



ISRAEL AS A CORNERSTONE OF JEWISH IDENTITIES

by David Bryfman and Barry Chazan

“Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.” —Dr. Seuss

It is difficult to imagine something so integral to human existence that has less clarity than the concept of identity. And while there are many theories that inform our understanding of identity, there is also something intensely personal that helps us to better grasp this phenomenon.

Answering questions to help us better understand ourselves (such as *what can I know?*; *what should I do?*; and *for what can I hope?*) provides some of life’s more challenging moments.¹ Struggling with these questions, although seldom done publicly, occurs throughout people’s lives as they consider their place in the world. These questions are

a variation on questions that many ask of themselves at various stages of their life—*who am I?* and *where do I fit into this world?* Dr. Seuss clearly understands the quest to find the true You as one of life’s more enduring challenges.

This chapter articulates some of the theoretical underpinnings of identity development, in particular as they relate to contemporary Jews. In the context of *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education 2nd Edition*, this chapter situates these theories within the broader understanding of the role that Israel plays in the identity of many Jews. What we frame in the next few pages, often as a theoretical journey, is also an intensely personal one. In doing so, we hope to offer educators a framework for understanding their roles in the facilitation of the journeys in which their learners are continuously engaged.

What is Identity?

Identity emerged in the twentieth century as a seminal philosophical, cultural, and psychological concept. Stage theorists constructed rational articulations of the identity development process positing that human beings traveled through life stages as they matured into adulthood. Erik Erikson, the father of modern identity theory, described a series of *psychosocial crises* that people struggle through, allowing them to progress along a normal trajectory of identity development.² That individuals would progress through sequential stages of development was a commonplace theory in this time period, including Piaget’s stage theory of cognitive development,³ and Kohlberg’s depiction of moral and ethical development.⁴

Has anyone ever asked you about your identity? It isn’t a particularly easy prompt to respond to. Instead, perhaps, consider: what are some of the core identifiers which describe who you are?

In no particular order—I am David, I am Jewish, I am Australian, I am male, I am the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, I am a family man (a husband, a father, a son, and a brother), I am a Jewish educator, I am a Zionist, and I am a global citizen. These are some of the core aspects of my self that constitute my identity. At various moments in my life, and even in a given day, I elevate different parts of my self to the fore. My personality is rather constant, but even that might fluctuate depending on specific circumstances that I find myself in. These are the labels by which I consider myself, and I believe others may see me. These might be just labels and yet as a whole they constitute who I am in this world. Collectively these labels form my identity.

- » Before reading any further, write down your answer to the following: What are ten identifiers that you feel best describe your self?
- » Then consider for yourself: What are the ten words which other people might use to describe you?

Other theorists favor a more individual approach towards identity development. They describe identity as being more personal, situational, and ascribing people with more agency and freedom than the more rigid construct of stage theory. As Carl Rogers wrote:

People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them be... When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner'... I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds.⁵

Contemporary discourse favors an understanding that individuals actually have multiple versions of themselves—namely multiple identities. As Turner and Tajfel (1987) described in their articulation of social identity theory:

A person has not one, 'personal self', but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel, and act on the basis of his personal, family, or national level of self.⁶

Although the core character of individuals is constant, the self brought to various tables might vary greatly. Leon Wieseltier describes identity this way:

Not my identity but my identities. There is a greater truth in the plural. I feel like jumping out of my skin—and so you should. I hear it said of somebody that he is living a double-life. I think to myself: just two? The absence of coherence is not yet incoherence.⁷

Accepting that human beings have multiple versions of themselves leads us to understand that identities can also be hybrids. For some people the hyphen may be useful in signaling a combination of two identities (e.g. American-Jew or Jewish-American),⁸ but even that is insufficient for many people because of the multiplicity of ways in which people increasingly define themselves. In what has been referred to as the *saturated self*, some have suggested that in the twenty-first century, largely but not only due to technology, there has been even further expansion in the range of selves that people present because of the many new relations that people are engaged in (including those real, virtual, and imagined).⁹ In this framing, people's identities can best be described as multiphrenic, pieced together from the multiplicity of worlds that they find themselves in.

The multiple versions of individual selves, the hybridization of these various selves, and the fluidity at which people can transition between these various versions all contribute to the complexity of articulating identity today.

That Problematic Thing Called Jewish Identity

The term *Jewish identity* has proven to be an important, albeit complicating, concept of contemporary American Jewish life. It entered the lexicon of American Jewry in the mid-twentieth century, probably influenced by Erikson's work. It has proven to be a term of great popularity, and at the same time of great ambiguity, used to describe something Jewishly desirable, but with no clear defining characteristics and no

“ As Harvard academic Herbert Kelman suggests, social influences can effect identity by three processes:

- » compliance—accepting others’ influences in order to elicit favorable reactions from them;
- » identification—accepting others’ influences in order to try to emulate them; and
- » internalization—accepting influence because it fits one’s own value system and therefore is rewarding.

compelling contents. It became the go-to word to describe the goal of Jewish education—possibly because of its lack of definition and demands. Today there is an increasing distancing from the term with contemporary Jewish educators going as far as to suggest that, “When we talk about Jewish identity, we literally do not know what we are talking about.”¹⁰

Critical to understanding this current dissent over the concept of Jewish identity is the important distinction between *identity* and *identification*, as described by social scientist Harold Himmelfarb:

Jewish identification is the process of thinking and acting in a manner that indicates involvement with and attachment to Jewish life. Jewish identity is one’s sense of self with regard to being Jewish.¹¹

Identifications are often easier to observe and measure, as they are often the things that people do. They belong to organizations, they perform rituals, and they say specific things. However, to understand identity is to delve beneath

these actions to understand what is happening within someone’s internal self. Identity is more difficult to observe, more complex to conceptualize, and still far more critical for us to understand if we are to better know about people’s lives and how their Jewish selves present in the world today.

Consistent with contemporary notions of identity, we understand Jewish identity as being intensely personal, multi-faceted, and highly fluid. It is personal in its understanding that Jews today are choosing how to express themselves from within rather than being dictated to by any external forces.¹² It is multi-faceted because Jews, like other people, have multiple identities that connect and repel like molecules to present complex interactions that are highly situational.¹³ It is fluid because Jews, like all other people, experience diverse life journeys and multiple variables over a lifetime.¹⁴

This approach certainly favors the line of thought that sees identity as the way in which people present themselves in relation to the social contexts in which they find themselves. In this framing, identity is seen as the way in which

one's personal identity, the enduring aspects of a person's self-definitions, interact with their social influences. As Harvard academic Herbert Kelman suggests, social influences can effect identity by three processes: compliance—accepting others' influences in order to elicit favorable reactions from them; identification—accepting others' influences in order to try to emulate them; and internalization—accepting influence because it fits one's own value system and therefore is rewarding.¹⁵

The multi-faceted nature of Jewish identity has led some to believe that Jewish identity should be defined solely as "whatever makes a person feel Jewish." In a postmodern world this formulation might seem appealing, but it is misleading. Without some criteria of what it means to be Jewish, the phrase *Jewish identity* essentially loses any coherence. This does not mean that in our day and age we can, or should, pre-determine who is the ideal Jew. Indeed, rather than attempting to define the ideally identified Jew, we might better look for traits or dynamics which seem to characterize Jews who are regarded as strongly identified. This model suggests we may not be able to agree on the ideal educated Jew, but we could point to traits of diverse Jews who seem to be highly identified and then develop appropriate educational strategies for developing such traits.

While these advancements in conceptualizing Jewish identity are important and encouraging, Jewish life as a whole has failed to keep up to speed with contemporary developments in the study of identity and the sociology of millennial culture. In many instances when the Jewish community speaks and acts on this topic, it still relates to Jewish identity as the aggregation of

doing certain Jewish things (going to synagogue, lighting Shabbat candles, traveling to Israel), participating in Jewish activities (attending a Jewish film festival, participating in a Jewish book club, or going to Jewish summer camp), or belonging to certain Jewish organizations (synagogue, JCC, or youth group). The well-intended world of Jewish social science research and its funders exacerbate this quantitative notion of identity probably because it is easier to measure the *Jew without* than the *Jew within*. While understanding people's identities by looking at their identifications and associations may have served a twentieth century Jewish community focused on survival, advocacy, and communalism, it is less compelling for the twenty-first century post-modern world of Jewish millennials.

Jewish Identity and Twenty-First Century Jewish Education

If we understand Jewish identity to be personal, multi-faceted, and highly fluid, then the discussion around the role and purpose of Jewish education and engagement must adjust accordingly. These are some of the principles that Jewish education needs to adopt if it is to remain relevant to what we understand about Jewish identity in the twenty-first century.

- » Jewish identity must be understood within the realm of one's human identity because it is invariably only one part of any individual's existence.
- » Jewish identity should be understood as an ongoing, lifelong, developmental process because we understand it as

dynamic, fluid, and highly influenced by the social contexts that people find themselves in.

- » Jewish identity encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions because we are dealing with whole people and not compartments of themselves.
- » Jewish identity is not the domain of any one institution because people do not exist within institutions but within a multi-faceted ecosystem that is the world in which we live.
- » Jewish identity is not a subject or even a goal of Jewish education, but rather it is an outcome of good Jewish education(s).

These principles along with the next chapter on learner-centered education may be regarded as conceptual educational underpinnings of this rich anthology devoted to Israel education.

Putting these two chapters together, do not be surprised if one concludes that not only is Jewish identity part of human identity but that good Jewish education is in fact good education.

Identity and Israel

Up until now the focus of this chapter has been on the conceptualization of identity that has influenced our understanding of Jewish identity. Over the last few decades when discussing Jewish identity, and by extension Jewish education, the interventions commonly discussed as influencing these constructs include Torah, Jewish history, Jewish holidays, and Jewish values. But perhaps no other feature of Jewish life has been more dramatic in recent times than the establishment and evolution of the Jewish state. The social influence of Israel on the way that people see themselves as Jews cannot be underestimated. Today the issues of identity and Jewish identity not only have lots to do with Israel, but also the connection between Israel and Jewish identity may be one of the most significant developments for Jewish identity, life, and education that we have known.

While the study of Israel has often been seen through such lenses as a biblical homeland, the realization of the historical Zionist dream, or contemporary Hebrew language, Israel may also be a vivid and accessible kaleidoscope, a panorama, and a supermarket of possible Jewish identities. Contemporary Israel is the story of multiple identities. It is the story of Jewish and general history. It is a saga of the role of kinship, memories,

peer groups, and diverse value systems in modern Jewish life. It is the ultimate classroom and multiplex of actual Jewish identities and that is why it is an important identity teacher. Introducing our students to the multiplicity that is Israel might provide educators with tremendous challenge, but it also offers limitless opportunities.

We do not speak of the cogency of Israel in Jewish identities with such conviction because of zealous ideological convictions. We do so because we believe that for many Jews today Israel can be a portal into Jewish life that is meaningful and relevant. Indeed, it is an exciting and engaging Jewish portal.

To deprive our learners of this input is to deprive them of one of the entry points that can stimulate them on their life journeys, including the Jewish paths in these journeys. And just as we believe that studying Torah can be a multi-ported access point to feel more Jewish, we believe that Israel offers a similar and powerful opportunity. And just as we don't expect every student to know every verse of Torah or every important date in Jewish history, we do want them to know, value, and feel how these can be important in their lives. And so too, it is true for the study of Israel—they don't need to know everything there is to know about this little country in the Middle East, but they ought to understand the ways in which Israel has influenced and continues to influence Jewish existence.

For many Jewish educators, the very topic of Israel is either avoided completely or dealt with in the symbolic or historic realm. For them, and perhaps understandably, the conflicts

that are well known to Israel are too troubling or problematic (personally, institutionally, or communally) to deal with. But it is precisely because of these murky modern complexities that constitute Israel that this country might be central to the identity development of twenty-first century millennial Jews. Israel speaks their language of diversity, secularity, spirituality, ecology, ambiguity, lack of coherence, independence, and yes, conflict.

The centrality of Israel to identity development becomes overtly apparent when people experience Israel first-hand for themselves. In a well-orchestrated Israel experience people are able to see the diversities of Jewish life playing themselves out while sitting in homes, while traversing the streets daily, when waking up to a *Yom Shlishi* and not a Tuesday, and spending their evenings with Jewish peers from around the world. For some it is seeing street signs in Hebrew, living a calendar based on Jewish time, knowing that you are living in a country founded by Jews, or being in a country charged with the promise and pathos of Jewish power for the first time in 2000 years. The impact of the Israel Experience on people's Jewish and overall identities has been well explored and documented. It is profound and enduring.

Israel education outside of Israel offers equally exciting opportunities when looked at through the frame of helping to contribute to one's Jewish and overall identity. In this context Israel education rises above only teaching about maps and dates, food and music, war and peace. Instead its focus is on the people who are learning and how learning about Israel can indeed influence and impact their lives.

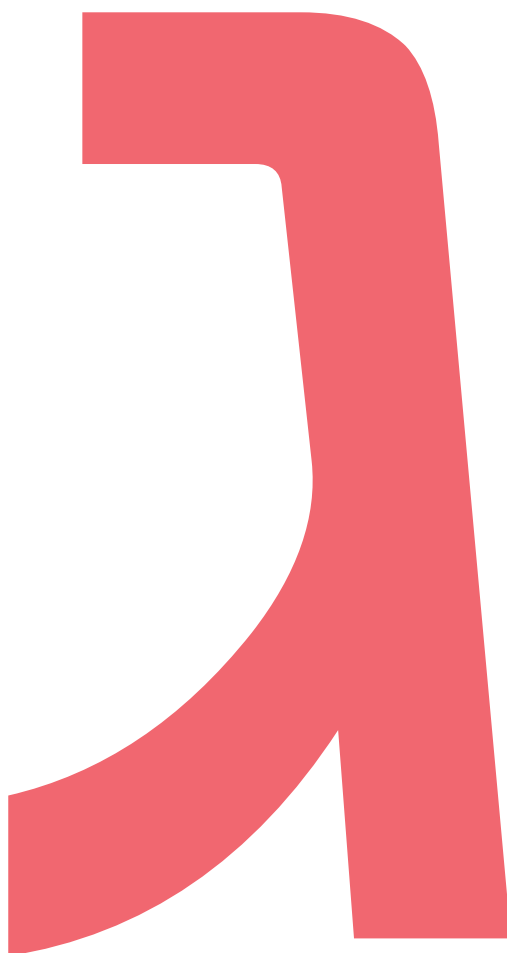
In this framing, learning about Israel's past is a way of connecting Jewish children with the history of their people. Learning contemporary Hebrew language and culture is a way of connecting with millions of people who have the same lineage. Observing Israel's Memorial Day or celebrating Israel's Independence Day are ways to deeply identify with issues of power and struggle, conflict and survival, and the sadness and joy that are a part of one's collective journey. Encountering an Israeli is seen not as a *meeting of the other* but a *meeting of another side* of the same coin. These are all examples that help Jews to better understand who they are and where they fit into this world. These are all examples of education that can leave an imprint on one's very being. Israel education is not separate to Jewish education, nor is it separate to the overall development of the human being.

Coda

To learn about Israel, to really learn about all of these things, is not an abstract study of another. To study Israel is to experience one's history, one's people, one's culture, one's language, and one's religion. It is difficult to learn about these without referencing Israel. What else are these elements if they are not some of the fundamental building blocks to helping people answer the questions of where they came from; where they fit into the world; and who they will become? These are not questions of content, but indeed when discussing issues of lineage, linkage, and destiny, they are profound questions about identity. These are also not questions of merely knowledge and

content. To learn about Israel is highly affective—it ought to be palpable and visceral, and yes, even emotional.

In these ways, Israel and identity are intimately related; Israel encompasses core issues of Jewish identities. On the surface, Israel education might be grappling with issues about a country, its politics, and its people, but at a deeper level it is fundamentally examining the ways in which an attachment to Israel can impact one's Jewish and overall identity. To state this categorically, Israel education is first and foremost about the education of human beings.



The Hebrew term for the word identity, coined by Eliezer Ben Yehuda, is *zehut*. Jan Katzew elucidates that from the root of the word *zeh* (this) the term aims to express the thisness of an individual.¹⁶ What is the thisness that you are building for yourself? What is the thisness which you could describe yourself, and that others would describe you? Are there Jewish words or phrases that help describe who you are? Does Israel appear in the words that begin to describe your thisness? We are reminded by the words of the poet Zelda:

לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ אֱלֹהִים	given to him by G-d
וְנָתַן לּוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ	and given to him by his parents
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ קוֹמָתוֹ	given to him by his stature
וְאָפֶן חִיּוּכּוֹ	and the way he smiles
וְנָתַן לּוֹ הָאָרִיג	and given to him by his clothing
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ הַהָרִים	given to him by the mountains
וְנָתַן לּוֹ כְּתֻלָּיו	and given to him by his walls
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ הַמַּזְלוֹת	given to him by the stars
וְנָתַן לּוֹ שְׁכָנָיו	and given to him by his neighbors
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ חַטָּאָיו	given to him by his sins
וְנָתַן לּוֹ כְּמִיָּהוּ	and given to him by his longing
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ שׂוֹנְאָיו	given to him by his enemies
וְנָתַן לּוֹ אֲהָבָתוֹ	and given to him by his love
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ חֲגִי	given to him by his feasts
וְנָתַן לּוֹ מְלָאכְתּוֹ	and given to him by his work
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ תְּקוּפוֹת הַשָּׁנָה	given to him by the seasons
וְנָתַן לּוֹ עִוְרוֹנוֹ	and given to him by his blindness
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Everyone has a name
שִׁנְתָּן לּוֹ הַיָּם	given to him by the sea and
וְנָתַן לּוֹ	given to him
מוֹתוֹ.	by his death.

Presumably your name was given to you by your parents or guardians. But what is the name that you are forging for yourself during your life? And what is the name that others will give to you in your death? When you describe yourself, or others describe you, will being Jewish, or having a connection to Israel appear in these descriptions? Perhaps, when it all comes down to it—this is your identity.

Zelda Schnerrsohn Mishkovsky. Translated from Hebrew by Marcia Falk, quoted from "Generations of the Holocaust," by Bergmann and Jugovy.

References

Chazan, Barry and Perry London. *The Psychology of Jewish Identity Education*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 1990. Print.

Levisohn, Jon. *What I've Learned about Jewish Identity*. eJewish Philanthropy. Web. <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-ive-learned-about-jewish-identity/>.

Endnotes

1. Shavelson, Susanne. *Rethinking Jewish Identity and Jewish Education*. Brandeis: PRX, 2014. 3:50-4:10. <https://beta.prx.org/stories/118439?play=true>.
2. Erikson, Erik H. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: International Universities Press, 1959. Print.
3. Piaget, Jean. *The Construction of Reality in the Child*. New York: Basic Books, 1954. Print.
4. Kohlberg, Lawrence. "Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive-Development Approach." *Moral Development and Behavior*. Ed T. Lickona. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976. Print.
5. Rogers, Carl R. *Freedom to Learn: A View of What Education Might Become*. Columbus, Ohio: C.E. Merrill Pub. Co., 1969. Print.
6. Tajfel, Henri and John C. Turner. "The Social Identity Theory of Inter-Group Behavior." Eds. S. Worchel and L. W. Austin. Chicago: Nelson-Hall. 1986. Print.
7. Wieseltier, Leon. *Against Identity*. New York: W. Drenttel, 1996. Print.

8. Lang, Berel. "Hyphenated-Jews and the Anxiety of Identity." *Jewish Social Studies* 12.1. (Fall 2005): 1-15. Print.
9. Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1991. Print.
10. Kelman, Ari. "Jewish Identity Ain't What It Used to Be." eJewish Philanthropy. 2014. Web. <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/jewish-identity-aint-what-it-used-to-be>.
11. Himmelfarb, Harold. "Research on American Jewish identity and identification: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects." *Understanding American Jewry*. Ed. Marshall Sklare. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1982. Print.
12. Cohen, Steven and Arnold Eisen. *The Jew Within*. Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2000. Print.
13. McCoy, Yavilah. "Identity Molecules." Keshet Online. 2012. Web. <https://www.keshetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/identity-molecule.pdf>.
14. Charmé, Stuart, Bethami Horowitz, Tali Hyman, and Jeffrey S. Kress. "Jewish Identities in Action: an Exploration of Models, Metaphors, and Methods." *Journal of Jewish Education* 74 (2008): 115-143. Print.
15. Kelman, Ari.
16. Katzew, Jan. "Responses." The iCenter for Israel Education. 2011. Web. <http://www.theicenter.org/comments/alef-bet/all>.



David Bryfman, PhD, is the Chief Innovation Officer at The Jewish Education Project. He is also the editor of *Experience and Jewish Education*. David has worked in formal and

informal Jewish educational institutions in Australia, Israel, and North America. David's current work focuses on bringing innovative strategies and creative thinking to Jewish education.



Barry Chazan is Professor of Education Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Professor of Education at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and

Leadership. He is founding Director of Education of Birthright Israel and author of books and articles on moral education, informal education, and Israel education.