
BEYOND DISPUTE

DEBATES THAT SHAPE JEWISH LIFE

UNIT 11

CAN COMMITMENT AND CRITIQUE COEXIST? TEACHING ISRAEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dr. Alex Sinclair

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DR. ALEX SINCLAIR

Dr. Alex Sinclair is the Lead Educational Consultant and Team Two Leader for Educating for Impact, an initiative funded by a consortium of European Philanthropies and the Government of Israel that seeks to enhance and deepen the Jewish educational provisions of Jewish day schools and their communities in Europe. He was a member of faculty at the Davidson School of Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary between 2002 and 2019 and remains a Tanakh Education Consultant for JTS's Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute, in which role he has coached instructional leaders in Jewish Day Schools throughout North America.

He has taught or run programs for the Hartman Institute, the Schechter Institute, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Agency. He has published many academic articles on Jewish education, and his book, *Loving the Real Israel: An Educational Agenda for Liberal Zionism*, was published in 2013.

Alex grew up in London, England, and received an M.A. in Hebrew Studies from Balliol College, University of Oxford and a Ph.D. in Jewish Education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He resides in Modiin, Israel with his wife and three children.

1. Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*, 2000¹

A leading Israeli historian and journalist (b. 1945).

Aharon Avraham Kabak, a teacher and author, wrote about the differences between children whose parents had come from Russia and Galicia, who were “a storehouse of mental energy and intellectual talents,” and children whose parents had come from Yemen. Of the latter he said, “The Yemenite child, after so many generations of idleness, penury, abjectness, and servility under the fierce Yemenite sun, brings with him, together with Oriental sharp-wittedness and wiliness, a tendency for delusion, negligence, slowness of movement, with bodily lethargy and weakness of the nerves.” . . . **According to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, “We Jews have nothing in common with what is called the ‘Orient’, thank God. To the extent that our uneducated masses have ancient spiritual traditions and laws that recall the Orient, they must be weaned away from them, and this is in fact what we are doing in every decent school, and what life itself is doing with great success. We are going to Palestine, first for our national convenience,” he wrote, and second, “to sweep out thoroughly all traces of the ‘Oriental soul’.”**

2. Sivan Zakai, “Values in Tension: Israel Education at a U.S. Jewish Day School”²

Professor of Jewish Education at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, whose research focuses on how Israel is taught in American Jewish schools, particularly to young children.

Rabbi Schulman outlined for his students his biggest challenge in teaching their class, a semester-long course in Israeli history. As a history teacher, he was given a “mandate” to teach his students to think critically and formulate their own opinions. As a rabbi and Jewish educator, he felt responsible for instilling in his students a love of Israel. But what if, in developing their own opinions about Israel, students decided that they did not feel a passion for or connection to the Jewish State? What if, in learning to love Israel, students refrained from asking difficult questions about it? The goals of critical thinking and love could potentially work at cross-purposes.

This tension existed in the school’s very mission. The Naphtali Herz Imber Jewish Day School intended to “cultivate young adults who are critical and self-reliant thinkers,” and it also hoped to “instill in our students an attachment to Israel.” As Rabbi Schulman explained in an interview:

Our mission statement talks to developing a love for and an attachment to the land of Israel, but I think in addition to that there’s an emerging consensus that students should be leaving the school with the ability to understand and formulate a perspective on a current situation in Israel....It [should be] a thoughtful perspective but not one

¹ New York: Picador, 2001, 150-151.

² In *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 77 (2011): 245.

that necessarily is being dictated to them, [but rather] one that they're coming to from a kind of process of reflection and education....They should have their own voice.

Twelfth graders in the school's mandatory Israeli history class offered conflicting accounts of the aims of their course. When I asked them what they thought were Rabbi Schulman's main objectives for the class, some believed their teacher wanted them to love Israel. Micah explained:

I think he's trying to get us to...really try to appreciate [Israel] more, to develop more of a sense of—for lack of a better term—a patriotism...to really develop more of a love for it, more of an understanding of it.

Students like Micah insisted that their teacher's primary goal was helping them develop Israeli patriotism, an affinity and passion for the country. Other students believed that above all, Rabbi Schulman wanted them to formulate their own beliefs even if that meant ultimately rejecting a connection to Israel.

3. Excerpts of Interview with MK Bezalet in Ravit Hecht, "The Face of Israel's Far Right Wants to 'Abort' Palestinian Hope" ³

Ravit Hecht is a journalist for Haaretz (b. 1980).

Bezalet Smotrich is a member of the Knesset for the Jewish Home-Tkuma alliance (b. 1980).

What is your political-diplomatic plan?

"We are placing a different alternative on the table, a plan that is not based on the country's partition, but on its unification. I want to apply [Israeli] sovereignty in all of Judea and Samaria..."

And thus create a Muslim state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River?

"No. I build another five big cities, bring in another half a million or a million Jews, but first of all I make a decision. The gist of my plan is based on making a determination. After a hundred years of conflict management, we make a decisive move vis-a-vis the conflict: I abort their [the Palestinians'] hopes of establishing a state."

How do you do that?

"When Joshua ben Nun [the biblical prophet] entered the land, he sent three messages to its inhabitants: those who want to accept [our rule] will accept; those who want to leave will leave; those who want to fight will fight. The basis of his strategy was: We are here, we have come, this is ours. Now too, three doors will be open; there is no fourth door. Those who want to leave—and there will be those who leave—I will help them. When they have no hope and no vision, they will go. As they did in 1948."

³ In *Haaretz*, December 3, 2016.

And those who do not go and do not accept you as the sovereign power—in my view, that’s most of the Palestinians?

“Those who do not go will either accept the rule of the Jewish state, in which case they can remain, and as for those who do not, we will fight them and defeat them.”....

You have 2.5 million people in the West Bank, not the PA or Abu Mazen, but people who can rise up against you in a popular intifada. Children who throw stones.

“That won’t happen. It won’t happen. If we show an iron hand, there won’t be children who throw stones. Anyone who throws stones will not be here.”

Why? What will you do with him?

“What will I do? Either I will shoot him or I will jail him or I will expel him.”....

Let’s talk a little about Jews you love somewhat less—Reform Jews, LGBTs.

“It’s not a matter of love but of legitimization. Look, I have a secular brother. I love him and he is my best friend, but I don’t accept him. I tell him: ‘My brother, you are wrong, you are living a life of lies.’ I was asked the same thing about the Reform Jews. On the one hand, I feel that the State should take responsibility for them. I love all Jews, really, all Jews are my brothers. But I do not accept them and I will not accord them legitimacy, because in my eyes they are a lie.”

Why do you say they are a lie? Do you like it when people say you are crazy or messianic?

“The big difference me [sic]—between Orthodox Judaism and Reform Jews—is that I believe in the existence of absolute truths. That is my life. The Lord is one. Not 30. He created the world and he gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai. That is the meaning of ‘Torah from on high.’ Torah from on high is above me and I am bound to it. I cannot legitimize the distortion of the truth in the Jewish state. Just as I cannot legitimize Christianity.”

4. Alex Sinclair, Toward an Israel Education of Direction, Not Connection ⁴ and Responding to Israel’s Direction: Clarifications and Responses ⁵

And now comes the part where I have to say some things that people won’t like. **Israel is moving in a worrying, disturbing, depressing direction. Religiously, a fundamentalist Judaism that is utterly alien to mainstream American Jewry is taking increasing hold of the country’s institutions, communities, and ways of thinking. Politically, the parties on the right and center-right are more and more tribal, jingoistic, and dismissive of minority rights (whether these be Jewish or non-Jewish minorities).**

Culturally, while there is an extraordinary and breathtaking creativity in Israeli arts, cinema, TV, song, and literature, there is also a closed-mindedness, an inability to see opposing points

⁴ In *eJewish Philanthropy*, October 2, 2017.

⁵ In *eJewish Philanthropy*, October 24, 2017.

of view, a peculiarly Israeli blend of arrogance and ignorance when it comes to anything outside the accepted narratives.

We should no longer be asking how to connect American Jews to this story. We need to ask how American Jews should respond to this story....

Response to Israel’s direction should be done in the spirit of true dialogue with Israelis, and with American Jews who hold different opinions. That means arguing, expressing opinions, taking strong stances, but also being open to listening and truly hearing those who think differently. In essence, what I am proposing is a double challenge. To the established forms of Israel education, it’s a challenge to have responding to Israel’s direction as a much more central part of the educational enterprise. But to those who disagree with aspects of Israel’s direction, it’s a challenge to have them think about how to respond in ways that other Jews and Israelis can hear them—in Dewey’s terms, how to have those responses be “educative,” rather than just venting. Ultimately, the goal is to have as many Jews as possible actively trying to impact and be impacted by the amazing, crazy, frustrating, imperfect project that we call Israel.

5. Eliot Abrams, “If American Jews and Israel Are Drifting Apart, What’s the Reason?”⁶ and Daniel Gordis, “How American Jews Have Detached Themselves from Jewish Memory”⁷

Eliot Abrams is an American diplomat and lawyer who has served in a variety of foreign policy positions for U.S. presidents (b. 1948).

Rabbi Daniel Gordis is Senior Vice President at Shalem College, Jerusalem, and the author of numerous books on Jewish thought and political currents in Israel (b. 1959).

Abrams:

What is to be done? Reversing the major demographic trends in the American Jewish population, for example by increasing endogamous marriage, does not seem to be in the cards. Where the Jewish state is concerned, should Israel and its American supporters rely more heavily on the Orthodox, whose sense of community and of closeness to Israel is intact? Turn outward and work more closely with evangelical Christians? Reach out to growing population groups like Hispanics and Asians? Seek to strengthen *hasbarah* [Israel advocacy] programs whose goal is to increase support for Israel among the American public in general?

Each of these suggestions has its value, and its limitations. **But the beginning of wisdom is surely to understand that the problem is here, in the United States. The American Jewish community is more distant from Israel than in past generations because it is changing, is in significant ways growing weaker, and is less inclined and indeed less able to feel and express solidarity with other Jews here and abroad.**

⁶ In *Mosaic*, April 4, 2016.

⁷ In *Mosaic*, April 11, 2016.

Gordis:

So this is where we find ourselves today: widespread ignorance about the Jewish past and an abandonment of the modes of Jewish communal behavior that once instilled in Jews of all kinds a reflexive commitment to peoplehood, coupled to a discourse in which the fact that Israel is beset by enemies still sworn to its destruction is regarded as not worth mentioning by alleged lovers of Judaism and the Jews.

6. Adina Shoulson and Laura Shaw Frank, “Israel Education at SAR: An Evaluation of the Teaching of Israeli History at a Modern Orthodox Day School”⁸

Salanter Akiba Riverdale (SAR) High School is a coeducational, private Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in Riverdale, NY.

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.

[The 10th grade curriculum was revamped] 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.

⁸ Full text available at www.machonsiach.org/israeleducation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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