

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

The following narrative aptly illustrates the far-reaching consequences of powerful Israel experiences. Aaron Binik-Thomas tells how his experiences in Israel impelled him to exercise his civil liberties. In sharing the lessons he learned about what it means to act on his Zionist and American beliefs, Aaron reminds us that an Israel experience can impact even more than participants' identification with Israel or Jewish identity. In his case, it informed and encouraged his activism, deepened his understanding of our civic freedoms and liberties, and stimulated his involvement and connection with local Jewish communal organizations.

Crisis on Campus

AARON BINIK-THOMAS

My first trip to Israel was a 10-day Bar Mitzvah trip when I was in the 7th grade. I thought the trip was amazing but, to be honest, I really went to Israel because I didn't want to have to have a big Bar Mitzvah and get up in front of lots of people. Israel was the "fall back" that my parents offered me.

When I was in the 9th grade my mom surprised me with another week-long trip to Israel. I was chosen because a friend needed one more person for a community Teen Mission to Israel, the first of its kind. This mission took place at the start of the *intifada*. I happily agreed, not because of my feelings for Israel, but because I got out of school for a week. I had the greatest time of my life.

But on the last day of that trip something happened in Israel that hit me very hard. During our final discussion about how the trip affected us, we got word that there had been a bus bombing. At that moment that I became a life-long advocate for Israel and the Jewish people. I decided that as long as I live everyone would know that I am proud to be a Jew, proud of the State of Israel and proud to be a Zionist. At that moment I put on my *kippah* and I have worn it every day since then; I am now graduating from High School.

What does that mean to me? In 1948 something amazing happened: Israel was declared a free nation in our homeland. We finally had a place of our own that we could call home, a place where Jews could defend Jews and we didn't

have to live as outsiders in other nations. Israel's job is to defend Jews all around the world, and my job is to defend Israel wherever I go. The teen mission I took part in the 9th grade seeded my immense passion for Israel.

The next summer I spent two months with the Alexander Muss High School in Israel, a program that focuses on the history of the Jewish people throughout the ages, and on the history of modern Israel. The *intifada* was at a high point during that summer. My program only had 21 students, compared to two years earlier when there had been 400 students and two summer sessions. I lived in Israel for two months and experienced how safe it was. It made me cry when I heard that other Jews simply didn't want to come to Israel because they thought it was dangerous. That was the start of my mission: getting more teens to go to Israel. Through the Muss program I gained the knowledge, the facts and tactics to communicate about Israel and defend it. I turned myself into a living database of Israel, her history and facts about her.

This time, when I returned from Israel, I became an activist. This was around the time of the nationwide "We Stand with Israel" rallies and campaigns. I traveled around attending these rallies with my Israel flag in hand.

I have been to Israel two more times since Muss: once on the March of the Living when I went to Poland and then to Israel and the second on Cincinnati's 2004 Israel Advocacy Teen Mission. As co-chair of the Cincinnati Jewish Federation's

Israel Teen Council, I organized the mission with the help of the Jewish Federation and Alexander Muss High School in Israel. We took seven high school students with us. It was a great achievement for our community.

Now that I told you what got me ‘turned on’ to Israel, let me share one thing I did regarding Israel that caused a great deal of controversy.

It all started at the end of 2003, my senior year in high school. One weekend the PSM (Palestine Solidarity Movement) organization, convened their second annual ‘divestment’ campaign conference at a local college campus. Their goal was to get colleges and organizations to divest from Israel and companies that have business ties with Israel in an effort to weaken its economy by adopting the same tactics used against South Africa, and using the same semantics... “Israel is an Apartheid state” ... “Israel is a racist state” ... “doesn’t want peace” ...and so much more.

When I heard this was going to take place, I felt it was my duty as an activist to defend Israel. I decided to attend the weekend. However, as a student who is very interested in video production I decided to try something different. I attended the conference ‘under cover’ as a non-Zionist non-Jew neutral student. I took video equipment to document what occurred. My goal was to capture what the conference was about and to explore what kind of people support each side and why. I interviewed participants from both sides.

As a Zionist and activist it was so incredibly hard not to jump in and defend Israel, but I maintained control and stayed in character. By the end of the weekend I had taped well over four hours of raw video. After months of editing and piecing I was half way to finishing a short documentary entitled “Crisis on Campus.”

At about this time, I was assigned a final end of the year project for my senior photo course in public school. The projects would be presented at an art show at my school that was open to the public. I chose to complete my documentary. Halfway through the year when we were

required to submit our proposals, I received my teacher’s approval for the video documentary.

About two weeks before the project was due, we brought our projects in for critique. My classmates thought the rough cuts were amazing, but my teacher didn’t agree. He felt the film was entirely one sided and extremely biased, and sent me directly to the office for the administration to make the final determination about the acceptability of my project.

My school has a very diverse student body, one that includes Palestinian Moslem students. Despite the fact that my documentary included diverse viewpoints from across the political and racial spectrum, the administration judged it to be biased and one-sided and potentially upsetting to my Palestinian peers. They claimed that I did not fairly represent the Palestinian viewpoint, and made the Palestinians look bad even though my documentary merely recorded the opinions of *other* people about Israel and the current situation. In addition, my principals said that the film could not contain references to religion, including the terms “anti-Jewish and anti-Christian,” or “Islamic clerics.” This decision was inconsistent because two other pieces in the art show related to religion.

My parents and I contended that I had every right to show my video as it was. Our offers to issue a disclaimer, to screen it in a separate room with advance notification of its nature, to provide headphones so that people would need to consciously choose to see and hear it, were not accepted.

In the end, under pressure from my parents, the Cincinnati Jewish Federation and the Jewish Community Relations Council, my case went to the superintendent who allowed me show the documentary in its entirety. The Federation and the JCRC backed me from the beginning and stuck it out with me and my parents, and without their help I’m not sure we would have come to the same outcome. My case also set precedent: as a result of my experience rules were established for the senior project in future years. That’s my story. I have screened my video very

widely, to unanimous acclaim. That is really an ego boost. Both the video and my hard-won right to show it are accomplishments that I am very proud of!

At the time when he wrote this article, Aaron Binik-Thomas was a high school senior. He served as 2003-2004 Co-Chair of the Israel Teen Council of Cincinnati, OH.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Who are the young adults in your community whose passions about Israel can be channeled into creative programs and initiatives? How could you include these voices in discussions on Israel education?
- This article highlights how a young adult's Israel experience led to an ongoing relationship and involvement with his community. How does/could your community engage alumni of Israel experiences beyond the parameters of the trip?
- Aaron's community fully supported and encouraged him. What mechanisms are in place in your community to support a young leader's pursuit of civil justice or protection of basic freedoms? How would a young leader access these supports?

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Finding ways to address the challenges and to achieve excellence in Israel education has confounded educators in all aspects and venues of Jewish education. NACIE, the North American Coalition for Israel Education, is the communal partnership established in 2003 to spearhead vigorous innovative efforts to deepen community-wide engagement with Israel. In this article, Sandy Katz, NACIE's Executive Director, shares the initiative's goals and aspirations.

NACIE: A Partnership to Deepen Community-Wide Engagement with Israel in North American Jewish Life

SANDY KATZ

The relationship between North American Jewry and Israel has arrived at a critical crossroads. In spite of North American Jewry's remarkable support for the State of Israel during the past three and a half years – as reflected in its high level of affection, devotion and commitment – there is surprisingly strong evidence pointing to a serious decline in engagement with Israel among members of the community. Community leaders in North America realize that currently available Jewish educational frameworks and resources are not powerful enough tools for stimulating a strong and enduring connection between American Jews and the State of Israel. Educators, communal professionals, and lay leaders are asking themselves, “How can Israel be transformed into a core component of Jewish

identity among North American Jewry?”

One of the answers is the North American Coalition for Israel Education (NACIE). Formally inaugurated in November 2003, NACIE's mission is to intensify the significance of Israel as a core component of Jewish identity in North America. Predicated on the assumptions that local communities are the locus of change; building a coalition of community players and institutions is essential to ensure that integrated and comprehensive Israel education can take place; the local federation is the convener of the community coalition; and national organizations and their relevant agenda have a key role to play in support of the change in communities.