

Making Israel Part of the Everyday Education For Young Students by Deena Bloom

I write this article with the premise that Israel education is an essential part of a child's Jewish identity. "Being Jewish" usually means that there is a common thread with others and explains why a family may engage in certain traditions, be affiliated with a synagogue or send their child to a Jewish preschool program. The families often hold a particular set of Jewish values and want them to be imparted to their child. I contend that with all this "Jewishness" should come extensive Israel education. I'd like to tell you why and provide you with some ideas of how to do it.

Let us first look at why Israel education "makes sense" for a young child and why it should be part of their school experience. The land of Israel is in some way connected to every Jewish subject taught in school. From any of the tefilot to any of the holidays, all connects back to Israel. Anything Jewish we are going to talk about in a classroom full of young children can (and should) be presented and explored as it connects back to the land. Our cycles of celebrations, our Torah ways and stories, and especially our foods are all related in some way to Israel. Each of the holidays we celebrate is linked and connected to the seasonal rhythms of the land of Israel. (Purim, whose story did not take place inside the land of Israel, is celebrated the way it is today because it is viewed as an external holiday.) Secondly, a Jewish child is automatically connected to Israel because of his or her heritage -- and that heritage continually connects us all back to Israel. Our ancestors traveled the land and settled it. More recently, our nation has fought to retain rights to live there and govern. The connections get stronger and stronger. Further, especially with the thrust of multicultural education today, Israel provides a myriad of possibilities for a multicultural curriculum. The land is culturally diverse not only in relation to the nations that inhabit the land, but also among the sects of Jews themselves who live there. From city to city, there are varied foods and music, along with historical artifacts that reflect how different the cities are today from what they used to be. One of the most exciting things about Israel is that we are always welcome there. It is viewed as a homeland (or a second homeland) and gives us a feeling of being special -- like we have more. Presenting to a child that he or she is lucky to have another place to call home is our duty as Jewish educators. With all of these themes woven throughout Judaism, how can we not use Israel as an integral part of our presentation of Jewish identity when teaching young children?

"Hard Things to Teach" about Israel

A usual comment I hear from teachers of young children is that there are too many "hard things to teach" about Israel. When I ask about what they are, I get the following feedback:

1. Currently, there are very few materials produced to support an "Israel curriculum". When teaching any subject, teachers often look for an organized, sequential curriculum to help them. Especially when very young children are involved, we look for developmentally appropriate materials and ways to set up our environment to support the learning. Currently, there is not very much "canned" material for a school to purchase to "ease" the planning phase of teaching about Israel. Additionally, many of those charged with the duty of teaching about Israel have very limited education and limited personal experiences themselves.
2. Israel is very removed from the child's own experience. I personally know many children who have been to Disneyland. I know very few that actually have been to Israel. It is much easier for any of us to

been to Disneyland. I know very few that actually have been to Israel. It is much easier for any of us to talk to children about Mickey Mouse or Cinderella than it is to talk about the Kotel or the Dead Sea with which they have no personal experience.

3. Most of the things we want to teach about Israel happened a long time ago. Unfortunately the current political situation hasn't helped educators make contemporary Israel more "user friendly" for teaching the young child. When we talk about any type of history with young children (such as Thanksgiving or the weekly parasha), it is often hard for them to picture life without cars and cellular phones. When presenting Israel, we add additional challenges to the mix by studying a land with geographical differences, too! (After all, just imagine floating in the sea because there is so much salt! So foreign!)
4. In much Early Childhood teaching, Israel seems "detached" from the remainder of the curriculum. Israel "shows up" around the time of Yom Haatzmaut and "stays" as a guest for about a week. Israel becomes a unit of study rather than a way of thinking.
5. Israel has so much to offer that it is hard to choose what is best to teach to the young child. There is, quantitatively, a vast amount from which to choose, which means that we inevitably leave something out because it is all defined as "important." A teacher must make judgment calls about what takes precedence in the short time span they have in the classroom. If our goal is to enliven and enrich the overall experience young students encounter when studying Israel, how do we manage to ensure that?

Each and every one of the five items listed above is a realistic and valid challenge for the early childhood educator. If they weren't challenges, we wouldn't need to figure out how to provide the best possible curricula to overcome them and we wouldn't be thoughtful and critical of what we teach. In fact, we can use each of these to address the needs of children and to figure out how to bring quality Israel education into our classrooms.

Israel: A Daily Occurrence in the Classroom

I would like to share with you a number of steps that can take place in your classrooms, if just a bit of effort is put forth. The overriding assumption I am making in providing you with some ideas is that you want to make Israel a part of the everyday education for your young students. This will mean taking the initiative and making an effort to change Israel into a daily occurrence in your classroom. You will be making it part of your environment and interacting with it, so that the relationship between the child and Israel can be established and, as time goes on, strengthened. It will become a way of thinking.

1. In many early childhood programs in the U.S., an American flag hangs in the classroom and even the very young child recites the Pledge of Allegiance each morning. Hang an Israeli flag next to the American flag. Begin the year by listening to a recording of Hatikvah, immediately following the Pledge. After a few months, the children will be able to sing most (if not all) of Hatikvah. This small gesture allows children to begin to feel that there is another place to they belong, not just America. This concept of two "homelands" is essential in establishing the beginning of a relationship the child will have with Israel.
2. Every early childhood classroom I have seen has at least one "meeting time" at some point in the day. We all know that the meeting time needs to be kept short and varied, but that quality should not suffer. There are many "quick but meaningful" things educators can do during this meeting time or that can be combined with some of the free time in the morning. Perhaps the most tangible is making the weather connection. Our school is located in South Florida and our temperature basically varies from hot to

connection. Our school is located in South Florida and our temperature basically varies from hot to hotter. The weather in Israel, however, has much more of a temperature span. Each morning our students come in and check the on Internet or in the morning paper for the temperature in one of the cities in Israel. I even have been told by some of our parents that when the children get on the phone with family members who live in Israel, they ask "What is the weather at your house because I have to tell my class!". Another quick thing that can be done daily is a "prop box" activity. This can be done during meeting time or when children are working on their own. Fill a box with items -- some unique to Israeli culture and some everyday items such as a toothbrush or coffee mug. I have been witness to some amazing discussions between children about whether or not they have toothpaste and coffee in Israel and why and how a shekel looks different from a dollar bill. The fact that Israel exists becomes "real" and tangible in conversation and as part of the child's reality.

3. Another feature of early childhood classrooms is the music that serves as a backdrop to the curriculum and develops listening skills in children. In the same way that I would recommend playing Reggae, Asian, and classical tunes, I would include Israeli music on a regular basis. Allow children to develop a familiarity with the varied musical language and recognize it.
4. Keep a map of Israel hanging or very handy so that when questions come up (and they should, if you have provided the right environment), you can refer to different cities and landmarks, in addition to information about their proximity to each other. If children talk about a recent bombing or a trip a family member is taking, be sure to look at the map and locate the city. Ask families to send you postcards with the cities' landmarks for all to share. Bring in actual pictures taken by you or by the family on a trip. My favorite teaching experience remains the day I brought in a picture of myself in soldier's clothing. The conversation was endless and that is the key -- to keep the conversation going as it relates to Israel. The daily exchanges are worth the time.
5. At our school, our sandboxes are filled with many items for the children to play with. We include items that resemble old pottery, mosaic tile creations, and even some coins. We do this so that the children get a sense of what an archeological dig might be like and why Israel is so full of them. An indoor sand table or plastic box filled with sand does the trick, too. Teachers "plant" different items to create a sense of mystery so that the children ask themselves "what will we find today?", take the next step in constructing a reality about the item, and conclude something about its relationship to Israel. At our school, we choose to plant things that are both uniquely Jewish -- and items that aren't -- so that the children can sort them and make critical decisions about them and whether they belong to Israel and its culture.
6. Changing the way we talk to children in relation to Israel is essential to this process. Make the commitment to ask the question, "Did anyone hear anything about Israel this week?" Many educators fear that this question will breed discomfort, because so much of what is going on in Israel nowadays is negative and, instinctively, they wish to shield children from the unpleasantness and evil that exists in the world. My philosophy dictates that we don't need to expose children to what they don't need to know, but Israel should be a reality in their lives and they will hear certain things. I say that we can turn these negative instances into an opportunity to problem-solve with the children about using words and peaceful negotiation and even to serve as a basis for participation in a class-wide get-well prayer or Tehilim session. When we speak to the children we need to put in the children's minds that one day they, too, will go to Israel. We can say "And when you go to Israel and see _____ in person, you will be able to _____". It presents to them a reason to get to Israel.

7. For older children, pick one city a month to study. Build it with blocks, look at pictures on the Internet, and find a school there with which you can establish a pen-pal relationship. Find a class member who has a relative who lives in that city and get them on the phone to ask about what it is like to live there. Find out whether most people living there have cars or prefer to take the bus. Is there a train that runs through the city? Have the children create a list of questions as a prototype and follow the structure as you continually investigate and explore together.

If a classroom has built-in structures such as those mentioned above, not only will you have overcome the challenges mentioned earlier, but the environment also will naturally evolve to a place where Yom Haatzmaut “moves up” from being a once-a-year holiday/birthday celebration to being the culmination of a year-long unit.

You will be surprised by how much information your students will have gathered independently, how much they care about Israel, and how they use what they know and apply it to other situations. The personal relationships your students establish with Israel will become evident through their comments that begin with phrases such as “I remember when...” and “I can’t wait to see ...”. Israel education is well worth the time and commitment because it “rounds out” the Jewish-ness we seek to impart to even the youngest learners and also establishes a Jewish identity with a connection to Israel.

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Deena Bloom and her Hillel staff have been involved in the Models of Excellence/Migdal Or project through the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and Local CAJE in Miami. She and her staff have had the opportunity to visit Israel as a group and have hosted Israeli Educators here in the states to assist in the program's transformation of their ECE Israel curriculum. The journey has been enlightening and has brought them to where they are in their philosophy.