



MA Concentration in Israel Education Alumni Interview Report

March 2015

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MA Concentration In Israel Education

The MA Concentration in Israel Education is a yearlong fellowship offered to select graduate students at eight academic institutions in the United States: Jewish Theological Seminary, Brandeis, HUC-JIR, New York University, Spertus Institute, Yeshiva University, American Jewish University, and Hebrew College. The program began with a pilot cohort of 11 students in 2010. The program continues to grow with 39 iFellows accepted into in Cohort 5.

The iCenter is not an accredited institution, thus the MA Concentration is part of the degree received from the student's home institution. Participants gather together for twelve colloquium days, receive individual mentoring, and create their own learning experience in Israel. Participants write an analytic mid-term paper related to the Aleph Bet of Israel Education and develop a final project.

Methodology

Eleven participant interviews were conducted with individuals identified by the iCenter. Those selected represent a diversity of participants across the 5 cohorts, who the iCenter felt received substantial benefit from the program. Telephone interviews were 60-90 minutes with a focus on the MA Concentration experience. Questions were also asked about their current work and how it relates to the field of Israel Education.

The Alumni

The 11 alumni interviewed went to HUC-JIR, Spertus Institute, Brandeis University, Yeshiva University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. **They hold diverse positions in Jewish education, including: Recruiting students to spend a gap year in Israel; program director for the Lauder Foundation, running camps for students who grew up in the former USSR and who are trying to connect to their Jewish Heritage; Executive Director of UJA Community Connect in Canada working to create a community of young Jewish adults who are meaningfully connected to each other through their Judaism and their Israel experience; working at the iCenter handling logistics for new cohorts; administrators and/or teachers at supplementary schools or Yeshivas; and, rabbis or rabbinical students. Most interviewed are involved in multiple professional roles and trying to teach Israel in as many different contexts as possible.**

Professional Trajectories

Participants learn about the program by way of recommendations from a faculty member who serves as the MA Concentration point person at their school, or from an iCenter presentation. **At most schools, the MA Concentration is highly competitive as there is limited space and many students who want to participate.**

For all those interviewed, the MA Concentration fits into their professional interests like a hand to a glove. The term “No Brainer” to describe their decision to apply for the program came up frequently.

When asked why they chose to participate, all indicated feeling as if they were answering a “calling;” they couldn’t imagine themselves not participating in this program. These alumni are a highly motivated and ideological group. They present their hearts and souls as completely dedicated to the cause of strengthening the connection of as many Jews in America and around the world to Israel, as possible.

Works Well

iCenter

All of the alumni made a point of mentioning how well they were cared for by the iCenter. The environment at the gatherings was very open, friendly, and collegial and allowed for an open exchange of ideas and creativity. One participant sums up the general sentiment:

“The iCenter treats the Fellows as Professionals. We were given activity cards that I’ve used as a teacher, tools and books, etc. We were given access to high-level educators. That’s something that has really stuck with me. A lot of Jewish organizations don’t treat you that way. The iCenter is the gold standard.”

Conferences

The MA Concentration conferences are the heart of this program, bringing together students from different schools and denominations from across the country for the purpose of Israel education.

Through the conferences, participants form connections with each other and with iCenter staff members. They learn about each other's strengths and the things they have in common.

"Each conference blew me away. The people were in it 120%. They were there because they really wanted to be there. It is so important to have people who couldn't fathom not being there. It created authentic conversation and a really tight cohort. We pushed each other and helped each other develop ideas. It was extremely encouraging. It's what made it so unique and special."

Faculty

The alumni are inspired by the MA Concentration faculty, their achievements and knowledge; and, aspire to emulate them in their personal careers. Influential names that are frequently mentioned are Barry Chazan, Jan Katzew, Anne Lanski, Lori Sagarin and Michael Soberman. One participant elaborates:

"Being exposed to Barry Chazan and Anne, Michael, and others who are leaders in Israel education was a highlight. They are bold, thinking, innovative and impressive people who I was able to learn from. They broadened my perspective. I was able to learn from their life experiences and perspective."

Interviewer: Can you give examples of things that you learned?

“They argue that Israel education is broader than we would normally think. For them, Israel Education has to do with everything related to Israel: Israelis, Music, Art, Prayer, Politics, etc. This broad sense of Israel education and their ability to connect across the disciplines was new to me. It is a new perspective that I agree with now. Previously, I thought Israel education was only about Religious Zionism, or Jewish history.”

Mentoring Program

According to alumni, the mentoring program is successful. The mentors take the Fellows under their wing, helping them with curriculum development, demonstrating teaching techniques, challenging the students on their final projects and generally being there for any support they need. Mentors are matched to the Fellows based on their interests; that enables them to form on-going bonds based on mutual interests and similar passions.

Students learn from mentors who are specialists the area of education they want to pursue. One alumna talked about her relationship with Lori Sagarin:

“We talked about what was going on in school, our denominations. (I am Modern Orthodox and she is Reform). She looked at my lesson plans and talked things out with me when I was having trouble in New York. I am very interested in Hebrew School Education. For the second conference I stayed with her in Chicago and went to her synagogue and watched her run an Adult Education Class and a Hebrew School class the next day.

Her attention to me was personal and I learned a huge amount. We will definitely be in touch for years to come."

Another alumna's mentor, Yehudit Werchow, helped her create a position for herself at a day school in New York City. The relationship with her mentor had a profound effect on her career path:

*"I had a great relationship with my mentor. She was a great sounding board for what I was learning at the conferences. **She was a helpful in guiding me through creating the job that I now have. The iCenter helped me realize that I wanted to be working in a job that focused on direct education with students. The MA Concentration also cemented for me that I want to be working in a job where my primary focus is Israel Education."***

Sometimes the mentors are not a perfect fit, but the relationships formed at the conferences with other iCenter faculty made up some of the difference. For one alumna, the relationships she formed at the conferences were the most meaningful to her. *"I spoke to Michael Soberman constantly about job searching and formulating my thinking about Israel, and about how to articulate my worldview, how to speak about Israel at job interviews. I also used him as a job reference. In a way, Michael was also a mentor to me. I stayed more in touch with Michael and if I had a question, I would reach out to him rather than to my mentor."* In this case, she did appreciate the help she received from her mentor, but her connection with Michael Soberman seemed to be a more natural fit for what she needed at the time.

The Aleph Bet of Israel Education

The iCenter staff dedicates significant time introducing the Aleph Bet. Students work with the Aleph Bet throughout the year and apply the principals to their papers and final projects. The goal is for the Aleph Bet to become a natural part of the Fellows educational work and a valued resource for them going forward.

For one alumna, the Aleph Bet “is like a bible.” She is passionate about the Aleph Bet and introduces it to people wherever she goes. She regards herself as an iCenter ambassador. Another alumna also uses the Aleph Bet, with her focus being the principle of communicating one’s personal passion for Israel to one’s students (her campers). **One alum likes the 1-page Aleph Bet, which gives an overview of all of the guiding principles, which enables him to hit on as many as possible when he is developing a lesson plan.**

Another alum:

“I definitely use the Aleph Bet at my school. It is an excellent and valuable resource. The principles help inform the educational programs that we run. They help demonstrate and show how you can use Israel Education in a lot of different teaching areas, including: Hebrew, arts, culture, trips and religion. By integrating the Aleph Bet, we improve our overall educational work.”

Israel Trip and Final Projects

The MA Concentration Israel experience and final projects are especially meaningful for alumni. **Most of those interviewed regard their Israel learning experience and final project as an opportunity to develop a foundation that**

will serve them for the rest of their careers as they continue their work to develop the field of Israel Education.

One alum, chose to go to Jerusalem to study Israeli history through poetry. The opportunity to work with poetry and Israeli history scholars on 2 continents was especially meaningful to him. His final project used poetry to connect with the Israeli narrative. He built on this project, when he traveled to Israel in July (2014), leading a group of American LGBT students to connect with the LGBT community in Israel. While there he used the poetry from his MA Concentration project to connect his students to the sites they visited. Another alum is working with a similar concept but wants to put it on the Internet, by way of an open source website that Israel Educators can go to find meaningful poems and prayers that can be used when visiting places in Israel. Users will also have the ability to upload their own content for travelers to use and share in order to make an Israel visit more meaningful for others.

Areas For Improvement

The Academic Courses

The iCenter website lists required courses that the students need to take for the MA Concentration, but alumni interviewed did not have much to say about them.

The courses are taken at each university and approved by the iCenter. There was some confusion regarding which courses would count toward the requirement

and which ones would not. The alumni from JTS could not remember anything specific about the required courses.

The value of the courses seems to depend on the how the affiliated university handles them. Brandeis students are required to take 3 courses related to Israel at Brandeis as part of the Fellowship, and in addition the Fellows need to submit their Final Projects to Brandeis as well as to the iCenter. The Hebrew Union College students don't need to worry about the courses, **because "Jan Katzew has integrated the Israel education focused courses so well, that we get an iCenter experience at the college before we even arrive in Chicago." One HUC-JIR alum reports: "The impression I got was that you needed to take some courses as part of your academic training, but the courses that I took at HUC-JIR already satisfied that requirement. Jan Katzew's course was a big part of that. It felt like the iCenter was coming into HUC-JIR to teach this class, which in a way it was."**

The question of the required courses highlights the relationship between the iCenter and the affiliated colleges. At HUC-JIR, where it works well, the relationship is seamless. Jan Katzew teaches about the Aleph Bet of Israel Education at HUC-JIR, but is also an iCenter consultant. **So for the students who take his course, it's hard to know where the school ends and the iCenter begins because it is essentially one and the same. At Spertus, where Barry Chazan is located, it functions in a similar way.** At Brandeis, the requirements are clear; but at JTS, it appears that no additional work is required other than what the students experience at the iCenter, or within their JTS coursework. The same is true for Yeshiva University.

Alumni Networking / Resource Sharing

The main thrust of the MA Concentration Program appears to be the 3 conferences that the students attend during the year. The conferences are a great success, but almost everyone interviewed expressed regret that there isn't a better way for everyone to keep in touch in between the conferences and after the MA Concentration ends. Can the iCenter set up a way for everyone to stay connected when they are away from each other? **They all want to stay connected.** The following are representative quotes:

"Now that we are done, I would like to maintain our relationships. How can we develop programs together; or work on new resources together. That is something I am very interested in thinking about how to do."

"My cohort is also pushing for a way to meet up again in a year's time even though the Fellowship is over."

"There are a lot of alumni and a lot of connections that were made. There are resources that we can all use to tap into each other. I would love to be able to use the network of iCenter graduates in a positive way. We all did final projects. Maybe someone would be interested in reading my project, or I could read his or hers. I would like an easy way to be in touch with the others. I would love to be able to log into the iCenter website and see all of the presentations and articles and other iCenter resources, so that I can use them too."

Marketing and Outreach

Two of those interviewed stressed the need for the iCenter to better market itself and do outreach.

“Before the fellowship, I never heard of the iCenter. That’s such a shame because they are creating so many great tools and have so many wonderful opportunities for Israel Education. I would want to make the iCenter better known. Not enough people know about their important work.”

One alum, would like to see more outreach to the Modern Orthodox Movement,

“I was one of the only modern Orthodox participants. The vast majority of the speakers and students were not Orthodox. I think the iCenter should try to pull from the Orthodox world as well. Have more Orthodox Jews on staff, on their board and as consultants. The Orthodox community is very focused on Israel and would be very engaged with this stuff.”

The End of the Program

With each of the participating schools ending their year on a different date, it is difficult to align the participants’ schedules. For some the MA Concentration ends before they graduate, while in other cases the participants graduate before the end of the program. Some participants report problems as a result. One alumna reports that she had to do her final project twice – once for the iCenter, because the timing didn’t align well with the end of her school program, and then again when her project was finally ready for her to present and receive her

degree. Two alumni had yet to complete their projects at the time of the interview. Once the MA Concentration ended, both students found time-management a challenge, trying to find time to finish their final projects and adjust to new jobs.

The Aleph Bet Of Israel Education

As much as the Aleph Bet is loved, there is frustration as well. Some participants felt that the framework is too general. They would like examples of best practices that illustrate how the educational principles elucidated in the Aleph-Bet might play out. Best practice examples some alumni feel, would help them translate the general principles into actions for their educational work. The following are representative quotes:

“The ideas are useful. The strength of the Aleph Bet is how much the framework encompasses. There are so many ways for learners to develop relationships with Israel. I would also like to have more specifics. I’m not sure of what though. I like specifics.”

“I think the Aleph Bet needs more tangible material. Things people can actually utilize: program ideas, and curriculum - maybe. Ways to integrate Israel all the time so it is part of a constant conversation.”

“There are a lot of educators who are not formally trained. Maybe a condensed version would be better for them - easier to understand. It’s easy for me to understand as an academic, but there is a need to make the Aleph Bet more understandable to the everyday lay person.”