



CREATING IMMERSIVE AND INTEGRATIVE ISRAEL EDUCATION

by Alex Pomson and Barry Chazan

The usual questions about Israel education are:

- » What is Israel education?
- » What are the contents of Israel education?
- » How do we do Israel education?

But we believe there is a fourth question, “where should Israel education take place?”



And you shall teach them to your children when you sit at home and when you walk on the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

—Deuteronomy 6:7-9

Why Ask Where?

In one sense, the question is misleading. Obviously, we should do Israel education wherever young Jews (or Jews of any age) are: in day schools, complementary schools, camps, JCCs, youth programming, Israel trips, retreats—in the many venues where Jewish education is implemented. But the *where* question we are asking is not geographical; it's ecological and environmental. What we are really asking is: *where does Israel education live in the ecosystem of an educational institution or framework?*

To answer that question we are required (of course!) to refer to a prior question cited above: what is Israel education? As many of the chapters in *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education™ 2nd Edition* have made clear, Israel education is a multi-dimensional activity concerned with the development of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. It involves the nurturing of:

- 1 An understanding of the origins of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, changing narratives of Israel in Jewish life throughout the ages, the rebirth and creation and lifestyle of a modern State of Israel.
- 2 An emotive appreciation of Israel in Judaism and Jewish life.
- 3 Development of a meaningful personal relationship with the State and people of Israel.

With such a full agenda of aims, it is no wonder that the question of how to do Israel education never seems to go away. The agenda of these goals is important, but also hefty.

What would it take to achieve these multiple aims ascribed to Israel education? It requires seeing Israel not as a distinct subject (such as history, geography, or current events) but as an integral dimension of all aspects of the educational settings in which it takes place. To make the same point differently: no matter how powerful the Israel curriculum we develop might be, it is likely to fall short unless we expand our notion of the venues of Israel education. Israel education should live everywhere in the life of an educational framework. It should be part of an immersive environment.

Immersive Environments

Consider how children ordinarily learn the ideas and principles that are valued most by their parents and their communities. Such learning takes place over time and it is not achieved through a specific course of instruction. It occurs

through interaction with significant others who embody and are committed to such values. It is advanced through formative experiences which enable young people to participate in these ideas and values in their own lives. It is enriched by being part of a community that shares these ideas and values. It is realized through opportunities to ask and answer questions that make it possible to deeply understand the meaning of the ideas and principles. Indeed, it truly occurs “when we sit in the house, when we walk by the way... when we lie down, when we rise up!”¹

Thus, learning about the most important things in life is not, in these terms, delimited by the outcomes of instruction. Such learning occurs through being immersed in certain kinds of educative environments, through experiencing a certain kind of life. Historically, it has been families, local communities, and enveloping cultures that have had the capacity to make such learning possible. These institutions are at the heart of immersive environments where learning is advanced through conversation, practice, ritual, and relationships.

The educational institutions that have come closest to achieving such outcomes are those that possess many characteristics of what twentieth century sociologist Erving Goffman called “total institutions.”² They are settings—such as boarding schools, army cadet programs, summer camps, or long-term retreats—which can co-opt the full range of experiences in a day, a week, and a month to “speak” the language of the desired ideas and values. The chief characteristics of “total institutions” are:

- » All aspects of life are conducted in a similar place and under the same authority.
- » Each phase of a member’s life is carried on in the company of others.
- » All phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled and sequenced.
- » The various activities are brought together in a single plan aimed to fulfill the goals of the institution.³

For Goffman, the paradigmatic total institutions were (ironically) prisons and mental hospitals, places that obviously don’t offer a desirable template for Jewish education.

However, it is no coincidence, as Jack Wertheimer has argued, that over the last 25 years, the educational forms that have provided the Jewish community with the greatest hope for increased vitality are those that tend to be the most immersive. He essentially is referring to those settings that come closest to possessing the comprehensive qualities of total institutions.⁴ Camps, Jewish day schools, and Israel experiences seem to be the educational forms that share a readiness to immerse participants in intensive educational settings, minimally for entire school days, or else for weeks at a time, round the clock.⁵ And they seem to have demonstrated a track record of success that has attracted great community support in recent years.

To be clear: the educational power of these programs derives not only from the amount of time they involve (although that often helps), but more significantly from their immersive nature,

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from their capacity to submerge young people in a total experience. It suggests that, if we are to do better at achieving the multidimensional outcomes of Israel education, we need to more effectively utilize the full immersive capacity of our educational institutions.

It is for this reason that we have introduced a new question that we believe is of central importance: where should Israel education take place? Our answer is that Israel education should take place in the totality of the framework in which it exists. It needs to exist in the school mission—and not simply in the written credo. The institutional leaders and owners of the framework must believe in it. Educational leaders are indispensable to the Israel mission. And if the Israel mission does not live in their hearts, the enterprise is threatened or even doomed from the outset. The curriculum, program, or itinerary—the formal contents of the institution—must breathe the Israel mission. The non-human artifacts that inhabit the venue—walls, halls, trees, busses, music, holiday foods—must all radiate this mission. Remember Goffman: his belief was that the non-verbal, non-cognitive,

» The extras in Israel education—a song, a story, a person, a fable, a recipe, or a picture—may be educational essence.

» Think immersively. Be aware of conditions, intensifiers and vehicles that help create the framework, environment, and forces that upgrade the Israel immersion.

non-discursive elements of a culture are as important, or more so, for conveying cultural norms than the written word or the classroom lesson. Numerous studies of unique schools, from Bettelheim's Orthogenic School in Chicago to Redl and Wineman's Pioneer House in Detroit to Peshkin's Bethany Baptist Academy echo this point.⁶

When Extras Are Essence

There is a tradition that has developed in education whereby there are core contents and subjects and then there are extras. Thus, in general education, the notion has developed that the curriculum should be the focus of schools, with extracurricular activities being supplementary activities (clubs, sports, hobbies, arts and culture) that enrich and embellish. The so-designated extracurricular activities add, enrich and broaden, but they are extra. Moreover, in times of financial or personal difficulties, it is usually the extra that is regarded as dispensable. Indeed, such activities are sometimes denoted as fluff (soft, downy, moss-like), also the name of a popular marshmallow topping for a cake.

In Israel education, it is these extras that may be educational essence. Sometimes a song, a story, a person, a fable, a recipe, or a picture connected to Israel touches those thousands of neurons in the mind, which leads to feeling, thinking, and doing. The immersive approach to Israel education argues that the distinction between *extra* and *intra* is not clear, since people learn and are affected in diverse ways. Don't regard the fluff as extra trim; for some it may be the entryway into the heart of the matter.

Thinking Immersively

Thinking immersively involves a sophisticated approach to education, which calls upon educators to engage a totality of foci.⁷ First, educators must be cognizant of the conditions that constitute the given framework (age level, ideological or denominational affiliation, size of institution, physical factors, and personnel). Second, educators should co-opt overt visionary factors (clear mission, bold leadership, accessible models, people and institutional features that might be denoted as *intensifiers*) to highlight and upgrade the Israel immersion of the institution. Third, there are a host of *vehicles* in an educational framework that are potentially educative forces. The curriculum is the most obvious, but it is only one of many. Other important vehicles include: the flow and timing of

a program, venue, decor, food, attire, music, aesthetics of a venue, mix of participants, weather, group dynamics, constellation of staff, and interaction of staff. When searching for shaping forces, the art of the educator is to consider the unlikely factors that could affect the educative moment—and harness them!

Educators must be, as it were, master conductors of a symphony, master chefs and restaurateurs, or hosts of a massive party of diverse guests. The ideal situation occurs when all the components of an immersion experience integrate; but that doesn't always happen. Too often educators are forced to become harried hosts of a smorgasbord that becomes messy and non-aesthetic or conductors of orchestras with dissonant instruments. The challenge for the immersive educator is to turn the buffet of diverse foods into an aesthetic dining experience or to turn the collection of dissonant instruments into a glorious symphony.

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What Will It Take?

Some might argue that we have painted an unrealistic picture of what it will take to do Israel education well. Nurturing an immersive culture can seem like an overwhelmingly complex task. We don't think it is. If the concept of the intensifiers and vehicles of Israel education is used as a heuristic cognitive and organizational device, it is possible to give order to something amorphous and complex that has challenged many institutions until now. By focusing on the different parts of an institution in light of the overall vision, it is possible to start the work of institutional and cultural



change. It is possible to think with precision about how we have impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Cultures, we believe, can and do change in ways that are significant if we pay attention to their particulars.

Indeed, almost all Jewish educational settings have the potential to be immersive and to achieve the multidimensional aims of Israel education. Teaching and learning can occur in these places in intensive fashion and can also evolve over time in ways that are developmentally appropriate. If we act with careful planning, Jewish learning can occur—powerfully—in nested communities of the young, and of adults, near-peers, and additional significant others. Because of these special conditions, Jewish education in its diverse forms has the capacity to transform the next generation of contemporary Jews' relationships to Israel. Together, the vehicles of Israel education can take us to places we might otherwise never reach.

Endnotes

1. Adapted from Deuteronomy 6:7-9.
2. Goffman, Erving. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961. Print.
3. Ibid. 6.
4. Wertheimer, Jack. "American Jewish Education in an Age of Choice and Pluralism." *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, eds. Helena Miller, Lisa Grant, and Alex Pomson. Houten: Springer, 2011. 1087-1104. Print.
5. Ibid. 1093.

6. Bettelheim, Bruno. *Love Is Not Enough: The Treatment of Emotionally Disturbed Children*. Glencoe: Free Press, 1950. Print.
7. To support this argument, see iCenter research conducted over the last few years by a research team at The Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University with the support of the AVI CHAI Foundation, the Jim Joseph Foundation, and the Schusterman Family Foundation. This research concentrated on some 300 denominational, communal and modern-Orthodox North American day schools, but its findings have relevance for camps and for supplementary schools, as well as for all institutional providers of Israel education. See Pomson, Alex and Howard Deitcher. "Day School Israel Education in the Age of Birthright." *Journal of Jewish Education*. 76.1 (2010): 52-73. Print.



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