What Is “the Israel Experience”?

Abstract Educational travel to Israel has become an important framework for American Jewish education. In this chapter, the core components of this Israel educational experience are analyzed.

Keywords Educational travel • The tour educator • Learner-centered • The holistic educator • The Israel experience

TRAVEL IN THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Travel is one of the oldest of human experiences. Over time, the functions and nature of travel have changed, but the phenomenon itself remains a significant dimension of life. The many iterations of travel include nomadic wandering, searching for sustenance in times of travail, religious pilgrimages, military campaigns, the quest for new scientific horizons and discoveries, and the search to find oneself and meaning in life.

In recent centuries, travel was no longer necessarily related to oppression, salvation, or the lust for power. Instead, it became a form of “finishing school” for graduates of European gymnasia and academies to search and seek out “the meaning of life”:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

from “Song of the Open Road” (Walt Whitman, American poet, 1819–1892), (Whitman 1998)

What is that feeling when you’re driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing?—it’s the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s a good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture between the skies from *On the Road* (Jack Kerouac, American novelist (1922–1969), (Kerouac 1957)

TRAVEL TODAY

Ours is an age in which travel has become an integral element of contemporary culture. Far-off places have become increasingly closer and more easily accessible by car, train, air, boat, and, even, by spaceship. The “business” of tourism has made travel comfortable, exotic, relaxing, and exciting—and if you get homesick you are likely to find the Golden Arches nearby! Tourism has become a major economic force; indeed, there are many countries whose primary industry is travel and tourism. Whereas travel in ancient times typically entailed travail and tremor, modern travel encompasses sunscreen and snack bars.

THE TRAVELING JEWS

The history of the Jewish people is very much connected with travel. In the book of Genesis, a man named Abram travels to a new land, his name changes to Abraham, and his destiny is to become the father of a people. In times of famine, Abraham and his descendants travel to Egypt for sustenance. Eventually, the periodic Egypt sojourns result in a long period of servitude to foreign masters, culminating in a lengthy desert journey from Egypt to the Promised Land with a brief stopover at a mountain called Sinai which dramatically shapes a wandering group of ex-slaves into the Israelite people and nation. After a formative period that included tribal formations and schisms, the Israelites experience varying degrees of stability under diverse foreign sovereignties, with periodic exiles to Babylon, Alexandria, Elephantine, and other places. Indeed, it might well be legitimate to describe the Israelites and their successors as a “traveling people” who throughout history moved from a variety of places to a multitude of locations. Travel somehow became integrated into the personality of the Jewish people. (Chazan 2019).

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL TRAVEL TO ISRAEL

The motif of “travel to the Promised Land” became a central motif of the life, prayers, language, customs, and traditions of Jewish life after the Exile. Actual mass travel to Israel never became the norm until the twentieth century, but thinking, envisioning, praying, and even being buried in the Holy Land became a central part of the law, liturgy, and lore of the Jewish people in its many diasporas (Chazan 2019). The story of early twentieth-century travel to Israel constitutes a dramatic new chapter in the history of the Jewish people and is transformed into the emergent idea of Israel as a “real” place for Jewish settlement and ultimately statehood. (Shapira 2012).

The focus in this chapter is on youth travel to Israel, which, as discussed in the last chapter, has become an important dimension of the new intercultural concept of experiential Jewish education. Fairly soon after the establishment of the State, diverse educational frameworks for youth travel to Israel developed and became part of the Jewish educational landscape of both North America and the entire Jewish world (Cohen 2000). For most of the twentieth century, the focus of Israel travel was mostly on summer teen travel programs conducted by major denominations, with periodic specialty niche program created by creative independent educators. In addition, a network of one-year or gap year study programs in Israel emerged, which had special appeal for graduates of Orthodox day schools. The concept of educational travel to Israel was significantly broadened toward the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century with the establishment of Taglit-Birthright Israel which provides the gift of a ten-day trip to all eligible post-high school young people. Over the last 20 years, it is estimated that close to three quarters of a million young Jews have participated in such programs. (Saxe and Chazan 2000; Kellner 2010).

Which terminology best characterizes travel to Israel for the young in our day and age? Such travel is not the traditional pilgrimage motivated by a desire to see and pray at holy sites. It is not a search for refuge, since most of the travelers are safe in the countries from which they come. Nor is it migration, because most Jews living outside of Israel do not feel the need to migrate. It is not tourism per se since the major frameworks for bringing young people to Israel are sponsored and implemented by educational organizations.

Several terms have been used over the past decades to describe such programs. They have been called “youth travel to Israel”, “Israel educational programs”, and even “the Israel pilgrimage”. In the 1980s, a group of Jerusalem-based educators discussed the issue of nomenclature, and from these discussions the current denotation of such travel as “the Israel experience” emerged. This language has persevered, and today the term “the Israel experience” is used to refer to frameworks created by various agencies (mostly educational) to enable young people to encounter the phenomenon of a modern Jewish state.

CHARACTERISTICS OF “THE ISRAEL EXPERIENCE”

The Israel educational experience has emerged as one of the new innovative educational frameworks in Jewish life. This educational framework has become a dynamic field of reflection, innovation, piloting, and evaluation, and, as a result, this domain has emerged as an exciting sphere of contemporary Jewish educational thinking and practice.

The Israel educational experience is rooted in a number of core principles. The first principle—learner-centered education—posits that the *subject* of Israel trips is not Israel but rather the young people who are experiencing Israel. This first principle neither diminishes nor denigrates the importance of Israel, rather it proposes that the Israel experience focus on the interaction of an individual with the diverse historical sites, contemporary places, and people of twenty-first-century Israeli life.

The second principle indicates that *the subject matter* of such an Israel experience is not the visit or observation of historical sites per se but the overall rhythms that constitute contemporary and historic Israel. The subject matter is a kaleidoscope of diverse peoples, ideas, and ways of life, all of which call for educators who are able to create a culture of dialogue and dialectic between the places and the visitor. The skill sets of trip educators include the ability to facilitate discussion between “places” which have much to say and young people who want to “communicate” with them. What matters is not the visit to the Western Wall or Tel Aviv beaches per se (although both are important), but rather the meetings and “conversations” of our young visitors with the many venues they will visit in Israel. Indeed, the various places of Israel are not sights to photograph but voices with whom one can speak.

The third principle is that every aspect of Israel—and not simply the famous sites—are places to be visited and engaged with. The names of the

streets in Israel are a lexicon of biblical, rabbinic, and contemporary heroes. Graffiti on the walls are new texts being written by twenty-first-century scribes of the community. Popular music reflects both the diversity of ethnic rhythms of Israel, as well as of the topics that shape contemporary Israeli discourse, such as war, peace, noise, quiet, not forgetting the universal motifs of the human condition—love, sadness, and existence. The traditional holy places or historic sites are not the totality of what there is to see in Israel. Yehuda Amichai quipped that it might be better to look at people buying fruits and vegetables in the marketplace for the family than at arches from many centuries ago (Alter 2015).

The fourth principle of the Israel experience is that Israel’s many diverse sites are waiting to “talk” with people, rather than be looked at like exhibits in a museum. The value of a visit to Masada is to engage with individuals who lived there thousands of years ago and to hear from them why they did what they did. A visit to the *Knesset*, Israel’s parliament building, is not to take pictures of important people, but rather to talk to representatives of the diverse parties, pose questions, and listen to their different answers. The Israeli educational experience is a conversation not a photo-op exercise.

The fifth principle is the importance of intensive interaction with Israeli peers. In the last decades of the twentieth century, one of the independent Israel experience organizations re-shaped the Israel trip by rooting it in the shared experiencing of Israel by North American and Israeli peers *traveling together*. This concept—called the *mifgash*—regards Israel experience as a unique opportunity for young people in Israel and Jews from all over to travel, learn, interact, and share both common and unique experiences.

The sixth principle views the Israel educational experience within the tri-level curricular construct of “overt”, “covert”, and “null” curricula. The *overt* curriculum of Israel education focuses on a group of places and experiences that are regarded as worthwhile for young people to visit and experience, such as The Western Wall, *Yad Vashem*, *Masada*, The *Knesset*, Rabin Square, and the desert. The *covert* curriculum, shaped by the participants, includes free time in downtown Jerusalem; swimming at Tel Aviv beaches; riding on the bus; and sitting outdoors or inside a hotel in the evening talking about anything and everything. These moments enable participants to set their own agenda and discuss their particular Israel experience and relate it to their own lives. Finally, there is the *null* curriculum, which refers to places not included on the trip because of time, convenience, personal safety, or other reasons. The null curriculum is

important, particularly if participants sense that there are parts of the Israel experience that the trip organizers are hiding. Trip organizers should be able to speak openly both about the places they go to and the places they don't go to during the experience in Israel—and why.

The seventh principle is the notion of the trip leader as a *moreh derech*—pointer of the way—rather than as a “tour guide”. Tour guides talk about the history and meaning of sites in the story of a country. *The moreh derech* does the same but also asks questions, and initiates conversations between participants and sites and venues and participants and each other. The *moreh derech* certainly needs to know facts, figures, and background and history of the sites; but they also need to know how to engage young people in discussions with the locations and with each other. Moreover, the days of the program are measured less by the quantity of sites visited than by the quality of the experiences that take place (distinguished Israeli educator Zohar Raviv reminds us that “less is often more”). The tour educator is a “matchmaker” whose mission it is to create meaningful interaction between different types of people, people and places, and persons with themselves.

The eighth principle is that a good Israel trip is one in which an active and dynamic social environment emerges so as to enable fruitful interaction amongst group members. The creation of a vibrant interactive group or community among participants is a central dimension of the Israel educational program; a good Israel experience is shaped by an animated learning community.

The ninth and final principle of the Israel experience is rooted in the philosophy of Dutch historian Jan Huizinga, who described humankind as *Homo ludens*, people who play (Huizinga 2014). The central point of Huizinga and others is that human experience is about learning, experiencing, relating, enjoying, and playing. Play is neither antithetical to education nor should it be regarded as stealing time for frivolity. Indeed, the beach, hikes, games, and hanging out are not “non-educative” activities—they often turn out to be pivotal life moments and experiences. Fun and relaxation do not preclude education but rather they are moments for education. Visiting Israel is not all classroom study. Israel and Israelis like to play, smile, and have a good time, and participants in Israel education experiences should be able to share those moments.

These nine principles are guidelines that should shape the planning and implementation of quality Israel experiences. There are no fixed lesson plans, textbooks, and materials that must be covered on an Israel

experience and certainly no final examinations, certificates, or pre-college credits. Instead, there are young people ready to experience, learn, explore, question, and play in this remarkable twenty-first-century classroom called the State of Israel.

THREE CHALLENGES

Clearly the Israel educational experience is a significant contemporary campus for meaningful education about Israel, in particular, and about Jewish life, in general. At the same time, the educational experience in Israel encompasses several challenges.

The first challenge is that contemporary Israel is comprised of a vast multitude of diverse Jewish ethnicities, religious orientations, and political views. In fact, Israel is the ultimate playground of Jewish diversity. While it is popular to use the phrase “Israelis” as though they were one entity, the term is misleading in implying that there is one homogeneous phenomenon of “being Israeli”. Indeed, the truth and the power of an experience in Israel is to make very clear that contemporary Israel is a strikingly heterogeneous mixture of diverse backgrounds, attitudes, and behavioral systems that do not easily fit into one stereotypical category. A major mission of the Israel experience is to highlight this diversity in the cultural, religious, and political sphere and to enable students to witness varied expressions of these diversities. Denominational trips need to move out of their ideological comfort zones and meet Israelis who do not fit neatly into the trip organizers’ framework. Non-religious organized trips should not simply present religion as a problem but expose its participants to rich and meaningful examples of living a religious life in Israel.

The second challenge of the Israel experience is how to explain the dynamics of church and state in Israel as compared with the United States of America and several other Western democracies. The Israeli governmental structure is modeled on social and political patterns found in many western European countries that are alien to the American total separation between church and state. In Israel, many matters related to life-cycle events such as birth, marriage, and burial are not solely personal or individual, but rather are under the jurisdiction of the state and religious bodies, where “religious” means “Orthodox”. The most strikingly controversial arenas of this system—who is permitted to officiate at life-cycle events (*bar mitzvah*, marriage, and burial) and non-egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall—are within the jurisdiction of the government-approved Orthodox

rabbinate. Israel educational experiences should elucidate and explain the origins of such practices and allow for questions, discussion, agreement, and disagreement. The purpose of the trip in this area is not to preach but to teach.

The third and most complicated challenge of Israel educational experiences relates to what is called “the conflict”—the longstanding disagreement, confrontation, crises, and wars between alternative narratives and claims related to Israel and Palestine. This dynamic has proven to be one of the major complicating aspects of the Israel experience, one which is frequently cited as a reason not to deal with this topic. The Israel experience should play an important role in educating participants about this longstanding conflict—its origins, its key events, and its centrality in every sphere of life in Israel. The overall goal is to enable the young from abroad to understand the many faces of contemporary Israel society concerning the various positions toward the conflict. Israel educational experiences are the appropriate settings for helping to explain this complicated and often significantly emotional aspect of life in Israel. This subject must be treated with openness and integrity, and it is crucial that its exploration presents a picture of the origins of the conflict from the Israeli perspective and the many diverse responses and reactions to this reality within Israeli society. The purpose is not to defend, impose, or indoctrinate any one position but to educate young people to understand the many complex perspectives on this subject within Israel. The visit to Israel should not be a seminar exclusively devoted to the Israeli—Palestinian conflict; yet to neglect this topic would be both a missed opportunity and a cause of questioning about the integrity of the Israel experience organizer. The parameters of the presentation of the conflict need to be precisely defined as encompassing diverse perspectives as reflected in Israeli society.

Obviously, a visit to Israel can only legitimately present the many diverse voices *vis-à-vis* the conflict from within Israel and is not able to present in-depth perspectives of the non-Israeli voices on this subject. At the same time, it is important to indicate that there are alternative Palestinian and Arab perspectives and narratives. It must be made clear that a trip to Israel is a trip to Israel and not a trip to Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia or post-1967 territories under Israeli supervision. The visit to Israel is not a seminar on Middle East relations and, because of security dynamics and for practical reasons, it cannot enable comprehensive access to the Palestinian perspective. It is important that this point be openly discussed and should in no

way be presented or understood as censorship or political narrowmindedness. The perspectives of the non-Israel side are important and at some point must be seriously encountered, but the Israel educational trips can only enable a thoughtful, open, and multidimensional presentation of diverse Israeli perspectives with an acknowledgment of the existence of other perspectives.

Indeed, we should not be afraid of teaching complexity. Our twenty-first-century young people live in a world defined by complexities reflected in family, gender, politics, and racial dynamics, and it is critical to treat this new generation in a manner that befits them and their expectations from education. It is essential to enable the formulation and discussion of intelligent questions rather than to provide slogan-like answers. The goal of dealing with the conflict in Israel experiences is to help the young to learn about, reflect on, and ask any and every question that will help them to better understand a very important dynamic in the life of the State of Israel.

CONCLUSION

Imagine the possibility of having a twenty-first-century Disney-World-like venue with neighborhoods, exotic foods, multiple beliefs and cultural traditions, and a Jewish calendar, as well as newspapers, TV programs, pre-schools, and great beaches that “speak” in Hebrew! Today, a twenty-first-century State of Israel exists! Babies are born, people fall in and out of love, kids go to school, families go on trips, good things and bad things happen. This is a significant moment and place in the long saga of Jewish civilization, and it is a particularly remarkable opportunity for those who love Judaism and education.

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