

## **Greensboro Jewish Federation News**

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### **"Why Jewish Students Don't Know the Zionist/Israeli Narrative"**

**By Kenneth W. Stein**

After the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000, trips to Israel virtually ceased. Acknowledged to be a key antidote to creeping assimilation and intermarriage (along with day school and Jewish camping experiences), North American Jews, for the time being at least, had to face-to-face contacts with Israelis almost fully suspended.

A second slap occurred when negative discussions about Israeli policies increased on North American university campuses. Jewish students were, for the most part, inadequately prepared to answer questions about the origins of Zionism or incapable of defending Israel because they lacked the facts. With or without trips to Israel, we learned that Jewish students did not know their own narrative. How did that happen?

Before Israel's creation, North American Jewish organizations imbibed "Israel" from episodic lecture, presentations, and symposia, listening to talks of a half-hour or less. For only a third of the North American Jewish population who were affiliated in any fashion, these were wonderful updates on the "matzav" (situation) today and tomorrow, but almost no time was spent in learning the historical context. Israelis and Israeli-born professionals suffused camp and Jewish school environments to organize activities and teach about Israel. Celebrating Yom Hashoah and Yom Ha'azmaut were important but not substantive.

In the early years of Israel's existence, the small minority of American Jews who identified with Zionism chose advocacy for Israel's survival and philanthropy to support the Jewish state. Unremitting Arab antagonism toward Israel from the Arab world and the Soviet Union kept American Jewry focused on both. In the 1950s and 1960s, American Jews adopted Israeli culture, foods, and songs as part of their Jewish identity in America.

What a wonderfully convenient formula to continue assimilating yet enjoy Israel's culture, grow materially and support for Israel financially, make it in America, and use Israel as your "religious" icon. We judged our successes year to year by how much more money we raised "card for card," a critically important function in saving Jews in crisis, need, and

peril.

We learned to use power to gain access to decision-makers, vowing never again to be powerless in the face of dictators or anti-Semites. So we licked more stamps per capita than any other ethnic group and displayed power far beyond our numbers.

While advocacy and philanthropy prevailed, our collective Jewish narrative focused on victimization, remembering the Holocaust. When Jewish Studies programs exploded on university campuses in the 1970s, endowed chairs in Holocaust studies were established, but equal treatment was not given to the study of Zionist/Israeli history. More recently, with Palestinian suicide bombings against Israelis and outbreaks of anti-Semitic acts in Europe, collective memories were reinforced that persecution against Jews is not just a drummed-up fear that belongs in the past but has validity in the immediate present.

One of the few places where Zionism and Israel can and should be taught is in Jewish academic settings, such as day schools, congregational schools, adult education programs, camp experiences, and in American Jewish organizational settings. And yet we find from the vast majority of 80 K-12 teachers who took a week-long intensive learning course about Israeli society, history, and politics at Emory University in June 2000 and 2002 ( a small sampling of Jewish school teachers in North America, to be sure), their discomfort in teaching Zionism or Israel does not come from disinterest-- far from it-- but from a lack of knowledge about the very Zionist/Israeli narrative they would be expected to teach. These highly dedicated teachers also suggested that severe time constraints limit the amount of time available to teach Zionism/Israeli topics.

Knowing Zionist history does not negate the importance of philanthropy nor does it diminish the critical nature of advocacy. By not knowing our own narrative, the points of argumentative departure are someone else's. Viola, Jewish students are on the defensive.

When trips start again, teaching and knowing the narrative will make connections deeper and more meaningful. When we were not an emancipated people, we had time for learning. Knowing the narrative might stem assimilation. Knowledge is empowerment.

"Card for card" increases are splendid, but so are annual double-digit increases in knowledge per person.

On our doorposts in the mezuzah is written: "Teach them diligently unto the children." Well, we have not done a very good job.

