"Friendship is a living thing that lasts only as long as it is nourished with kindness, empathy, and understanding." -Anonymous.

Countless studies, most recently those of Jewish researchers Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman conclude that young American Jews express substantially increasing indifference or even antipathy towards Israel.\(^1\) Such findings appear exceptionally applicable to young liberal Jews, who often express suspicion towards the historical Zionist myths and modern Israeli policies that once received a warm welcome among American Jews.\(^2\) Unfortunately, as preeminent scholar of Israel education, Lisa Grant, notes, “the teaching of Israel in American Jewish education has been much more often about the myth and miracle than it has been about the work of creating a relationship of mutuality based upon deep knowing and rich understanding.”\(^3\)

Resolution and Connection

The confounding task of fashioning, in Grant’s words, a “relationship of mutuality based upon deep knowing and rich understanding” remains the primary obstacle facing Israel education today. In his ethnography of Israel education at Camp Ramah, another leading scholar of Israel education, Alex Sinclair, suggests that effective Israel education must achieve two distinct goals, resolution and connection. Sinclair represents the two goals as intersecting axes, as shown in Figure 1.\(^4\) Resolution, the vertical axis, represents the comprehensiveness of the student’s knowledge, while connection, the horizontal axis, represents the level of identification that an individual feels towards Israel. Scholars, news correspondents, and authors may all achieve high levels of resolution, but connection requires an emotional commitment to the state of Israel. Israel must represent, within the individual consciousness, something more than just another country. Israel education, according to Sinclair, must aim for the top-right quadrant, producing students who, “feel deeply committed to Israel and who see it as an integral part of their identity, and who also have a high-resolution view of Israel, replete with its details, complexities, frustrations, and realities, both wondrous and worrisome.”\(^5\)

Teaching to the top-right quadrant, however, often proves an elusive goal. Sinclair suggests that exploration of themes beyond Israeli politics represents a fundamental step towards achieving a confluence of resolution and connection. However, Sinclair also offers us a warning

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5. Sinclair, 83.
against focusing strictly upon subject matter by describing an unrealized educational opportunity at Camp Ramah:

“The food station was a rather shallow overview of some of the different types of food Israelis eat…But the mishlachat member who ran the station did so in a rather unimaginative way. For each food, she waved it in front of the group of campers and asked if anyone knew what it was and where it came from…However, by asking campers how the food they eat affects their Jewish identity, or discussing how Israel’s “appropriation” of food from other cultures relates to the strength and weakness of its identity, or thinking about why pizza and burgers are now overtaking some of these traditional foods, or a dozen other ways in which the food-based trigger could lead into a brief glimpse at something deeper, the staff member could perhaps have moved them further up the y [vertical] axis [resolution] and also along the x [horizontal] axis [connection].”

Sinclair adroitly identifies that exploring Israeli food offers limited gains in either resolution or connection, and he offers suggestions for increasing both. Simply glancing at his suggestions indicates that increased sophistication in learning objectives may create a confluence of resolution and connection. Sinclair’s ideas require the learners to successfully negotiate their newly acquired knowledge with a higher level of sophistication by engaging in synthesis and evaluation, behaviors that rest at the pinnacle of what is known in education as “Bloom’s taxonomy.”

However, a simple movement of the subject matter away from politics, coupled with increased sophistication in learning objectives, fails to completely capture the meaning behind Sinclair’s insight. Increased sophistication cannot guarantee connection, even as it ensures that students achieve greater mastery of knowledge. For example, consider the task of assessing the legitimacy of hummus as an Israeli food. Although the task requires sophistication, a student may easily excel at the task without deepening her connection to Israel in any meaningful fashion. Here, increased sophistication in learning objectives leads to greater mastery of knowledge, and hence, greater resolution. However, the increased sophistication of the learning objective leaves us short of our ultimate goal – higher resolution and higher connection.

In order to determine how to establish connection, we must determine how students understand the knowledge that they learn. In their acclaimed work on curricular design, Understanding by Design, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe discuss six facets of understanding. All six address understanding, but only two directly address human relationships: Perspective, the willingness to embrace solutions from multiple vantage points, and Empathy, the ability to adopt alternate viewpoints as our own. Understandings that require perspective and empathy must always create connection, as one cannot truly empathize without connecting. Therefore, when exercised in concert, perspective and empathy represent the tools necessary to achieve connection, to confidently move along the horizontal and vertical axes of Sinclair’s heuristic.

Curricula create opportunities for connection by articulating understandings that exactly require both perspective and empathy, as well as sophisticated objectives that require students to demonstrate such understandings. For example, reconsider the campers and their Israeli snacks. Asking students to truly consider, “how the [Israeli] food they eat affects their Jewish identity,”

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6 Sinclair 99.
7 Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (Alexandria, Virginia: Pearson, 2005), 84. The six facts of understanding according to Wiggins and McTighe are: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge.
or “how Israel’s ‘appropriation’ of food from other cultures relates to the strength and weakness of its identity,” requires perspective and empathy. An answer results from examining multiple, legitimate points of view and adopting one of those viewpoints as one’s own. In such a fashion, Sinclair’s suggestions for enhancing education at Camp Ramah exemplify the power of coupling perspective and empathy.

**Perspective in Action**

Lisa Grant assesses the impact of perspective in her analysis of the Israel curricula at the Kehilah High School. The high school offers two courses. One focuses upon Israeli society and culture, while the other addresses the Arab-Israeli conflict. The first uses contemporary media and a book entitled, *The Lemon Tree*, which provides an account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through an Israeli and Palestinian family who lived in the same house, to provide an overview of Israeli society. The second, meanwhile, employs a curriculum that presents accepted Israeli and Palestinian narratives regarding modern Israeli history side by side.

Many of the students’ reactions testify to the power of perspective in Israel education. Karen, a student in the Israeli-Palestinian course with little prior knowledge of Israel, writes, “I’m changed now, as a person who is more knowledgeable about the situation. I can be more public about my opinions.”

Sarah, who conducted interviews of her fellow students throughout the course, suggests, “In challenging myself in ways I neither wanted nor expected to, I learned a lot more about myself than I think I ever intended – I learned that I can sympathize and I can understand, despite, or perhaps in spite of, my firm bias of the situation.”

However, several students from the same course expressed a distinct lack of change in their level of connection. Lev, who exhibited disdain for his “unreflective pro-Zionist indoctrination” prior to the course, recalls, “I still don’t have any attachment to the issue, but I have an intellectual interest and I believe that it is important for me to know.” In Lev’s case, while perspective encourages introspection, it does not necessarily increase connection. The lesson remains invaluable, but there may exist another way to reach someone like Lev.

**Perspective and Empathy Together**

In the spring of 2009, I enjoyed the pleasure of sitting alongside several IDF Soldiers and Hebrew Union College students in the small town of Binyamina for the annual Parallel Lives retreat. That afternoon, the group greeted a retired Israeli general, who greeted us with an engaging dilemma. He recalled how one of his subordinate units came under attack while on patrol in the West Bank. Following a brief exchange of fire and the successful evacuation of two wounded IDF Soldiers, the commander on site faced a dilemma: kill the unit’s attacker or allow armed insurgents to treat him. The general turned the dilemma over to the Soldiers and students.

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8 Grant, 13.
9 Grant, 17.
10 Grant, 16.
11 The Parallel Lives program brings together combat soldiers from Special Operations Units of the Israel Defense Forces with young Jews from around the world in an endeavor to create a dialogue that results in long-term friendship and understanding. For more information, see http://www.parallel-lives.com.
The ensuing discussion raised many of the concerns that a battlefield commander regularly faces – the sanctity of human life, verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed to the enemy, verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed to Soldiers within the unit, verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed to the public. These are monumental decisions that young Soldiers on patrol must make each and every day. Furthermore, the general’s lesson also raises global questions. What decision would a secular Jew in Tel Aviv want to see the commander make when he picks up the newspaper the following morning? A haredi in Jerusalem? A liberal American Jew in New York? All of them likely have something important to say about the matter, but how many of them consider the issues facing that commander in that moment?

The general’s brief lesson offers valuable insights into the way education can strengthen connection. Anyone who truly embraces the dilemma faced by the young commander must leave the room with a newfound respect for the complexities of command and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the lesson accomplishes several goals for the different participants, the lesson also serves as a classic example of empathy in the classroom, increasing connection by asking students to wholly inhabit the perspective of another and render a decision on his behalf.

**Summary**

Understandings that require both perspective and empathy represent our best hope for creating a confluence of resolution and connection, for teaching our students to live on the upper-right corner of Sinclair’s heuristic. Sinclair is absolutely correct that we must move beyond politics, but moving beyond need not imply abandonment. At the heart of politics sit people, people with perspectives different from our own. Learning their perspectives, accepting their legitimacy, and learning to try on those perspectives for ourselves without prior judgment or dismissal represents our best hope for fashioning a mature, informed relationship with Israel. Indeed, if done correctly, it should enable us to achieve Grant’s “relationship of mutuality based upon deep knowing and rich understanding.”
Works Cited


