



## CURRICULARIZING ISRAEL: PRINCIPLES AND THEMES

by Jan Katzew

Many factors shape a curriculum for Israel education. There are ideological issues related to one's vision of Israel. There are educational questions about presenting Israel to diverse ages and making the subject age-appropriate. How do educators handle sensitive topics? How do we deal with potential conflict between what a curriculum presents and the views of families? And perhaps most importantly, are our educators equipped to engage the young with this fascinating but complicated topic?

Many of these questions have surfaced throughout *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education 2nd Edition*. My task is to clarify the idea of an Israel curriculum for you who actually make education happen. In this chapter, I propose directions and practices which can guide our work in the field. Let me begin with a few preliminary assumptions.

First, as I have hinted, creating a curriculum is one of the most complicated tasks of Jewish education. One doesn't sit down and write a curriculum. As you shall see, a curriculum is more than a list of topics I should teach tomorrow, or what materials should be used. It might be more accurate to talk about the *process of curricularizing or curriculum development*.

Second, the term curriculum is not just for schools. The term applies to all kinds of Jewish education: schools, camps, and youth groups; educational travel; synagogue life, and family. When educators hear the phrase *Israel*

*curriculum*, we should understand that it is a dynamic and creative process which applies to everyone who engages in Israel education, and we shouldn't understand it only as school-based.

Third, the issues of curriculum are relevant for everyone involved in Israel education. Whether you are responsible for curriculum design and development or its executor; whether you are an organizational executive, teacher, counselor, unit head, board president, or committee chair, you are involved in making curricular decisions.

My intention is neither to present you with a definitive nor complete Israel

curriculum. Rather, I shall present some key ideas about curriculum, followed by some core values, ideas, overarching rubrics, topics, and framing questions all related to *curricularizing* Israel. In addition, I shall reference some practical examples to help guide your work in this area. My hope and intention is to demystify the curricular process and provide you with guidelines and strategies for making Israel education meaningful and compelling.

## What Is Curriculum?

The word *curriculum* has its origins in ancient Greece as a term used to describe a racecourse and it has come to mean an intentional course of study leading to competency and ultimately to mastery in a field—not only in school, but also and more importantly in life. During the twentieth century, curriculum rose to the top of the educational agenda in the United States under the orchestration of such figures as Ralph Tyler, Joseph Schwab, John Dewey, and Lee Shulman. Curriculum developed into something of a science influenced by psychological, sociological, ethical, and spiritual factors; in a word, it came to suggest the notion of a *culture*.

Curriculum continues to play a vital role in contemporary general and Jewish education. In the words of the American educator Elliot Eisner, “The field of curriculum resides at the very core of education.”<sup>1</sup> Yet there is no consensus on the best curriculum in any discipline. Consequently, there are many theories, approaches, and methods of curriculum design and development. This complex and confusing reality often results in ideological and political disputes.

The domain of Jewish education is no exception. Educators should celebrate this curricular diversity, even when it results in divergence, because multiple curricula honestly reflect the cultures in which we live and the multiplicity of ideological and educational perspectives. Therefore, I propose to understand curriculum as more than one formalized course of study that can be distilled into texts and lesson plans. If education includes a process of enculturation, then Israel education is the process of enculturating Jews to live in a lifelong relationship with Israel; and curriculum is a blueprint to help make that happen. The various chapters presented in this anthology are interrelated and you may want to particularly look at: “Israel as a Cornerstone of Jewish Identities,” “A Learner-Centered Approach,” “The Educator: The Power of Teaching, The Power of Learning,” and “Diverse Narratives.” These are complementary pieces in the mosaic of Israel curriculum. I hope that even—and perhaps especially—if you do not agree with every one of my assumptions, you will be open to implementing some of what I believe is integral in facilitating Israel education.

While curriculum creation has become a field unto itself, it is not the exclusive responsibility of specialists. The people who interact directly with learners in school and campers in camp are the individuals who truly implement the curriculum—which may have little similarity to the resources developed by others. If you are a teacher or a camp counselor, or staffing an Israel experience, then you are, by default, delivering curriculum. You are needed as partners in creating a culture of Israel education that will thrive.

## Some Core Assumptions

I would like to briefly enumerate some core curricular assumptions and invite you to personally reflect on these assumptions by considering the guiding questions.

- » A *curriculum* encompasses a document predicated upon values that make claims about what is worth knowing. Therefore, it is critical to uncover and articulate the presuppositions of any curriculum.

**Guiding Question:** What document articulates your fundamental ideas and ideals?

- » The process of creating and developing curriculum takes into account both the *explicit* curriculum and the intangible aspects of the *hidden* curriculum.

**Guiding Question:** How does your plan reflect both your explicit aims, as well as strategies that may not be apparent to the learners/campers?

- » In attempting to *curricularize*, one needs to be sensitive to books, maps, websites, smart boards, as well as to educator moods and modes, learning space aesthetics, group dynamics, body language, and many other intangible yet palpable factors.

**Guiding Question:** How do you assess the existential state of the people involved in delivering the educational messages?

- » Curriculum has both scope and sequence. Scope determines curricular breadth which refers to the expanse of issues dealt with, and sequence articulates developmental issues of levels of depth and complexity. Together, scope and sequence define a course of study.

**Guiding Question:** What is the breadth and depth of your immersion in Israel?

- » I advocate a *thematic curriculum*, organized around ideas that connect one lesson or session to another, in contrast, for example, to a purely chronological curriculum organized by dates.

**Guiding Question:** What are the themes in alignment with your Israel education mission and vision?

- » A thematic curriculum is a means of encouraging learners to connect people, events, and values, in an attempt at imprinting ideas to be nurtured and challenged over time.

**Guiding Question:** How are you intentionally balancing commitment and openness, respect for tradition and receptivity to innovation?

## Israel and Curriculum

There are many ways to look at Israel; small as it is on a globe, there are diverse Israels. Even a simple thing like a map of Israel lends to differing perspectives that reflect deep values. Therefore, every Israel curriculum is partial, in both senses of the word: it reflects the biases and perspectives of the authors, and tells only part of the mosaic-like, often conflicting narratives. This complexity makes *curricularizing* Israel one of the most challenging (yet exciting) of Jewish educational tasks!

The starting point of this curriculum frames the State of Israel as part of a long Jewish legacy; it is a historic, national, political, social, and religious achievement and its potential is still being realized. Educators should see the State of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state that is an emerging experiment in self-determination. We should aim to foster in each learner, camper, and Jew a lifelong relationship with, and ideally, a romance with Israel. I hope that this curricular process will lead to respecting different, even divergent perspectives on Israel. There will be time for thinking, debating, reflecting, challenging, and criticizing Israel. Nevertheless, my curricular point of departure is *shehecheyanu*, an expression of profound gratitude, and I hope you will join me in that spirit.

The Israel curriculum should be a combination of education and experience, addressing the mind, the heart, and the limbs. We strive to connect learners to the land, people, and state of Israel through intimate knowledge, deep feeling, and responsible action. The Israel curriculum should be part of each of the years of the young person's Jewish

The Israel curriculum should encompass:

- » Core values about Israel that we want young people initially to internalize.
- » Israel themes that we regard as essential to conveying those values.
- » Experiences related to Israel that we see as integral to making these values real.
- » Educational resources that are effective in conveying the values we believe learners should internalize.
- » Behaviors we hope will emerge as a result of this curricular process.
- » Opportunities for learners to interact with role models (ancient, medieval, and modern) that exemplify the values worth preserving and growing.
- » Texts that are foundational to appreciating the evolving, dynamic relationship of Jews and Judaism to Israel.

education so that a connection to Israel can grow over time with the learner's increasingly nuanced understanding. This proposition stands in stark contrast to linking Israel education to a particular program, date, or grade.

The Israel curriculum should permeate the culture of the institution, i.e., its aesthetics, its ethics, its staff, and its budget. The Israel curriculum should be intentionally embedded in the context of the larger Jewish educational

experience of our learners at all ages and stages. Its themes should reflect the educational ideology of the learning community, themes that recur and echo throughout the environment—themes that are brought to life through experience.

The curricular road that leads to compelling Israel education is layered. It encompasses: core values, framing questions, over-arching rubrics, specific topics, and lesson plans. Curricular values are necessary; they provide the foundation upon which the curriculum will be built. The questions need to balance openness and commitment, a field within which the learner can chart her own course, and yet she can also find common ground with people who have walked before her. The curricular design must take into account meaningful types of Israel experiences. Educators are challenged to achieve a dynamic, lifelong relationship to Israel. Apathy may very well present the greatest threat to our curriculum. We can understand and respect conflicting ideas and feelings, but disinterest has the potential to undermine the entire Israel

education enterprise. Israel education cannot be reduced to a rational proposition, and a curriculum cannot be distilled to facts. Instead, we rely upon a reservoir of goodwill and a modicum of trust that allows for the possibility of Israel education as a desirable pursuit. In order to create, sustain, and grow a relationship between a Jew and Israel, i.e., to achieve the overarching curricular aim, the following questions and themes constitute an essential element.

## Creating Israel Curricula

There are a series of components important for the development of Israel curricula.

### Core Values and Ideas of Teaching Israel

You should regard the following list of core values as suggestive rather than exhaustive:

- » The Land of Israel is the birthplace of Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> It is the site and setting of many core Jewish texts and values.
- » The Land and the idea of Israel have been an enduring sacred shared value and a centripetal force for Jews throughout Jewish history in the many lands and eras in which Jews have lived.
- » The Zionist Movement and the establishment of the modern State of Israel reflect the commitment of the Jewish people to renew the connection with an ancient birthplace, create a home for Jews

after the Holocaust, and create a center for Jewish creativity and innovation.

- » The State of Israel is a modern society and a democratic state that at the same time has deep links with a long, varied, religious, and cultural past. It is a physical home to more than seven million Jews, making Israel the one country in which Jews constitute a majority and thereby presents the challenge of being both powerful and ethical. Contemporary Israel is an exciting laboratory for an ancient religious civilization learning to live in a modern world and culture.
- » The physical existence of the contemporary State has been threatened since its creation, causing profound challenges.
- » The Land of Israel is a spiritual and cultural home for Jews. A link with contemporary Israel can enrich the lives of Jews.
- » Ultimately, the most exciting and fruitful way to know Israel is through multiple experiences in Israel. One of the centerpieces of such Israel educational experiences should be the *mifgash*—the encounter with Israeli peers.
- » Israel education is personal. One can study the history of Israel without embracing that history as his or her own. Such study may have its place, but that place is not our place as educators. In our place, Israel education transforms history into my-story.

## Framing Questions

Here are a few framing questions that I believe, over the years, should be the backdrop of the curriculum:

- » What does Israel mean to me?
- » Why is Israel so important to Jews, Judaism, and Jewish life?
- » How can knowledge of Israel enrich my Jewish beliefs and behavior?
- » What is the nature of the relationships with Israel I can have and will have as I grow?

## Overarching Rubrics and Specific Topics

There are five overarching rubrics which, together, encompass a series of topics that seem important for a meaningful core Israel education.

- » Roots
- » Rebirth
- » The New Land
- » A Contemporary Society
- » My Israel

## Scope and Sequence

Finally, there comes the actual task of teaching Israel! There are various ways to create actual lessons out of this evolving process of Israel education. I have found value in a curricular design described as “understanding by design” in the book of the same

name by Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe,<sup>3</sup> which aims to go beyond specific classroom activities or lessons as the goal and instead focuses on enduring understandings and enduring dilemmas. Wiggins and McTighe report that these understandings and dilemmas will then become the basis for later learning and living. Rather than proffer a formula for Israel education, I advocate an intentional strategy: teachers and learners should join together to develop modularized units woven from the values and topics I have suggested. This strategy is interdisciplinary—a weave of geography, history, and literature in an attempt to develop a personal, biographical narrative of Israel as a basic element of a Jewish self. You will determine the most effective trajectory in your community.

## Summing Up

The overall purpose in developing an Israel curriculum is to nurture a personal, emotional, and reflective relationship with Israel—a connection that is affective as much as it is cognitive, and psychological as much it is historical. A theme that I believe is appropriate to be considered in all settings for all ages is: finding the “I” in Israel, i.e., seeing oneself in direct relationship to Israel. That is my foundational rationale for Israel education. Complementary disciplines include: geography, history, literature, music, theology, and politics. However, they all are means to an end. This thematic curriculum is intended to integrate multiple settings: home, school, and camp, as well as visits to Israel with family and peers.

Although this chapter is entitled “Curricularizing Israel: Principles and

Themes,” it is not what you may have previously encountered as curriculum. It is not limited to school. It is not a list of books and resources. It does not restrict Israel to a course or a grade. It purposely does not look like a curriculum with scripted lesson plans. Nevertheless, I am committed to the idea that all worthy education has a curricular core, and furthermore, that all worthy Israel education has themes which cut across time and place. I regard curriculum as a gateway rather than a rubric, an adventure rather than a sealed box. Israel educators need and deserve curricular paths that lead them and their learners to Israel.

» To view overarching rubrics and age specific sequences please visit: [www.theicenter.org](http://www.theicenter.org)

## Endnotes

1. Eisner, Elliot W. “What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?” *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. 2002. Web. [www.infed.org/biblio/eisner\\_arts\\_and\\_the\\_practice\\_or\\_education.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/eisner_arts_and_the_practice_or_education.htm).
2. “The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel.” Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1948. Web. <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx>.
3. Wiggins, Grant P. and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005. Print.



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