

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Educating in and about Israel is one of the powerful ways to renew the Jewish spirit. In this piece, one community's experience putting Israel in a prominent place on the communal agenda is shared in detail. Laura Samuels of Cincinnati shares honestly about both the challenges and lessons learned, and puts forth a compelling model connecting the Israel experience and deep community-building.

Israel Education: A Community Effort

LAURA SAMUELS, ED.D. (SPECIAL THANKS GO TO BARBARA MILLER, ISRAEL RECRUITER)

In January 2000, the Jewish Community of Cincinnati launched a major initiative to support youth travel to Israel. The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati granted five million dollars to underwrite two Israel trips for each of our community's young people. Any high school student who wished to go on a trip to Israel of three weeks or longer received \$4000, and college students received \$3000 for attending a trip of 14 days or longer. Eligible grantees included Jewish high school students enrolled in supplementary schools run by both the Reform and the Conservative congregations of Cincinnati, a girl's Yeshiva and youth programs under Orthodox Jewish auspices, Jewish youth in a Humanistic congregation, as well as unaffiliated Jewish youth. The one stipulation for eligibility stated by the Jewish Foundation was that high school students would be enrolled in a pre-trip course. The grant also stipulated that long-term research on the effects of the trips be conducted by JESNA.

The grant has been administered by a part-time Israel recruiter who worked out of the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati. At the time of the launch of this initiative, I served as the Director of the Cincinnati Reform Jewish High School (CRJHS), a joint supplementary program for the four Reform congregations of Cincinnati enrolling approximately 300 students.

The grant was announced in January 2000 at a city-wide joint program entitled "A Taste of Israel." From the start, the Jewish Federation and the various agencies involved with teenagers were confronted with challenge and conflict.

The first and most immediate task we faced was organizing the required pre-trip educational component. The tim-

ing of the announcement, less than one month before second semester, left little opportunity for schools to plan a pre-Israel trip course. At the time, the CRJHS was the only school that required an extensive pre-trip educational course. How would the Federation coordinate efforts so teenagers across the city would have similar courses while respecting institutional integrity?

A second issue that took the community by surprise was the aggressiveness of some of the trip providers. As news of the initiative quickly spread, families experienced confusion as they were inundated with mailings about a large number of trips. This took place before the community began to reach out to parents and engage them in the communal effort.

Third, the formation of a Teen Council for Israel by the Jewish Federation generated friction. The purpose of the Teen Council, which was composed of teen leaders from various congregations and youth movements, was to help recruit teenagers to attend summer trips to Israel. The congregations, however, were not informed or consulted about the creation of this new program; they were not treated as partners.

The community could have splintered at this point. Grant money had been allocated, but the natural partners of Federation for this effort – synagogues, schools, and parents – were not a part of the process.

Fortunately, Cincinnati was committed to finding the way to make Israel an agent of community renewal, rather than destruction. The community realized that it was critical to begin a new process, one that would be based on input from all those involved with the education of high school youth. Rabbinic and educational representatives

from all of the institutions that worked with youth were convened, along with key lay leaders. These meetings resulted in the resolution of issues and the development of partnerships, strengthening the effort to encourage youth trips to Israel and laying important groundwork for the teenagers of Cincinnati to work together.

Over the last several years, the Jewish teenagers of Cincinnati have helped plan and lead a teen rally for Israel; a teen mission to Israel; Jewish Java's to promote travel to Israel; trip fairs; a community walk for Israel; and speaking engagements throughout the city.

Through our efforts, we have learned a great deal about what is needed to help make the connection between Jewish adolescents, Israel education, and community renewal:

Jewish youth and Israel education

- The Israel experience works best when it is an integrated experience with the students' Jewish education: a pre-trip class, post-trip get-togethers and volunteer opportunities at community events about Israel;
- We need to really hear and answer kids' questions about Israel. We have learned that many teenagers do not really understand why adults keep telling them they need to care about Israel. Because of these questions we have developed a course entitled, "Why should I care about Israel?" and it gets filled quickly semester after semester.
- The teachers who teach about Israel need to be passionate and committed to Israel. They need to have been to Israel so they can share experiences with the students. The students need to know that the teachers are talking and teaching from a very honest and deep place in their hearts.
- We need to prepare our young people for anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses. Our students are not always well-armed with facts and we have learned that many of our students are dismayed by the attitudes on campus and they do not know how to respond.

Israel education and community renewal

- It requires a great deal of personal relationship building, sustained over time.
- Strong connections between students and their synagogues need to be continually fostered, even as the students venture out to community events. High school stu-

dents who go to Israel should become ambassadors in their congregations, even teaching a class or two to the younger students. Within the synagogue community, kids who go to Israel should be publicly acknowledged by the community before they leave and upon their return.

- Working with parents is a necessary and important part of the program. We have found that parents often do not know how to talk to their children about Israel, particularly given the political situation of the last few years.
- Partnerships need to be constantly fostered and negotiated between all of the people involved: the rabbis, the educators, the community *Shlichah*, the trip providers, the agency that dispenses funds, the parents, the youth groups leaders, and the students.
- The community-at-large needs to support someone whose job is to encourage youth to travel to Israel. This person should work closely and collaboratively with the congregations and other relevant communal institutions.

The Cincinnati Jewish community was given an extraordinary gift by the Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati. To make this gift helpful in strengthening teenagers' Jewish identity and fostering the Israel/Diaspora relationship, we in the adult community had to learn how to work together, across institutional and movement boundaries. We had to be willing to learn and take the time to reflect on what was working and what was not.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons we have learned in the last three years is to listen to the youth. They want to learn about Israel. They want to go to Israel. They want to support Israel and they want to do this as a community of youth – regardless of movement or affiliation. In the words of Cincinnati students:

"We toured the country and were taught some history lessons and even had some fun, but it was during our discussions where I really understood what I could not have understood before. With my orthodox, conservative, reform, unaffiliated, and Israeli friends I participated in intense discussions about Judaism. Our mission had become a success. Our goal had been accomplished and our message delivered. We were united as a group, as a people, but most importantly as Jews.... We were able to travel to Israel as Jewish youth to show that it is our job to make sure that Israel will be the Jewish homeland forever. Who knows what us kids are

gonna come up with next, but whatever it is, we will continue to be active in the community. We want to show the world just how much our Judaism means to each and every one of us.”

“Israel is our homeland, our place of refuge, and a place where a Jew can become a citizen in just fifteen minutes. Yet this Jewish state is being abandoned by those whom it may one day have to help and it is being abandoned in its time of need. Perhaps we American Jews have a terrible fear of turmoil in the country. After all, we only know of peace. We know very little about struggle or what it means to defend ourselves against injustice. And, perhaps the media is more powerful than we

understand. However, never once, even when I heard of the bus bombing in Kfar Saba on our very last day in Israel, was I afraid to be in Israel. Instead I was proud. I felt safe. I was where I needed to be. I knew the importance of being a Jew and being connected to Israel.”

Laura Samuels is currently the Educational Fellow at the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. She’s worked in a variety of Jewish educational settings, including day schools, supplementary schools, bureaus of Jewish education, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, and the Experiment of Congregational Education.

Editor’s Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Samuels describes the chaotic beginnings of an initiative that originated centrally without serious involvement of all the communal stakeholders. What experiences in your community reflect a similar dynamic? Is the story familiar?
- Samuels presents four lessons she has learned about Israel education for Jewish youth. To what extent does Israel education in your community or institution meet these criteria?
- In the current environment, how has your synagogue, school, or agency promoted and celebrated the Israel experience for its young people while maintaining respect for personal decisions of parents and kids who choose not to go? In your opinion, have you found the right balance? Is there a forum for open and honest discussion of these issues?
- How would your community benefit from a program like that offered in Cincinnati?