

*Black Magic:  
The Challenge of Teaching Israel at Reform Jewish Camps*

“What *was* that?”

“Um... this is like, *so* weird you guys!”

“I’m bored. Ugh. Let’s ditch this and hang out in the *chadar*.”<sup>1</sup>

“I’m *totally* offended you guys, but *whatever*.”<sup>2</sup>

At a Jewish summer camp high up in the hills of California’s wine country, these comments might be mistaken for those of adolescent campers reacting to a less-than-stellar program. Yet, these were the words of American born Jewish camp counselors – ages nineteen to twenty one – during an Israel program planned exclusively by their Israeli counterparts. Each counselor, in addition to the seventy plus campers whom they were supervising, walked away from this ninety minute program on Israel nearly unanimous in their disappointment and disconnection – momentarily *or* permanently – from Israel.

As the camps’ education director that summer, I happened to observe the program from start to finish. I watched as the Israeli counselors set up the program’s various stations with little to no help from the American counselors. I witnessed participants trudging into the program with little enthusiasm. I heard the poor communication between the program’s Israeli facilitators and the massive group with whom they were working. And I listened, with much dismay, as campers and counselors alike expressed their disappointment, frustration, and offense. As the person responsible for overseeing the presence of Israel at camp, I knew this was no isolated incident. Israel finds herself struggling at Reform Jewish camps each summer.

Having experienced two blissful summers at Jewish residential camp, I have witnessed first-hand the magic that camp can create. It is a place so special and unique; an isolated, sanguine Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Dining Hall

<sup>2</sup> Overheard during camp program, August 1, 2011

community filled with incredibly happy individuals. However, those same happy personalities can turn on a dime when it comes to Israel programming. Israel-specific camp programs often disappoint, disinterest, or irritate their participants. Most campers and counselors see Israel as being lowest on the camp programming “food chain,” and those responsible for planning programs often devote the least amount of time to topics and themes relating to Israel. In response, those responsible for it – largely the *mishlachot* (Israeli young adult delegation) – grow cynical and disappointed.

What makes Israel the outcast? Why does she struggle so deeply for acceptance in a place so synonymous with joy and fun? What makes Israel the least popular topic when it comes to planning a camp day, week, month, or entire summer? And what, if anything, could make things better?

The aforementioned program addresses a much larger educational issue – the challenge of teaching Israel to American youth. How a synagogue, religious school, or camp chooses to educate its students on a country thousands of miles away with a history thousands of years old is often problematic. Among American Jews in the year 2012, opinions on Israel are as diverse and contested as they have ever been. From the political right to the far left, from AIPAC to J Street, Jewish organizations in North America possess deeply varied views on who Israel is and what she means to the Jewish people. Among these many institutions, camps are seen as one of the most successful settings for teaching Israel. Camps enjoy one of the highest rates of connecting youth with Israel: 30% according to the 2011 survey “Camp Works” by the Foundation for Jewish Camp<sup>3</sup>. Yet this number is still low, and it does not describe the *nature* of that connection.

The challenges facing Israel at camps across North America are many, and they vary from camp to camp. The first subject to address writ large is the conversation on Israel education itself. When a person of any age engages with Israel, he or she is engaging not only with the country but with years of contested discourse on how to teach it, as well. In the larger context of the American socio-cultural milieu, Israel itself is largely portrayed in a negative light. How the mainstream media represents Israel to

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<sup>3</sup> Steven M. Cohen, Ron Miller, Ira M. Sheskin, Barry Torr. *Camp Works: The Long-Term Impact of Jewish Overnight Camp: Evidence from 26 Jewish Population Studies on Adult Jewish Engagement*. The Foundation for Jewish Camp, Spring 2011, 11

Diaspora Jews is often problematic, and as a result her supporters are constantly on the offensive. Jewish institutions and their leaders, largely looked to as sources of wisdom and guidance on the topic of Israel, often face tremendous criticism on which Israel to represent to congregants and stakeholders. The result: the intensity of the conversation on Israel has been turned up so high that any step taken is fraught with potential controversy or backlash.

Additionally, among Jewish American educational institutions – where camping is often identified as the Gan Eden or Holy Grail – leaders see Israel as a challenge meant to be overcome. Educators, writers, and sociologists – myself included – treat Israel as thorny issue to navigate rather than an opportunity for growth and learning. As internationally acclaimed educator Barry Chazan writes, “The road not taken by most of North American Jewish education would have presented Israel as a contemporary Jewish society that confronts individuals with the meaning of their Jewishness and invites them to develop a personal relationship with the Land, the Language, the People, and the Promise. It would focus on Israel as a presence rather than a problem.”<sup>4</sup> When the camp spotlight shines on Israel, it almost always sheds on it a negative, dark, or minimal light. This only serves to heighten the intensity of the curricular conversation about Israel and produces a sense of uncomfortable urgency.

The second subject to address is the presence of Israelis at camp. Each summer, Reform Jewish camps across America host an emissary group of post-army Israeli young adults; their *mishlachot*, or Israeli delegation. This group of ten to thirty individuals occupies different roles at camp, from in-bunk counselors to ropes course specialists. These staff members are mostly responsible for presenting Israel in each *eidah* (unit). Unfortunately, they mostly work alone. A deep schism exists between the majority American staff cohort and the minority post-army *mishlachot*. They are often two completely separate units. As leading scholar of Israel education Alex Sinclair writes: “It was as if there were two different

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<sup>4</sup> Alex Sinclair. *A New Heuristic Device for the Analysis of Israel Education: Observations from a Jewish Summer Camp*, Journal of Jewish Education, 2009. 82

Israelis being experienced: one by the campers and many of the American staff, and one by the Israelis; one from a less connected perspective, and one from a more connected perspective.”<sup>5</sup>

What that evening program so rejected by campers and campers alike highlighted was a noticeable lack of buy-in from American staff. Without that cooperation, the program was destined to fail. The Jewish Agency’s mission to bring Israelis to North American camps is a noble and simple one: “The role of the *shaliach* [is] to represent Israel to Diaspora Jewry.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, there is little to no admission from the Jewish Agency of a partnership between Americans and Israelis. This in and of itself is a huge obstacle in teaching American youth about Israel. If camps are ever to possess a successful, positive, accepted representation of Israel, something must change in this arrangement.

What these points speak to is an overriding question, in many ways the inspiration for this article: when children and young adults come home from their magical camp experiences, what Israel are they taking with them? Are they actually able to understand Israel in an age-appropriate, nuanced, way? Has their camp experience created a strong or weak tie to *Medinat Yisrael* and its people? Do campers even *possess* a connection with the Jewish state? Will that link be a lifelong bond, or will it wither and fade with little to no follow-through once camp ends?

I firmly believe that articulate and thoughtful responses *are* possible, provided a camp prioritizes Israel as an opportunity for a stellar educational experience.

First, a community must change the nature of its conversation on Israel. The obsession with Israel’s politics and her future often makes educators and learners stray from the citizens of the country and their lived, daily realities. At the center of Israel’s intricate politics are *people*; human beings whose story teaches the most about who and what Israel is today. By focusing on the unique human relationships and Israel’s sense of peoplehood, educators greatly shorten the distance between their North American homes and a Middle Eastern homeland. Israel could come alive for young children and teenagers. This curricular approach could be embedded in the day-to-day camp schedule through programs that teach

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<sup>5</sup> Sinclair, 82

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Kopelowitz and Minna F Wolf. *Israeli Staff in American Jewish Summer Camps: The View of the Camp Director*. Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), Spring 2003,13

about *who* Israelis are. It would involve the *mishlachot* telling their stories, showing their pictures, teaching their family histories, and describing their lives in Israel. By humanizing Israel, we approach the country from as a “presence,” rather than a “problem” as Chazan so aptly writes. This small yet powerful shift would present a wealth of opportunities for campers and counselors to engage.

Second, camps must recognize that in order to teach Israel successfully, the relationship between Israeli and American staff must grow stronger. This is often a difficult move to make, as the deeply engrained culture which exists at camps across America precludes otherwise. Yet the intention must be clear from the top down: shifting the relationship is essential for success. Conscious change begins when American and Israeli staff members are hired for the summer. Before one has even signed his or her contract, a clear message must emerge from those responsible for hiring and training staff and *mishlachot* members that a partnership is possible and critical. Heavy emphasis must be placed on working together and building bridges right from the start. This will undoubtedly begin to shift the overall camp culture in a positive direction. In short, both parties must be convinced that Israel cannot be taught alone. Eventually, the greater message will filter down to campers: Israelis and Americans are partners, connected by their love for and appreciation of Israel.

The significance of these changes speaks to the overwhelming potential Israel has to change lives. As scholar of Jewish education and author of numerous articles on Israel Lisa Grant writes, “Attachment to Israel is tacitly used as a means to strengthen American Jewish identity and facilitate group cohesiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the significance of Israel as a source of camp learning and a tenet of Reform Judaism is indisputable. The URJ, which oversees thirteen Reform Jewish residential camps in North America, approaches Israel in a clear way: “As a Jewish movement, Israel is an integral part of our camp experience. Every camp welcomes a number of Israeli *shlichim* (ambassadors) each summer, Israel education plays a central role in each camp’s programming, and every camp offers the opportunity to

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<sup>7</sup>Lisa Grant. *Sacred Vision, Complex Reality: Navigating the Tensions in Israel Education*. Jewish Educational Leadership. Lookstein Center for Jewish Education. Fall 2008: 1--13, 12

travel to Israel with the camp community.”<sup>8</sup> As camp continues to enjoy a hallowed place in the minds of academics, educators, and lifelong campers – a breeding ground and powerful vehicle for Jewish identity formation – camp can play a major role in facilitating a legitimate, lifelong attachment to Israel.

Even more significant is the emotional connection and long-lasting impact of the link between camp and Israel. As sociologists of contemporary American Jewish life Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe note in their book-length study of liberal Jewish camping, “Camps seem to work ‘magic’—captivating children’s imaginations, building strong camp memories, and easily winning lifelong devotees. These same conditions make camp an ideal venue for informal Jewish education that gives children the experience of life in a Jewish community and teaches them about Judaism.”<sup>9</sup> Camp is a powerful tool for building Jewish identity, and Israel, particularly at Reform summer camps, can be its most valuable tool. Moreover, Grant adds, “Israel matters because it is a core value of Jewish life that is an integral and inseparable piece of a larger whole. As a sacred symbol, it is a unifying force for the Jewish people and a motivating force to do our best for ourselves and in service to others.”<sup>10</sup>

Teaching Israel at Jewish camps across North America is undoubtedly a challenging endeavor for any educator. Admittedly, Israel is a complex beast – a contested arena of belief and belonging. Yet in Grant’s statement there lies a simple truth: Israel has the potential to connect us with the best versions of ourselves. It has the power to teach us things no other country in the world can. Most importantly, it is a phenomenal, powerful opportunity for helping this generation of rabbis, cantors, educators, and Jewish communal leaders teach and reach the next generation of Jews.

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<sup>8</sup> Union for Reform Judaism, About Us: URJ Camps. <http://www.urjcamp.org/about/>

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Saxe and Amy L. Sales. *Limud by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps*. Avi Chai Foundation. October 2002., 20

<sup>10</sup> Grant, 13

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