

THE NEW YORK JEWISH WEEK

August 24, 2005

"Poor Grades On Teaching Modern Israel"

Jewish schools celebrate the Jewish state, but few provide meaningful instruction with an organized curriculum.

Carl Schrag - Special To The Jewish Week

When Hindy Poupko was a senior at Yeshiva University's Stern College this past term, she and a few of her friends in the Israel Club decided to offer Orthodox Jewish high schools a series of Israel education workshops.

"I thought we should do something to help high schools," she said.

Poupko, 21, and her friends contacted schools and offered to run a few sessions teaching modern Israeli history and Israeli advocacy, and about Israel's case in its conflict with the Palestinians.

The response was overwhelming, and they taught at 13 schools in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Florida and Texas.

The Israel Club's effort was such a success that YU turned it into an official program called Teach for Israel.

Poupko, who graduated in May and began a one-year fellowship in YU's Center for the Jewish Future, continues to be involved in the program.

She said she was gratified by the students' interest but distressed by their lack of knowledge.

"The average student knew so little about basic Israeli history," she said, adding, "They wanted to know more."

And these were Jewish day schools, many of whose students have been in full-time Jewish programs since kindergarten.

Some schools rejected the students' offer to teach.

"A lot of schools said, 'We're doing enough already,' " Poupko related, but she doesn't think many really are teaching the subject adequately.

Teach for Israel is intended as a supplement to regular Israel education curriculum, not as a replacement, but few schools actually have such a curriculum.

"It's absurd that Israel education is not on a par with math or American history in Orthodox day schools," Poupko said. "The schools are not doing a good job, but they are becoming aware of it. It has to be more than advocacy training. The students we worked with love Israel, but they need knowledge."

Judging by the Israeli flags and posters that adorn the walls of many Jewish schools, parents might be excused for thinking their children absorb deep lessons about the Jewish state. In truth, the décor may be the strongest message kids get about the centrality of Israel.

As the Teach for Israel team learned, in most schools across the country, little pedagogical thought goes into teaching about the modern Zionist movement, Israeli history and the connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel — if they are taught at all — or current events that affect a place called the Jewish homeland.

In fact, five years after the outbreak of the second intifada, when the focus of Israel advocacy is beginning to trickle down to high school students, few Jewish schools are offering substantive curriculum that deals with the Arab-Israeli conflict today and the facts and events leading up to

it.

Interviews with students and educators in more than a dozen states across the United States found that at a time when even committed Jews on college campuses are feeling inadequate in responding to anti-Israel demonstrations and propaganda, and when the community is recognizing the need for more focused attention, most Jewish schools would get a failing grade when it comes to addressing this crisis.

One Day Not Enough

In most schools, Israel Independence Day is the annual occasion for Israel education, and many teachers come up with creative approaches to the topic each year. Last year, teachers at a day school in Chicago put their students through a rigorous hour of Israeli-style paramilitary training on the sports field, while a school in St. Louis staged an assembly in which members of each class stood up and described a gift they wanted to give to the State of Israel.

Each activity was well received, but if such special programs are not part of a broad educational approach to Israel they have limited educational value. Unfortunately, these once-a-year special programs are the extent to which most Jewish schools address Israel education.

“If you Google ‘Israel education curriculum,’ not a lot comes up,” said Rebecca Neuwirth, director of special projects at the American Jewish Committee. Most of what does exist, she added, avoids contemporary issues.

Last year, United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for Jewish federations across the country, mapped existing Israel education programs. It came up with a rather small collection of curriculum outlines.

“We heard repeatedly, ‘We don’t have anything written down,’ or ‘We let our teachers figure it out for themselves,’ ” said Andrea Fram Plotkin, a project manager at UJC.

But leaving teachers to “figure it out for themselves” can be problematic, considering that some estimates say less than half of Jewish educators have been to Israel. Even those who do have personal connections to the country may not be trained to deal with the complexity of issues related to modern-day Israel.

“So many of our teachers who are former Israelis maintain a nostalgic connection,” said Dr. Elaine Cohen, the associate director of United Synagogue’s education department, who serves as an educational consultant to the Conservative movement’s Solomon Schechter day schools.

While many of these Israeli teachers do an excellent job sharing their love of Israel with students, Cohen said, “they do not necessarily have the tools to help students deal with some of the complex issues” emerging from Israel’s history and current challenges.

A veteran Jewish educator who asked not to be named said many teachers develop special programs to mark Independence Day each year.

“I’ve done many amazing things about Israel in my class, and so have many other teachers,” she said. “But when a child graduates, he hasn’t necessarily learned specific units about Israel.”

The teacher acknowledged that while this haphazard approach to studying Israel reinforces the students’ sense of connection to the country, the study of modern Israel has not been accorded the careful planning that is routinely invested in the study of other subjects.

No Quick Fix

In the past five years, as Israel plunged deep into the crisis brought on by the Palestinian terror war, concerned American Jews rallied around the notion of Israel advocacy. But some educators are asking whether school-age kids should learn the basics before they get

advocacy training.

“Israel advocacy programs are very important,” said Dr. Eli Kohn, director of curriculum development at the Lookstein Center for Jewish education at Bar-Ilan University. “But you cannot start studying about Israel from 1948. This starts from Abraham.”

Dr. Daniel Margolis, executive director of the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, concurred.

“We start from the premise that students of all ages need to understand the topic before we ask them to advocate for a particular position,” he said. “Our goal is to teach the real Israel, historically and in its contemporary manifestations.

“We do not believe there is a quick fix,” Margolis said. “It takes years to build the intellectual background and the emotional commitment.”

Many summer camps and youth groups include informal Israel education in their programs, and a small but growing number of selective programs, including high school Israel clubs and initiatives launched by such organizations as AIPAC and the Jewish National Fund offer intensive study of modern Israel.

The most academically oriented of these efforts, Write On For Israel, a project launched by The Jewish Week of New York and funded by the Avi Chai Foundation, is a two-year program that includes a free 10-day seminar in Israel. But it reaches only a few dozen high school students in the New York and Chicago areas. The other efforts, while significant, do not replace formal teaching about Israel.

There is no better place to do that teaching than in Jewish day schools and supplemental schools, where hundreds of thousands of young people are sent for a basic Jewish education.

That sounds deceptively simple. Day schools face an acute shortage of time as they try to squeeze a dual curriculum into a single school day, and supplemental schools traditionally focus on Hebrew language, holidays and prayer. Adding hours to Israel studies necessitates trimming hours elsewhere.

Schools’ time constraints are very real but so, too, are the implications if Israel education does not assume a central place in Jewish education.

“We find with every passing year, the kids have less and less basic understanding of the Middle East,” said Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, founder and president of Panim: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, a Washington-based program that runs seminars for Jewish high school students from across the country. “Very few schools are tackling these issues.

“It’s not just about reading three biblical verses, mentioning Golda Meir and singing ‘Hatikvah,’” Rabbi Schwarz said. “That doesn’t cut it anymore.”

Wake-Up Call In L.A.

Despite the difficulty of finding classroom hours to devote to Israel education, some schools have made the effort in the past few years.

The faculty at the Milken Community High School in Los Angeles got a wake-up call when, soon after the outbreak of violence in late 2000, graduates of the school bombarded them with complaints.

“We began to hear from our alumni that they arrived at college completely unprepared for the [anti-Israel] environment they found,” said Matt Albert, assistant principal at the school last year.

As college freshmen, the students said were they were unable to rebut the virulent anti-Israel outbursts they faced on campus. Some said they felt cheated by their alma mater.

“They said, ‘How did we go through so many years of day school education and not feel comfortable with this?’” related Rabbi Neal Scheindlin, a Jewish studies teacher at the school.

Despite a good deal of Israel-focused programming at the school, Milken’s faculty realized it had never made a concerted effort to teach the basics of Israel’s history and current challenges. They developed a homegrown curriculum for a mandatory one-semester senior seminar on Israel that educates students and prepares them for what they may encounter at college.

Following a lecture from a Muslim-American scholar one morning this spring, a roomful of seniors gathered to talk about the program. Most seemed to feel it was a good preparation for college and beyond.

“I’ll go to college much more comfortable and confident enough to stand up for what I know,” said one 18-year-old. “This class can only enhance the college experience.”

Michelle Jackson, 18, added, “I don’t think I’ll know the full effect of this class until I begin college.”

The Solomon Schechter High School of New York underwent a similar process. Three years ago, the school collaborated with the American Jewish Committee to develop Israel education curriculum materials.

The Schechter-AJCommittee effort resulted in IKAR (Israel: Knowledge, Advocacy and Responsibility), which consists of materials for five workshops that can be used as a crash course on Israeli history, culture and current events.

“IKAR is really good for what it is,” said Meredith Katz, who teaches at the school and implements IKAR as part of an integrated social studies curriculum. She noted, however, that the program is only one component of a comprehensive approach to Israel education.

As long as teachers lack the training needed to teach about Israel, even those schools that want to approach the subject seriously are hard-pressed to do so.

Since 1997, Emory University Professor Kenneth Stein has offered annual training seminars for day school and supplemental school teachers, aiming to give them the knowledge and materials needed to teach about Zionism and modern Israel.

Stein developed the course when he realized that “no one was sitting down and planning how to teach this,” he said. The program, funded by Avi Chai, provides tools to teach the history of Zionism, the shift from powerlessness to power and the impact of Jewish sovereignty on Jews worldwide. Including the seminar that was held in Boston this summer, more than 450 teachers from around the country have participated.

Curriculum Needed

All of these efforts are a step in the right direction, but they are limited in scope. Just as students cannot learn everything they need to know about math in a senior seminar, Israel education should not be relegated to a few special programs or a short immersion course during part of one year.

While Kohn of the Lookstein Center acknowledged the importance of occasional seminars or workshops, he stressed that teaching about Israel must be approached in the same way as other subjects.

“I ask, ‘When do you teach about Israel?’ and I’m told, ‘On Independence Day.’ That just isn’t serious. It does have value, but not on its own. You have to start teaching Israel in a formal way,” he said.

For the past five years, Kohn has been working with the Association of Modern Orthodox Day Schools and Yeshiva High Schools to develop a comprehensive approach to Israel education

in the lower grades. After input from educators at five Orthodox day schools, and pilot testing over the past several years, a comprehensive Israel studies syllabus has been written for use in Orthodox elementary schools.

It encompasses 16 lessons per year between first and eighth grade, and addresses issues related to the Land of Israel from a historical and religious perspective.

“The Modern Orthodox schools know they do not do a good enough job teaching their kids about Israel,” Kohn said, adding that this curriculum aims to fill the void and create the foundation children need.

Chanie Winter, who teaches at the Epstein Hebrew Academy in St. Louis and has been involved in developing and piloting the curriculum, praised the effort to formalize Israel education.

“The curriculum spans eight grades, reinforcing the lessons year after year,” she said. “We still have to think of creative ways to teach each part of the curriculum, but it’s in the framework of a comprehensive approach to producing Israel-educated children.”

Winter praised the new curriculum, noting that it is more of a syllabus than a complete curriculum. Teachers still need to develop their own lesson plans and worksheets. At her school, a coordinator has overseen implementation of the curriculum for the past two years, and she already sees a difference in her students. She expressed the hope that other schools would adopt the syllabus. In fact, she sees no alternative.

“A school with a Zionist mission should have a syllabus that enables it to fulfill that mission,” she said. n

Carl Schrag, a former editor of The Jerusalem Post, is a journalist and educator based in Chicago. He is a senior mentor for Write On For Israel/Chicago, and is an associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.