

## Making Israel Real: Strategies for acquiring and using authentic resources as learning tools in the process of student inquiry and discovery

### By Ronni Sims and Anne Rothenberg

Along with consideration of the theological, historical, and political implications of teaching about Israel comes the challenge of making Israel Studies an effective part of the classroom program. The actions and activities presented here are designed to make Israel an active, relevant, ongoing component of Jewish learning at all grade levels. These actions and activities will enhance and energize commercial or school-produced Israel Studies curricula.

1. Many of the actions and activities to be discussed are based on authentic Israeli resources such as newspapers, postcards, posters, photographs, coins, stamps, CD's, books, and more. While some of these items are available through American sources, they can be acquired in a much more meaningful way from travelers to Israel. In every community, even when security concerns are at a high level, there are those who travel to Israel to visit family and friends, to participate in organized learning experiences, to be a part of a community mission or simply to demonstrate support by touring and shopping. We shall call such individuals "travelers." To build a collection of authentic Israeli resources, ask one or more travelers to Israel to bring back a few items for classroom use. The items are generally low cost or free and can easily be slipped into a suitcase. Such a request has the positive effect of recognizing that a traveler to Israel is embarking on a significant Jewish journey. It also establishes a link between students and the traveler – a link that may continue after the trip and through future trips. Invite the traveler to bring the items to the classroom and, at the same time, speak about his/her trip and to answer students' questions.
2. Make Israel a part of the classroom environment by displaying a map of Israel, an Israeli flag, Israeli visuals (posters, postcards, magazine pictures, tourist brochures, etc.), and a student-made mizrach (a wall hanging for the most eastern wall of the Jewish home, reminding them which way to face while praying--toward Jerusalem--and directing the family's thoughts to that holy city during prayer). Travelers' photographs of Israeli sites and celebrations can be color-copied, enlarged, laminated, and displayed. At the beginning of the school year or whenever the items are displayed, call students' attention to them. Engage students in a discussion of their nature and significance. It is illuminating to display a world map near the map of Israel so that students can better understand Israel's location and size in relation to neighboring countries and to other parts of the world. Maps of individual Israeli cities reveal street names that commemorate famous figures and events in Israeli history.
3. Where age appropriate, set aside a bulletin board or display space for news articles about Israel. Give students an opportunity to discuss the image of Israel as projected by the American media. Encourage students to think critically about the information reported and to compare media accounts of incidents with information reported in the Anglo-Jewish press, on the web at Israeli newspaper sites or in English or Hebrew language newspapers brought back by travelers.
4. Hebrew language has a place in every Judaic Studies classroom from a sign on the door saying Baruchim Habaim (welcome) to the use of talmidim for "students," kitah for "class," and mitzuyan for "excellent." When travelers bring back Israeli children's magazines, students who are familiar only with siddur Hebrew may be pleasantly surprised to see Winnie the Pooh, Harry Potter, and Barbie speaking Hebrew! Have students research the life of Eliezer Ben Yehudah, who was instrumental in reviving

Hebrew! Have students research the life of Eliezer Ben Yehudah, who was instrumental in reviving Hebrew as a modern language – a truly remarkable feat.

5. Develop tzedakah projects that give students and their families a chance to personally support Israel. Send home a sheet of paper with a symbol representing the Israeli charity (ex.: A tree for Jewish National Fund). Direct students and their families to fill the sheet with taped-on coins. When the filled sheet is returned, students may count the coins and write a letter to accompany the contributions when they are sent to the charity. Travelers who have witnessed tzedakah institutions at work in Israel may be invited to share their experiences with students.
6. Large-scale projects depicting Israeli subjects may be mounted on religious school walls. Projects may include a painted mural of Jerusalem; a wall of tiles depicting Israeli cities; a mosaic design showing the “seven species” of fruit and grains associated with Israel; a quilt-style wall hanging with squares representing the twelve tribes; and a giant map of Israel made from burlap covered frames decorated with felt, satin, and fabric paints. While the artwork is itself enjoyable, it is important that each project be accompanied by an in-depth study of the topic on which the project is based.
7. Send students on an Israel scavenger hunt through tour books and large “coffee table” books with color photographs of Israeli sites – ancient and modern. (These expensive books can be found in synagogue or public libraries or borrowed from religious school families and travelers). Students may also search the web for information. The scavenger hunt sheets list clues about different sites in Israel and students must discover the site that fits the clue.
8. When the weekly Torah portion refers to places in Israel such as Jerusalem, Beer Sheva, and the Red Sea, show students pictures of these places in ancient and modern times in books, post cards, posters or photographs. Ask a traveler who has visited one of these sites to speak with the class. This activity can also be a part of a B’nai Mitzvah child’s preparation for his/her D’var Torah.
9. Each classroom should have a Jewish calendar. Israeli museums sell beautiful calendars with Judaic art, Israeli nature scenes, and archaeological artifacts among other topics. (In North America, such calendars may also be available in bookstores, Jewish museums, and Judaica shops.) Begin each class by writing both the Hebrew date and the secular date on the chalkboard.
10. Celebrate birthdays and holidays Israeli-style. On students’ birthdays, sing Yom huledet sameach (Happy birthday). Invite travelers or Israelis living in the community to tell students about holiday celebrations in Israel. From the silent streets of Yom Kippur to citywide Purim parades and fireworks on Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), the spirit and observance of each holiday pervades all of Eretz Yisrael in a manner that is hard to experience outside of Israel.
11. Let students use recipes from Israeli cookbooks to prepare a meal that they share with parents or with another class. Ask a traveler to bring back an English or Hebrew language cookbook of Israeli recipes or borrow one from synagogue or public libraries. Invite an Israeli guest or traveler to help with the preparations. Pita, humus, falafel mix, and Israeli snacks and candies may be purchased in American supermarkets. Prepared cake mixes and frostings can be used to make a large cake shaped like a map of Israel. Advanced Hebrew students can use a recipe written in Hebrew. Youth groups may enjoy this activity as well.
12. During any classroom hands-on activity, play Israeli music in the background. Travelers can bring CD’s of Israeli children’s songs, holiday songs, Israeli army songs or modern Israeli popular music.
13. Base some student art projects on the work of Israeli artists such as Agam and Chagall or on Israeli art forms such as Sephardic hamsa (an amulet or good luck charm shaped like a hand and thought to symbolize the protective hand of God) designs, “ancient” clay pottery, Hebrew calligraphy, and mosaic.

symbolize the protective hand of God) designs, “ancient” clay pottery, Hebrew calligraphy, and mosaic creations. The art projects should follow a study of the artist or art form. Help students understand the diversity of the Israeli population by including a project involving the unique embroidered designs made by Bedouin women (the Bedouin are Israeli Arabs who live in the Negev desert.) Examples of Bedouin embroidery are available to travelers in the shuks (open air markets) in Southern Israeli towns.

14. Israeli bookstores carry a wonderful array of children’s books. Ask a traveler to bring back several picture books. Hebrew language children’s books may also be found in synagogue and day school libraries. During story time, have a teacher or volunteer who is fluent in Hebrew read a storybook aloud in Hebrew and give an English translation. Advanced Hebrew students can also be readers and translators.
15. A handful of Israeli coins and bills exemplify the blending of ancient and modern that is so striking a feature of Israeli culture. The symbols on modern coins reflect Biblical themes, while the vividly colored bills depict elements relating to the founding and development of the State of Israel. Let students compare and contrast Israeli and American currency, with special attention given to the national images expressed by each.
16. Israeli stamps have long been prized by collectors. The designs represent myriad aspects of Israeli history and culture including art, agriculture, social and environmental concerns, nature, holidays, and historic figures. After examining actual stamps and learning about the topics depicted, students can demonstrate their knowledge of Israeli and Judaic Studies topics by creating their own oversized “Israeli” stamps on paper or on ceramic tiles. Israeli stamp projects are a natural tie-in with a pen pal or e-mail program where students correspond in English or in Hebrew with their Israeli counterparts. Jewish educators who travel to Israel may seek out opportunities to arrange such an exchange of letters or e-mails. Travelers can purchase inexpensive sets of stamps and coins mounted on cardboard in souvenir shops as well as in post offices,
17. A web search for “Israel” reveals a number of informative websites which students may explore including:
  - o <http://encarta.msn.com/>- an interactive encyclopedia site
  - o [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com)- online edition of the Jerusalem Post
  - o [www.info.gov.il](http://www.info.gov.il)- the Israeli government website of information and services
  - o [www.imj.org.il](http://www.imj.org.il)- the Israel Museum in Jerusalem site
  - o [www.blmj.org](http://www.blmj.org)- the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem site
  - o [www.eimuseum.co.il](http://www.eimuseum.co.il)- the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv site
  - o [www.maven.co.il](http://www.maven.co.il)- MavenSearch – a Jewish web directory with a wealth of links to Israeli and Hebrew sites
  - o [www.israelvisit.co.il](http://www.israelvisit.co.il)- Information on touring and shopping in Israel
18. Celebrate Israel with a schoolwide Israel Fair or Israeli Song and Dance Festival. Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) is a popular date for such events. Israeli fairs and festivals feature student projects such as those described previously, which are prepared over an extended time period. In addition, Israeli food and presentations by Israel “experts” in the community may be offered. These events are both entertaining and informative and showcase a school’s Israel Studies program. Often, parents and members of the community are invited.

All of these actions and activities are but beginnings, frameworks for Jewish educators to adapt, expand and embellish in ways distinctly suited to their own school environments. It is our hope that

expand, and embellish in ways distinctly suited to their own school environments. It is our hope that students who paint the Kotel on a mural will one day pray there; that students who research and create a display about the Negev will one day hike there; that those who meet travelers will one day be travelers. We hope that learning about Israel takes place with such positive spirit that students who fill a sheet with coins or a notebook with facts will be filled with pride and commitment to the Jewish state and to the Jewish people.

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*Ronni Sims has lived and worked in Israel. For a number of years, she taught in a Jewish day school and directed a Jewish Teacher Resource Center. This article is based, in part, on Ronni's 1998 Raquel H. Newman National CAJE Mini-Grant, "Project Eshkol: A joint venture between travelers to Israel and Jewish educators." Ronni is currently developing a Jewish Teacher Resource Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Together with Anne Rothenberg, Ronni co-chairs the CAJE Teacher Resource Center and the CAJE Teacher Resource Center Network. She is also co-chair of CAJE 29.*

*Anne Rothenberg is a native of the Albany, NY area, but currently "commutes to Jerusalem" several times a year for several weeks at a time. She has been a faculty member in many afternoon Hebrew schools and at two different day schools, where she developed social studies units integrating Jewish history and Israel. Anne has facilitated workshops on those and other topics in a variety of resource centers and at CAJE. Together with Ronni Sims, Anne co-chairs the CAJE Teacher Resource Center and the CAJE Teacher Resource Center Network. When she is in Albany, she is the art specialist at Congregation Ohav Shalom and substitutes at a variety of educational institutions. Anne has taken part in CAJE's Leadership Kallah.*