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# Israel & Zionism Education



# What Works in Israel Education

■ by **KENNETH W. STEIN**

**I**n teaching history, the most difficult task remains creating context: catapulting students back into a different time frame and having them disregard their contemporary historical perspective. The goal is to “witness” history as it unfolded, not as it concluded.

How do you teach students to comprehend the multiple virtues of Jewish nation building? My answer: documents.

A clear understanding of Israel’s essence unfolds the core questions that generate the answers that led to the Zionist national identity and then to Israeli success. The documents explicate the story.

The essence of Zionism is Jews taking destiny into their own hands. Among other factors, the Jewish drive to acquire land, grow their population, build infrastructure, earn political power, develop an economy, and express self-determination led to the establishment and sustenance of the Jewish State.

## Keeping Focused on Big Issues, Big Questions

Below are half a dozen core statements and questions which guide learners to a deeper understanding of the driving concept of the Zionist endeavor. They are embedded in Israel’s national anthem, as *lehiyot am chofshi be’artzeinu*, “to be a free people in our land.”

*There is a Jewish inner core; it is peoplehood.* What connects the Jewish people through time? What are those values, customs, symbols, and traditions that welded Jews together before they returned again to Eretz Yisrael in the 19th century?

*Some Jews chose to take destiny into their own hands.* How did failed civic emancipation, virulent and subtle anti-Semitism in the 1800s, combine to cultivate the rebirth of Jewish nationalism? Who were these early audacious practical and political Zionists? How did they crystallize together, sometimes in contentious ways, to gain great power endorsement during and after World War I? Why did the Zionists switch from Great Britain to the United States as a primary focal point for support of a Jewish state?

*Zionism was a dynamic, varied, and contentious movement.* How did Jews manage their differences to create a nucleus for a state before the Holocaust? How did Arab fragmentation and dysfunctional politics benefit Zionist aspirations?

*Israel succeeded in 1948 because it had leadership, made strategically critical decisions, befriended great powers, and had endless supplies of perseverance.* How did Jews organize to build and lobby to create and sustain the state? Where did they sacrifice personally and ideologically for the good of creating a state?



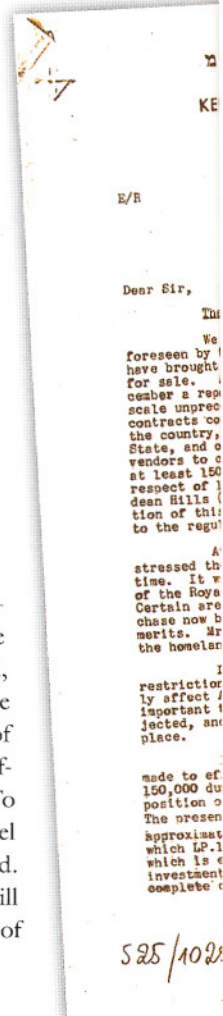
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...tive with friends, and at others, unilateral and pre-emptive? Where did the Zionist enterprise not reach its objectives of providing equality for all its citizens and equality for all its Jewish citizens?

*Israel is a focal point for American Jewish identity.* How did it become so and where is that relationship headed? Where is American Jewish identity or Jewish identity in America with or without Israel? Has not Zionism and belief in Israel slowed down Jewish assimilation into the greater American social landscape?

## Employing Primary Sources

When learners are offered a window through which to glimpse history, as it actually happened, they better contextualize the situations and perspectives of the time. Primary sources offer the critical perspective. To this end, the Center for Israel Education’s website ([israeled.org](http://israeled.org); debuting May 2009) will include an online repository of





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primary sources selected from the most revealing archives, bibliographies, memoirs, and historical compilations. For example, we have a December 1937 letter—the original is housed at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem—which details a pivotal meeting of the Jewish National Fund Directorate. It reads:

As foreseen by the JNF management, the disturbances in Palestine have brought about a considerable increase in the offers of land for sale. At a meeting of the Board of Directors held on 6th December 1937 a report was submitted showing that these offers were on a scale unprecedented since the World War. If means were available, contracts could be closed for 200,000 dunams [50,000 acres] in various parts of the country, including both areas in the projected Jewish and Arab State, and on their borders, with an undertaking on the part of the vendors to complete the transaction in a short time. Of these offers at least 150,000 dunams have been examined and found satisfactory in respect of lands in Upper Galilee, Districts of Beisan and Acre, the corridor to Jerusalem, and in the south.

This letter reveals the ironic conflict Zionists faced: they had limited money available for land purchase, but virtually endless offers to buy land from Arab vendors all over Palestine. At the meeting, Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion advocated that purchasing of a particular area of land had strategic consequences—be it in the upper-Galilee to secure the northern border with Syria, around Acre as the backwater to the strategic Haifa port that the British fleets were using for the Iraqi-Palestine oil terminus; in the “corridor,” the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Road, or in the south, in the Negev—and was critical. The letter depicts how Zionists made land-purchase decisions based on strategic value and shows why and how Zionists legally purchased vast amounts of land, decades before the state was established.

Documents as primary sources leave lasting impressions on students and teachers alike. They teach historical context. The teacher needs to know the learning outcome. Provide the right document with the right questions. The result is intellectual ownership. ■

