

# STANDING WITHIN THE GATES

## A Study of the Impact of the Cleveland Israel Educators' Seminar on the Personal and Professionals Lives of its Participants

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*A carefully crafted Israel experience, even one that is only two weeks in length, can have a significant impact on the personal and professionals lives of its participants, as indicated in this study of the Cleveland Israel Educators' Seminar. There was a significant correlation between participation in the Seminar and professional stability, and it served as an impetus for many participants to engage in continuing study. All the respondents to this study reported that the Seminar enabled them to better integrate the various aspects of their Jewish identities.*

This article reports the results of a retrospective survey of educators from Cleveland, Ohio, who participated in a two-week Israel Seminar co-sponsored by the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. The authors apply Bernard Reisman's (1993) assumptions that an Israel trip can serve as a transforming experience for adults who are searching for community, transcendence, and rootedness.

It is widely accepted that an Israel experience has the potential for a strong impact, indeed a life-transforming impact upon Jewish identity ("Attitudes," 1992; Chazan, 1992; Cohen, 1986; Hochstein, 1985). This assessment is based on research about the Israel experiences of teenagers. Whether the Israel experience has a similar impact on adults has yet to be investigated systematically (Klein-Katz, 1990, 1991). Bernard Reisman (1993), who has been a consultant to program providers in Israel, promotes the trip as a transforming experience that

uniquely responds to the major interests and concerns of today's Jews—the quest for community, transcendence and rooted-

ness....This process represents a transition to a post-modern era for American Jewry.

Their quest is for *community*, to afford them a sense of belonging and to offset impersonality and transiency; for *spirituality and transcendence* to provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose; and for *tradition and rootedness*, to offer a link to the past and guidelines to shape their lives and the lives of the families they raise.

This article tests these assumptions by examining adult Israel experiences in the Cleveland Israel Educators' Seminar.

The Seminar is an initiative of the Joint Federation/Congregational Plenum Commission on Jewish Continuity in Cleveland. One element in an overall plan to increase the effectiveness of personnel in day schools and in supplementary education, the Seminar is offered based on the assumption that Israel experiences had the potential to strengthen Jewish educators.

The Seminar was developed jointly by the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. Sally Klein-Katz, who as a Jerusalem Fellow had developed working hypotheses

that applied theories of adult learning to adult education experiences in Israel, made her the natural Israeli partner in this venture.

Planning for the Seminar was based on three key assumptions.

1. For Jewish educators to motivate young people to identify with Israel, they themselves need to experience Israel. All too often the Israel curriculum of Jewish schools are taught by individuals who have no personal knowledge of Israel and thereby unwittingly perpetuate clichés and stereotypes about the Jewish State.
2. Field study, in this case in Israel, motivates professional growth. Many Jewish educators are avocational, particularly those employed in supplementary education; that is, they do not view their teaching role as their main profession, and they are not professionally trained in Jewish education. The general studies teachers in Cleveland's Jewish day schools are expected to teach beyond their areas of training by engaging in projects that integrate Israel into the curriculum; without an Israel experience, these teachers cannot be effective.
3. Israel is an integral part of Jewish life. Study of the Jewish experience while in Israel creates more natural links among the various aspects of Jewish identity. The primary articulated base of Cleveland's educators' Jewish identity is religious; this seminar allows for exploration of Judaism's cultural, national, ethnic, communal, political and historical dimensions as well.

Each aspect of the Israel Educator Seminar is crafted to create a study experience to engage the Jewish educator with the land and its people on both personal and professional levels on the assumption that a strong personal attachment will deepen and enrich one's professional identification.

## THE SEMINAR

The Seminar includes three pre-trip study sessions, the two-week Israel experience, and three post-trip meetings. In Israel, the educational programming addresses the complexities of an open Jewish society.

The participants experience a variety of cultures, touch the mix of ancient and modern, smell the contrasts, and hear the voices of young and old. As learners they study through field experiences and programs, visit important sites, and meet ordinary citizens, educators, and leaders. As educators, they compare Jewish education in the Jewish State with education in their own community, visiting educational institutions, observing programs, and entering into dialogue with their Israeli colleagues. Regular opportunities are provided for reflection on the personal and professional implications of the experience: "What does this mean to me?, What are the implications for my work?, and What does this mean to me as a member of a Jewish community in America?"

Funding for the Seminar is provided through a combination of resources. The Fund for the Jewish Future of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland provides an annual allocation for this venture to the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC). This allocation enables the JECC to offer each participating educator a generous subsidy, presently \$1,500, to cover the staffing, marketing, and recruiting costs. Most of the educators' employing institutions offer additional stipends ranging up to \$500. Participants have access to the JECC's conference grant fund if they have financial need. In 1995, the cost to a subsidized educator was \$1,650 and for a non-subsidized participant \$3,150. The majority of those traveling in 1995, after receiving the grants from their schools and financial aid, paid about \$1,000 from their own funds.

Educational personnel who have served at least two years in any JECC affiliate are eligible. Spouses or family members over

18 are welcome. Because of the intense personal nature of the seminar, size is limited to no more than 15 subsidized participants. The smallest number to attend was in 1990/91, the year of the Gulf War, when 9 participated, and the largest was in 1993/94 when 22 traveled. After that larger group, the leaders determined that 15 was ideal for the types of interaction desired.

The three pre-trip study sessions establish the context and expectations for the Israel experience: that it is a study seminar and not a tour. Themes are examined beginning with "Israel and Me," the Israeli educational system, and politics. Each year's readings reflect current issues. Among the 1995 readings were such articles as, "Jewish Education in Israel: The Ideological Factor" by Michael Rosenak (1989), an excerpt from *From Beirut to Jerusalem* by Thomas Friedman (1989), and two pieces by Emil Fackenheim—"The Americanization of Israel" (1995) and "Fighting for Jewish Jerusalem Today" (1995). Before leaving for Israel, participants design a service for Yad Vashem and choose a group Tzedakah project. For example, when the 1992 Seminar participants visited an Ethiopian caravan, they purchased a dual-cassette tape recorder for the nursery school. Some educators apply for academic credit at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies and also commit to writing a paper about the seminar.

The seminar in Israel is developed as a course of field study with a balance between seminar-style and experiential exploratory learning. The program is based on a series of themes that build on each other, rather than on a series of isolated tours. There is also a balance in the content between a focus on Jewish issues and on Israeli issues. A basic premise for determining what may be included in the program is that it must be distinctly different in some way from what could be studied in the home community. There is also flexibility in the program development so that it may reflect current concerns of the Jewish world. Although the itinerary is appropriate for the

first-time visitor, even those sites that are chosen in order to meet those needs, such as Massada, the Diaspora Museum, and the Kotel, are presented within the themes of the seminar. For example, the theme for the day on which we visit Massada is "Strategies of Survival." The day begins with an opening seminar at the model of the Second Temple in Jerusalem; the seminar is continued en route to Massada with references to Qumran and the Essenes, and concludes in the evening in the Negev with a reflection on Ben Gurion's vision for that area; all these discussions have the common theme of responses to survival of different kinds and in different historical periods. During the course of this day, the educators are asked to also reflect on issues of Jewish survival for their community and family in their modern settings. This day is usually preceded by a visit to the Israel Museum and the Shrine of the Book, which ties in the issues of survival preceding and during the War of Independence for the State of Israel, the Bar Kochba Revolt, and the life and beliefs of the Essenes. And so, as the participants move from place to place and day to day, they are on a complex journey that is at the same time highly personal and carefully developed to support intense reflection in a supportive atmosphere.

The Seminar is simultaneously a very intense personal and group experience, and this is reflected in those features that most influence the participants. On the one hand, the high level of the staffing with a master educator-scholar is generally significant for everyone. The presentations when touring are also on a sophisticated level. Rather than presenting the usual historical listing of every detail of every place, each site serves as the setting for exploring a well-crafted theme that unfolds before them with all of its complexities and with no easy answers provided. That each participant highlights different moments of the experience as powerful to them is an indication of how varied they are in their backgrounds and interests. It also demonstrates how varied the program must be to facilitate those

moments of connection, meaning, personal reflection, deep understanding, spirituality, feeling moved, and transformation, as the participants themselves have written.

In the evaluations immediately following the Seminar's conclusion—written hours before they board the plane—the educators' "disappointments" are generally that the pace was so intense that they did not have time to do something that was on their personal list. Maintaining the balance between educational goals and personal agendas that do not always fit into the admittedly very limited free time seems to be the greatest challenge. As one participant wrote, sounding a theme echoed by others, "Although I wish that we could have added on, there is nothing in the program that I would have wanted to miss, so I guess I will just have to return!" This is also a challenge to those responsible for the pacing of the program.

On return to the States, there are three post-trip study sessions that focus on revisiting unresolved topics from the Israel experience—such as the complexities of the peace process, and the place of Judaism in the life of Israelis, continuing the social network created in Israel, and encouraging the participants to function as Israel educators in their home institutions, as advocates for Israel, and as recruiters for future cohorts.

Assessment of the Seminar's immediate impact continues to be ongoing. These evaluations gave immediate feedback indicating overwhelmingly positive responses to the Seminar, but gave no information about its long-range impact.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

In 1994 the long-range impact of the Israel Seminar became a focus of research. A retrospective questionnaire was developed and distributed to all 32 participants in the four annual Seminars (1990–1994). Twenty were returned, yielding a 63% rate of return. The survey respondents were sixteen current and one former classroom teachers, (three in day schools and fourteen in con-

gregational schools), a synagogue librarian, a congregational educational director, and a central agency employee. Those who did not complete the survey included two day school teachers, one central agency employee, one preschool teacher, and five congregational teachers. Thus, one can assume that the data gathered from the survey respondents are representative of the whole group of participants.

The responses showed a significant correlation between participation in the Seminar and professional stability. The annual system-wide rate of turnover in Cleveland is 20 to 30 percent, with supplementary schools in the higher range and day schools in the lower range. In contrast, 17 of the 20 respondents were still working in the same position held participating in the Seminar. One changed positions, one enrolled in rabbinical school, and one left Jewish education because of health reasons. An analysis of those who did not complete the questionnaire, based on the JECC's teacher database, reveals that all but four are in the same positions. Of these, two moved out of town, and an additional two enrolled in the Cleveland Fellows Master's Degree Program at the College of Jewish Studies. Thus, all but seven of the educator participants are in the same positions, while three are in the process or have completed advanced study to become full-time Jewish education professionals.

The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in light of the basic organizing assumptions of the Seminar.

#### **1. If Jewish Educators are to Motivate Jewish Young People to Identify with Israel, Then They Themselves Need to Experience Israel.**

Seventeen of the twenty educators responded that this seminar influenced them to include and/or enhance the role of Israel in their teaching.

- "It made me better able to teach, explain, identify with Israel as a teacher. It is

much easier to talk and teach about something you yourself have experienced."

- "I devote more time to teaching Israel in my Holocaust class."
- "I inform my [science] students of the historical changes in the environment and the current efforts at conservation; I pay particular attention to the water shortage which plagues that part of the world and the political problems which result."
- "I also include Israel in my lessons quite consciously. This is a personal decision that receives the endorsement of my school director."
- "I buy more books about Israel for the school [library]. I promote their use through displays, booklists, and newsletter articles. I incorporate Israel into the library programs I plan, especially for the third grade."
- "I am more aware of the possibilities and necessity of integrating Israel into a curriculum. I am more able to aid and assist faculty in this implementation."

## 2. Field Study in Israel Motivates Professional Growth.

Twelve educators responded that they were engaged in more study since the Seminar. All three educators who enrolled in full-time graduate programs in Jewish education indicated that participation in the Seminar influenced their decision to do so. One teacher reported that the Seminar was part of her motivation for earning a license in Jewish education.

- "It influenced me to engage in more study. It gave my educational life a boost."
- "Oy, have I ever. I continue on the Lehrhaus Committee.... I have taken two or three classes through the JESP [Jewish Educators' Services Program] almost every year."
- "Received my Master's in Judaic Studies from the Cleveland College of Jewish

Studies in '93."

- "I am working on all of the above [more study, an additional degree, and Hebrew]. In Cleveland I studied Hebrew and Talmud at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, and now, of course, I'm studying intensively"—first-year rabbinic student.

## 3. Study of the Jewish Experience while in Israel Will Enable Participants to Create More Natural Links among the Various Aspects of Jewish Identity.

All twenty respondents reported that the Seminar had a significant impact on their personal and professional lives and on their understanding of the various aspects of Jewish identity. The strength of this impact was not related to the length of time between the trip and filling out the questionnaire.

- "Without question this Seminar has greatly enriched my knowledge of and connection to Israel, and also to Judaism."
- "The experience impacted my life on several levels: psychologically I feel more connected with my heritage; philosophically I'm more comfortable with Israeli policies."
- "The Seminar experience affirmed my connection to Judaism. It was a tremendously stimulating learning and exploring experience. It somehow broadened my understanding of the breadth of Israel, in all of these senses: cultural, historical, and religious. It also made Israel more than a quaint and antique and pretty place to visit."
- "Personally, it has added great depth. Israel has meaning and importance in my life."
- "It had a profound and lasting effect.... This has led to a deeper understanding of the continuity of our people and our beliefs and to a stronger commitment to Jewish continuity.... The trip resulted in an emotion[al], spiritual and intellectual

integration of many diverse strands of thought and feelings.”

### CONCLUSION

The Cleveland Israel Educators' Seminar demonstrates that a carefully crafted experience, even one that is only two weeks in length, can influence the personal and professional lives of Jewish educators. Fifteen participants responded that they continue to have personal contact with other Seminar members. The mini-community created during the intensive two-week experience has been sustained for these adults even up to four years later, echoing Bernard Reisman's (1993) finding that Jewish adults seek community and a sense of belonging. Participation has also decreased feelings of isolation, teacher-to-teacher and school-to-school. The participants' work in Jewish education, to which they have added a more significant Israel component, has been renewed and provided with more meaning and purpose. Their personal interpretations of Jewish identity have been enriched, linked to the past, and infused with the richness of tradition and rootedness. Their commitment to Jewish community and tradition, both personally and professionally, has clearly been positively affected by "Standing Within the Gates" through the Cleveland Israel Educators' Seminar.

The retrospective study not only validated the assumptions on which the Seminar was constructed but it also has indicated areas for refinement. It is important to create more opportunities to decrease educators' sense of isolation both in the pre- and post-trip study sessions and in Israel. In the two Seminars conducted since the initial research, more periodic processing sessions within a supportive atmosphere, called "Think, Reflect, Connect," have been instituted to enable educators to re-examine their personal or professional perspectives. The five-year evaluation suggests that more overt connections may be made between enrollment in the Seminar and commitment to future study. It is also important for the Seminar itinerary to incorporate changes

within Israel so that Jewish educators have the tools to motivate young people to identify with Israel. The Seminar continues to serve as a micro-laboratory to test assumptions about the impact of a thoughtful and intensive Israel experiential seminar on Jewish educational personnel.

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