

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?

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

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

whether we have the communal capacity to develop educational, cultural and religious innovations, sustain the quality of successful initiatives and efforts, find and retain qualified educators, and develop the financial resources to support all this. And beyond this, we have serious questions about our commitment to the centrality of Israel in our lives.

The mythic, romantic, Zionist/socialist Israel is no longer. Neither is Israel, the “poor immigrant cousin.” The old paradigmatic and generative metaphors no longer obtain. Instead, we confront a place where “milk and honey” have been replaced by computer chips and *chutzpah*. Neither defenseless nor quaint, no longer a country uniquely characterized as an idealized expression of Biblical and rabbinic texts and values, Israel today is rich in her modernity, diversity, and complexity.

Two realities have come together in the last few years that provide the impetus for us to re-engage with Israel education in new ways: first, the *intifada* heightened the community’s awareness of the need for all American Jews to have more basic knowledge, as well as greater concern and commitment regarding Israel. This presents a dilemma: as Israel becomes more central to our communal lives and identity, the contradictions it poses for us (particularly against an inadequate knowledge base), highlight more of the divisions within the community, even leading to internal political polarization.¹ Undoubtedly, this communal tension contributes to the decline in personal commitment to Israel and its becoming less central in our personal and spiritual lives.² How can we understand Israel and be committed to her while disapproving of some of her actions? How do we support Israel and sense that she is becoming the source for rising numbers of anti-Semitic acts around the world? In a very public way, we are feeling caught! The second reality, substantiated by national and local research, is the lack of basic knowledge, concern and commitment among a disturbingly large portion of the Jewish population in America.

Attachment to Israel: The Current Reality

We need to understand the sources of divergent opinions current in the community and how to respond to them. We know that there is a strong correlation between adult involvement in Jewish life and an early experience in Israel. Research suggests that Israel experiences as teens or undergraduates – in conjunction with ongoing academic study and other informal activities (camp, youth group, etc.) through high school and beyond – appear to be formative components for long term adult relationships with Israel, in strengthening Jewish identity and in promoting community involvement.

Across the American Jewish community, most Jews are concerned about Israel’s existence, but for younger Jews, the sense of attachment is more fragile than it is among older age groups.³ Today, support for the state among American Jews seems to be weaker than it has ever been since its founding. Events of the last few years may have eroded these positions even further.

In their survey of “moderately affiliated Jews,” Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen found that although two thirds of respondents thought Israel was very or extremely important to their “sense of being Jewish,” that sense of importance did not necessarily translate into an attachment to Israel. Less than a third felt very or extremely attached to Israel.⁴ Most regarded support for Israel as a desirable or essential part of being a good Jew. Fewer regarded visiting Israel as desirable or essential. When compared to other characteristics associated with being a good Jew, *those relating to Israel were of less consequence.*

Cohen and Eisen also asked their subjects about their beliefs and opinions concerning Israel. Half thought Israel was critical to sustaining a Jewish life. Yet, among those Cohen and Eisen surveyed, 64% had never been to Israel, 21% had been to Israel once and 15% had been two or more times.

Cohen and Eisen’s analysis of American Jewish attitudes towards Israel helped delineate the extent of the problem as well as the sources of the disaffection or seeming indifference to Israel.

“Israel is not central to who American Jews are as Jews — and so the need to visit it or learn about it or wrestle with its importance to the Jewish people is far from pressing.”⁵

During the same time frame, Bethamie Horowitz⁶ surveyed 1,425 individuals in the metropolitan New York area who identified themselves as Jewish but varied greatly in the extent of their Jewish engagement. She found “supporting Israel” a “less personally meaningful component of American Jewish identity than, for example, the Holocaust.” “Supporting Israel” ranked close to the bottom among the items she called “meanings associated with being Jewish.”

The attitudes of members of Boston’s Jewish community parallel the American Jewish community at large. Most Boston Jews are concerned about Israel’s existence, but many lack an emotional attachment to her. According to the 1995 Population Survey conducted by Boston’s Combined Jewish Philanthropies, most of those interviewed considered the “existence of the state of Israel” extremely or very important. Seventy percent said they try to keep up with events in Israel. Less than half, however, (45%) said they feel very or extremely emotionally attached to Israel.⁷

Sales, Koren and Shevitz reported on the attitudes of Boston area Jewish parents with children in the 5th or 8th grades in congregations with full-time family educators. Sixty-four percent of respondents in 1998-99 thought “keeping informed about Jewish or Israel-related current events” was very or extremely important to them, but only 36% considered it very or extremely important to have a connection to Israel. As educators, we asked ourselves how surprising this was in light of the fact that only 4% of family education programming in those congregations at that time was aimed at conveying anything about Israel.⁸

The Current Reality: The Teaching of Israel

In 2002, Koren and Miller-Jacobs reported on a study of 13 schools (5 day schools, 7 congregational schools and one communal school, representing over 1/3 of all enrolled students in the

greater Boston) to determine how Israel was being taught in the Boston area.⁹ They found that there was no unanimity about specific goals and objectives for teaching about Israel, although all schools desired both cognitive and affective outcomes. These schools taught Israel as a specific content area rather than integrating it with other aspects of the Judaic curriculum. The researchers found that principals expressed a great need for high quality curriculum materials. Family and adult learning opportunities about Israel were, for most part, not available.

This poses a serious educational challenge: We contend that the decline in levels and quality of Jews’ support for Israel is rooted in a significant move *away* from these topics in the Jewish school curriculum, and even youth group and summer camp programs, compared to the picture only a decade or two earlier. Research reveals that the history of Zionism, the geography, culture, and history of the State are no longer found in the core curriculum of most of our Jewish schools. Further, an ongoing decline in the emphasis given to Hebrew language in many schools is another indicator of the gradual weakening of our educational attachment and commitment to Israel.

Though Israel lies at the heart of our liturgy and textual foundations, the commitment to Israel most of us hold is a highly personal one rather than one anchored in *halakhah*. Therefore, most of us – as individuals, lay or professional leaders – should begin the process of articulating our stance with an exploration of personal ties to Israel. As Jewish educators, we need to ask ourselves how we relate to the centrality of Israel in our lives. From there, we should intensify our study of sources, learn, again, Israel’s story and history, and consider the ways in which both educators and young people might engage with Israel as part of a fundamental process of thinking about what it means to be Jewish in the modern world.

Keys to Creating a New Reality

Jewish education leaders need a new vision of Israel. To develop a new vision, we need a new

ideological starting point. In order to re-engage with Israel, we and our communities must re-examine our ideological commitments – how we, in all our diversity, understand and relate to the basic Jewish core texts and ideas that put Zion and Israel, land and people, at the center of our tradition and history. To be sure, this centrality is necessary, but not sufficient to our self-definitions as complete Jews. We will each understand these root sources differently, and we will continue to relate to contemporary Israel differently, but from such a re-examination, a new, contemporary articulation of our stances will emerge. Those stances will lead to new visions, which will, in turn, contextualize and direct us to new, more effective educational encounters with Israel in both academic and experiential settings.

We must create new metaphors and rationales – and new understandings, teaching approaches and materials must accompany these new generative ideas and foundations. To start, we need to articulate a new, comprehensive ideology that places today’s Israel in the center of our Jewish lives, minds, and hearts. Each synagogue, school, community should develop for itself a clear statement of its commitment to Israel, revealing the traditional and contemporary textual and philosophical roots and sources upon which such a statement is based. These sources must be aligned with the institution’s primary philosophy (and, hopefully, that of its members).

We should engage scholars, educators, rabbis, and others to help us in this process. In the end, we should be able to answer such questions as: Is Israel our homeland? A refuge? A grand experiment? The beginning of our deliverance? The third Commonwealth? Each of these options represents a legitimate ideological stance and has its own set of proof-texts.

Clearly, there will be a variety of ideological positions about Israel, each evolving from different starting points – theological, denominational, political, and personal. Eisen and Rosenak¹⁰ offer five commonplaces about Israel from the perspectives of Israelis and of North American Jews. Each category is a trigger to developing a more comprehensive ideological position. Chazan and

Towvim provide a similar set of commonplaces as the organizing themes of the curriculum series, *The Israel Connection*. This healthy diversity can generate a broad continuum of varied, but legitimate and authentic educational approaches and materials.

Even though articulating an educational approach is a long-term effort, with results and outcomes apparent only at some future time, we must remain true to the process and our educational objectives. Educating children and adults about Israel is not the same as training them to be better advocates for her. We don’t deny that we must be better prepared to explain and defend Israel on the campus, the street, and in the media. We must not abandon or neglect our responsibility to “be there” for Israel when she is in need. However, a comprehensive, non-didactic education is the best foundation for effective advocacy.

Our effort should focus on Israel’s striving for peace and normalcy. “Normalizing” American Jews’ relationships with Israel will mean creating learning opportunities and personal experiences that are in and of themselves, “normal.” Learning about Israel as she is; building personal connections with Israelis because we have something in common with them and because they could be our friends – doctors with doctors; joggers with joggers; rock music “groupies” with their fellow fans.

Which brings me to the issue of reciprocity and mutuality. Is this proposal simply the same old paternalism in post-Zionist dress? I suggest that at the heart of the educational estrangement between North American Jews and Israelis is the lingering sense that we are still traveling down a one-way street. Visit Israel. Make *aliya*. The Diaspora has no future.

It is my conviction that what is true about the North American Jewish identity “scene” is also true – either in the same or similar terms or in mirror image – in Israel. Israel, too, is facing a critical challenge to its national and Jewish identity: a decline in knowledge of and respect for the tradition; a critical shortage of knowledgeable

teachers willing and capable of teaching in liberal school settings; a seriously flawed and skewed view of the *tefutzot* (dispersion) permeated by a simplistic understanding of the *Sho'ah*; and pervasive feeling of being seen either as a “second-class” Jew or a triumphant, heroic savior of world Jewry.

It has taken nearly 50 years to shake both the North American and Israeli communities¹¹ from some of these conceptions. With a more even “playing field” on a wide range of issues, we can now see how important, useful, and (relatively) “easy” it may be to re-imagine the relationship between us, redefine and articulate the common ideological foundations we share, and work together towards a generative educational vision with authentic and creative materials and experiences to re-engage with Israel, for our part, and re-engage with world Jewry and Judaism, on the part of Israeli educators.

While we all try to gain greater understanding of

the complexity of the situation and the diversity of opinions around it, we affirm that in addition to *knowing* about Israel, our goal is also to ensure that every Jew should *feel committed* to Israel, *support* Israel in times of crisis or tragedy in whatever way possible or deemed appropriate; and *enable and allow* Israel to be a vigorous, vibrant element in our daily lives. However, our cumulative, evolving educational approach should also result in more of us who feel comfortable with our roots in the prophetic tradition – so we can each inherit the mantle and mandate of our prophets and become what Martin Buber calls a “loving critic” of our people, our land, our state – and through that newfound relationship allow ourselves, our communities, our Israel to soar to new heights on the wings of our shared *b'rit* and *halom* – covenant and dream.

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- ¹ Some local rabbis have told me that they do not preach about Israel as much as they'd like for fear that it will create divisiveness within their congregations.
- ² It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that American Jews are reacting to Israel in the same way that they are reacting to other aspects of organized religious and communal life, i.e., those who are intensely engaged are doing more – study, religious practice, philanthropy, etc. – but their numbers are declining, while those who do less are increasingly marginalized and their numbers are growing.
- ³ This shift has been documented by Cohen and Eisen, Mayer, Kosmin and Keysar and others. Researchers at the Cohen Center and David Mittelburg among others, are studying the effectiveness of Israel visits as a way to counteract this trend, but the jury is out on what kinds of trips are most successful and whether those who go to Israel are already among those with a greater sense of attachment. It is unclear whether attachment produces visitation or vice versa.
- ⁴ Steven M. Cohen, Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 142-154.
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 152.
- ⁶ Bethamie Horowitz, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*, (New York: UJA-Federation of New York, 2000), pp. 64-70.
- ⁷ Sherry Israel, *Comprehensive Report on the CJP Demographic Study*, (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 1997).
- ⁸ Amy L. Sales, Annette Koren, Susan L. Shevitz, *Sh'arim: Building Gateways to Jewish Life and Community* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 2000) p. 17. (Until 2002 we had little or no information on content or teaching practice about Israel in Boston area Jewish schools.)
- ⁹ Annette Koren, Sandy Miller-Jacobs, *Teaching About Israel in Boston Area Jewish Schools: Implications for the Community, Research Report #10* (Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education, 2002).
- ¹⁰ Arnold Eisen and Michael Rosenak, *Teaching Israel: Basic Issues and Philosophical Guidelines*, in the *Israel in Our Lives* series, edited by Barry Chazan, Elan Ezrachi, Rafi Sheniak, and Barbara Sutnick (Jerusalem: The CRB Foundation, JAFI Department of Jewish and Zionist Education, and JESNA, 1997).
- ¹¹ Though we will not go more deeply into the use of this terminology, it is important to note that Israelis do not use nor do they comprehend the notion of “community” as we do; on the other hand, North American Jews rarely speak of “peoplehood,” which has much meaning for Israeli Jews.

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