

Breaking myths, building identity: Practitioner-researcher reflections on running an Israel seminar for Jewish education graduate students

Alex Sinclair, Jewish Theological Seminary | alsinclair@jtsa.edu

Ofra Backenroth, Jewish Theological Seminary | ofbackenroth@jtsa.edu

Roberta Bell-Kligler, Oranim Academic

College of Education | Roberta_b@staff.ornanim.ac.il

Abstract

This paper explores how we as practitioner-researchers interpret our students' responses to our deconstruction of their "myths" about Israel. The three authors of the paper are both researchers and practitioners of Jewish education, and have for the past several years envisaged, built, and run a three-week educational seminar in Israel for students in a North American MA program in Jewish education. The educational philosophy of this three-week seminar is grounded in much recent research on and thinking about Israeli education and engagement, which suggests that we should seek outcomes in which our learners view Israel from a multi-dimensional, complex perspective, rather than thinking about the country in simplistic terms. As such, this three-week seminar is an experiential introduction to these new ways of thinking about Israel engagement and the themes of complexity, reality, multi-dimensionality, and nuance.

Student responses to this seminar over the past five years have often displayed considerable amounts of unease, frustration, and sometimes

anger, as they move from their previous “mythic” relationship with Israel into a more complex, multi-dimensional, “reality”-based relationship. Foundational beliefs are subverted; deep-held convictions are questioned. We explore here the similarities between our roles as Israel educators and Professor Neil Gillman’s role as a teacher of Jewish theology.

We interpret a range of data collected from our students, using a theoretical framework suggested by the psychologist Robert Kegan. As practitioner-enquirers, our interpretation of our students’ learning leads us to important insights about the work of Israel education today.

As the new discourse on Israel engagement becomes more and more prevalent in the field, it is important to consider the very real personal grappling that goes on in students’ minds and souls when their myths about Israel are broken. This paper’s exploration of these pre-service education students is therefore an important baseline study for those who wish to carry out reform in the field of Israel education.

Key words: Israel, engagement, practitioner, enquiry

I think the Seminar has changed the way I look at Israel. It isn’t a mythic place to me any more, and I’m not sure if I’m okay with that. I can’t teach my students to love Israel when I walk away from this trip unsure if I love Israel any more.

I am definitely viewing Israel with a much higher resolution and know more about the reality of life here. This knowledge has, however, detracted from the mainly positive connection I had with Israel before the trip.

I still wholeheartedly support Israel and its right to exist, but I think my love affair has ended tragically after this trip.

As an educator, there are few more difficult sentences to read than these. “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought... and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit” (Kohelet 2:11). As educators, we read these responses to the Israel Seminar that we have led, and feel terrible pangs of guilt, of confusion, and of doubt. We have done this to these young men and women: men and women who loved Israel and felt connected to it. We have broken that love. We have

broken their hearts. Did we mean to do that? Was it part of our plan? Is this what Jewish education is about?

Background Information

In order to answer these questions, some background information is necessary about the educational seminar from which these statements emerged. They come from students who participated in a two-and-a-half-week long “Israel experience” designed by the Jewish Theological Seminary’s William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education for its first-year Master’s students.

The seminar, entitled “Visions and Voices of Israel,” first took place in the winter of 2004, and has taken place every year since then. Its objectives were articulated early in 2004, and were agreed upon and approved by the leadership of the Davidson School. The overarching goals have remained relatively constant over the years that the seminar has been in existence, and have revolved around three themes:

- Israel-Diaspora relations, specifically what role Israel plays for Diaspora Jews and what place Israel fulfills in Diaspora Jewish identity;
- Educational visions in Israel, particularly directions and programs being developed in Israel that might promote conversations and interactions with Diaspora Jews; and
- Israel education, intended to help the seminar participants “bring Israel home” to their educational settings and think about how to teach and talk about Israel in those settings.

It is important to stress that the underlying idea behind all of these three themes is that Israel must no longer be presented to youth educators in an overly-romanticized, idealistic way; rather, students should be helped to develop realistic connections to Israel that are rooted in complex, nuanced understandings that take into account Israel’s multi-dimensional and complicated nature: its beauties and its frustrations, its successes and its failures, its wonders and its flaws. We will expand on the philosophy of Israel education that is behind the seminar later in the paper.

The seminar has been subjected to comprehensive evaluation process each year. Students complete two written questionnaires: one before the trip to Israel, and one on the last day of the trip. Both questionnaires include closed and open questions.

Each year, the data from these questionnaires is analyzed and compiled into a written report that includes recommendations for future seminars. It is important to note that while certain changes have been made to the program, its format has remained essentially the same. We, the program leaders, together with the Davidson School and JTS leadership, tweak the agenda each year, but we remain committed to the fundamental idea that drives the program and its component parts. We see the “Visions and Voices of Israel” Seminar as a successful program, and it has begun to gain a reputation in the field of Jewish professional training programs as a model to be emulated.

Over the course of five years, the students themselves also have reported that the Seminar was an important educative experience for them. Despite fluctuations in the group’s responses from year to year, it is fair to generalize that participants from all five years:

- Essentially thought the Israel Seminar achieved its goals;
- Enjoyed and learned from the educational activities that comprised the program;
- Felt much more motivated to learn Hebrew;
- Reported that they had benefited from the group experience; and
- Felt more connected to their cohorts from JTS and to the Jewish collective.

As one indication of satisfaction with the program, it is revealing to note the participants’ willingness (definitely or probably) to recommend it to their friends.

TABLE 1

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
91%	81%	90%	84%

This, then, is a successful program, from the perspectives of its participants, its organizers, and outsiders. Yet within that broad success, reactions such as those with which we began this paper emerge with regularity. In this paper, we explore those reactions.

Methodology

In this study we follow a methodology of practitioner enquiry. While there are several traditions of practitioner enquiry, we employ that espoused by such researchers as Ball, Lampert, and others, who emphasize the study of their own students and the effects of their teaching on those students (Lampert, 1985; Ball & Wilson, 1996; Wilson & McDiarmid, 1996; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Lampert & Ball, 1998; Ball & Lampert, 1999; D. Chazan, 2000; Heaton, 2000; Lampert, 2001; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004); some practitioner-researchers have adopted this methodology to the field of Jewish education (Epstein, 2004; Sinclair, 2005; Tanchel, 2008). While this mode of practitioner enquiry necessarily begins from a very narrow focus on one particular educational context, its strength as a methodology is that it allows the researcher to generate from that limited base significant new understandings that apply to much wider questions in the field. Many practitioner enquirers who use this approach rely significantly on new technologies to help them study their own teaching: for example, they use video footage or electronic records of classroom work to examine their interactions with their students. Our enquiry here also makes use of electronic technology: the primary data sources are collections of real-time data using online survey tools.

Teacher as Complicator: the case of Neil Gillman

One of the authors of this paper has written elsewhere about the manifold connections between Bible education and Israel education, focusing on the attempt to teach both subjects in ways that are compatible with academic scholarship but simultaneously emotionally and religiously compelling (Sinclair, 2003, 2006). Here, we wish to make a similar analogy, not to the teaching of Bible per se, but to a related field: the teaching of Jewish theology. Our pangs of guilt, confusion, and doubt likewise seem somewhat similar to those expressed by a far greater teacher and scholar than any of us: Professor Neil Gillman.

Gillman has been a professor of Jewish theology at the Jewish Theological Seminary for decades, and is one of the most influential liberal Jewish theologians of contemporary times. For a more extensive introduction to Gillman, see Tauber's (2007) remarkable study, to which we will refer in detail below.

Gillman is famous – infamous, perhaps – within the halls of JTS for making students cry. Students in his classes cry not because he is mean; he is by all accounts one of the gentlest, most caring teachers in academe. They cry because he breaks their myths, and with those myths, their hearts. Gillman’s classes in Jewish theology confront students, often for the first time, with theological positions that contradict many of the “mythic” or “romantic” ideas with which they grew up. Revelation, the existence of evil, and even the very idea of God, are all explored from a diverse range of perspectives, including traditional interpretations, but also including radically untraditional ones. In Tauber’s portrait of Gillman, she notes that, in the eyes of some of his students:

he is disturbing theologically for many Conservative Jews, and that includes rabbis. His use of the word ‘myth’ in regard to Torah disturbs them, especially if they don’t understand how he uses the term anthropologically in relation to Judaism.... Some people in the movement have accused him of turning Jews away from Judaism because of his stance. (2007, p. 235)

Another former student of Gillman has noted:

Most of us know about and accept the “broken myth” idea.... At the same time, and this was very powerful and unsettling for me, I think that even though, or maybe because he understood that we live in a time when the Jewish myth is a broken one, he was also mourning that fact. Mourning it alone and mourning it with us. (Tauber, 2007, p. 237)

Gillman himself struggles with these questions. He is adamant about his role as an educator:

This crossroad between Fowler’s stages 4 and 5, the focus of this entire inquiry, is precisely where most of my students are stuck. I understand my task as the attempt to get them over this hurdle, to convey to them the full exhilaration and liberating power of Paul Ricoeur’s “second naivete.”

(Gillman, 2008, p. 130)

But nevertheless, Gillman admits the difficulties and challenges of the task he has set for himself:

Fowler claims that stage 5 is “unusual before mid-life.” That was true in my case, and it may account for the resistance of some students. We are all too painfully aware of the seductive quality of absolute systems and of our need for authoritarian models, whereas this approach puts a premium on individualism, pluralism, the inherently relative nature of all religious claims, personal responsibility, and extended periods of indecision as the process of appropriation and rejection works itself out. (Gillman, 2008, p. 131)

A historical approach to Judaism, writes Gillman, sometimes threatens to “play havoc with the religious sensibilities of students” (2008, p. 125). And just as Gillman worries about the effect that his teaching of theology might have on the religious commitments of American rabbis, so too we worry about the impact that our teaching of a nuanced and complex Israel, rather than a perfect-romanticized one, might have on the feelings of connection or commitment to Israel amongst our education students. The educational vision of the Davidson Israel Seminar is to move students from a uni-dimensional towards a multi-dimensional understanding of Israel. Our goal is that Israel no longer be seen as a perfect and miraculous entity that must be supported and loved blindly, but as a complex, real place, alternatively beautiful and frustrating, bursting with pride and cowering with shame, ground-breaking and backward: ultimately, an unfinished product, a work in progress, an ongoing project that urges the Jewish people to participate in its completion (Eisen & Rosenak, 1997; Chazan, 1998; B. Chazan, 2000; Cohen & Liebman, 2000; Cohen, 2002; Sinclair, 2003; Chazan, 2004; Gringras, 2006; Sinclair, 2006; Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Sinclair (2009) offers a heuristic device that analyzes Israel educational activities along two axes, an x-axis of disconnectedness towards connectedness, and a y-axis of low resolution towards high resolution. Our educational aim in these seminars was to move participants into the top-right-hand corner of this graph, so that they will come to have a “hi-res” understanding of Israel, including its complexities, difficulties, and challenges, that is integrated with a deep feeling of connectedness to Israel qua Israel.

Gillman believes that, ultimately, his teaching of theology is an

essential aspect of rabbinic training, and we too can put our hands on our hearts and say that we believe that our approach to Israel engagement and education, which we share with an increasing and persuasive number of thoughtful researchers, thinkers, and educators, embodies an essential feature of the training of Jewish educators. In this paper we wish to explore the tension between this deep-seated belief in the critical importance of our work and some of the more difficult short-term reactions to it among some of our students.

These short-term reactions are infused with the feeling, akin to being “off balance,” that students sometimes experience as they begin to see Israel through different lenses. Confronting points of view that challenge previously held comfortable and one-dimensional assumptions about Israel, Israelis, Israeli politics, Arabs, and religious life in Israel, to name just a few of the core issues encountered during the Visions and Voices of Israel, can frustrate the participants and throw their equilibrium off balance. This instability is uncomfortable, to say the least, and even frightening to the students, who are confronted with contradictions between what they were taught to believe and feel towards Israel and what they meet during the trip. Realizing that the way they related to and conceptualized Israel previously is no longer adequate creates dissonance and anger.

A Methodological Caveat

Answers to open-ended evaluation questions are always a text that, written by the participants, is read and interpreted thoughtfully by the program designers. In what follows, we offer an interpretation of the texts (the evaluation answers, written by our students). Our interpretation, like all interpretations, may or may not be persuasive. As with all hermeneutic activity, the reader or community of readers of the interpretation will judge whether or not it is persuasive (Fish, 1980). In particular, Joseph McDonald has taught us that “if teaching is a text, then it is a fast and evanescent one” (McDonald, 1992, p. 17), and that even when what is being read is a written or otherwise documented record of student learning, the act of “reading” that text is still an interpretive act, with all the uncertainties that any interpretive act entails.

In the rest of this paper, we suggest a theoretical framework (the work of the psychologist Robert Kegan) that has provided us with a lens

through which to view and interpret our students' reactions; through which to "read" our teaching. Our hermeneutic stance in reading our students' words is deeply influenced by the terminology and ideas of Kegan's theoretical framework. To repeat the caveat: it may be that a reader with a different hermeneutic stance might read our students differently. That is fine. What we offer now is our reading; we hope you find it fruitful.

The Theoretical Framework for our Reading: Robert Kegan

As we embarked on our interpretive activity, we were greatly helped by the terms introduced by Kegan, in his book *The Evolving Self* (1982), to reflect on the responses we received from our students. Kegan is a psychologist whose fields of expertise are adult development, adult learning, and professional development. His work explores the possibility and necessity of ongoing psychological transformation throughout adulthood; the fit between adult capacities and the hidden demands of modern life; and the evolution of consciousness in adulthood and its implications for supporting adult learning, professional development, and adult education. Kegan's work provides us with a theoretical framework that has helped us make meaning of the responses of our adult students. In the book, Kegan describes a sequence for understanding the process of being thrown into disequilibrium. He identifies three positions that learners go through in a progressive sequence as they confront new ideas, engage with new concepts, and eventually incorporate the new learning and understanding into their repertoire of notions, beliefs, and thoughts. He names these positions as follows:

1. Defending (anger and resistance)
2. Surrendering (loss and confusing)
3. Reintegration (excitement and knowledge)

The sequence provides a framework for making sense of the various reactions and positions participants may experience at different stages of their learning; furthermore, it can help educators empathize with the learners as they go through the struggle to make meaning at each stage.

For each of these positions, Kegan identifies a corresponding supportive environment to be offered by the educational system: confirmation, contradictions, and continuity. In the first mode of support, while learners are *defending*, educators should *confirm*: that is,

offer participants the possibility to open up, to engage with the new ideas and information, while they simultaneously defend their prior assumptions. In our case, the educators thus help the students understand that even as their perceptions about Israel change, it is not because they were ignorant about Israel before or were totally mistaken, but because there are other options of knowledge to consider. Secondly, by enabling learners to grapple with the *contradictions* with their old knowledge that the new knowledge suggests, educators can help learners reach a point where the new knowledge is an option, an option that would compel them to *surrender* and modify their previous knowledge. Lastly, *continued* exposure to new knowledge provides them with the opportunity to *reintegrate* their new experiences into a framework of ongoing meaning. Kegan uses a radical metaphor in his description of how a new identity is constructed: he claims that transitions from one stage of identity to another involve a *loss*. It is as if the self needs to separate from part of him/her self, before regaining a new balance. Leaving a consolidated self behind before any new self can take its place, and waiting until a new balance is achieved, the individual feels a loss of control and enters a state of disequilibrium. Nevertheless, even after equilibrium is reached once again, the learner still recalls the feeling of loss: the memory of loss always remains.

Kegan’s framework was later expanded on by Bell and Griffin (1997). Bell and Griffin summarize the new process by means of the following chart, which we have slightly modified:

TABLE 2

Experiential Sequence	Facilitating Environment	Transition
Defending (Embeddedness)	Confirmation	Anger, resistance
Surrendering (Differentiating)	Contradiction	Loss, confusion, cognitive dissonance
Reintegration (Transforming)	Continuity	Synthesis, excitement, knowledge
Retrenching	Patience	Incomplete integration

(first three rows of table from Bell & Griffin, 1997, 51; fourth row added by us)

We have added a fourth element to this sequence: retrenching. While we have placed the retrenching mode in the final row of this table, in actual fact this process can happen at any time during the sequence, not necessarily only at the end. Retrenching may happen when students do not *yet* feel ready to move to the next level of the sequence; they may revert to a previous stage and then progress forward later on. We will return in detail to the notion of retrenching when discussing our examples below.

Kegan and Culture Shock

It may be noted that Kegan's framework has certain similarities with what is often called "culture shock." This term refers to "the ebbing and flowing of exhilaration, anxiety, frustration, hostility, bewilderment, homesickness, denial, lethargy, and other reactions to situational stress, are supposed to subside and eventually settle into a calming sea of relative adjustment to, and acceptance of, the other culture as just another way of consuming reality" (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, xvi). Nevertheless, there are two key differences between Kegan's framework and culture shock. Firstly, while culture shock is a fluid process (note Furnham and Bochner's use of the phrase "ebbing and flowing" and their continuing tidal metaphors), Kegan's framework is a more linear one, albeit with movements back and forth along that linearity. Indeed, below we raise some concerns about the linear and hence perhaps hierarchical nature of Kegan's framework. Secondly, when culture shock has subsided, a person is left with a pluralist or comparativist understanding of the original and new cultures in relation to each other. The reintegration position of Kegan's framework is more fixed: once one has got there, one can't "go back" - the previous position held is *discarded* as the process of change creates a new system of meaning that integrates the new knowledge and understanding on top of the old.

How, then, does Kegan's framework help us understand our students?

Defending with Anger and Resistance

When we introduce new ideas about Israel engagement and education, ideas that sometimes clash quite openly with students' previous conceptions and prior assumptions, we would expect to see the defending mode in action. One student, for example, went back again and again in his written evaluation to the motif of "love." While during the seminar we explore ideas like the meaning of "critical love" versus "blind love," or "mature love" versus infatuation, this student is intent on defending love qua love:

Q: How would you describe your relationship to Israel now?

A: I'm in love.

Q: In thinking about yourself as a Jewish educator responsible for including Israel in the curriculum, what messages / components / experiences will you try to incorporate?

A: First a love, and LOVINGLY [sic] addressing the complexities. Always with love.

Q: What, if any, major insight/s did you have as a result of the Seminar?

A: Complexities can lead to commitment, and also abandonment.

(Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

This student appears to be defending the place of love against what he perhaps perceives as a questioning or a destabilizing of love for Israel in Israel engagement as experienced in the Seminar. He may be questioning whether notions such as critical love actually result in "love," or whether they over-emphasize the "critical." This is especially apparent in the third answer: complexities can lead to commitment, and also abandonment. This statement is, on the one hand, a highly nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the multi-dimensionality approach to Israel engagement, one that notes its potential benefits as well as its drawbacks. On the other hand, and especially when read together with the two previous answers, the statement can be seen as a pushing back against the educational approach of the Seminar: a defensive act. We see

this defensive mode in the answers of another student as well. She writes:

If we are going to be taught about a reality-- we need to see the myth as well. To learn to balance between the two we need to have both elements.

I think the Seminar has changed the way I look at Israel. It isn't a mythic place to me anymore, and I'm not sure if I'm okay with that. I can't teach my students to love Israel when I walk away from this trip unsure if I love Israel anymore. (Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

Again, it is hard as an educator to read this student's response. The same student, elsewhere in the evaluation, indicates that she is, along with her defensiveness, dipping her toe into Kegan's next phase of surrendering:

I want to rewrite my Israel curriculum. I don't feel as if I am teaching my students the right things by giving them the myth of Israel. Or am I wrong? Do I have to invoke a love of Israel first before I tear it apart?

(Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

And she also offers responses that clearly indicate the success of our educational goals:

Q: Do you have any thoughts or ideas about Israel-Diaspora relations as a result of the Seminar?

A: I think that Israel-Diaspora relations need to be strengthened. I think there are hard feelings at times and I think we have a lot to both say to each other and offer each other. I would love to work with Israelis in the future on this concept.

Q: What gaps in your own knowledge about Israel do you want to fill? How might you do that?

A: I want to know more about the conflict and Israeli-Palestinian relations. I want to learn more about the military and its goals. I want to learn about the government. I'm not sure how to go about doing this, but I'm going to ask around JTS.

(Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

Here is a student, then, who has embarked on new paths of

knowledge-seeking and identity-building, but is at this stage both defensive and confused about where this new path leads and how she should go about following it. As educators, we must also learn to live with the disquiet created by hearing a student's pain and anguish alongside powerful and moving statements such as the one she makes about Israel-Diaspora relations. In Kegan's terms, we need to provide a confirming environment for this student as she expresses her anger and resistance rather than feel threatened by those feelings. Our responses need to consider where she is in Kegan's sequence, and also to confirm that anger and resistance are natural and "normal" emotions for her to feel. Equally, we mustn't abandon our thought-through educational process because of our student's defensive reaction to it..

While the above examples of the defensive mode portray students feeling the need to remain "in love," other manifestations of defending can be on angrier, more bitter terms. One student gives the following answers:

Q: What impact do you think that the Davidson Israel Seminar will have on you personally?

A: A complete lack of connection with Israel.

Q: How would you describe your relationship to Israel now?

A: I have no relationship with Israel.

Q: What are your thoughts about the place of Israel in the Davidson MA Program?

A: Pointless.

(Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

Much lies behind this student's answers: a complicated Jewish journey and other factors that we have learned about since; despite the evaluation's anonymous structure, many of the answers made this student's identity quite apparent. One important thing we learn from this student's responses is the complexity of seeking an evaluation immediately at the end of the seminar, while many of these ideas and experiences are still raw. Here, for example, is an email written by the above student about two weeks after the return to the US:

First of all one of the things that I wanted to tell you is that after much internal debate, I have refound my connection to Israel. I realized

that a lot of the things that I was frustrated with had nothing to do with Israel. I wanted to be a tourist. I came into the trip knowing many of the warts in Israel. I wanted to have an “Ah ha” moment and got frustrated that this did not happen. I tried very hard to keep it inside but it didn’t work. So it is what it is. There isn’t really anything I can do about it now. (email correspondence, 1/24/08)

And this from a further email, a month after the seminar:
BTW the more that I talk/read/debrief, I think the frustration that I had was more from a language barrier. I think I had a different definitions [sic] of the words (i.e. myth, reality, love, etc.) that we were using to define things.

(email correspondence, 2/5/08)

We see, then, that for this student at least, the movement from defending to surrendering simply could not happen during the seminar itself, whether because of the intensity of the situation, the immediacy of the experience, or the lack of time to think and process at leisure. The later emails seem to show that the student has entered the “surrendering” phase (although, we would suggest, not yet the “reintegration” phase).

Surrendering to Loss

The feeling of loss was articulated by many of the participants. One student told us (oral communication, 5/15/2008) that:

The Israel trip was eye opening. All my previous experiences were based on an idealistic view of Israel. I was aware of many of the issues such as the religious divide, the foreign workers, the second class status of the Israeli Arabs, but never really thought about them when I thought about Israel. During the trip I felt that there was too much of it. I wanted to see beautiful Israel.

This student emphasizes her feeling the loss of her previous images of Israel. “I suffered from broken illusion [sic]. I love Israel, I lived in Israel for a while and I was looking for the same feeling I had many years ago.” However, in a more recent conversation, she concluded that she did find the experience to be worthwhile and educative. “It was a time to really understand the country and the people. I had the feeling that I really understood how things really work.” (oral communication, 10/8/2008).

Another student effectively summarized his feeling that: *Trying to put it all together is proving quite difficult. When people asked me what the purpose of this trip was a month ago, the best I could manage was, “to explore Israel in its nuances, complexities, and difficulties, all the while examining the reasons for our commitment to the land and its people, and hopefully bringing back with us and to those we teach deeper connections.” I can’t say I have so many answers to the questions, or that I have a clear picture of “what” I will teach about Israel, but perhaps that is exactly the point. For me, Israel is no longer a place of promise or disappointment, perfection or disaster. It something in between, and we can only come close to understanding what Israel “is” by looking very closely. And hopefully in such a deep examination we will come to see our place here, and the central role Israel plays in our identity as Jews (email correspondence 1/4/2008).*

Other students expressed similar feelings about the loss of “beautiful Israel” and the images of the halutz (pioneer), the invincible and almighty sabra, and the idealist, self-sacrificing Israeli soldier. While they wanted to preserve these images, they realized that it is time to move forward and see Israel with open eyes.

The Excitement of Re-integration

Kegan suggests that the feeling of being “off balance,” or disequilibrium, can also be exhilarating; we saw this element emerging as students started to grapple with new points of view and begin to extend their repertoire of ideas and notions about Israel. “Life gets more disequilibrated before it can become balanced again...continued exposure to new knowledge provides [them with] the opportunity of reintegration of the new experiences” (Kegan, 1982, p. 170).

Kegan outlines a progressive sequence in which learners confront new ideas, engage with new concepts, and eventually incorporate the new learning and understanding into their repertoire of notions, beliefs, and thoughts: “The hallmark of every balancing is that the past, which may during transition be repudiated, is not finally rejected but re-appropriated” (104).

Some students were able to reach the reintegration stage during the Seminar itself. The palpable excitement in their new thinking can be seen in some of their evaluation comments:

This experience has given me the bargaining tools to engage with Israel in a more dynamic way both in developing programs and curricula as well as working with colleagues in the U.S. and Israel. I feel as though I have either internal “checks and balances” or a new list of resources with whom to consult whenever I’m using Israel in educational settings to make sure that I’m moving beyond a 2-dimensional side of Israel. (Online evaluation, 1/8/07)

Where do I begin...as I said before, this seminar provided me with the opportunity to take a deep look at my Jewish identity and prioritize my values. It allowed me to reignite my passion for Judaism and Israel and think about the role that I want these things to play in my life. (Online evaluation, 1/8/07)

I will be able to give a more balanced lesson on Israel and be able to teach both the myth and the reality and realize the importance of teaching both. (Written evaluation, 1/12/05)

Q: [What is your relationship with Israel right now?]

A: More complex. More layered. I feel more responsibility to Israel and less guilt. (Written evaluation, 1/12/05)

Being on the Davidson seminar as an adult (rather than as a teenager or a recent college graduate) also gave me a great deal of perspective as to my interactions with Israel in the past, and how I relate to it now: in a more mature, informed, less fantastic way. (Written evaluation, 1/10/06)

It was a good opportunity to learn about more complex issues. The beautiful landscape combined with difficult reality strengthened my love to Israel. It made my view of Israel complex and rich. (email correspondence, 1/4/08).

However, some students were not able to reach this level of reintegration during the Seminar itself; many took several months to do so. We saw earlier, in the example of the student who had become so angry and bitter by the end of the Seminar, but whose later emails displayed much greater levels of understanding, that this extended process can be difficult for both the student and the teacher. Below is an interview with another student whose initial evaluation indicated that

she had not yet reached integration, but whose later emails indicated forward progress along Kegan's sequence:

Q: What impact do you think that the Davidson Israel Seminar will have on you personally?

A: *[I'm] not sure.*

Q: *How would you describe your relationship to Israel now?*

A: *I'm still figuring it out. (Online evaluation, 1/8/08)*

In a later conversation, the student states:

I love Israel and I still love Israel, but I was struck by the amount of downside pictures of Israel we have seen. It was difficult to take. It took me a while to overcome these visions and integrate the new visions into my images of Israel

(informal conversation, 10/8/08).

Retrenching

We noted earlier that the retrenching movement is not necessarily a linear one, and can occur at any stage during the process of identity formation as understood by Kegan. Students can move to a new stage, then retrench, and then return to the previously held stage again at a later point. We observed this move back and forth happening on many occasions. Here, for example, is an example of that retrenching happening “in real time”:

I want to rewrite my Israel curriculum. I don't feel as if I am teaching my students the right things by giving them the myth of Israel. Or am I wrong? Do I have to invoke a love of Israel first before I tear it apart? (Online evaluation, 1/8/08)

We have found it helpful to employ the metaphor of a U-shaped skateboard ramp (see the image, for example, at <http://www.kingramps.co.uk/images/vertpic.jpg>). The skateboarder travels up the wall of the ramp, but may not have enough velocity to make it “over” onto the ledge at the top; she may slide back down and continue to skate up and down until finally achieving the speed needed to make it onto the ledge. So, too, with retrenching. Students may “almost” come to new understandings, but then pull back from them until a later time when they are more receptive.

Here, for example, is another student exhibiting this sliding back and forth in the same online evaluation:

Already, I'm thinking about how to incorporate some of these visions into a June family trip that will have mostly first timers to Israel, so they see more than just the standard tourist stops illustrating the myths.

[The seminar] concentrated on showing the problems of Israeli society without any positives to balance. I was extremely disillusioned....

(online evaluation, 1/8/07)

Embedded within this skateboard-ramp metaphor may be a value judgment on our part that the stage of reintegration is a “higher level” than the previous stages. This concern has of course been raised about many other scales of moral and educational development (Gilligan, 1982; Crain, 1985). While we do not diminish these concerns from a research perspective, as practitioners, we view the reintegration level as a critical educational outcome consistent with critical thinking and mature attachment to Israel, and therefore as practitioner-enquirers, it is essential that we measure our students’ outcomes against the ones that we set for them.

One way to expedite reintegration: meeting Israelis

One recurring theme throughout all of our data is that meeting and interacting with “real” Israelis is one of the most significant elements of the students’ experiences in Israel. Each successive year of the Seminar, we created more opportunities for these kinds of interactions, and each year, students’ thirst for such encounters and demands for more also increases. Our bemused reactions to these responses was at times like urban planners who build more roads, only to find that the new roads are immediately clogged up with traffic, leaving drivers even more desperate for additional routes. So, too, with “mifgashim”: the more students experience, the more they realize just how meaningful they can be, and the more they demand further interaction.

For some, the trip was their first opportunity for first-hand, meaningful interaction with Israelis. One student stated:

I've seen the "clean" touristy side of Israel and many religious and historical sites in Israel. This trip took away the sunglasses and has given me the opportunity to see the soul of Israel - her people. They come in every size and shape. (email correspondence, 1/4/2008). Another student suggested, in an informal conversation, that the complex prisms placed before them had much beauty and many splashes of pain, regret, and sorrow. For her, only through exposure and conversation with Israelis did she manage to go beyond the frustration and resolve some of the contradictions.

These students' reactions already tell us something important about meeting Israelis. Not only is the *mifgash* itself valuable on the level of personal interaction, but the *mifgash* is also a powerful impetus towards understanding the Seminar's wider goals. A statement like "[Israelis] come in every size and shape" is the kind of multi-dimensional understanding that we seek as a desired outcome of the Seminar.

Our findings about the importance of *mifgash* are not new; there is a growing body of research that highlights the meaning that this educational activity gives its participants, both the Americans and the Israelis (Sasson, Mittelberg, Hecht, & Saxe, 2008; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Nevertheless, what we have learned here is that the *mifgash* mode of Israel education and engagement, if well-planned, well-structured, and well-implemented, may be a particularly effective technique to enable students to reach the "top-right quadrant" of the Israel engagement graph, with a hi-res understanding and a deep feeling of commitment (Sinclair, 2009).

Excursus: A brief comparison with another program: *Machon L'Madrichei Chutz La'aretz*

Before concluding this paper, we will note some brief, initial but interesting comparisons to a project that one of the authors is conducting in a different context (in collaboration with Neta Katz). *Machon L'Madrichei Chutz La'aretz* is a 10-month-long leadership training program in Israel for 18-year-olds from across the Jewish world. The program is closely connected to the various Zionist youth movements, and its participants are young Jews who have "grown up" in these movements. It consists of a 4-month period of leadership training at Kiryat Moriah in Jerusalem, followed by 6 months out in the field,

doing volunteer work at different locations throughout Israel.

The *Machon's* educational goals are remarkably similar to those of the Davidson Israel Seminar. At the *Machon*, too, senior staff talk of the desire to move students from simplistic love of Israel to a more complex relationship; of the need for critical thinking along with bonding; of the need for multi-dimensionality.

A research project is currently underway to explore how *Machon* students respond to the program. The project includes qualitative interviews with a representative selection of students, as well as quantitative surveys filled in by all of them. At this stage, the research is only half-completed, and thus any thoughts suggested here are highly tentative and made with the disclaimer that they come from early impressions of unprocessed data. A further disclaimer is that the *Machon* research uses a very different methodology from the practitioner-enquirer approach adopted here; neither of the *Machon* researchers are involved in any way with the philosophy or execution of the *Machon* program.

Those disclaimers notwithstanding, initial data from this partially parallel project sheds very interesting comparative light on the ideas we have raised here. The most striking difference between the *Machon* students and the Davidson ones is that the *Machon* students seem to have found the move from simplistic to complex views of Israel much less troubling and difficult. In the second set of interviews with *Machon* students, conducted mid-way through their year in Israel, we saw relatively few examples of the kind of disequilibrium so common with the Davidson students. This is surprising, because in our first set of interviews with *Machon* students, before their program began, we encountered very simplistic views of Israel, fully consistent with the perfect-romanticized theme that we have spoken about here. In our interviews with *Machon* students four months into their year, at the end of the formal educational leadership segment, students display a much greater understanding of the complexities of Israeli society and its flaws, problems and frustrations. Yet they seemed much more at ease with this greater understanding than some of the Davidson students had been.

At this initial stage, we would offer the following highly tentative suggestions as to why the *Machon* students might have reacted differently:

- *Age?* – *Machon* students are about 18 years old, whereas Davidson students typically range in age from their mid-20s to their mid-50s. Perhaps the *Machon* students are still forming

their identities, whereas we encounter students with identities more fully shaped.

- *Program duration?* – the *Machon* program is 4 months long, whereas the Davidson program is 2 ½ weeks. The high-speed intensity of the Davidson program and the sense that these new understandings are rapidly piling on top of each other may well contribute to the disequilibrium felt. A longer program might allow these understandings more time to settle, take root, and integrate into the students' awareness in a less stressed manner.
- *Living in Israel?* – *Machon* students live in Israel, with a home base, and, while they still “live in a bubble” (by their own admission), they are more in touch with the realities of Israeli life than the Davidson students, who spend most of their time surrounded by the paraphernalia of typical tourists (buses, hotels, restaurants, etc).
- *Focus on personal rather than professional?* – While the *Machon* program is billed as one dealing with educational leadership, the age of the participants and the duration of the program allow for the luxury of a strong focus on personal identity. The Davidson trip is more clearly directed at professional issues, and its participants are highly conscious that in just over a year they will need to deal with these dilemmas in their paid professional lives.
- *Lower pressure?* – Partly as a function of the time issues and the personal/professional concerns involved, the *Machon* experience is a lower-pressure environment than the Davidson Seminar, and offers a less intensive program.
- *Nationality?* – Davidson students are (with one or two exceptions) American, whereas the *Machon* students interviewed hailed from Australia and South Africa. In a fascinating comparative study of Jewish students from different nationalities, Cohen (2003) argues that American Jewish students have images of Israel that are largely spiritual, traditional and uni-dimensional, whereas students from other nationalities (France, UK, and Canada) view Israel from a much more pragmatic, mundane, realistic, and multi-dimensional perspective. Indeed, Cohen goes so far as to

suggest that “American organizations sponsoring trips could include an orientation... [to] introduce their students to more images of contemporary Israeli life” (2003, p. 274) – a goal taken to heart by our program.

Clearly these are enormously complicated questions, and detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this brief suggestive comparison. It is hoped that a detailed essay on the *Machon* data will be forthcoming on the completion of the research project. Nevertheless, we hope that this brief comparative insight has been fruitful.

Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions that we have drawn from this process of practitioner enquiry. First of all, the learners’ move from a simplistic understanding of Israel to a complex, nuanced one, takes time. Two-and-a-half-weeks may be enough for some students to reintegrate all the new understandings and attain a hi-res, connected view of Israel, but for many others, it is an insufficient period of time. Perhaps a four-month program (like *Machon*) would afford enough time; perhaps the process of reflection back in America creates that time. But it behooves us to be patient with our students during the first stages of this process and to understand that radical change does not often happen overnight.

Secondly, there is a process being undergone within this timeframe. While not all students will move through the phases of development that we have described here, many will, and recognizing these phases helps us to be more sophisticated educators, ones who are more in tune with our students’ thinking and feelings.

Thirdly, disequilibrium is a necessary step in this process, or at least, it is when the initial exposure to new ways of thinking is so intensive and rapid. Disequilibrium, together with the feelings of anger, sorrow, and loss that accompany it, may not be a bad thing in the long run. It is sometimes important: without it, new learning may not happen. The process that students undergo, and the time that takes, are not uncomfortable intermissions to be waited out, but significant steps in a complex educational process. It may be extremely difficult, both professionally and personally, to see students in disequilibrium. But sometimes we as educators need to take a deep breath and accept students’ disequilibrium, defensiveness, anger, and cognitive dissonance.

We need to learn how to support our students in that phase, knowing when to listen, when to challenge, and when to push. These educational dispositions are much easier to describe in writing than to perform in practice, but stating them in print is an indispensable step towards improving our practice.

Finally, and in summation, in a complex and important educational endeavor such as this we cannot expect immediate gratification. Changing decades of entrenched educational and sociological cultural understandings about Israel will be a long process. Along the way, we will meet anger, sorrow, and loss. But instead of feeling Kohelet's despair, with which we began this paper, we should perhaps seek solace from a different Biblical verse: "Be strong and resolute!" (Deuteronomy 31:23).

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