

ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

# ISRAEL IN JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS

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## DEAR COLLEAGUE,

As we approach the twenty-first century, we are entering a new period regarding the place of Israel in the lives of contemporary Jews. The historic eras of struggling for a homeland and creating a state are over. The State of Israel has been in existence since 1948. It is a modern country which, while beset with problems and challenges, has established itself as a vibrant and dynamic contemporary Jewish society. Israel has changed; the North American Jewish community has changed; and the world that we live in has changed. Consequently, the challenges facing Israel and world Jewry at the end of the century are different than those faced by the Zionist Movement and the fledgling state in prior decades.

As we enter the new millennium, two educational challenges call out to us. The first challenge is to make Israel a dynamic and living force in the personal life of every modern Jew. While there is little doubt that Israel has become a major factor in the life of the Jewish people as a whole, it is less clear that enough Jews are personally touched and moved by the miracle called Israel. Consequently, great energy needs to be invested in making Israel "speak" to every Jew in a very personal and compelling way. Such a personal connection between Israel and North American Jewry will ideally enrich young people in both societies, as Jews and as human beings.

The second challenge is to significantly increase the number of Jews - particularly young Jews - who visit Israel. We have been successful in bringing Israel's survival needs to the attention of North American Jewry; now we must devote great energy to enabling Jews to actually visit Israel. In the coming decades we should aspire to bring great numbers of Jews to Israel within the framework of meaningful and well-planned educational programs. Indeed a positive Israel Experience can be a vital part of the Jewish education and development of contemporary young people, and our young deserve to have such a wonderful opportunity.

*Israel In Our Lives* is a series of Guides aimed at helping you to respond to these two challenges. These Guides serve two purposes:

To suggest ways to help you in introducing the idea of Israel into the lives of your constituents in an interesting and accessible manner.

To suggest ways to help you in promoting the idea of a visit to Israel - "The Israel Experience" - as a critical Jewish experience for every young Jew.

These Guides are intended to help lay and professional leaders (rabbis, educators, board members, youth workers, camp directors, early childhood supervisors, and others) in their effort to introduce the idea of Israel and the challenge of an Israel Experience to their constituents. They are not program materials or curricula. Rather, they are planning documents intended to help you in your work. The Guides can be used in staff and in-service sessions devoted to the place of Israel in your organization; in policy planning sessions with your board and professional leadership; in retreats and programs with your constituents and members, and in numerous other ways.

The Guides have been created by teams of North American and Israeli Jewish educators working together. They are part of a new venture now being undertaken by a partnership of North American and Israeli agencies to promote the Israel Experience as a major priority in twenty-first century Jewish life.

The Guide you are holding includes cross-referencing to other titles in the series *Israel In Our Lives* which you may also find useful in your work. We look forward to receiving your feedback about the issues and suggestions raised in this and complementary Guides in the series. We hope that *Israel In Our Lives* will serve you in your blessed efforts to establish Israel as a deep and rich dimension of the lives of our young and our old.

Barry Chazan, Elan Ezrachi, Rafi Sheniak, Barbara Sutnick  
Jerusalem, 1997

## ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

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## PART ONE: IN THE BEGINNING

The gradual evolution of a significant role for Israel - and by extension, for Israel education - has paralleled the emerging commitment to Jewish education as a central area of activity in the world of North American Jewish Community Centers. A proper understanding of Israel education in the Center movement therefore requires a prior appreciation of the emergence of Jewish educational priorities in the Center world throughout the past decade and a half.

Since their inception in the previous century, JCCs and YM-YWHAs were primarily concerned with the Americanization of Jewish immigrants to North America, and less so with enhancing their Jewishness or their ties to world Jewry. By the latter half of this century, the Center had taken the shape of an institution in which Jews found an opportunity to meet and spend time with other Jews, largely in activities of a recreational or leisure orientation - sports, cultural activities, camps, swimming pools, and ongoing programs for seniors, small children, teens, and others. As early as the 1920s and 1930s, the voice of Lou Kraft could be heard in regard to the Jewishness of the JCC (for example, in regard to appropriate Shabbat policy), but the Center world was not yet prepared for this discussion.

Jewish Centers evolved with an image of service provider for members. This institutional ethos is quite distinct from many other Jewish communal institutions (such as synagogues and schools), which tend to advocate a particular, normative formulation of the desired or even correct Jewish way of life. Such notions have been historically foreign to the Center movement, which aspired to be a neutral, non-demanding meeting ground for any and all Jews, regardless of their particular orientation to Jewishness and Jewish life; Centers wanted to be a place for Jews to meet and share in activities, without any preconditions or “strings attached.”

Many would say that together with other segments of North American Jewry, the Center

movement began to awaken seriously to the notion of Jewish education - and to Israel - after the Six Day War in 1967. (The actual “cause and effect” relationship isn’t entirely clear, and there are indeed differing points of view in this regard.) By the mid-1970s there were dozens of Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) operating under the auspices of the World Zionist Organization as specialists in North American Jewish communities, most of them in JCCs. A decade later, many Centers were sponsoring summer Israel experience programs for their own youth; for a time the number of such groups was sufficient to sustain a paid professional in the then-JWB’s Israel Office, just for the purpose of overseeing these programs for Center youth in Israel.

By this time, the Center world had begun to awaken to a more system-wide stirring, as national lay and professional leadership became increasingly aware of the heretofore untapped Jewish educational potential of JCCs throughout North America. Early in the first decade-long cycle of the process known as “The Commission on Maximizing the Jewish Educational Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers” (COMJEE), the unique promise of Israel education in the Center world began to become more and more apparent. Indeed, five years into the process of transforming Centers into significantly enhanced agents for Jewish educational change, Bernard Reisman (1988) identified Israel training seminars for Center professionals as one of three developments reflecting the highest correlation with effective maximizing of Jewish educational objectives in the JCC. Since then, the Center world’s relationship with the State and people of Israel has grown and diversified. It is our intention to describe this process and analyze the current state of affairs, in hopes of being able to formulate strategies for the further strengthening of Israel education and the Israel experience as an important educational priority for Centers throughout North America.



## PART TWO: ISRAEL AND ISRAEL EDUCATION IN TODAY'S JCC

Where does a Center member encounter Israel in his or her JCC experience? The great diversity from community to community and Center to Center tends to defy generalization. S/he might find programs about Israel as part of the JCC early childhood education program, or the day or resident camp curriculum, and Israelis might be found among staff members in any of these settings. Israel might surface as extra-curricular educational programs within summer regional JCC Maccabi Youth Games or merely in the names of teams in sports leagues. Most Centers sponsor community-wide Israel Independence Day celebrations, including music, food, and other cultural imports from the State of Israel. Adult education programs may include courses, programs, and cultural events about Israel. JCC resident camps, youth programs and adult travel programs may sponsor Israel experience programs for members of their respective age groups (in addition to many other travel options, Jewish and otherwise). And behind the scenes, a majority of the lay and professional leaders of the JCC may have participated in one or more of a great variety of Jewish educational seminars and longer-term learning experiences in Israel, some in conjunction with ongoing Jewish studies in their local communities. Israel education opportunities and initiatives vary greatly in terms of program content, seriousness of the learning experience, and the nature of the target population, but in the 1990s, Centers are clearly engaged in an array of Israel-related activity. Let us attempt to flesh it out in a more systematic manner, in order to explore possible trends and paradigms, en route to charting a course which might enhance the role of Israel education for Centers in the future.



JCCs have made an honest attempt to have the notion and reality of Israel affect the very *culture* of the agency. While some Centers have taken this more to heart than others and success differs widely from community to community, Centers have moved past the idea of the Israel experience as the once-in-a-lifetime Jewish pilgrimage to a (geographically and otherwise) distant, holy land.

# Continental Initiatives

The first<sup>1</sup> major attempt to change that culture was the Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational

Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers (COMJEE). This eighteen month process drew together lay and professional leaders from the Center field as well as from the worlds of Jewish education, Federations and representatives of a variety of other interests and beliefs. Over 2,000 community leaders were involved in the process through site visits and continental meetings.

COMJEE was not essentially a prescription for effective programming, but sought to win the “hearts and minds of the people.” As such, it was critical to establishing the place of Israel in the Center movement. The recommendations addressed:

- the mission of the Center
- the role and nature of lay leadership
- the commitment and competence of professional staff
- inter- and intra-agency cooperation

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1. The term “first” is *not* meant to imply that no significant efforts were previously made to strengthen the Centers Jewishly. It *does* recognize, though, that the recent history of the JCC movement was so greatly influenced by the first COMJEE process that one can rightly understand the history of Jewish education in the JCC as BCE (Before the COMJEE Era) and CE (the COMJEE Era).

- community perceptions
- programming
- funding

With this ambitious menu, those involved in the COMJEE process hoped to shape the very nature of the Center. And Israel was central to that shaping. COMJEE asserted that central to the mission of the agency should be “deepening understanding of Israel and its meaning for the Jewish people and using subject matter related to Israel effectively in programming.” The report also made specific reference to the teaching of Hebrew language and Zionism.

COMJEE urged Centers to take a thoughtful approach to infusing Israel into the lifeblood of their agencies by making it a part of the Jewish educational planning process itself. Centers were encouraged to plan and promote short and long term educational visits to Israel, to incorporate *shlichim* into their professional staff, to create an Israel desk that would provide Israel information as well as encourage members to spend time in Israel, and to establish ties with a local Center (*matnas*) in Israel. The latter idea produced some promising examples of building authentic relationships between communal institutions in North America and Israel. Several JCCs developed ongoing relationships with centers in their Project Renewal communities . This twinning saw annual visits where JCC staff met with their counterparts at the *matnas* to discuss common issues; North American teens served as counselors and taught English in the day camp of the Israeli *matnas* and Israeli teens worked at the North American JCC day camp; the kindergartens exchanged letters and drawings; and North American and Israeli families got to know one another around the dinner table.

The COMJEE report also encouraged JWB (later to become JCCA) to strengthen (and in some cases establish) effective working relationships with a range of educational institutions in

Israel. These relationships have helped guide our work and enrich our thinking to this day.

Ten years after the release of the original COMJEE document, the Center movement decided to take stock, for two reasons: to chart (and celebrate) the advances made because of the COMJEE process, and to determine how to continue and expand this forward momentum. The result was the Task Force on Reinforcing the Effectiveness of Jewish Education in JCCs (commonly referred to as “COMJEE II”). The findings of the Task Force, published in May 1995, attempted to address both goals. The former was accomplished, in part, by a study appended to the report, entitled *Assessing the Jewish Educational Effectiveness of JCCs* (Chazan and Cohen, 1994). While not focusing on Israel per se, the report offers a glimpse of some areas where a typical Center member might encounter Israel at the local JCC in the 1990s, including:

- adult education courses with an Israel focus
- trips to Israel of an educational nature, sponsored by one third of JCCs
- observance of Jewish holidays including *Yom HaAtzma'ut* and *Yom Yerushalayim*
- an ambiance that includes Hebrew signs and Israeli images
- displays about Israel (found in one third of JCCs)
- programs with Israeli performance groups ( 50% of the JCCs)
- visits to Israel by JCC executive directors (nine out of ten), with a great majority having visited three or more times

Moreover, the study pointed to a close correlation between staff participation in an Israel seminar and an increased level of Jewish educational activity in the Center. This proved to be an instructive statistic for boards interested in strengthening their Center Jewishly.

The evolution of Israel-related contexts was clearly interwoven into the two continental

COMJEE initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s. As the Center movement's lay and professional leadership explored ways of enhancing the Jewish educational effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers, they discovered and became boldly committed to Israel as a Jewish educational opportunity par excellence.



One of the most important areas of JCC involvement with Israel has been the training of professional staffs and lay boards in Israel. The success of these seminars has been an important factor in the attempt to change the nature of Jewish educational work in the Center field.

The name itself is indicative. These programs were not called "Israel trips" but rather "Israel seminars." There was an attempt to emphasize that these were not vacations but rather serious study programs. In most Centers the

Israel seminar is treated as work time and all its elements are compulsory. Typically Centers that decide to send all or part of their staff on a JCCA Israel Seminar<sup>2</sup> initiate a diverse selection process which highlights the rigor of the program. Participation is voluntary<sup>3</sup> and subsidized. Participants agree to take part in a series of up to fifteen preparatory educational

# Staff and Board Seminars in Israel

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2. JCCA Israel Seminars are planned and executed by the JCCA's Israel Office in cooperation with a consortium of Israel-based educational institutions including the Melitz Centers for Jewish-Zionist Education, the Hebrew University's Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education's Youth & Hechalutz Department, the Israel Association of Community Centers, and the Shalom Hartman Institute.

3. On the other hand, one JCC executive director reports that a senior staff member who expressed no interest in participating was told that this decision was evidence of his lack of understanding of the agency's mission and could hamper his career path.

4. JCCA has developed a curriculum manual for these sessions: see Barry Chazan, *The JCC Israel Seminar: A Preparation Guide* (Jerusalem: JWB & World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers, 1990).

sessions<sup>4</sup> over the course of several months. Sessions include the movement's rationale for sending staff to Israel, Jewish and Israeli history, Zionism, themes of contemporary Israel, politics, war and peace, Jews and Arabs, diversity of Israeli Jewry, Israel and the Diaspora, and some Hebrew words and phrases. Throughout these sessions, teachers use ancient and modern texts. Staff might be given personal assignments or team projects to complete before or during their experience. In many instances, the entire Center was included in the process, e.g. in learning about the itinerary, in wishing the seminar participants farewell, in welcoming them home and in sharing what they have learned. The seminar itself is crafted to facilitate an exploration of contemporary Jewish issues as they present themselves in classical and modern Israel. The intent is to transcend the tourist's experience and to get inside Israel and Israeli society. In addition, much emphasis is placed on gaining new insights into personal and professional issues of Jewish continuity in the home, the Center, and the community. Participants pursue their own sense of Jewishness, their role vis-a-vis Jewish education and Israel in their Center and community, the struggles and joys of contemporary Israel, and the concept of Jewish peoplehood.

Beyond the expected benefits (enhanced insight into contemporary Jewish issues in Israel and the local Jewish community, greater appreciation of the Jewish educational potential of the JCC, increased sense of one's own ability to grapple with these challenges in personal and professional contexts), there are other benefits, equally profound. The staff develop a different perception of themselves as professionals, and of the role of their agency in communal life. For the first time they begin to see themselves as having a Jewish educational role in their JCC, a Center for which they have a new-found commitment and respect. While much of their professional lives has been consumed by the *urgent*, they have finally had a chance to focus on the *important*. The seminar helps to empower them and give them new confidence. An illustration: One typical seminar included an archeological dig at a site from the Hasmonean era. A participant, an early childhood educator, gathered a bag of pottery shards and brought them home with her. A few weeks after her return,

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during the week of Chanukah, she recreated her entire Israel seminar for her class. They made pin hole cameras and passports, received letters of permission from their parents for overseas travel, and sent postcards home from every “site.” And, of course, they participated in an “archeological dig” in the sand box, where they each found a Maccabean-era pottery shard (which they were allowed to keep). She brought Chanukah to life for her pupils in a very special and creative way because she could now draw on her own experiences to do so. This highly competent teacher now felt *Jewishly* competent for the first time.

Over 2,000 JCC professionals, from more than three quarters of North American Centers, have participated in JCCA Israel seminars to date. Recently, the JCCA Israel office has created a newsletter for alumni in an attempt to extend the impact of the seminar experience and maintain an educational dialogue with the participant.

The project has also expanded into less conventional formats; in addition to seminar groups hailing from a single JCC, there have also been seminars from multiple Centers, various national groupings by professional affinity, multi-agency community-wide seminars (in one case, with lay and professional participants together, rabbis included), and even seminars for students in graduate schools of Jewish communal service as part of their mandatory university studies.

The Israel seminar program also includes Board seminars which have become important vehicles for the development of JCC board members as Jewish leaders. In addition to single-Center groupings, novel configurations have begun to emerge, for example, in the case of a (Contemporary Jewish) “Women’s Issues” seminar for lay leaders from the JCC on the Palisades in New Jersey.



Over the years, the Center movement has wrestled with the question of how to effect change in local centers. One important strategy that was adapted in the past decade was the focus on executive training. The assumption was that if executives were changed Jewishly, they would then re-shape their centers. The Wexner Program of Continuing Jewish Education

# New Models of Executive Training in Israel

for Center Executives and Camp Directors engaged forty-five Center executive directors and JCC resident camp directors in two years of regular Judaic study, both in individual local study groups and also in a series of quarterly regional study retreats. The curriculum of this program focused on four areas of basic

Jewish literacy, and culminated in an advanced academic seminar in Israel developed in conjunction with the Hebrew University's Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora. It also included individual field work projects throughout Israel.

The Executive Fellows program in 1988-1990 and the Israel Fellows program in 1994-1996 were advanced leadership programs designed to enhance the Jewish-Israeli experience and knowledge of senior JCC executives. These programs brought two groups of JCC Executives to Israel for three months of intensive Jewish living and study within a sequence of preparatory and follow-up study retreats in North America, and a three week concluding seminar in Israel during the third year of the program. Graduates of this program have assumed leadership positions in major North American JCCs; it is noteworthy that in 1994, a graduate of this group was selected by the national JCC Association board to be the new executive vice-president of the JCC Association.



The Mandel Executive Education Program, a two year training program for new - and prospective - executive directors of JCCs, culminated with a two and one-half week intensive learning seminar in Poland and Israel. Virtually all of the participants had already visited Israel in the past, and most had participated in other JCC Association sponsored training seminars in Israel. This particular Israel experience was therefore designed with two foci in mind: in Poland, an examination of the richness of pre-Holocaust Jewish communal life and heritage, the process of that community's destruction, and the young, new Jewish communities beginning to emerge there today; and in Israel, in addition to exploring reverberations of the Poland experience in Israeli society, it also attempted to introduce the twelve participants to a number of contemporary Israeli visionaries, in hopes of inspiring them with a sense of what modern Jewish leaders can dream to accomplish when they set about translating their commitment to Jewish continuity into a plan of action for a larger Jewish community.

In addition to these special national programs for advanced executive training, a number of Center professionals have also arranged individualized sabbatical learning experiences in Israel. In such cases, the individual professional, with the assistance of the JCC Association Israel Office, has arranged lodging and assembled a program of courses at Jerusalem institutions of learning such as Pardes, Matan, or Hebrew University, together with individual tutorial learning and independent research. These initiatives have continued for periods of two to six weeks, including regular "processing" with JCC Association staff. Participants reported that they were highly valuable and rewarding experiences, both professionally and personally.

# Enhancement of the Israel Dimension for Center Members

■ Changing the culture of the agency vis-a-vis Israel must ultimately be measured in terms of the impact on Center members. COMJEE II articulates a vision for Jewish Community Centers, urging them to create a community that (among other things) “make[s] Israel a central component in their identity as Jews.” COMJEE II acknowledged the profound cultural change regarding Israel in the life of the Center and then turned its attention to effecting a similar change in the lives of individual Jews. More specifically COMJEE II asks the Center to “emphasize the centrality of Israel, connect Jews to Israel, and build an ever more intensive relationship between the JCC constituency and the land, the State, and the people of Israel.”

To implement these efforts, JCCs should consider a range of services that could include:

- trips to Israel
- investment in Israel
- ongoing discussion of issues related to Israel
- an Israel Corner in the JCC lobby to keep everyone current on events affecting Israel
- a Board officer with special responsibility for fostering the Israel connection
- a *shaliach* on the JCC staff
- Hebrew classes

As the above recommendations illustrate, COMJEE II shifted the goal from connecting Centers to Israel, to connecting the Center *member* to Israel.



Special mention must be made regarding two primary focal areas of Center life: camping and early childhood education, both of which represent major arenas in Center life and clear areas of potential for the Center's Jewish-Israeli educational agenda. Many groups of early childhood teachers and administrators have received professional training through five JCC Association-sponsored Israel seminars. Where possible, these seminars utilized a great variety of Israeli early childhood contexts to orchestrate and illustrate the elements of an Israel seminar. In addition to the more familiar components of JCC Association sponsored training programs in Israel, these particular seminars brought the JCC early childhood educators deep inside the world of Israeli early childhood education through many site visits and exchanges with colleagues, all of which were mediated and managed by a professor of early childhood education at the Hebrew University who served as scholar-in-residence for these five seminars.

## Camp & Early Childhood Education

The Center movement is investing its resources in the Israel dimension of early childhood education within North America as well. While about 90% of JCC pre-schools already teach about Israel (see the 1995 Chazan-Cohen Survey), the JCCA has hired a full time early childhood education consultant to develop a comprehensive Jewish education curriculum for all JCC early childhood programs as a joint effort between educators in Israel and North America.

JCCs have sent many of their youth workers, teen workers, and day and resident camp

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directors on Israel training seminars over the years. Some JCC camps have begun experimenting with providing their camp staff with training and Jewish learning in Israel as well, an effort that has grown in popularity in recent years. These seminars incorporate many specialized meetings and experiences designed to bring the youth workers, camp directors, and camp staff into contact with professional counterparts and with Israeli youth, as an integral part of their seminar training program in Israel. In addition to enriching the seminar with contents related to the participants' area of professional work, this also serves to enhance the collegial and Israel-Diaspora relationships which form as part of the seminar experience. Nearly half of the JCC camps currently have Israeli *shlichim* serving on their staff, as specialists for various camp skills, but also as a living Israeli presence, a bridge between the world of the camper and the people, culture, and lifestyles of contemporary Israel.



One of the results of the change of culture described above is a new concern for enabling Center teens to participate in an Israel Experience. While some Centers have long histories

# The Israel Experience

of sending teenagers to Israel, there has not been a comprehensive effort to recruit the teen potential for the Israel Experience. In 1996 the JCCA received a grant from the CRB Foundation which enabled it (together with the Youth and Hehalutz Department's emissary) to launch a major multi-year project bringing teen participants in JCC camps to an Israel Experience. In 1997 it will be expanded to include an Israel Sports Spectacular for young JCC athletes who compete in the North American JCC Maccabi Youth Games. This program encompasses a major outreach effort, educational programming, and pre and post-educational activities.

Additionally, JCCA's Department of Jewish Educational Services has begun offering specially tailored Israel trips to senior adults, singles, families, sport groups, and any other JCC membership population group. These Israel trips not only enable JCCs to offer an additional service to their members, but also afford the member the opportunity to experience Israel through the Center's distinctively creative, informal, and educational focus on people, contemporary Jewish issues, and aspects of community. The operating assumption is that Center members who enjoy pursuing their various recreational and educational activities in the Jewish milieu of the JCC will find the "immersion experience" of Israeli public Jewishness to be very special. From encounters with the widespread synagogues and other Jewish institutions, the many Jewish cultural opportunities, the presence of Hebrew signage amidst elements of Western pop culture, the intertwining of the Jewish past and present, and most of all, from exchanges with members of Israeli society (who are so diverse in their ethnic background, Jewish lifestyles, political outlook, and so on), the Center member often comes away with a profound appreciation of the possibilities of Jewish diversity, and with an enhanced level of comfort with the range of Jewishness in his or her own world. Along the way, s/he may also develop some meaningful friendships with Israelis who are part of this process (journey); in this regard, there is an added enhancement in the context of "Israel-Diaspora" relations.

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## PART THREE: A VISION - THE NEXT DECADE

What might constitute appropriate parameters for a Jewish Community Center's notion of Israel education as part of the areas of activity and service it provides to members? It might be possible to enhance the Israel component of educational curricula for JCC early childhood programs, as well as day and resident camps; indeed, educators and other specialists have devoted much thought in recent years to this question in the context of broader plans for the development of more systematic, disciplined Jewish educational curricula for these Center settings.

Many more Center youth may participate in Israel experience programs in the coming years, whether under the auspices of a growing number of JCC-sponsored summer teen trips, periodic Jewish sports competitions in Israel (modeled on the regional North American JCC Maccabi Youth Games), or novel educational Israel experiences for JCC resident camp counselors-in-training. Perhaps JCC departments sponsoring travel programs for their members (particularly seniors) could be induced to offer more diverse and frequent travel opportunities to Israel. All these - and other possibilities, perhaps not yet conceived or implemented - will certainly further the development of Israel education within the expanding arena of Jewish education in the world of North American JCCs.



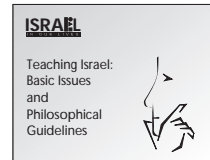
As a first step toward enhancing the prevailing state of Israel education in JCCs, those charged with responsibility for formulating and implementing a local Center's mission might devote greater attention to the remarkable "symmetry" between Israel and JCCs as Jewish environments and settings; this, in turn, would open up endless opportunities for shared learning and "doing," as North

# Charting a Course for the Future

American and Israeli Jews benefit from each other's experiences in their various efforts to find and create Jewish meaning in their respective worlds. Barry Chazan has pointed out that while there are obvious differences of scale, with accompanying distinctions in terms of institutions and responsibilities, there are nonetheless striking parallels between important public aspects of Jewishness in Israeli society and the North American JCC. Both share an inherent pluralism and an openness to Jewish diversity (unlike other Jewish institutions and ideologies with a normative notion of Jewishness). Jews can live their Jewishness in almost any way they choose, and be accepted in the public sphere on their own terms. They can therefore generally mingle as they please with other Jews, without demands being made upon them or their Jewishness. Perhaps even more significantly, Jews who are not connected to *halakhic* or even traditional forms of Judaism can often find comfortable, legitimate alternative modes of feeling and being Jewish, whether in different religious modes, or even in decidedly non-religious (sometimes called "secular") ways. In this context, one can even expect to encounter honest dialogue and exchange among Jews of dramatically different outlooks, on equal footing and levels of comfort, rather than in a dynamic of defensiveness or intimidation. There is an implicit partnership that derives perhaps from a sense of shared destiny and common heritage.

Because of this unique parallel between public Jewishness in Israel and in North American JCCs, many national (and local) Center leaders, as well as the majority of JCC executive directors, have found a regimen of regular visits to Israel - for travel, study, dialogue, and spiritual nourishment - to be a central component of their own Jewishness, and of the vision that guides their professional work in the Center field. To the extent that resources and program priorities permit, a Center's orientation to Israel and to Israel education needs to be reexamined through the filter of this particular dimension of Israel, rather than the more prevalent and conventional approach, which tends to relegate Israel and Israelis to "other" and to "there."

Please see...



Jewish travel to Israel often focuses on important historical and sociological aspects of the

modern State of Israel (particularly Second Temple Jerusalem or Massada, or the unique institution of the kibbutz). Without detracting in any way from the legitimacy and significance of these components, an Israel experience can also address the very real and substantial spiritual search which exists within the “pilgrimage” part of most Jewish travel to Israel. Center Jews, like most other travelers, often identify a religious element when describing their “agenda” on a trip to Israel. In this sense, they are journeying to their spiritual “center” (in an anthropological sense, i.e., the center of their spiritual world), and they expect some measure of meaningful experience in this regard as well. It is therefore important that the trip to Israel offer not only an opportunity to experience the open, public Jewishness on the grand scale of Israeli society, but that it also contain a variety of opportunities for the Center-traveler to “plug in” to his/her spirituality and religious quest, whether at the Kotel (Western Wall), synagogues, inspiring natural settings in the Galilee, the desert, the beach, or other venues s/he is likely to find appropriate. (It may be equally important to provide occasional opportunities to discuss feelings and thoughts arising out of the rush of meaningful moments on such a special journey.)



Some aspects of more up-to-date Israel experiences and Israel relationships for the Center world might fall more in the category of method than substance, though the two are not entirely distinct from one another. For example, in the context of the JCC’s well-known ability to offer creative, pleasurable programming of a high quality for all ages, it would seem obvious that a Center-sponsored local Israel program or Israel experience travel program would have to be of the highest caliber. In the case of youth programs, it would be equally important to ensure that they are replete with enjoyable and pleasurable experiences - “fun” - so that participants return with the fondest memories and most positive associations when reminded of their time in Israel.

Because of the aforementioned similarity between public Jewishness in Israeli society and in



the Jewish Community Center, and in light of all that Jews in Israel and North American Jewish communities could learn from one another about paths towards meaningful Jewish living, it would seem that Center-sponsored Israel experience travel programs would be oriented particularly towards the people of Israel, certainly more than the conventional tour's more typical focus on historical and contemporary tourist sites. This is not to detract from any of the authentic sites of Israel, which are an important component of any journey, but the potential meaning a Center member might derive from an Israel experience resides as much in the human component of Israel as in the sites; opportunities for dialogue and exchange can become the stepping stones towards relationships, learning, and a shared future as Jews. In a way, this is really a means of extending the collective, public Jewish realm of the JCC or of Israel, to incorporate other, possibly like-minded Jews across the ocean.

Please see...



If Centers want to carry this to the next step - i.e., that of actual programming - they might consider some of the following options:

- selecting some of the models developed to date for Center leadership, executive directors and other professionals, and extending them to their next logical phase. (Some could also be made available in suitable form for Center members-at-large, particularly if these would facilitate greater interpersonal contact between Center members and Israelis.)
- encouraging Center executive directors to consider additional short term as well as longer sabbaticals in Israel - perhaps three months to half a year or a full year - studying Hebrew and working in the world of Israeli Community Centers.
- initiating programs to help Center leaders and professionals arrange sabbatical years for themselves and their families in Israel, whether for study or work or some combination of the two (depending on Hebrew proficiency, profession, and financial need).
- exploring opportunities for exchanges of staff between JCCs and Israeli municipal and

*matnas* (Community Center) camps, particularly in the very promising context of Partnership 2000.

- mobilizing community resources to invest in a local infrastructure in Israel for visiting community members, as the Greater Washington, D.C. community has done at Kibbutz Beit HaShitah.

Please see...



- encouraging post high school/university/army Jewish youth from Israel and North American JCCs to devote a year to volunteering in one another's communities, whether in the context of programs such as *Otzma*, Partnership 2000, or other arrangements.

Beyond the context of specific programmatic initiatives, JCCs which are in the process of developing specific goals and outcomes for their educational programming (or the educational aspects of their programming) would do well to incorporate an Israel dimension as part of the process. Departments should be urged to clarify the essence of their implicit and explicit relationships to Israel (for example, in terms of the peoplehood, pluralism, and spirituality dimensions of a Diaspora Jew's ties to Israel, as described above). They should further attempt to elucidate how they would like these notions of relationships to affect their members and enhance their own Jewishness. They might ask themselves what a Center teen's relationship to Israel ought to be by the time s/he graduates from a JCC camp, or whether there might be some normative behaviors or experiences they would like to teach or facilitate for members, staff and lay leaders as part of their involvement in the local Center and the Center movement.



The challenge of effecting a breakthrough to a new stage of JCC involvement with Israel may require a rethinking of the very assumptions upon which the Center movement has based its ties to Israel. To a large extent, Israel and Israelis are “other” and “there” in the world of JCCs, where members are preoccupied with their own activities and friends in their local setting. Israel is a far-away place, often perceived (in the context of fund-raising campaigns) as a poor and distant cousin (despite the meteoric rise in the standard-of-living in Israel of the 1990’s). Israelis, while acknowledged as fellow Jews, may be perceived as different, whether in temperament, manner, or mindset. So Israel may (or may not) be a source of Jewish pride, a place in the news, a homeland in a certain undefined and distant way - but is not necessarily an essential, integral part of one’s Jewishness. As such, Israel may appear as a curious (Jewish) place to visit, or an available topic for diversifying curriculum or programming; this, however, does not necessarily lend itself to an ongoing, balanced, profound relationship between Center members and Israel (as a place) or Israelis (as fellow Jews). Even in the absence of a negative association, Israel may still not be particularly on the minds or agendas of many a typical JCC member. There are countless exceptions to this seemingly harsh description of the relationship between American Jews and Israel - whether in terms of programs, trips or personal contacts - but by and large, Israel as a real place and Israelis as a real people are not significant components in the day-to-day Jewishness of many Center members, professionals, or lay leaders.

There are three significant exceptions to this generalization about relations between many American Jews and Israel in the Center world. Perhaps these cases can illuminate our understanding of the potential to facilitate a more desirable Israel dimension for other mem-

# Concepts of Israel and Israel Education in JCC

Please see...

## **ISRAEL**

Teaching Israel:  
Basic Issues  
and  
Philosophical  
Guidelines



bers of the Center world. Many National JCC Association board members, local JCC executive directors, and JCC Jewish educators have transcended the aforementioned stereotypical dynamic, and have reached a much more profound, insightful, and meaningful relationship with Israel and with Israelis. This is largely due to serious time invested in ongoing learning opportunities in North America and Israel (often as part of the COMJEE process, in which the Center movement has tried to flesh out its Jewish educational vision and strategy), and in regular, creative, and sophisticated Israel experiences of their own. As a result of this involvement, many of them have developed a deep attachment to Israel and to many Israelis - as an integral part of their Jewish world, and as full partners in their collective effort to improve the Jewish educational horizon for Jews everywhere. Hence, there is an apparent gap between their state of mind and the one more prevalent among Center members and many local leaders-at-large. This begs the question of how accomplishments of the intellectual and educational “journey” undertaken by national board members and executive directors might be facilitated for a broader portion of the Center world.

As this brief and preliminary inventory indicates, there is really no end to the possibilities for more meaningful and substantive Israel experiences for North American JCCs, once one begins to think in terms of the natural areas of affinity between these two parts of the Jewish world. The important hurdle is shifting away from a mindset of “other” and “there” or of “poor, distant Jewish cousin” to something reflecting a more accurate, honest, and up-to-date image of Israel: Israel and the JCC as two open, pluralistic, dynamic Jewish settings, in which Jews can meet one another, be Jewish in ways they choose, and continue on their Jewish journeys in a spirit of togetherness.

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