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# “I’m Going to Israel and All I Need to Pack Is My Imagination”: Pretend Trips to Israel in Jewish Early Childhood Education

Lauren Applebaum and Sivan Zakai

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the practice of pretend Israel trips in Jewish early childhood education. Jewish early childhood educators who work in markedly different preschool settings, and who have differing beliefs about Israel and Israel education, nonetheless converge on a practice of pretend trips to Israel that remains remarkably stable across settings. This article examines how and why these pretend trips have become part of the “grammar” of Jewish early childhood education, illuminating a practice that is simultaneously beloved and unsatisfying for Jewish early childhood educators who care about early childhood education and Israel education.

## KEYWORDS

Israel; early childhood; teaching

## Introduction

Israel education is widely considered to be an integral part of the education of young Jews in the Diaspora (Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012). As Israel education has developed as a distinct subfield of Jewish education (Horowitz, 2012), so has the practice of bringing young American Jews to Israel as a deliberate effort to foster connections with the Jewish State and the global Jewish people. Young Jews who travel to Israel as part of a Jewish educational trip are more likely to feel a connection to Israel (Saxe, Shain, Wright, Hecht, & Sasson, 2017) and participate actively in Jewish activities (Saxe et al., 2014).

Jewish educational trips to Israel, often framed as “heritage tourism” or “ethnic pilgrimages” (Kelner, 2010), are intended to offer Diaspora Jews a firsthand “Israel experience” (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Through Israel trips, Jewish educators have developed a particular approach to “pedagogical tourism” (Kelner, 2010) that frames travel to Israel as the “expression of the emotional, religious, cultural, and political ties that Jews [hold] toward their homeland” (Ezrachi, 2015, p. 213).

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Yet an Israel trip can also be conducted – with modifications – from a perch in the Diaspora. To do so requires creativity, playfulness, and inventiveness as educators and their learners pretend to travel to and through Israel as part of an elaborate imagined journey. As one young learner explained, “I’m going to Israel, and all I need to pack is my imagination.”

Jewish educators commonly refer to this practice as “pretend trips” (cf. Jewish Celebrations, n.d.) or “virtual trips” (cf. Ghent, 2003) to Israel. The practice of pretend trips exists in a variety of Jewish educational institutions, including camps, day schools, and supplementary schools, and it is especially common in Jewish preschools, as early childhood educators in Jewish settings view these pretend trips as a particularly effective way of connecting their learners to Israel (Handelman, 2000).

This article offers an examination of pretend Israel trips in Jewish early childhood education. By investigating the pedagogical beliefs and practices of early childhood Jewish educators, we explore a practice that has become deeply embedded in the “grammar” of Jewish early childhood education (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). We argue that Jewish early childhood educators who work in markedly different preschool settings, and who have differing beliefs about Israel and Israel education, nonetheless converge on a practice of pretend trips to Israel that remains remarkably stable across settings. We examine how and why this is the case, illuminating a practice that is simultaneously beloved and unsatisfying for Jewish early childhood educators who care about early childhood education and Israel education. In so doing, we make a case for situating the work of Jewish early childhood educators as part of a larger discourse and set of practices in Israel education.

## Literature Review

For many Jewish children in the United States, formal Jewish education begins in a Jewish early childhood center (Schaap & Goodman, 2004). The American Jewish community invests heavily in Jewish early childhood education (Heckman, 2008; Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010), viewing early childhood education not only as a place where individual Jewish children can learn, but also as a gateway for Jewish families into ongoing connections to the Jewish community (Ben-Avie, 2012).

Like Jewish educators who work in day schools (Pomson, Wertheimer, & Hacoheh-Wolf, 2014), supplementary schools (Grant, 2007), teen programs (Ezrachi, 2015; Sinclair, 2013), and camps (Kopelowitz & Weiss, 2014; Sinclair, 2009), many early childhood Jewish educators view teaching about Israel as an “essential element of any Jewish early childhood program” (Handelman, 2000, p. 89). As travel to Israel has become a central feature of contemporary Jewish education for American Jewish young adults and

teenagers (Ezrachi, 2015; Saxe, Fishman, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2013), so too has pretend travel to Israel become a core feature of Jewish early childhood education.

As an educational practice, pretend trips to Israel sit at the nexus of two different pedagogical approaches: simulations and pretend play. Educational simulations are constructed learning environments that attempt to mirror some aspect of real life (Martin & Mcevoy, 2003; Swanson & Ornelas, 2001). Simulations offer learners an opportunity to encounter a simplified version of the world that allows them to “experiment with aspects of reality that otherwise would be impossible to study outside of real life” (Sauvé, Renaud, Kaufman, & Marquis, 2007, p. 251). Simulations have been used to teach social studies concepts at all grade levels, including elementary school (Bagley & Pierfy, 1972; Harding, 1991), middle school (Balaban, 1982; Gehlbach et al., 2008), high school (Lo, 2017; Parker, 1987), and higher education (Gersmehl & Kammrath, 1977), and they are often seen as particularly well suited to teaching geography (Conolly, 1982; Tansey, 1971). Simulations can be live (Coffey, Miller, & Feuerstein, 2011) or virtual (Asakawa and Gilbert, 2003). What unites simulations in all of these contexts is that they offer learners a “quasi-real” situation (Claudet, 1998) that imitates, but does not fully reproduce reality.

Although pretend trips to Israel are in some ways educational simulations, within the realm of early childhood education they might also be categorized as a subset of pretend play. Pretend play is an “as-if” experience (Garvey, 1990) in which children act as if they were in a certain environment and role. Pretense is layered over reality (Austin, 1979) as the participant knowingly and intentionally projects some mentally represented alternative on to the present situation in the spirit of play (Lillard, 1993). Pretend play is commonly seen as crucial to children’s development (Bergen, 2002), including the development of abstract thinking (Vygotsky, 1967), inhibitory control (Bodrova & Leong, 1996), and semiotic functioning (Piaget, 1962).

While pretend play is often spontaneously generated through children’s interactions with one another, the kind of pretend play involved in a pretend trip to Israel is constructed and guided by adults. This form of pretend, also called “tutored dramatic play” (Mellou, 1994), offers adult guidance, directions, and participation while establishing a rich environment for children’s play. Though children may resist participating in pretend play when the activities and roles are too highly controlled by adults (Rogers & Evans, 2007), collaborative or co-constructed dramatic play offers an alternative to child-initiated or adult-controlled pretend play (Hakkarainen, Brédikyté, Jakkula, & Munter, 2013).

Pretend Israel trips therefore exist at the intersection of simulations and pretend play, combining distinct elements of each. Like simulations commonly used in social studies education, pretend trips to Israel are often quasi-real,

simplified geographic explorations elaborately constructed by the educator. Like the pretend play that is a hallmark of early childhood education, pretend trips allow young children to act as if they were traveling to Israel, layering an alternative reality on the classroom for the purpose of playful learning.

While pretend trips to Israel have long been a part of Jewish early childhood education, we know of no scholarly examination of the practice. There is scant scholarship about any form of Israel education in Jewish early childhood settings, and the limited writing that does exist has focused on setting goals for teaching Israel in early childhood institutions (Feldman, 1994; Rotenberg, 1994) and recommending “best practices” (Feldman & Simchovitch, n.d.; Handelman, 2000). Though scholars have probed early childhood Jewish educators’ reflections on their own general constructivist practices (Muller, Gorsetman, & Alexander, 2018), their teaching of Bible stories in American (Brody & Gorsetman, 2013) and Israeli contexts (Achituv, 2013), and their beliefs about how to teach Jewish holidays (Tal, 2013), little is known about pretend trips, a seemingly signature pedagogy (cf. Shulman, 2005) of Jewish early childhood education.

What are the common features of pretend trips to Israel in Jewish early childhood education? How and why do educators from different institutional settings, and with differing beliefs about Israel education, plan and facilitate similar pretend trips? And what questions, concerns, and dilemmas arise for Jewish early childhood educators as they do so? These are the questions we examine in this article.

## **Method**

To address these questions, we draw on data from a year-long collaboration with two groups of educators in different major metropolitan cities.

## **Participants**

In each city, a group of eight and nine educators, respectively, had created a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) focused on improving Israel education in their early childhood Jewish settings. Each CoP was sponsored by a local central agency that had selected early childhood educators interested in collaborative learning and reflection about the teaching of Israel in their professional contexts. Some worked as directors or teachers in early childhood centers. Others had developed expertise in early childhood Jewish education in other contexts, including as educators in synagogue family education programs and communal organizations such as Bureaus of Jewish Education and PJ Library. See [Table 1](#) for a description of the participants.

**Table 1.** Participants in the study.

Participant (pseudonym)	Institution type	Position
Addie	Synagogue Education Department	Education Director
Bina	Synagogue ECC	Teacher
Carmella	Synagogue ECC	Director of Early Childhood
Elka	JCC	Education Director
Hadas	BJE ECC	Teacher
Jocelyn	Synagogue Education Department	Director of Young Family Education
Mandy	JCC ECC	Teacher
Michelle	Synagogue Education Department	Teacher
Natalie	BJE	Director of Early Childhood
Ohr	Synagogue Education Department	Israeli Shlichah (emissary)
Randi	Synagogue ECC	Director of Early Childhood
Rebecca	PJ Library	Program Director
Renaë	JCC ECC	Teacher
Rivka	Day School ECC	Director of Young Family Education
Shifra	Synagogue ECC	Teacher
Shira	Day School ECC	Director of Early Childhood

Note: Each of the participants in this study self-identified as an early childhood educator and viewed early childhood education as a substantive part of their professional portfolio. ECC = Early Childhood Center; JCC = Jewish Community Center; BJE = Bureau of Jewish Education.

The CoPs were directed by local educational leaders who reached out to us to provide facilitation and field expertise. Over the course of the year-long collaboration, we functioned as teacher educators who worked with CoP members to reflect on their own practices of early childhood Israel education, and as researchers attempting to understand the distinct practices and questions of early childhood Israel education. We neither screened nor selected the CoP participants, but we are solely responsible for all other methodological decisions made in the research design. This article focuses on a subset of the data we collected during that year, focused on educators' practices of and beliefs about pretend Israel trips. We draw on two primary sources of data: semistructured interviews with the educators, and transcripts from seminars in which the educators explicitly reflect on their own use of pretend trips.

### **Semistructured Interviews**

At two points during the year – once in the fall and once in the spring – we interviewed each participant. The interviews were semistructured, based on a prewritten script but allowing for fluid conversation and follow-up probes (Gillham, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The interview questions fell into three primary categories. First, we sought to collect information about participants' backgrounds. We asked questions including: *What is your background and training in early childhood education? What prior training or learning have you done (if at all) about Israel*

*education? What, if anything, do you remember learning about Israel when you were the age that your students are now?*

Second, we sought to understand each educator's approaches to early childhood education and to Israel education. Interview questions included: *How would you describe your philosophy of early childhood education? How would you describe your philosophy of Israel education? What questions do you have about your own practice of teaching Israel?*

Finally, we asked specific questions focused on the use of pretend trips in the educators' practice. Some of these questions directed participants to describe in detail any simulations they conduct. We asked: *Do you use pretend trips to Israel in your practice? If so, please describe it/them.* Other questions asked participants to reflect on their pedagogical rationales, including: *Why do you use this/these pretend trips? How did you pick the elements you described?* Still other questions asked participants to locate and name the questions and dilemmas that arise in their practice. For example, we asked: *What questions do you have about your use of pretend trips? Are there any changes you want to make or have considered making to your pretend trips? If not, what has stopped you from making those changes?*

These semistructured interviews allowed us to better understand the practices and beliefs of the educators and offered the educators themselves a voice in the research and an opportunity to better understand their own practice. For, as anthropologist Beth Leech (2002) explains, "Semi-structured interviews allow respondents the chance to be the experts" (p. 668).

### **Seminar Records**

The second source of data is the set of records from collaborative reflective seminars that we facilitated for the participants. In addition to regular meetings, each CoP participated in two two-day seminars, one in the fall and one in the spring. The records of these seminars contain three distinct sources of data: transcripts from professional learning sessions grounded in research in Israel education, educators' documentation of their own practice that they brought to study as a group, and transcripts of educators' reflections about their dilemmas of teaching (cf. Lampert, 2001).

As educators learned about the larger field of Israel education, they examined and reflected on lessons and activities from their early childhood institutions. Many of the educators spoke about the ways that they plan, execute, and evaluate pretend trips to Israel in their institutions. Transcripts of these conversations offer a rich source of data for this inquiry.

In addition, many of the educators brought to these conversations artifacts of practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999) or documentation (Katz & Chard, 1996) that they created for their simulations. For example, one participant brought a storybook that she and her students created as they "visited" different

sights in Israel. Other educators, for whom documentation is a regular part of their teaching practice (cf. Thornton & Brunton, 2007), brought photographs and written descriptions of their work. In our research, we examined the educators' documentation and the transcripts of their reflections on this documentation.

As one part of the seminars, the educators used highly structured protocols to surface, examine, and probe the dilemmas that arise in their work (cf. Bambino, 2002; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). For example, one teacher articulated the difficulties of talking about the "real" Israel as an Israeli working among Americans. One Early childhood center director struggled with how Israel learning in her institution could be authentic when led by teachers who may not be passionate about Israel. Transcripts of these reflections about educators' dilemmas offered particularly generative data for this study.

### **Data Analysis**

We used two primary approaches to analyzing these sources of data. We generated some conceptual categories in this article using what Robert Weiss (1994) calls issue-focused analysis. This required us to search for patterns "to describe what has been learned from all [interview] respondents about [how] people in their situation" understand a particular issue (p. 153). In this case, we searched for patterns in the way that educators described the practices and purposes of the pretend trips that they use in their early childhood settings. This led us to explore ideas such as the labor involved in pretend trips, the role of tradition and ritual in annual events, and the relationship of these trips to the rest of educational practice for an individual or school.

Other conceptual categories were generated using selective open coding to search for emergent themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In the tradition of grounded theory, these codes emerged from the thoughts and reflections of the participants (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1999/1967). For example, many educators in this study spoke about "authentic" Israel education, and so we attempted to understand what this concept meant across educators and settings.

Taken together, careful analysis of the interviews, transcripts, and documentation from sessions offered a rich and multifaceted perspective on the practices, beliefs, and questions that educators articulated as they examined their own work and the work of their peers.

### **Findings**

Early childhood Jewish educators work in different institutional settings and express different beliefs about Israel education. Nonetheless, they unite around

a common practice of pretend trips to Israel, which look remarkably stable across institutional contexts. These trips, which offer young learners an opportunity to pretend to travel to Israel and visit its major geographic regions and landmarks, are – at once – cherished by, and deeply unsatisfying for, many educators. As educators reflect on the pretend trips that they plan and execute, they express pride in the careful and creative work that it takes to create an elaborate Israel simulation, and concern about the developmental appropriateness, teacher-directed orientation, and questionable authenticity of these pretend trips. Thus, the practice raises profound questions about the relationship between early childhood education and Israel education.

### ***Different Settings, Different Beliefs***

The early childhood educators in this study worked in different institutional contexts and held differing beliefs about the role of Israel education in those contexts.

The institutions in which the educators in this study worked differed primarily in two ways: their denominational affiliations, and their strict or loose adherence to the philosophy and inspiration of the schools of Reggio Emilia. Some of their institutions were affiliated with particular Jewish denominations, including Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox Judaism. Others were deliberately nondenominational, catering either to more secular or to transdenominational populations. (See [Table 2](#)).

Perhaps more important to the ways that the educators framed their own work was their relationship to the philosophy of the schools of Reggio Emilia, associated with a range of constructivist pedagogical approaches (Ben-Avie, Vogelstein, Goodman, Schaap, & Bidol-Padva, 2011; Edwards, Gandini, &

**Table 2.** Denominational affiliation of the educators' institutions.

Participant (pseudonym)	Institution type	Denominational affiliation
Addie	Synagogue Education Department	Reconstructionist
Bina	Synagogue ECC	Conservative
Carmella	Synagogue ECC	Conservative
Elka	JCC	Postdenominational
Hadas	BJE ECC	Nondenominational
Jocelyn	Synagogue Education Department	Conservative
Mandy	JCC ECC	Nondenominational
Michelle	Synagogue Education Department	Reform
Natalie	BJE	Nondenominational
Ohr	Synagogue Education Department	Reform
Randi	Synagogue ECC	Conservative
Rebecca	PJ Library	Nondenominational
Renae	JCC ECC	Nondenominational
Rivka	Day School ECC	Modern Orthodox
Shifra	Synagogue ECC	Conservative
Shira	Day School ECC	Sephardic/Orthodox

Note: ECC = Early Childhood Center; JCC = Jewish Community Center; BJE = Bureau of Jewish Education.

Forman, 2011; Muller, 2013; Muller et al., 2018). A significant majority of Jewish early childhood institutions are committed to constructivist pedagogical approaches (Ben-Avie et al., 2011; Muller, 2013; Muller et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the degree to which early childhood educators adhere to the practices of the schools of Reggio Emilia differs widely. While nearly all of the educators in this study expressed a belief in constructivist, child-centered approaches (and often referred to themselves as inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia), in practice the educators range from a deep commitment to these principles to a more loosely “inspired” approach. Some, like Carmela, have visited the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy as part of rigorous professional development and consider themselves faithful devotees; others, like Randi or Natalie, attempt to balance constructivist and teacher-directed approaches to early childhood education.

As a group, these educators also expressed markedly different views about Israel education and its role in their institutions. While all of the educators in this study were committed to teaching about Israel in their settings, they offered different conceptions of why and how Israel ought to be taught. This group of preschool educators contained what Pomson et al. (2014) call “exemplars” (those who model their own connection to Israel) and “explorers” (those who want students to engage in their own inquiry). Exemplars, like Ohr, believed that Israel should be taught to children by modeling excitement and commitment to Israel, explaining “just my presence there is doing most of the job.” Explorers, like Carmela, believe that children must learn about Israel from their “own experiences,” viewing children’s processes of inquiry as essential for Israel education. While Pomson, Wertheimer, and Hacoheh-Wolf found that far more day school educators in their study were exemplars than explorers, in our much smaller dataset, a greater number of preschool educators were explorers, committed to providing young children an environment and experiences through which the children themselves could explore and develop their own ideas and beliefs about Israel. This seems to reflect the general stance of early childhood educators, who often express a commitment to inquiry and exploration for young children in all subject areas. Although many of the preschool educators had a clearly articulated philosophy about Israel education, some described their own beliefs about Israel education as “emergent” (Renae) rather than fully formed. As Sarah explained, I “don’t really have a philosophy right now.” Thus, just as the institutional contexts in which they worked varied, so too did the educators’ conceptions of and beliefs about Israel education.

## A Common Practice

Despite their differing institutional affiliations and beliefs, the educators in this study all embraced a common practice: the pretend Israel trip. The trips that these educators plan and facilitate look strikingly similar despite different institutional contexts and differing beliefs of the educators themselves.

The trip sits in different places within the Jewish early childhood curriculum. In some settings, the pretend trip to Israel functions as *the* major site for Israel education. In these instances, the pretend trip and attendant preparation usually occur around the time of *Yom Haatzmaut*, Israeli Independence Day. In other settings, the pretend trip is the culminating experience of a larger process of learning about Israel, which often includes reading books, learning songs, and engaging in co-constructed conversations about Israel on an ongoing basis. Yet regardless of whether the pretend trip is a stand-alone experience or the culminating event in a larger learning trajectory, the structure and framing of the trip remain remarkably consistent across settings and educators.

A pretend trip to Israel almost always begins with the travel experience. Some classes check the weather in Israel and discuss what they will need to bring on their journeys. Sometimes the children “pack” suitcases with the creation of magazine collages; in other instances, children bring a suitcase or bag from home.

Next comes the plane ride. Sometimes children are invited onto the plane by teachers serving as flight attendants and guides or passport officials, and other times they participate in the creation and “flying” of the plane to kick off the experience. Randi describes a typical classroom setup, explaining,

The chairs are set up. ... There’s a pilot. There’s music that’s playing when they’re on the plane. There’s Israeli crackers or cookies that are passed out by the flight attendants. Someone’s dressed as the pilot.

On arriving in Israel, children usually present their passports. In Mandy’s classroom, for example, children had simulated the entire passport process earlier in the week by taking photographs and waiting impatiently for a few days for them to be “delivered” to their classroom. When the children leave the plane, she explained, “they get their passports stamped. We use Hebrew words to welcome them into Israel.”

After arrival, some groups engage in a multisite experience of traveling around Israel to various key destinations, while others might visit only one or two tourist spots. The simulation can play out over the course of a single morning or over the course of several weeks.

The first stop for nearly all trips is Jerusalem, which was synonymous with a visit to the *Kotel* (Hebrew for Western Wall) for every site represented in this study. In most settings, children had prepared by building the *Kotel* out

of shoeboxes, classroom blocks, or cardboard painted with gold glitter. The children are given an opportunity to leave a note, “hoping that God [will] see them.” Sometimes this element affords an opportunity for learning about the nature of prayer, as in one school where children and their families were asked to prepare a note that was “thankful for something, you could ask for something, you could ask for something for someone else.” In other settings notes are more general “hopes and wishes.” The *Kotel* is often designed to be the most impressive piece of the simulation’s physical environment, and sometimes invites family or congregant participation with an ongoing note-writing station. Reflecting new technologies, some schools have started projecting images from a livestream of the *Kotel* on or near the wall while this happens.

While not all pretend trips follow a logistically plausible map, most head from Jerusalem either up the road to Tel Aviv or south into the desert. “Tel Aviv” is rarely explored as a distinctive city, and instead is usually either the location for a beach trip or a *shuk* (open-air market) experience. The “*shuk*” offers for sale a mix of fresh fruits and vegetables (or plastic ones), artwork created by children, or a chance to prepare simple Israeli foods (cucumber and tomato salad, fresh orange juice, pita with hummus or chocolate spread). Often children use photocopied Israeli money and take turns buying and selling to each other. Sometimes, parents and teachers work the stalls.

The “desert” is also an indistinct category that often involves the school sandbox and the chance to make a delightfully muddy “Dead Sea” mess, exploring the properties of saltwater and painting faces and arms with actual Dead Sea mud. In many settings, the desert stop also affords children the chance to participate in an archeological dig in the desert. As Hadas describes,

We turn our room into an archeological site and ... we fill up the room. Half the room is filled with bins with sand. ... We hide necklaces, jewelry, many different things in the sand, and we give them tools and they are archeologists and they do a whole big dig. All the kids love the dig. ... They have tools, and the kids all have pouches with magnifying glasses, tweezers, a puffer, a spoon, and a flashlight.

In most settings, children “return home” at this point. However, depending on the length of the pretend trip and the particular class, some learners also visit a *kibbutz* (collective agricultural community) complete with a petting zoo, go “fishing” in the *Kinneret* (Sea of Galilee), check out boats in the port of Haifa, or make art in Tsfat. These more extended pretend trips are generally handled with a stations approach, where learners rotate between classrooms to visit each place for a short visit during the course of a single day.

Regardless of size, affiliation, or orientation of the setting and educator, the major elements of pretend trips to Israel are remarkably consistent across settings: a plane ride, a visit to the *Kotel*, a food/*shuk* experience, and some

time in the sand. We argue that this practice has become embedded in the very “grammar” of Jewish schooling (cf. Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Tobin, 1994), remaining remarkably stable across institutions and classrooms. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) explain, it reflects “unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs” about what constitutes good early childhood Israel education (p. 88).

This is true despite the fact that educators offer different rationales for what they believe pretend trips provide for their young learners. Some educators, like Hadas, argue that pretend trips are, in part, good for building children’s fine motor skills because of “all of the tools, the tweezing” in the archeological dig. Others, like Natalie, believe that these trips are good for social-emotional learning, because “we do teaching of how to do social dramatic play which means engaging, cooperating in imaginary play with restaurants in Israel [and] Hadassah Hospital.” Still others, like Renae, believe pretend trips are important because they can carry cognitive benefits, for “whether we’re talking about the bricks [in the *Kotel*] or counting [in Hebrew], there’s language activities that come from it.” Thus, while pretend Israel trips as a practice look alike across diverse institutional settings, educational rationales for these trips are as varied as the educators themselves. In other words, what educators *do* may be similar, but their reasons for *why* they do what they do are not.

### **Questions and Concerns About Pretend Trips**

Although early childhood educators appear to have embraced pretend trips to Israel as a signature pedagogy (cf. Shulman, 2005) of Jewish early childhood education, they also consistently raise profound questions about the nature and efficacy of those trips. As they gave voice to the questions, concerns, and reservations they had about their own practice, their worries generally fell into three categories: (a) concerns about the developmental appropriateness of pretend pedagogical tourism, (b) concerns about adults dictating or directing the play of children, and (c) concerns about the “authenticity” of pretend Israel trips. Educators grappled with one or more of these questions, expressing hesitation, uncertainty, and doubt about a practice that they facilitated year after year.

### **Concerns About the Developmental Appropriateness of Pretend Pedagogical Tourism**

One common concern of educators is that a pretend trip to and through the geography of Israel is misaligned with children’s limited ability to grasp geographic terms and concepts. Even as they stamp their students’ “passports,” educators with a keen sense of the developmental needs of young children understand that children’s conceptual understanding of geography

is quite limited. Although children begin to map the environment around them from a very young age (Matthews, 1992), preschool-aged children often find it challenging to conceive of larger geographical concepts related to space, and have particular difficulty with the nomenclature used to discuss geography (Platten, 1995).

Many educators are thoughtfully skeptical about whether a simulated tour of Israel is within the developmental grasp of young children. As Shifra explains, “I think that preparing for this trip and going on the airplane is fun, but do they really know where they are going? I’m not so sure that the children really understand it.” Similarly, Rivka wonders, “Are they really getting that when they make colored sand bottles ... they’re in Israel doing it? Probably not.” In order for a pretend Israel trip to be comprehensible, the children would need to understand, at the very least, that a pretend Israel trip is intended to be an imaginary visit to a real place. Yet as Jocelyn points out, “There’s so much backup information for a simulation to even make sense, that I don’t know that it’s our best entry point.”

The educators’ concern here is not that pretend travel itself is a developmentally inappropriate practice; they enthusiastically endorse pretend play as a central component of children’s development and early childhood education. Rather, their concern is that pretend trips to Israel may not actually affect children’s limited ability to understand a remote place on the globe. As a way of checking that hypothesis, Randi decided to learn about what the four-year-olds in her institution who had actually been to Israel – not as a simulation, but on a family trip – understood about Israel. In her words, “I asked them, ‘What do you remember? What do you know about Israel? Could you tell me something about Israel?’ I could’ve been asking them about Brazil. It hadn’t resonated.” Randi was disappointed to realize that Israel was not a distinctly memorable or significant place in the children’s minds.

Thus, even as they take groups of young children on elaborately staged airplanes to meticulously reconstructed landmarks in Israel, early childhood educators with a commitment to early childhood education and Israel education wonder whether the children themselves actually understand the purpose of the pretend play.

### ***Concerns About Adults Dictating or Directing the Play of Children***

Just as educators worry about the developmental appropriateness of the pretend trip, so too do they express concerns about their own role in staging the kind of tutored dramatic play (cf. Mellou, 1994) required by a pretend trip to Israel. As discussed above, the educators in this study embraced – in whole or in part – a commitment to constructivist approaches to early learning, and they expressed consensus that child-centered practices ought to guide their own teaching. Yet educators’ own desire to impart

knowledge of and connection to Israel contended with a firmly held belief in child-directed learning, where children's own interests and passions direct the play.

Strict fidelity to an approach inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia calls for children to direct their own learning, with teachers providing support for children's "natural development" and wondering (Thornton & Brunton, 2007). As proponents explain, "Education is seen as a communal activity and as sharing of culture through joint exploration between children and adults who together open topics to speculation and discussion" (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 7–8). For Bina, as well as many other similarly minded teachers, this approach is about, "where the children are taking us and what they are involved or interested in." In such classrooms, while an educator offers provocations or invitations to explore, it is the children who decide if and how they will direct their play and learning in response.

Yet in a learning environment committed to fostering children's own explorations of the world, there is no guarantee that the children in any particular classroom will select to explore any particular topic or idea. Thus, it is not hard to imagine a classroom in which there was no learning about Israel at all, if children did not show interest or involvement. A firm commitment to learning about Israel, therefore, requires a more teacher-directed approach, one that can sit in tension with the teachers' own professed commitments to child-driven learning.

For these educators, pretend trips to Israel became an exercise in compromise, allowing educators to manufacture a learning environment that put the focus of children's explorations on Israel, yet that nonetheless allowed children hands-on, experiential learning within that environment. As Shira somewhat ruefully explains, it is "a child-centered-enough activity." Renae describes how she attempts to strike a balance between her own commitment to Israel and fostering children's exploration by asking, "What would you like to learn *about Israel*? I have a whole list of questions that the kids came up with, and it was those questions that directed what we did [in the trip]." Some educators, like Renae, comfortably embrace the pretend trip as a reasonable balance between competing priorities; other educators, like Shira, remain dissatisfied by the sacrifices it requires of children's agency.

### ***Concerns About the "Authenticity" of Pretend Israel Trips***

Even as they embrace the playfulness of pretend tourism, many educators also worry about whether it offers children an "authentic" view into daily life and culture in Israel. Pretend Israel trips tend to blur the boundaries of time and space; a child could be in contemporary Chicago one minute, soaring on an El Al plane the next, and soon after in the desert of biblical Israel and the modern-day *shuk*. Yet young children often struggle to understand temporal and geographic concepts (cf. Zakai, 2015), and so their teachers wonder:

Does this pretend play actually allow the children a meaningful glimpse into contemporary Israeli life? Does it give children, in the words of Renae, an “authentic as possible” chance to experience a place that would otherwise be inaccessible to them?

Most educators in this study were aware of the power and the limits of the pretend play. They go to great lengths to make sure that the simulated environments that they create are as “authentic as possible,” painstakingly carting 40 pounds of sand into the classroom to create archeological digs (Natalie), constructing elaborate classroom-size versions of Israeli landmarks (Renae), shipping in actual mud from the Dead Sea (Mandy), and more. At the same time, they wonder whether even careful attention to detail is sufficient for helping the children themselves understand life in Israel. They ask, in the words of Randi, “How realistic is this? Is there meaning? Does this speak to the [children]?” And they recognize that even the children see the limits of the pretend play. As Jocelyn explains, “A lot of our kids do travel so you can be like ‘We’re pretending to get on an airplane’ and they’re like ‘This isn’t an airplane.’”

On the one hand, many educators are readily willing to abandon fidelity to details of contemporary life in Israel to help children connect the concept of Israel to Jewish culture and stories. For example, in Hadas’s class, the children visit an archeological dig site where they dig up a variety of objects, including a contemporary *Shabbat* [Sabbath] candle. “Why a *Shabbat* candle?” she explains, “Because we celebrate *Shabbat* every week. I guess that’s more of a Jewish lens, I think, than Israel.” Hadas knows that archeologists would not find *Shabbat* candles at a dig site, but this is okay with her. “I see the importance of everything,” she says. “The history, the modern, the ways to make it fun for young children.” By knowingly blurring the boundaries between ancient and contemporary, real and symbolic, early childhood Jewish educators toggle between pretend trips for the purpose of Israel education and using a pretend trip to Israel as a site for other educational goals. This flexibility offers them a chance to reinforce concepts unrelated to Israel that are important to them as educators.

On the other hand, educators recognize that this flexibility also comes at a cost, often presenting an imaginary or distorted understanding of “the real Israel” (cf. Sinclair, 2013). For example, in several early childhood centers, children visit a mock *shuk* where they make an Israeli salad. As Renae explains, “They made a shopping list [and] we made an Israeli salad.” Yet as Jocelyn reflects on the Israeli salad-making experience in her (different) early childhood setting, “You’re not going to go to a *shuk* and make Israeli salad. That’s not what a trip to Israel would be at all.” Israelis may shop at a *shuk* to buy ingredients for their salad, yet visitors to the *shuk* would be unlikely to prepare their salads there. In another common element, even as the educators construct simplified replicas of the *Kotel* in Jerusalem, they

often build spaces without the gender division that exists in the actual *Kotel* in Jerusalem. As they do so, some educators worry, in the words of Randi, “What are we doing?” As Jocelyn explains with trepidation, “[You should] not to teach them something you’re going to have to unteach them later, but [our *Kotel* is not] representative of what’s real and then we’re going to have to debunk all of it later.”

Some educators, like Hadas, raise questions about the authenticity of their pretend trips, but readily bracket these questions to construct playful pretend environments for young learners. Other educators, like Carmella, are constantly in search of new ways to introduce young children to Israeli culture that feels “a little bit more authentic.” In both cases, educators embrace the pretend trip not because they are confident that it is the best way to teach early years learners about Israel, but rather in spite of their lingering questions about it.

### ***A Persisting Practice***

Given the fact that educators readily question the value of the pretend Israel trip, why does the practice persist? In theory, early childhood Jewish educators have a variety of choices they could make about how to teach their young students about Israel. They could, for example, focus on the culture or religious traditions of Israel, or they could spend time creating immersive Hebrew language environments. Why, then, do so many early childhood Jewish educators orient their classrooms toward a pretend trip around Israel’s primary geographic regions and landmarks? In the words of one educator (Jocelyn), “Why is this one of the things that’s stuck around for so long without being reinvented at some point?”

We argue that, whether intentionally or not, this practice persists not because there is a clear, unifying educational rationale that undergirds it. Rather, it persists for two reasons: because it is a beloved part of educators’ professional lives, and because it is easily reinforced by trends in the broader structure of Jewish communal life.

To understand the fact educators return year after year to the practice despite their own professed skepticism about it, it is essential to understand the cherished role that it plays for educators and children alike. Many educators believe that the pretend trip brings joy to early childhood learning. As Bina explains, “The children loved it.” In Randi’s words, “I think they have a fabulous time.” These educators, who themselves find meaning in children’s joy, express delight that children are genuinely happy and engaged in the experiences.

Just as important, many educators view pretend trips as an opportunity to do their own best work as professionals. To build a simulated Israel requires a tremendous input of time and effort, and educators spoke with pride about

the attention to detail this work demands. As Natalie explained with pride about her archeological dig, “We brought in 40 pounds of sand into the classroom and it was all on the floor. It’s hard work to get them to really feel the essence of what it is really like.” Educators go great lengths to construct plane rides that have snack service with Israeli foods and brands and to build towering cardboard replicas of the *Kotel*, and they find this work exciting and motivating. As Hadas explained with great satisfaction, “We’re doing really different and unique units on things that you don’t normally see.” Creatively designing elaborate pretend trips offered educators a chance to give careful attention to their work, and they found professional satisfaction in that work even as they harbor concerns about it.

Pretend trips focused on visiting Israel’s geographic regions and landmarks are also reinforced by two trends in the broader Jewish community: the prevalence of actual homeland tourism and the proliferation of geographically centered children’s books about Israel. When educators make decisions about how and what to teach young learners about Israel, their decisions are mirrored, and therefore reinforced, by larger Jewish communal trends.

First, as more and more young American Jews have access to actual trips to Israel, “pedagogical tourism” has become a major force in the education of contemporary young Jews (Kelner, 2010). Given the phenomenal presence of Taglit-Birthright, which offers American Jewish young adults a free trip to Israel, traveling to the symbolic homeland of the Jewish people is increasingly a rite of passage for young American Jews (Saxe et al., 2013). Jewish communal leaders often frame these trips as an important vehicle for bolstering Jewish engagement and fostering connections with Israel (Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

Early years learners are not the target audience for communally sponsored trips to Israel, yet pretend trips within the walls of their classrooms – which often closely mirror itineraries of trips for young adults – offer an easily accessible way to provide young children a parallel Israel experience. Some educators are even explicit with children that their early childhood “trips” are preparation for their later actual trips as young adults. For example, Randi, describing the foods they serve in “Tel Aviv,” tells her students, “You know, you’re gonna see that when you go to Israel.” Thus, we argue, early childhood pretend trips essentially function as Taglit-Birthright for four-year olds, previewing the itineraries of these trips from the familiarity of the early childhood classroom.

Second, a geographic “tour” through Israel parallels the approach to Israel found in many recently published Jewish children’s books. These books, including *Let’s Visit Israel* (Groner, 2004), *Ella’s Trip to Israel* (Newman, 2011), *Shalom Everybodyee!: Grover’s Adventures in Israel* (Balsley & Fischer, 2016), and *Dinosaur Goes to Israel* (Rauchwerger, 2018), take young readers

on a journey to Israel that highlights Israel's landmarks: the Dead Sea, the *Kotel* in Jerusalem, the ocean in Eilat, a *shuk*, and a *kibbutz*. Rather than focus on the experiences of children who live in Israel, or on the cultures and customs of diverse Israeli communities, these books highlight the natural and human-made features of the land of Israel.

These geographically focused books are accessible to educators and parents of young children in large part due to the PJ Library, an organization that “sends monthly, free, age-appropriate Jewish themed books ... in order to strengthen [children's] Jewish identity and their family's connection to the Jewish community” (Alexander, 2013, p. 175). Thus, when educators make decisions about how to frame Israel in their classrooms, classroom practices oriented toward the geography of Israel are easily reinforced with readily available books for young learners.

Educators love preparing and facilitating pretend trips – despite their questions about them. And when they look to the broader Jewish community, they see their own pedagogical decisions reflected back at them.

## Discussion

Pretend trips to Israel are deeply embedded in the grammar of Jewish early childhood education, widely prevalent and remarkably consistent across different early childhood institutions. Jewish educators who agree about little else – including religious interpretations of Judaism or philosophies of early childhood education – have converged on a single practice that looks and sounds similar across institutions. Though they offer varying rationales for why they do it, few early childhood Jewish educators can imagine Israel education without pretend passports and pita. At the same time, when they pause to reflect, most educators can readily identify concerns and frustrations with the practice.

They wonder about whether the pretend trips that they design with such care and attention are the best way to allow young children a glimpse into life in a faraway place. Educators question whether (or not) the benefits of the hands-on, experiential nature of pretend trips override fact that asking young children to understand certain geographic concepts may be beyond their developmental grasp. They ask themselves whether the children for whom they care even understand the basic idea of a simulated or pretend trip. And some ask themselves a difficult question, voiced most clearly by Jocelyn: “Is there value to it or not?”

These lingering questions coupled with deep desire for powerful Israel education mean that many of the educators are disinclined to reproduce the exact same trip year after year. What results for most educators is a constant practice of what Tyack and Cuban (1995) call “tinkering toward utopia,” a slow process that makes changes around the edges but rarely substantively

changes the core practice itself. Therefore, when educators make adjustments to the trips that they plan, they do so in the spirit of helping make a remote place more accessible to young learners. For example, one school experimented with shrinking the pretend trip down to just be a *shuk* (market) experience, where children made food and crafts to buy and sell in a room decorated with sights and sounds of an Israeli *shuk*. Carmela explains that a small, “more sensory thing” offers opportunities for more discussion and reflection with children, which she hopes helps them feel a “more authentic connection.” At her school, Randi makes changes each year “based on what resonated for children,” most recently by building in additional art experiences with blue and white colors, adding more technology (music and streaming videos), and creating more hands-on play with salt and water at the “Dead Sea.” These educators gather information about how their young learners are experiencing the pretend trips and make adjustments based on the children’s input. As a result, the specific contours of the experience may shift to better reflect the ways that young children experience and view the world, while maintaining the centrality of an immersive pretend visit.

Despite any lingering questions about the value of the exercise, pretend Israel trips are a cherished practice, easily reinforced by broader trends in the Jewish world. Educators – even ones who are uncertain what children learn from the experience – take great pride in the work of carting “40 pounds of sand into the classroom” and arranging the other painstaking details that make a pretend trip possible. For these educators, the pretend trip is so interwoven with their conception of diaspora education that to suggest an alternative practice is unimaginable. As Jocelyn explained, “I don’t know that it’s our best entry point ... [but] what would replace it?”

Given the fact that the practice is so embedded in the grammar of Jewish schooling (cf. Krasner, 2016), and that it brings great joy and satisfaction to educators, early childhood Jewish educators are unlikely to abandon the pretend trip altogether. Is it possible, then, to improve the practice so that it is more educative for young learners attempting to learn about their symbolic homeland from afar? In one regard, the answer is no. The developmental stretch for preschool age children attempting to conceptualize a place that is geographically remote and culturally foreign is a hurdle that even a revised or restructured pretend trip would likely be unable to surmount.

Yet educators who are committed to Israel education and early childhood education can shift both their classroom practice and the ways in which they conceive of their work so that they better align with their own stated goals. Rather than tinkering with details, educators could instead redesign the pretend play experience, even if these changes could not address the larger issues of kids’ developmental capacities. We can envision three distinct ways that early childhood educators could do so.

First, educators could choose to more closely simulate heritage tourism trips that are so common for older Jewish learners (Kelner, 2010), eliminating the frequent anachronisms of the early childhood pretend trip. In the typical pretend trip, the role that the children are expected to play often shifts with each activity. In some moments such as when they travel on the plane, children are tourists, while at other moments their “Israeli passports” are stamped, signaling that they are citizens of Israel. Instead, educators could clearly explain to children that they are pretending to be tourists visiting a real country called Israel, and they would build trips to align with this frame. For example, educators could give children pretend U.S. passports and make it clear that they are visiting Israel as tourists, not pretend Israelis. Instead of digging in the desert to discover modern-day *Shabbat* candles, they could visit an archeological dig and learn from archeologists about how cities in Israel are often built atop much older cities. While part of the current playfulness of the pretend trip is the blurring of the boundaries of time and space, greater clarity would likely benefit young learners attempting to piece together an understanding of where they are pretending to go and why.

Taking a very different approach, instead of mirroring heritage tourism trips with greater fidelity and clarity, educators could instead frame the pretend trip as a chance to experience life in Israel like a contemporary Israeli child might. This option would maintain the centrality of pretend play and harness a multisensory evocative experience, but would resituate the role of the children themselves as Israeli children. It would be possible, for example, to simulate morning at the *gan* (Israeli preschool) or afternoon at a children’s park – highlighting the many ways that Israeli children’s experiences mirror those of children in the United States, and the distinct differences between U.S. and Israeli experiences of childhood. This version of a simulated Israel experience would focus less on a trip, replete with airplanes and passports, and more on a day in the life of an Israeli child. Technology, skillfully applied, could help bring the sounds and sights of a day in an Israeli child to life, as educators could use streaming radio stations and other media to enhance the experience. Like a heritage tourism pretend trip, this option would allow for greater clarity for educators and learners alike about the roles that children are being asked to play, and the place where they are pretending to be.

A third way to tinker with the pretend trip might involve more deliberately highlighting the complexity of contemporary Israel itself. The street signs that direct children through their tour can be printed, as they are in Israel, in Hebrew, English, and Arabic, seamlessly introducing the multilingual, multicultural reality of Israel. Setup and design choices can also offer a subtle and thoughtful introduction to the messy realities of homeland-Diaspora relations. For example, currently many religiously liberal Jewish early childhood

institutions take children to visit a Western Wall that they have designed to be one continuous space, erasing from the pretend play the divider that exists in the actual Wall in Jerusalem to separate men's and women's prayer space. This choice highlights for preschoolers that the Western Wall is a place of spiritual meaning for Jews, but downplays the ways that the Wall is a lightning rod for intra-Jewish political and religious disagreements and a major source of tension between Israeli and Diaspora Jews – a fact that often surprises and angers children when they later learn about it (Zakai, 2017). But a pretend Western Wall that looks more like the real *Kotel* might actually better prepare children to understand key issues in Israel-Diaspora relationships, even if it initially surprises children from communities whose prayer does not include a *mehitza*. This option would not involve altering the itinerary of a pretend trip, but rather deliberately including aspects of the play that raise substantive questions about the ways that Jewish life is different in the State of Israel and in the Diaspora. In this way, the experience lays the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of and relationship to Israel later in life.

Each of these options offers an approach to tinkering, providing small modifications that are easily within reach. Rather than asking educators to abandon or radically overhaul the pretend trips, these avenues are intended to afford educators options to maintain all they love about the practice – the attention to detail, the joy of immersive learning, the playful pretending – while addressing many of the educators' own concerns about developmental appropriateness and authenticity.

## Conclusion

Early childhood educators are thoughtfully engaged in the challenging work of Israel education. As the adults tasked with offering the first formal educational space in which young Jewish learners might encounter Israel, they feel a significant sense of responsibility. And they take pride in their ability to make children's first engagement with Israel a joyful – even if pretend – experience. In the words of one educator in this study, “I think they have a fabulous time doing the things I create for them, and I would like to think that some connection in them gets buried and maybe it's going to kick in later. I'm hoping that will happen.” This hope is grounded in their best efforts and built on their intuition as early childhood educators.

Yet while early childhood Jewish educators proudly display great expertise in early childhood education, they rarely have any formal training in Israel education and do not often see themselves as part of larger communal public or scholarly discourse about how to teach Israel. Providing training and support for early childhood Jewish educators to see themselves as part of that conversation not only would help contextualize their work, but also may

be necessary to make possible the kinds of shifts and innovations to the practice of pretend trips that would help them fulfill their hopes. The educators in this study who voiced greatest unease about pretend trips frequently ended up tweaking details that made little structural difference to the pretend trip. Giving them access to larger conversations currently under debate in the field of Israel education might allow them to engage in more purposeful tinkering that would better allow them to meet their own goals while laying the groundwork for lifelong learning about Israel.

The larger field of Israel education, too, is missing the voices and contributions of these early childhood educators. Continued study of – and with – early childhood educators who engage in Israel education will make important contributions to discussions of the unique ways that Israel education functions in the Jewish early childhood context. We envision future research – with the essential input and collaboration of early childhood Jewish educators – about how preschool students feel about and understand Israel, and how early childhood educators themselves approach the age-specific demands of their work. Only with additional scholarship that honors the developmental needs of young children and the particular pedagogical practices and questions of early childhood educators will it be possible to build a comprehensive understanding of the ways that Israel and Israel education function in Jewish educational contexts. The ultimate goal is to map the entire field, from preschool to campuses, schools to synagogues, trips that require official passports – and those that require only imagination.

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