

## TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

### *Israel in the Jewish Curriculum*

Barry Chazan

**T**HE PAST FEW YEARS have witnessed a striking new emphasis on Israel in the American Jewish community and in American Jewish education. This resurgent interest is documented in sociological, theological, and educational sources which seem to indicate that the role of Israel in American Jewish life is far more complicated and problematic than is normally assumed and may be more tenuous than is often implied by cursory investigations.

It is an undeniable fact that the American Jewish educational establishment has reacted to the phenomenon of Israel with widespread acceptance and popularization of the subject of Israel in all spheres of Jewish education. Not only have verbal declarations about Israel become more fervent, however, but there are also signs of serious wrestling with a deeper issue: the nature of the theoretical and operative concept of Israel underlying current educational activities.<sup>1</sup> This issue may be formulated more acutely as follows: once the surface level of contemporary Israeli heroes, the Israel Emergency Fund, and falafel has been penetrated, what is the core conception of Israel in a comprehensive theory of contemporary Jewish education?

The textbooks currently used to teach about Israel reflect some underlying assumptions and attitudes. We shall briefly examine the concept of Israel as projected in four textbooks, and then suggest certain guidelines which may be regarded as basic for any theory and practice of the teaching of Israel in contemporary Jewish education.

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1 See "Israel and the Jewish School in America: A Statement of Objectives," The Commission on Teaching about Israel in America, of the American Association of Jewish Education (May, 1969). For discussions of the relation between theory, goals, and practice, see Schwab, J. J., "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," *School Review*, 78, 1, 1-12 (November 1969); and Fox, S., "Prolegomenon for a Philosophy of Jewish Education," (in Hebrew), School of Education of the Hebrew University.

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*secular neutrality*

NORA BENJAMIN KUBIE's short volume, *Israel* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1968), for early elementary grades, is representative of a broad category of books on Israel that take a secular-neutralist position. The basic assumption of this position is that Israel, like Vietnam, Nigeria, or Japan, provides an interesting example of one style of contemporary life. The educational assumption is that knowledge about current events and other countries and cultures is basic to one's functioning as an intelligent and contributing member of American society. Hence, the objective of textbooks of this sort is to convey information about a particular country in order to broaden the student's understanding and appreciation.

One of the prominent themes of this volume (as, indeed, of most texts on Israel) is the notion of contemporary Israel as the continuation and extension of the ancient land of biblical history and religion, which is the foundation of modern Western civilization. Israel is the "Holy Land": the land promised by God to Abraham, the home of the Bible, and the scene of Jesus' birth and death. It is important to know about Israel because it is directly linked with Western religion and civilization, but this link appears to be formalistic and secular in essence (in the same way that Halloween, Christmas, Easter eggs, and gefilte fish are religious yet secular). The "religious" references in the volume are either to the Bible or to contemporary rituals. Israel is not regarded as a contemporary religious approach to the world or human existence, nor as contributing a real input into the individual's life.

Another feature of this volume is its preoccupation with the mystique of exotic Israel. This is expressed by the attempt to picture Israel as either "the holy other" or "the wild west."<sup>2</sup> Israel is turned into a never-never land that everyone loves to read about and even visit, but in which one would not really "live." This may be illustrated by a discussion of Tiberias, Safed, and "The Jewish Sages of Galilee" (pp. 12-13):

*Safed, now a summer resort and an artists' colony, has been a holy city since the fifteenth century. Refugees from Spain came there and established a center for cabalists. These were Jewish wise men who were thought to understand the language of birds and beasts, to speak with angels, and to be able to foretell the future. People in Safed still believe in magic and miracles. (Emphasis mine.)*

One can imagine the young visitor to Safed being eternally crushed when the local busdriver or shopkeeper indicates that *he*, in any case, does not

<sup>2</sup> Another manifestation is the idealization of the new Israeli as a fighter. See, for example, the anthology *Fighting Heroes of Israel*, Harold U. Ribalow, (ed.), New York: New American Library, 1967.

believe in magic and miracles.<sup>3</sup> (A reverse sort of crisis might occur when the same young person meets the busdriver or shopkeeper in Forest Hills, New York or Columbus, Ohio who *does* believe in magic and miracles.)

Together with the emphasis on Israel as the Holy Land and a land of the exotic, there is also an attempt to convey an image of Israel as a modern, dynamic state similar to America.<sup>4</sup> One finds emphasis on Israel's assistance to developing countries, the democratic structure of Israel's government, beaches, modern apartments, and transistors.

Thus, the conception of Israel conveyed in this volume—and the justification for study of the subject—is fourfold: (1) Israel is an interesting place to visit and know. (2) It is of special interest because of its link with religious origins and traditions that have become the common heritage of contemporary Western civilization. (3) It is a fairly developed and respectable modern state (although strange attire, camels, and old Desotos are still to be found there). (4) It embodies and reflects important mores and values of the American way of life (e.g., modernity, freedom, democracy, ingenuity, hard work, fun).

#### *historical continuity*

EMIL LEHMAN'S *Israel, Idea and Reality* (New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1965, revised edition), intended for junior high and high school readers, projects an ideological assumption and seeks to establish and justify the link between Israel, Zionism, and present-day Judaism:

*Our young people today, as well as many of their elders, have come to look upon the establishment of the State of Israel as an outgrowth of political predicaments, as the crowning development of a heroic pioneering effort, and last but not least, as the telling and glowing result of a gigantic exercise in Jewish philanthropy. Little thought and less recognition is progressively given to the impact of that profound revolution in Jewish life that history has marked as Zionism . . . [and to the] insight that Zionism as a political movement is but the transfer into modernity of a spiritual force that has motivated the continuation of the Jewish people ever since the prophets of old envisioned its physical rehabilitation, and the restoration of its spirit to the soil of the ancient homeland. . . . It is the interlocking combination of Judaism and Zionism that opens the secrets of Jewish destiny. (p. v)*

Lehman's basic assumption is that Zionism is an integral part of "that con-

<sup>3</sup> Harold Isaacs writes of similar disillusion in his study *American Jews in Israel*, New York: John Day and Co., 1967.

<sup>4</sup> This theme is particularly emphasized in *Understanding Israel*, by Gartler, M., Laikin, J., and Hall G., River Forest, Illinois: Laidlow Brothers, 1965, an elementary level text which is part of the "Understanding Your World" series.

stellation of historical continuity” which comprises Judaism, rather than being an isolated modern nationalist movement, or the ideology of another developing country. This is obviously a broader and more legitimate conception of Israel than that implied in the first volume.

The problem with this approach is that when it is translated into the practical educational sphere, Zionism and Israel emerge as *exclusively* historical phenomena. This volume is really a Jewish history text, the first 190 pages (out of a total of 236) dealing with the history of Zionism from the Exile until 1949. This essentially historical conception of Zionism and Israel is emphasized by the rich collection of photographs—the early Biluim, Herzl and his mother, the founding of Tel Aviv in 1909, important Zionist leaders—which supports the position that Zionism and Israel are *exclusively* matters of history, to be recorded and documented in classic photographs.

In the closing section of the volume, Lehman focuses his attention on contemporary Israel, dealing with such issues as Judaism in Israel, Zionism after statehood, Israel and American Jewry. The treatment of these subjects is cursory (especially when compared with the comprehensive analysis of the Zionist movement), descriptive, and non-ideological in nature. Lehman deals with the issue of Israel and American Jewry in half a page, indicating that

*the relationship between Israel and world Jewry is a complicated one. Israel derives much of her financial support from the contributions of Jews in the United States. Nevertheless, there are Israelis who have argued that a vital Jewish life outside of Israel is impossible. This is heatedly denied by many Jews in this country. (p. 236)*

The claim that *Israel, Idea and Reality* is essentially a history text is not meant to be a critique of the ideological assumption of the inherent historical link between Israel, Zionism, and Jewish history. The problem is that such an approach only partially describes the relationship of Israel and Judaism and is inadequate for three reasons. First, while it is true that Israel is an aspect of Jewish history, it certainly is not the only, and perhaps not even the predominant, aspect of that history. Second, this argument neglects the fact that Israel is not simply a relic of the past; it is a living, dynamic, religious phenomenon which is a part of present and future Jewish life. Third, the assumption that history has authority and legitimacy for the present and the future is debatable, and even if it were true, it would probably carry little weight for today's young people who question and doubt the legitimacy of the past and the authority of tradition for their lives. Thus, it would not only be questionable philosophy

or theology but also debatable pedagogy to view Israel's link with Judaism as essentially historical.

*religious ideology*

THE TWO TEXTS on Israel published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *Behold the Land* by Helen Fine (1968), and *Israel Today* by Harry Essrig and Abraham Segal (revised edition 1968), provide the clearest examples of a defined position on Israel, and of a conscious confrontation with the meaning of Israel for the life of the contemporary American Jew. This is not to say that the particular ideological position is always a defensible one, or that it is consistently presented. Nevertheless, it is clear that these volumes are concerned with religious ideology.<sup>5</sup>

The objective of *Behold the Land* (which is the elementary level volume of the UAHC series on Israel) is to bring Israel into the lives of children "who did not experience the miracle of Israel's rebirth and early development" (editor's introduction, p. v). In addition to its emphasis on the contemporary nature of Israel and its people, this volume directly focuses on the relationship and meaning of Israel for American Jewry and for the American Jewish child. The author's position is succinctly stated in the epilogue:

*Although you and I live in America so many miles away, strong bonds join us to our Jewish homeland for we are part of the Jewish people. We, too, are descendants of the ancient Israelites who lived on the historic soil of the Land of Israel. We, too, share the love for the Tanach. It is our everlasting treasure and Eretz Yisrael is our Holy Land. (p. 257)*

Israel has meaning for the American Jew, and hence is an objective of American Jewish education, as a result of its link with religious history, and of its being the home of a significant concentration of the Jewish people today.

A clear—if unintended—statement about the relationship of the American Jewish child to Israel is conveyed by the series of fictitious young people created by the author to highlight the multi-cultured nature of Israeli society. There is Saadia, born in Yemen, brought to Israel on Operation Magic Carpet, and now living in Kiryat Shmonah, where he is a happy and successful diamond polisher. Naama came from Tunisia and now lives in Jaffa. Yussuf, originally from Persia, is now a parachutist in the Israel Army. Nissim and Zev came from Algeria via France, and they now live in an Aliyat Hanoar youth village. Avinoam, the director

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of Reform ideology and education in Adar, *Z. Jewish Education in Israel and the United States* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv: Gema, 1970, pp. 241-55.

of the youth village, was also brought to Israel by Aliyat Hanoar as a refugee from the horrors of Nazism. These figures have the following characteristics in common: they are fresh and likeable young people; they are escapees from some sort of suffering or persecution or from backward societies; they are all in Israel for good.

There are also two American children in this book: Judy Phillips, whose parents are in Israel on business, and Heidi Morrison, who is in Israel for a year with her family while her father, a history professor at Brandeis, is teaching at the Hebrew University. Judy and Heidi love being in Israel and have many exciting adventures. However, there is an overly romantic and unreal aspect to their confrontation with Israel; it certainly does not make the same demands nor relate to their lives as it does to Saadia, Naama, or Yussuf. Ultimately there is a limit and restraint to the relationship of a Judy Phillips and a Heidi Morrison with Israel (and the issue here is *not* simply the question of *aliyah*).

#### *the significance of israel*

HARRY ESSRIG and Abraham Segal's *Israel Today* (grade 8–10) is the most noteworthy text on Israel from two perspectives. Technically, it is an exemplary textbook (e.g., page layout, photographs, text style, bibliography, anecdotes, maps and charts). Conceptually, the volume has three central objectives. First, it seeks to transmit the sense of inspiration and human achievement which characterizes Israel, without sacrificing honesty or objectivity. Thus, for example, straightforward discussions of the problems of war, Arabs in Israel, religion and the state, appear alongside comprehensive analyses of the achievements of Israel in immigration, social services, agriculture, and democratic living. A second focus of the volume is a clear and comprehensive treatment of Israel's culture, economy, government, cities, etc. The authors skillfully blend such specifics as local jokes, descriptions of foods, weather, holidays, and photographs of faces into a complete and living picture of the country.

The authors' main objective, however, is not simply to convey the nature of Israel, but to *confront the American child with Israel*, and to provide a *justification of the meaning of Israel* for modern Jewish youth.

Israel's special significance devolves upon several factors, some of which were introduced in the companion volume, *Behold the Land*. First, American Jews are related to Israel just as other Americans are related to Ireland, Italy, Greece, or Poland. Israel is part of the extended family of American Judaism, Israelis are "brothers," and American Jews should be concerned for and involved in the welfare of their "family" abroad. Second,

Israel is the "Jewish national home." This does not mean that American Jews have a physical tie with Israel, but that Israel is a potential source of Jewish culture, religious forms, and ideas. The American Jew need not relate to Israel as a physical home, since:

*We American Jews do not believe we are in exile—the United States is our safe and happy home . . . we need Israel—not, like some Jews, as a place to live, but as a source of help and inspiration in Jewish living. (p. 269)*

A third element in Israel's special meaning for American Jews is its connection with almost all aspects of Jewish life. Hebrew, Bible, current events, community functions, Jewish history, all are integrally related to Israel and become fully meaningful in terms of Israel's existence. Finally, Israel is a fulfillment or an outlet for the humanitarian concerns of American Judaism. Through Israel, American Jewry is able to guarantee a refuge for the displaced and persecuted Jews of the world. This role is also of importance in that it serves as a unifying element for the disparate Jewish groups of America.

Thus, Israel is important to American Jewry in historical, spiritual, and humanitarian terms. Such linkage is clearly important; however, it is an insufficient justification for the serious preoccupation with Israel implied by this volume. One could relate historically to Israel's past without necessarily feeling concern for the modern political state. Spiritually, Israel is certainly not the exclusive, and probably not even an essential, component of American Judaism. The "spiritual Israel" to which so many American Jews wish to relate is probably a "reading in" of their own preconceived attitudes and wishes. (The classic example of this is the wealthy American, Mr. Zodman, in Michener's *The Source*.) Finally, while Israel is an important humanitarian cause, American Jews are also involved with other important causes.

#### *enriching the image*

THE IMAGE OF ISRAEL in Jewish education as exemplified by these four texts may be summed up as follows: ① It is an historically and religiously important phenomenon. 2) It is an exotic and somewhat unusual place. 3) It is a fairly modern, American-style country. ④ It is the scene of important humanitarian gestures (immigration) and social experiments (the kibbutz). Such a conception is inadequate for the teaching of Israel in contemporary Jewish education. What is lacking is the notion of the primacy and indispensability of Israel to contemporary Jewish existence, and its crucial role in the formation of the Jewish child's character.

Let us, therefore, explore the minimal components of any conception

of Israel rooted in the basic premise just enunciated, as they might appear in the educational sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Israel must not be included in school programming simply because it is an issue of current interest, or because it supplies convenient program material, without concern for the relationship of this subject to the remainder of the curriculum and to the objectives of the educational enterprise as a whole. Unfortunately, much of the teaching of Israel, especially in the post-Six Day War period, seems to reflect this unthinking approach. Most Hebrew schools have Israel programming in their curriculum and extra-curricular activities, and most American Jewish summer camps want "an Israeli" on their staff. However, in the majority of cases, there is an inadequate conception of *why* there is such an emphasis, and of *what* Israel actually means for contemporary American Jewry. The result, in terms of student attitudes, is not only ambivalence but, in many cases, negativism towards Israel as an element in American Judaism.

Israel must be integrated into a comprehensive theory of Jewish education through *the underlying conception of the nature of Judaism*, which constitutes the frame and justification for the various subjects of the curriculum. This does not mean that there is only one possible theory of Israel in Jewish education, for there is more than one defensible conception of Judaism and its relation to the notion "Israel." But whatever theory is projected, it must be based on theoretical and practical sources.

A theory of Israel in Jewish education must be rooted in a philosophically, theologically, and historically legitimate conception of Judaism and Israel. In addition, such a theory must be consistent with the best hypotheses and (tentative) conclusions of the social sciences and education as applied to contemporary Jewish existence, and be developed within the context of the realities of current Jewish educational practice. In short, the development of a theory of Israel in Jewish education is a complicated and multi-sourced enterprise, requiring the contributions of the philosopher, theologian, sociologist, psychologist, and educator.

#### *unacceptable justifications*

CERTAIN CLAIMS or justifications for the teaching of Israel in Jewish education are theoretically incomplete or inadequate:

- 1) The position that Israel is the homeland of all Jews is historically

<sup>6</sup> The following comments are based on a series of discussions on "Israel in Jewish Education" sponsored by the Division of the Teaching of Israel of the Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Fall-Winter 1969-70, and particularly on the following working papers: Rosenak, Michael, "Reflections on the Teaching of Israel," and Arzt, Raphael, "Israel: A Working Paper."



and sociologically inaccurate. At most it is a prescriptive or emotive statement of what *should be* the case. It is inadequate as a justification because it is inaccurate as a fact.

2) The position that Israel is a refuge from potential and real tensions and crises may have historical and even sociological legitimacy, but is inadequate psychologically and theologically as a justification for the teaching of Israel. This conception is too defensive and negative to constitute a sound theory of mental health or a positive theology. Such a justification only explains what "evils" Israel may prevent; it does not indicate the positive and formative role of Israel in one's physical and spiritual being and character.

3) The position that Israel is legitimized because it is a modern developed state "like" America certainly is not a logical or educational justification for preoccupation with it.

4) The position that Israel is the central historical museum of Judaism is inadequate on three counts. First, all of Jewish history did not take place in Israel. Second, Israel is not simply an historical phenomenon, but a living entity. Third, it is questionable if the tradition of the past has, or should have, authority in the lives of contemporary young people and contemporary Judaism.

5) The position that Israel constitutes an interesting social experiment equates Israel with such phenomena as communes, Swedish socialism, or drugs. While there may be an element of truth to this argument sociologically, it is philosophically, theologically, and historically unacceptable.

6) The position that Israel is the Promised or Chosen Land is based on a theologically unacceptable conception of God and His operation in human life.

In addition to the unacceptable justifications just noted, any theory of Israel in Jewish education must avoid two pitfalls prevalent in contemporary Jewish education. The first is the equation of the teaching of Israel with "teaching for *aliyah*." Such a claim is an incorrect simplification of the position that Israel is an indispensable element of Judaism. Although Israel and Judaism are integrally related, the latter is not exhausted by the former, and living in Israel is not an automatic verification of "Jewishness." Thus, while *aliyah* may be an objective of certain educational theories of Israel, it can be neither the sole objective nor the sole criterion for evaluation of success or failure. The second pitfall is the exclusive equation of Jewish education (or "religious education") with "moral education" or "social action."<sup>7</sup> Such an equation results in the justification or rejection of

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<sup>7</sup> For comment on the confusion of "moral" and "religious" elements in Jewish education, see Hazzan, B., "On Moral Education," (in Hebrew), *Shvilei HaHinukh*, 30, 1, 1970, pp. 48-51.

Israel exclusively in terms of "morality" or "humanitarianism" (e.g. refugees, "imperialism," "colonialism"). One of the important contributions of a theory of Israel to Jewish education is precisely the rectification of this faulty equation. Morality and humanitarianism do play a central role in the definition of Judaism, but they do not exhaust such a definition, and in themselves do not constitute the totality of Judaism.

In light of what has been said above, it is clear that the essential requirement for the teaching of Israel is the production of educational materials which represent a legitimate theory of Israel. Jewish educators and educational planners might more profitably concentrate their efforts on this problem rather than on "fitting" Israel into the existing curriculum, or on planning *Yom Ha'atzmaut* programs. The technical questions (texts, teacher training, etc.) can only be dealt with when there is clarification of the philosophical, theological, sociological, psychological, and educational nature of Israel in the context of American Jewry and Jewish education.

AN UNDERSTANDING of Judaism as a religious civilization is a viewpoint which might best establish the place of Israel in the Jewish curriculum. Israel then becomes the cardinal example of a situation in which all aspects of Jewish existence are expressed, and in which there is an opportunity for the autonomous development of the Jewish outlook. Israel may thus be presented as a central element in the understanding and formation of one's Jewish being. A curriculum which started from this point of view would make the teaching of Israel a focal point of the entire Jewish educational process and would give our instruction a coherence and contemporaneity which it now lacks.