Israel Education Is...
Identification and Commitment

¿ by **Anna Kolodner** and **Jonina Pritzker**

In January 2009 Israel is fighting in Gaza to defend its citizens from rocket attacks launched by Hamas. At the same time, anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment stoked by the situation in Gaza is accelerating throughout the US and Europe. We see virulent anti-Israel demonstrations calling for the destruction and isolation of the Jewish state. Hamas supporters accuse Israel of "genocide" and "war crimes." Supporters of Israel and Jews everywhere are on the defensive against a well organized and well funded opposition that dominates the media, negatively influencing public discourse. The confluence of these events exposes the vulnerability of our educational system, yet defines the elements which must be rebuilt, our sense of Jewish peoplehood, identity, and connection to Israel.



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The need for Israel education for Jewish children and adults is enormous. The cold, hard fact—reinforced by everything from academic studies to the low turnout at pro-Israel rallies—is that Israel today is not central to the lives of many American Jews, and with each generation the sense of distance increases. Just as Judaism itself has become voluntary for Jews, a lifestyle or a hyphenated identity to be blended together with other concerns or beliefs, Israel is just another item to be picked up from the smorgasbord and accepted wholly or partially, or simply rejected. There is a long trail of literature which seeks to explain how things have come to this. Much of it reflects a failure of Jewish education over many years, but from this failure flows an opportunity.

How can Israel be made central again to Jewish children and adults? In an age when educators, Jewish and otherwise, are called upon to do more with the same or fewer resources, the challenges are daunting. The first obstacle to overcome is to understand Israel as a non-ideological Jewish case. Whatever one's level of approval or agreement with Israeli policy or conduct, Israel is home to 40% of world Jewry and thus represents a substantial portion of the world Jewish future. Simply on that basis alone, it is central to Jewish life. Meaningful understanding of Israeli history, life and culture is therefore a requirement for all Jews everywhere. It must be infused with a sense of ownership and pride in our people, our land and our history. Without a widespread commitment to Israel at the very core of Jewish education we are swimming against the tide. Rabbis, educators, communal leaders, and funders have to get on this same page.

The second challenge is to recognize that Israel education cannot be limited to children. There is a natural tendency for parents to want their children to go beyond their own levels of knowledge and achievement. But as with many aspects of education, Israel education cannot be achieved by children learning in isolation. For children, learning about Jewish history and the lives of fellow Jews cannot succeed without adult reinforcement, and often parallel learning is needed. Adult education is an integral requirement not only for reinforcement but for its intrinsic value. The sad fact is that too many Jewish adults are woefully uninformed about Israel, the Middle East conflict, and frankly, about Judaism. Adult education about Israel is not intended to produce any given ideological outcome, on the right or the left, but only a higher level of knowledge, more intelligent discourse, and a greater degree of empathy, than is currently on display among American Jewish adults.

Much of American Jewish life has followed an inner-directed course, where education has been pursued for the sake of individual development and personnel success. This

path has come at the expense of a more outer-directed course, in the sense of inculcating commitment to the Jewish community. The individualistic focus has been partially counterbalanced by the vague notion of *tikkun olam*. But as worthy as this impulse is, there is often nothing particularly Jewish about the outcome or even the impulse – it could be as easily cast as doing good deeds in the name of the Golden Rule. But Israel education offers the opportunity for Jews to reconnect with their own community and to become active in support of that community. Becoming educated means becoming involved, and as a result developing a sense of responsibility toward fellow Jews. It may even mean taking up the challenge of community leadership.

Israel education must begin as early as possible. The positive results of introducing Israel in elementary schools have been demonstrated repeatedly. Whether in day schools, congregational schools or yeshivot, modern Israel is a natural complement to Jewish history and religious studies curricula. Emphasis on the physical dimensions of the ancient and modern land makes the connection between the past and present something living and real. Israel should permeate the classroom through pictures and maps and symbols. Showing

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that Jews in ancient times and Jews in the present practice Judaism, its laws, customs and morality, in Israel, the setting where Judaism was born animates and reinforces the message of Judaism's timelessness. It states forcefully that Israel was, is, and will always be the pivot around which Judaism revolves. Moreover, modern Israel is a thriving multicultural society, where Jews of all colors and from all nations are joined together to live. Whatever their backgrounds and individual customs, their Judaism is united through Israel. These are lessons that adult Jews should learn alongside their children.

Giving children (and adults) a sense of pride in their culture and in Israel is vital. But high school students face different challenges. More complex information and the development of critical thinking skills are necessary. For Israel education, the challenge is to solidify the Jewish identity and to keep Israel as a central part, whatever the student's denominational background. The challenges facing students who articulate a position in support of Israel on many college campuses are daunting: open hostility toward Israel among faculty members and well organized and vocal opposition among students. Israel education and strong Jewish identities are necessary to prevent this potentially corrosive environment from tearing away the Jewish foundations of young people.

The moral and political complexities of Israel and the Middle East conflict are inevitable and must be addressed head on in any high school curriculum. The discussion must include Israel's creation, Arab and Jewish refugee crises, and the human rights issues that result from the denial of the Jewish right to a sovereign state. Israel is not always correct in its policies, but its existence cannot be negated nor does it rest on the acquiescence of others. The goal is for students to learn to stand up for Israel with confidence, skill, and facts in hand, to cultivate pride as Jews and as educated adults in its accomplishments, and to develop the willingness to lead others. These can only be achieved through an approach that is honest, that once again incorporates adults, and that works in tandem with the many other programs which provide trips, organize events, and create a holistic experience at whose center is Israel.

In all this, teacher training is vital. Teachers are already called upon to do too much, but effective materials, well-run workshops, and supportive administrations will go a long way to easing the problem of putting Israel at the center of the Jewish curriculum. The David Project has had some success in this area, providing an integrated curriculum for Jewish high schools and middle schools. For college students, we have found that ongoing support once they get to college, with training, speakers and materials, is also vital. Without continuity and demonstrated support from Jewish organizations, Jewish students will be unable and unwilling to sustain who they are and speak up for Israel.

In the wake of financial scandals that have shaken the Jewish community and faith in its organizations, and the larger economic climate, the instinct to cut back and focus on core concerns is strong. But these crises should force us to reexamine our priorities. Putting Israel and Jewish identity at the center of the Jewish community's priorities would be one positive outcome. ¿

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The David Project

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