

Reconsidering the Goals of Israel Education

Dr. Daniel Held
Chief Program Officer,
UJA Federation of Greater Toronto

One night in early November, as my daughter and I were curled up in her bed reading stories, she looked at me and said, "I'm scared." She explained how, on the way to the school bus each day, she walks past posters of the hostages and an older child told her stories of terrorists entering homes and kidnapping children. She has noticed the increased police presence: the officer posted at her school and the mobile command unit stationed at the end of our block. Two Israeli children, seeking safe harbor from the war, have joined her class. Of one, my daughter said, "I'm so glad Niva is here. It's not safe in Israel." There are many narratives we teach about Israel: Israel as the land of the Bible, the land given to us by God; Israel as the fruit of modern day Zionism, draining the swamps and building a thriving modern state; Israel as the land of our people, where diverse Jews from around the world gather; Israel as the startup nation, a dynamic tech-driven wonder; Israel as a bastion of democracy, even if fraught with complexities.

For many in my local community, a prevailing narrative about Israel has been Israel as a homeland, a land of refuge. My community was built by newcomers: Holocaust Survivors, Hungarians, South Africans, Argentinians, North Africans, Jews from the former Soviet Union, and others who fled their



countries of birth. Many of their family and friends immigrated to Israel, realizing the promise of the Law of Return. Israel was, and is, a place of safety. A place they, as Jews, can turn to at any time.

Our family has tried to construct a narrative of Israel that transcends the notion of it simply being a safe haven, instead underscoring Israel's profound importance to our collective peoplehood. For my children, Israel represents the retirement destination for two of their grandparents, the backdrop of family summers, the setting of cherished memories at summer camps, the place where they forged strong bonds with their cousins, and the home of the *shinshinit* who lived with us, with whom we have remained in close contact through visits, FaceTime, and texts.

Even though it's not the narrative we sought, for my daughter who is scared, the narrative of Israel as a refuge for the Jews, implicitly absorbed, has come crashing down. While I believe that, in time, this narrative will be restored, the question we are now faced with is: where from here?

First, on the most basic Maslowian level, we need to restore a sense of safety for our children, both in Israel and locally. This is a prerequisite to the more significant Israel education work we must undertake. October 7 forced a paradigm shift for security in Israel and around the world. Just as security in Israel will change, so too will it change at my children's school, synagogue, and camp. Ensuring that these protocols are developed and implemented with a child's eye in

mind is critical to securing Jewish life and the Jewish way of life.

Second, as a community planner responsible for establishing policies that enhance the vibrancy and vitality of our local Jewish community, I know that our response to October 7 necessitates that we redouble our efforts in community security and combating antisemitism. A third pillar of our local policy response, however, must be a redoubling of our efforts in Israel engagement and education. Educating our community to have the knowledge, passion, and drive to act on Zionist values is undoubtedly a critical response to October 7 and the corresponding rise in antisemitism in our local community.

A redoubling of Israel education will require a multi-pronged approach: Developing strong curricula for a range of settings, empowering educators, increasing participation in Israel experiences – particularly those that are longer, younger, and lead to repeated participation – and much more.

At the same time, in this redoubling of Israel education, we must reconsider its goals. Educational goals can be divided into three areas: knowledge, values, and actions. For most of the last quarter century, our Israel educational goals have primarily focused on values: developing people-to-people connections, imbuing a love for our Israeli siblings, or “hugging and wrestling”, enabling us to both love Israel and grapple with Israel’s contemporary challenges. These are important goals. But as we look forward, we must couple these value-based goals with

knowledge and action goals. A holistic Israel education will ask: what do we want our community to know, value, and do when it comes to Israel?

At bedtime over the last few weeks, I've circled back to my daughter's sense of security. She is feeling safer today than she was a month ago. We'll return soon to Israel, her understanding of Israel will continue to evolve, and she'll grow up as an ardent Zionist. At the same time, her Israel narrative—like all of ours—changed dramatically on October 7. Our Israel education will need to change as well.