



Teaching Israel: A More Effective Strategy

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Standing in stocking feet on a giant, 30 x 13 foot floor map of Israel, 75 Jewish educators explored the strategic land decisions made by Zionists involved with the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in Palestine in the late 1930s. During an experiential text study recounting a meeting of Zionist leaders, teachers began to discover the valuable lessons and big ideas embedded in the history of the founding of the State of Israel. What's more, they glimpsed the potential of bringing sophistication, nuance, critical thinking, best practices, and primary sources to the study of modern Israel. What challenges face educators in providing such opportunities for their students?

Writing for JESNA in 2004, Barry Chazan articulated three core components of the historical challenge to Israel education in the U.S.: fostering individual meaning related to Israel, making a trip to Israel standard for all Jews, and reversing the decline in Hebrew language competence.

Since the publication of Chazan's assertions, Taglit-Birthright and Hebrew language programs such as Tal Am and early childhood immersion have begun to address the latter two challenges. But the first challenge remains: fostering an environment in which learning about Israel is meaningful and relevant.

For every organization, the first step is gathering laypeople and educators who believe the story of Israel is one worth telling. What then are the steps necessary for endowing the future of American Jewry with a compelling and germane understanding of modern Israel? The following suggestions emerge from nine years of data culled by Emory University's Institute for the Study of Modern Israel (ISMI) during 20 teacher workshops.

Identify the message. What is the relevance of the State of Israel to American Jews? Every organization should determine enduring understandings that answer that question, but many have not considered the following: How did Jews acquire and maintain sufficient power and authority to create and sustain a state of their own? How did Jews outside of Israel use the support and defense of a Jewish state to cement their own Jewish identity and develop influence in the U.S. and elsewhere? Jewish youth who are unsure of Israel's relevance need to understand how Israel's existence strengthened their own existence.

Invest in a learning community. By the teachers' own admission, one prominent factor limiting student achievement in the area of Israel studies involves the knowledge of educators. Surveys of workshop participants indicate that while nearly all teachers agree that teaching about Israel is important, the large majority perceive themselves as possessing only limited or basic knowledge of Israel and Zionism. Fewer than one-third reported having taken at least one college course on the subject. In order to educate these teachers, we should train them intensively in person and also utilize long-distance teaching tools to inform and connect interested educators.

As for the donors who are needed to invest in this field, these individuals rightly look for the measurable outcomes of their donations. Such individuals may feel more comfortable investing in a political action group than in an educational process whose results will only be evident over time. Laypeople and professionals must work together to determine satisfactory barometers for success in education.

Reconsider time allocation. When teachers are asked why they do not teach more about Israel, most answer “lack of time.” Instead of focusing years of Jewish education exclusively on prescribed bar/bat mitzvah preparation, how might communities reimagine the time and place for further study of Israel? In a school, this could mean more time devoted to Jewish values and life lessons in Israel’s history; the integration of the subject into multiple disciplines; the empowering of educators from different fields of study (not merely Judaic and Hebrew teachers); and innovative family educational opportunities.

Procure high-quality educational materials. The nature of teaching contemporary politics, international relations, or history requires regular updating of materials. Many of the best materials about Israel are unfortunately outdated, out of print, or in Hebrew. Regrettably there are few qualified individuals taking the time to produce and revise curricular units. Moreover, while more and more Web sites collect data, few provide teachers with the context, enduring understandings, essential questions, and suggested pedagogy to teach age-appropriate, meaningful and innovative units.

Make pedagogical methods and materials age appropriate. In his recent landmark study for the Israel Project, communications expert Frank Luntz recommends that Israel educators “get real,” since young adults will reject anything that appears one-sided. If our brightest students, in our best programs, feel they are getting half the story, what will happen to them when they begin to hear a different perspective upon reaching the college campus? Getting real does not mean turning Israel studies into a dominant concern for the “other,” but it does mean answering questions with an earnest effort to tell students how the current state of affairs came to be.

Standing on the giant map, we learn that Jewish nation builders — much like Jewish leaders today — had big dreams for the future. Examining the story of the State of Israel, we can learn how to grapple with limitations, overcome adversity, and think strategically to achieve success, both for Israel and for our children. This is a story to learn from and one that is worth telling and retelling until it is as familiar as the “Four Questions.”

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