

Israel Education in Reform Congregational Schools

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In September 2005 I was asked to present a conceptual map for fostering Reform Zionist Identity as part of the work of ARZA's Reform Zionist Think Tank. As I prepared my talk, I searched to see what we already know about the teaching of Israel in the Reform Movement, whether in congregations, at summer camps, or through Israel trips. While there is a sizable body of literature about Israel trips—for youth, for teachers, and for adults, some of which does focus specifically on Reform Jews (for example, Goldberg, 2002)—there is relatively little research on teaching Israel in schools and/or congregational settings. The few studies that focus on formal Israel education across the denominational streams (Chazan, 1979; Ackerman, 1996; Koren, 2002; Kopelowitz 2005) provide some basis for contextualization of the findings that are presented herein.

The view that emerges from this research is that, by and large, the American Jewish educational system has failed in building strong connections and commitments to Israel. Indeed, over the past few decades, Israel and a sense of Jewish peoplehood have become increasingly peripheral to American Jewish identity (Cohen 1998, American Jewish Committee 2003, Reinharz, 2003). While most American Jews care about Israel's survival, for far fewer does it figure into their religious identity or how they find personal meaning in being Jewish (Liebman and Cohen, 1990; Cohen and Eisen, 2000; Horowitz, 2000; Ukeles, Miller, and Beck, 2006).

In a study conducted almost thirty years ago, Barry Chazan noted that the goals for teaching Israel are vague and diffuse and fail to address the core question of what Israel means to American Jews living in American society (1979). We see the pattern continuing today as demonstrated by a much more recent study of thirteen

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schools in the Greater Boston area (Koren and Miller-Jacobs 2002). Here again, almost half the schools surveyed had no defined curriculum objectives for teaching Israel.

Like Chazan, Walter Ackerman presents a cogent analysis for why, notwithstanding good intentions, formal Jewish education has had little or nothing to do with how American Jews' attitudes and identification toward Israel are shaped. Both Chazan and Ackerman claim the reasons boil down to the simple fact that American Jewish educators have yet to figure out what to teach, how to teach, and, most importantly, why to teach Israel to American Jews. Few even reflect seriously on this question; instead, they make the implicit assumption that Israel is important and proceed from there. This tendency is hardly exclusive to Jewish educators. Also many rabbis and communal leaders are unable to clearly articulate goals for, and a program of, encouraging engagement with Israel. According to this argument, Israel remains peripheral because we haven't figured out how to teach from the pulpit, from the board room, or from the classroom why Israel matters to those who feel fully rooted and at home in America and are perhaps discomfited or alienated from the seeming political morass of contemporary Israeli life.

The purpose of this study was to explore how Israel education in Reform congregations measures up relative to this consensus opinion that American Jewish Education falls short when it comes to significant and enduring Israel engagement. In January and February, 2006, I mounted an on-line survey of NATE (National Association of temple Educators) members to gather data on the teaching of Israel in Reform Congregations. Starting with a base list of 805 names, I eliminated 46 names of people I knew were not involved in congregational education. Presumably, there are additional NATE members who are not congregational educators, but I had no way of telling by email address alone. After I sent out the request to participate in the survey, 116 emails were rejected and twelve people emailed me to say they were retired or no longer in Jewish education. A total of 93 people responded to the survey, which represents 15% of a total pool of 631.

The survey included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Response rates tended to be higher for the closed-ended questions and considerably lower for those questions that asked for a narrative response. In the latter case, depending on the question, somewhere between 40 and 70 usable responses were obtained. Each

table I will present notes the number of respondents to that particular question.

The data provided through a survey such as this tend to raise as many questions as they answer. Given the low response rate, we should be cautious about drawing a precise picture of what, how, and why Israel is taught. There is no way to know whether these respondents are fully representative of the mix of approaches and attitudes toward Israel education. In addition, the study's limited focus on educators did not allow for exploring the broader context of how rabbis and lay leaders shape educational vision in their congregations and schools. Nonetheless, with almost 100 respondents we can draw impressions from these findings that suggest that Israel education is far from a carefully planned and well-developed program at the majority of Reform congregational schools. 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. Such an in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this study, but perhaps the findings presented here will stimulate further investigation.

Key Impressions

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of each question, below are several key impressions drawn from this study.

- Virtually all respondents reported a wide range of formal and informal Israel education activities in their school, including youth, adult, and family education. However, the amount of classroom time dedicated to Israel education varies considerably by school, by grade, and by age-level.
- Goals for teaching Israel continue to be expressed in broad and diffuse terms. Most respondents were unable to articulate a clear and precise vision for teaching Israel.
- Israel appears to be taught in one of three principal ways. (1) As a sacred symbol, emphasizing Israel as the Jewish homeland through episodic encounters and celebrations, and the study of Bible and other Jewish texts; (2) As a content area, in which students develop basic knowledge about the history of the state, its geography, culture, and politics; and (3) As a

means of developing and reinforcing Jewish identity. In some cases, behavioral goals of expecting and preparing students to actually travel to Israel are set.

- The most frequent way in which Israel is taught is as a content area: 49% indicate their curricular objectives include teaching about the land, people and culture of Israel, 39% current events, and 35% geography.
- About 43% of respondents articulate three or more clear and detailed objectives for teaching Israel. A correspondent 57% report fewer than two specific objectives for teaching Israel.
- There appears to be a significant disconnect between those with an espoused goal of connecting Israel education to Reform Jewish life (41%) and those setting a specific curricular objective to achieve that goal (17%).
- A similar disconnect exists between those who state one of their three top goals was to encourage travel to Israel (48%) and those who listed travel as a specific curricular objective (17%).
- Fully 85% of respondents indicated that Israel trips were part of the Israel education program. Of the 43 respondents who provided further detail, 60% said their congregation plans a trip every one to two years or more frequently. The survey did not ask for numbers of participants on these trips.
- The most significant amount of classroom time dedicated to Israel education appears to take place in Grades 4 and 5 with 62% of respondents noting they devote six or more weeks per year to Israel. The focus on Israel declines precipitously in Middle School and rises again in High School and adult learning once Jewish education becomes more of an elective experience.
- About one-third of respondents note that their Israel curriculum is strongly integrated into the Jewish studies curriculum at their school. Somewhat less than one-third (28%) describe their Israel curriculum as primarily a separate subject of instruction.
- The key challenges respondents perceive to teaching Israel focus on questions of meaning and relevance—how to connect people to a place and a people far away from their

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daily reality who often don't live up to their desired expectations.

- 60% of respondents note that less than half of the teachers in their school have been to Israel.

Detailed Analysis of Responses

Broadly speaking, there is a wide range of formal and informal educational opportunities to learn about Israel in Reform congregations. As we see in Table 1, virtually every respondent (99%) noted that Israel is part of the religious school curriculum. Israel appears to be a prominent topic in adult and family education as well, with respective responses of 81% and 77%.

TABLE 1. EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN ABOUT ISRAEL (N=91)

	#	%
Religious School	91	99
Congregational Trips	77	85
Adult Education	74	81
Family Education	70	77
Other	33	36

Fully 85% said their congregation sponsored Israel trips. Though the survey did not specifically ask for the frequency of these trips, 43 (46%) of the respondents provided some detail in the comment space, as shown in Table 2. Of those responding, almost two-thirds said they were either planning a trip, had recently sponsored a trip, or both.

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF CONGREGATIONAL ISRAEL TRIPS (N=43)

	#	%
Trip in 2005 or planned for 2006	12	28
Every 1 to 2 years	14	32
Every few years	4	9
Hoping to do so soon	5	12
No Interest	8	18

While there are few detailed studies of Israel Education in Reform Congregations, a cross-denominational study conducted more than thirty years ago provides some basis for comparison over time (Chazan, 1979). As we see in Table 3, the three top goals for teaching Israel are the same as they were for Reform congregational schools in a survey conducted in 1974, though the order and emphasis has shifted somewhat. Whereas Jewish peoplehood took the primary position in the earlier study, it has fallen to third by virtue of the greater emphasis placed on the more general goal of creating positive attitudes. This may also account for the greatly increased focus on teaching current events, given the ever-growing complexity of the political landscape and the increasing discomfort, if not altogether disconnect, of many American Jews to Israel.

The original study offered three different items from those included as options in the NATE study. They correspond loosely to three of the items on the NATE list as follows. The earlier study had "to teach about Israel as a religious and Holy Land" in place of this study's "to teach Israel about the Jewish Homeland"; I replaced the earlier "to make us better Jews" with "to connect Israel to Reform Jewish life"; and I changed "to encourage aliyah" to what I thought would obtain a more positive reception of "to encourage travel to Israel." Indeed, aliyah received the lowest rating on the earlier study at 5.4%, while 48% of the NATE respondents listed travel as one of their top three goals. Similarly, a mere 7% of the 1974 respondents wanted to teach about Israel as a religious and Holy Land, while 46% of NATE respondents set teaching about Israel as the Jewish Homeland as a goal. Likewise, 41% of current respondents found greater resonance with the goal of connecting Israel to Reform Jewish life

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compared to 22% of the 1974 respondents who felt teaching Israel should make us better Jews.

TABLE 3. GOALS FOR TEACHING ISRAEL—TOTAL % RESPONDING (N=92)

	NATE	1974
Create positive attitudes toward Israel	81	46
Teach about our history and heritage	61	40
Build a stronger sense of Jewish peoplehood	51	53
Encourage travel to Israel	48	
Teach about Israel as the Jewish homeland	46	
Teach about contemporary events	43	28
Connect Israel to Reform Jewish life	41	
Other	7	

At the time of the first study, its author ruefully commented that all the goals were vague and diffuse, reflecting “no ideological principles beyond the assumption that Israel is important, nor [did they]...delineate any clear sense of [the] meaning of Israel for Jewish life” (Chazan, 1979). Indeed, the two items that did reflect some ideological perspective—aliyah and religion—were lowest on the list. As noted above, I removed aliyah entirely from the NATE list of options, assuming it would gain even fewer votes today. Indeed, throughout all the narrative responses in the survey, aliyah was mentioned only twice. But, just as in the earlier survey, religion, even in the explicit form of Reform Jewish life, was last among respondents’ priorities.

Like the earlier study, this survey shows vague and diffuse goals are far more common than the more ideological and behavioral goal of connecting Israel to Reform Jewish life. Granted, I presented a closed list of options that may not have fully represented respondents’ intentions. I attempted to allow for further expression through a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit more specifics as to how these general goals were realized. The following

tables reflect a summary and coding of the narrative responses to these questions in order to discern patterns and trends.

When asked to describe their overall curriculum objectives for teaching Israel, respondents gave answers that fell into ten broad categories. As we see in Table 4, the three most frequently described objectives related to Land, People and Culture, Current Events, and Geography. One could argue that geography is subsumed by the land, people, and culture category but I kept separate those who simply described objectives relating to cities and the map of Israel, from those whose responses were more inclusive of cultural and human factors. Nonetheless, fully 84% of respondents noted that either all or part of their overall curricular goals was to teach geography, making it by far the most predominant focus.

It was also somewhat curious that although 48% of respondents said one of their top three goals was to encourage travel to Israel, only 17% listed it as a specific curricular objective. Similar is the distinction between the 41% who noted connecting Israel to Reform Jewish life as a top goal compared to 17% who listed this as an objective. Even starker is the single respondent who included teaching about Reform Jewish life in Israel as an objective. What we may be seeing is the will to attain these goals without a clearly defined plan or process to achieve them.

It is interesting to consider the number of curriculum objectives provided by each respondent. Some people wrote lengthy and detailed objectives; others wrote just a short phrase such as "To help students understand and appreciate that Israel is our homeland." As shown on Table 5, of the 70 who responded to this question, 57% listed two or fewer objectives. Just 13% listed more than five. Thus we might conclude that relatively few schools have well-developed curricular objectives for teaching Israel. There is no way to know definitively whether the Israel curriculum at a school where the respondent provided a grade-by-grade listing of objectives is richer than at one where the respondent wrote a few words or short sentences. However, it is one way, albeit inexact, of ascertaining the degree of engagement in Israel education.

Only four of 80 respondents (5%) mentioned Hebrew language as a component of their curricular objectives. Of those, one noted that Hebrew was a High School elective; the other three simply noted that they wanted their students to understand that Hebrew is "both a modern and historical language" that "connects us to Jews around the world." Undoubtedly, more than four schools teach

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Hebrew, so it is telling that so few respondents linked their teaching of Hebrew to Israel education. This suggests the strong likelihood that Hebrew is taught solely for *siddur* literacy.

TABLE 4. OVERALL CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES (N=70)

	#	%
Land, People, and Culture	34	49
Current Events	27	39
Geography	24	35
Israel in Jewish History	21	30
Biblical/Liturgical Connections	16	23
Israel as Homeland	13	19
Connect Israel to Jewish Life	12	17
Encourage Travel to Israel	12	17
Foster Ahavat Zion	7	10
Learn about Reform Judaism in Israel	1	1

TABLE 5. RESPONDENTS REPORTING MULTIPLE CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES (N=70)

	#	%
Fewer than 2	40	57
3 to 4	21	30
More than 5	9	13

I asked respondents to approximate the number of weeks spent teaching Israel. In Table 6, we see that the greatest focus of attention is in grades 4 and 5, with 62% reporting they spend six or more weeks teaching about Israel during these years. In high school, 50% say they teach Israel for six or more weeks, though frequently this

is through elective classes, and no data are available as to the numbers of students who choose Israel-related courses over others. Conversely, during the middle school years Israel is taught for two or fewer weeks by a plurality of respondents. With adult education, an entirely voluntary enterprise, about half the respondents estimate they spend three to five weeks a year focused on Israel.

TABLE 6. WEEKS PER GRADE SPENT TEACHING ABOUT ISRAEL (% RESPONDING)
(N=68)

	2 or less	3 to 5	6 or more
Grades 1 to 3	31	27	42
Grades 4 and 5	16	22	62
Grade 6	44	29	27
Grade 7	39	29	32
Grade 8	45	37	18
High School	18	32	50
Adult Education	30	48	22

Respondents were asked also to describe the topics or themes emphasized at each grade level. In Table 7, we see some interesting variations. In the elementary school years, geography and culture predominate with 32% of respondents who provided this detail saying this is their emphasis in grades 1 to 3 and 59% reporting likewise for grades 4 and 5. The second most common focus in the early grades is on Israel as homeland with 17% noting this as their emphasis. In grades 4 and 5, Jewish history enters the picture with 36% responding. Thus, we seem to have the most curricular coherence and time allotted to Israel education in grades 4 and 5 with 85% of respondents saying they teach either geography and culture, Jewish history, or both, and 62% of respondents reporting they teach Israel for six or more weeks during these years.

In middle school, when the time allotted to Israel drops significantly, the topical emphasis shifts to politics and current events (36%) and modern Jewish history (19%). Close to 20% of respon-

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dents say they do not teach Israel at all during these years that are so focused on b'nei mitzvah preparation.

As we move to the more voluntary and fewer hours of high school and adult education, the emphasis shifts even more to current events. In high school, 55% indicate this as their principle focus. Another 21% note history as their emphasis and 19% say encouraging or preparing students for travel to Israel takes primary place. Here too, 19% say they do not teach Israel at all during the high school years.

With adults, 47% report politics and current events as the major focus and another 19% report geography and culture. In the latter category, the emphasis seems to be much more on culture, through Hebrew literature (in translation), film, music, and the like, rather than on cities and sites as it is in the early school years. Travel to Israel is noted by 14% of respondents as a priority. The same number reports no Israel education activity at the adult level.

I was also interested in exploring how respondents understood the connection between Israel education and the overall Jewish studies curriculum in their school. One of the frequent critiques of Israel education is that it is rarely taught as an integral part of Jewish life. Too often, it is relegated to episodic celebrations around Tu B'Shevat and/or Yom HaAtzmaut or, as we have seen above, dedicated to just a few weeks of independent study. Using the narrative answers to the question "How does your Israel curriculum tie in with the overall Jewish studies curriculum," I assigned responses to one of three categories: (1) Strong—when the respondent self-reported a strong connection or described multiple areas within the curriculum and/or calendar where Israel was taught; (2) Weak—when the respondent self-reported a weak connection or noted only one or two subject areas to which Israel was connected; and (3) Stand alone—when the respondent noted that Israel was taught primarily as a separate subject. Based on this scale we see in Table 8 that about one-third of the respondents reported a strong link between Israel and Jewish studies, slightly more than one-third (36%) reported a weak link, and 28% described their Israel curriculum as principally a stand-alone topic of instruction.

TABLE 7. TOPICAL/THEMATIC EMPHASIS FOR TEACHING ISRAEL BY AGE

<i>Topic</i>	Grades 1 to 3	Grades 4 to 5	Grades 6 to 8	High School	Adults
Geography and Culture	15/32%	26/59%	2	6	8/19%
Israel as Homeland	8/17%	6	3	1	1
History	2	16/36%	8/19%	9/21%	2
Politics and Current Events		5	15/36%	23/55%	20/47%
Travel or a “virtual” trip	5	1	1	8/19%	6/14%
Reform connections			1	1	2
Peoplehood connections	4	5	3	3	4
Biblical connections	6	7	3	1	
Israeli Holidays	7	3	2	1	3
Hebrew Language	1	5	1	3	1
Other*		1	6	1	3
None	6	1	8/19%	8/19%	6/14%
Total # Responding	47	44	42	42	43

* Grades 4 to 6: Vision and Reality
 Grades 7 to 8: Vision and Reality (1); Holocaust (3); Part of Jewish Religion (1);
 Context is tools for living a Jewish life (1)
 High School: Philosophy and the land of Israel
 Adults: Guest Speakers (2); a little bit of all of the above (1)

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Examples of narrative comments are listed in Table 8, to further elucidate how responses were assigned to one of the three categories.

TABLE 8. CONNECTION OF ISRAEL TO JEWISH STUDIES CURRICULUM (N=77)

	#	%
Strong Connection (linked to 3 or more topics or grades)	25	32%
Weak Connection (linked to 2 or fewer topics or grades)	28	36%
Stand-alone Subject	22	28%

Strong Integration into Jewish Studies

- Israel is just one component of the curriculum for each grade level in which it is taught. For example, in Grade 5, the focus is geographical. As the fifth-graders are studying the stories of the prophets, we teach about where their stories took place and compare the ancient map to today's map to link our history to the land and discuss connections between the ancient and modern.
- It is an integral part and in fact drives much of what we do in the school in terms of observances and study.
- With a new young Israeli emissary in our community each year, Israel is a key component of the curriculum in every grade. Every year students participate in lessons about the way in which Jewish holidays are celebrated in Israel. Ancient Israel is a focus through the Torah and Prophets segments of the curriculum in Grades 4 and 7. The history of modern Israel and Israeli politics become key topics in Grades 7 through high school. Grade 5 learns about Israel through a focus on the theme of Diaspora Jewry.

Weak Integration into Jewish Studies

- Israel is celebrated on Yom HaAtzmaut in our school...we learn the Israeli National Anthem, we simulate a tour of Israel, we eat Israeli foods. Some of our teachers are Israeli and they bring in personal stories as they teach on a particular topic.

- We relate it to the modern history of Judaism, including Jewish identity and anti-Semitism.
- We incorporate history as the main thread that binds it together.

Israel as a Stand-Alone Topic

- Specific rather than general: Israel is integrated into our curriculum at Grade 3, Introduction to Hebrew and Israel at the same time. Grade 6, a section just on Modern Israeli History; Grade 7, current events.
- Israel is introduced in Grade 2 and is our entire year's curriculum in Grade 4. This extends to family education as well.
- Currently, it is treated as a separate entity in our upper school...we do have special programs (assemblies, dance groups, etc.) for the rest of the school.

Once again, Hebrew language was not identified as a prominent place of potential integration. Here, 9 or 12% of respondents described Modern Hebrew study as one way in which Israel is integrated into their overall Jewish Studies curriculum. This is more than the 5% who listed Hebrew as part of their Israel curriculum objectives, but it is hardly a significant number who see Hebrew language as a means of relating to Israel and the Jewish people.

Respondents were asked also to reflect on what challenges they face when teaching Israel in their school. As we see in Table 9, these narrative responses grouped around three main issues—making Israel relevant, countering apathy or resistance, and working to reconcile the idealized vision of Israel with its more complex reality. A few respondents saw their challenges as having more to do with time in the calendar or appropriate resources. A small number, 4 or 7% of those responding to this question, said they faced no challenges at all in teaching Israel in their schools.

Another crucial challenge that was noted by one respondent concerns the connection between congregational schooling and the broader system in which it operates. This educator wrote: "Curriculum doesn't develop in a vacuum. The religious school exists within a congregational system including rabbis, and a movement that has failed to centralize Israel or encourage congregant engagement with Israel. Until we address those larger issues, we educators will only be able to work piecemeal."

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TABLE 9. CHALLENGES TO TEACHING ISRAEL (N= 59)

Making it Meaningful and Relevant to their lives	16	28%
Apathy/Resistance to Israel	15	26%
Reconciling Vision with Reality	13	23%
No time in the Curriculum	5	9%
Lack of Good Resource Materials	4	7%
Not a Problem	4	7%
Getting People to Visit	1	2%
History is Boring	1	2%

Two questions related to how respondents select or develop curricular materials and which prepared materials they most frequently use. These results are reported in Tables 10 and 11. The three most common means of developing curriculum are through in-house means, either by the principal, individual teachers, or in teams, and by using internet resources. Over one-third (37%) say they use textbooks by major publishers and 16% indicate they use the URJ Chai Curriculum. A wide variety of textbooks were listed with Behrman House publications and the Chai Curriculum being most frequently mentioned. Three respondents indicated that they were participating in the Lokey International Academy of Jewish Studies School-to-School (Yachdav) curriculum program.

The final questions of the survey asked for demographic information. Table 12 provides the geographic breakdown of respondents. Table 13 shows the estimate of what percentage of faculty at the respondent's school has been to Israel. Only a small handful of respondents (3%) said their entire faculty had been. Just 37% indicated that three-quarters of their faculty had been, and 60% noted that half or less of teachers had been to Israel.

TABLE 10. HOW CURRICULUM IS DEVELOPED (N=61)

	#	%
Team Process	20	46
Individual Teachers and/or Principal	19	43
Internet Resources	18	41
Major Publishers	17	37
BJE Resources	8	18
URJ Chai Curriculum	7	16
Media, Popular Culture, etc.	7	16
Conferences, Workshops	5	11
Israel Travel	2	5

TABLE 11. MOST COMMONLY USED CURRICULUM MATERIALS (N=55)

	#	%
The Great Israel Scavenger Hunt (Behrman House)	10	18
Welcome to Israel (Behrman House)	10	18
Music, Videos, Newspapers, etc.	8	15
URJ Chai Curriculum	7	13
Lokey Academy Yachdav Materials	3	5

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TABLE 12. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS (N=93)

Northeast	30	32%
Midwest	24	26%
California	10	11%
Southeast	6	6%
No Response	23	25%

TABLE 13. APPROXIMATE % OF FACULTY WHO HAVE BEEN TO ISRAEL (N=70)

	#	%
100%	2	3
75%	25	37
50%	16	23
25%	16	23
Less than 25%	10	14
None	1	1

Implications of Findings

What can this scan of NATE members tell us about Israel education in Reform congregations? As noted earlier, such a limited response cannot provide an in-depth picture of what is being taught and how, but the findings can help us better understand some of the core questions that need to be addressed if we are to meet the challenges of teaching Israel to a community where it is remote and often irrelevant to daily life.

While there are few standards and little consensus about what, how, and, most importantly, why to teach Israel, this study shows that Israel tends to be taught in one of three principle ways (See p. 3, above). At times, these three approaches are combined and synthesized, and even integrated into Jewish studies. However, for a majority of respondents, objectives focus on content, which

remains separate or weakly integrated into the core Jewish studies curriculum.

This emphasis on subject matter seems to be “the safe way out.” Content is certainly important, but teaching geography, for example, evades the key question of why Israel matters. Indeed, none of the three approaches in isolation can address this challenging question.

Israel is a multi-dimensional, complex, religious, social, cultural, and historical reality that, conceptually at least, is integral to every aspect of Jewish life and Jewish community. However, this perspective runs against the tide of American Judaism, which has become increasingly personalized and localized. Jews today are more at home in America than perhaps ever before. This is particularly true for Reform Jews, as we see from the 2000/2001 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS). In this study, Reform Jews report lower levels of attachment to Israel than either of the other two major denominations. Reform Jews travel to Israel less often, and send their children to Israel less often. Indeed, only about 38% of Reform Jews say they strongly agree with the statement that Jews in the United States and elsewhere around the world share a common destiny, as compared to 51% of Conservative and 72% of Orthodox Jews, who strongly agree with this statement. In other words, Israel does not figure into Reform Jewish identity or how Reform Jews make personal meaning from being Jewish (Liebman and Cohen, 1990; Cohen and Eisen, 2000; Horowitz, 2000).

These data are consistent with a decline among Jews in North America (and elsewhere) of a sense of ethnic connection (Cohen, 1998). This is particularly salient amongst younger Jews, who are emblematic of an ethos that allows for and even celebrates the personal freedom and the constructed nature of identity in a post-ethnic world. Indeed, there is even a growing discourse that claims that a Jewish world framed around Israel and the Diaspora imposes a hierarchy that is no longer relevant to the way most Jews live their lives. In this construction, Israel is just one of many places where Jews are rooted in their homes (Aviv and Shneer, 2005) (is this a quote or a paraphrase?).

The combination of these factors makes the teaching of Israel, in particular, or the general principle of Jewish peoplehood, in general, one of the most challenging aspects of Jewish education in American communities. Most other aspects of Judaism can be taught experientially, at least in part, but Israel and Jewish peoplehood are diffi-

cult to experience beyond the symbolic level in a classroom or even in an informal setting. And as we see, this is borne out by the findings from this survey. Although a sizable portion of the NATE respondents set a goal of connecting Israel to Jewish life and, even at times, Reform Jewish life, far fewer seemed able to articulate specific curricular objectives as to how to achieve this end. Thus, it is not at all surprising that so many respondents noted the challenge of drawing personal meaning and connection either to the historical and sacred dimensions of Israel and even more so to the contemporary and complicated dimensions of the modern State.

Almost twenty years ago, the Melton Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora developed a curriculum that focused on Israel education as a central dimension of Jewish character development. The intent was to inextricably link Israel to Jewish life so that it “becomes a means for value development, intellectual challenges, and affective growth” (Ariav 1988, 10). This perspective does not say Israel is central to Jewish life, but rather Israel is an integral/inseparable piece of a larger whole. If we accept the premise that Israel is integral to everything we know, feel, and do as Jews, then the question of why Israel matters becomes clear. Israel matters because we cannot understand ourselves as individual Jews or as a part of the Jewish people without a strong spiritual and physical connection to the people, the land, the history, and the contemporary reality of the Jewish state.

As this survey of NATE members suggests, many Reform educators are far from this understanding. If they themselves have not developed an appreciation for the essential role Israel can play in fostering a deeper connection to Judaism and the Jewish people, how can we expect them to be able to teach this to their students?

So how do we do this?

It seems that the most effective way to foster a deep sense of connection and commitment to Israel is to work on two planes—teaching Israel as a means to foster and strengthen personal Reform Jewish identity and teaching Israel as a means of developing a stronger connection and commitment to the Jewish People. Introducing new curriculum material in and of itself cannot lead to systemic change. Indeed, without more significant support and direction from the Movement in general, and rabbinic colleagues in congregations, it is unlikely that educators alone can solve this enduring problem. As one respondent noted: “This is a very complicated issue. There are many of us who would like to do more with Israel

education, but the truth is that 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.”

Certainly, clarity of vision and active support for Israel education is not the sole responsibility of educators. But, educators, working in partnership with rabbis and lay leaders who are committed to serious reflection on why and how to make Israel more central to Reform Judaism, can begin a process of planning curricular change. For it is when we can articulate and conceptualize a coherent vision of what compels us to teach Israel that we can design content and methods to help us achieve this goal. While it is beyond the scope of this study to present a detailed curriculum plan, I can offer two ideas to frame and further our thinking. These are integration and connection.

A basic educational principle is that people learn by building on and enriching existing knowledge and experience. This means we must do a better job of integrating Israel into what Reform Jews already know and do. This requires much more deliberate integration of conversations, texts, and images of Israel in all aspects of Reform Jewish learning and life. It also means attending to deeper integration of curriculum goals and processes across grade levels and across formal and informal educational settings, including congregational trips. Curriculum goals should be set through careful deliberation on two key questions: (1) What does Israel—mythic and real, sacred and contemporary, land and people—have to do with my Jewish experiences? and (2) How can an understanding of the multiple dimensions of Israel as *Am*, *Torah*, *Eretz*, *U'Medinah* enrich my experiences as a Jew?

The second area that needs greater focus is the development of concrete programs and experiences to create a deeper sense of belonging and connection to the Jewish people. Kopelowitz (2005) defines this approach as social engagement through activities designed to create tangible, ongoing relationships between the students and Israelis and Israeli society. Such activities include partnership programs such as shared curriculum, events such as *mifgashim* (virtual or real), and programs that encourage aliyah (p. 9). While aliyah is hardly on the radar screen (nor was it a major aspect of the social engagement activities found in Kopelowitz's Community Day Schools study), there are a handful of Reform congregational schools that are working to promote such connec-

tions through programs such as the Lokey International Academy of Jewish Studies Yachdav (School-to-School) curriculum and Israel trips for teens, families, and adults. Indeed, the fact that so many congregations are organizing Israel trips is an encouraging sign. The question, of course, remains as to how well integrated such trips are into educational planning and programming. And, it should almost go without saying that we need to do a better job of getting our religious school faculty to participate in carefully creatively planned professional development seminars in Israel.

Studies of the American Jewish community tell us that levels of attachment to Israel increase with levels of affiliation (Cohen 1998, NJPS, 2000/2001). In other words, the more identified and active one is as a Jew, the more important Israel is in one's life. The social scientists measure this attachment according to denomination, and thus Orthodox Jews emerge as the most strongly connected to Israel and Reform Jews as the least.

Thus, it seems that we must see Israel education as an integral component of Reform Jewish identity by fostering deeper identification and attachment to Reform Judaism. By creating a "thicker" Reform Judaism that integrates and connects the many faces of Israel, we foster a deeper connection to what it means to be a Reform Jew. This task can and must be enhanced by actively integrating Israel into religious studies and by developing meaningful and enduring modes of social engagement with Israelis and Israeli life. Seen this way, deeper connection to Israel in all its manifestations creates a "thicker" Reform Jewish identity. And, ultimately, that should be our educational goal.

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