

Blog Post: Rethinking the Teaching of Israel

By Jon Levisohn

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The annual conference of the Association for Israel Studies (AIS) typically features scholarly presentations on diverse aspects of Israeli history, politics, literature and arts. *This year's conference*, however, included a focus on the *teaching* of Israel as well. One panel discussed Taglit-Birthright Israel. Another presented research on the teaching of Israel on university campuses with small Jewish populations. A third was devoted specifically to the argument that Israel studies, as a field, has much to learn from educational research.

Then, at a *post-conference seminar* co-sponsored by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Alex Pomson of Hebrew University and Dan Held of the Jewish Theological Seminary presented their work on Jewish teens' attitudes towards Israel and towards the Israel education efforts of their Jewish day schools. Three things were particularly notable about this session.

First, the room was packed with a diverse cross-section of people. There were instructors of Israel studies courses on university campuses (American, Israeli, European, and South American), and educational researchers, as well as those who teach in Jewish day schools or supplementary schools or informal ed programs. In designing the session, we had hypothesized that a conversation across educational settings would be valuable and constructive, that the differences in setting are not as important as what we can learn from each other. Based on the level of interest and engagement of the participants in the seminar, the hypothesis seems to be correct.

Second, Israel and the teaching of Israel are so intensely politicized that the students cannot help but be affected. In talking with students, Pomson and Held have discovered a pervasive belief that everything they hear about Israel, including everything that they hear from parents and teachers, is (as they say) "biased." One astute participant in the seminar observed that this should not be surprising to us. After all, we've been telling students to distrust what they hear about Israel for years, so it is only natural that they have come to believe that! The result, however, is a disheartening abandonment of critical thinking, and an embrace of a kind of cynicism or nihilism.

Third, and relatedly, we seem to be confused about what we mean when we talk about "teaching Israel" (here I've been influenced by *other work* by Alex Pomson, together with his colleague Howie Deitcher). If Birthright or other Israel trips are our paradigm of Israel education, for example, then "teaching Israel" may mean giving students a brief first-hand experience in the land, with a thin overlay of information, intended to provide both a lasting connection to the land and its people and, at the same time, a lasting commitment to their own Jewish identities. For other initiatives, on the other hand, Israel education seems to be primarily about Israel advocacy, with students drafted as front-line troops for skirmishes on

college campuses or elsewhere.

Israel trips and Israel advocacy may each have their proper place. But school subjects succeed in engaging students when they possess intellectual richness and texture, when they hold the capacity for sustained and disciplined inquiry, when they provide opportunities for the delight and surprise of genuine learning, when instructors know their subjects well and have a clear understanding of their pedagogic objectives, when students feel that there is a subject to be mastered and a there is a sense of accomplishment in advancing towards greater understanding.

If Israel education is failing, perhaps it is failing in part because we have not conceived of Israel as a subject in these ways.

This brings me back to the AIS. For three days, three hundred fifty scholars met to talk about various aspects of Israel. These scholars are endlessly interested in Israel, its past, its present and its future. They are politically diverse, to be sure, but they do not spend their time in political debates. They have more interesting things to talk about, and more enjoyable things. They would rather learn something new and insightful about Israeli literature or gain a new perspective on a fascinating aspect of Israeli culture.

The AIS folks surely have something to learn from the folks who work in Jewish (and general) education, and the interest in the sessions on teaching Israel at this year's conference indicates an impressive degree of receptivity. But perhaps Jewish education also has something to learn from AIS. What, I wonder, would Israel education look like, if we took AIS as our model and treated Israel education as a serious academic subject?