in reaction to an ongoing, recurring set of crises – real, horrific, irrational, and tragic – alternating with periods of “paternalism” towards Israel. Thus, by adopting these governing metaphors, Israel has become the essence of our Jewish communal activity, “We Are One!” at least up to, but not including, *aliya*.

Relating to the New Reality of Israel

The problem is, when we define our relationship only through “crisis,” we frequently expand the definition and call for intensive responses to other “crises” – of economic or political survival, media or religious discrimination – many real, some exaggerated – to keep up the momentum. In doing so, North American Jewish leaders, abetted by Israeli counterparts, have created our own *matzav* of educational credibility which has made it extremely difficult to educate succeeding generations about Israel as she is actually evolving; how and why to love, support, defend, and critique her.

The Jewish people is a covenanted nation, linked to each other and bound to our Creator through texts and teaching, vision and values. This commitment to a future of promise has been sorely tested in the recent past. World over, Jews face severe challenges – further erosion of affiliation, intermarriage and literacy; questions about