



THE ISRAEL EXPERIENCE

by Michael Soberman and Adam Stewart

Israel education has something about it which most other kinds of education can only dream. It has the *real thing*—the ability to give learners the opportunity to have an actual experience in Israel.

An Israel experience encompasses: tour buses with Wi-Fi, hotels, dogs and cats that understand Hebrew, walls and hills that tell ancient and contemporary stories, and real people living in a thriving modern Jewish nation.

It is almost inconceivable to imagine Israel education without a direct experience in Israel itself—a visit to the place in which a young person can see, feel, hear, taste, and touch the reality that is the State of Israel. Indeed, if there is one facet of Israel education that has proven itself, it is that the power of an effective Israel experience is unmatched and irreplaceable.

In many ways, what we now call *the Israel Experience* forms the foundation of Israel education. Until recent decades, Israel was often taught as a far-off land with which we should familiarize ourselves in order to complete our destiny as the Jewish people and religion. With the emergence of actual trips to Israel for young people, Israel emerged as an alive, vibrant, multi-dimensional place, which evoked great electricity within the young. The organized Jewish community began to understand the value of a quality educational Israel experience as a powerful force in Jewish identity development.

In recent decades, organized travel to Israel for children, teens, and young adults has developed into a major new arena for Jewish education. More than half a million young Jews, many of them within the context of Birthright Israel, have had the privilege and pleasure their parents and grandparents never knew. Their visit to Israel has enriched, educated, and transformed them in ways that will affect the broader Jewish world in the coming generation.

In the past two decades, a consensus about the centrality of such an experience for personal identity and communal life has emerged, and a wide constituency within Jewish communities has advocated for the Israel Experience. Once again, Birthright Israel and other path-breaking Israel educational programs have not only changed the landscape of those who have experienced Israel, but they also have changed conceptions of how we can educate and engage the young in an exciting experiential fashion.



It is this power and value of the experience in Israel that we address in this chapter centering on the following four questions:

- 1** Why is the Israel Experience so crucial to Israel education?
- 2** What constitutes the effective Israel Experience?
- 3** What does the research say about the impact of the Israel Experience?
- 4** What do we imagine the future of the Israel Experience to be?

As we re-imagine the Israel Experience, we will do so within the context of a greatly expanded field.

Why is an Israel Experience so Crucial to Israel Education?

In addition to the anecdotal experiences of practitioners who have seen firsthand the power of an Israel experience to transform the lives of participants, we offer three theoretical reasons that explain and describe why a genuine experience of Israel is so important.

Experience as Education

This approach reflects the thinking of such educators as John Dewey¹ and others concerning the value of experience and education. Dewey reminds us that the process of learning is about far more than the inculcation of knowledge and facts. He considers learning to take place through the interaction of the learner with experiences that take place in his or her environment. If an experience is *educative*, it will spur the learner to want to experience more, and if it is not, it will narrow the learning process.² When we consider the value of a trip to Israel through this lens, we see that the physical environment of Israel and the experiences that can be facilitated and enjoyed in Israel have enormous potential for education and growth. Effective educators maximize the potential of the environment by creating experiences that stimulate the learner's senses (focusing on the smells, tastes, touches, sounds, and varied sights that are available), creating direct interaction with the environment—through hiking and physical challenge, meeting people, touching the landscape, and more—to create powerful educative experiences.

Theories of Place

Over the past twenty years, social scientists, geographers, and

philosophers have considered the importance of place in the lives of individuals and communities. What gives places their power and roles in our lives? How do we experience different places and what do we learn from them? How does Jewish tradition and culture understand the power of *place*, whether it is Israel as a holy place or other places where Jews live? While answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this document, thinking about the power of place will enrich any discussion about Israel travel education.

Drawing from some of these theories, we learn that the physical surroundings of Israel function as a powerful educational tool, because the subject matter (Israeli history, geography, and culture) matches the setting in which the learning is happening. We can refer to this as *placed learning*: the learning that happens in a place and of that place, so that we learn about Masada at Masada. This idea, combined with the concept of experience, highlights the added power of Israel education in Israel.

Mediating Learner-Centeredness and Values Perspectives

The learner-centered approach to Israel education, discussed in “A Learner-Centered Approach,” raises the question of learners’ interests and educators’ values. On one hand, we want to meet our learners wherever they are experientially; on the other hand, we do not enter the project of Israel education unbiased and without agenda. We want our learners to form a connection with Israel—the land and its people. We want them to experience the sense of community and peoplehood derived from the historic project of nation-building. Parker Palmer insists “good teaching comes from the

identity and integrity of the teacher”³ and our integrity pushes us toward instilling the same love and passion for Israel that informs our Jewish life and being.

So how do we reconcile these two tensions? In many ways, the Israel Experience itself is the remedy. By allowing our learners to truly and authentically experience a land and its people, we allow them to form their own personal connections, negotiate their own dilemmas, and search for their own truths. The project of Israel—of Zionist nation-building—is one of the great projects of contemporary Jewish life; one of the most foundational

educational experiences we can give our learners is the opportunity to be a part of it.

Yet how we negotiate the space between where they are experientially and where we would like them to be remains an ongoing challenge for the educator. In some ways, negotiating this tension is the essential work of Israel education, and through the essential parts of an Israel experience below, we will attempt to provide some questions, tools, and strategies for success.

What is an Effective Israel Experience?

The act of getting young people to Israel is not a success unto itself. While Jewish communities should be proud of the enormous success in making an Israel experience the norm, we should be more proud of the standards that we have set for an effective Israel experience.

In many ways, the *Educational Platform of Birthright Israel*⁴ is the culmination of decades of thinking and practice in the Israel Experience. Shaped by Barry Chazan and Zohar Raviv, and influenced by a wide array of educators, trip organizers, and tour educators, the *Platform* contains a set of “Core Educational Principles” from which we shall borrow in order to highlight the essentials of an effective Israel experience. While we do not suggest that Birthright Israel is the only model for an Israel experience and we do recognize it focuses on a specific age group, the groundwork that Birthright Israel has done in the area of creating an educational platform for Israel experiences is both instructive and useful.



Following each principle, we suggest a set of questions designed to further explore the concept in relation to a specific Israel experience.

1 Learner-Centered Education

The Israel Experience regards *people* as subject matter along with sites, narratives, and ideas (see “A Learner-Centered Approach”). The needs and interests of young people should be the starting point of educational work, and it aims to engage teenagers and young adults in a meaningful dialogue with Jewish and Israel content. It is committed to a teaching and learning approach rooted in the active engagement and involvement of the learner.

Questions to ask:

- » How will this experience intersect with the interests of the intended audience?
- » In what ways will this experience contribute to their needs in forming a Jewish identity or living a Jewish life?
- » What is required, in terms of staff skills, to facilitate this experience?

2 An Experiential Approach

The Israel Experience sees Israel as a diverse landscape encompassing a rich array of interactions, narratives, and places that can be effectively presented in the course of an experience. These experiences are personal, collective, spiritual, secular, political, social, cultural, recreational, and deeply rooted in engagement and interaction with peers.

Questions to ask:

- » How will this experience use the landscape of Israel to reveal its purpose? What are the specific ways in which this purpose can only be achieved in Israel?
- » How is this experience *curricularized* (see “Curriculizing Israel: Principles and Themes”) so that learners get an intentionally focused, yet purposely diverse understanding of Israel?
- » In what ways will this experience engage the concepts of the Land, the People, and the State of Israel (see “Eretz, Medina, Am Yisrael: Navigating Multiple Landscapes” and “Diverse Narratives”)?
- » Is our staff trained in best practices of experiential education? How are we leveraging the resources in our community to contribute to their expertise?

3 A Culture of Values

An Israel experience should enable participants to learn about diverse concepts regarding the Jewish people and Judaism. Like any Israel education curriculum, values underlie the purpose of the project and shape the experience in the most fundamental ways.

Questions to ask:

- » What are the values which underlie the experience that we want to create?
- » How are these values uniquely presented in Israel?

- » In what ways does the interaction with these values build upon the experience the learners have had? How does it prepare them for future engagement with these values?

4 A Culture of Ideas

An Israel experience should enable participants to deliberate on ideas and beliefs in a safe and non-judgmental context that fosters open discussion and critical examination of concepts and viewpoints. Our goal is to help participants to experience, think, discuss, and feel during their journey, making their own connections between their experiences in Israel and their daily lives, in the present and in the future.

Questions to ask:

- » What are the key ideas in which we want participants to engage in the course of this experience?
- » Are we comfortable with open deliberation, and if so, how are we ensuring a dialogue which is safe, non-judgmental, and critical?
- » Where are these conversations taking place and between whom?
- » How is the staff of this experience trained in best practices of discussion facilitation?

5 An Integrative Approach

An Israel experience should take an integrative approach, which allows participants to seek and establish connections between the different experiences of their Israel trip. It calls upon the curriculum designer

to create a comprehensive set of themes, core questions, and values whose various associations present a meaningful narrative of Jewish identity, Jewish peoplehood, and contemporary Israel. The purpose of the integrative approach is to guarantee an educational coherence that underlies the diverse experiences of the program.

Questions to Ask:

- » What are the themes that will guide the presentation of subjects in this experience? (See "Curricularizing Israel: Principles and Themes")
- » In what ways are the days and sites woven together in a narrative that is rich but coherent?
- » How have we decided what's in and what's out based on our approach to the subject matter rather than our preconceived notion of what the Israel Experience requires?
- » How is our staff prepared to understand and utilize these themes to effectively present a narrative?

6 A Social Interactive Experience

In the Israel Experience, the group experience, itself, is important to identity development, and promotes community as an essential building block for the Jewish future. As such, the integration of Israeli peers is regarded as a valuable component in individual identity development and in social networking for overseas Jews and their Israeli counterparts.

Questions to Ask:

- » What are the common elements among these learners upon which to build an interactive experience?
- » How does the program—the timing, the flow—facilitate social interaction amongst the group?
- » In what way will learners interact in a meaningful and authentic way with people in or from Israel and in what specific ways does this interaction contribute to the goals of the program? How is our staff trained to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue?

7 An Emotionally Engaging, Intellectually Challenging, and Enjoyable Culture

The Israel Experience models Jewish learning and experience in enjoyable and gratifying ways that are as emotionally engaging as they are intellectually challenging. A *fun* atmosphere is not seen as the antithesis of education, but rather, if utilized properly, an essential step toward its facilitation.

Questions to Ask:

- » In what ways are *pleasure* and *fun* built into the programmed experience? Are these elements part of, or separate from, the values-based agenda of the program?
- » Does the *flow* of the program contribute to an enjoyable atmosphere? Is there enough downtime and opportunities to reflect?

- » Is the staff of the program fun-loving and enjoyable to be around?

8 Outcomes Oriented and Self-Reflective

As part of engaging in an Israel experience, a community or organization must be committed to measuring outcomes and to using those measures to provide feedback, reflective upgrading, and ongoing change and improvement to the Israel Experience program.

Questions to Ask:

- » Who are the stakeholders (including participants) in this experience and what are their interests in the outcomes?
- » Which outcomes do we plan to measure and how do we propose to capture them?
- » How will learning be presented? By whom and to whom?
- » What is the mechanism by which learning will inform future Israel experiences?

What Do We Know About the Israel Experience?

In preparation for creating an Israel experience, we recommend an examination of some of the considerable research that has been done about the Israel Experience. This research, both qualitative and quantitative, describes the educational processes and impacts of a trip to Israel. A bibliography and references are included at the end of this article.

Here are the key facts we believe to be fundamental to the Israel Experience as it is now practiced and as it should be evaluated in the future:

Impact. There is a long-term correlation between participating in an Israel trip and strengthened dimensions of Jewish identity. The trip impacts on the lives of participants, although the nature of that impact is debatable and difficult to determine. Still, it is clear from the data that the more people who get to Israel, the more they will connect to their Jewish identity and to Israel.

Community Context. More Jews still have not gone to Israel than those who have, and changing this fact alone will have enormous impact on the Jewish community. It has taken a mammoth effort to begin to change the paradigm; as a result, more than 500,000 people have been on Birthright Israel, and the field has been expanded and strengthened.

Purpose and Planning. A good Israel experience does not happen by virtue of a trip taking place. Not all Israel experiences are the same, and there is a diversity of qualitative educational components that matter.

Program. Trips must be adapted to ages and developmental needs. In addition, the *mifgash* is often cited as the most meaningful and impactful part of any Israel experience and that it is often the most neglected component of the program. The experiential nature of the program and group dynamics are key factors for the success of an Israel experience and, therefore, affinity group programs tend to yield more positive and lasting impact.

Staff/Educators. The educational staff is instrumental in the overall effectiveness

of the experience. The individuals we choose and how we train them are key elements of the program. Recently, we have seen a proliferation of programs aimed at properly training trip staff for their roles as *madrichim* on the Israel Experience, and this may be one of the most important ways in which we can continue to grow and strengthen the Israel Experience.

Conclusion. There is still a great deal that we do not know about the Israel Experience, particularly about the interaction of all the characteristics, the role that educators play, and the significance of pre- and post-trip learning. We look to the research community to consider these questions.

A Vision for the Future

The Israel Experience field has grown and developed through various stages. It had modest beginnings, in which just a few thousand of the most engaged teenagers visited Israel, usually at the age of sixteen or seventeen, on six-week summer trips organized by youth movements and camps. The field then expanded to include day-schools, supplementary schools, and congregations which offered a wider variety of ages and lengths of stay. But the majority were still untouched by an Israel experience, and those with big imaginations had always dreamed of a time when every young Jew would be able to visit Israel. Those dreamers revolutionized the field with the creation of Birthright Israel. The Masa Israel Journey initiative and Onward Israel seek to expand on this success by enabling a longer term Israel experience (for two months, five months, or a full

year). This development of the field has shown that in the arena of Israel travel, there is always room to dream and grow.

Contemporary stakeholders and thought leaders challenged our major assumptions about an Israel experience program. Could we do a meaningful program in a shorter period of time? What if we removed price as one of the major obstacles to participation? This type of revolutionary vision transformed the Israel Experience into a major force in education. We wish to add our own imaginings to this dreaming, as we consider what is still to be achieved in this field, and what the impact might be on individuals and whole communities if the Israel Experience moves to a new phase:

New Contexts. Currently, Israel experiences take place in a relatively small number of communal contexts. If one doesn't belong to a particular school, youth movement, or congregation, or is not between 18-26, there are very few opportunities to visit Israel in an organized framework. Imagine new contexts for traveling to Israel, in the framework of JCCs, early childhood centers, Jewish workplaces, or with all congregations and community organizations. Consider the possibility of virtual communities that currently exist through various social media, becoming realized in actuality for the purposes of a trip to Israel.

New Populations. The overwhelming majority of Israel Experience participants are between the ages of 16 and 26. There are enormous possibilities for expanding the age demographic to include participants of other ages and life stages. A few ideas include: massive expansion of the Israel Experience as a multi-generational family experience,

perhaps connected to bar/bat mitzvah; school trips, pre-teen experiences, young professionals, newly married couples, intermarried couples, and various family constellations and trips for retirees.

New Programmatic Elements. Although Israel is an incredibly multifaceted and complex country, Israel experiences tend to have a fairly standard program and set of programmatic elements. We suggest that it is time to think much more broadly about the possibilities of what can be done during a trip to Israel. There are so many ways to connect Israel experiences to professional and other niche interests for lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, and those interested in sports, Hebrew language, Jewish text, politics, music, literature, food, and much more.

Conclusion

There has been more research on the impact of an Israel experience on adult Jewish identity than any other form of Jewish education—and the results are significant. It may still be argued that the field, especially in the pre-collegiate years, is in a nascent stage. Programmatic options need to be expanded; financial resources are unstable; and in some circles, the case still needs to be made.

A wise investment strategy is to invest in what is known to succeed. If the success we desire is a stronger Jewish community that is connected to Israel and the Jewish people, then any strategy aimed at increasing the numbers of people participating in quality programs needs to be embraced

today. And all practitioners of Jewish education, in whatever framework, will see the benefits when they deliberately include an Israel experience as a key element in their work. We have a dream that every Jewish educational setting—be it camp, day school, supplemental school, or youth group—will one day have an Israel experience as part of its curriculum.

“If you will it, it is no dream.”⁵ Theodor Herzl’s words have been the mantra or call to action for the Jewish people for over 100 years. We have gotten where we are today by following our dreams and making those dreams, however ambitious, a reality. We believe that anything is possible if enough people believe that everything is at stake. Given the unquestionable power of the Israel Experience at strengthening Jewish identity and connection to the Land and people of Israel, the dream that every Jewish person participates in an Israel experience is not an unattainable dream.

Further Reading

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Kelner, Shaul. *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage and Israeli Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. Print.

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Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.

For all of the research on Birthright Israel, and more, see the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, www.cmjs.org.

For a good collection, and links to research on Israel and Israel experience education, see www.jewishfederations.org.

Endnotes

1. Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone Press, 1938. Print.
2. Ibid.
3. Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. Print.
4. Birthright Israel. *The Educational Platform: Standards and Requirements*. 2012. Web. <http://www.birthrightisrael.com/TaglitBirthrightIsraelStory/Documents/Educational-Platform.pdf>.
5. Herzl, Theodor. *The Old-New-Land*. WLC. 2009. Print.



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