

TEACHING ISRAEL IN REFORM CONGREGATIONAL SCHOOLS

By

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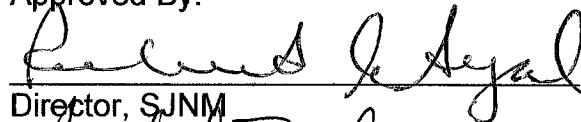
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

SCHOOL OF JEWISH NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT
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ABSTRACT

The Central Conference of American Rabbis Pittsburgh Principles of 1999 emphasize the importance of the relationship between God, Torah, and Israel in the Reform Movement. It is no surprise that the subject of Israel has been on the agenda of Reform Jewish Educators. While Israel trips have been successful in strengthening Jewish identity as well as connecting Jews to Israel, the majority of North American Jews in these Reform synagogues are not going to Israel. Thus it is essential that Israel be brought into the lives of those Jews through other avenues. This Capstone explores the following two questions: (1) what is being taught about Israel and (2) how is it being taught in Reform Congregations across North America, to pinpoint areas in which Israel Education can, and should, be improved. This small study makes it difficult to draw any decisive conclusions. But what can be gathered from this study is that the field of Israel education is growing. Israel remains an important priority for both scholars and educators in the field of Jewish education.

INTRODUCTION

The Central Conference of American Rabbis Pittsburgh Principles of 1999 emphasize the importance of the relationship between God, Torah, and Israel in the Reform Movement. It is no surprise that the subject of Israel has been on the agenda of Reform Jewish Educators. As a product of the Reform Movement, Israel has also been on my mind, and in my heart, for many years. My love and connection to the land, people, and symbolic presence of Israel has developed into a deep passion for the modern State of Israel. And yet, I have learned that not all American Jews, experience this same connection. In particular, the younger generations feel less connected to Israel. Israel is beginning to disappear as a critical component in these young Jews' lives. Cohen and Kelman (2007) write, "indeed, a mounting body of evidence has pointed to a growing distancing from Israel of American Jews, and the distancing seems to be most pronounced among younger Jews" (p. 2). Research has proven that trips to Israel, in particular the rise of Birthright in the early years of the 21st century, have helped young adults feel connected to Israel (Cohen & Kelman, 2007). And yet, despite this research, the reality remains that not every Reform congregant will go on a trip to Israel. So, what is being done in Reform Congregational schools to ensure that Israel maintains on the agenda and is not lost as a component of the "God, Torah, and Israel" model? How is Israel being taught in these schools? Is Israel even being taught in Reform Congregations? What are the challenges that Jewish educators face when teaching Israel? These questions and many more led me to explore two issues: (1) what is being taught about Israel and (2) how is it being taught in Reform Congregations across North America? This capstone explores these two questions to pinpoint areas in which Israel Education can, and should, be improved.

Why Israel?

The question, “why Israel?” is in many ways the greatest challenge of Israel education. Jewish professionals continuously struggle to clearly define the role of Israel in Jewish life. Chazan (1998) acknowledges this challenge faced by Jewish educators today. He writes, “because there is far less clarity or consensus about what Israel means and why it is important, teachers need some underlying philosophy or rationale for their work. And such a rationale is absent” (p. 304). If teachers of Israel are uncertain about why they are teaching about Israel, it is likely that students will also be unsure of the importance and significance of Israel in their own lives.

While the Reform Movement has made Israel a priority in its platform, there is still no definitive rationale that answers the question, “why?”. Grant (2007) addresses this same concern for the Movement. She writes, “if the Movement had a clear message as to why Israel is central to Reform Jewish identity, chances are that educators would be able to translate that in the same manner that we can translate why holiday celebrations are important” (p. 22). On the other hand, Chazan (1998) argues that answers to the question “why Israel?” have in fact been provided, but have changed over time. While Jewish pride and survival once served as a response to the question, that rationale has since fallen by the wayside. Today, answers range from emphasizing the importance of Jewish peoplehood to strengthening one’s own Jewish identity. Hoffman (2005) makes a similar claim to Chazan:

“Jewish education, especially with Israel at its center, is not only about the transmission of substance but also about the deep experiences of culture. Education can enhance the feeling of Jewish peoplehood and allow a young person to develop his or her own personal passion for Judaism and answer to the question, ‘Why be Jewish?’ (p. 54)”

What is Being Taught?

Despite the challenges of teaching Israel, synagogues are attempting to find ways to put Israel in the curriculum. Lesson plans address a multitude of topics related to Israel including the people, the geography, and Israeli culture. As part of her study, Grant surveyed National Associate of Temple Educators members in 2006 and identified common curricular objectives. She also identified the various grade levels at which Israel is taught, citing following topics: (1) Land, People, and Culture, (2) Current events, (3) Geography, (4) Israel in Jewish History, (5) Biblical/Liturgical connections, (6) Israel as Homeland, (7) Connecting Israel to Jewish Life, (8) Encouraging travel to Israel, (9) Fostering Ahavat Zion, (10) Reform Judaism in Israel. (Grant, 2007, p. 11). Chazan (1998) also writes about common topics of Israel Education, (1) Israel to Biblical Eretz Yisrael, (2) origins of Jewish people, (3) History, (4) Heroes as related to the land, (5) ongoing connection of the Jewish people with Israel and the dream of Return, (6) heroic effort of the Zionist Movement, (7) creation of the State after the Holocaust, (8) ingathering of the exiles, (9) the ongoing struggle of Israel to guarantee survival and security, and (10) the importance of North American Jewry and how it has played a role in Israel's growth. Diana Yacobi (2004) argues that Hebrew is the central way to teach Israel, and that "a better experience with Hebrew offers our students one of the most potent and direct links to Israel"(p. 2). It is clear that there are many different areas of focus in Israel education.

Since 1994, students in the Rhea Hirsch School of Jewish Education at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion have been designing curricula on Israel, as illustrated in the following chart.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Intended Age Group</u>
A Curriculum Guide for teaching students the biblical geography of the land of Israel	Weiss	1995	5-6th

Exploring Contemporary Issues facing Teens in Israel	Sagan Masey	1998	High School
Israel: the Heart of a People	Barth	1998	Adolescents
Israel: Yemenite and Moroccan Jews:	Bergenfeld	1994	Bergenfeld
My Israel: A Non-Traditional Approach to Israel Advocacy	Wasserman	2006	12 th Grade
Zionism: The Collision of Modernity and Judaism	Schwartz	1994	6 th grade

In addition to these student curricula, the Union for Reform Judaism has created a “Chai Curriculum” which includes several of these topics.

Israel is taught in congregational schools to classes ranging from pre-school through adult education. However, it is in grades four and five where Israel appears to be the core component of the curriculum. There is a decline in Israel Education during the middle school years, and only sometimes is Israel taught when students choose to take an Israel elective as part of their studies (Grant, 2007).

Challenges

Many researchers argue that the core reason people do not teach Israel is because it has become too challenging to teach. Grant (2007) notes, “Jewish educators have yet to figure out what to teach, how to teach, and most importantly, why to teach Israel to American Jews” (p.4). These issues of what and how to teach, along with the big underlying question of why Israel is important, present major challenges in Israel Education. An additional challenge to teaching American Jews about Israel is that these Jews live physically distant to the land of Israel and people of Israel. Ezrahi (2004) alludes to an additional challenge: “American Jews chose to keep Israel on the symbolic level and refrain from direct engagement with the evolving Israeli experience” (p.13). When American Jews feel no connection and are physically distant from

Israel, teaching Israel on the symbolic level becomes the safe way out. Thus the daily lived reality of Israel, which includes more difficult material, is often ignored. Chazan (1998) recognizes that while there may be an abundance of material available and accessible for teaching Israel, these existing materials continue to lack quality. He writes, “the materials that have been created have not been contemporary, student-centered, interesting, and reflective of some cogent philosophy of Israel” (p. 305). Teachers and educators remain uncertain of what and how to teach Israel. They simply choose to use the existing material, which lacks such quality.

What is Missing?

While a variety of topics are addressed in Israel Education, scholars believe other topics still need to be considered. According to Chazan (1998), topics that have not yet been fully developed in Israel curricula include:

- Israel as a modern and alive society
- Contemporary Israeli art and culture
- The rich diversity of Israeli life
- Visiting Israel as a central Jewish opportunity and experience
- Personal connection of Israel to our lives.

Addressing the challenges of Israel Education goes beyond improving the subject matter. It is critical, Chazan (1998) argues, for educators and teachers to first understand what Israel means for the Jewish people and to determine the role of Israel in their individual lives. Unless educators and teachers first acknowledge their own relationship to Israel, the struggle of how to engage students about Israel will persist. Hoffman (2005) lays out three crucial elements that are missing from Israel education: inspiring educators, compelling content, and a transformative

experience. It is these three elements that must exist simultaneously to ensure the future success of Israel education. Grant (2007) addresses the need for more qualitative research,

“qualitative interviews with rabbis and educational leaders, and site visits to congregations would contribute greatly to our understanding of how these schools are supported in their Israel education initiatives, how they translate education vision into curricular goals, and what impact the teaching is actually having on the learners” (p. 5).

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to inquire how Jewish educators in Reform Congregations approach the topic of Israel. I was particularly interested in what they teach about Israel (i.e. the specific content areas) and how they teach about Israel. In order to gain this knowledge, I interviewed seven Directors of Education (DoEs) in Reform Synagogues in Los Angeles and Orange County. These synagogues were selected based on the availability and willingness of each educator to respond to the questions posed. It is important to note that one DoE who was asked to take part in this study opted out. This DoE responded that Israel education was not well thought out in that particular religious school and hoped to be more helpful in two or three years. Due to scheduling conflicts, of the remaining seven participants, only one interview was conducted in person, while the other six were completed over the phone. Each educator was asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Do you teach Israel in your religious school? If so, why do you teach Israel?
2. What are the goals of Israel education in your school?
3. In what grade or grades is Israel taught?
4. Who teaches Israel?
5. What is the content of the Israel education in each grade?
6. How is Israel taught?
7. Have there been some topics that the students have been more excited about? If so, which ones?
8. What is the most successful component of teaching Israel in your religious school? How do you evaluate this success?
9. What is the greatest challenge in teaching Israel? How have you addressed this challenge?

10. What is the response from the parents in your community regarding Israel and Israel education?

RESULTS

Why Synagogues Teach Israel

All of the DoEs whom I spoke to emphasized the importance of teaching Israel in religious school. Many of the educators had similar reasons for teaching Israel; however, not all of the rationales for Israel education in each religious school were the same. None of the DoEs cited one particular reason for teaching Israel in their religious schools. Rather, a combination of several factors together made up the congregations' rationale for Israel education. The most common responses consisted of: the importance of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people (DoEs 2, 4, and 6), Israel as a pillar of Judaism (DoEs 2, 4, and 6), wanting students to feel connected to Israel, the people, history, and land (DoEs 4, 5, 6, and 7), and emphasizing the importance of Jewish peoplehood (DoEs 1, 2, 3, and 7). Both DoEs 2 and 3 expressed a need to teach Israel as a response to the students' and parents' lack of knowledge of Israel as a whole. DoE 1 also added that the importance of teaching Israel in the synagogue was to spark the students' interest to visit Israel. DoE 2 emphasized the importance of preparing students to engage in dialogue about Israel post-religious school. This DoE added that a reason for teaching Israel in this congregation was specifically to prevent students from being "caught off guard" by the topic of Israel when they went off to college.

Synagogue Goals of Teaching Israel

The goals of Israel education in each of the seven synagogues ranged from extremely broad to very specific goals. The importance of the students feeling a connection to, or building a relationship with, Israel served as one of the commonalities amongst all of the synagogues. On a more concrete level, the goals of these synagogues included teaching the students about the geography, people, history, and land of Israel. Some of the DoEs expressed a desire for their

students to begin to be able to engage in dialogue on this topic and to be aware of and the difficulties and challenges with the modern state of Israel. DoE 6 expressed the importance of connecting the Hebrew language learned in the school to the language of Israel today. The DoE at synagogue 7 expressed that a goal of teaching Israel is for the students to learn a few key words in Hebrew that are used today on the streets of Israel. Another goal of DoE 7 was for the students to connect to students the same age in Israel and explore their similarities and differences. One of the goals of the DoE at synagogue 2 was to convey to their students that Israel is different than any other country. A visit to Israel is not solely about a vacation to another country (like Costa Rica), but is a Jewish country, a Jewish homeland, and as Jews there is a different connection and relationship.

When is it Taught?

According to almost all of the DoEs, Israel is addressed in many of the grades. During the holidays of *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day, or *Yom HaZikaron*, Israel's Memorial Day, various synagogues have an Israel program in order to bring awareness to Israel during these holidays. However, Israel served as one of the core curricular components in only one or two grades for the majority of the synagogues.

Table 1: Grades in which Israel is Taught

Institution	Kindergarten	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	H.S	Family Ed
S-1			X			X					
S-2			X				X				
S-3	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
S-4				X					X		

S-5					X	X	X		X	X	
S-6				X		X	X				
S-7						X		X	X	X	

As indicated in this chart, 2nd, 5th, 6th, and 8th grade are common grades in which Israel education is emphasized.

The Teachers

Several of the Jewish educators were caught off guard when I asked them, “who teaches Israel in your religious school”? Their immediate answer was, “the teachers do.” Synagogue 1 was the only exception to this response and was the only congregation where the teachers were hired based on the curriculum of Israel. Many of the other educators commented that the content of Israel played less of a role in selecting the teachers for the class, and that it was the group of learners who played a larger role and affected the choice of the teacher. However, after each DoE elaborated on his or her response, it came to light that in six out of the seven synagogues there was at least one Israeli teacher, and in three of the synagogues the American teacher had a deep understanding or a strong connection with Israel.

Content

Table 2: Israel content taught at each Institution

Institution	Geography	People	Historical/Biblical	Challenges/Dilemmas	Culture	Land
S-1	X	X	X	X	X	
S-2	X		X		X	
S-3	X	X			X	X
S-4		X			X	X
S-5	X					X
S-6	X		X	X	X	
S-7	X	X	X		X	

The content at the seven congregations overlaps greatly. Six of the seven synagogues focus on geography and culture in their curriculum. At least three synagogues focus on people, history/biblical Israel, or Land. Both DoEs at synagogues 1 and 6 also include the challenges of Israel in their curriculum. In many of the congregations, the content of Israel reflects the resources and textbooks made available to the educators.

How is it Taught?

The two major responses to how Israel is taught in these seven religious schools were (1) experientially and (2) through the use of textbooks. The Directors of Education emphasized the importance of making Israel education interactive. More than any other topic taught in their religious schools, the educators expressed the need to make Israel come alive and believed that through interactive experiences the students would be most engaged and their goals would be most successfully achieved. For example, DoE 4 explained that instead of telling the students what Israelis eat, the students themselves were able to try various Israeli foods and begin to experience a taste of Israeli culture. In addition, congregations 4, 6, and 7 use Skype to engage in real interactions with Israelis in order to teach about the people of Israel. Synagogue 1 focuses on drama and music and brings the arts and culture into the classrooms in order to make Israel come alive for the students. DoE 2 emphasized the need for Israel education to exist outside of the congregation, emphasizing the importance of Israel as a congregational value and thus an integral aspect of congregational life.

Most Interesting Topics to Students

The DoEs expressed that it was difficult to assess which topics were most interesting to the students. However, synagogues 1 and 4 found that learning about Israeli food was a topic

that students seemed to enjoy since they actually tried different foods. In addition to food, synagogues 1 and 6 found that the topics that were easiest for students to relate to were also the topics that were most interesting. At synagogue 7, the DoE commented that the fifth graders love learning about topography. All of the grades at synagogue 7 also love to learn about the Israeli army. The DoE of synagogue 2 commented that it was difficult to determine what was most interesting to the students. At times the DoE would predict that a particular topic would be interesting and engaging, but the students were always proving this DoE wrong. The DoE responded that the topic of study was not what was most important, but rather teaching the topics in a way that reflected the students' interest.

Most Successful Component of Israel Education

The majority of the synagogues have not identified the most successful component of teaching Israel in their religious schools. The DoEs expressed that they have not developed methods for evaluation of such success at this point. The following remarks indicate the way in which the DoEs choose to assess the success of Israel education at each synagogue, but are not measurable outcomes. Each DoE identified success in terms of their particular synagogue values and goals. The DoE at synagogue 2 stated that the most successful component of Israel education at the congregation was the congregational support for teaching Israel. While there is no direct evidence for this success, the DoE explained that the overall congregational support for Israel demonstrates the importance of Israel not only as a subject matter in the religious school but also, as an important component of Jewish life throughout all areas of the synagogue. The DoEs of synagogues 4, 5, 6, and 7 expressed that personal stories from the Israeli teachers and Skype conversations with Israelis appeared to be the most successful component of Israel education in their schools. The DoE at synagogue 7 explained that the students have started to

connect to Israelis through Facebook. All of the DoEs commented that a visit to Israel, in one form or another, constituted a measure of success. According to three of the DoEs, they consider Israel education successful when students show interest by asking difficult questions and engaging comfortably in dialogue with others. The DoEs at synagogues 2 and 6 acknowledged that, while currently they do not have an effective way of measuring the success of Israel education in their synagogues, there is a need for a way to effectively evaluate it.

Greatest Challenge

One of the greatest challenges DoEs encounter is the difficulty of teaching about a far away place that the majority of the students have never visited. Many of the DoEs expressed a desire for their students to feel connected to Israel. The challenges mentioned by the educators reflected this goal directly. While Israel trips might help with this challenge, the DoE at synagogue 1 commented that they have had two successive failed attempts to organize family trips to Israel in recent years. The lack of desire to go to Israel is also seen as a challenge at this synagogue. The DoEs at synagogues 5 and 6 expressed the challenges and restrictions of the physical space and environment of the religious school. The few hours a week spent in religious school make it difficult for the DoE at synagogue 6 to devote ample time to Israel education. The DoE at synagogue 7 wished that there were more opportunities for the students to connect to Israelis, like a twinning program. The challenge at synagogue 7 is that it is a lot of work for their staff.

Parental Response

The reactions and responses these DoE have received from parents have been positive, negative, and indifferent. At synagogue 1, the parents have pushed for more Israel education for the High School students. The DoE at synagogue 3 has also experienced a positive response

from the parents. The DoE of synagogue 4 commented that the parents expect Israel to be a core component of what their students are learning. Synagogue 2 has experienced hesitation from parents who have had negative Israel educational experiences. Parents have taken issue with the politics of Israel being a topic taught in religious school. At one point the parents brought this issue to the Director of Education who realized that the parents were in need of an explanation for what was being taught and why it was being taught. According to DoE 5, the parents seem to be indifferent towards Israel education. This DoE spoke about how the synagogue as a whole is not an “Israel synagogue.” While this synagogue has sponsored group trips to Israel, the trips are solely composed of adults. The DoE at synagogue 6 experiences a similar response of indifference receiving neither positive nor negative feedback from the parents. She explained that most of the people in the congregation have not been to Israel and that the synagogue has made no effort to arrange for a congregational trip. The DoE at synagogue 7 also has not had many reactions about the subject matter, but has received negative feedback about the teacher, which appears to be unrelated to the topic of Israel.

CONCLUSION

As seen in this study, there is no doubt that teaching Israel is on the minds of both DoEs at Reform synagogues as well as on the minds of the key scholars in the field of Israel education. While Israel trips have been successful in strengthening Jewish identity as well as connecting Jews to Israel, the majority of North American Jews in these Reform synagogues are not going to Israel. Thus it is essential that Israel be brought into the lives of those Jews through other avenues. Over the past decade there has been an increase in the amount of research on the effect of Israel and Israel education on North American Jews. Scholars in Israel education are attempting to narrow down the key questions in order to focus on how Israel can be taught in a compelling way to achieve the desired goals.

The seven DoEs echoed much of what is mentioned in the literature on Israel education. They too are attempting to find the best ways to both engage and educate their students on matters related to Israel. The goals of these DoEs focused on a need for strengthening the relationship between Jews in America to Israel. None of the DoEs, however, appeared to have an approach with which they were satisfied. The focus of the DoEs at seven of the synagogues was the method of teaching the content of Israel. Many of the educators in the study commented that religious school in general does not foster the compelling environment needed to educate young Jews. The formal classroom environment with rows of desks and a frontal teacher cannot engage students. And yet, these DoEs fight the formal setting of religious school as they strive towards innovative and creative methods of engaging these young students. For these seven DoEs the methodology of “how” Israel is taught outweighed the “what” about Israel is being taught.

Once they could pique their students' interest in learning about Israel, the hope would be for the students to continue to engage with Israel. Aside from the challenge of lack of time in religious school as a whole, the other major challenge for these DoEs was that Israel still remains a distant place for their students. Most of the students have not been to Israel and according to the DoEs it appears that this remains a barrier to a deep understanding of Israel. The DoE at synagogue 2 seems to have a different approach from the other six DoEs. The focus at synagogue 2 is on making Israel a more integral part of Judaism by infusing it with components of Jewish life outside of the religious school. All DoEs are still working towards determining what constitutes successful Israel education and how to achieve it.

This small study makes it difficult to draw any decisive conclusions. But what can be gathered from this study is that the field of Israel education is growing. Israel remains an important priority for both scholars and educators in the field of Jewish education. A new organization, The iCenter, started by Anne Lanski and funded by the Charles and Lynn Shusterman Family Foundation, works to "advance high-quality, meaningful, and innovative Israel education by serving as the national hub and catalyst for building, shaping and supporting the field" (The iCenter Mission Statement). The organization has brought together leading scholars as well as experienced and new educators to create a field of Israel education. In addition to the iCenter, students at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion concern themselves with the challenge of teaching Israel. In May 2012, six students will complete curriculum guides on Israel for a variety of age groups focusing on a variety of topics on Israel. Efforts from the iCenter, along with continued research and passion from Jewish educators, will help ensure the success of Israel education.

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