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"Charting New Courses"

Educators at conference clued in on creative ways to teach about modern Israel.
Gabrielle Birkner - Staff Writer

Two years ago Barbara Gononsky was looking forward to retiring. She had been teaching Hebrew language and literature at Jewish day schools for nearly 25 years, and was considering a move to Florida.

Then Gononsky, who chairs the Hebrew Department at The Frisch School in Paramus, N.J., attended a five-day workshop on the "History, Culture and Politics of Modern Israel."

Florida, she decided, would have to wait.

"It really transformed me," Gononsky said of the workshop, where she learned about the biblical origins of Zionism, Palestine under the British Mandate and teaching modern Israeli literature, among other topics.

Upon returning from the conference, sponsored jointly by the Institute for the Study of Modern Israel at Emory University and the Avi Chai Foundation, Gononsky embarked on developing a Zionism curriculum for her students at Frisch.

The curriculum is already being used in the ninth- and 10th-grade honors classes. Ninth-graders are studying early Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel, and 10th-graders are examining legal and illegal Jewish immigration under the British Mandate.

"Students are generally taught a lot about the Middle Ages and a lot about the Holocaust, but I don't think they learn enough about the State of Israel," its history and development, said Gononsky, who hopes to expand the curriculum into the 11th and 12th grades, and adapt it for non-honors ninth and 10th-graders.

This year the annual teacher workshop, which has trained more than 300 Jewish educators since its inception five years ago, was held July 31 to Aug. 5 in Waltham, Mass. The symposium attracted more than 60 Jewish educators from more than 19 states.

They gathered daily in a hotel conference room, adorned with colorful posters showing a Jewish pioneer taming the swamplands in Palestine before the State of Israel was founded; Orthodox Jews praying at the Western Wall; a pensive-looking David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister; and a Tel Aviv beach scene, among other images.

Bringing the comprehensive study of Israel, including the diversity of the Israeli experience depicted in the posters, into the classroom was the goal of the workshop spearheaded by Emory University Professor Kenneth Stein.

Stein, who teaches contemporary Middle Eastern history and Israel studies, said Israeli history lessons often begin with the Holocaust and end with a discussion of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Teachers talk about American foreign policy, about disengagement, about Rabin and Arafat," he said.

What ultimately gets lost in the shuffle, according to Stein, is the proud narrative of how the state was birthed, and how it has evolved.

"There's a great history to be told, and unfortunately American Jews are not telling it to their children, and Israelis Jews are not telling it to their children," said Stein, who goaded educators to keep Israeli history lessons as apolitical as possible.

He also warned them about oversimplifying the connection between the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.

“Stop basing the story on what happened between 1939 and 1945,” he told the group. “The Holocaust is important to our identity, but it’s not why we have a state. ... The state was not delivered on a silver platter in 1947. It takes people to take a dream and turn it into a reality, and that’s what you have to get kids to understand.”

Conference attendee Hillel Meyer, who teaches Hebrew language and Israel studies to fourth-graders and high school students at the Columbus Torah Academy, an Orthodox day school in Ohio, agreed that many of his students see Zionism as a post-Holocaust phenomenon.

“My students come in thinking Israel was started in 1947 or 1948, and they don’t realize the groundwork that was laid hundreds of years before,” he said.

Educators at the conference were exposed to an array of creative Israel-themed classroom activities. They included simulating a radio program, complete with news reports and advertisements, that might have been broadcast from Tel Aviv on the eve of Israel’s Declaration of Independence; transforming the classroom into a mock Knesset; having students debate issues like civil marriage, allocation of funding for development towns and military exemptions for yeshiva students; and having students design their own Palestine partition plans, taking into account Jewish and Arab population centers, and the location of holy sites, natural resources and seaports.

The teachers also learned how to design lesson plans centered on biblical passages, Hebrew-language fiction and poetry, and historical documents like land records, correspondences and newspaper clips.

“Now I can use the documents to show my students, ‘Hey, there was a lot going on before 1947,’ ” Meyer said.

At Tichon, a nondenominational supplementary Jewish high school in Atlanta, students learn Israeli history as part of modern Jewish history. The course tends to be heavy on Holocaust studies and the American immigrant experience, said Robert Cook, the school’s director, who attended the workshop.

“I think there would be value in having a course just about Israel,” he said, noting the workshop provided the impetus to deepen Tichon’s Israel studies curriculum.

And Terri Klein, a seventh-grade Hebrew school instructor at the Conservative Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown, Conn., said the symposium inspired her to begin developing a synagogue-based adult Israel studies curriculum.

“You ask my students about Israel and they’ll tell you that it’s a dangerous place that’s far away,” she said. “They don’t know much beyond that and it saddens me. ... I think we need to raise the whole congregation’s level of consciousness, interest and commitment to Israel.”