

A Chronicle of One School's Israel Experience Program In a Time of Turmoil by Elaine R. S. Cohen

The first responsibility of school leaders is to ensure the safety and security of the students who are placed in our care. Concern for the physical well-being of the young people in our charge is a necessary prerequisite to issues of teaching and learning, personal and moral development, and the many goals and objectives of Jewish education. A significant clash of values came to the fore in Jewish schools throughout the Diaspora in the wake of the violent second Intifada when Israel programs had to be curtailed due to fear and uncertainty about security. Although an educational visit to Israel is integral to the fulfillment of the mission of many Jewish day schools, professional and lay leaders in numerous communities reached the painful decision to cancel their trips because of the relentless cycle of bombings, shootings, and attacks on civilian targets.

This article chronicles an imaginative response to the crisis in one Jewish high school, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union, in West Orange, New Jersey. For more than a dozen years, the school had offered a three-month program in Israel for the second semester of the senior year of high school. The program is called Neshama, because the trip aimed to touch the soul of the participants and also because it represented, to a significant degree, the soul of their Jewish educational experience at the Solomon Schechter Day School.

In years past, more than three-quarters of the senior class -- excited to have the opportunity to travel, study, and engage in programs with Israeli peers and community service activities in Israel -- would choose to take part in Neshama, rather than participate in the work/study internship alternative in New Jersey.

Since the outbreak of the Intifada in 2000, the school grappled each year with the tough decision whether to maintain the program. The professional leaders especially were reluctant to cancel it, believing keenly in the incomparable educational value of the individual and group experience. Realistic about the need to curtail many of the activities that were once a central aspect of the program, we nonetheless felt that we could offer a meaningful visit to Israel that would benefit the students and reinforce their strong feelings of attachment to the people, State, and Land of Israel. In February 2001, with the backing of the Board of Trustees, we agreed to send 24 students (out of a class of approximately 60 seniors), a far smaller contingent than in past years and at greater expense to the school.

One year later, the number of participants had dwindled to sixteen. It was a frightening year and the Head of School and High School Principal¹ spent many a sleepless night fretting over whether our commitment to the program exceeded the bounds of responsible decision-making. The group of sixteen departed at the end of February. After a month of almost daily acts of terror in Israel and resultant daily changes in the group's itinerary, we made the enormously difficult decision to bring the group home. In the end, it was a joint decision of the lay leadership and the educators, and while a few parents were keenly disappointed, most were relieved and grateful for the judgment call. The students were universally disappointed and felt deeply aggrieved. Their work in the local communities of New Jersey on behalf of Israel when they returned just prior to Passover was exemplary. We are confident that most, if not all of them, will return to Israel during their college years, either for a semester or year abroad, on college-sponsored programs or family trips.

When school resumed in September 2002, talk of war with Iraq was already prevalent and the episodes of civilian deaths in Israel due to acts of terror continued unabated. It seemed initially impossible to consider launching Neshama XI, despite the urging of the school's Jerusalem-based Israel program director who wanted us to find a way to do it and the desire of the school not to let down this class of seniors who had been counting on their Schechter Israel experience ever since they entered high school. After the initial planning meeting with the students and their parents, it was evident that the number of participants in 2003 would be even smaller than the year before. We set the minimum number at fifteen students in order for the trip to be a "go."

Flexibility and Adaptation

Given the instability of the world political situation throughout the weeks of the fall and winter, we knew that the only chance of going ahead with the program was to adapt it both conceptually and in actuality. The resultant success motivates us to record the story of Neshama XI and present it as a model for other Jewish high schools in the sad but likely eventuality of continued or future violence in the region.

The plan for Schechter's Israel experience program in 2003 was built on flexibility, the readiness to adapt to changing outside circumstances, and the recognition that the student's time in Israel would have to be less than in "normal" years. Phase one began in late February with sixteen seniors who ventured north to the Laurentian Mountains approximately 60 miles from Montreal, a location chosen for a number of reasons, including affordability; the availability of outstanding resource people; an excellent year-round, kosher facility (Camp B'nai Brith); and the opportunity for the students to explore a Jewish community that offered interesting contrasts with the ones they knew in New Jersey.

The Neshama Director is Rabbi David Ebstein,² a member of the professional staff of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in Jerusalem. After he arrived with the young madrikha (staff person) he had hired, the group quickly bonded with the staff of the camp and with the leaders. Professor Gil Troy of McGill University³ met the students on three occasions and presented dynamic sessions on Zionism and its relevance for them today. Rabbi Ebstein taught numerous text sessions that introduced the students to a diverse range of Zionist thinkers. As they sat around a campfire, they debated issues that are still current and relevant today. Avital shared her stories of army service and engaged the students in discussions about choices facing young people in Israel and America. In addition to all the conversations, the participants played in the snow, took skiing lessons, and enjoyed a few field trips to Montreal and Ottawa.

The planned week in Québec extended into a second, due to the increased certainty that war with Iraq would soon be declared. After a meaningful Shabbat experience in the mountain retreat setting, the group moved to a hotel in Montreal. The students' good humor and openness made everything work. They studied conversational Hebrew, visited the McGill campus, and got a taste of the challenges Jewish students can face on college campuses when they confronted Palestinian ideologues at Concordia University. The eye-opening experience of confrontation jolted them into recognizing that they lacked the skills of advocacy and the information that they needed to enter into dialogue with political groups whose extremist views on Israel were inflammatory and distorted. This led to a shift in priorities and the stage was set for the next phase of the Neshama program. The group decided to do research and prepare individual and small -group projects on a

variety of topics and questions, including the birth of Israel, government policies since 1967, whether Zionism is racism, and attitudes to the peace process. The students saw their work through to completion, and, before their graduation in June, they put together a collection of their essays entitled "Project Israel."

A More Thorough and Comprehensive Background

In mid-March, the U.S. campaign against Iraq was imminent. There was no way that the school could endorse sending a group of students to Israel at a time of such turmoil on the world stage. We needed to "buy time" in the hope that the war would be brief and that it would still be possible for the group to venture to Israel for several weeks prior to the end of their school year. Luck was with us. After some exploration by phone and Internet, we found Camp Interlocken in New Hampshire, an appropriate facility within easy reach of New Jersey by chartered bus. The camp had staff people already in place and was available. The match was made and a larger group of twenty-three Schechter students arrived with their Director and two madrikhim, as the male staff member for Neshama had arrived to join the leadership team.

Camp Interlocken presented new challenges for the group. They had to make the camp kosher and share the tasks of cooking and cleaning. While the students had already become a close-knit group, they continued to develop and evolve into a remarkably self-sustaining community. Their experiences at the camp cemented their relationships and enhanced the group spirit. More winter sports and community service activities in the area provided meaningful involvement for all, while small-group work on their Israel-oriented projects sustained the focus of the program during the next month. With time for research via the Internet, aided by print resources they had collected and brought along to the camp, they utilized the time for discussion and debate. It was becoming clear that these Neshama participants were acquiring a more thorough and comprehensive background in the historical, demographic, religious, and political dimensions of Israeli society than had previous groups that had spent fourteen weeks in Israel. Gleanings from their experience will inform all future Neshama programs.

It soon became evident that the active military campaign in Iraq would be brief and that Israel would not become involved in the hostilities. The students wrote an impassioned letter to the school administration and the Board of Trustees, imploring us to send them to Israel so that they could enjoy the culmination of their Neshama experience in the homeland of the Jewish people. With parental support, the school agreed to send this motivated group of young people to Israel for five weeks. The compressed itinerary incorporated a week's stay in the Partnership 2000 community of UJC MetroWest, Ofakim-Merchavim, and other encounters with Israeli age peers. The students were exposed to a number of inspirational speakers, hiked, swam, prayed, toured, and had many first-hand opportunities to challenge their assumptions and continue the debates they had started back in the snowy hills of Québec and New Hampshire. They loved being in Israel and, needless to say, in a season of few tourists, Israelis were thrilled to meet them.

When the students returned to New Jersey a few days prior to their high school graduation, they were filled with appreciation for their varied and rich experiences on Neshama. The student speakers at the Senior Awards Assembly, part of their graduation festivities, spoke poignantly about all they had learned in and about Israel, and about creating a community. It was evident to all that these young people had seriously examined the basis of their personal Jewish identity and thoughtfully reflected about many of the major issues in Jewish life today. They had matured and benefited in multiple ways from their Neshama experiences.

A Commitment to a Serious, Substantive Program

An article that appeared last summer in the Forward newspaper began with the statement “Israel education in North America is in the dumps.”⁴ As coordinated efforts are about to be launched through a new partnership, the North American Coalition for Israel Education, we offer this narrative chronicle of one Jewish day school’s successful effort to maintain and sustain its commitment to a serious, substantive Israel experience program, even during a period of turbulence.

The year 2003 found most Jewish day schools casting about for alternatives to their customary Israel programs. Some communities invited a number of Israeli teens to visit the States, endeavoring to expose their students to life in Israel through encounters with a few youth representatives. Other schools substituted U.S.-based trips of different kinds to provide their youngsters with a special experience that would alleviate the disappointment of a cancelled Israel program.

The twelfth grade students of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union were able to benefit from a focused Israel-oriented program that emerged from the school’s belief that it could offer an authentic and stimulating variety of meaningful activities through which the participants would gain a deeper understanding of Israel, both prior to their visit there and during the weeks that they were able to spend in Eretz Israel. The chronicle of Neshama XI can now contribute to the evolving models of and options for meaningful Israel experience programs. Based on follow-up interviews with the students who took part in the program, the school leadership feels confident that the experience was affirming and even life-changing. It is evident that the participants further developed their personal sense of Jewish identity, anchored in a love of Israel and a mature appreciation for its struggles and aspirations.

Endnotes:

1. Joyce Raynor, Ph.D., is the High School Principal of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union. She has spearheaded the Neshama program for the past several years. She can be reached at jraynor@ssdseu.org.
2. Rabbi David Ebstein has served as the Neshama Director for the past four years. He resides in Jerusalem and is on the professional staff of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in Israel. He can be contacted at debstein@netvision.net.il.
3. Dr. Gil Troy’s book, *Why I Am A Zionist*, is available through the Bronfman Center for Jewish Education in Montreal and through the birthright israel Program, courtesy of the AVI CHAI Foundation.
4. Educators Aim to Move beyond Mythic Israel, in *The Forward*, August 8, 2003.

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