

Israel Literacy: The Development of a Conceptual Framework for Jewish Education Dr. Liat Ben-David

There is an emerging recognition that Israel Education cannot be addressed satisfactorily until the community as a whole and institutions devoted to Jewish education in particular, address the ideological underpinnings of Israel Education. This is both a community-wide and context-specific conversation that needs to take place in a thoughtful and systematic fashion.¹

*Mapping Israel Education:
an Overview of Trends and Issues in North America,
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The place of Israel in the life of the Jewish people is at a crucial, historical turning point. To successfully deal with the variety of challenges that world Jewry faces - the ongoing conflict in Israel, combined with global forces that are increasingly placing demands on the Jewish state, the rise in anti-Semitism, the rising percentage of intermarriages, the lessening ties between young Jews and Israel, the dramatic decrease in Jews visiting Israel, and many more -- a broad-based collaboration and partnership between individuals and different Jewish and Israeli organizations must be created. Effectively dealing with these challenges will occur only if the problem is addressed in a holistic and systemic fashion, i.e., if the different parts of the organized Jewish world create an ongoing dialogue based on mutual understanding and an over-arching, shared paradigm that deals with the basic, fundamental questions of Jewish identity, targeting all age groups and affiliations: Why Israel? What is Israel's role in Jewish life? What does Israel education mean?

The place of Israel in Jewish education in North America has been a source of discussion for many years and there are different views regarding what Israel education means. Israel education can be as little as a one-day celebration of falafel and Israeli folk dances, be based on Israel-related events and "crisis-response" curricula or take the shape of Israel programs as an integral part of community programming. This situation stems from a variety of conceptual frameworks, each of which regards the place of Israel in Jewish life very differently. Varying from regarding Israel as a pillar of Jewish identity to viewing Israel as a haven for Jews if they need it to seeing Israel as a country like any other, the result is an eclectic, unorganized pile of experiences and underlying philosophies. A study recently conducted by the Gilo Family Foundation identified some of the major problems of Israel education in North America as the "...lack of focus, goals, specified body of knowledge and educator training that characterizes other educational fields," and a lack of a "clear, ideological and conceptual framework,"² i.e. – a serious absence of answers regarding the why and the what: why are we teaching about Israel and what are we trying to accomplish. There is no one underlying paradigm that guides Jewish educators as to what the goals of Israel education should be.

In striking paradox, Israel is one of the basic concepts that all Jewish streams agree should be "a pillar of Jewish education." There is no doubt that Israel plays a central role in the building of Jewish identity and that the support of Israel is essential to the survival of the Jewish people, both in Israel and the Diaspora, yet there is no consensus on what that means. "Which way should I go?" Alice asks the Cheshire cat at a crossroads and he answers with a smile, "That depends on where you want to arrive."³ Without a clear view of what basic Israel education should achieve, without a shared and systemic conceptual framework regarding what Israel education is - the range of expressions of Israel education is beyond variety; it is chaotically destructive. There

education is - the range of expressions of Israel education is beyond variety; it is chaotically destructive. There is a growing sense that long-standing questions and gaps in Israel education should be revisited, especially now. In today's world, we would like all our People to understand why Israel is important and relevant to their lives, regardless of age or affiliation. For them to do so, they must be able to understand the threads that make Israel what it is: a central expression of Jewish life in all its vibrant, multi-faceted meanings, with rich cultural expressions and achievements as well as debates. A democratic state that is based on Jewish values, history, narrative, and religion, still struggling with questions that rise from this complex interaction of aspects and its everyday expression. The varieties of answers that are given to these questions are crucial to the present and the future of not only Israeli society, but also of all world Jewry. Each and every one of us needs to be able to debate opinions, make decisions, and solve problems -- based on knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the goal of Jewish education is to develop an over-arching, systemic paradigm that regards Israel as an integral part of Jewish Identity, a paradigm that is based on Israel literacy for all.

In order to make a case for the importance of "Israel literacy" in Jewish education, the word "literacy" must first be defined.

The original definition of "literacy" was a narrow one: literacy was based on a person's ability to read, write, and master basic numeric functions. As the 20th century unraveled, it became clear that these basic operations are not enough for successful, everyday functioning in a sophisticated, modern world, a world that accumulates information, develops knowledge, and defines new disciplines day by day.

In the 1950s, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) defined literacy in the broader sense of "functional literacy."⁴ According to this definition, literacy is the ability to implement knowledge combined with skills in a social context. For example, it is not enough for a person to know that certain chemicals destroy the ozone layer: if that person does not act upon that knowledge, if he does not check for the "environmentally friendly" mark on the deodorant he buys, he is not functionally literate. Functional literacy is the level of literacy a person must have in any given area in order to make meanings, based upon knowledge and skills he possesses, expanding and enriching them through personal and social experiences that enable him to successfully make decisions and solve problems in the cultural and social context in which he lives. "Such mastery (of functioning in the environment) can never occur if education is restricted to the accumulation of facts, concepts and skills; it can only come about if individuals have the opportunity to use them in ways and situations where they are appropriate."⁵ The role of education is to create the learning environment that provides, encourages, and supports the development of thinking skills, knowledge, and values that enable students to make meanings, solve problems, and function thoughtfully and flexibly in today's world.⁶

This approach regards every person as operating upon his knowledge and beliefs about the world, within a flexible, yet well-defined, cultural setting and as a full partner responsible for his thinking and behavior.⁷ Therefore, the process of developing functional literacy is ongoing throughout life; it is personal, time-consuming, and highly related to cognitive and affective development. In the process of acquiring functional literacy in a certain subject matter, the individual continuously develops the knowledge base and skills in areas that are meaningful and relevant to the culture in which he lives. Furthermore, the development of functional literacy enables the individual to become familiar with a variety of opinions, while utilizing tools of information processing, critical thinking, and development of tolerance and a pluralistic approach toward opinions and

processing, critical thinking, and development of tolerance and a pluralistic approach toward opinions and concepts that are different than his or her own. In this process, the individual grants personal meaning to the decision-making processes that he is engaged in, while clarifying personal, social, and cultural values in an interactive dialogue with a dynamic society.⁸

It should be emphasized that functional literacy is subject-matter dependant. A person can be literate in a certain discipline, illiterate in another, and achieve levels of expertise in yet a third, all based on his experiences, personal goals, and cultural context. The major goal of general education is to create the environment and experiences that lead to the development of functional literacy for all. In view of all the above, the major goal of Israel education should be the development of Israel literacy for all.

What does “Israel Literacy” mean and how can it be achieved?

It is an understatement to say that deciding on what Israel literacy includes is not an easy task. How does one build an integrative, underlying paradigm that is based on a variety of concepts, values, and cultural expressions? How can we bridge the gap between different groups and affiliations, when each one of them is so different? How can we make sure that such a “chimera” does not lose the basic characteristics of Judaism, while maintaining relevance to a pluralistic People? The answer lies in a combination of two aspects that are imperative for success:

1. Focusing on the majority: If we are seeking to strengthen the place of Israel in the heart of the Jewish people as a whole, then Israel literacy is meant for and should appeal to all affiliations. Generally speaking, Orthodoxy engages in Israel education on a high level, regardless of situation or time and it is still true that, across the board, the Orthodox community remains highly connected and physically present in Israel, even when other affiliations stay away. But the truth is that the majority of the Jewish People is not Orthodox. Most Jews have very little knowledge of Israel beyond what is reflected on CNN. This majority is the main group that Israel literacy should target. Existing models of Israel education should be thoroughly explored and used as a base line for decision making: why, what – and what not.
2. Establishing an integration of dialogues to identify the agreed parameters of Israel education, leading to the creation of an Israel education discipline, with the goal of achieving Israel literacy as its over-arching objective: Building a paradigm to lead Israel literacy must be a continuing dialogue between leading Jewish philosophers, educators, rabbis and others, from both Israel and North America. Several attempts at developing such a dialogue have been made in recent years, such as the “Israel in our lives series.”⁹ Some seven years later, the basic assumptions on which these series were founded are still very much valid: the lack of a guiding vision, translated into guiding action plans and professional development of educational leadership, as well as the lack of candid, multifaceted dialogue between Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews.¹⁰ These earlier mind-opening attempts can and should be expanded, enriched, and utilized in the discussion regarding what Israel education means. Based on the above, a renewed ideological and practical dialogue must commence, placing the creation of an Israel education discipline at its heart.

It should be emphasized that the goal of such a dialogue is NOT to create an “inventory list” of essential details that “every Jew needs to know about Israel, as E.D. Hirsch tried to do for general education when dealing

with American cultural literacy.¹¹ Rather, the goal should be to develop the systemic, over-arching, guiding principles, bodies of knowledge, skills, and concepts that create the discipline of Israel education. This puts a great challenge on educators, since by nature and definition such a discipline will be interdisciplinary: It will combine contents and methodology from areas such as history, literature, social studies, religion, anthropology, geography, and others. Although highly complex, the creation of such an Interdisciplinary discipline is not a revolutionary thought: the 20th Century brought to life many viable interdisciplinary fields – genetic engineering, biotechnology, and socio-economics are but few examples. It is an inevitable result of the developing understanding of the complexity that our world operates in and in which we are expected to function in, while finding the ways to sustain a continuing, flourishing Jewish existence. It is a task that, therefore, should be taken on headlong instead of avoided.

The paradigm developed for Israel literacy should be structured enough, on the one hand, to include the basic concepts that every Jewish person should hold about Israel, and flexible enough, on the other, to enable integration of specific, various expressions to answer local and affiliated needs and enable ongoing reflection, evaluation, and adjustment. The establishment of such an ongoing dialogue will be the foundation for creation of Israel education leadership, a crucial component for successful implementation of Israel literacy, through professional development programs, curricula development, ongoing reflection, evaluation, and so on.

Conclusion

Israel literacy includes the knowledge, understanding, and actions that are necessary for decision-making and problem solving, based on the understanding of Israel in a variety of contexts, both on the personal and the social levels. These processes are based on a worldview that regards the Jewish people as a holistic, cultural system, comprised of multifaceted expressions of mutual history, language, religion, and values, with a dynamic, vibrant relationship between its parts. It also regards Israel as a pillar of its identity.

To define the goals and components of Israel literacy for all, a consented integration of dialogues should begin between leading Jewish philosophers, educators, rabbis and others, from both Israel and North America. This dialogue will lead to the creation of an Israel education discipline, interdisciplinary in fashion, and to the creation of Israel education leadership.

Israel literacy as part of Jewish identity will contribute to the ongoing development of each individual Jew, as well as to the cultural development of the entire Jewish People as a nation. On the personal level, it will strengthen the bond between each Jew and the Jewish People, the Jewish religion, Jewish history, Jewish values, and different cultural aspects of the State of Israel as the Jewish state. On the national level, it will strengthen the bonds between different Jewish groups and affiliations, while enriching the foundation of the State of Israel as the center of Jewish entity.

Endnotes:

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 7. Gardner, H. *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*. New York: Basic Books, HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 1991.
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 10. Abrams-Gerber, K. and A. Mazor. Op. cit.
 11. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Vancouver, WA: Vintage Books, 1988.
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