

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In the past, many have looked to the Israel experience as a way to strengthen Jewish identity — particularly in cases where other forms of Jewish education did not succeed. However, in recent years, the effects of a vicious cycle have been felt, in which flaws in Jewish education have resulted in reduced participation in Israel trips. Deborah Kantor Price argues passionately that in light of our experience over the past several years, the North American Jewish community must develop compelling education from which an Israel experience flows rather than pinning all our hopes exclusively on the Israel trip.

The Israel eX-perience: Lessons Learned from Low Participation in Israel Programs

DEBORAH KANTOR PRICE

In the throes of the Continuity agenda of the 1990s, the Jewish community woke to the idea that the Israel experience was the antidote to assimilation and an effective inoculation against intermarriage. Israel Program/Experience Centers mushroomed in Federations throughout the United States (Isaacs and Silverman 1998). In an effort to make Israel trips accessible, mega dollars were spent on scholarships and savings plans. At the same time a virtual cafeteria of Israel programs grew, designed to appeal to every possible teenage interest from the arts to zoology.

Then in a matter of months, between the summers of 2000 and 2001, the bottom fell out. By 2002, the numbers of teens and youth participating in Israel experience programs had decreased by 92% (Levrant 2004). From a high of nearly 10,000 summer participants from the U.S. in the year 2000, fewer than 10% remained. The Israel experience, it seemed, was becoming an “eX-perience,” a thing of the past.

It is anticipated that participation will climb to around 5,000 in summer 2004. (Levrant 2004) While a great improvement, these numbers represent only half of the participation at its peak and are roughly equal to participation levels of 1992. Even with participation on the rebound, this is the critical moment to reflect

— why did the “eX-perience” happen and what can we learn from it?

There are a number of possible reasons for the precipitous drop in numbers. The *intifada*, 9/11, anti-Israel press and the increase of anti-Semitic activity have shaken the American Jew’s sense of security. Add to this a weak economy, and clearly, discretionary travel plans suffer. However, the fact that not all programs were equally affected by these events is an indicator that bears examination.

The statistics appear to support the observation (Chazan and Cohen 2000) that “Israel trips are undertaken by a small number of the most committed and religious sectors of American Jewry.” Day school education, participation in synagogue or Zionist youth groups, Jewish summer camp experience and ritual commitment featured largely in those groups that maintained participation levels throughout the worst years of the “eX-perience.” (Cohen 1995)

In 2002, the nadir for participation, community groups whose target group was the unaffiliated, were typically the hardest hit. NFTY, with participation rates by far outstripping every other program in the year 2000, elected not to operate its trips in 2001 due to security concerns. As a result, participation remained

negligible for an additional two years, effectively “closing out” an entire generation (three years) of high school students. By contrast, more than half the participants in the summer of 2002 were orthodox affiliated and their numbers have more than doubled since.

Participation in six-week summer programs by youth group based programs

	1991	1992	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
NFTY	200	657	1400	0	10	33	295
USY							
Pilgrimage	332	570	650	290	76	232	352
Ramah Seminar	231	296	230	217	72	189	268
B'nai Akiva/Machach	116	110	266	206	173	325	450

(Source: Levran 2004, Chazan and Cohen 2000)

In the environment of the 1990s, community leaders assumed that improved marketing and cost reduction would be sufficient to generate wholesale participation. In reality, this approach was far from successful. Even with substantial efforts, the total number of participants barely doubled in the space of 10 years. Viewed in the context of what the NJPS reported as 354,000 eligible teens in the year 2000, Israel experience participants figured as less than 3% of that number. Thus, Cohen (1995) appears to be correct in his assessment that “the vast majority of Jewish youngsters will never participate in an Israel experience program.”

Community decision-makers were and are correct to invest in the Israel experience. It is a “powerful vehicle in the development of Jewish Identity.” (Finkelstein and Shimon 1991) What they need to understand, however, is that barriers to participation are not simply external politics or economics. Other critical barriers to participation, such as lack of motivation, general ignorance about Israel and indifference or even antipathy towards Israel (Isaacs and Silverman 1998) are bi-products of our flawed Jewish education system, the same system whose shortcomings the Israel

Experience is expected to redress.

From the vantage point of summer 2004, it is clear that the Israel “eX-perience” was more than just an aberration. We must see it as a wake-up call – as a charge to address core issues in American Jewish education. If there is to be a future for Israel programs as a critical and transformative experience in the lives of our teens, and more importantly, if there is to be an enduring relationship between American Jews and Israel, we need to tackle the hard questions surrounding the role of Israel in an American Jewish identity. The time for a haphazard approach to Israel education is past. We need to be clear about our goals and address them with rigor.

The primary goal of Israel/Zionist education is to produce both a love of Israel and a feeling of personal connection to it. These feelings are cultivated in a context of knowledge of our historical roots. They are deepened by pride in the Zionist accomplishments of the past century, and they are expressed as acts of responsibility for the present and the future.

Through Zionism, American Jews experience a connection to Jewish life (*Klal Yisrael*) beyond the borders of geography and culture (Habib, 1999). Zionism cultivates a passion for life “against the odds” and a sense of historical perspective. In this way an effective Israel/Zionist education enhances and enriches American Jewish identity and potential.

Ezrachi (1998) suggests that historically the relationship of American Jews to Israel has been characterized by “high emotion, but low engagement.” Today, he adds, “young Jews lack the formative memories” to create an emotional bond with Israel. Personal connection and active involvement must be the targeted goals of a new approach to Israel education.

To achieve this, creative programmatic and curricular energy must focus on:

- Helping learners translate the national narrative of Israel’s past and present into a personal one

- Communicating the value and importance of a connection to Israel
- Building bridges of understanding between the two cultures and active ties between American Jews and Israelis
- Developing concrete and meaningful connections that do not rely upon Israel experience, but provide opportunities for hands-on involvement even at a distance
- Re-envisioning Israel education as a process of lifelong learning.

The Israel Experience must remain a critical element of a “complete” Jewish education. We must continue to offer and promote a variety of affordable Israel Programs for teens, taking into consideration the various and changing factors that motivate participation. Research suggests that if we succeed in accomplishing the objectives listed above, recruitment for Israel Experience will be a much simpler matter.

“The most successful model is one in which the focus is not solely on Israel experience, but rather where Israel is a part of every aspect of the institution/community” (Chazan and Cohen, 1998). The kind of transformation I am suggesting requires the commitment of the entire community. The community’s schools and educational institutions need to incorporate this vision into their mission statements. Lay and professional leaders of synagogues, agencies and federation need to understand their part as role models and lifelong learners as well as decision makers. The same kind of energy that is expressed in the emergency campaigns must drive this revolution.

Serious efforts to engage families in the process of Israel education are needed. Parents are the gatekeepers for Jewish education. Yet, many of today’s parents have negative memories of their own educational experiences and feel alienated from Israel. We must target young families and provide them with informal educational experiences that bring Israel into their lives and their homes.

Educators, serving on the front lines of Israel education, also need to feel the passion and connection. They must expand their knowledge of Israel and must be given the tools to excite and engage students.

Finally, Israel education needs to be structured in a continuum of lifelong learning. We need to start as early as possible to create not only positive experiences, but genuine connections. We need to carefully develop a child’s contact with Israel and make certain that these and all subsequent steps on the journey lead to the development of a lifelong relationship.

Conclusion

“Everywhere I go, I am going to Jerusalem.”
(R’ Nachman of Bratslov)

The lesson of the Israel “eX-perience” is a simple one. We cannot expect teens, or adults for that matter, to visit Israel or participate in Israel Experience programs in spite of their Jewish education. We need to inspire in them desire to visit Israel *because* of quality formal and informal educational experiences. When we succeed in creating a “community culture where knowledge, passion and active connection are transmitted from the earliest educational experiences” (Isaacs and Silverman 1998) then all roads will inevitably lead to Israel.

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Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Deborah Kantor Price views the "Israel eXperience" as a wake up call for Jewish education in the United States. Do you agree that the decline in participation in Israel trips in recent years reflects a deeper problem at the core of our educational curricula? What is the place of Israel in your educational institution(s)' philosophy and curriculum?
- The author references current research that has aided in developing and understanding the Israel trip and its role for Jewish education in the United States. How does your community or educational institution utilize research to make policy decisions regarding educational ventures like the Israel Experience? What additional research is needed to inform decision-making in this area? How can such research be financed and conducted?
- Price argues strongly that lifelong learning and family engagement is critical for successful Israel education. Do you agree that families must be the next community of learners engaged actively in Israel education? Which other populations are priorities for Israel Education? How might your community develop programs and initiatives to engage these groups?
- What does, "all roads lead to Israel" mean to you? How does your interpretation affect your thoughts about the Israel experience?

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In this article, Michael Rukin, presents the *birthright* experience as one model of Israel education, and articulates his vision of how this Israel trip could be an even more successful vehicle towards developing Jewish identity amongst college youth in the United States.

Looking for the Keys?

MICHAEL RUKIN

A policeman came upon a man, crawling on his hands and knees, at the base of a lamppost. At 2 a.m., his behavior seemed odd. "What are you doing?", the policeman asked. "Looking for my car keys," came the reply. The policeman proceeded to get down on his hands and knees to help look. After 10, unsuccessful, minutes he asked: "Where did you drop them?" Pointing down the street, the man replied: "In the middle of the block, near the fire hydrant." Puzzled, the policeman asked: "Why are you looking here?" "Because the light is much better."