Israel Education for What?
An Investigation of the Purposes and Possible Outcomes of Israel Education

A Research Brief for the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education

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One of the core questions that have yet to be fully answered by the research on Israel education relates to the overall aim of the enterprise. Simply put: What are the purposes of Israel Education in North America? This question of purposes has lingered around the edges of discourse about Jewish education for decades(Chazan, 1979, 2005; Ackernman, 1996; Fox, 2000; Fox, Scheffler, Marom, 2003). Our task in this policy brief is to provide a rationale and articulate a research agenda for establishing why this question is essential for advancing the field of Israel education in particular.

We will focus on four key issues, each of which relates to the current context in which Israel education is situated. Addressing these issues both helps us to better understand the challenges that inhibit addressing the question of "Israel education – for what?, and also points to research questions that invite us to imagine new visions of Israel education that can make a deep and lasting contribution to the what, where, and how we educate about Israel.

Four Key Issues

1. Reluctance/resistance to articulate a clear ideology of Israel education

There appears to be a great reluctance on the part of Jewish policy makers, funders, researchers, and educators to engage in thoughtful and systematic consideration of the range of possible aims, means, and outcomes of Israel education. For the most part, these various "stakeholders" hold to an assumption that Israel is important to Jewish life but are unwilling or unable to examine this assumption more closely in terms of their own ideological stance towards Jewish education, towards Jewish life, and towards Israel.

This reluctance (or resistance) appears to be rooted in some combination of: a) a visceral sense of commitment to Israel and/or fear of Jewish learners losing that sense of commitment; b) a self-limiting assumption that Jews living outside of Israel don't have the right to even ask the question of Israel for what purpose; c) the inertia and relative ease of continuing existing practice; and d) an inability or unwillingness to devote sufficient time or resources for research that is necessary to better understand this complex field (Grant, 2007, Pomson and Dietcher, 2010, Zakai 2011). Perhaps the most significant factor, however, is that addressing the question of purposes forces us to come to terms with the diversity of understandings and viewpoints that American Jewry holds towards Israel. At one time, Israel was a topic that gave expression to Jewish solidarity and consensus among American Jews. For many, this assumption no longer holds. As such, each educational community within the American Jewish community needs to both directly define and justify its own commitment to Israel, and to make sense of the diversity of approaches that American Jews hold towards Israel. This, in turn, raises difficult questions regarding the diversity of Jewish identity altogether. In other words, if we are so diverse, what makes us into a distinct people, or a religion? How can we interact with Jews with different approaches than our own (to Israel, Judaism or any other topic)?

While the current attention seems to be primarily on Israel education, ironically, fruitful research on "Israel education for what?" could ultimately lead policymakers, funders and practitioners to more seriously consider

the broader question of "Jewish education for what?"

Indeed, many of these same factors may apply to Jewish education as a whole (Fox, 2000, Fox, Scheffler, Marom, 2003). They appear to be particularly relevant to Israel education because it has without critical inquiry become a high priority for many of those who today make decisions about Jewish educational program and policy and allocate its funds accordingly. These stakeholders sense that contemporary circumstances dictate that Israel education needs urgent and massive attention.

The need to articulate clear purposes for Israel education may begin as a conceptual problem but it also has deeply practical implications. Otherwise, how can policymakers, funders and educators evaluate their decisions to place such central emphasis on Israel education? How can they respond to colleagues and/or students who might be struggling with the question "Israel education for what?" How can they make wise, informed and strategically sound decisions regarding what is feasible, desirable, worthy and capable of implementation in various settings? And, how can they develop the means to do so accordingly in areas such as teacher education, curriculum development and evaluation studies? In order to take on these tasks they need research that suggests alternative answers to the question of: What is Israel's central importance? For instance, does it reside in its responding to anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist persecution and preventing future Holocausts? Is it about enabling democratic and pluralistic Jewish communal life? Is it about providing a cultural bridge between the Jewish past and present? Is it about connecting one's religious life or other aspects of one's Jewish identity to a vibrant and complex Jewish state? Or is it about contributing to peace among nations and a better global condition? Inherent in this sampling of questions are diverse and conflicting ideological value assumptions that would need to be clarified and critically considered with respect to each other. One key question to explore is whether there is a common core of Israel education regardless of ideological stance? If we accept the more likely reality that we need a diversity of approaches to Israel education, we should be examining what are the relative advantages and shortcomings of each of them? What are their criticisms of each other? In what ways can they work together and in what ways do they run counter to each other?

It is very difficult to find instances of current research in Israel education that address such issues in a methodologically sound, systematic and profound manner (i.e., in distinction from the prevalent mode of public lectures, after dinner speeches and media presentations regarding Israel). Too much of the relatively little research on Israel education at present is driven by the social sciences and aimed at describing what is. We already have considerable research that tells us what currently exists is insufficient (Grant, 2007, Zakai 2011, Pomson and Held, 2012) or that it produces desired outcomes regardless of its pedagogy and practice (Saxe et al, 2009, Hecht et al, 2010).

What we need is a serious exploration of what Israel education could be as opposed to what it currently is, and if and why these other options might be preferable. This exploration must begin with clarification of values and articulation of what ideology of Israel is represented or held by the institution, community, and individuals in which the Israel education is to take place. In other words, we cannot begin to answer the question of Israel *education* for what without first clarifying the question of *Israel* for what. Given the diversity within the American Jewish community, it may be impossible to come up with a single answer to this question. If we accept the likelihood that Israel education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, then we need research that can help us better understand the implicit assumptions underlying the range of implicit ideological/religious/values approaches within varying sub-groups of the American Jewish community in order to make them more explicit.

Related to this process is the need to examine how alternative approaches might be taken to translate existing ideologies of Israel into practice or how alternative approaches to Israel education might:
  a) develop in and through different stages of the learners' growth from early childhood to adulthood
  b) be undertaken in different settings, separately or in various combinations, such as the home, the Internet, summer camp, afternoon or day school, synagogue, youth groups, Israel experiences, higher and adult education studies.

c) require from educators and professional learning (including rabbis) in order to be successfully implemented in different settings
d) offer as indicators for the appraisal of their relative success
e) explore the role and impact of Israeli educators (both shlichim and others) on North American educators and Israel education in general.

2. Israel Education – Compartmentalized or Integrated

The very appellation of "Israel education" – as if it were a special and separate subject matter area in and of itself – betrays an instrumental or functional emphasis that implicitly suggests the purpose of Israel education is to expand the pool of Jews who will advocate for its existence or find inspiration for participating in Jewish communal life in America. This approach is very vulnerable to achieving the opposite effects – either estrangement from Israel and its policies that comes from mere opposition to its being advocated by the establishment and a topic beyond discussion and critique (Pomson and Dietcher 2010, Zakai, 2011, Pomson and Held, 2012) and/or distancing from Israel and the established Jewish community.

While there is a legitimate place for Israel advocacy on the Jewish communal agenda, its place in Jewish education is fraught with difficulty. Advocacy training is about imparting skills and knowledge about Israel that train the advocate how to support and defend Israel against its adversaries and critics. It presumes that everyone agrees with this premise and the goal is to convince others to believe the same. Thus, the effort focuses on the "other," not on the individual learners who may still be trying to figure out why, when, how, and where the multiple layers of Israel--as sacred center, as site of personal and collective memory and experience, and as a modern state may be factored into their own active beliefs and commitments (Grant and Kopelowitz 2012). Advocacy training assumes this work is already done or unnecessary. It would seem that an Israel education that makes no pre-existing suppositions about where the learner stands, allows for more open exploration and addressing the key question of "what does Israel mean to me?

This is not to say that Israel education can be apolitical. Indeed, as noted earlier, Israel education and all Jewish education are inherently ideological whether that is made explicit or not. The key is for educators to become more aware of their own ideological and political stance towards Israel and make that explicit without attempting to indoctrinate the learners into their own particular point of view. Indeed, Israel education altogether raises the larger question of what constitutes an appropriate Jewish or American-Jewish political education – a topic that has not been extensively researched.

A related point is that the compartmentalization of Israel education might be in danger of precluding or at least limiting the possibility of integrating Israel into overall Jewish identity development. Keeping Israel education separate does not take into account relation to, support from, or impact on other parts of the curriculum. When the larger purposes of Jewish education are made clear, the whole of the curriculum may support and positively impact the Israel component. For example, whereas a Jewish education aimed at developing halachic Jews might teach Israel as Eretz Muvtachat (the idea that the Land of Israel was promised by God), drawing upon the larger effort to develop halachic orientation and practice and linking it to modern Israel, a Jewish education that places emphasis on cultural literacy might teach Israel as a means to learning to speak Hebrew and read modern Jewish literature that addresses contemporary Israel.

On the other hand, when the question of the relationship of Israel to the larger purposes of Jewish education is unaddressed, the impact can be negative. Take for example, the emphasis many Israel educators place on Israel as the source and model for communal Jewish authenticity. Such an approach may have a deep impact on those who visit Israel for a short period, but what does it tell them about Jewish life in American Jewish communities? Might it have the unintended (or perhaps intended) consequence of perpetuating a message that Jewish life in Israel is somehow richer, fuller, and more complete than anywhere else in the world? How might such an approach be corrected or balanced by the teaching of American Jewish history as a model of

communal Jewish resilience, innovation, and pluralism? Indeed, one might even ask why should Israel education take precedence over the study of American Jewish history and culture? (Neusner, 1981; Marom, 2003; Sarna, 2003,). This example reinforces the fact that we have barely, if at all, explored alternative educational approaches to making Israel a more integral component of American Jewish identity and Jewish life and their anticipated effects.

Even more problematic is the contradiction between liberal values that are transmitted by the general education that Jews receive in Jewish and non-Jewish settings and the particularistic and non-liberal values that often get transmitted by Israel educators. Where the two come into conflict without any attention from educators, there is every reason to believe that the former will override the latter, thereby actively leading the learner away from Israel (Hyman 2008; Zakai 2011; Pomson and Held, 2012; and Marom, 2012) We need the kind of curricular and pedagogical research that would help Israel educators develop their students' capacity to address such conflicts, since they are part and parcel with the history and ongoing development of Israel itself.

The problem of the compartmentalization of Israel in the larger Jewish curriculum looms large when one begins to explore the domain of "follow up" activities to short-term visits to Israel (Birthright, March of the Living, family and synagogue visits, day school trips, bar and bat mitzvah trips, etc.). While these activities are quite limited in scope, most Israel educators agree that the Achilles Heel of these programs is that such activities have limited involvement in transforming the visit to Israel from a one time "quick fix" experience to an ongoing engagement with Jewish life and learning. Yet even though there seems to be a growing commitment to investing in "follow-up" activities, their effective design would require prior research on the role of Israel in larger visions of Jewish life and education.

Research to explore these concerns might address questions such as: If Israel education remains separate and distinct from other elements of Jewish education, what impact has that or can that have on the integration of Israel into one's overall *Jewish* beliefs and commitments when it is fully integrated with other aspects of Jewish education? How does an Israel engaged Jew translate their beliefs into daily actions? What possible curricular models offer a more integrated approach to Israel education? What is the relationship between Jewish literacy and Israel engagement? In what ways can and should Israel advocacy be in conversation with Israel education and in which ways can and should it not be in conversation with Israel education? Is the latter (education for self-knowledge) a pre-requisite for the former (training to defend Israel to others)?

3.   Impact of new conceptions of self and identity

The "what does Israel mean" question is a core and very personal one, that earlier generations of Jews may never have even considered. It is laden with value tensions about our fears, anxieties, hopes, questions, conflicting loyalties and values, and/or ignorance and apathy that can be situated across the ideological, denominational, and theological spectrum of contemporary Jewish life. These tensions may be most evident across the generational divide with policymakers, funders, teachers on one end, and learners on the other.

Israel education is rarely studied or talked about in the broader context of the meaningfulness of American Jewish life (Eisen and Cohen,2000; Wexler, 2000; Sarna 2003; Cohen and Wertheimer 2006). Compounding this are the broader trends in religious and communal practice in general, where identity is defined far more by personal choice than any adherence to communal norms (Bellah et al., 1985; Putnam, 2001; Roof, 2001; Wuthnow, 2010).

At an earlier point in time, Israel may have been understood as the joint project of the Jewish People (and is still understood in this way by many older Jews today). This is a much more difficult idea for younger Jews to grasp, having grown up and been educated with a significantly different sense of self, community, modernity and humanity than earlier generations. As such, they often reject efforts to belong to anything that limits their freedom and lifestyle or that does not speak to the global agenda at large (Giddens, 1991). Even by

saying: "Here, Israel is one particularly attractive element of the smorgasbord of Jewish life that you can pick and choose from," one limits one's working assumption about the scope of choice or contributes to the relegation of Jewish communal life to peripheral status because for the learner the scope is in truth much larger. Research on Israel education will be self-serving to its funders and possibly self-damaging if it does not address this divide for it leaves the learner to confront the most intimate and consequential issues and tensions in his or her own life alone.

As noted above, much of the existing research tells us that Jewish identity is strengthened through an Israel experience. That knowledge is useful, but insufficient. We have not yet delved into these more complex questions of how one's understanding of, relationship to, and engagement with Israel relate to conceptions of self, conceptions of community and Jewish Peoplehood, or one's ideology, theology, and level of Jewish literacy. We have not yet examined how a clearer articulation of purposes for Israel education might link (or run counter to) to larger theories of Jewish or human meaning. Such an approach may be avoided because it runs counter to much of the prevailing culture regardless of whether it stems from a religious belief, historical consciousness, a commitment to the Jewish collective, or a belief that the Jewish textual tradition contains key values for life.

One example that illustrates the profound possibilities here relates to the current research that Sherry Turkle, (2012) has undertaken regarding the damaging psychological impact that overdependence on digital technology (social networks, I-phones, internet) make on the capacities of youth and adults alike on establishing human connection.   What would an Israel education aimed at providing a genuine experience of and training for human connection look like and how could such an approach contribute to a sense that enhanced and sustained belonging to the Jewish community is a compelling alternative or addition?

4. *Israel Education in a broader context*

To date, Israel education is largely a parochial and insular business. Not only is it rarely considered in the broader context of Jewish education, but - ironically, given the prevalent view of Israel as a symbol of Jewish peoplehood - very little work has been done to explore the relationship of Israel education for American Jews with Jewish identity education in Israel or anywhere else in the Jewish world. Israel education matters not just for American Jews, but is in fact of concern to Jews throughout the world. Learning from one another not only increases our collective knowledge base but also reinforces the idea that we are a collective that cares for and about the Jewish People as a whole. We suggest that fruitful research could be done to explore the conceptual similarities between Israel education in the diaspora and Zionist education in Israel. The latter, in many ways grown more similar to the former as it has turned its recent efforts largely towards Jewish identity education in critique of the earlier modes of Zionist education that were more focused on nation and state building and aliyah and/or in response to "post-Zionist" critiques on Zionism at large (Marom 2003b; Schweid 1996).   Consequently, research on the purposes of Israel education in America could both contribute to and learn from Zionist educational efforts around the world. Continuing to treat these as two separate and unrelated issues limits the possibility of knowledge generation and would somehow ironically seem to undermine the whole peoplehood premise of Israel education.

Another way in which research on Israel education could broaden its scope is by learning from non-Jewish diaspora communities and their educational approaches to their homelands and heritage tourism in order to better understand what's going on in Israel education[1]. Might Israel education have something to learn from the ideas that inform the ways that African-Americans are now being educated to relate to Africa? What can be learned from studying educational approaches that have been developed by other religions, nations and communities to their sites of pilgrimage? How can post-modern critiques of implicit foundational concepts such as "peoplehood," "homeland" and "sacred place" help us imagine new possibilities and new approaches for Israel education?

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[1] This point derives from a personal conversation between Zvi Bekerman and Danny Marom, September 2012

Conclusion

As this brief suggests, there is no one answer to the question of purposes of Israel education. In fact, whether made explicit or not, the reigning purposes of Israel education are highly dependent on the particular ideological and theological stance of whoever maintains control over the educational endeavor at any particular moment: the funders, the educators behind the closed doors of their classrooms or out touring Israel, the educational institutions determining the programs and policies of their Israel trips, the denominational movements or other settings in which these institutions are situated, and the learners and their families. Despite the fact that these custodians of Israel education may sit under one roof, their understandings of and commitments to Israel and may vary greatly from individual to individual within those settings. All this suggests, that perhaps it is necessary for research to explore how a vision of Israel education can be consciously and consensually owned by an educational community as a whole, so that learners receive an authentic, coherent and broadly supported approach to the desired role of Israel in the life of the community – one that that can guide them in addressing possible criticisms of communal hypocrisy such as "if Israel is so dear to us, why do we suddenly refrain from visiting when security conditions falter?" or "if Israel is about Jews interacting democratically, why can Israelis be critical of government policy and not I?".

As we noted at the outset, the inability to address the question of purposes has kept Israel education at a largely instrumental or functional level of focusing on general ends rather than specific means or clearly articulated outcomes. It has restricted our ability both to deeply understand what our current education paradigms yield and to explore what potential new paradigms might attain. What emerges from our concern for breadth and depth of perspective in researching Israel education is also that we go beyond the current pool of researchers in an effort to include thinkers from within the community whose profundity and broad horizons can stretch the field out of its self-referential tendencies and thereby keep it more honest and more qualitative. Research on and planning for Israel education requires deep intellectual work by thinkers who can serve as resources for policy makers, funders and educators involved in the direction, design and critical evaluation of their practice.

Research Needed to More Fully Address the Questions of Purposes
- Critical conceptual analysis of current funding policies, curricular-pedagogical practices and the content of various Israel education programs in light of diverse ideologies
- Exploration of how alternative visions of Israel education guide and/or could guide coherent curriculum, institutional culture and teaching practice over various stages of development (e.g. Israel education as part of a larger vision of Jewish peoplehood education)Investigation of the reigning and possible relationships of Israel education to broader Jewish and general educational goals and purposes, including in response to post-Zionist and post-modern theories
- Philosophical analysis of differences and possible relationships between Israel advocacy and Israel education as well as between Israel education and Zionist education
- Comparative research between Israel education and Jewish identity education in Israel and in Jewish communities around the world
- Comparative research between the conceptual basis of Israel education and heritage tourism in non-Jewish diaspora communities
- Conceptions of follow up activities to short-term and long-term Israel education
- The influence of the identity and nationality of the educator on Israel education (e.g., what happens when the ideology of the educator differs from the institution? What differences are there between North American educators, Israeli educators, American educators born elsewhere, etc., etc.)

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