

Sacred Vision, Complex Reality: Navigating the Tensions in Israel Education
Lisa D. Grant

For most of the twentieth century, the importance of Israel as spiritual homeland and safe haven served as the foundation of American Jewry's relationship to the emerging State of Israel during most of the twentieth century. At the onset of the twenty-first century, however, these symbols have lost much of their power to engage young American Jews. While caring about Israel's survival remains important to the majority of American Jews, it does not appear to figure strongly into religious identity or how people make personal meaning from being Jewish (Liebman and Cohen, 1990; Cohen and Eisen, 2000; Horowitz, 2000), particularly for Jews under the age of forty. Indeed, some evidence claims that for many today, Israel is irrelevant to sustaining rich American Jewish life (Aviv and Schneerson, 2005).

Israel is certainly an integral part of Jewish tradition. It is embedded throughout the liturgy and calendar. Sacred texts are permeated with references to the landscape, climate, history, and theology of the land. It is an idealized homeland, now made real. It serves both as a sacred symbol of moral striving and a unifying force for the Jewish people. Demographic studies consistently demonstrate that the more identified and active one is as a Jew, the more important Israel becomes. Thus, it appears that the more connected one is to Jewish life, the less one needs an Israel "education" per se. But, Jewish tradition is not the guiding force for most American Jews today. What was once an organic and integral part of Jewish life has now become diluted and detached from the more personalized and customized forms of Jewish engagement typical of most American Jews.

The primary goal of American Jewish education has always been about helping American Jews adapt and accommodate as Jews in America (Sarna, 1998). The predominant American Jewish educational approach to teaching Israel is consonant with this overarching goal. While not always explicitly stated, attachment to Israel is tacitly used as a means to strengthen *American* Jewish identity and facilitate group cohesiveness. This means that the content and experiences of Israel remain primarily on a symbolic level so that they can remain consistent with American conceptions of “Zion as it ought to be” (Sarna, 1996). We create larger-than-life representations of Israel through episodic and rather superficial encounters. We avoid problematizing or over-complicating in order to ensure a love of Israel. But by doing so, we are left with a superficial understanding of why Israel is or should be significant in American Jewish life.

Most of the research conducted about Israel education measures its affective impact on Jewish identity. It fails to explore the specific content of the program or assess how the multiple layers of Israel – as sacred lodestone for the Jewish people, as site of personal and collective memory and experience, as a vibrant center of Jewish culture, and as a modern geopolitical entity – may be factored into one’s active commitments. If participants feel more strongly Jewish and/or more attached to Israel and/or the Jewish people, then the program is deemed a success. Indeed, there is ample evidence to support the fact that organized Israel trips have been quite successful in this regard (Chazan and Koriensky, 1997, Saxe et al, 2004) particularly for teens and young adults.

Using Israel as a means of building and reinforcing Jewish identity is hardly a bad thing. Neither do I mean to belittle or diminish the impact that Israel experiences have had on participants. Nonetheless, this instrumental focus on Jewish identity

seems incomplete and one-sided, implying that Israel exists to make American Jews feel better about being Jewish. In order to feel better, we must perforce keep the content and experiences of Israel primarily on a symbolic or even “mythic” level.

One of the core challenges impeding the articulation of a compelling vision for Israel education lies in an inability to describe in a substantive and compelling way why Israel matters to American Jews who are comfortably at home in American society. Israel matters because it is a core element of Judaism and the collective Jewish experience wherever it is lived. God, Torah, *and* Israel are the foundational pillars upon which rich Jewish life is built. As one of three points on the triangle, Israel is not central, but it is essential to a stable and well-grounded foundation. A tendency in Jewish education seems to be to focus more on God and Torah because these are portable, personal and more immediately relevant to synagogue worship and holiday rituals. Building basic literacy for worship and holiday observance is the primary focus of congregational education, which is the form of education that the majority of American Jews receive. In these settings and in many day schools and camps as well (Kopelowitz and Markin, 2002, Kopelowitz, 2005, Grant, 2007) Israel is an occasional and episodic experience, hardly a central feature of the educational program.

Israel is part of our collective story and hence it is integral but not necessarily central to what it means to be a Jew. Centrality presumes a hierarchy and is therefore accompanied by attendant feelings of guilt or alienation if one does not fit with this normative assumption. Indeed, if we consider Israel central, we challenge those who choose to live on the periphery. This guilt-inducing approach is characteristic of Classical

Zionist ideology that privileges life in Israel over the Diaspora. It also places Diaspora Jewry into a supporting role that can be fulfilled through philanthropy and political advocacy while the leading role is taking place on the main stage in Israel. While I believe wholeheartedly that Jews in the Diaspora and Israel are inter-dependent, the relationship is healthier and more sustainable if it becomes a reciprocal one of mutual support and exchange of ideas, rather than one based on patronage and privilege.

Making Israel a more integral aspect of Jewish education and Jewish experience is one approach to a more robust and meaningful Israel education. Another step we must take is to confront our discomfort and fear of teaching the complexities of Israel. We are far more likely to see Israel represented as an adventure tale of rescue and refuge for Jews in danger around the world or a story of modern miracles and technological marvels, than we are to hear about the social ills and tensions between rich and poor, religious and secular, and Arab and Jew. In fact, Israel is all of this and more, but our Israel education, in camps, schools, synagogues, and on trips rarely address these multiple dimensions that make Israel both vibrant and complex. Any single orientation to Israel is insufficient and attenuated. The combination, however, provides us with rich material for exploring both the sacred vision and the complex reality of the land, people, and State of Israel.

In the last few years, more and more scholars and educators seem to be challenging the old paradigm of single dimension teaching and asking us to think more substantively about the content and processes of Israel education both in Israel and in North American Jewish educational settings. One way this was made evident was through the February-March 2008 issue of *Sh'ma* that was dedicated to the topic of teaching Israel. In varying ways, each of the contributions pointed to the need to rethink

and reshape what and how we teach Israel. Several writers directly criticized an approach to Israel education that exclusively focuses on advocacy or unquestioned support of the State; virtually all agreed that we need to move away from teaching solely myths and symbols and get more complicated, share more of Israel's "blemishes and flaws" (Geffen, p. 4), shift to a "commitment and critique" paradigm (Perlman, p. 17) or engage in what Robbie Gringras (p. 19) calls "hugging and wrestling" with Israel.

Israel matters because it is a core value of Jewish life that is an integral and inseparable piece of a larger whole. As a sacred symbol, it is a unifying force for the Jewish people and a motivating force to do our best for ourselves and in service to others. As a complex reality, it both inspires and irritates. Israel is filled with heartbreak and hope, woe and wonder. If we focus only on the inspirational side we run the risk of indoctrination on one extreme and alienation on the other. A more holistic and responsible approach demands critical engagement with both the sacred vision and complex reality. Michael Marmor (2007) uses the metaphor of a cup that is half empty and half full to describe this perspective. He calls it a sense of "confident inadequacy" that enables us to accept the complexity of imperfection, to celebrate what has been achieved and at the same time, to strive to repair all that yet needs to be done.

Marmor's stance of confident inadequacy resonates with the many other tensions that are inherent to the Jewish condition. Just as we navigate between the many other dualisms – the tensions between universal and particular values, religion and peoplehood, the individual and community, sacred and profane, tradition and change – so, too, must we navigate the dualisms inherent in Israel in all of its manifestations, symbolic and real. Our continuing participation in this unresolved discourse is what keeps a relationship to

Judaism and to Israel dynamic and alive. To me, Israel “engagement” means the continuing participation in this unresolved discourse. It is what keeps my relationship to Judaism and to Israel dynamic and alive. Just as with any relationship worth preserving, sustaining this relationship takes work. I see this work as a form of *tikkun* – working towards repairing an imperfect world. I also understand it a partnership, a *brit leolam*, a covenant for all time.

To realize this vision, I believe that our approaches to Israel education must do two things. First, we must recast the myths, shifting the symbols of what could be described as a “dead past” into a usable past by adding layers of complication and nuance. And second, we must be more conscious and deliberate about integrating a multi-layered Israel more fully into those areas of Jewish life where American Jews already connect, no matter how attenuated that connection might be: *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *Gemilut Hasadim*. Indeed, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually engaging encounters with texts, people, images, and experiences of Israel within *each* of the strains of Jewish practice thickens and adds richer meaning to Jewish experience.

Two examples of this two-pronged educational approach take place with my students at Hebrew Union College through a semester-long course entitled “Why Israel Matters” and a bi-annual twelve-day seminar in Israel. The course is designed to provide a forum for students to wrestle intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually with their knowledge of and relationship to Israel and what this means to them as American Jews. Each class session is designed as a multi-layered *mifgash* (encounter) between the idealized visions and complex, dynamic, and always challenging realities that shape our understandings and connections to Israel. We use primary sources, scholarly articles,

literature, film, visual images, and music to consider four closely related conceptions of *Am, Torah, Eretz* and *Medinat* Israel (People, Torah, Land and State of Israel) as a sacred symbol and a living polity. Ample class time is devoted to address questions of personal meaning and to help students articulate a strategic vision for why and how to teach Israel from the pulpit, at camps, in the classroom and other settings where Jews gather to learn.

The bi-annual Israel seminar for students is organized in partnership with colleagues from the Lokey International Center for Jewish Studies at the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa. Our goal, to develop a deep and multi-layered appreciation for thinking about and teaching Israel, is realized through a series of encounters with land, texts, and people. The learning is largely experiential and integrated, meaning we work to connect study about and experience of Israel with Jewish beliefs and values and Jewish practice. The program strives to model creative educational experiences of multiple *mifgashim* – encounters with Jewish history, with Jewish time and sacred space, with contemporary Israeli culture and politics, and with a plurality of Jewish voices in Israeli society, and around the world. These encounters prompt participants to grapple with “formative tensions” between myth and reality, Israel and Diaspora, sacred and profane, religion and people, time and space.

This year, I have also been involved in a project called Beit Keneset Yisrael (BKY), a collaborative initiative between ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, and MAKOM, the Jewish Agency’s Israel Engagement Network, aimed at strengthening the place of Israel in Reform congregations. The goal of this two-year initiative is to help participating congregations create an integrated and systematic approach that will combine activities such as Israel travel, empowerment of synagogue

leadership, and educational development work under one programmatic and organizing framework. By partnering with innovative Reform congregations, ARZA and MAKOM seek to build a congregational norm that reflects this new paradigm that will be replicable throughout the Reform Movement and within other denominations of Judaism.

Ten congregations are participating in the first cohort of this initiative. In phase one, they will undertake a comprehensive mapping of the place of Israel in their congregations, through membership surveys, document analysis, and critical reflection on formal and informal educational programs, worship, cultural and social offerings and all other aspects of congregational life. Phase two begins with an intensive seminar in Israel and is intended to serve as a catalyst to inform thinking and planning for a more robust and integrated vision for Israel in Reform congregations and the Movement.

As part of the mapping process, a team of congregational lay leaders and professionals will engage in an extensive analysis of where Israel already exists within the congregation: through formal curriculum, Israel trips, Israel committees, cultural and educational programming, worship, social action initiatives, etc. To help with this process, the BKY planning team developed a tool called the “Faces of Israel” (see sidebar). This tool is designed to help analyze the different ways in which Israel might be represented throughout the congregation through print media, educational programs, visual images, sermons, social and cultural events, and informal conversations. It will help congregational leaders identify and understand what are the Israel narrative(s) currently present in the congregation. What predominates? What is the mix? How often and where does Israel appear as a safe haven, as sacred center, as a country in conflict, as a mythic place of heroes and miracles (ancient and modern), as a center of Jewish cultural

innovation, as a society filled with social, economic, political, and religious tensions, as a community with a shared destiny with Jews around the world?

This analytical tool will help congregational leaders reflect on how broadly or narrowly Israel appears in formal and informal educational experiences in the congregation. It should lead them to assess whether their programming fits with espoused and implicit goals and identify areas needing greater (or lesser) emphasis. Finally, it should help them make the implicit more explicit and clarify priorities for more fully integrating Israel into all aspects of congregational life.

The Faces of Israel tool is one way to help planners and educators get more complicated about Israel. It can help gauge how Israel is currently presented and taught and identify potential areas for further development in order to create a more robust and integrated approach. It can be easily adapted to other settings including day schools and camps. It might also be a useful tool for analyzing prepared curriculum to determine how rich or thin the curriculum writers' approach is to representing Israel.

As yet, this reconceptualizing of Israel education as more complicated and more integrated into Jewish life is largely taking place in intellectual circles. As noted earlier, the vast majority of research on Israel experiences focuses on trips for teens and young adults and measures the impact of the Israel experience on Jewish identity. Research to assess whether and how a more nuanced and integrated approach to Israel education is taking root and its impact is very thin indeed. Virtually no studies have been done to examine what is taking place with teacher-training programs, published curriculum, or site-based programming. One recent study of Reform congregational educators, reported that just under a third of respondents indicated that Israel education is strongly integrated

into their Jewish studies program (Grant, 2007). However, the research did not explore the question in sufficient detail to understand how these schools define and actualize this integration.

The anecdotal evidence of congregations, camps, and schools that are doing creative work in undertaking an approach that embraces the tensions inherent in a complex and vibrant Israel appears to be growing. Several curriculum initiatives also appear to be moving more in this direction. However, we do not yet have research that more systematically identifies where these innovative sites are, the specifics of the work they are doing, and the impact on their learners. Clearly, research about these initiatives is essential if we hope to foster critical and committed engagement with Israel and further develop a responsible and active relationship with *Am, Torah, Eretz* and *Medinat Yisrael*.

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Sidebar

The Faces of Israel

Beit Knesset Yisrael: AN ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE IN REFORM CONGREGATIONS

Israel as Safe Haven for Jews- *Eretz Miklat*: The destination for Jews under duress. This includes a focus on those who have fled to Israel and the need to financially support Israel's immigrants and her capacity to protect Jews.

Israel as Land of Sacred Moments – *Eretz Mikdash*: The land of our ancestors in the classic Jewish texts and within the world of liturgy and worship. It also includes a strong focus on sacred places such as the Kotel and the messianic vision of Israel.

Israel as Country at War – *Eretz Okhelet Yosheveha*: Israel is examined primarily through the lens of the Arab-Israeli conflict and in the context as a country at war. This includes North American, international and Israeli political issues facing peace and security, the role of the IDF, and issues surrounding non-Jews in Israel.

Israel as Symbol – *Eretz KeSemel*: Here Israel is part of the decorations and aesthetic that marks a congregation, camp, or school as a Jewish institution. It includes Israeli flags, maps and pictures of Israel on walls, the playing of Israeli music over the intercom system, or the presence of Israeli media in the library.

Israel as Our Partners – *Eretz Shel Shutfut Goral*: This focus is on the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism, other organizations and projects in Israel that focus on shared Reform values, and the challenges of religious pluralism in Israel. This lens also includes ways in which Israel is seen as a Jewish partner, engaged in activities with local communities and around the world.

Israel as Larger than life – *Eretz Gedolah meHaHayyim*: This representation focuses on the larger than life narrative of Israel's history and society. It involves the presentation of items such as the extra sweetness of Jaffa oranges, the technological advances of Israeli society, and the achievements of Israelis on the world stage. Conflicts and challenges are not directly associated with this notion of Israel.

Israel as Jewish/Hebrew Cultural Center – *Eretz HaTarbut HaIvrit*: A central source of new Jewish and Hebrew culture, including literature, visual arts, performance arts and aspects of culture such as food and wine. This presentation includes how Jewish culture is evolving within the context of Israeli society.

Israel as Home of Israelis – *Eretz KeBayit*: The focus here is on the daily lives of actual Israelis, including family and friends. This includes items from Israeli media that

highlight both the similarities and differences between Jewish life in Israel and in North America. This lens also presents the social ills and tensions present in Israeli society, including the governmental corruption, poverty, civil rights, ethnic relations, and immigration challenges.