

## Recreating Israel

### *Creating Compelling Rationales and Curricula for Teaching Israel in Congregational Schools*

Almost all Jewish congregations include teaching Israel as part of their religious school curriculum. Many congregational schools make Israel the theme of memorable events. Both professionals and lay leaders believe in the importance of teaching Israel. Yet, despite immense time and energy invested, Jewish educators and schools articulate few rationales for teaching Israel. Many teachers who are passionate about Israel will say, “I love Israel,” but are unable to explain *why* teaching Israel to a particular grade level in a congregational school setting matters and works. Textbooks, too, are often part of the problem. Too often, textbooks seem to mirror teachers: “We, the publishers and Jewish professionals and stakeholders in Jewish education, love Israel, and we want you, the Jewish children, to love Israel too.” David Breakstone’s observation in 1989 often still holds true: “The prominence of Israel in American Jewish life is a commonplace in any discussion of the community today. But as a commonplace its significance is often assumed rather than explicated.”<sup>1</sup> Educational researcher and professor of education, Lisa Grant, in her 2005 study of Jewish educators who teach Israel in congregational schools noted that there is “the will to attain these goals [in teaching Israel] without a clearly defined plan or process to achieve them.”<sup>2</sup> What teachers and textbooks need is a conscious rationale.

I am not the first to note fuzzy rationales and objectives in the teaching of Israel—notably the philosopher of Jewish education Barry Chazan has done so, in addition to Breakstone and

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<sup>1</sup> David Breakstone, “The dynamics of Israel in American Jewish life: an analysis of educational means as ‘cultural texts,’” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 66:1 (1989), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Grant, “Israel Education in Reform Congregational Schools,” *CCAR Journal*, Summer, 2007, 10.

Grant. I believe compelling rationales for teaching Israel do exist—and that if educators uncover and implement these rationales they could transform Israel education programs. Perhaps part of the fuzziness arises out of the ad-hoc way Israel education developed in congregations. Indeed, prior to the 1960s, teaching about Israel was rare. In 1959 Arnold J. Band found that in Boston schools, Israel education did not exist as a separate topic. He writes,

In both primary and secondary [congregational afternoon] schools, therefore, knowledge and love of Israel is imparted as an integral though not independent part of the curriculum. The curriculum itself is based primarily on the study of classical texts. References to Israel, be they brief or lengthy, should not interfere with the teaching of text but rather enhance it by contemporizing and concretizing events and places.<sup>3</sup>

Commentators on the American Jewish community bemoaned the lack of Israel education, but little changed until the Jewish community in particular, and the public in general, became excited about Israel, in part thanks to the movie *Exodus* portraying the foundation of Israel as a heroic effort.<sup>4</sup> Later in the decade, the Six Day War was seen by most in the West as a triumph of the underdogs, and support for Israel ran high.

Teaching Israel emerged as its own subject area organically, as interest in the new state/grew and Jews felt comfortable expressing dual loyalties<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps because classes emerged “as needed,” or perhaps because of the emotional nature of this subject for many American Jews, teachers, schools and curricula writers generally did not clearly articulate rationales In Breakstone’s 1989 article “The Dynamics of Israel in American Jewish life: an analysis of educational means as ‘cultural texts,’” he notes that a generation after the teaching of Israel in

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold J. Band, “Trends in the Jewish School System Boston: A Case Study,” *Jewish Social Studies*, XXI (1959), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: a History*, New Haven: Yale UP (2004), 334-336.

<sup>5</sup> My teacher, Tali Zerkowicz, credits this comfort in part to Louis Brandeis, who wrote, “[M]ultiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent. There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit...is essentially modern and essentially American” (cited by David Ellenson, 2008, p.9).

congregational schools had begun, the situation was changing—but at a glacial pace. He writes, “While conceptualization remains a problem, there are also isolated manifestations of the beginnings of a conscious effort to develop a theory of Israel in American Jewish education”<sup>6</sup> Now, twenty years later, we are not much further along, despite repeated calls for meaningful rationales.

To escape from the grip of directionless Israel education, stumbling along without clear maps, we must first understand the topography: why Israel education matters to American Jews. And this is exactly what Breakstone set out to learn. He wanted to discover how American Jews related to Israel and therefore what rationales they had for teaching Israel. He found the following principles behind American Jewry’s attachment to Israel and reasons for teaching it:

- He found that American Jews want education on Israel that will increase awareness and even involvement in Israel-related issues, but which will not demand any significant life change in its students, in either behavior or belief;
- Israel was seen as a vehicle for enabling Jewish survival, although no one asked why the underlying value— Jewish survival—mattered.
- Teaching Israel focused on identity and belonging rather than on the religious aspects of the subject of Israel.
- Finally, he found that the purpose of Israel education was to evoke “positive attitudes towards, and strong identification with” Israel rather than particular content.

A full 20 years later, these attitudes, assumptions, relationship to, and use of Israel persist today. In Alan Hoffman’s 2005 article, “Israel for Jewish education and Jewish education for Israel,” for example, he argued that American Jewish institutions should teach Israel in order to

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<sup>6</sup> Breakstone, 7.

excite youth about their Jewishness. He wrote that Israel “offers a fresh and exciting entry point for many young people” – particularly visiting Israel.<sup>7</sup> He understood that this was true because Israel connects young Jews to Jewry—to Jewish peoplehood. What emerges from his article is his view of Israel as a source of meaning not because it embodies Jewish peoplehood but because it gets the next generation of Jews affiliated with their Jewishness. In his article, Hoffman seems to identify with the teachers I mentioned above, knowing that “he loves Israel;” but he struggles to answer why it should matter to others. As a result he offers suggestions for the use of Israel in educational contexts but no rationales for why to do so.

Loving Israel is not enough. If educators avoid reflecting more deeply on the value of Israel education we risk another twenty years of unreflective, directionless teaching. Rather than abandon a generation of students to this fate, I will use Breakstone’s observations and Grant’s research to generate possible rationales, and consider what they might imply for curricula. For an organizing framework, I turn to philosopher of Jewish education, Michael Rosenak, who suggests three commonplaces for Jewish education: Judaism, Jewry, and Jewishness.<sup>8</sup> Israel, as a subject, could fall into any of these commonplaces. Current Israel education seems to emphasize peoplehood heavily.<sup>9</sup> However, thinking consciously about a subject and our values surrounding it allows us to move beyond the status quo. I hope my colleagues might join me in helping to create a serious and sustained discourse on this topic and in implementing the resulting rationales in their curricula.

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<sup>7</sup> Alan D Hoffmann, “Israel for Jewish education and Jewish education for Israel,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 81:1-2 (2005), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Rosenak, “Education for Jewish Identification: Theoretical Guidelines,” *FORUM* 28-29, (1978) 118-129.

<sup>9</sup> Grant, 9-11.

### *Judaism*

A rationale deriving from the Judaism category might teach Israel as a messianic hope and symbol of redemption, as a return to an ideal time and place. Such a rationale might involve studying Biblical and rabbinic texts about Israel and messianic hopes, especially in the liturgy. Storytelling might also be an important part of this. Students might imagine what they think the messianic age should look like. With the existence of an actual state of Israel, this image of Israel as a symbol might be less relevant; or it could become an interesting and productive tension. It might present the opportunity to explore the tension between religious ideals and principles and the complexity of realizing God's will, *mitzvot* and Jewish values in the world. Admittedly, the idea of a messianic Israel presents cognitive dissonance for most liberal American Jews who do not yearn for an idealized time of Jews worshipping God at the Temple under their own sovereignty in the land of Israel. Indeed, many are even disgusted by this idea.

For liberal Jews, then, in addition to the productive tension I suggest above, an alternative rationale in the category of religion might assert that the land of Israel can deepen an understanding of the characters and events of the Bible and the context in which Judaism emerged. This rationale requires experiencing—either in reality or through simulation—the land of Israel. This would involve the study of geology, ecology, agriculture, archaeology, and ancient history.

### *Jewry*

As we learn from Breakstone, this category has paradoxically been at once the most compelling and unexamined rationale for contemporary American Jews. Using “Peoplehood” as a rationale leaves the exact nature of peoplehood and even its purpose to interpretation. Expressions of rationales in the Jewry category can range from identifying with liberal Jews in

Israel, to valuing Israel for the sake of *klal Yisrael*—essentially pluralistic or non-pluralistic conceptions of peoplehood. “Peoplehood” can mean seeing Israel as an opportunity to explore Jewish diversity, or about our responsibility to engage with Israel as one of the two major Jewish communities in the world today. Depending on what aspect of “Peoplehood” matters to the curriculum writer, it might imply radically different curricula might arise. If the desire is for students to *identify with* Israelis as their fellow Jews, the rationale might demand a curriculum that demands cross-cultural study, *mifgashim*<sup>10</sup>, and experiential education, with an emphasis upon visiting Israel. If the priority is to recognize Israel as the other most substantial and influential population of world Jewry, the curriculum might include cultural studies, some history, and a focus on understanding current events and how they might relate to the American Jewish community and even to the future of Jewry in general.

### ***Jewishness***

I understand “Jewishness” to refer to the cultural side of being a Jew, including ritual and *minhag*. The study of Israeli culture might enhance how students understand their own American Jewish culture; both by looking at the exchange between American and Israeli culture and by offering contrasts to what students might have taken for granted about their own culture. Israeli cultural studies might also express the value of multivocality, teaching students that Jewishness includes many diverse ways to be a Jew and express one’s Judaism. On the other hand, one might study the connection between the *land* of Israel and rituals and practices. Such curricula might add depth and meaning to existing rituals by invoking images of the land of Israel, or by connecting practices to the geography, seasons, even history of Israel. The study of Israeli culture might be as simple as adding depth, frames and opportunities for reflection to existing Israel days. It might involve bringing in Israeli immigrants to talk about their culture and

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<sup>10</sup> Meetings between Israelis and Americans.

experiences in Israel, and how these differ from their American experiences. Or it might look similar to the cross-cultural *mifgashim*, simulations and visits to Israel that the Jewry category suggested. Curricula that value the connection between the land of Israel and American Jewish practice demand inter-disciplinary approaches, especially history and geography. Educators might think creatively about how their local geography might parallel areas of Israel—or might contrast sharply and thus offer other educational opportunities. Groups might act out historical events or practices, such as blowing the *shofar* from the Temple Mount.

Of all the three categories, I find that “Peoplehood” is the wellspring for rationales to which I constantly turn. Although all the categories and rationales offer meaning and imply meaningful curriculum, the value of *klal Yisrael* is the one which I believe Israel best embodies and which offers the most possibility. Peoplehood is also the basis for the most consistent rationale used in the past, one that rarely expresses itself as an educationally sound, clearly articulated rationale: that is, the fear for Jewish survival. This fear underlies Hoffman’s call to use Israel in Jewish education. But as Breakstone indicates, this leaves out the question, “why does Jewish survival matter?” I believe we fail our students and dim the glory of Judaism if we teach out of fear. Rather, education serves the future when it reveals the intrinsic worth of Judaism and Jewry, and when educators convey their love of Judaism, Jewry and Jewishness—including Israel—through clearly articulated rationales that capture the meaning and value inherent in the subject matter.

Whichever rationale an educator, school or curriculum writer chooses, the rationale should be consciously *chosen* and the curricula should reflect it. We have a better chance of engaging our students with Israel and teaching them to love it if we know why it is worth loving and worth teaching.

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