

Vision and Voices of Israel: The WM Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education Israel Program

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Each winter break a group of students enrolled at The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at The Jewish Theological Seminary go to Israel for a pre-service professional seminar in Israel education. The program's participants are students studying towards their MA in Jewish education. Since The Davidson School believes that Israel education is part and parcel of Jewish education, it created this pre-service seminar for its students with the idea that the students will integrate Israel education into their own practices later on when they are working in the field of Jewish education.

The seminar is ten days long and time is short, and there are lots of issues to be explored. The core goal of Vision and Voices is to open up a variety of questions about Israel education. The seminar organizers can't promise that in the short time available the participants will get to definitive answers, but they certainly hope that by the end of this week-and-a-half, the questions will be much clearer and richer.

Among the core questions that the participants engage with during the Seminar are:

- Israel's place in our Jewish identity: (Why) is Israel important to us as American Jews? What does it mean to be a Zionist today? (How) does Israel play its part in our Jewish identity? How might Israel infuse or enrich our conceptions of what it means to be a Jew?
- Israel-Diaspora Relations: What does it mean to have a dialogical relationship with Israel today? What are the rights and responsibilities that Israelis and Diaspora Jews have to each other? What can we as emerging Jewish educators add to this relationship?
- Israel engagement in educational contexts: What is the Israel to which we should be exposing our students? What kinds of engagement with Israel should we be fostering? How can we get our students (and ourselves) to engage with the complex reality of Israel? How do we create "narratives" of Israel that are multi-layered enough to deconstruct old myths and build sophisticated yet compelling new ones?

During the seminar, participants dialogue about these questions and others like them. In addition, an underlying goal of the Seminar is to build the Davidson school's student community. Towards this goal the director of the program, Dr. Alex Sinclair will work together with the group to become a reflective, learning group of colleagues and friends, sharing wisdom, ideas, practices, hopes and dreams with each other. During the Seminar the group will create, teach, and work together.

The Vision and Voices of Israel trip is 10 days during winter break, each day is organized around a theme. Before the trip begins, the students receive a handbook with essential questions and resources such as poems, newspaper articles, position papers and short biographies of presenters. During the trip, the students have multiple opportunities for Mifgash (meeting with Israelis) and each day ends with reflection sessions led by the participants.

Places of visit were chosen by their appropriateness and connection to the theme of the day. For example, one day focused on pluralism, multiculturalism and identity in the Galilee, and the students discussed the saying "A land without a people for a people without a land" (variously attributed). They were introduced to the notion that the demographic realities were far more complex than the early Zionists, whom they learned about the day before at Independence Hall and Kinneret, had realized. The participants encountered one of Israel's core struggles: how to navigate the tensions and claims of its Jewish majority and non-Jewish minorities. Another day began in Hannaton listening to Rabbi Yoav Ende, after which the group continued to Shorashim to meet an activist supporting co-existence with the Arab minorities, visited a college in Sachnin, meeting with the Arab students for a discussion, and finally with a performance of the Arab-Jewish Galilee Youth Circus of Carmiel, followed by time to hang out with the teenage performers and learn circus tricks with them. The next day students visited Tzipori; Modern Tzipori and Old Tzipori. During the trip the students were asked to grapple with the following questions: What does it mean to be a Zionist today? What is the intersection of Pluralism, Multi-Culture and Identity? What is the place of the "conflict" in Jewish education? What does it mean to be in a dialogical relationship with Israelis? Is there a place for Pluralism in Israel? How do we navigate between Jewishness, Israeliness and cosmopolitanism?

How do the seminar organizers know that the seminar works? The seminar's organizers administer a survey which includes both qualitative and quantitative questions and includes open and closed questions twice during the two weeks of the trip. The first survey is administered before participants board the plane to Israel, and a second survey is administered on the last day of the seminar. In the evaluations the students were asked to think about and rank various statements according to importance. For example:

- * Israel is a source of pride and self-respect for Diaspora Jewry.
- * I have a sense of attachment to Israeli culture.
- * You can have a strong Jewish identity without knowing Hebrew.
- * Israel as a Jewish state versus a state of all its citizens.
- * Knowledge of Palestinian society and their opinions about Israel.
- * The questions around separation of religion and state in Israel.
- * I have a well-thought-out personal vision of what it means to be an Israel educator.

According to students' responses, the seminar impacted their views of Israel and how they'll teach about Israel to their own students. One student shared that: "I am definitely viewing Israel with a much higher resolution and know more about the reality of life here." Another posits that: "The trip gave me a great deal of perspective as to my interactions with Israel in the past, and how I relate to it now: in a more mature, informed, less fantastic way". And yet another said: "I have a new and deeper understanding of Israel and my attachment to the Jewish State. I think about what I teach now and how I teach differently and recognize some of the frustrations that I have been feeling are 'normal' in terms of the grappling and struggling."

What did the leaders of the seminar learn? The organizers learned that it takes time, love, and patience to change habits of mind and introduce students to the merits of complexities. Educators cannot expect immediate gratification in this kind of complex educational endeavor.

Encountering difficult questions is a necessary step in the process of education and reflective practice teaches emerging educators how to be more thoughtful and intentional in choosing material and presenting it to their students. Educators should help students understand complexity by introducing them to different points of view and helping them discuss and research the various opinions and points of view on any given issue,. As one of the students

emphasized: “Whether you come to change your beliefs or hold them ever firmer, it will be because of conversation, not indoctrination.”