

Needed: Real Zionist Education, Not Hasbara¹

By Gil Troy

Sadly, the Jewish campus experience over the last two years has provided dramatic evidence of a massive educational failure in the North American Jewish world. At McGill University in Montreal and elsewhere, I have seen graduates of the best Jewish day schools in the Diaspora emotionally, intellectually, and ideologically unprepared to defend Israel or to withstand the intense pro-Palestinian onslaught from Arabs, academics, and their fellow students. Jewish educators must take stock of this failure, but not with the sole aim of reevaluating how we teach Israel and Zionism so that we can produce a new, better crop of pro-Israel activists. That functionalist and all-too-often propagandistic approach is actually part of the problem. We need true education and real ownership by our students of the facts and ideas, not a “line” we peddle to them to pass on to others. In that spirit, we must reevaluate how we approach the entire Jewish educational component in our schools, so that we nurture a new, more engaged, more creative, more agile, and more committed Jewish community.

In fairness, many individuals have risen to the challenge. I have also witnessed some wonderful Jewish moments on the McGill campus and elsewhere in the last two years. Montreal Hillel is undergoing an extraordinary revival, one that has been in the making for about five years; it has been furthered by the birthright Israel gift to so many students and intensified by the challenges of the Palestinian rejection of the Oslo peace process. This revival includes not just effective Zionist activity and many student trips to Israel, individually and collectively. It also entails activities such as a Purim party for over a thousand people that combines the sounds of a traditional Megillah reading with the beat of the latest dance music and the rise of what is known as “the Ghetto shul,” a mostly-student run initiative that regularly packs over 100 traditional and non-traditional students into a second-story duplex in McGill’s student “ghetto” for a vigorous Carlebachian Friday night tefillah and dinner. These students understand what too many of their peers do not, that the “fight” for Israel cannot be an end in itself, but must be part of a broader Zionist and Jewish revival.

Alas, most students don’t “get it.” Most Jewish students enter college with a superficial and brittle understanding of Israel and Zionism. This brittleness has negative consequences both left and right. For most, their happy-dappy, hava nagilah, blue-and-white stereotype of Israel is so fragile that it shatters at the first hit from a questioning roommate, let alone a hostile professor. For others, the same fragile construct leads to a smothering “Israel, right or wrong, love it or leave it” approach that stifles dissent and helps perpetuate the popular campus stereotype of Israel advocates and Jews as remarkably close-minded on the complex challenges facing Israel.

These “brittle” students, by the way, are usually the Israel “experts” on campus. An overwhelming majority of Jewish students enter college without even that superficial support of Israel, with their feelings for Israel first diluted by the ambivalent and distant approach of their parents to Zionism, then beaten down by media reports about Israeli “oppression.” (When people ask me: “What about the students?” I always reply, “What

about their parents?” The sad truth is that ambivalence and ignorance about Israel begins – and is encouraged – at home.)

The Palestinians’ greatest propaganda victory, the culmination of a quarter-century campaign to demonize Israel and Zionism, comes from our inability to discuss Israel or Zionism without discussing the Palestinian problem and current events. All roads should not lead to Damascus and the other Arab capitals’ interpretation of events. Our task as educators must begin there. Just as our feelings about the United States go ‘way beyond slavery – which was evil – and the current president’s policies – that are always controversial – so, too, must our relationship to Israel be broad, deep, and multi-dimensional. We also must begin with foundations – meaning the Jewish people’s deep and enduring ties to Eretz Yisrael, the centrality of the land in our tradition — before we get to the “sexy” stuff, the contemporary fights that are so much more volatile and thus so much easier to teach (or at least appear to be easy, because students can plunge into one side or another, though they pose very complicated educational challenges).

At the end of the day, effective Israel education begins by rooting it in the right context, by rooting it in a love of homeland, not of the fight for a homeland. We should be honest and acknowledge that Orthodox students tend to “get this” more than secular students and that younger students tend to “get this” more than older ones. When I have traveled to various schools in the Montreal area, I often start off by saying, “When I say ‘Israel,’ what pops into your mind?” Religious students rooted in the centrality of Eretz Yisrael to Torah and mitzvot and young students engaged with “Eretz Yisrael ha-yaffa” and not the headlines are more likely to associate Israel with God, Torah, Jerusalem, peace, and King David than with bombs, Palestinians, pain, and terror.

Along with context comes balance. By rooting our identification with Israel in our broader Jewish identity, we achieve a more constructive equilibrium in two ways. First, we balance out the constant mentions in our own schools, shuls, and homes of the oketz, the sting of modern Israeli life, with some of the dvash, the honey. How many Yom Ha’atzmaut speeches and programs last year were about “the matzav,” the situation in Israel, and how many took the time to celebrate some of the other headlines – the Israeli astronaut preparing to launch, the amazing medical breakthroughs being developed daily – or, even more important, all the everyday miracles that don’t make headlines of Jews living rich, modern Jewish lives in their altneuland, their old new homeland? We must challenge ourselves as educators by creating imaginary scales wherein we make sure that we have two, three, four, ten, one hundred positive mentions of Israel and Zionism for every negative one – when, at the present, it is probably the reverse.

A Jewish Identity Anchored in Israel

The second type of balance comes not from evening the scales, but from ballast. We need a Jewish identity anchored in Israel, anchored in the fact that you cannot tell the story of the Jewish people without Israel and that even when we haven’t been in total control of the land, we kept our ties to it. By defining ourselves as “exiled,” we defined ourselves in relation to that land. If we get beyond the artificial divide of Zionism versus Judaism and see Zionism as another dimension of Judaism, an emphasis on the national aspects of

Judaism that doesn't preclude the religious dimension, we end up teaching Israel and Zionism in many different parts of the curriculum. From this perspective, Hebrew becomes not just *lashon hakodesh* (the holy language), or, as is too often the case, the mystery code you must crack in order to sing your Haftarah and get your Bar Mitzvah presents, but also an entry point into the Israel of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Our goal should be to raise a modern Jewish community that can host Israelis in the language of the Jewish people, not force Israelis to speak English when they come visit us here. With this understanding, Jewish history is not something sterile and distant, seemingly "irrelevant" because not only does it have nothing to do with a future career, but also because it does not even tell the story of where we live. Rather, Jewish history becomes the key to understanding who we are today, what we are doing here, and what some of the challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora are. North American Jews tend to view their arrival on that continent as the culmination of history, the high point. Perhaps we need to think about it as, if not an historical mistake, certainly an historical anomaly, a twist of fate that was not foreordained. With this approach, the *hagim*, the songs, and the *tefillot* become transcendent moments wherein we blur yesterday and today, Israel and the *galut* (Diaspora), and see how interconnected all these things are in Judaism. We have become too compartmentalized and too polarized in our approaches; we need to see where the secular and the Orthodox, the religious and the national, the Jewish and the Zionist, overlap and not just where they diverge.

By having a broad, deep, intense identification with Israel, students can learn how to be "pro-Israel" without agreeing with every Israeli move, just as we are U.S. patriots without approving every mistake or misstep. By having a rich, balanced understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Jewish people, we can disprove the ever-more-popular slur that Zionism is colonialism and assert our rights as an "indigenous people," people with a 4000-year-old link to a land that is consecrated by our history, by our theology, and by our identity. By studying Israel in context and with balance, our students will emerge with a robust Jewish and Zionist identity, one that can tolerate dissent and ambiguities, one that can sustain assault and doubt, one that can be dynamic and open rather than static and defensive.

Guidelines and Goals to Improving Israel Education

With this in mind, the Bronfman Jewish Education Centre in Montreal, under the direction of Shlomo Shimon, appointed a committee led by a BJEC professional, Dr. Karen Gazith, to improve the Israel education in Montreal's day schools. The first step was coming up with seven guidelines and six goals to get the conversation rolling and to challenge the schools to rethink their approach to Israel and to the current conflict. The BJEC then hosted a special day-long seminar with teachers from across the religious spectrum to brainstorm about how to implement these principles in the classroom – and within the peculiarities of the Quebec curriculum. As the teachers and administrators applied these guidelines in the day schools, the BJEC also hosted parents' nights to engage parents as critical partners in this process.

The guidelines, provided below, are no panacea. But, they are a start for a complicated process, with no easy answers, wherein we try to make our ties to Israel as parents,

students, and educators more fun, more meaningful, more complex, and more lasting. The best Hasbara is good, authentic, integrated education.

Guidelines: A Statement of Principles Re: Israel and the Current Israeli-Arab Conflict:

1. Israel and the Jewish people are facing a serious situation. This is an emergency. We as Jewish educators are compelled to respond.
2. Sadly, the current crisis in Israel has demonstrated that there is widespread ignorance throughout the Jewish community about the fundamentals of Israel's story, and about the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We must teach our students the basic facts about the conflict.
3. We must educate our students, not propagandize. While remaining age-appropriate, we owe it to our students not to shy away from complexity, to acknowledge that this is a story not only of competing nationalisms, but also of competing narratives.
4. We need to teach our students about the multi-dimensional nature of the Jewish people's relationship with the land of Israel, and the state of Israel. Israel should not simply be thought of as the central headache of the Jewish people, but as the historical, ideological, intellectual, and emotional epicenter of our people. We must teach ahavat Yisrael, not simply the Arab-Israeli conflict.
5. Our education must be active not passive. We must educate our students toward a sense of ownership, of engagement, of viewing Israel and the Jewish people as theirs. We all must be willing to take responsibility for Israel, together as a people.
6. In the SHORT TERM, we need to respond immediately to the crisis with particular lessons and actions. We should brainstorm about what activities, what initiatives, we can undertake quickly and effectively to respond to this challenging historical epoch, and this powerful teaching moment.
7. In the LONG TERM, we need to reconceptualize how we approach Israel in our schools. We need to contemplate curriculum changes, new approaches, that steep our students in the facts and engage them in the enduring and profound relationship the Jewish people have had and will continue to have with the Jewish homeland, and the Jewish state.

Ultimately we want our students to have developed the following understanding and knowledge.

1. The complexity of the current situation.
2. The ability to express emotions as related to the situation in Israel.
3. The understanding that Jewish history is not a static discipline and that we are a part of history-in-the-making.
4. The skills to examine the media critically, related to Israel and the current Israeli-Arab conflict.
5. The development of ownership over each individual student's relationship with Israel.

6. The ability to debate and argue about the Israeli-Arab conflict with fairness/openness and decency.

Activities by grade level will be developed to support the schools as they continue to develop student competencies in this area.

Endnotes:

1. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word *hasbara* is interpretation. It has also been translated as propaganda.

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