

Israel Education: The Other Matzav

Israel education – Another casualty of the Intifada

When the current Intifada began, Israel and the Jewish people were caught by surprise. Along with the mounting death and injury tolls in the region, and many people's disillusionment with the collapse of the peace process, there has also been another casualty of the recent crisis in the Middle East – Israel education.

More than three years after the *matzav*¹ began, Israel Education for Jews in the Diaspora continues to suffer as many communities continue to react to the situation rather than proactively confront the new reality head on.

In place of education about Israel, *Hasbara*² programs and workshops have appeared in the curriculum of many communities throughout the Jewish world. As western media began presenting a daily barrage of perceived anti-Israel reports, many local Jewish communal and Israeli organizations³ clamored to begin equipping our “foot soldiers”⁴ with an armory that would enable them to defend Israel in a “war that threatened Israel's very existence”.

In the last three years a plethora of Israel advocacy websites⁵ have appeared that offer ready made answers to some of the questions that Jews are having trouble responding to. Many speakers are now making a living flying around the Jewish world speaking to audiences for brief periods of time teaching them strategies and techniques about how to deal with those that present Israel in a negative light. Large financial investments have been made, especially with Jewish college students, training them to deal with anti-Israel sentiment that they may confront. And with less Jewish teens travelling to Israel, many efforts have been made to bring more Israelis to the Diaspora, to try and help bring a real face to the conflict and to show aspects of Israeli life other than the daily conflicts that appear in western media.

To varying degrees these predominantly one off workshops and programs have been successful as they endeavor to equip high school and college age Jewish students with the ability to defend Israel whenever necessary. More successful have been the intensive seminars that have taken place, sometimes in Israel

I am not attempting to diminish the achievements of these programs, or suggest that they have no place in our communities. But we as Jewish educators must recognize them for

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³ The list of Jewish organizations who have become involved in Hasbara activities is too large to list in total but includes North American organizations (including Hillel, AIPAC, ADL, AJC, JESNA) and Israeli organizations (most notably Israeli embassies, consuls and various government Ministries including Foreign Affairs, the Joint Authority for Jewish and Zionist Education, World Zionist Organization)

⁴ The term “foot soldiers”: has been used by many people, most notably Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in his meetings with Jewish college students from around the world.

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what they are, and more importantly for what they are not. If we don't, our students will, if they haven't already done so.

Now the time has come to examine what has been lost as this new approach of *Hasbara* has in many cases replaced Israel education. I write about this issue with somewhat authority, as I was one of those educators who fell into the trap of becoming a public relations teacher, and for a while relinquished my role as an Israel educator⁶.

I share with you a “discussion” between teacher and student that I have observed many times in the last three years. Often for further effect such discussions have been accompanied by a power point presentation.

Teacher (T): Zionism is not racism!

Student (S): But you must admit that Zionism does favor the Jews over other people.

T: Jews have a right to a homeland like any other people.

next slide

T: Ariel Sharon is not a violent man. He wants peace as much as any other Israeli.

S: But...

T: (interrupts) He is the democratically elected Prime Minister of Israel, and as you all know Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.

next slide

T: The I.D.F, which stands for the Israel Defense Force, does not use excessive force.

S: But you must admit that that innocent Palestinians have been killed

T: Innocent Jews are dying every day. Any democratic country would be doing the same thing, if not more if they were in Israel's position.

In this “dialogue” between teacher and student, a few things are apparent, that are common to many *Hasbara* presentations.

Teacher as spokesperson: The teacher delivers stock slogan answers regardless of the specifics of the student's question. Without intentionally doing so the teacher has become a spokesperson for the Israeli government. The educator who might normally have been a great facilitator of discussion and attentive to every question and comment of their students has become a fountain, spurting forth knowledge that cannot be questioned.

Students are knowledge seekers: A substantial part of the formation of a person's identity takes place during their teenage and college years.⁷ In today's post-modern world, perhaps even more so than in previous generations, young people find themselves on a mission to find out as much information for themselves to help shape their identity. In the discussion above it is clear that student is on a quest for knowledge, to find out as

⁶ While presenting a series of workshops at the CAJE 28 conference it became more apparent that I was not alone....

⁷ Erikson

much information as possible as they try to reach their own conclusions in what is a very complex matter.

Everyone knows there are two sides to any argument: Students are often only being presented with one side of the argument. Even if the teacher's answers are well held truths, those of us who work with teens and college students know that they need to reach these conclusions on their own. It has also been noted that the more students are presented with only one perspective the greater chance that they will reject it as a half-truth, manipulation, propaganda or indoctrination.

A Return to Israel Education – Reclaiming our Destiny

While no one can profess to have all of the answers, I am convinced that we as Jewish educators do need to start instituting Israel education in places where *Hasbara* has become the dominant feature in curriculum. I am also of the belief that Israel education is in fact the best form of *Hasbara* as over a period of time it best equips our students with a greater depth of knowledge.

Hasbara is about transmitting knowledge and also the skills for students in turn to be able to articulate this knowledge. It solves a particular problem – how a student should respond when they feel that Israel is under threat.

Israel education extends far beyond this. In the twenty-first century knowledge of Israel is a vital component of Jewish identity. Students without a full understanding of Israel and the role that Israel plays in Jewish life today are missing a key ingredient of Jewish identity. Israel education also incorporates a system of values and ethics that should be transmitted to young Jews.

Unlike *Hasbara* that attempts to counter negative images of Israel, Israelis and Jews, Israel education should accentuate the positive features of the Jewish State. Unlike *Hasbara*, good Israel education will also focus on the negative aspects of Israeli society, but do so in a way that it is expressed within an overall positive context for the State of Israel.

Hasbara programs have anecdotally lead to the alienation of many young Jews. Many students have felt as if the material being brought before them does not fit into their value system, and therefore reject it and may even turn away from other things Jewish. In classroom situations as diverse as Los Angeles, New Jersey and Sydney, educational institutions have come under attack from communal organizations for presenting the Palestinian perspective to the current situation. One communal leader commented, “why should Jewish money be spent educating our students about this, they can see all of that rubbish on CNN”. Notably many students appreciated being presented Palestinian poetry and “the other’s point of view”. Very few students became anti-Israel because of this new information. Good Israel education must be accepting of a true diversity of opinions.

Israel education must include the history of *Eretz Israel*. With this detailed knowledge students will have a better understanding of Jewish claims to the land of Israel and the historical context of the current crisis. Israel education must include a detailed analysis of the Zionist movement, so that students can understand that Israel does not exist solely because of the Holocaust, but because of deep-rooted feelings of nationhood that all people aspire to and deserve. Israel education must include a comprehensive understanding of Middle East geography and topography. This information allows for a far broader comprehension of the current crisis and the real threats that Israel faces.

Israel education must involve an analysis of the Israeli system of government, legislature, and military. Even with all of their problems, only with this information can students fully appreciate what it means for Israel to be the only true democracy in the region.

Israel education must involve a look at contemporary Israeli society, with all of its beauty and achievements, and all of its dilemmas and conflicts. It must involve an examination of youth culture and issues facing the younger generation of Israelis. Only then will students in the Diaspora be able to relate to the Jewish State and its people as a realistic entity and not a mythical enterprise as is so often described in many Jewish educational institutions.

Israel education cannot afford to avoid the negatives of the country. Any student who has a vague understanding of world affairs knows that no country is perfect. Any person who travels to Israel knows that Israel is not a utopian society. Better our students find this out from us rather than first being exposed to it on hostile college campuses, or perhaps even worse, the shattering destruction of a mythical country on their first visit to Israel.

Of course, nothing can replace the Israel experience as the key component of Israel education. But while students are not yet travelling to Israel in vast numbers we need to be doing our best to ensure that their connection with Israel remains strong. This year will mark the first year when an entire generation of high school students will not have had the same Israel experience as previous generations. Who knows how much longer this crisis will continue for? But if we do not continue to educate about Israel, then we should also be aware that even if peace was achieved tomorrow, that our students will not necessarily all be flocking to Israel immediately. Our task is also to ensure that we maintain their desire to go to Israel even when this might not be foremost in their minds.

I have purposefully avoided making a further distinction between “Israel education” and “Zionist Education”. In my mind the terms are almost synonymous but that is a discussion for another time. However, when it comes to Israel education one of our greatest challenges should be to try and reclaim the word Zionism into our students’ discourse. As many people around the world try and revile the word, one of our clear objectives should be to empower our students to once again be able to say that they are proud Zionists.

I conclude by sharing with you an activity that I have conducted many times, with different age students ranging from elementary school students to adults. It is a very

simple yet immensely effective activity that I believe has at its cores some very complex issues.

Each student is handed a blank piece of paper.

“Get to know your piece of paper. Don’t be shy, introduce yourself,” the teacher states as students return quizzical faces. The teacher continues, *“don’t give up, become friendly with your paper. And over time, you and your piece of paper do become friends. But slowly, as is often the case, the two of you have a disagreement – a falling out. But in this case it escalates, and you both begin to get a bit angry with one another. Eventually you get violent and before you know it you and your piece of paper are actually at war*

“You now have 5 minutes to conduct war against your piece of paper,” the teacher states.

With a bit of encouragement the students begin to tear, rip, cut, chew, scribble, curse, throw, kick, stomp, draw tanks and blood, abuse, staple.....

After 5 minutes the teacher interjects. *“As the war continues, you get a bit tired of fighting. Your arsenal is running low, you are getting a bit tired of blood and conflict. Before long you find that you and your enemy paper decide that enough is enough.*

“You now have 5 minutes to make peace with your piece of paper.”

And no matter what the students try to do, no matter how hard they try to unfold, straighten, flatten, apologize, draw flowers, beg for forgiveness, stroke, laugh, tell jokes – comments similar to the following always arise:

“No matter what I do now me and my piece of paper can never return to the way we were”

“Can my paper ever really forgive me?”

“I give up. It is just too hard.”

But was it worth trying? Invariably the answer to that question is “yes”.

Israel education is not a simple task. Educating about Israel in times like these is even more difficult. Our students want and deserve more than slogans and “sound bytes” from their teachers. When they become better educated about Israel and not simply trained to become a *Hasbara* mouthpiece, that is when will have succeeded. That is the means of instilling pride and passion, and ensuring that Israel is a cornerstone of Jewish identity.

I realize that as Israel is currently under siege and we might feel an instinctive need to offer a quick-fix immediate response. Perhaps if we only have students for a short amount of time then we should be offering *Hasbara* courses that give them the necessary tools. But surely we must also acknowledge that this is not ideal and that this approach is fraught with many shortfalls.

Despite the difficulties that this battle has placed before us – surely the answers lie in quality Israel education curriculum and programs. Many may give up along the way – but surely this is where we should be investing our resources. *Hasbara* is important. But quality Israel and Zionist education is vital.

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