

*Contributing to the Field*  
Locating Israel's Educational Why  
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“If you understand the why and wherefore of what you learn,  
you do not forget it quickly.” – Jerusalem Talmud 5:1

In 1979, philosopher of education Barry Chazan wrote the following regarding a problem with Israel Education:

...While there is both a practical and ideological commitment to Israel by American Jewish education, there is no clearly-enunciated nor explicated ideology of Israel. That is, there is agreement *that* Israel is important; [but] *what* Israel means and *how* it relates to being a Jew today in America is either unclear or not at all dealt with in the American Jewish schools.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty years later, researching the same question, professor of Jewish education Lisa Grant reiterated almost the exact same point:

Even among those individuals and institutions at the forefront of Jewish educational innovation, few are able to articulate a clear vision or purpose for teaching Israel that extends beyond vague and implicit expressions of Israel being a core component of Jewish identity formation.<sup>2</sup>

Today, after decades of surveys and panels and committees, after Israel education has been evaluated, re-evaluated, and expanded, after the NJPS and Makom and Birthright and Masa, nothing has changed. American Jewish educators have been wrestling with Israel curricula for decades and we are still in the same place we have always been: talking about *what* to teach *and how* to teach it better, but without clear and intentional rationales for *why* we need to teach Israel.

At first glance, one might look at the goals and objectives of a curriculum and assume that those are sufficient answers to the “why” question. However, what I am talking about goes beyond goals, objectives, and enduring understandings. The true rationale of a curriculum is the underlying purpose and direction which educators aim to give the learners. Educational

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<sup>1</sup> Chazan, Barry. 1979 “Israel in American Jewish Schools Revisited.” *Jewish Education* 47,2 p.14

<sup>2</sup> Grant, Lisa. “Connecting Israel to Jewish Life.” *Sh'ma*. February 2008. p.1

philosopher Neil Postman is emphatic that education<sup>3</sup> has an overarching narrative that fuels the meaning of the schools, for “without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention.”<sup>4</sup> The narrative needs to be rich and sustaining, filled with aspects of community, identity, continuity, and meaning – otherwise the educational endeavor is a lost cause. Narratives, in turn, fuel rationales. They are motivating and driving forces behind the teaching of a curriculum. And Israel Education is sorely lacking in clearly stated, comprehensive narratives and rationales.

This gaping lack of a compelling “Educational Why” is well documented. As Barry Chazan argues, we know Israel education is important, even critical, for our schools and camps and yet we cannot effectively articulate why. Moreover, without our own understandings of why, we can hardly expect our students to understand why Israel should – or should not – be a central part of their Jewish identity formation process. There is a set of standard Educational Whys one encounters in Israel Education curricula: to impart a love of Israel, the importance of Jewish Peoplehood, to teach about modern Hebrew, Israel’s role of caretaker of Jews around the world, and the physical concentration of Jews in Israel and the ideas and culture they are creating. However, in our liberal, postmodern Jewish culture, these rationales are not compelling on a stand-alone basis. No single rationale is definitive.<sup>5</sup> For each single rationale that exists, there is an equally strong counter-argument.<sup>6</sup> The contemporary sociological atmosphere has voided traditional rationales. Sadly, it is not because Israel is important, but

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<sup>3</sup> Postman wrote about education within public schools, but I believe that his ideas can and should apply to Jewish schools (day and supplementary) as well as Jewish camps, outdoor education, youth group, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Postman, Neil. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. New York: Vintage. 1996. p.7

<sup>5</sup> I am very much obliged to Isa Aron for helping me develop this idea and incorporating it into my argument.

<sup>6</sup> Especially for the “millennial generation,” the next generation of Jewish leadership, which, as discussed below, struggles with the defined “ethnic” boundaries of Judaism.

rather because liberal Jewish America lives in relation to a relentlessly contested Israel.<sup>7</sup> Jewish educators do not know where we stand in relation to Israel. As a result, constructing an authentic underlying purpose is exceedingly difficult since contested rationales lead to fragmented identities.<sup>8</sup> We cannot clearly state why Israel is important because we do not know ourselves.

The difficulty liberal American Jewish educators face in locating the Educational Why today is not exceptional: liberal American Judaism itself struggles with its relationship and connection to Israel. Chazan argues that since liberal American Judaism has never consistently or fully made Israel central to Jewish identity and community, we were “doomed – or consciously chose – to portray Israel as a society of fellow Jews in need, rather than a source of positive content, like Bible, the *Siddur*, and Jewish thought.”<sup>9</sup> While *Siddur* Hebrew is an educational priority, there has been a substantial decline of Modern Hebrew education that parallels a growing dissonance with regards to determining the centrality of Israel.<sup>10</sup> One of the most widely used rationales for teaching Israel is to foster “Love of Israel.”<sup>11</sup> But what does “love of Israel” even mean? How can you demonstrate it? It is incredibly hard to agree on a definition and to focus exclusively on “love” is a fuzzy, hard to assess area. Affective goals as the core of an educational rationale almost undermine the seriousness of the educational endeavor, generating educational goals that are hard to achieve and even harder to assess.

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<sup>7</sup> That Israel’s own internal narrative has grown increasingly fractured and into the “post-Zionist,” contested viewpoint phase it is currently in has only exacerbated its contestedness.

<sup>8</sup> Cote, James E. and Charles G. Levine. *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 2002. p.40

<sup>9</sup> Chazan, Barry. 2004. “Schechter’s Lament: Israel and Jewish Education Once Again.” *Agenda: Jewish Education*. Issue #18. p.7

<sup>10</sup> Ackerman, Walter. “Israel in American Jewish Education,” in Allon Gal, ed. *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*. Jerusalem and Detroit: The Magnes Press and Wayne State University Press. 1996, p.178;and Chazan 2004: p.7

<sup>11</sup> Ackerman: p.186

Perhaps the most ubiquitous basis for Israel education is building “Jewish Peoplehood,” which is a concept, like “Love of Israel,” that sounds nice but means something different to everyone. In a lively 2007 online exchange, Joey Kurtzman, the founding editor of the online magazine *Jewcy*, and Jack Wertheimer, professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, debated the potential demise of Jewish Peoplehood. Ultimately, what emerged from their provocative conversation was that how American Jews see Peoplehood correlates strongly with age: namely, older Jews have a stronger sense of unity with Jews around the world while younger Jews are oriented by a localized, individualized identity.<sup>12</sup> The role of Israel as “caretaker” is also questioned, because if the ethnic quality of Judaism decreases, Israel no longer needs to be responsible for Jews around the world.<sup>13</sup> There is no consensus in the liberal, post-ethnic community on the importance of Peoplehood, leading to a pervasive ambiguity regarding its value. If strengthening Jewish identities is a goal, then this goal is compromised with such cloudy commitment. Indeed, psychologists note that facets of identity are best developed when clear models are established and maintained.<sup>14</sup> With respect to Jewish Peoplehood, this is not the case today, so we are paradoxically weakening the significance of Jewish Peoplehood in American Jewish life.

Moreover, America’s cultural model of “a melting pot” has always made wrestling with two distinct identities a challenge – especially when the Jewish frame is often connected with a separate nation state. Other Jewish communities, from Canada to Argentina to the FSU, for ex-

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<sup>12</sup> The entire exchange can be accessed here: <http://www.jewcy.com/dialogue/2007-06-11/joey1>

<sup>13</sup> The anti- Israel as Caretaker argument is also substantiated by a post-Zionist argument, which assumes that there are no more Jewish communities in need: all the Jews who need to flee and make *aliyah* have already done so. However, it is critical to note that Israel has the *potential* to resume this role in the future, if need be, and that potential is what fuels the caretaker argument. See David Mendelsson’s piece “Zionism and Post-Zionism: Radicals and Moderates” posted July 2000, on <http://www.doingzionism.org.il/resources/view.asp?id=4&subject=189>

<sup>14</sup> Cote: p.16

ample, do not face the same difficulties of juggling multiple identities.<sup>15</sup> As a result, accepting Israel's role as the center of Jewish life can be challenging in America. Many American Jews feel uncomfortable negating their own flourishing Jewish life to Israel's, despite the thriving Jewish cultural and religious life within Israel's borders. While Israel is a Jewish cultural center, many liberal American Jews do not see it as *the* critical center because to do would diminish our own accomplishments, community, and history.

What often emerges from these rationales and their counter-arguments is a zero-sum mentality. Either there is Jewish Peoplehood or there is not. Either Israel is a caretaker of Jews around the world or it is not. Israel is the center of the Jewish world or it is not. But social psychologists argue that dividing the matter into "eithers" and "ors" is a non-productive educational approach.<sup>16</sup> We see an either-or framework frequently in our culture, especially in conversations about Israel. It is easier that way. Nuanced and ambiguous arguments and rationales are not pervasive in Israel education because they are not easy. And yet, they are necessary. Although we yearn for simple, clear-cut, positive rationales, we do not live in a simple, clear-cut, positive world. Our world, our relationship to Israel, is messy, nuanced, and complex. And so our rationales have to account for this messiness, and be nuanced, and complex.

As a result of these fractured components of Israel-based Jewish identity, determining a holistic rationale for Israel education may actually be impossible. But this may be the result of the world we live in: our personalities often become what psychologist Kenneth Gergen calls "Pastiche," or a puzzle that takes a little from here, a little from there, ultimately forming something utilitarian and practical.<sup>17</sup> The notion of a "pastiche" identity may seem disconcert-

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<sup>15</sup> Chazan 2004: 6

<sup>16</sup> For how this might look, curricularly, see Makom at <http://www.makomisrael.org>

<sup>17</sup> Gergen, Kenneth. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books. 1992. p.150

ing or frightening, but it is, in fact, beneficial. It helps us to reconcile the conflicting rationales and truths we inherently know but can also readily argue against. Today's rationales for teaching Israel are not Peoplehood, or caretaker, or cultural importance or Hebrew, but rather, the potential *aggregate* of all of these ideas. The fact that all of these ideas are located within and in relation to a certain content area makes it compelling and necessary, educationally. There is no single, brief, clear *definitive* rationale – and it becomes folly to strive for one. The Educational Why for Israel education is a conglomeration of many partial puzzle pieces that come together to form a comprehensive, nuanced collage. A widespread pastiche of Israel, in content but especially in rationale, provides Jewish educators the ground to stand on to build a strong, compelling Israel curriculum. Once the Educational Why is established and clear, then the “What” and the “How” can clearly fall into place.