

Israel and Intentional Engagement

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The atrocities committed on October 7 and subsequent responses have re-ignited a conversation that has been ongoing for the past two decades about how best to teach about Israeli society, history, and relations (or lack thereof) between Israelis and Palestinians. The discourse surrounding how Israel is taught to Jews in Diaspora communities, particularly in the context of North America, is not a new conversation. It is an educational discussion that has advanced in thoughtful and serious ways. A field of Israel education exists and is recognized as a necessity interconnected with Jewish education and as part of the Jewish educational experience.

Where Israel education now intersects with the study and understanding of contemporary antisemitism is a reality that is difficult for most individuals to continue to ignore or downplay. There may not be agreement or consensus on where these two subjects interface and how best to navigate that convergence, but one would be hard-pressed to suggest that the societal conversations playing out in various spaces—on the campus quads, within classroom environments, in social justice movements, throughout the media (traditional and social), and the political realms (local, state, and federal)—can



ignore the ways in which the Israel conversation and Jew-hatred interface.

Working with faculty, university administrators, teachers in middle and high school settings of non-sectarian institutions, public school educational leaders, and Jewish educators of all stripes, I double-down on a position that I have held for more than twenty years. In order to engage with Israeli and Palestinian identity and history one must understand these people, national narratives, histories, and identities. One must know something. It is not simply how the places, people, and politics make you feel at any given moment. It is not about superficial talking points and advocacy positions. It is about engaging with the complex contexts and holding these perspectives in relation to one another and grappling with the nuances and historical contexts.

To be very clear and direct, when it comes to Israel much of American society, perhaps even globally, people tend to be high on opinion about Israel yet void of any substantive knowledge. There is a sense that one's opinion matters and knowledge is not a prerequisite. I'd like us to flip that equation.

Developing a deep sense of literacy around Zionism, Israeli history and society, Palestinian history and national identity needs to be fundamental and foundational. I would venture to say not only for North American Jewry, but for the larger American citizenry who will need to encounter this subject in media outlets, foreign policy decisions, political

matters, and the larger societal and cultural discourse.

Intentionally engaging with these subjects requires an investment in human capital in education. Education that is not only based on how one feels emotionally, but with a focus on what one knows. If one believes that the West Bank is located on the left-hand side of the map and therefore thinks Tel Aviv and Jaffa are the West Bank, that matters. When students think that the chant “From the River to the Sea” is about the Tigris River and the Red Sea, that matters. When individuals apply an American lens of separation of church and state and transpose it onto Israel, that misconception matters.

As educators we must do better to teach the next generation of educators, let alone children, and dare I say their parents, that in order to build greater understanding and engagement with a complex set of peoples, places, religions, and historical messiness, we need to invest in teaching subjects with historical rigor, examination of primary sources, and build the tools of critical thinking skills while learning to live with an appreciation that things don’t usually fit neatly into a box and are rarely easily resolved.