



Honoring the memory of Belda K. Lindenbaum z"l

***Israel Education at SAR:  
An Evaluation of the Teaching of Israeli History at a Modern Orthodox Day School***

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**Introduction**

Israel Education in general, and in a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in particular, is a high-stakes endeavor. The organized American Jewish community expects a great deal from Israel education, including fostering affinity for Israel among young American Jews and giving them the tools they need to defend Israel in an increasingly hostile public sphere. At the same time, changing attitudes toward Israel among those same young American Jews is causing educators to reevaluate the tone and content of Israel education.<sup>1</sup> While Modern Orthodox students' attitudes toward Israel have not changed to the same degree as their cohort in the liberal movements of Judaism, the results of a recent study of the Orthodox community in America show the decline of both emotional connection to and actual support of Israel among the young adult cohort.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the expectations of the Modern Orthodox community with respect to Israel education are particularly high, as our community defines itself by its powerful commitment to Israel and the expectation that its day schools will cultivate students who will be both knowledgeable and passionate about the State.

It goes without saying that commitment to Israel education has been central to SAR's philosophy since the inception of the school. SAR Academy, in existence since 1968, has always worked to inculcate love of Israel through academic and supplemental programming. When the high school was founded in 2003, it was understood that Israel education would play a central role in its curriculum as well. From the beginning, some history of Israel was taught in history classes, and other aspects of Israel education have taken place in Hebrew and Judaics classes.

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<sup>1</sup> For changing attitudes toward Israel, see the [Pew Research Center's "A Portrait of Jewish Americans"](#), pp. 81-94. For implications for Israel education see "[New Consensus Emerging on Israel Education](#)" *The Jewish Week*, December 6, 2010. For examples of new Jewish communal Israel education initiatives, see [Center for Israel Education](#), [Reframing Israel](#), [Prizmah](#), [StandWithUs](#), among others.

<sup>2</sup> [The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews](#), September 28, 2017, pp 15, 59-61.

Supplemental programming such as celebrations on Yom Ha'atzmaut and commemorations on Yom Hazikaron are given a place of importance in the life of our school.

Given SAR's commitment to fostering affinity for Israel among its students, combined with changing attitudes among American Jews with respect to Israel and a new Jewish communal focus on the philosophy of Israel education, we felt it was time to critically examine and revamp how SAR was teaching about Israel. Our goal was to build an Israel curriculum that is nuanced, complex and academically rigorous, and that fosters both a strong Jewish identity and a strong affinity for Israel. All of these elements felt critical to any Israel curriculum in SAR. Our entire history curriculum is based on teaching a critical view of history that incorporates multiple perspectives and engagement with primary material. And, of course, teaching Israel is far from solely an academic pursuit in our school. We are teaching hearts as well as minds. We are also cognizant that our students are and will continue to be exposed to a great deal of information and rhetoric about Israel from multiple sources. From this deluge of information, students and emerging adults must construct a coherent Jewish identity and relationship to Israel, one that we hope will adhere to our core values. Any Israel education program must teach toward this complicated goal.

The dual goals of academic rigor and fostering affinity for Israel may seem on their face to be contradictory. After researching academic literature, experiencing our own classrooms, and surveying our students, we see that these characteristics are not fact not contradictory, but rather necessary for teaching toward identity in a postmodern era in which identities are multifaceted and constantly in flux.

## **Our Goals**

### ***Rigorous Critical Study of History***

The history faculty at SAR has an overarching goal of teaching students to be critical thinkers who understand and participate in the interpretive endeavor of history. This involves the rigorous study of multiple perspectives of both historical actors and historians who interpret the past. As history educators, we believe that teaching history in a rigorous and complex manner is critical to educating the future adult citizens of our community and our world. As Sam Wineburg argues in his influential book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, "history holds the potential ... of humanizing us in ways offered by few other areas in the school curriculum...The sustained encounter with this less-familiar past teaches us the limitation of our brief sojourn on the planet and allows us to take membership in

the entire human race.”<sup>3</sup> Wineburg argues compellingly that the essential purpose of the study of history is to enable students to apply their evaluative skills to the present and become both active and moral citizens within their own communities.

A robust critical study of history does not merely teach events, facts, and dates, but rather teaches historical *thinking*, which “prepares us for the challenges we face as citizens in the present...Participation in public life means we need to evaluate information critically.”<sup>4</sup> An effective history curriculum should include a rich investigation of primary source materials, which help expose students to varying perspectives as well as fostering in them the skills of interpretation, contextualization, and application. It is these very skills that students need in order to understand the debates of our time, from politicians’ speeches to newspaper editorials, and to help them make sense of the vast amount of information that comes at them every day via the internet.

At the same time, history education must not be solely academic. A true student of history must identify with the actors of the past in order to understand their motivations and challenges. However, in fostering that identification, history educators, warns Wineburg, must be cognizant of what he calls the “tension between the familiar and the strange.”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, if the historical forces and actors feel too distant, we tend to exoticize them, feel no connection, and be unable to learn from them. The flip side of this is presentism -- the pull to over-connect with the past and read our own experiences into the lives of those living in a different time and place. For example, rather than criticize the decision of German Jews to remain in Germany in the 1930s, students must understand the context and forces influencing their decision.

In addition, history educators must be cognizant of the powerful role that memory plays in forming our students’ understanding of the past and present. Much has been written on the differences between history and memory, perhaps most famously by Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. A concise explanation of the differences between the two is found Yehuda Kurtzer’s book *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*. He writes, “Memory is selective, deliberate, literary, constructed, and oriented toward the lessons we take from the past; history, in this binary, is scientific and empirical. Memory, played out in ritual and recital, is an act of embracing the past; history, of understanding the past --- even if that understanding can create a deep alienation between the past and the present.”<sup>6</sup> Our students have been influenced by many cultural and familial forces before entering our classrooms which have shaped their historical memory. As Wineberg writes,

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking Matters*. <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why/>

<sup>5</sup> Wineburg, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 7.

“The calculus classroom may be the site where we learn advanced mathematics, but we learn history everywhere -- school hardly possesses a monopoly.”<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, Wineburg reminds his readers that collective memory, which emphasizes certain historical facts and narratives and occludes others, has a powerful hand in shaping students’ understanding of the past. This is particularly the case with respect to Israel, which plays such a central role in Jewish communal memory. The contexts in which our students have internalized their understandings of history can be powerful in shaping their ideas and views not just about historical events, but about the present impact of those events.

The study of Israel’s history in day school and other Jewish educational settings has historically been an endeavor rich in non-academic, affective programming, and lacking in the rigor that we expect from a general history curriculum. It is critical to change this paradigm, particularly at a school like SAR, which prides itself on a nuanced and complex curriculum that pushes students “beyond their comfortable limits.” We model for our students the joy of deep critical engagement with the subject of study; any education about Israel must be as rigorous as the rest of our history curriculum. In a postmodern world in which multiple viewpoints are expected and simple answers non-existent, the uncomplicated “rah rah” Israel education of the past would cause the opposite of its intended result of inculcating love of Israel in our students. Indeed, it would serve as a red flag for our students that we are hiding something or that Israel cannot withstand critical examination. Further, as SAR endeavors to prepare our students to be integral members of the adult Jewish community, whether in America or Israel, we fail by not giving our students the tools to engage with the complex and nuanced realities of the State.

### ***Fostering Strong Jewish identity and Love for Israel***

Our commitment to teach Jewish history and Israel’s history stems from our desire to nurture powerful Jewish identities and an affinity for the State of Israel in our students. SAR’s mission statement articulates its commitment to producing graduates who will “shape Jewish life [and] create Jewish culture” and who will feel “an attachment to the State of Israel and its people as well as a sense of responsibility for their welfare.”<sup>8</sup> When we consider what Israel education should look like in a school like SAR, we have in mind that our ultimate goal is molding our students into the adult Jews we want to see in our communities.

There is no question that one of the goals of the Jewish history classroom is to foster strong Jewish identity. Jonathan Sarna, a Jewish historian who has written a great deal about Jewish history education, notes that educators teach Jewish history “to link Jews one to another to create shared Jewish memories to promote community.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Ken Stein, Middle East

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<sup>7</sup> Wineburg, 250.

<sup>8</sup> SAR Mission Statement.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Sarna, “Why Study American Jewish History?” *Hayediyon*, Spring 2014, 52.

scholar and President of the Center for Israel Education believes that “our journey through history is our Jewish identity... without it we are not a people.”<sup>10</sup> *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools*, the seminal 2014 Avi Chai study of Israel education, found that rooting study of Israel in a larger narrative of Jewish peoplehood was central to the success of Israel education.<sup>11</sup> At SAR, where we teach about Jewish life in the diaspora prior to 1948, the study of Zionism and the creation of the state is rooted in a larger narrative of the Jewish people. This narrative helps students understand the desire and need for a Jewish state and the political, religious, and cultural philosophies that gave rise to Zionism.

Researchers in Jewish history and Israel education support the rigorous and critical study of Jewish and Israeli history with a reliance on primary source material and the inclusion of the more troubling elements of the Jewish past. Curriculum should include everything from Jewish slaveholders in the American antebellum South, to Jewish involvement in white slavery and organized crime, to Israel’s involvement in the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. While it might seem counterproductive to the stated goals to allow students to see the underbelly of the subject at hand, all of the literature that we surveyed, whether about teaching history, Jewish history, or the more recent literature on teaching about Israel, recognize that teaching a one-sided, unnuanced history can backfire when it comes to building long-term loyalty to the Jewish people and Israel.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to Israel education, in the past few years, numerous accounts have been published in the Jewish press by students who found themselves alienated from the State of Israel because they felt their day schools “lied” to them about the “true” nature of Israeli history and society. By whitewashing some of the more complicated and unpleasant aspects of Israeli history and society, whether it be the relationship with the Palestinians or the role that religion plays in state policies, day schools have caused their graduates to call into question much of their Israel education.<sup>13</sup> While it did not specifically focus on these disaffected students, the Avi Chai study noted that “In schools that offer different, more critical perspectives on the history and development of modern Israel, especially on the upper school level, students scored no lower in their sense of connection to Israel. Students can be aware of the challenges facing the Jewish State and still be committed to Israel’s well-being and importance in their own lives.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Alex Sinclair, “Between History and Memory in Israel Education.” *The Prizmah Journal*, Spring 2014. <https://prizmah.org/between-history-and-memory-israel-education>.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Pomson, Jack Wertheimer, Hagit Hacohen-Wolf, *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools*. Avichai Study 2014, 54-5. [http://avichai.org/knowledge\\_base/hearts-and-minds-israel-in-north-american-jewish-day-schools/](http://avichai.org/knowledge_base/hearts-and-minds-israel-in-north-american-jewish-day-schools/)

<sup>12</sup> Sarna, [Why Study American Jewish History?](#), [Makom Israel - About Us](#); Wineberg, 217-231.

<sup>13</sup> For example, [Unlearned Apartheid Apologism: A Jewish Response to Israeli Apartheid Week](#), *The Columbia Spectator* 3/5/17; [Between the Lines](#), a documentary about Israel Education, [Students Seen ‘Suspicious’ of Israel Education](#), *The Jewish Week*, 2/8/11.

<sup>14</sup> Avi Chai Study, 55.

Of course it is important to note that as a Modern Orthodox institution, SAR does not face the same struggles as much of the rest of the American Jewish community when it comes to identification with Israel. Much of the student body already has a strong connection to and experience with the State. Therefore, we wondered to what extent the literature we read accurately addressed our specific community. Much of the Jewish history and Israel education literature (with the exception of the Avi Chai *Hearts and Minds* study which specifically set out to study North American Jewish day schools and included SAR and other Modern Orthodox day schools) addresses teaching Jewish history in supplemental Jewish programs and pluralistic Jewish day schools. This is a crucial distinction since the assumption of most of these educational environments is that they are providing the foundation of the Jewish identity and knowledge for their students. This is not the case for SAR where the assumption is that our students come from homes with rich Jewish lives and meaningful Jewish affiliations, including strong ties to Israel. Nevertheless, it may be worth questioning the assumption that all students at SAR possess strong Jewish identities. This is surely not true, as we have all taught students who are struggling with their Jewish identity, particularly the religious component.<sup>15</sup> Where religious practice and text study may not speak to such students, the study of Jewish history and Israel can help affirm a cultural Jewish identity rooted in Jewish nationhood rather than religion. A rich Jewish history curriculum can also play an important role for students with a strong religious identity, many of whom live in a Modern Orthodox bubble with negative associations of Jews to their right and their left. For them, the study of Jewish history is crucial in expanding their notions and broadening their sense of peoplehood. Balancing the needs of students with a primarily cultural Jewish identity against the needs of students for whom Israel's central value is in the fulfillment of a religious ideal is a challenge that we must continue to consider.

In constructing our high school Israel curriculum we embraced the idea that we were trying to offer the students something different from what they had been given in the lower grades and in summer camp. The Avi Chai study states that “Israel education in day schools, we have found, is to a large degree a practice of working on the heart.”<sup>16</sup> The stated goal of Israel education in day schools is to instill love in and identification with the land and its people and it is done primarily through affective connections, symbols and positive images and experiences. When it comes to high school students, who developmentally are at a stage of questioning and skepticism, we believe that “working on the heart” must engage the critical mind as well. This is particularly true in our “post-everything era,”<sup>17</sup> in which Jewish young adults, even those in the Modern Orthodox community, have very complicated and diverse identities. They feel free to

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<sup>15</sup> Avi Chai Study p. 44. In this section of the study, the authors identify three clusters of 12th grade students including a group of 20% of students they call “detached” and describe as “turned off mainly to religion, but not to all aspects of Jewishness.” This 20% statistic is presumably reflected in SAR’s student body as well.

<sup>16</sup> Avi Chai Study p.10.

<sup>17</sup> Ben Jacobs, “Cosmopolitan Jewish Education of the Jews Next Dor,” *eJewish Philanthropy*, August 29, 2013. <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/cosmopolitan-jewish-education-for-the-jews-next-dor/>

constantly reconstruct their personal identities and don't feel constrained by the categories and institutions that have traditionally defined Jewishness. When Jewish identity is up for grabs, a properly crafted Jewish history course has the potential to ground students in their Jewish identity. Therefore, our curriculum must simultaneously promote identity while making room for criticism. Ultimately, based on the research we have explored, we believe that teaching this tension is actually the way to help students develop an enduring and more resilient connection to Israel.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Challenge**

As we approached our Israel curriculum, which has a specific goal of fostering a close connection to Israel in our students, we were cognizant that teaching Israeli history in this critical and nuanced way would be far more complicated than teaching even the most controversial episodes in the American or European past. Firstly and most importantly, it is difficult in the American Jewish community, and particularly in the Orthodox community, to deviate from a singular positive narrative of Israeli history. Approaching the War of Independence, for example, from the perspective of Palestinian Arabs living in what was to become Jewish sovereign territory may alienate and even enrage students who have internalized narratives and communal memory that are not inclusive of any Palestinian experience. Exposing our students to other perspectives and narratives may also open us up to the ire of sectors of our parent body who either do not see such perspectives as valid, or see them as detracting from the pro-Israel, Zionist narrative that they think SAR should be teaching. Examining primary sources that are either critical of Israel or come from a perspective other than that of Zionist Jews may be pointless if we cannot make the case to our students that they should try to identify with the creators of those sources. Likewise, examination of primary sources that devalue or negate the experience of Arab residents of Israel may cause over-identification in students predisposed to those viewpoints. And without teaching this unit using the same critical methods as other units, we risk alienating students who have come to expect that the authentic study of history is multi-faceted.

Israel education poses a unique set of challenges at SAR. Modern Orthodox Jews in America often embrace a Zionist collective memory that overlooks aspects of Israeli history and society that contradict that memory. Our community's collective memory about Israel emphasizes such themes as the larger-than-life halutzim draining the swamps, the headiness of the birth of the state, the miraculousness of military victories against all odds and of the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, the role Israel has played in rescuing and assimilating Jewish

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<sup>18</sup> We are cognizant that an important discussion needs to take place regarding the differences between Israel advocacy and Israel education in the day school setting. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, others are addressing this issue. See, e.g., David Bernstein, "Moving Beyond the Israel Education and Advocacy Dichotomy," *The Avichai Foundation Blog*, February 16, 2012. <http://avichai.org/2012/02/moving-beyond-the-israel-education-and-advocacy-dichotomy/>; Rivka Press Schwartz, "A (Post) Modern Israel Education." *Machon Siach* (2017).

refugees from around the world, and the status of Israel as a leader in technology innovation today. Furthermore, Israel is seen as the answer to anti-Semitism and violence against Jews that culminated in the Holocaust. The Modern Orthodox community views the State of Israel as *reishit tzmichat geulateinu*, the first step toward the messianic era and the fulfillment of a Divine promise. It is the place where many in our community spend holidays and summers. We send our children there for a gap year post-high school to strengthen their connection to the state and their Jewish identity. Our Yeshiva day school curricula and school-wide celebrations focus on celebrating Israel's history and successes. The summer camps to which we send our children devote much, if not all, of their educational programming to Israel. Many in our community are "one-issue voters" -- they vote based solely on candidates' positions on Israel. While the organized American Jewish community is generally fairly monolithic in terms of unwavering and uncritical support of the state of Israel, the Orthodox community is the least forgiving of differences in opinion regarding Israeli politics, with a majority of Orthodox Jews identifying with a right of center viewpoint regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>19</sup> The prevalent narratives about Israel in our community occlude almost any element in Israel's history or current existence that could be perceived as negative. This sets up an "us against them" narrative, which pits "us," community insiders who present a relentlessly positive picture of Israel, against "them," the press or organizations that criticize certain aspects of Israel's political or religious policies. To present a critical stance regarding anything to do with Israel can be, and often has been, seen in our community as a traitorous act. Being labeled as disloyal or lacking in Zionist bona-fides could have serious implications for recruitment and retention of students in a highly competitive yeshiva day school market.

However, the SAR community is not monolithic. There are students, parents and faculty who embrace a left-of-center ideological stance with respect to Israel. They are sympathetic to a counter-narrative that challenges the inviolability of the traditional Zionist narrative. We have students, faculty and parents who support the initiatives of more liberal Zionist groups such as the New Israel Fund and others. Further along the spectrum are a few students and parents who are actively seeking out ways to participate in dialogue with those traditionally seen as the "enemy," as well as students who express disaffection with the way they were taught about Israel after leaving SAR.<sup>20</sup> Teaching to the entire SAR community and holding on to our Zionist beliefs

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<sup>19</sup> "A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews," *The Pew Center for Research on Religion in Public Life*, August 15, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/08/26/a-portrait-of-american-orthodox-jews/>

<sup>20</sup> "Seeds of Peace" summer program which brings together Jewish and Palestinian teenagers in a community of understanding and dialogue. See also the following excerpt from a letter to Rabbi Harcsztark from an SAR graduate, class of 2014:

During my time [at Hebrew U], I was exposed to new narratives regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict, through both a history class taught by a brilliant Palestinian professor and by a trip I made to Bethlehem with a Jewish group organized to promote intercultural dialogue. From my course at Hebrew U., I began to see that there was much to the history of the Palestinian conflict that I had not learned at school. During the trip to Bethlehem, I spoke with nonviolent Palestinian activists, Palestinian teenagers, Palestinian government officials, and even



and critical history lens is the central challenge of the creation of an Israel curriculum in our school. We constantly struggle to find the appropriate balance and to have a clear message to students and parents who might question our decisions.

## **Curriculum Summary**

### **A. Background**

Up until the 2014-2015 school year, all formal instruction at SAR about the history of the State of Israel was saved for the Modern Israel course in 12th grade. Tenth graders learned about the emergence of Zionism in Europe and bit about the Mandate Period and early aliyot within the 10th grade curriculum. However, due to limited time and the need to cover World War II and the Cold War, we did not teach about the founding of the State, the wars that shaped Israel in its early decades, or anything about Israel's internal affairs or foreign relations. We attempted to make up for this in the 12th grade second semester "Modern Israel" mini-course. The challenges and shortcomings of this model were abundant. Our goal for the 12th grade course was to delve into contemporary issues about Israel, but the students lacked the historical foundation for those conversations so we had to spend time giving them background, leaving little time for exploration of the issues. In addition, second semester senior year is a challenging time to teach new and important information, especially in a course that is graded on a pass/fail scale. The students themselves felt that this was too late in their high school career and that we were sending the message that Israel education was not important. The history department struggled with this problem and long felt that 10th grade was the appropriate place for teaching Israeli history, as the students are invested and it fits the themes and chronology of our 10th grade curriculum. In the spring of 2014, we proposed an Israeli history unit in the 10th grade to the

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stayed in a Palestinian family's home overnight. I learned more than I can put into words on this trip; I left feeling filled with new knowledge and a new perspective on this conflict. I also left with a huge sense of bafflement, because I became intimately familiar with a narrative that was completely missing from our education at SAR.

Why did I never learn that whether the Six Day War was a war of defense or offense is deeply disputed amongst historians? Why did I never learn that almost every historical "fact" is used differently within these different narratives? Why did I attend courses like "how to stand up for Israel on your future college campuses" that aim to guide children in rhetoric without understanding? Why did I learn that "the IDF is the most moral army in the world" without testimonies from those whom the IDF's actions affect? I recognize that Zionism is a core value of SAR's, but I think the value of Zionism is not served by hiding half the story. Quite honestly, to learn about the Palestinian narrative only after leaving school has made me feel intellectually cheated, and to have been taught only the Zionist perspective makes me feel more distanced from Zionism.

Israel Education committee.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the 10th grade was given an extra period a week for the following year (up to 6.5 meetings/week from 5.5/week) and we introduced our Israel unit in Spring 2015. Simultaneously, this allowed us to modify the 12th grade curriculum to address more contemporary issues and debates on a more sophisticated level.

## **B. 10th Grade Curriculum**

Given the circumstances our Israel unit in the 10th grade were meant to address, our goals for the unit were twofold. First, and most importantly, we wanted to provide the students with a basic chronology of the major events and figures from the British Mandate Period through the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005. This knowledge is crucial for the educated Zionist, and would serve as a foundation for deeper topical discussions in 12th grade. We wanted to build cultural and historical literacy regarding Zionism and the State of Israel that included domestic and international issues and personalities. We organized the unit by decade and within each decade we discussed the most pressing topics that shaped Israel from within and without during that time. Our second goal was to begin to introduce a critical lens in our students' understanding of Israel. While we would save extensive discussion of multiple narratives (for example, the Palestinian view of the War of Independence) for 12th grade, we wanted to expose our 10th graders to some of the controversies surrounding Israeli politics and history, and we also wanted them to see the importance of studying Israel's history using the same critical tools that we used in other units. We thought this was crucial both because, as historians, we believe this is the only authentic way to study history, and also because raising these issues would be a good way to engage and excite students, both those with little previous knowledge and those with prior background and assumptions.

See Appendix A for an outline of the content of the 10th grade Israel unit.

## **C. 12th Grade Curriculum**

Modern Israel, our 12th grade Israel studies course, is a pass/fail course which meets two to three times per week during the first half of second semester of senior year. Focusing on Israeli history and society, the course allows students to explore controversial topics about Israel in a non-threatening and nuanced way. Given the toxic atmosphere on college campuses with respect to anything related to Israel, our students and former students felt they needed to be empowered with knowledge, both to answer the claims of Israel's critics on campus, and, perhaps more importantly, to formulate their own informed opinions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Alumni confirmed what we read in the literature, that they felt "lied to" because they heard a very one-sided narrative about the conflict during their time at SAR. Other alumni felt

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<sup>21</sup> The Israel Education committee is a group of SAR administrators and faculty who meet on a regular basis to evaluate Israel education in the high school.

that they did not have enough information at their fingertips to respond to Israel's critics. In addition to addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we wanted to expose students to a more complex picture of Israeli society, culture and politics. Thus, our aim for the course was to ground students with the background they needed to be conversant in Israeli history and culture, and also to expose them to different narratives and perspectives on that history and culture to allow them to gain a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the modern State of Israel.

This past year (2016-17) was the first in which the seniors had the benefit of the Israeli history unit in 10th grade. Freed from the need to cover a chronological overview, we reorganized the two-month curriculum to center on Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state. We used this overarching theme to highlight Israel's unique values and the many ways that it has successfully lived up to both of these value systems. We then discussed tensions that can emerge between these two systems that our students hold dear. While we did, of course, have to review some of the basic chronology, we found that due to the 10th grade experience, these students did have a better grounding, allowing us to jump into a more complex and nuanced discussion of these issues.

### **Implementation of Goals through Curriculum**

#### *Historical Thinking*

Throughout all four years of history coursework at SAR, the interpretive study of history through the use of primary sources is central to our teaching. This approach extends to our teaching about Zionism and pre-State Palestine. In our 10th grade unit on the 19th century, students [read](#) excerpts of Herzl, Pinsker, Ahad Ha'am, A.D. Gordon, Jabotinsky, and others and engage in a Socratic Seminar debating these various approaches to Zionism. We encourage them to consider the context in which these thinkers wrote and to apply their ideas to the situation today. In comparison to other units, however, our 10th grade Israel unit is notably lacking in rich primary source-based discussions. This is due to our desire to cover a great deal of material in a relatively short period of time. In a survey we administered to our students to assess the success of the Israel unit in 2016, students themselves recognized this, as 66.7% of the respondents to the evaluation answered "less than other units" to the question: "Did you use primary sources as a way to understand the time period you were studying?" There is no writing assignment that accompanies this unit, and the assessments do not require as much synthesis or interpretation as other units. While the multiple choice questions used to assess students' knowledge acquisition in this unit are not "spit-back" and require deeper understanding of significance, students were not required to do any serious interpretation on their own. In constructing this unit we set out to teach basic information-- chronology, important figures and events. As Wineburg and we understand, there is no such thing as facts out of context, so we did raise a number of interpretive

issues and drew the students' attention to various perspectives (ex. perspectives on the tactics of Irgun and Lehi, treatment of Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern countries by the Ashkenazi establishment, and criticism of the events in Sabra and Shatilla, to name a few). However, this was not generally done through the use of primary sources and our intention was to save that work for the 12th grade curriculum. Interestingly, most students felt that the amount of discussion and the complexity with which the material was presented in this unit was equal to or greater than other units of the year and that the teacher lectured the same amount or less than in other units. Nevertheless, these discussions were not generated by primary source material and students did less constructing on their own, and more reacting to teacher prompts.

The 12th grade curriculum is more reliant on primary texts, although the texts tend to be more contemporary. For example, we read Israeli Supreme Court decisions about the controversy over transportation on Shabbat, case studies about Chief Rabbinate control of marriage and divorce, newspaper articles about the Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem, and multiple primary sources on civil rights of minorities. We also use websites of relevant organizations, book reviews or short excerpts of contemporary scholarship, and video clips to stimulate conversation and introduce various perspectives. In 2017 we were able to spend less time on powerpoints and lecture in order to provide the historical background to these issues, but still need to do a better job having students access different perspectives through their own engagement with the sources.

As the 10th grade curriculum currently stands, we have opted to cover more material rather than delve into deeper textual analysis in any one topic. As noted above, this past year was the first cohort of 12th graders to have benefitted from the 10th grade unit, and the groundwork they gained in 10th grade enabled deeper discussion this year. Nevertheless, we wonder whether we are perhaps unwittingly transmitting the message to our 10th graders that Israeli history should not be subject to the same rigorous analysis as other histories we study. Additionally, we realize that pushing off the heavier work of contextualization to the 12th grade comes along with its own set of issues, most importantly the fact that it is challenging, as noted above, to keep 12th graders engaged in academic study in a pass/fail course which is taught in the second half of senior year. We continue to assess whether the choices we have made are effective.

A second value that permeates our history curriculum is the inclusion of multiple perspectives, and we attempt to integrate this into our Israel curriculum as well. Our students' identification with the Israeli past tends to only include the perspective of Zionists, often solely religious Zionists. Given what our students already know, and think they know, about the Holocaust, contemporary anti-Semitism, the current conflict in the Middle East and the world, their own experiences of Israel, and their own Jewish identities, it is a challenge to "cultivate puzzlement" and to retain a "humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of the species."<sup>22</sup> There are various places in our

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<sup>22</sup> Wineburg, 21-22.

10th and 12th grade curriculum in which we have consciously complicated the narrative that our students expect to hear. For example, in the 10th grade, when we study the Peel Commission debate over whether and how to divide the land of Palestine between Jews and Arabs, we divide the class into four groups (pro-partition Jews, anti-partition Jews, pro-partition Arabs, anti-partition Arabs), each of which is required to argue its particular perspective in front of the class. We complicate the European Ashkenazi narrative of Israeli nation-building by introducing the perspectives of Mizrahi and Ethiopian immigrants who felt oppressed by Israeli leadership. Similarly in 12th grade, by introducing the question of transportation on shabbat and rabbinic control of marriage and divorce, we challenge the idea that religion should have a central role in state policy and consider what that means for non-religious and the non-Orthodox Jews.

### *Jewish Identity and Connection to Israel*

Teaching Israel as part of our larger Jewish history curriculum enables us to highlight Jewish creativity and initiative beginning in the diaspora and culminating in the Zionist endeavor. The diversity of Zionist ideologies, including Labor, Political, Cultural and Religious, demonstrate the depth and breadth of Jewish engagement with the world and the needs of Jews in particular. In addition, since high school is a time of questioning, some students push back against the narratives about Judaism and Israel they have received since early childhood and continue to receive at SAR. Allowing for a more nuanced and critical discussion about Israel within the history classroom where such discussions are already commonplace is a way of keeping those students engaged and connected. Furthermore by situating our Israel history curriculum within a larger story of human potential and growth, students are able to relate to the story of Israel--to themes of human ability to affect change, conscious society and nation-building and human triumph over adversity. These themes can provide points of connection for all students, particularly those who are pushing back against the narratives about Israel they have learned up until this point and searching for one that is meaningful to them.

However, the process of teaching historical thinking unavoidably results in seeing history through a nuanced lens, which does not lend itself to a straightforward message about identity. Throughout our history curriculum we often foreground contemporary issues and moral questions which lead to rich and important discussion. In most units, these discussions are not contentious as the members of our school community generally share a common moral code and the topics we cover are removed from personal experience. This is not the case regarding Israel around which the conversation in the Jewish community is extremely emotionally charged. Within the Jewish community, those expressing views to the left of center are often labeled traitors and self-hating Jews and those expressing views to the right of center are often labeled racists and destroyers of Jewish morality. While we hope that our school community's common moral code extends to Israel, it is fair to say that individuals within the community have different moral priorities. Most, if not all, members of our community love and support Israel and agree

that Jews need to have a safe place to go. However, our perceptions of the degree of danger that Jews face both in Israel and in the diaspora, the intrinsic value of the diaspora, the role of Israel in the lives of diaspora Jews, and how these issues are addressed differ. It is these different visions and priorities that give rise to differences of political views and moral questions. These differences can emerge in any history classroom and present a sticky situation for the teacher who has one set of moral priorities that is different from some of his/her students and their parents. The challenges are even greater in teaching Israel in a Modern Orthodox framework due to the centrality of Israel in the heart and mind of the community and the loaded nature of moral stances about anything related to Israel. Introducing competing narratives about Israel and evaluating the moral decisions of Israel's past and present challenge traditional Zionist identity and thereby may challenge our community's cohesive self-understanding.

As we noted above, our students do not enter our history classrooms as a blank slate. By the time students arrive in our classrooms in high school, many, if not most, have strong beliefs about Israel that have been shaped and reinforced by their surrounding community and its collective memory. Anything we say or teach about Israel in our high school classes is received within this context. This makes the job of the teacher a difficult balancing act. Challenging a student's beliefs can backfire and lead students to shut down and dismiss the new ideas. This can work in both directions—a student can view the teacher's narrative as too one-sided, either from a Jewish perspective or Palestinian perspective, depending on their assumptions. The Avi Chai Hearts and Minds study devotes a section on teachers in Jewish Day Schools who teach about Israel and note that teaching about Israel is highly personalized.<sup>23</sup> They identify two distinct groups with different goals and approaches. The Exemplars have more robust cognitive, behavioral and affective goals, and they achieve them by sharing personal experiences about Israel. The Explorers tend to lead students to reach their own goals through questioning and exploration. In teaching history in general, we favor the Explorer model. However, our experience in teaching Israel has taught us the importance of the Exemplar model, not only to increase affective connection, but more importantly, to build trust. Anecdotal evidence, as well as common sense, indicates that the teacher must make a conscious effort to frame the critical approach. A teacher must always “read the classroom” and respond to his or her audience, but this is all the more true for this topic. The teacher must “prove” his or her love and commitment to Israel. Personal stories as well as emphasizing personal support of Israel can help students be more receptive to the new ideas. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the Israel unit takes place at the end of the year so there has been plenty of time a trusting relationship between student and teacher to be built. Nevertheless, at the beginning and throughout the Israel unit, the teacher must overtly explain why this new approach is necessary as well as why recognizing nuance, alternate perspectives and even criticizing does not negate the commitment we have to Israel and the Zionist endeavor.

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<sup>23</sup> Avi Chai study pp. 27-33.

## **Analysis of Application to SAR**

To help us assess the effectiveness of our 10th grade curriculum, we administered pre- and post-unit assessments to our students this year, and will continue to do so in the years to come. We are interested in both students' affective state before and after the unit, as well as their knowledge base and acquisition. In creating the assessments, we consulted with Dr. Steven Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at Hebrew Union College and Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at Stanford University. See [pre-assessment](#) and [post-assessment](#) results.

Unsurprisingly, our students did have knowledge about certain aspects of Israeli history and society before the unit began, but their knowledge increased significantly due to the unit. For example, prior to the unit, 47.4% of students knew that Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords, and 86.7% of students knew that fact after the unit. Similarly, 52.6% of students knew prior to the unit that the First Intifada was a Palestinian uprising against Israel, a number that rose to 90.5% after the unit. In particular, prior to the unit, students generally had high familiarity with facts that painted Israel in a positive light. For example, before the Israel Unit, 83.3% of the students knew that Israeli Arabs were citizens of Israel. After the unit that number rose by an additional 5.3% to 88.6%

However, there were significant gaps in our students' pre-unit knowledge that were ameliorated by the unit. For example, only 18.4% of students responded correctly that Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Accords prior to the unit, a number which rose to 71.4% after the unit. Many of those gaps were connected to different perspectives and narratives on Israeli history and society. For example, before the Israel unit, 15.8% of the students knew that the word *Nakba* ("catastrophe") was the term Palestinians use to describe what Zionists call Israel's War of Independence, and after the unit 52.4% knew its meaning. Similarly, only 13.2% of students knew before the Israel Unit that Sabra and Shatila were the sites of massacres of Palestinians in Lebanon for which Israel took some responsibility, while 75.2% knew this information after the unit.

In terms of affect, perhaps the most interesting finding was that the Israel unit seemed to increase students' interest in Israel and engagement with issues of importance to Israeli society. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 referring to no interest and 5 referring to great interest, the number of students who rated their interest in the study of Israel as 5 rose from 31.6% to 35.2%, and the number of students who rated their interest at 4 similarly rose from 38.6% to 42.9%. The number of students who were neutral about their interest fell from 20.2 to 16.2 and the number of students who chose low interest (2) or no interest (1) fell from 9.6% to 5.7%. While before the unit, 3.5% of students rated their interest as 1, after the unit, that number fell to 0. Another interesting development was the change with respect to students' responses to the statement

“Israel should grant citizenship to the Palestinians in the West Bank.” The number of students who strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement rose from 36.8% to 41% and the number of students who strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement also rose from 15.8% to 20%. The number of students who were neutral about the question fell from 47.4% to 39%. This change also seems to support the idea that the Israel unit increased student engagement with Israel. Students became more opinionated once they had more knowledge.

The survey showed a similar rise in interest and engagement with respect to our students’ emotional attachment to Israel. The survey asked students to check off adjectives that described their relationship to Israel. The choices were: loyal, passionate, engaged, neutral, disengaged, questioning, and critical. Students could check off more than one adjective. Students’ connection to Israel did not generally seem to suffer in light of their increased awareness and understanding of other narratives in Israeli history. The percentage of students who described their feelings toward Israel as “loyal” increased significantly from 62.3% to 70.5% and the number who described their feelings as “passionate” increased marginally from 71.9% to 72.4%. At the same time, however, the percentage of students who described themselves as “critical” of Israel rose from 4.4% to 8.6%. Since students could choose more than one adjective to describe their feelings, we were interested to see if the number of students who expressed both connection to Israel (by checking off loyal, passionate, and/or engaged) and feelings that differed from simple support (by checking off disengaged, questioning, and/or critical) grew by the end of the unit. Interestingly the numbers did not change significantly. Prior to the unit 18.4% of students fell into this category, and after the unit 19.2% of students did so.<sup>24</sup>

In their comments, students generally evaluated the unit favorably. Some said it was their favorite unit of the year or that they learned a lot and that the information was important. One particular comment validated the organization of the unit which helped the students make sense of the information they already possessed and see how events related to each other. The student commented, “Before the unit all my knowledge was mixed up like tangled earphones. This unit helped me untangle everything so I could see where it fits.” Among the student critiques was one that the teachers shared as well: there were a lot of facts to cover and for many it was an information overload. While we tried to create a unifying framework within each decade, it was difficult to successfully integrate every topic in a coherent way. In addition, since it was the end of the year and there was so much information to cover, it did feel rushed. We did not have the time to do document analysis, group work, Socratic seminars, formative assessments or personal reflections. The one project students did in 2017 was an [Annotated Timeline](#). This required students to creatively present twelve mandatory events (geopolitical turning points) and then select twelve additional terms (events, figures) with an emphasis on culture, religion and

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, due to technical problems with the survey questions, we do not have accurate information about our students changing attitudes about Palestinians. We hope to correct the problem and to have that information for future years.



economy. Students were required not only to identify the terms, but also include their significance in order to force them to think more analytically about bigger themes and ideas. The project was a success--students really enjoyed it and learned a great deal. They created beautiful products. Nevertheless, the quality of the analysis varied and the small observations that students made about each term did not compare to an essay.

While we do not yet have data from pre and post-assessments for our 12th grade Modern Israel course, after two years of teaching Modern Israel, we believe that our dual goals of giving students both background knowledge and nuanced understanding about Israel are on the path to being achieved. Anecdotal evidence in the form of feedback from students has been cautiously positive. A number of students expressed their appreciation for the course and shared with us that they felt that the course enhanced knowledge about and understanding of the State of Israel. Some students told us that the course felt like “too little, too late.” They bemoaned their lack of intensive Israel education prior to the course and worried that most of their classmates were no longer invested in school by second semester of senior year. While we have been able to ameliorate part of this critique with our Israeli history unit in the 10th grade, we acknowledge that it is difficult to keep second semester seniors motivated to learn, particularly in a pass/fail course that has a limited number of class meetings. In the coming year, we will create a survey for students in order to obtain more substantial and meaningful feedback about the efficacy of the course.

## **Conclusion**

SAR is a school that sees identity as complex and nuanced. The administration of our school has staked out unique, sometimes groundbreaking, positions within the broader Modern Orthodox community on religious and social issues. Nevertheless, we are keenly aware that in some ways, discourse about Israel can be more controversial than any other topic in our community, and it highlights often radically different perspectives among an otherwise fairly homogeneous group. The administration placed its trust in the History Department which has been developing the Israel curriculum over the past few years according to the values that guide the overall history curriculum scope and sequence. The SAR High School Israel Education Group that met over the course of three years, and the process of writing this paper have given us the chance to reflect on our goals and implementation, as well as to get some feedback on how the curriculum has been received by students. While we were always aware of the difficulties the Israel curriculum presented, this project highlighted the tension between the two values that we embrace: that of academic rigor and that of traditional Jewish communal assumptions about identity building.

One central take-away for us is the need to both articulate and own our personal position on this question. We embrace the position that is committed to historical thinking but also values fostering strong connection to Israel. This means that we rely on the same tools as we do in other history units (primary texts, multiple perspectives, critical analysis), but we acknowledge that we are constructing a selective narrative that cultivates a love of Israel. The truth is that all history education is selective in this way. In order for history to make sense, there must be a narrative and that narrative is shaped by the choices that reflect our values. So, for example, American history curricula focus on the emergence of the liberal values of the European Enlightenment and connect them to the emergence of successful western democracies. That we do this in our Israel curriculum is no different and does not need to be justified, but should be articulated to both students and parents.

Similarly, we must make clear our belief that our students' Jewish identity, particularly on a high school level, is enhanced by using critical study. The diversity of our student body (which is often overlooked), the developmental stage of teenage students, and the complexity of identity building in the twenty-first century milieu all demand a more sophisticated and nuanced presentation in the classroom. We risk turning students off now or in the future if we do not treat Israel education with the same rigor as other topics. Recognizing the world that they will enter after leaving SAR compels us to not whitewash Israel's history. Our students will hear the unpleasant narratives about Israel on their college campuses soon enough, and we would rather expose them to those narratives in our classrooms where there is a shared commitment to, and love for, Israel. Our new self-awareness resulting from our work on this project must be translated into increased transparency through increased communication to our larger community.

While reassessment of Israel education has been a front-burner agenda item for Jewish educators in the liberal and non-denominational Jewish community for a number of years, this reassessment has not yet occurred in Modern Orthodox educational settings. We see SAR as a thought leader in this regard. We plan to continue to develop our curriculum in response to our ongoing experience in the classroom, feedback from students, and conversation within the school and the greater SAR community. We hope our experience and conclusions will impact the larger Modern Orthodox community.

## Appendix A: 10g Israel Unit Outline

- I. Founding of the State
  - A. The Aftermath of WWII, DP Camps
  - B. Life in Pre-State Palestine, Yishuv and institutions
  - C. Jewish defense organizations: Haganah, Irgun, Lehi, internal conflicts, conflict with British
  - D. U.N. Partition Plan
  - E. Founding of the State (including War of Independence)
  
- II. 1950s: Growing Pains
  - A. Immigration: Law of Return, Great Aliyah, Operation Ezra and Nehemia, treatment of Mizrahi Jews,
  - B. Economics: Reparations
  - C. Security and Sinai Campaign
  
- III. 1960s
  - A. Dealing with the Aftermath of the Holocaust: Eichmann Trial
  - B. Six-Day War: Causes, Aftermath--Resolution 242, impact on world Jewry
  - C. Introduce vocabulary of settlements, occupation, Judah and Samaria, West Bank, Yesha, Gush Emunim, Greater Israel
  
- IV. 1970s
  - A. Post Six-Day War Issues (demographics, settlements, occupation)
  - B. Palestinians Organize: PLO, Arafat, Black September, Munich Olympics, Entebbe
  - C. Yom Kippur War: Nasser
  - D. Politics: Golda Meir, Likud takes control of the government, Menachem Begin
  - E. Camp David Accords
  
- V. 1980s
  - A. Fallout from Camp David Accords: Evacuation of Sinai, Yamit,
  - B. Lebanon War: background, Sabra and Shatilla (Sharon)
  - C. Foreign Relations: bombing of Osirak, Jonathan Pollard
  - D. Internal Politics: Shas, Kach, National Unity
  - E. First Intifada: Creation of Hamas vs. Fatah
  
- VI. 1990s and Beyond
  - A. Oslo Accords: Clinton, Rabin, Arafat
  - B. Baruch Goldstein

- C. Peace with Jordan
- D. Rabin's Assassination
- E. Second Intifada: security wall
- F. Evacuation of Gaza