

## The North American Coalition for Israel Education by Wallace Greene

In some communities, Israel education is like Mark Twain's description of the Mississippi River – “a mile wide and an inch deep.” In other places, it isn't even that broad. The importance of Israel is seemingly axiomatic, yet structured study is often lacking. Every school and community “does Israel” around Yom Ha'Atzmaut, but there is so much more than can be done beyond felafel, horas, and Hatikva. An annual injection of nationalistic pride or an occasional burst of celebratory activity is not a substitute for serious, critical study of Israel on a multi-dimensional basis. Some communities send people young and older to Israel on missions and various Israel Experience ventures. Birthright brings many college-age students to Israel. However, there must be pre- and post-trip learning, study, and debriefing to maximize the long-lasting effect of the encounter with the land, the people, and its history.

Our young people need to be equipped with a solid knowledge base about Israel when they enter college. Anti-Israel sentiments and anti-Semitism parading as anti-Zionism are rife on campuses. Our students are not well prepared to advocate, defend or be proactive. This training can and must take place in the schools, youth movements, camps, community centers, and wherever else young people congregate.

There is no universal agreement regarding the core of Israel education. There is no clear conceptual vision or articulation of the place of Israel in American Jewish life. To quote Director-general of the Jewish Agency's Education Department Alan Hoffman, there is a serious need “... to engage a disengaged generation and ratchet up the importance of Israel.”

The acronym NACIE (North American Coalition for Israel Education) should stand for the Hebrew word *thGb* (*nasi*), which means we will elevate or lift up. Israel education must take its place in the curriculum of the Jewish school alongside Bible, Hebrew, holidays, rabbinic texts, and Jewish history. Israel education must be raised and bumped up to a higher priority in the overall framework of the educational endeavor.

Some schools employ Israeli teachers whose strength is the Hebrew language. Other schools teach about Israel in a social studies or history course. Some do a better job than others, but all should do more. Our own Bergen County High School of Jewish Studies (for public high school students) sends students to Israel each year – provided that they enroll in a yearlong course on Israel. Every federation sends missions to Israel, but often there is there is no required educational component.

With minor variations, every Jewish educational institution agrees on the curricular content of teaching Bible, the Holidays, etc. There is no such agreement however, when it comes to the teaching of Israel. Materials exist in abundance. But a unified approach at developing a structured curriculum over the course of the time that a student spends in school is still a desideratum. Just as students study the Siddur, or any other required subject, each day, so, too, should Israel education occupy a fixed place in the school day.

This is the challenge facing us in Bergen County and around the country. Motivation, time allocation, buy-in, basic premises, and diversity are some factors to consider. Our Board of Trustees, through our Strategic Planning Committee process, has given us the encouragement and funding, to become involved in this exciting process. A chairperson has been appointed and a committee is in formation. We are very fortunate to have as

our consultant Menahem Revivi who was our community's shaliach over thirty years ago.

We have established a timetable for this initiative that includes:

- Developing and disseminating a mapping protocol.
- Mapping what exists in each of our schools, community centers, and youth groups on the topic of Israel education.
- Meeting with principals, educators and youth directors for buy-in and participation.
- Meeting with school lay leadership for buy-in.
- Developing a strategic plan.
- Developing an evaluation tool.
- Networking with the other communities involved in the project.
- Setting up in-service sessions with the various stakeholders.
- Holding discussions on the theoretical framework.
- Identifying existing resources.
- Developing an implementation plan.
- Beginning to construct curricula.
- Adapting materials for individual institutions.
- Preparing first draft.
- Holding a two-day retreat to work on a presentation/experimental draft.
- Disseminating materials.
- Evaluating the work done.
- Making corrections and implementing the curricula.

This timetable will take over a year. During that time, we will work closely with those who are in the classroom, since they are the ultimate determinants of success or failure.

The scope of this initiative is quite broad. Some of the pilot communities are hiring a staff to implement this initiative. Others are working within their Jewish education agency or with their shlichim. Nationally, communities are gearing up to provide educational materials on all levels. From nursery school through the grades, in day schools and in synagogue schools, JCCs, camps, synagogues, youth groups, high schools, and every other possible education venue. It's a huge undertaking with tremendous potential. Committees are being formed, meetings are being held, and consultants from Israel are making site visits.

In order to maximize our efforts in Bergen County, our initial focus will be on teenagers, so that after 4-5 years of study, they will be ready for the college campus. (Eventually the process will be implemented for all ages.) The major obstacle to overcome is principal/teacher resistance. The means have to be found to encourage and motivate educators to understand that Israel education is no longer an option. There is a crisis out there and we cannot afford to produce students who are pareve about Israel. It is mandatory today that Jewish literacy incorporates the ability to be articulate about Israel. Every challenge is also an opportunity. Lay support is crucial to the success of this endeavor since lay boards set the policy of the school.

We hope that the success of the nine pilot communities will be the impetus for a revolution in Israel education in North America and elsewhere.

*Dr. Wallace Greene ([wallyg@ujabergen.org](mailto:wallyg@ujabergen.org)) is the Director of Jewish Education Services for the UJA Federation of Bergen County & North Hudson in Northern New Jersey. Wally is active in the National Board of License, has a Ph.D. and semichah, and is President-Elect of the NJ Association of Jewish Communal Services.*