



A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

by David Bryfman

Educators have always tried to strike a balance between the theories of education, the sociology of their learners, and their classroom realities. I am sure many of us can recall a lecture about classroom management, for example, when we rolled our eyes and wondered if that professor had ever stood before a group of rowdy 13 year-olds. Nevertheless, very few of us are naïve enough to suggest that the theory behind classroom management isn't important, but balancing it with our reality is an educator's enduring task.

This chapter of *The Aleph Bet of Israel Education 2nd Edition* strives to do just that—outline a framework for Israel education that draws on our knowledge of today's youth and young adults (referred to interchangeably as Millennials or Generation Me) while simultaneously holding the core value of a learner-centered, or what might

be called an I-Centered, approach to education.

The “I” referenced above deliberately connotes a dual reference. On one hand, it feeds into the self-centeredness of Generation Me who largely view the world only through their own eyes. But the “I” also reflects the value of an educator in understanding each individual, not merely as a member of a collective, but as the true essence of who they are. It is this latter understanding, embracing the whole learner as the “I” that they are, that The iCenter adopts in an I-Centered

We complete all of our coursework. We read all there is to know about Millennials and Generation Me. We even succumb to hours of smartphones, tablets, and video games, scanning social media—all in an effort to get inside their teenage heads. We want to be the best educators that we can possibly be, so many of us do everything possible to understand them properly before meeting those kids for the first time.

And then something happens: we enter a classroom, or step onto a bus, walk into a summer camp, or engage in a one-on-one conversation with a real teenager. It’s not that we didn’t already know this, but each time we are confronted by real youth, we are reminded that despite everything we know about Generation Me, we are actually faced with a whole lot of I’s—and each one of them is very, very unique.

approach to education. That is not to say that we don’t need to know a lot about our learners as a whole—it’s our understanding that when educating about Israel (and indeed anything) that we need both—to understand Generation Me as well as the I’s who comprise it.

What is an I-Centered Education?

The understanding of the “I” is not foreign to Jewish thought. When Martin Buber writes about the I-Thou (*Ich-Du*) relationship, he stresses the holistic interaction of two beings. Buber understands that only in relationships of true mutuality are growth and transformation possible. He contrasts these relationships with ones that might be more reflective of the stereotypical qualities of Generation Me, the I-It (*Ich-Es*) relationships that are often more one-dimensional and utilitarian by design. An I-Centered approach to Jewish education is one that embraces the I-Thou interactions of educators with their learners, and between the learners themselves.

An I-Centered approach to education, as it relates to child-centered learning (synonymous with learner-centered), is not new. It is a philosophical approach to education that builds upon the works of many who have long argued that the most meaningful and enduring education occurs when the learner is the center of any educational experience. When we at The iCenter speak about a learner-centered or a whole-person approach to education, we infer that the primary focus of the education ought to be the learner. The educator,

the curriculum, and the setting are all important features of the learning experience, but at its core is the individual that we are educating. To provide learning that is both personally meaningful and relevant we must understand these learners as unique individuals.

This child-centered approach is not without its critics—it faces opposition from those who believe that the acquisition of knowledge is the primary purpose of education and that it is the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge to students. While we do not shy away from the significance of knowledge in education, we argue strongly that this content must always be experienced firsthand by learners if it is to be enduring.

In an I-Centered approach, the educator's role is very different than the teacher's in a traditional educational environment. Paulo Freire teaches us that learners should not be treated as empty piggy banks for whom educators merely deposit their coins of knowledge. We also learn tremendously from Janusz Korczak, who strongly believed that such educators must fully respect their learners, because that is the human dignity that they are entitled to. Korczak goes even further than most when describing this respect as truly valuing the paths that young individuals are traveling on:

Children are not the people of tomorrow, but people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. ... They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be. ¹

This quote should resonate strongly with Jewish educators who have often cited from the *Book of Proverbs* 22:3, that we should “educate a child

according to his way” as a core value in Jewish education.

We also understand that when the learner is the primary focus of the learning, they are experiencing the learning for themselves. This is not a teacher instructing students about what they should know; instead, a student becomes an active agent in the learning process. This understanding of experiencing education has several theoretical roots from Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who writes about a young boy Émile discovering life for himself, to the modern pragmatist John Dewey, who stated that “education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” Many theorists have long stressed the importance of experience-

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based education, even though it often runs contrary to mainstream Western educational systems.

An I-Centered Approach To Israel Education

Israel education may be understood by some educators as the transmission of important information to our youth. Often in these settings Israel education teaches our learners about important dates and events, shows them maps, and tells them about famous Zionists and Israelis. While these content pieces remain important, an I-Centered approach takes these elements into a new realm. In an I-Centered approach this information is only important



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—Janusz Korczak

because it is meaningful and relevant to the lives of individual learners. And as explained in the previous chapter, “Israel as a Cornerstone of Jewish Identities,” Israel education ultimately serves the purpose of cultivating the identities of those learners.

As Israel educators, there is no doubt that we need to know the content of Israel that we want to teach. We need to know her history, her culture, her language, and her politics.

But we also need to understand the world in which our learners live. We need to know what characteristics encapsulate today’s generation of Jewish children, youth, and young adults. Through this understanding, we need to learn how we can create curriculum and facilitate learning experiences that touch individuals in this generation. Some of the presumed characteristics of Jewish Millennials include:

- 1 Secure:** Born close to or even after the turn of the century, this generation is not preoccupied with the existential threat to Jewish life in America or Israel.
- 2 Proud:** There is strength in being defined as part of a collective, largely because almost everyone in America belongs to some other self-ascribed tribal group (including those based on gender, ethnicity, religion, race, sexual-orientation, etc.).
- 3 Multiple, Hybrid, and Fluid Selves:** As much as being Jewish is important, it is only one piece of who the youth of today are. In many cases, their Jewish identity is no more or less important than any

other piece of their identities. What makes this generation different is the relative ease with which they can move between their various identities depending on the specific context and who surrounds them at any given moment.

4 Universalists: Despite at times feeling very much at home with fellow Jews, at their core, Jewish Millennials are universalist, global citizens. Whereas their parents and grandparents may have asked why something is “good for the Jews,” today’s youth are more likely to ask whether it is “good for the world.”

5 Creative and Challenging Generation: Jewish youth are not passive consumers of anything, and have displayed tremendous capacity to invent, build, and adapt to their new realities. Not always dismissive of tradition, youth are challenging conventional norms and building a new Jewish reality.

To be an I-Centered approach to Israel education, we take what we presume to know about Israel, and what we presume to know about this generation of learners, and frame it in a way to reach our individual learners. Ultimately, when we have this combination, we will best succeed in achieving our goals of contributing to the development of well-rounded Jewish people for whom Israel is resonant in their lives.

Some of what we have seen in Israel education that works, involving all three of these elements—knowledge of Israel, knowledge of Jewish Millennials, and a primary focus on individual learners—includes:

- 1 Connected Israel:** Israel is taught as a place of people in which learners can meet, connect to, and interact with others. In this way Israel is presented not as an abstract entity, but one of personal and human significance.
- 2 Attractive Israel:** Israel is presented in a way that is compelling, dynamic and engaging given that it is competing in a marketplace of opportunities designed to attract the attention of discerning consumers.
- 3 Nuanced Israel:** As learners mature they must be presented a sophisticated and nuanced Israel, because it is through understanding these complexities that they will struggle and develop their own personal relationship with Israel. We introduce our learners to all types of people who live in Israel because good education involves exposing learners to multiple viewpoints regardless if we, as educators, agree with them or not.
- 4 Global Israel:** Israel must be presented in a way that speaks to youth and young adults who see themselves both as members of the tribe and global citizens. In this regard, educators must strive to relate to both the uniqueness of Israel as well as its role as a normal country among the other nations of the world.
- 5 Diverse Israel:** Israel must be presented in a myriad of ways because what is meaningful for one person is not so for all. This diversity must reflect both varied pedagogic techniques, as well as the diversity of lenses through which Israel can be presented, including technology,

arts and culture, sports, politics, environment, social action, pop culture, health, science, business, etc.

6 Action-Oriented Israel: Israel education should inspire learners to act. It should empower them to create projects, develop personal relationships, want to visit Israel, and get to know Israel better. Most importantly, good Israel education will succeed when Jewish learners include Israel as part of their own personal narrative.

Even in these examples one can see how an I-Centered approach to Israel education and engagement allows us to embrace our knowledge of Jewish Generation Me while allowing for individual growth to take place. We offer multiple narratives because Generation Me is critical and challenging, and because we believe individuals have the right to hear others' narratives before determining their own viewpoints. We respect learners by exposing them to the complexity that Generation Me craves, and the belief that critical inquiry is fundamental for individual learning. This approach gives the opportunity to create sophisticated Israel-infused programming that speaks to a generation and always allows for individuals to embark on their own journey.

And finally, it must be emphasized: experiential learning is more than just a series of experiences that a learner undergoes. All of us have thousands of experiences in any given day, but not all of them constitute learning. For learning through experience to occur, David Kolb² and others teach us that reflection of an experience is critical if one is to learn and advance from that experience. True reflection requires us to take a moment and to think about what it was

you learned from that experience, and how that learning might influence your behavior the next time you undergo a similar experience.

And so I leave you with a question to ponder as you reflect upon the chapter that you just read:

What is one thing that stood out in your mind while reading this chapter that might influence the way you next educate about Israel?

Endnotes

1. Joseph, Sandra. *Korczak: A Voice for the Child*. 1st ed. Thorsons. 1999. 4. Print.
2. Kolb, David, A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Vol. 1. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1984. Print.



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