

**“Resettling the Land:
Israel Engagement and Education in the 21st Century”**

Since its (re)birth 60 years ago, the state of Israel has served as both a religious and political refuge for Jews worldwide. It is the safe haven where thousands of Ethiopian and Soviet Jews found sanctuary in the late 1980s and 1990s. It is the magnetizing force that attracts *olim* [immigrants to Israel] throughout the Diaspora, those deeply committed to fulfilling the centuries-old prophecy of returning to the land of their ancestors, as well as those who have chosen to proudly display their patriotic stripes with the modern political state. Even for Jews who have little or no inclination to physically relocate there, Israel has had a powerful impact on their political, religious and psycho-social identities.

Undoubtedly, the display of solidarity with Israel among American Jews was at its height during the summer of 1967 and the decade that followed:

“The “miraculous victory” of the Israeli army in the Six Day War set in motion a rather remarkable period in the history of American Jewry. Israel moved to the fore as the most compelling cause in American Jewish life and became the centerpiece of fund-raising and of political activism. The cause of Israel pushed aside the civil rights agenda, liberalism, and even the fight against American anti-Semitism as the major public issues of American Jewry’s vaunted organizational infrastructure.”¹

But the maxim that “Israel is the spiritual and geographic center of the Jewish people” is no longer an indelible truth for the majority of America’s Jews. Dismayed by Israel’s

¹ Cohen, Steven M. “Relationships of American Jews with Israel: What We Know and What We Need to Know.” *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol.23, 2002, p.132

showing on the international stage, troubled by its less-than-praiseworthy portrayal in most Western media outlets, and incensed by the Orthodox monopoly over all religious matters, increasing numbers of American Jews have distanced themselves from the land and its people. Over the past quarter century, Steven M. Cohen, a leading sociologist of Jewish behavior and identity, has observed this widespread decline in American Jewish attachment to Israel manifest itself in a variety of ways:

- Less interest in current Israeli issues
- Fewer sustained interactions, domestically or abroad, with Israelis
- Less political activism, advocacy and public demonstration on Israel's behalf
- Less philanthropic contributions to Israel-specific causes

While it is true that *Taglit*-Birthright Israel, Israeli film and culture festivals, and *shlichim* [cultural ambassadors] sent by the Jewish Agency have all made strides to bridge this ever-widening gap between North America and Israel, today's younger American Jews (Generations X, Y and "millennials") are not nearly as invested, emotionally or otherwise, in the affairs of the Jewish State as were their parents' or grandparents' generations. In a recent study conducted by Cohen and Kelman, less than 25% of American Jews below the age of 35 felt a strong emotional attachment or sense of pride toward Israel, and less than 50% of the same sample population felt that the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy.² The quantitative data, coupled with qualitative research and interviews with young American Jews, suggest that "disengagement" is not merely a term that is on the minds of West Bank settlers. Indeed, it is one of the more

² Cohen, Steven M. and Ari Kelman. "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel." Jewish Identity Project of Reboot/Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007, p. 9

troubling phenomena that concern Jewish educators, philanthropists, lobbyists and Zionists in their efforts to bolster Israel engagement domestically.

Because this detachment has been most readily observed among young people, it follows that early and adolescent Jewish education would be one of the more logical settings in which to teach about and help foster connections to Israel. Educator Shoshana Glatzer frames the goals of an Israel-oriented classroom as falling into one of four categories: *Cognitive, Affective, Identity, and Behavioral*.³ These categories provide a balance of intellectual and emotional fodder for the student so that she can connect to Israel in a way that is most compelling and resonant for her. No single category of engagement by itself, Glatzer argues, will successfully lay the groundwork for a deep-seated concern and ongoing commitment to Israel. Rather, the student must be exposed to Israeli history, geography, culture, agriculture/industry, politics, social justice, and an array of other lenses through which to view Israel in both its ancient and contemporary incarnations. This produces a nuanced, multilayered introduction to the Jewish homeland and its inhabitants, which the student may not actually visit for years to come (if at all).

But Glatzer falls into the same trap that ensnares many American educators who focus entirely on creating “positive attitudes” about Israel and developing “Jewish pride” that they neglect to address the very real ethical and political dilemmas surrounding 21st century Israel. In their deliberate decision to exclude potentially difficult or unflattering topics, such as the unchecked authority of the religious right or abuses of Palestinian rights, these educators do a disservice to the middle- or high-school age Jewish student who can access unlimited virtual information at the touch of a button. Idealism can only

³ Glatzer, Shoshana. “Characteristics of an Israel Oriented Classroom.” *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol.61:3, Summer 1995, p. 10

last so long before what they read on the blogosphere or what they overhear in an adult conversation leads students to distrust the honey-flavored myths they have been fed and consequently disassociate from the narrative entirely.

Cohen and Kelman conclude that a single trip to Israel “is almost a requirement for a young person to feel highly attached to Israel.”⁴ While young people might well substantiate this claim in follow-up surveys and personal testimonials, it is unclear what their “higher attachment” entails. Do they persuade their peers to follow in their footsteps and sign up for a Birthright trip? Do they continue to support Israel, either verbally in the arena of public opinion or philanthropically?

While I agree with Cohen and Kelman’s basic assertion, the trip to Israel still represents a singular and confined experience, not a lasting change in one’s worldview. Short of sending every young Jew in North America on a Birthright trip (for which spaces are limited) or a teen tour (for which financial constraints can be a strong deterrent), I suggest a bold, two-tiered approach to revitalize Israel engagement in the classroom:

1) Throw out the myths.

While it is certainly true that myth plays an essential role in the formation and propagation of a culture deeply embedded with rituals and symbols, the folktales of pioneers and heroic Zionists breaking from their eastern European past no longer resonate with the younger generations of American Jewry. Instead of idealizing the days of the *chalutzim* [pioneers] and the kibbutz movement which now nears extinction, the educator

⁴ Cohen and Kelman, p. 18.

in an Israel-oriented classroom must consider the current historical, political, religious and social climate of Israel so as to construct a more relevant and relatable narrative of how Israel came to be, how it functions today, and how it will have to change and adapt to ensure its survival.

2) Engage all of the senses.

Partner with Israeli educators to create an Israel curriculum that draws upon the most up-to-date literature, music, art, and technological innovation that Israel has to offer. For younger students just learning to read Hebrew, collect Israeli pictures, postcards and movie posters to read and translate. Watch and listen to various renditions of “Hatikvah” on YouTube for comparison. As students mature, challenge them to look at international media about Israel with a critical and comparative eye. Create a Bedouin tent in a corner of the classroom and discuss passages from the works of S.Y. Agnon and A.B. Yehoshua while sipping Wissotsky mint tea. Listen to and dissect each bumper sticker slogan in Ha-dag Nachash’s hit song “*Shirat Ha-Sticker.*” Have students imagine and execute social justice projects that connect in some way to *k’lal* or *eretz Yisrael*. Eat Bissli.

There is no shortage of ways to make Israel come alive for American Jewish students as long as the teacher refrains from using coercive or rose-colored glasses to indoctrinate an artificial pride in the student. If they ask a question that may reveal an undesirable truth about Israel, do not skirt away from the tough issues. Be transparent about your own opinions, but also provide students with an alternative set of conclusions and assumptions so that they can formulate their own. If they feel a sense of ambiguity or anger toward Israel, validate it. As some American citizens know all too well, it is more

than justified to become disenchanted with a country that one nonetheless holds dear. Lastly, reinforce younger students' learning and curiosity by bringing Israel into adult discourse. When we equip parents and adults with the vocabulary and information necessary to speak about modern Israel, we not only give them a forum to espouse their personal beliefs and prejudices, but we invite them to view current Israeli issues from multiple vantage points and thus conduct a richer dialogue with their children at home.

These recommendations – to discard tired Zionist myths and reinvigorate Israel curriculum – are intentionally broad in scope. Each North American Jewish community, as well as each synagogue, has a particular relationship with Israel, in both mission and in action. Therefore, the content-infused lessons, social action initiatives and cultural events that captivate one community may not speak to another. *Know before whom you stand.* Tailor your medium and your message to engage your specific group of learners. Once they are engaged, (re)introduce them to Israel on terms that they can understand and appreciate her. In this way, the first journey your students take to the Holy Land does not require them to leave their home or synagogue at all. If planned well and prioritized, Israel education can be dynamic, topical and genuine, paving the way for a lifetime of struggling and supporting the Jewish state, our “home *away* from home.”