



THE EDUCATOR: THE POWER OF TEACHING, THE POWER OF LEARNING

by Clare Goldwater and Lesley Litman

Think of a powerful learning moment in your life. Where were you? Who guided you through this moment? What made it a learning moment and, more importantly, what made it so powerful? Powerful learning can occur anywhere. However, turning a given moment into an important learning experience demands a set of skills that includes recognizing the potential in the moment and knowing how to capitalize upon it for maximum impact. That is the core work of passionate and knowledgeable Israel educators. This piece will explore the characteristics and actions that are necessary for these Israel educators to foster and nurture powerful learning moments as they relate to Israel learning and engagement.

In considering the potential impact of Israel in educational settings, we need only go back to our own experiences of Israel inspiration and to those educators who inspired

us—whether on our first *tiyul*, meeting our first Israeli and hearing his or her stories, or encountering Israel at camp through music and play—in order to understand the power inherent in each of us to create deep connections to Israel and our Jewish selves.

We start with a few definitions that will guide our thinking on this topic, from the general to Israel specific:

1 Who is an Educator?

The moment we are in a position to affect another human being's perspectives, we enter into the role of educator. Educators can be youth group leaders, camp counselors, classroom teachers, Israel trip leaders, and rabbis, among others.

Whatever word we use to describe ourselves, as educators (in the broadest sense) we are charged with facilitating the ongoing growth and transformation of our learners. As educators, we bring a deep sense of caring for others to our work, an intention to broaden the horizons of our learners, and a desire to enrich their lives in some tangible and meaningful way.

2 What is Considered Educational Activity?

Our approach to what is considered an educational activity is expansive and inclusive. Essentially, anywhere learners and educators gather to engage in the work of learning and teaching is considered an educational activity. And, educational activity occurs in a broad array of settings—the classroom, a living room, a patch of grass, a beach, and more. At the same time, certain venues bring an added dimension of significance to a learning moment; in particular, those venues that might be considered authentic are where the learning is lived out in real time and real space. For more on this point, see “Creating Immersive and Integrative Israel Education” and “The Israel Experience.”

3 Who is an Israel Educator?

What makes an educator specifically an Israel educator? Do we include a camp counselor who (in the course of a summer) leads some Israel-focused activities? What about a rabbi who regularly answers questions about Israel? Or a Jewish studies teacher who includes study of the Land of Israel in the study of Bible? To all these examples and more, we say

yes—you are an Israel educator if Israel forms a meaningful part of the educational work in which you are involved. Whether or not Israel is in your job description or your title, if you are concerned with connecting your learners to the Land and State of Israel, then this chapter is talking to you. And we believe that you are involved in enormously inspiring and challenging work.

We might refer to the Israel educator as a *moreh derekh*—which in Hebrew literally refers to someone who “points to” or “leads the way.” This phrase was coined by early Zionist educators to refer to tour guides who inspired generations of young Israelis to love the land of Israel by walking its length and breadth. For us, especially outside Israel, an Israel educator is a *moreh derekh* who can take his or her learners on a figurative (and sometimes literal) journey through the depth and breadth of Israel studies and inspire them to feel at home in the Israeli landscape.

4 Being an Israel Educator

In summation, being an Israel educator is an exciting prospect that demands the best from us. The Israel educator, in addition to *having a purpose for Israel education, knowing the subject matter deeply, and using the most effective pedagogical techniques*, must also (as Parker Palmer argues on behalf of all educators in *The Courage to Teach*¹) be able to teach from within, be able to *teach from their own selfhood*. The truth is that these demands are true for all educators, no matter what or where they are teaching. But they find unique expression and contain unique challenges for

Israel educators. In the next section we will look at what being an Israel educator requires of us, and the challenges that go with it. At the end of this chapter we will make some suggestions for how you may strengthen yourself as a passionate and knowledgeable Israel educator.

The Israel in Me

The first demand for Israel educators is to address the most important factor in Israel education: Israel as it lives inside of me, the Israel educator.

Parker Palmer describes what he calls “two of the most difficult truths about teaching:”

The first is that what we teach will never ‘take’ unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students’ lives, with our students’ inward teachers. ... The second truth is even more daunting: We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves.²

So, we must access our own emotions and beliefs about Israel and use them consciously.

At the same time, we recognize that Israel raises deep emotions in teachers, parents, and learners alike. These emotions are not always positive. For example, in a teacher education class on the topic of teaching Israel, the lecturer asked aspiring teachers about their own relationship with Israel. While several learners gleefully described their love of Israel and the exciting and engaging visits they had made there,

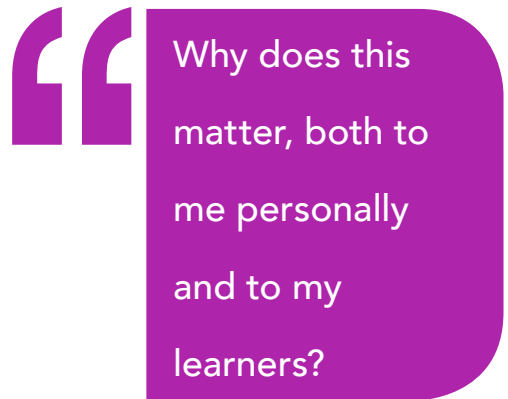
one usually vocal and articulate learner was particularly quiet. With some prodding, she described her ongoing sense of conflict around her personal relationship with Israel as well as her ensuing difficulty in projecting an enthusiasm about and love for Israel to her learners. In short, she described feeling *like a fraud*.

Hence, Israel, even for the most committed Jew, is a complex and sometimes conflictual topic. While it is unreasonable to expect that we have all worked out all the questions and concerns we harbor about Israel, it is certainly reasonable to demand of ourselves that we reflect on our own personal Israel biography, on our own relationships and engagement with, and questions about Israel. As we evolve and mature, our relationship with Israel must mature and develop so that it remains part of us, authentically connected to our own personal journeys.

Thus, authenticity in Israel education can only be achieved when the deliverer of that education is authentically connected with his or her own feelings and passions about Israel. This authenticity will then naturally lead one to grapple with the why of Israel education: Why does this matter to me? Why should it matter to my learners? And that brings us to our purpose. It does not necessarily take a complicated professional development program to help teachers to connect to their inner selves, according to Palmer. Sometimes it only takes time, solitude, journaling, and/or the opportunity to talk with colleagues.

Purpose

Before we even approach a group of learners, we have to know our end goal, our purpose, the real reason that we are interested in doing what we are doing. And often the questions related to purpose are relegated to second priority, behind the questions of how and what, which tend to be more immediate and pressing.



But it is critical for educators to clearly and deliberately ask themselves and their institutions the question.

There are many possible answers:

- » Do I want my learners to develop an ongoing and deep relationship with Israelis? If so, why?
- » Do we want learners to integrate Israel into their Jewish identity and practice?
- » Maybe we want our learners to consider *aliyah* as a real life choice.

All of these are valid goals, and some even overlap. By choosing one, it is then possible to sculpt the learning in such a way as to build toward the ends we have in mind. For example, if the focus is on relationships, we might focus on meeting and learning about the diversity

of Israelis, and create partnerships with Israeli schools, or use media to introduce learners to the lives of their Israeli peers. Or if Israel in Jewish identity is the core goal, one might highlight the Jewish rhythms of life in Israel and focus on Israel in Jewish texts. If interested in *aliyah*, we might build a curriculum that connects learners to daily life in Israel and focuses on stories of immigration and *olim*. The actual purpose is up to you—the key is that whatever purpose you choose is aligned with your choice of content, methodologies, and the interests of your learners.

The Subject Matter

Israel is a subject unlike many others; its demands are multiple and challenging. Firstly, the content areas that comprise Israel education are numerous and multi-faceted. Israel includes teaching Bible, but it's not just about Bible. There is the Hebrew language, which is central, but does not in itself exhaust the topic. Then there is history, cultural studies, and social studies. As a result, Israel is more than the longitude and latitude on a map or main products of England or Venezuela. It takes us into many disciplines and fields.

Then, once we have made ourselves familiar with all these fields, we realize that the subject matter itself is continually evolving and changing. There is new research, new facts, additional approaches and plenty of new news! It is hard to keep up and be abreast of the latest developments.

Additionally, as Barry Chazan suggests in his chapter titled "Diverse Narratives," the subject matter is further complicated

by the multiple narratives that exist around Israel. What may seem like a simple fact may not be simple at all. Facts are everywhere and, at the same time, are elusive. A textbook, a newspaper article, or even a video clip from the daily news may look and feel factual or true, but on examination, may raise questions more than portray actual events.

The implications for those engaged in Israel education are myriad and serious:

- » We must carefully check and recheck our sources (and ourselves), not only for accuracy, but also in order to understand the underlying narrative of the writer or teller.
- » We must have clarity on the narrative(s) we bring to the learners (including our own) and how they shape our understanding of the subject matter. Given the wide range of potential narratives, choosing one or two may seem daunting. One way to address this is to start with purpose (as we have referenced above). Additionally, it is important to carefully examine the stance of the educational setting. Such an examination might involve looking at the literature of the institution (school, camp, synagogue, etc.) for mention of Israel, or speaking with the director of the program, a supervisor or fellow educators. The bottom line: intentionality and care in determining what is meant by knowledge and into which narrative that knowledge is embedded are key.
- » Most importantly, we must always be striving to expand our own knowledge and understanding. This

stance recognizes that we do not know everything, nor do we need to. Indeed, the ability to say *I do not know* is an important quality for every educator, especially when it is combined with the attitude that, even if I don't know this now, I am always moving towards a greater level of understanding, and modeling that approach for learners.

Effective Pedagogical Techniques

Just as the subject areas for Israel education are many, so are the pedagogies that educators are called on to use. Effective Israel educators use pedagogies that are learner-centered and focused on the genuine needs of the learners. They also make use of cutting-edge technologies, multimedia, arts and culture, and immersive trips to Israel. For more on these topics, see the chapters in the *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education 2nd Edition* that relate to pedagogy.

Ideas for Enriching and Enhancing Your Practice as an Israel Educator

So, what must we do as responsible educators to maximize our own capacity to craft effective learning experiences in the realm of Israel education?³

First, (as we have already said) we must start with our own connection to Israel (in whichever way and through whichever pathway is most powerful for us).

- » Don't be scared to engage honestly with your own Israel biography.
- » Bring together colleagues and friends to discuss your own relationships with Israel and how they find expression in your work.
- » Use the iCenter resources like the Israel Resource Cards to provide structured discussion and prompts that can help you in these conversations.
- » Start an Israel journal where you can write and reflect on your growing knowledge of and relationship to Israel.
- » If you supervise educators, create a safe space for the educators to discuss their own Israel biographies.
- » Participate in an iCenter professional development opportunity.

Second, we must keep abreast of current and emerging subject matter resources in the field. We must continually update ourselves and seek out resources and



people that can provide us with the newest and best of Israel engagement resources, information, and materials.

- » Develop your own go-to list of resources. Websites such as theicenter.org, israel21c.com, toldotyisrael.org, and makomisrael.org (among others), provide rich, varied, and authentic perspectives into Israel for all ages. They bring people, ideas, and places together in unique ways that draw learners into a vibrant, exciting and cutting-edge Israel.
- » Make a reading list of books, articles, movies, and other resources that you want to read and explore. Ask colleagues for suggestions. Develop a strategy to read some of these each year. You might find a book club is helpful as a structure for learning with colleagues.
- » Find a master Israel educator or expert in the field who can provide ongoing support in your learning and be a first port of call if you have urgent questions.

Third, as an educator of any domain, we must have a deep knowledge of a learner's cultural context, developmental stage, interests, prior knowledge, and experience with Israel. These elements then inform our decisions regarding the purpose of the learning—why it would be important to learners. It is incumbent upon us to be keenly aware of who our learners are and of the natural connection points between them and Israel and to infuse those connection points with relevant and meaningful knowledge and insights. We must also pay close attention to those pedagogic approaches which will be most effective in engaging the particular learners we educate.

- » Read the other chapters from *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education 2nd Edition* that deal with learner-centered education and effective pedagogies.
- » Talk to your learners! Find out what they care about, their motivations, and what Israel really means to them (if anything).
- » Craft your own purpose for Israel education. You might want to convene your colleagues to discuss the alignment between your own personal goals for Israel education and your institution's goals.

Finally, we must strive to present our learners (at their appropriate level) with a balance between the two master stories of Israel. On the one hand is the story we might understand as the *envisioned* Israel. This is the story that sees Israel as the fulfillment of the ancient promise made by G-d to the Jewish people, in which contemporary Israel is the nexus of sacred meaning and history, propelled by a belief in the ultimate redemption. And, at the same time, coexisting with this story, is the approach we might call the *enacted or actualized* Israel. This is the story of the Jewish return to Israel seen through the perspective of modern nationalism, and the ongoing story of Israel as the daily effort to build a sustainable, modern democracy in a difficult neighborhood. The balance between these two stories is a core component of thoughtful Israel education and educators must be able to find their own personal balance for themselves, analyze contemporary Israeli reality through the lens of these two stories, and find the appropriate balance for their learners.

As Israel educators we have been given an extraordinary gift. There is no more exciting time for teachers and learners alike to be engaging with Israel. Yes, there are complex issues. Yes, we may be engaged with our own challenges about Israel's contemporary policies and behavior, but we still live in a time of wonder and miracles. Israel, the country and the people, is visceral proof that:

- » Dreams can come true.
- » Human beings can change the world.
- » Jewish life has responded with hope to its darkest chapter.
- » We are part of a living, modern Jewish society, culture, and people shaped by diversity, creativity, complexity, and passion.

B'hatzlachah!

Endnotes

1. Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. Print.
2. Ibid. 32.
3. For more insights in this area (big ideas, understanding, questioning), see Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005. Print.



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