

## Yediat Yisrael: A New Paradigm for Israel Education

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Travel with me. Imagine, for a moment, we are standing on the *Tayelet* - the Haas Promenade - at the south end of Jerusalem. Look north toward the walls of the Old City, with the shimmering views of the structures on the Temple Mount, replete with thousands of years of history.

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק

On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

(Gen 22:4)

Do you get goosebumps up your arms? I do. I remember that moment when I first made this connection between our ancestors' experience and my own, standing on that *same land*. I felt it - the history, the connection across time. I felt that Israel was my home too.

This experience is recreated all over the land of Israel. We can name the places; perhaps you are thinking of a landmark, a historical site, or a corner of Israel that has special meaning for you.

Learning experiences like these are part of an educational approach called *yediat ha'aretz*, or Land of Israel studies. Historically, the early settlers in the pre-State period developed this approach as a way for new immigrants and sabra children to get to know the land of Israel. The aim was, through content learning and first hand exposure to the land, through hikes and day trips, to build "an emotional attachment to something greater than a physical place (Benvenisti, 2000, p. 246)." The theory was that in coming to know a place one would come to love and own it (Almog, 2000).

*Yediat ha'aretz* is still employed today with native Israelis at multiple stages of their education and socialization as well as with pilgrims and tourists.

The wisdom of *yediat ha'aretz* as a pedagogy is that there is an understanding that **before one can love a place, they first have to know it.**

When we consider Israel education in North America in the 20th and first decade of the 21st century, most educators could summarize their visions in two words: *ahavat Yisrael*. They sought to nurture a love of our historic homeland and unconditional loyalty to the State of Israel. Frankly, **I think this focus on *ahava* is unattainable and misdirected. And, I believe it contributes to the challenges we find ourselves facing right now.** Let me say more.

Our current paradigms of Israel education have been hampered by a number of limiting assumptions. A limiting assumption is a belief that is restrictive, untested, and held as truth. Limiting assumptions prevent us from seeing new opportunities or from seeing how we are missing the mark. Our Israel education efforts have been constrained by several limiting assumptions.

Assumption: Jews need to love Israel before being critical of Israel.

Assumption: Young children do not have the capacity to understand the nuance and complexity of Israel. (Dr. Litman will elaborate on this)

Assumption: To be critical of Israel is to *not* love Israel.

Assumption: It is *essential* that American Jews *love* Israel.

Well, as the great educator Alan Alda said, quoting Isaac Asimov, "Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in." The time is well past for us to examine this focus on *ahava* as an essential

element of connecting to Israel. Even prior to October 7th we were hearing and seeing these rumblings. Now, even more so.

Let's take a few minutes to consider four pitfalls of *ahavat Yisrael*.

A pedagogic pitfall. While our aim has been to develop *ahava*, love, our curricula routinely focus on information about Israel. We have a misalignment between a cognitive learning process and an emotional outcome. We cannot control outcomes such as emotions or even opinions. If our goal is education, we need to aim toward learning and questioning, developing understanding, and finding meaning. Not indoctrination.

A conceptual pitfall. We have been singularly focused on *ahavat Yisrael*. Do you or don't you? But, like many relationships, "it's complicated." Right? We're forcing people into a binary choice. Either you love Israel or...? You hate it? You're indifferent to it? Our communities are troubled and being pulled apart by this binary. Is this what we are seeing now, post Oct 7?

A relational pitfall. We hear from disillusioned Jews who feel that they have been "lied to" about Israel/Zionism. We didn't teach the challenging aspects of Israel's story. While we do not yet have empirical evidence about the pervasiveness of this attitude, many of us can bring to mind a young person who has expressed such frustration and sense of betrayal. Our collective experience confirms that this is a reality in our communities. They feel that their educators-rabbis-cantors-teachers-parents lied to them, and they are hurt, angry, and struggling.

Finally, a values-related pitfall. Our singular focus on the value of *ahavat Yisrael* has not created space for Jews to maneuver when it is in tension with other Jewish values: *b'tzelem elohim*, *tikkun olam*, welcoming the stranger, and even freeing the captive. If we have inculcated *ahavat Yisrael* as **the** way to demonstrate loyalty to Israel - and to express otherwise is disloyal - then where is the room for navigating these other worthy

and laudable Jewish values that come into tension with love of Israel? Why do we marginalize Jewish community members who are *davka* living out their Jewish values?!

So if not *ahava*, then what? Let's return to where we began - with *yediah*.

In Jewish tradition, the concept of *yada* - knowing - is not limited to sexual intimacy. It is much, much more. Knowing is mutual and multidimensional; humans come to know each other in a variety of ways. It is about “showing concern for, entering into a covenant with, being familiar with, and understanding the reputation” of another (Brooks, 2023, p. 34). Knowing, in our tradition, is also transcendent. We come to know God and God comes to know us, as we read in Psalm 40:10, *Adonai ata yadata*. The Mishneh Torah explores the practice of *yediat Hashem*, coming to know God as an ongoing process of questioning, expressing doubt and uncertainty.

David Brooks describes in his new book *How to Know A Person* the process of knowing as illumination and accompaniment, about asking the right questions, having hard conversations, and always holding each other with empathy.

Drawing upon the wisdom of *yediat ha'aretz*, of our textual tradition, and upon my beliefs about teaching and learning, I believe that our Israel education should aim for learners to *know* Israel. I call this paradigm *Yediat Yisrael*.

*Yediat Yisrael* more accurately reflects the type of knowledge, understandings, and connections our learners need. Yes, *it may* lead to *ahavat Yisrael*, but that is not the primary objective. *Yediat Yisrael* aims for learners to find and navigate their own meanings and connections with Israel, as the historic homeland, as a global, diverse Jewish community, and as the modern State.

*Yediat Yisrael* aims to build understanding. Dr. Litman and I draw upon educators Jay McTighe and Elliott Seif, who say we need to “help students go beyond learning facts in order to develop deeper understandings of the world around them and the diverse

global society in which they live... so that they can flourish in an unpredictable world (McTighe & Seif, n.d.).” This means that *yediat Yisrael* is both a cognitive and an experiential learning process. It is dialogical, creating space for honest and hard conversations, for hearing different perspectives and narratives.

*Yediat Yisrael* is grounded in an understanding that all Jews are *mishpucha*, family. And yet, we are diverse, with different cultures, lived experiences, perspectives and narratives. Twentieth century Israel education focused on mobilizing the Jewish community to advocate and support the nascent and struggling State of Israel. *Ahava* was deemed necessary to build loyalty and obligation. Israel education can no longer be solely about the diaspora being there to support Israel. We all - Israeli Jews and Jews around the globe - have to see, support, accompany each other. My own experience in Israel this past February revealed to me that Israelis are just as worried about us right now, as we are about them. *Yediat Yisrael* builds that interdependence and mutual understanding.

*Yediat Yisrael* is theological and spiritual. It affords learners the opportunity to grapple with how Israel fits into their theological and spiritual world views. Rav Kook believed that *eretz yisrael, am Yisrael* and God are linked. One can only be complete as a Jew when on the land. As Reform Jews, we live authentic Jewish lives here in North America. Nevertheless, Rav Kook speaks to a *Yediat Yisrael* paradigm and challenges us to create opportunities for learners to discern what the Land of Israel means to them and how it is (or is not) part of their theological and spiritual lives.

Finally, *Yediat Yisrael* is epistemological. Knowing Israel helps us understand the world and our place in it. As Quaker educator Parker Palmer writes, “the knower, the known and their relationship are formative in the way an educated person not only thinks but acts. The shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world (Palmer, 1993, p. 21).” Teaching from a *Yediat Yisrael* approach aims for learners to act, to

produce, in the ways that are meaningful, compelling and transformative for them and those with whom they are in relationship.

When we clear away the assumption that *ahavat Yisrael* has to be the outcome of our Israel education endeavors, we open ourselves up to new ways of thinking about what our learners need today and how best to accomplish that. *Yediat Yisrael, knowing Israel*, is attainable.

**STOP HERE**

[This is incredibly important to me. Last February, after spending 5 days in Israel with 30 Reform Jewish educators, bearing witness, hearing stories, offering support, and thinking deeply about this watershed moment in our history, I returned home and said to my husband, “we are going back this summer.” I need more *Yediat Yisrael*. I want to know Israel just as much as I want Israel to know me. Eleven days from now, we will board that El Al plane, to return, to be with Israel during these crucial days.]

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