

Defining Israel Education



BETHAMIE HOROWITZ, PH.D

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Executive Summary

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This Study

In recent years there has been an upsurge in organizational activity on the American Jewish scene regarding Israel. Between 2001 and 2009, in the wake of the political developments in the Middle East since 2000, at least 15 new organizations were founded to address what and how younger American Jews should be learning about Israel: 12 of them were geared to advocacy training, two focused on education more broadly construed, and one addressed Israel studies at the university level.

The present inquiry, commissioned by the iCenter to support its own planning efforts, was designed to sharpen and clarify the special role of a *Jewish educational enterprise directed at learners in the years between kindergarten and the end of high school*. The findings draw on interviews with 21 experts about American Jewish and Israel education and ethnographic observations of the field and of the iCenter in 2010 and 2011, plus additional historical research about the development of the field.

Why has “Israel education” emerged at this particular point in time?

Although Israel has always been part of Jewish education, in recent years there has been a move by some to describe their work as *Israel education* rather than teaching *about* Israel. This new phrasing hints at a significant shift, most notably the emergence of an effort to more deeply and explicitly weave present-day Israel into the enterprise of American Jewish education.

Israel education is a response to the fact that the socialization of young American Jews into a deep and meaningful connection with present-day Israel is not as self-evident or as “natural” as it was 40-60 years ago. Today, building an enduring connection to contemporary Israel depends especially on the deliberate educational efforts of families, educators, and communities to develop a thoughtful, coordinated, holistic Israel education as an integral part of American Jewish education from an early age and continuing over the years.

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What are the contours of Israel education compared to Israel advocacy training and Israel studies?

The purpose of Israel education is to *build a relationship between the learner and Israel*, and to create a sensibility that Israel in its varied aspects figures centrally in the experience of being a Jew. Three features distinguish it from other related undertakings. First it is directed towards Jews, rather than others, thus it is rightfully a part of Jewish education. Second it is an enterprise that involves children and teens as well as adults; consequently Israel education requires educational strategies that are developmentally attuned. Finally, because fostering a personal connection between the person and Israel is its main purpose, it involves a broader set of efforts than formal schooling and subject-matter knowledge alone.

Israel education can be contrasted with both Israel advocacy training and Israel studies. Advocacy training involves efforts to prepare people—mostly college-age, or late high school age—primarily for political argumentation in defense of Israel carried out especially on campus. Israel studies differs from Israel education in that its focus is to deepen and expand knowledge about Israel, remaining dispassionate about the affinity of the learner toward Israel. Because Israel education begins in childhood and is part of the enterprise of Jewish education, it is the broadest and most basic of these various efforts.

What are the key elements of contemporary Israel education?

The study revealed a great deal of consensus about the following aspects of Israel education:

1. *The goal of Israel education is to forge a relationship between the individual person and Israel, so that it becomes part of how a person thinks about him/herself as a Jew.*
2. *Israel is an integral part of Jewish education.*
Because Israel education is explicitly situated as an element in Jewish education, its stance is more explicitly Judaic than that of classical Zionist education.
3. Because Israel education seeks to promote identity outcomes, good Israel education is *learner-centered, developmentally appropriate, ongoing and holistic. It involves multi-dimensional engagement with Israel in its many facets and dimensions.*
4. *The work of Israel education extends beyond schools to a wider range of educating agents—including parents and families, as well as others—in shaping the outlooks of the learner.*
5. *Israel travel and directly encountering Israelis are now viewed as essential to the enterprise of Israel education.* Thus, there are two basic components: the part that takes place in the diaspora and the part that involves visiting Israel.
6. Israel education is viewed as *more deliberate and planful, extending beyond “one-shot” efforts to include a life-long aspect.*
7. *Hebrew language attainment was viewed as a significant piece of the puzzle.* More attention to Hebrew would be better.

Three significant issues facing the field

1. There is a debate about the extent to which political questions *in* Israel and *regarding* Israel should become the main content of Israel education. Some people considered the political questions as complicating Israel education and preferred to keep that separate. They chose to bracket the political issues because these are so divisive within the Jewish communal-organizational world, and because much work in Israel education, particularly as it relates to young children, is separate from the political. Others viewed these political issues as something that needs to be addressed educationally. This is especially so for the people who deal with teens and adults.
2. *There is a lack of clarity and consensus about the role of present-day Israel in contemporary American Judaism.* Even though this is beyond the ken of young children, because education does not happen in a vacuum but involves adults as teachers, parents, counselors and so on, there is room for a broader conversation in American life about the relationship between Judaism in the diaspora and present-day Israel.
3. One of the most pressing pedagogical challenges has to do with the divergence of opinion about Israel among American Jews. *How do educators deal with students' (and their parents') support or opposition to the things they see taking place in Israel?* Among learners old enough to engage with the political issues of the day, one preferred strategy is to make the liveliness of debate *within* Israel the object of educational inquiry.

Recommendations

The interviewees identified six main efforts that would improve the field of Israel education.

1. While it was widely recognized that educational travel to Israel is an integral part of Israel education, no one sees that alone as sufficing. In the face of a largely piecemeal approach up to now, all agreed that what is needed is to *develop a sense of what coherent, planful, American-based Israel education would look like.* What are the best ways of incorporating the variety of modalities now available into a coherent progression, tailored to different ages and stages and Jewish subcultures?
2. In contrast to a “scattershot” approach to Israel education employed in many Jewish educational settings, there is a need for *a more deliberate, systematic approach that threads both experiential and intellectual learning throughout the curriculum* over the years. This would be enhanced by *community-wide strategies to enhance Israel education.*
3. The American Jewish educational enterprise is sprawling, diverse, and hard to keep track of. The field would *benefit from opportunities to learn about Israel education as it is practiced across the various Jewish educational settings and purveyors.* Sharing this knowledge and thereby expanding the awareness of resources could help communities imagine and develop approaches to Israel education that suit their particular needs.

4. *Opportunities for cultivating Israel educators amongst Jewish educators are essential to this enterprise.* Over the years the number of Jewish educators coming to Israel during their professional lifespan has declined. There is a need for Israel education specialists as well as a renewed focus on deepening the understanding of, knowledge about and commitment to Israel among American Jewish educators.
5. *There is a need for a clear and compelling conception of the role of present-day Israel in contemporary American Judaism.* There is room for a serious and engaging people educationally regarding the meaning of Israel for Jews living in a very comfortable and powerful diaspora community. That would be a timely and significant and dynamic role for Israel education within the American Jewish community today.
6. *There is a growing need for educators who are able to engage teens and adults in the ongoing flow of events involving Israel.* Although it may seem that that these issues concern only adult learners and are not the main focus of Israel educators working with younger children, there has to be some recognition that educators themselves are affected by the contemporary context, as are the parents of the children. In light of the fact that American Jewish educational activities often influence the families and not only for the children who participate, it would be important to foster ways of addressing Israel education in the context of *family education*.

Conclusion

In recent decades North American Jewish educators have spearheaded an American-based effort to cultivate deep ties between American Jews and contemporary Israel through a variety of educational modalities from across the American Jewish educational configuration. This explicitly educational leadership originating in North America rather than in Israel represents a significant development in the evolving relationship between American Jews and Israel in the changing terrain of the 21st century.

Defining Israel Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to examine the issues and concerns that shape the broader context out of which “Israel education” and more recently the iCenter have emerged. It was motivated by a sense that both the stage and the actors in it have changed in recent years, and there is no longer an agreed upon script. Indeed, the very phrase *Israel Education* signals that something is afoot. After all, there has always been some connection between “Israel” and Judaism and Jewish civilization, beginning with the Bible, the prayer book and so on. With the birth of Zionism and then the founding of the State of Israel, there has been an enterprise of *Zionist* education. Only recently, in the past decade, did people begin to speak of *Israel Education* instead of “teaching Israel” and this new nomenclature piqued my interest in taking stock of the field at this point in time.¹

The emergence of the iCenter, the sponsor of this study, is in ways part of the phenomenon under investigation here. The iCenter was launched in 2008 by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation to address “pre-collegiate Israel education” in the North American Jewish community.² Late in 2010 I was retained to work with the iCenter on the iCenter’s own organizational learning and evaluation efforts. In that role I recommended that the iCenter take stock of the broader organizational context in which it was planning to operate, and to then follow up periodically to see how the field of “Israel education” was evolving. This report, undertaken in summer 2011, is the result of this initial stocktaking.³

¹ In Nov 2004 I began to tune into happenings in this in this arena. I commenced a small investigation of the mutual views of expert visitors – Israeli Jews regarding the US and American Jews regarding Israel. The publication of Mearsheimer & Walt’s essay in LRB in April 2006 was another punctuation mark, followed by the Hezbollah war in July-August, 2006. After that I began to inquire into how American Jewish schools were responding to the summer’s war and more broadly to the changing political realities and flow of (largely negative) events in the region. I presented findings at the AJS conference in 2006, and then dropped the active inquiry until the current opportunity arose and provided a new means for me to focus on these concerns.

² Although the founding of the iCenter is itself also part of the phenomenon in question, that story lies beyond my analytic lens in this report.

³ I could not have completed this study without the terrific assistance of Galia Avidar and Arielle Levites, doctoral students in Education and Jewish Studies at NYU’s Steinhardt School, who served as superb interviewers. In addition, Galia assisted me in the participant observation and the qualitative analysis that undergirds this report. It was a great pleasure to have them as part of my team.

In designing this study I have adopted the ecological approach of historian Lawrence Cremin, who viewed education as inclusive of much more than schooling alone.⁴ He noted that learning is shaped by an “educational configuration,” which in the American Jewish case includes the educative and social interactions in families, schools, camps, youth groups, synagogues, the news, on campus, on-line, at work, and so on (varying per age, stage and Jewish subculture as well), in addition to federations, foundations, local and national central agencies of Jewish education. On this basis I identified key people working in the field and spoke with them about the major trends, developments, challenges and opportunities they see regarding “Israel Education.” I supplemented these interviews with ethnographic observations of various gatherings of Israel educators over during 2010 and 2011, as well as my inquiries about the history and organizational dynamics of the field. *For more details the Methodological Appendix.*

II. HOW THE BROADER CONTEXT HAS SHAPED THE FIELD OF ISRAEL EDUCATION

The field of “Israel Education” has been shaped by three different kinds of elements: perceptions about recent events involving Israel, longer term changes in the relationship of U.S. Jews and Israel, and the dynamics of the Jewish organizational context.

1. **The interviewees viewed the political situation itself as figuring prominently in thinking about “Israel Education.”**

The key informants had a great deal to say about the effects of the political climate in recent years of “embattled Israel” on the enterprise of Israel education. They noted the constantly changing political developments of Israel in the Middle East and the media surrounding that, and how little control the American Jewish world (and especially educators) has over what comes its way. Instead, the events themselves and subsequent responses in the amplified news environment have become a central concern.

2. **The milieu of “Israel education” is also shaped by the longer-term trends affecting US Jewry, Jewish identity and the interconnection of US Jews and Israel.**

American Jews and American Jewish educators used to operate in one context with a known set of assumptions and expectations, and now in light of the changing realities in the world over the past 30 years, they sense that the old patterns and routines are no longer sufficient.

More seasoned interviewees framed their views in terms of shifts in how US Jews encounter the state, society, land, and people of contemporary Israel. They noted how different that is today compared to the era in which they were raised, when Israel was viewed as the underdog, a source of pride. They see that the old socialization forces do not operate as they once did, when the connection between being Jewish and loving

⁴ Lawrence Cremin, (1976). “Towards an Ecology of Education,” in *Public Education*. New York, Basic Books, pp. 27-53.

Israel was seen as natural, as if it were inscribed in a person's "DNA" and therefore it was not something that needed to be addressed educationally. There is a widely shared sense that (compared to a generation ago) it is much more difficult for young Jews to develop a ready connection to Israel. People no longer simply grow up with such a "hard-wired" connection, even for people with deep involvement in Jewish life.

In the early 1980s US Jews revealed high emotion but low information about Israel's political situation,⁵ compared to today where there may be low emotion (and more ambivalence) about Israel, and still less information (except about current events as reported in the media). In this regard one informant told of being ready to debunk Herzl for his high school class when he realized to his dismay that the students didn't really know enough about Herzl for him to use a debunking approach!

Likewise, the philanthropic relationship has since changed, insofar as Israel no longer views itself as a poor cousin to American Jewry. There has been a shift from Israel as the object of worldwide charity (the blue and white JNF box) to high tech, "Start-up Nation." It is noteworthy that in June 2010 the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) redirected its efforts from more Israel-focused strategy of *aliyah* to attend to strengthening Jewish identity both in Israel and Jews in communities around the world.⁶ The shift in strategy from an emphasis on *aliyah* to a focus on Jewish identity is noteworthy because it involves a reorientation away from a unidirectional model where the flow of funds (and people) moves from the diaspora to the core, Israel, to a bi-directional model that is much less hierarchical. Instead there are more open, two-way flows and interchanges between more equal partners.

3. A third element that shaped the field of Israel education: the changing dynamics of the American Jewish organizational and institutional world.

These dynamics can be traced by considering the new organizations that were founded in the 1993-2010 period that deal with Israel in terms of advocacy, media relations and branding, Israel studies and Israel education. Some changes were underway in the Oslo period (1993-2000), while others emerged after 2000 following the second Intifada.

The Oslo period coincided with the heightened attention to "Jewish continuity" in the American Jewish community following the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. In this decade there was a great push to develop "The Israel Experience" as a planful

⁵ The "Images in Conflict" Study, a study involving surveys of Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians living in the Middle East, and of Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians and Jews living in the USA, conducted between March 1 and April 24, 1982, prior to the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula (and before the Lebanon War and the events of Sabra and Shatila). Described in Horowitz (1987) Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian Explanations of Political Actions in the Middle East. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. City University of New York

⁶ "The Jewish Agency is redirecting its primary focus toward the greatest challenge we currently face as a people – strengthening the Jewish identity of young Jews in both the Diaspora and Israel." <http://www.jafi.org.il/NR/rdonlyres/7EFF16C5-188D-46BC-9ECD-8D4A5676B3CE/0/JewishAgencyataGlanceletter.pdf>, retrieved Dec 22, 2011.

educational endeavor.⁷ At the same time (1994) Yossi Beilin called for a new framework, *Beit Yisrael*, to radically reshape how young Jews saw themselves in relation to Israel.⁸ This eventually led to the establishment of birthright Israel, itself a major intervention into how American Jewish youth encountered Israel. The program sent its first cohort in 1999. During this same period in 1997 the Jewish Agency published a set of booklets called “Israel in our Lives,” and although it was never widely distributed, it nonetheless represented a serious planning effort. At the same time in the USA Kenneth Stein founded the Center for Israel Education at Emory University in 1998; Peter Geffen began bringing teachers to Israel in 1999 (Kivunim). All of these efforts suggest that educators sought ways of connecting American Jewish youth to Israel in a time when the existing socialization didn’t produce this “naturally.”

This distressed and distressing post-2000 regional environment prompted a great deal of new activity regarding Israel on the American Jewish scene. Three major reports designed to spur action were issued in 2003. First, the Gilo Family Fund commissioned Karen Gerber and Aliza Mazor to study the state of Israel Education, resulting in the “Mapping Israel Education” study.⁹ Second, a report by media specialist Frank Luntz entitled “Israel in the Age of Eminem” spurred the advocacy enterprise, which had already begun to develop. Both documents were widely circulated in the Jewish communal-organizational world. A third report entitled “Israel in the Eyes of Americans: A Call to Action” by Jehuda Reinharz, then President of Brandeis University, made the case for investing in new university-based ways to generate a scholarly knowledge base and to “educate Jews and others about the realities of the Middle East and the nature of the present conflict.”¹⁰

⁷ Shaul Kelner marks the era as beginning in 1994 with Barry Chazan’s essay of that name, that laid groundwork for Israel Experience, Inc., created in 1996. *Tours That Bond: Diaspora, Pilgrimage and Israeli Birthright Tourism* NY: NYU Press, (2010), pp. 35-42.

⁸ In his 2000 book, in *His Brother’s Keeper*, p 116, Beilin recounts kicking off this new direction and then generating interest subsequently among American Jewish leaders at the GA.

⁹ This report contributed to the founding of North American Center Israel Education (NACIE--now, in a new form, Makom)

¹⁰ This report created the rationale for the founding of the Israel Studies Center at Brandeis.

Between 2001 and 2004 at least 12 new organizations were founded that in some way involve addressing the interface between Israel and American Jews. These included:¹¹

- 2001:** Myths and Facts
Stand With Us
Hasbara Fellowships
Fuel for Truth
- 2002:** The David Project
The Israel Project
Israel Campus Coalition
Caravan for Democracy
- 2003:** North American Center for Israel Education (NACIE)¹²
Blue Star
- 2004:** Israel 21C
Write On for Israel

Eleven of the new organizations founded between 2001-2004 focused on advocacy or media branding, while one focused on education (NACIE). Subsequently, three more organizations were founded: Schusterman Center of Israel Studies at Brandeis (2006), the iCenter (2008), and the Israel Advocacy Initiative (2009).¹³

The missions of these new organizations can be viewed as part of the growing array of ways that American Jews now mobilize or express themselves in relation to Israel. These strategies now extend beyond the more conventional modes of mass fundraising on the one hand and paying membership in denominational streams or the older Zionist parties on the other.¹⁴

In sum, recent changes in all three of these levels – events from the region, the reactions within the Jewish organizational world and trends affecting American Jews—have shaped the educational milieu connected to “Israel education.” In light of these new developments it makes sense to re-visit the implicit ideas about the socialization and education for US Jews regarding Israel.

¹¹ There is no comprehensive listing of Jewish organizations, so I’ve been gathering the list of relevant organizations from informants and my own research. I welcome additions and corrections! Furthermore, at this point the list focuses only on advocacy, media branding, Israel Studies and Israel education organizations. It omits (for now) political action and peace/conflict resolution organizations.

¹² NACIE morphed into Makom.

¹³ IAI founding date not clear on website.

¹⁴ There are additional strategies, including lobbying congress (AIPAC) grass-roots political expression like J-Street, the more policy-oriented work of IPF and so on, in addition to cultural activities (Just Vision). Kelner (2010) situates Israel tourism as part of an expanding set of diaspora strategies (p. 39). Keeping up with Israel’s rich cultural output is also widespread.

III. DEFINING THE FIELD OF ISRAEL EDUCATION

In recent years, Israel advocacy, Israel Studies, and Israel education have all become more prominent enterprises in the American Jewish communal-organizational world, and this exponential growth has led to some confusion about the goals and purposes of the various kinds of undertakings. As one respondent observed, “Education, advocacy, *hasbarah* [communications] and fundraising have become intermixed and this muddies the waters of a genuinely educative interchange.”

To clarify how the informants understood “Israel education” I asked interviewees to define it in their own terms, and then to compare and contrast it with “Israel advocacy” and “Israel studies,” two other modes of relating to Israel that have received funding in recent years. In addition, a number of people mentioned media “branding” and “political action” as efforts undertaken by supporters of Israel.

Interviewees differentiated among the four modes as follows:

MODE	MAIN PURPOSE	TARGET POPULATION	
		JEWS/OTHERS	AGE GROUP
ADVOCACY	To train young people to enter into political argumentation in defense of Israel	Jews*	Young adults and up
BRANDING	To develop a more positive image of Israel in the media	Both	All ages
ISRAEL STUDIES	To develop knowledge about Israeli society, history, politics, culture, etc.	Both	Adult
ISRAEL EDUCATION	To cultivate a connection to contemporary Israel as part of the person’s self understanding as a Jew	Jews	Childhood and older

*These programs are aimed at preparing Jews to advocate on behalf of Israel among both non-Jews and Jews.

How Israel Education Differs from Israel Studies

The key informants viewed Israel studies as university-based, involving academic scholarship and teaching about Israeli society, history, culture and so on. They saw its purpose as centering on developing and conveying knowledge, without attempting to cultivate the relationship between student and subject matter (i.e. bracketing that as a possible by-product, but without making this in any way the focus of the work.).

In contrast to the largely agnostic stance of Israel studies regarding the learner’s relationship with Israel, “the goal of Israel education is not just to teach *about* Israel, but also to develop a personal connection *with* Israel.” In this regard, said one interviewee,

Israel education is partisan... However, unlike advocacy, Israel education, while it does have the agenda of connection to Israel, does not have explicitly political agenda.

Its purpose is to create opportunities for learners to develop a personal connection to contemporary Israel.

What Differentiates Advocacy Training and Education?

In discussing the differences between Israel *education* and Israel *advocacy*, the interviewees employed a couple of key distinctions. First, nearly all of the informants understood advocacy as training people—mostly college-age, or late high school age—primarily for political argumentation in defense of Israel carried out especially on campus (Some also included defending Israel publically in the media). They considered advocacy as a defensive move arising in response to “anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic tropes in the media,” as one person put it.

Second, while all recognized that political advocacy is one activity that supporters of Israel might choose to undertake (e.g. fundraising, political action, learning Hebrew, keeping abreast of Israeli culture, and so on), people viewed its emphasis as different from that of Israel education, and not as a substitute for it.

Note that compared to the adult orientation of Israel advocacy and Israel studies, *Israel education involves children, as well as adults*. Consequently Israel education requires educational strategies that are developmentally attuned, whereas both Israel advocacy training and Israel studies face fewer challenges in this domain.

Finally, irrespective of the age of the learner, the *goal of Israel education is to build a relationship between the learner and Israel*, and to create a sensibility that Israel in its varied aspects figures centrally in the experience of being a Jew.

Media Branding & Israel Education

The comparison of media branding and Israel education is also instructive. Branding involves taking charge of the communications regarding Israel to highlight the positive and move media attention “beyond the conflict.” When undertaken as a sole strategy this ends up creating an overly idealized image, which can become problematic when learners encounter narratives that differ from those they have previously learned.

IV. KEY ELEMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL EDUCATION

Having clarified the ways that Israel education differs from some of the related efforts regarding Israel operating in the American Jewish context, we can now lay out the defining features of good Israel education. The interviews revealed a great deal of consensus about the following aspects of Israel education:

- 1. The goal of Israel education is to forge a relationship between the individual person and Israel, so that it becomes part of how a person thinks about him/herself as a Jew.**

[i.e. Israel becomes part of the person's own Jewish narrative or identity.] Note that there are three elements: the *individual person*, a sense of oneself *as a Jew*, *deeply connected to Israel*.

- 2. Israel is an integral part of Jewish education**

The key informants see Israel—the people, and the place, and the history of the Jewish people (among other aspects)—as a core element in “the cultural storehouse of Judaism” which contains numerous arenas of involvement and exploration (like “text study” or “*tzedaka*”). Note that this stance is broader than more classically Zionist understandings, placing Israel within a wider Jewish frame.

The goal is to create opportunities for young people to both learn and think about the role of Israel (along with Torah, God, covenant, text study, and so on) in the life of the Jewish people as part of becoming a well-educated Jew.

- 3. Because Israel education seeks to promote identity outcomes good Israel education is learner-centered, developmentally appropriate, ongoing and holistic.**

Interviewees employed two similar phrases to describe the elements that make up Israel education: “knowledge, identity-building and action,” or the more generic “cognitive, emotional and behavioral.” These triads convey the comprehensiveness that people envision in this work. The idea is that Israel education as a 360-degree endeavor with many facets and entry points.

- 4. It is important to recognize a wider range of educating agents in the lives of the learners—especially parents and families as playing a key role.**

The notion of cultivating the individual's experience vis-a-vis Israel over the life course will make educators/communities think about parents and their potential role in this.

5. Israel travel and directly encountering Israelis are essential to the enterprise of Israel education.

Thus, there are two basic components: the part that takes place in the diaspora and the part that involves visiting Israel. In the past the emphasis has been to get US Jews to know and love Israel – the land the people, the nation—and this centered very much on flows from the diaspora to Israel whereas today there is an additional a two-way, bi-directional expectation.

In the recent decades the educational possibilities that are afforded from *mifgashim*—personal encounters between American Jews and their Israeli peers—have come to be seen as an important means of learning about and from one another. For American Jews the experience of Israel is being interpreted through these relationships, as well as through the other ways of encountering Israel. In this regard the key informants lauded a variety of *bridging organizations* that are designed around shared peer to peer work between Israelis and Americans, where people interact with their peers around shared concerns in a sustained way, and get time to reflect upon and learn how to tell the story of their experience.

6. Informants envisioned a more planful, systematic approach that extends beyond “one-shot” efforts to include a life-long aspect.

Informants noted that very often what has counted as Israel education has been inadequate:

What used to happen before about “what is Israel education” was that all too often it was like “we just want our kids to feel a connection to Israel, and so we’ll bring some real live Israelis to them on a regular basis and they’ll present some programs and they can be infected with the joy and with the experience and it will create these connections.”

They described efforts to go beyond this largely “scattershot” approach, and in particular *they singled out a role for central Jewish educational agencies to play that involves creating a community-wide infrastructure* that can build relationships and a coherent plan.

[Rather than hosting individual *shlichim*,] we...would create a corps of a few people to circulate among the synagogues working in a more integral way and then create an institutional plan, developing capacity by working with teachers and principals...The idea is that we can bring in Israelis and we’ll continue to do that— there are lots of them who come through [here] periodically -- but we need it to be planful, to have a context, to look at it systemically.

We created a document of the general content areas that they should be dealing with from kindergarten through high school. The schools wanted us to create a common Israel curriculum, but we realized that what they really they needed was not a curriculum, but *goals and standards*. Even there, it’s more general because each setting is so unique.

7. Hebrew language attainment was viewed as a significant piece of the puzzle.

Even though the interview did not include a specific question about Hebrew, nine of the 21 interviewees explicitly mentioned the importance of Hebrew as part of Israel education. They noted that Hebrew language learning has been uneven as an area of study in American Jewish schools. Some people imagined that if American Jewish professionals spoke Hebrew, it would have a transforming effect on Israel education.

V. NEW EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS EMERGING FROM THE POST-2000 CONTEXT

1. There is a debate about the extent to which political questions in Israel and regarding Israel should become the main content of Israel education.

All of the interviewees viewed building of a personal connection between the student and Israel as lying at the heart of Israel education, but there were differences about how the political issues of the day should be handled. Some people considered the political questions as complicating Israel education and preferred to keep those separate. They chose to bracket the political issues because these are so divisive within the Jewish communal-organizational world, and because much work in Israel education, particularly as it relates to young children, is separate from the political.

Others viewed these political issues as something that needs to be addressed educationally. This is especially so for the people who deal with teens and adults. One very experienced educator of high school students and their parents said:

We were almost all brought up in the kind of liberal, *dash* and *kova tembel*, Six- Day War Jews. It had a big impact on us. Most people who are organizing these things, including myself, were fired by that. We've never adjusted to the post-Intifada Israel from an ideological and from an educational perspective and we have to do that. It has a big impact on American Jewish identity. Israel, right now, turns Jews off from Judaism. Not off from Israel, off from *Judaism* and we have to cope with that in a serious way, and we don't cope with it. In fact, we can barely talk about it.

2. Pedagogical challenges

There are two main challenges reported by the interviewees. One has to do with *rationale* for a contemporary relationship to Israel. The other addresses views, both positive and negative, of contemporary Israel.

- **The Need of a Zionist Educational Philosophy of Our Times**
A common theme among interviewees was a call to develop an answer to the question of “why Israel” for today’s students. They viewed this as paramount. Yet most educators reported that the contemporary context was particularly challenging to their work as Israel educators. The American diaspora, which has seen the extraordinarily success of Jews into the general society, needs a clearer educational philosophy to undergird Israel education for today’s young people (and even for some adults). The idea of Israel as a refuge from Anti-Semitism does not speak to today’s American children. The heroic struggles of early Zionists and the founders of the State are in the distant past for today’s young people. For Jews in the liberal denominations the idea of the land of Israel as God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants is also a concept that may be foreign to their religious sensibilities. As one educator interviewed put it, “I think that the more explicit statements [we have]

of how Israel affects American Jewish identity in the educational structure the better. I think we have to articulate it, we have to name it.”

Thus the reports from the field suggest that there is a need for a clear and compelling conception of the role of present-day Israel in contemporary American Judaism. Even though this is beyond the ken of young children, because education does not happen in a vacuum but involves adults as teachers, parents, counselors and so on, there is room for a broader conversation in American life about the relationship between Judaism in the diaspora and present-day Israel.

- **Supporting and Disagreeing with Israel**

The educators had a great deal to say about the pedagogical challenges of Israel education in these times. One of the most pressing issues has to do with the divergence of opinion about Israel among American Jews. Some of this has to do with particular policies of any government in place in Israel at any particular time. How do educators deal with students’ (and their parents’) support or opposition to the things they see taking place in Israel? Events in Israel dealing with religious matters are particularly challenging for Jews—particularly liberal Jews—in the Diaspora, as recent events in Israel around the Haredi community and women have shown. Disagreements among American Jews about the approach to the peace process can be very heated. How is the educator to deal with these conflicts?

The educators interviewed see exploring hard questions and engaging in difficult conversations as part of their work. Respondents noted that in a learner-centered approach “silencing dialogue is the wrong move” because it backfires, saying to the learner, “your views are not welcome here.” Instead, interviewees viewed it as essential to provide space for disagreement while still being committed to Israel. Even those among the interviewees who were more in synch with the position of the current Israeli government say they do not advocate “blind love” of Israel as the goal:

The analogy to me is kids. You know, I love my kids. I don't love everything they do. Sometimes I actually want to kill them. You know, there's a kind of unconditional love that allows for disagreement, criticism, discomfort, [and] something that surpasses all of that, that remains strong.

The ideal educative approach begins early in life and involves building a sense of loving Israel and a feeling that it is part of people’s lives as Jews on the one hand, and over time another developing a more analytic understanding that involves both commitment and the possibility of critique.

The two approaches might play out in the same setting – for example at different grade levels, or with different teachers with their own point of view and agenda. “Different things are appropriate at different times and you have to keep building, building, building.”

Figuring out the ways that these approaches can most effectively be intertwined remains a subject for further investigation.

One promising development among educators working with students of high school age and older are pedagogical approaches that view *Israel education can be the means for*

reconciling the things about Israel that make people uncomfortable. Rather than silencing debate or dissension, giving space for voicing those concerns may be one productive way to deal with the ambivalence people feel about Israel today. Among learners old enough to engage with the political issues of the day, one preferred strategy is to make the liveliness of debate *within* Israel as the object of educational inquiry:

The focus is on seeing Israel as an experiment of what a democratic Jewish state looks like and examining how it works and how it doesn't work. This would then require that people to be "more honest about where the edges are" and allow for disagreements.

...Israel education involves understanding its multiple voices. I tell my students that sometimes they will hear offensive, hurtful, angry voices. Other times the voices are closer to home. Why should kids care? If you do this right the conversations will lead to commitment. If you take the social studies model, issues of capital punishment for example, if it's taught right, it gets to the core of their identity that will lead to connection and identity building.

These conversations will lead to questions of: What does it mean to be a Jew today? What power does a Jew have today? What does Jewish health care policy look like? What does a Jewish policeman look like? All these questions come up around Israel education. Students should be enriched with sophisticated questioning. The pedagogic vehicles [include] triggers like media, music, arts, [and so on].

The view is that conversations like these --that bring the learner inside the Israeli dilemmas and debates - will generate interest and emotional investment and commitment among learners. This would make the learner more actively connected to the issues at stake, without there being a dogma, a "right answer." This conception of Israel education provides learners' space for their own voices, viewing that as a vehicle for creating a personal stake in the societal conversation.

Overall, there was great consensus among interviewees about the importance of creating an educative space allows the learner to explore and investigate rather than one that indoctrinates or silences people. Educators believe that building commitment depends on valuing the learner's concerns by building a community of shared inquiry and connection.

The question of how to deal with support of and disagreement with Israel in their contexts is one the concerns many educators. In light of the fact that many people in the larger community of parents, board members and donors have strong ideas about what the relationship between Israel and US Jews ought to be,¹⁵ one educator noted "I feel there is a great deal of judgment in the field as to where someone is supposed to be."

These dynamics lead many educators to *avoid* the topic of Israel or to take a neutered, disconnected approach, removing themselves from it, teaching only what is safe or expected.

When "things are hot, like in the intifada... sometimes it becomes so hot people become paralyzed... The feelings are so volatile or so high that what ever they do is

¹⁵ See Sivan Zakai (2011) for an analysis of how some of these dynamics play out in a day school. (2011) "Values in tension: Israel Education in a U.S. Jewish Day School." *Journal of Jewish Education*, 77:3, 239-265.

misrepresented and they don't have enough- You have to be pretty savvy and - well-enough placed to take some risks by having people talk."

In sum, Israel educators will benefit from opportunities to address their own questions in the face of these emerging challenges. Their work would be advanced by being able to draw upon a newly articulated rationale about the relationship of Judaism in the diaspora and present-day Israel. And they will be greatly aided by pedagogic assistance in dealing with the issue of support and disagreement with Israel.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviewees identified six main efforts that would improve the field of Israel education.

1. While it was widely recognized that educational travel to Israel is an integral part of Israel education, no one sees that alone as sufficing. In the face of a largely piecemeal approach up to now, all agreed that what is needed is to *develop a sense of what coherent, planful American-based Israel education would look like*. What are the best ways of incorporating the variety of modalities now available into a coherent progression, tailored to different ages and stages and Jewish subcultures?
2. In contrast to a “scattershot” approach employed in many Jewish educational settings, there is a need for *a more deliberate, systematic approach that threads both experiential and intellectual learning throughout the curriculum* over the years. This would be enhanced by *community-wide strategies to enhance Israel education*.
3. The American Jewish educational enterprise is sprawling, diverse, and hard to keep track of. The field would benefit from *opportunities to learn about Israel education as it is practiced across the various Jewish educational settings and purveyors*. Sharing this knowledge and thereby expanding the awareness of resources could help communities imagine and develop approaches to Israel education that suit their particular needs.
4. *Opportunities for cultivating Israel educators amongst Jewish educators are essential to this enterprise*. Over the years the number of Jewish educators coming to Israel during their professional lifespan has declined. There is a need for Israel education specialists as well as a renewed focus on deepening the understanding of, knowledge about and commitment to Israel among American Jewish educators.
5. *There is a need for a clear and compelling conception of the role of present-day Israel in contemporary American Judaism*. There is room for seriously engaging people educationally regarding the meaning of Israel for American Jews, who today live in a very comfortable and powerful diaspora community. That would be a timely, significant and dynamic role for Israel education within the American Jewish community today.
6. *There is a growing need for educators who are able to engage teens and adults in the ongoing flow of events involving Israel*. Although it may seem that that these issues concern only adult learners and are not the main focus of Israel educators working with younger children, there has to be some recognition that educators themselves are affected by the contemporary context, as are the parents of the children. In light of the fact that American Jewish educational activities often influence the families and not only the children who participate, it would be important to foster ways of addressing Israel education in the context of *family education*.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The term “Israel Education” can now be understood as a field that has taken shape from the deliberate efforts of Jewish educators to forge a personal connection to contemporary Israel in the lives of American Jewish learners. While it is shaped by and responsive to the more distressing post-2000 Middle East environment, its roots also precede these developments, and it neither frames the subject matter of Israel as limited solely to the contemporary political questions of the day, nor are those issues viewed as something to be necessarily avoided.

Historically Zionist education was an enterprise of the Zionist parties and of the Jewish Agency for Israel, who saw *aliyah* as an end-goal, at least for the leadership elites. In recent decades there has been a noteworthy shift, as North American educators who have long-standing, intimate connections to Israel have spearheaded a new American-based development. Rather than *aliyah* as the main goal, they seek to cultivate deep ties between American Jews and contemporary Israel connection through a variety of educational modalities from across the American Jewish educational configuration. This new explicitly educative stance represents a significant development in the evolving relationship between American Jews and Israel in the changing terrain of the 21st century.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

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In designing this study I have adopted the ecological approach of historian Lawrence Cremin, who viewed education as inclusive of much more than schooling alone.¹⁶ He noted that learning is shaped by an “educational configuration,” which in the American Jewish case includes the educative and social interactions in families, schools, camps, youth groups, synagogues, the news, on campus, on-line, at work, and so on (varying per age, stage and Jewish subculture as well). On this basis I identified key people working in the field and spoke with them about the major trends, developments, challenges and opportunities they see regarding “Israel Education.” I supplemented these interviews with ethnographic observations of various gatherings of Israel educators over during 2010 and 2011, as well as my inquiries about the history and organizational dynamics of the field.¹⁷

The purpose of the key informant interviews was to explore interviewees’ conceptions of the field, its contours and boundaries, and their views about the forces that have shaped it. These conversations were expansive, as befits an interview that was designed to set the questions of Israel education in ways that extended well beyond the typical K-12th grade framing of American Jewish education.

The ideal interviewees for a key informant approach are people who could provide an “insider” perspective about “Israel Education” based on their long involvement and current social location in the American Jewish communal-educational system. The 21 people interviewed for this study come from a variety of communal and educational institutions including federations, foundations, BJEs and other central agencies, day and supplemental schools, youth organizations, camps, Israel travel, Hillel distributed across a number of regions and across the Reform, Conservative and modern Orthodox American denominations. Also included were several university-based scholars working in this field.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lawrence Cremin, (1976). “Towards an Ecology of Education,” in *Public Education*. New York, Basic Books, pp. 27-53.

¹⁷ In addition as part of my effort to learn more about the emerging field of “Israel Education” I drew on my weekly phone meetings with the iCenter staff as well as my review of iCenter’s 2010 communications log.

¹⁸ I developed a list of key informants in consultation with the iCenter. The key informants did not include anyone from the Centrist Orthodox, Haredi or Chassidic Jewish educational systems, and largely excludes the perspective of the many Israel-based institutions that work in this arena. Eventually I would like to expand the research to cover these segments of the field as well.

I deliberately avoided including more than one or two people who were part of the iCenter’s core group of advisors, since that group included key voices in the field. Also, I excluded Makom from this particular set of interviews.

At least 16 of the 21 have worked as educators or interface directly with the American Jewish educational enterprise and most have professional training in education. As a group the 21 interviewees include people who have worked in day and congregational schools as principals, teachers, educational planners (in local and national central educational agencies) in camping, and youth movements, universities, foundations, federations. (At least) five people hold Israeli citizenship (2 Israeli-born; 3 people currently reside in Israel). Their ages were skewed towards those more experienced in the field: one-third each in the 60s, 50s and under 30-40s. There were people from each of the three main rabbinical seminaries (YU, HUC and JTS).

My research team¹⁹ and I conducted the interviews between June 22 and August 10, 2011 in person wherever possible, and in some cases by telephone. We recorded the interviews (with the respondents' permission), with the understanding that people would not be quoted by name, although they would be named as key informants. We summarized the interviews and in some cases the transcribed them. Where necessary, we followed up with interviewees to clarify the meaning of remarks that seemed hard to understand.

In addition to these 21 interviews, my work has been informed by more than a year of participant observation (by me and Galia Avidar) in a number of different settings:

- Meetings that gathered a core group of roughly 20 “thought leaders” of Israel education, convened by the iCenter in Chicago. The meetings were consultations regarding the evolving “Aleph Bet” of Israel education, and my purpose in attending these meetings was to hear the conversation among educators about the issues they face (2 days each in June and October 2010).
- Consultation about Teen Travel to Israel (A day-long gathering in NYC in February 2011), which involved representatives from approximately 15 organizations.
- The “iCamp” gathering of 130 Israel Educators working in the United States that took place in Chicago on August 14-16, 2011.

Pretesting and adjusting the study design

At the outset of this inquiry I expected to be able to map out the main organizational players involved in Israel education as I had done in an analogous key informant investigation (about major American Jewish organizations addressed in the *Power and Parity* study²⁰). The task in that earlier study was for the key informants to look at a list of 135 organizations and to use that to identify the 50-70 organizations that could be deemed the “key players on the American Jewish scene.” Some people added additional names to the list. All in all, the 20 key informants agreed 90% of the time on the importance of 48 organizations.

¹⁹ Galia Avidar and Arielle Levites, doctoral students in Education and Jewish Studies at NYU's Steinhardt School, were superb interviewers. In addition, Galia assisted me in the participant observation and the qualitative analysis that undergirds this report. It was a great pleasure to have them as part of my team.

²⁰ Horowitz, Beck and Kadushin, (1997). *Power and Parity: The Role of Men and Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations*. Center for Social Research, The Graduate Center, CUNY.

However, from the initial interviews for the present study it became apparent that people weren't sure about what was meant by "Israel education." The initial interviews revealed that there were divergent understandings about the meaning of "Israel education" and who was involved in that. So I dropped the expectation that I'd get a straightforward list of places and people working in the field and instead spent more time exploring the concerns that "Israel education" raised in people's minds.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

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Introduction:

A. Purposes, broader context

The effort to map Israel Education, directed by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, is being undertaken as part of the strategic research supporting the development and assessment of the iCenter's work.

This study is designed to identify:

- The contours of the field of Israel education
- The key people and organizations that deal with Israel education
- The conceptions and prioritizations of Israel Education
- To identify the location of the iCenter within the field and to align its role and monitor its visibility and reach.

The study will provide recommendations for advancing the field and the iCenter's work within it.

B. Informed Consent

With your permission I'd like to tape the interview to let me have a good record of our conversation. I'll write up a summary of the conversation for my own records and to share with the research team. The report based on these interviews will not quote anyone by name. However, the report will include a list of the people who participated.

Are you comfortable with these arrangements?

Name _____ Date _____

How would you like to be identified in the report (i.e. using what organizational affiliation)?

1. Who are the key organizations and people working in the arena of how American Jews relate to Israel? [Are there different buckets of activity? What are they?]
2. What do you see as "Israel education"?

3. *[I'm going to read you four categories and I'd like you to tell me how you see the relationship between them and Israel education. The four categories are: Advocacy, fundraising, Israel Studies and political action]*

What do you see as the relationship between Israel education and the following?

- *Advocacy*
 - *Israel Studies*
 - *Political action, policy and expression (AIPAC, J-Street, IPF etc.)*
 - *Fundraising -- The American Friends of... Institutions.*
4. How does Israel education interface with Jewish education? *[Probe: Does this intersect with what some have called "peoplehood education"]*
5. What are the main goals or purposes that shape the field of Israel education?
6. What kinds of approaches are being used to affect the relationship between American Jews and Israel? What sorts of connection/relationship are they seeking/assuming?
7. Main challenges, points of debate or tension?
- a. *[Probe for ideological stance if this hasn't already become apparent.]*
 - b. How important is it to bring the complex politics surrounding Israel into the domain of "Israel education?"
8. Who else should I speak with? There are many experts in the field. To whom do you pay attention? How well do you know these people?
9. What resources **(people, funding, organizations, etc.?)** are there in the field?
10. How do you keep up with the field?
- a. What sources do you rely upon? What do you read, what's the best stuff in the field?
 - b. *[Probe for NY Times, NPR, Other key outlets, Jewish sources, general sources....]*
11. What are the latest developments in the field of Israel education? (Are you aware of new partnerships, and so on?)
12. What functions do you see as missing in this whole arena?
13. **The iCenter's role: have you heard about the iCenter? If so, what role do you see for it in this field?**
- 14.
15. What research would be helpful to undertake?

Any final comments?

KEY INFORMANTS

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