

# Why Should We Focus on Israel Education?

A Few Thoughts, by Joshua Yarden, ACAJE Consultant for Israel Education



## **Where are You from?**

My parents are from New York, but I don't consider myself a New Yorker. I had a grandmother who was born in Montreal, but I'm not Canadian. My other grandparents were from Poland, Romania and Latvia, but I certainly don't celebrate their national holidays, go to their parades or teach my children those languages. I can't tell you much about my personal ancestry going back more than three generations, but I know that the Jews come from Israel. I come from Israel.

## **How Connected are Young American Jews to Israel?**

According to a study conducted by the American Jewish Committee, most Israelis and American Jews no longer see themselves as belonging to one nation. Israel occupies a marginal place in the younger generation's Jewish identity. This reflects, "educational failure and slipping down the slope of mutual alienation." The study conducted among 1.5 million American Jews concluded that Israel was not a central component in young people's Jewish identity. Israel was placed 11th out of 15 identity components presented to the interviewees. The younger the interviewees, the less sympathy they felt for Israel.<sup>1</sup>

In order to change that trend, we need to expand the knowledge base and pedagogical tools of teachers in order to increase their ability to integrate the broad range of Israel-related themes into their programming across the Jewish curriculum. Students who receive a Jewish education through high school should: (a) have knowledge of and positive attitudes about Israel; (b) appreciate the significance of the people, the culture and the Land of Israel; (c) embrace the centrality of Israel to their Jewish identity and have a desire to spend time there; (d) understand elements of the controversies in Israeli Society; and (e) be able to confront challenges to the legitimacy and significance of the State of Israel.

## **The Content: Ancient and Modern Israel, Between Continuity and Change**

Israel has so much to do with where the Jews came from, both geographically and culturally, that a lack of knowledge of Israel is really a matter of not knowing much about who we are. In other words, if we do not teach our children much about the history and culture of ancient and modern Israel, we are

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<sup>1</sup> Barkat, Amiram. "Study: Israelis and U.S. Jews no longer seen as one nation" *Haaretz*. 26/10/2006

offering them assimilation as an alternative. We need to make Israel meaningful for people who have not been there, and to encourage them to be curious about going there to travel and learn in the future. If we are doing our jobs effectively, our children should know something about the following topics:

- Our historic connection to the Land of Israel from the Torah to today
- The map - settlement, borders and the neighbors of contemporary Israel
- Shoah and resurrection of the survivors and our people in Israel
- Israel as a Jewish and a democratic state
- Jews & Arabs in Israel
- Hebrew: The ancient and the renewed language of the Jewish people
- The contemporary culture of secular and religious Jews
- Israel-diaspora relations

### **Embracing the Complexity of Israel Education**

Making sense of all of these interconnected issues creates a pretty complex picture. It might be easier to present a mythical picture of Israel, a heroic history or an Israel under siege that calls us to circle our wagons and focus on advocacy training. Eventually, however, our children are bound to discover that the picture is not so simple. Recognizing that neither the issues nor our children are simple, we owe to them to approach teaching Israel in ways that promote thinking and understanding.

We hope to inspire teachers to engage students in an enduring exploration of Israel - the land, the culture and the people - including ourselves, as Jews, members of the People of Israel living in the United States. The reality of Jewish education in the Diaspora is that we either struggle to embrace our identity or we ignore the fact that the swift current of the mainstream moves us away from where the journey of our people began. If we reject ignorance, and we reject assimilation, we must recognize that it requires a great deal of energy to be part of the mainstream American society and still maintain a minority identity with a vibrant sub-culture. Considering how difficult it is to maintain a rich cultural or religious identity as Jews in contemporary America, we have to be willing to struggle if we want to rise to the challenge. It is through our experience struggling to understand and overcome challenges that we become who we become.

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