

JEWISH ADULTS AS LEARNERS IN FAMILY EDUCATION:

The Family Israel Experience

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A family Israel experience can be transformative, particularly when it is geared to facilitating the integration of what participants learned into their lives back home. This article explores programming principles for such trips that involve multigenerational learning.

ISRAEL AS THE SETTING FOR FAMILY EDUCATION TRAVEL

- How are adults affected when they are simultaneously the learner and the teacher?
- How do parents cope when their authority is subjugated to that of an educational staff person and set program?
- What happens when adults bring their family on an organized educational tour to Israel when they have never traveled in a group framework before?
- How can the Jewish educator foster intellectual stimulation for the adults while not losing the children and still focusing on the family dynamic?

These are just some of the questions facing Jewish educators when planning and implementing family educational programs for groups of families visiting Israel. This article explores these and other questions within the context of a two-week family experience in Israel. It is based on my experience leading countless such trips and on the research reported in an article that appeared in this *Journal* in Fall 1996 (Abrams et al., 1996).

The power of experiential learning within an Israel trip can be significant, even to the extent of being transformative, as documented

by many studies in recent years, most of which have focused on teenagers (see References). Furthermore, Israel itself has been undergoing transformation recently, and as part of that, the relationship between Jews of the Diaspora and Israel has been changing. As Barry Chazan (1993) has written:

Once Israel was a dream; then it became a cause. Now it is becoming a living human reality and context. As we move out of the infancy period of Israel-Diaspora relations, it is becoming clear that Israel is more than a religious laboratory of Jewish experiences, ideas, and people. It is a living mirror of modern Jewish life—and it offers the promise of profound impact on the psyche of people of all ages. Indeed, an increasing body of research points to the great impact of Israel on subsequent Jewish identity and consciousness.

The field of the sociology of travel provides an additional framing concept for working educationally with adults in Israel. At any moment, adult participants may be shifting from a vacation mode of curiosity-seeker to that of a religious pilgrim seeking an existential experience. They may be internalizing instrumental knowledge or feel as if they are off on a secular adventure. They may be on a spiritual quest, seeking meaning for their existence or be driven to find the perfect gift for someone in their family or office back home! All of these switches happen without

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participants intentionally focusing on them and sometimes without notice. Therefore, when providing educational programming for adult participants in an Israel experience, one must allow for the safe space and build a supportive community to facilitate easy adjustments. Furthermore, one must allow for some unstructured time to facilitate the adults' assertion of their own agendas.

LOOKING AT THE ADULT AS A LEARNER

Within family education there are several definitions of "the learner." At times the learner is the whole family, interacting intergenerationally and learning together and from each other. At other times, the learner is made up of separate age-appropriate groups learning parallel to each other. Family education is complicated, particularly because both adults and children are participants in educational programs. For the purposes of this article, the learner is the Jewish parent, both as a separate adult and within his or her roles as parent and spouse, and even sometimes the child of someone when traveling with a three-generation family.

Furthermore, the adults are "themselves" in all that this means. Within the context of the Israel experience, this includes their own personal histories as Jews: the history of their family tree, the level of their Jewish and Zionist knowledge, their comfort with Hebrew (written or spoken) and Yiddish, and the like. In addition, their comfort level as a traveler—dealing with foreign currency, sleeping away from home, and coping with changes in food and climate, all following a very long flight—affects their experience. Giving up adult independence within the context of a group Israel trip is also significant. An adult, especially as the family head, is accustomed to being the ultimate authority, the decision-maker, the one in control. When traveling within an organized group context, such basic decisions as when to start and end the day, when and what to eat, how much time to spend at any site, and the like, are usurped by the program and its staff. One may be

better able as an adult to accept this loss of control when traveling alone, but when traveling with one's family and the options are either to join the group for the day or not, then that loss of independence is more stressful.

For example, in a recent trip a father and a 10-year-old son were traveling together with a group. The father had special dietary needs and certain desires for experiences in Israel that led him to do some activities independently of the group. Meanwhile, the group's program was very attractive to his son and was heavily based on interaction within each family. The boy also enjoyed being with the other young people as part of the group. During the first few days this conflict of interests was played out in different ways—sometimes by the father removing himself from the group at which times one of the staff people adopted the son and at other times by the father taking his son away with him. During this time, the staff invested much time keeping the father informed in advance of all activities and the program's expectations of the participants. It took a few days, but eventually the father understood that his independent program was actually hurting his son and, thereby, his relationship with his son. After that they both were regular participants in every activity. Following his return home, the father wrote that he wants to organize a group of families to return next summer on a similar program, again with his son. We can thus assume that although he had to set aside some of his own needs and expectations, the experience he shared with his son and the group was enough compensation to have made the sacrifice worthwhile. And we may further assume that the family educational program actually had significance for him as an adult learner and a parent to the extent that he stands ready to initiate and serve as the lay leader of another group of families coming to Israel.

There is another challenge posed by the family education approach to Israel visits. With the fluidity of role switching between learner and teacher common in family education, there are times when the children are

leading the learning process. The balance of knowledge between parents and their children may sometimes be reversed, especially for those families who send their children to Jewish day schools. For example, in one group of six families, there were two *B'nei Mitzvah*-aged young people (one boy and one girl). Both were receiving good Jewish educations and in some areas had more knowledge than any of the adults on the trip. The parents were often very proud of their children's knowledge, and many times when the group was divided between adults and children, these two remained with the adults. At the end of the trip, the adults were able to express to these two young people their gratitude for often raising the level of the discussion! In this case, it worked out well. In other cases, it may be embarrassing for some adults to show their lack of knowledge in front of young people.

Care needs to be given to the balance between adult and children's learning needs. Although much of the curriculum can be made accessible for the various generations at the same time, some aspects of the content need to be provided for the adults and older youth separately. For example, there may be an evening program, such as an "Update on the Israeli Political Scene," for the adults while the younger participants are either asleep or participating in some other age-appropriate activity. At other times, bits and pieces need to be added throughout the day—whether at a particular site, in preparation for meeting with Israelis, or on the bus—that allow for the adults to be intellectually stimulated and also pursue some of their areas of interest. We have found that a well-told story reaches all ages! In addition, we have learned that the presentation or story may be told in such a way as to allow the inclusion of information and perspectives that can only be understood by the older members of the group while not losing the interest of the younger members. It is an art that is very important to learn when working with family groups aged six and older.

Another way to address the separate edu-

cational needs of adults and children is to provide separate resource materials, such as adult resource booklets, "My Israel Trip" booklets for children, and a Family Israel Album for each family. In this way the adults are provided with background readings on various subjects that can stimulate questions of tour guides at various places of interest and can facilitate the learning-teaching dynamic within the family. The different age-appropriate resource activity books provide sufficient information so that every member of the family can have something to contribute to the discussion on various subjects. The Family Israel Album is designed to help the family focus on the various subjects/sites touched on and visited each day while also recording their reactions and thoughts, both as a family and as individuals. Any member of the family who can read can help lead this dynamic. We observed that in some cases the older youth were the initiators of this task, but most often it was the parents who appreciated the guidance in processing each day.

MULTIGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Multigenerational learning is particular to family education, and within the context of an Israel experience, it is particularly meaningful. It can strengthen the family as a unit while facilitating their learning together. For example, the family may be given the task of learning as much as it can about a particular neighborhood's history and the background of its residents. With the help of a guideline sheet, and the suggestion of various roles that need to be filled—map keeper-navigator, recorder, photographer, person who approaches the local residents—the family sets off to formulate its own picture of the community. The family needs to pull upon its own resources (Hebrew-language skills, comfort level about approaching strangers, knowledge of various ethnic groups, powers of observation, and political knowledge) to complete the task. Then it needs to formulate how to present the information learned to the other families in an interesting fashion. During the discussion period that follows, participants of

all ages and staff help to fill in the picture of the various neighborhood while learning more about various ethnic approaches to Judaism and Israel as well as the Zionist principle of the "Ingathering of the Exiles." Sometimes family members act out one of the conversations they had with someone on the street, each taking another role. In so doing, they explore even deeper how each member of the family felt during that conversation and why that meeting was particularly poignant. Then the whole group asks questions and compares it with the information they learned about their assigned neighborhood. Even the youngest of the group often contributes significantly, noticing the types of pets, the friendliness, the feeling of safety, the smells from the bakery, and the like.

Another example of multigenerational learning takes place when visiting historical sites. When on Masada, for example, families may enact the various options the Zealots faced the night before the Romans breached the walls. By doing so they are also revealing their feelings and values about life. The culmination of such an activity could be having the families identify an important value that they hold dear and writing a family declaration stating what they as a family need to do in order to uphold it. Some of the families have since reported that they have framed this declaration and refer to it on occasion while sitting around their Shabbat table. This is an example of where each member of the family theoretically has an equal say in the process. It also represents an important objective of such programs: transferability of the experience to the home environment. In as much as possible, the programs are geared to facilitating the families' consideration of how what they learned may be integrated into their lives back home.

STAFFING

There are specialized staffing requirements for such programs. Even for a group as small as 15 people, at least two educational staff people are needed. The staff needs to function as a team, respecting each other's talents and

knowledge and keeping a close watch over the well-being of the group and the program. One successful model uses a Family Israel Educator and a Family *Madrich*.

The Family Israel Educators are usually licensed tour guides who have undergone training as tour educators to understand how to use a site as a text within a specific theme, rather than just a place at which to recite historical facts, including all names and dates pertinent to that site. In addition, they should have taken a course for tour educators designed to prepare them for working with families within a Family Education framework. In this course they study a combination of the theory of family education and the practical implications for their work, including program planning and field techniques.

The Family *Madrichim* are also educational staff members who can work with the whole group or with either the adults or young people when they are divided into groups. Their training includes a six-month course at the School for Developing Facilitators for the Israel Experience at Melitz, the Center for Jewish-Zionist Education. This course prepares them to develop and practice educational approaches to working with various groups in the field. In addition, they also participate in a specific course for family education during which they learn the theory and practice of working with families and the programmatic "glue" that pulls a family trip together. They may be assigned responsibility for various aspects of the trip; for example the Family Circle, which is a time when the families regularly meet to either review what they have done or to prepare for the next step.

PROGRAMMING

One basic programming principle relates to the balance between experiential learning and recreation. Generally, the mornings are a time when the families are best able to participate fully and appreciate a program with content that requires their input and reflection. The afternoons are the best time to focus on recreation and pure fun (kayaking, swimming, going to the beach, etc.). This is

not to say that the mornings are devoid of fun; for example, the group may rise early and collect a packed breakfast and go on an early morning hike, seeing the wildlife at the waterhole and then sharing breakfast together. Such a program still provides content relating to wilderness, ecology, and Jewish text and is done in an active and experiential manner.

In addition, all programming is planned to incorporate these principles:

- involving the whole family
- promoting interaction within the family
- providing Jewish content that allows for meaningful connections with who they are as Jews
- allowing for different levels of Jewish knowledge and observance
- building connections between families
- placing primary responsibility for Jewish learning on the family (empowering the family)
- allowing for various family configurations
- facilitating transferability to their home environment
- drawing on the family resources and knowledge
- doing activities that can only be done in Israel

PRE-TRIP AND POST-TRIP PROGRAMMING POTENTIAL

One of the greatest challenges for all Israel program providers is their dependence upon partners in the Diaspora for all programming done before and after the Israel trip. It has been demonstrated that the impact of the Israel trip is increased when follow-up programs are provided in home communities. However, our research thus far has indicated that the extent of pre-trip preparation does not necessarily correlate with how well a group functions together or a higher degree of satisfaction on the part of the participants, as recorded in their evaluations. However, this finding does not negate the importance of several pre-trip sessions that introduce the families to each other and to family educa-

tional techniques. Such sessions allow the families to self-select out if they are not comfortable for some reason and also enable the group leader to determine whether some families are not appropriate for this kind of experience before everyone gets on the plane.

Post-trip programming can be very effective in enabling participants to make contributions to their home communities, as well as in reinforcing their transformative experiences and facilitating their integration into their normal lives. To date, very little such programming has been provided, beyond the required reunion and photograph swapping. The Israel program providers must take responsibility to assist in the planning process for such programs.

CONCLUSION

The most effective way to demonstrate the value of family Israel trips is to quote from the written evaluations that the participants completed on the last day of their two weeks in Israel:

Seeing Israel through my daughter's eyes made this experience for me. Maybe it was the fact that the educational staff invested such incredible energy in both the adults and the kids, bringing the sites alive and making them meaningful simultaneously for all of us. This was no tour of Israel. It was an intense journey of exploration into our family roots. I have no doubt that our family life back home will be deeply affected. This program has helped us confront the issue of why we need to raise our kids Jewishly.

We have gone away before on family vacations, but this was different. We and our kids were involved because of the outstanding educational components. We became a family of Zealots on Masada, pilgrims from Alexandria coming to Jerusalem of the Second Temple, pioneers drying the swamps of Palestine. Never have my kids felt so totally connected to their heritage. I would recommend this experience to any Jewish family that cares about growing together as Jews. It was great.

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