All education – whether formal or informal, Jewish or secular, pre-school or graduate school – is iterative and builds new understandings in the context of prior knowledge. In some cases, it simply adds knowledge; in other situations, it is transformative and provides new and more complex understanding of existing knowledge. The extent to which attaining new knowledge or more nuanced understanding of what is already known affects the self, however, depends on the way knowledge is developed. Does it promote an aspect of the self that is particularly valued by the learner? Does it confirm the learner’s most deeply-held values, attitudes, and beliefs? Does it evoke meaning? The
challenge of Israel education, to borrow Einstein’s phrase, is to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge and channel that joy into ahavat Yisrael – both the country and the Jewish people.

Perhaps the challenge is easy to meet for Jews living in Israel, but the majority of contemporary Jews live in the Diaspora. How can Israel, and the study of Israel, help to develop the Jewish identity of those living in Diasporic communities? Pedagogy aside, insights from sociology and social psychology suggest the specific mechanisms by which exposure to Israel can affect Jewish identity, and they tell us that the Israel experience is a powerful tool to turn Judaism from an abstract collection of values into a concrete, salient identity.

**Jewish Cultural Capital**

For some, the joy in creative expression and knowledge of Israel is awakened through formal education. Jewish cultural capital development – the accumulation of general cultural knowledge, skills, and background pertaining to Jewish life – has depended on this investment. Typically, the more time one spends in a formal Jewish educational setting, developing the general knowledge and skills that are particular to Jewish life, the easier it will become to engage in and relate to any and every aspect of the culture, be it language, literature, music, cuisine, history, or ritual. And Jewish cultural fluency operates as a feedback loop – the more fluency one develops, the easier it is to engage in Jewish life; the more one engages in Jewish life, the more likely one becomes to identify strongly and positively with it; and the more one identifies strongly and positively with Jewish life, the more driven one tends to be to develop greater and greater levels of cultural fluency.

But formal educational settings are not the only Jewish educational settings available, and in any case they do not always promote strong, positive associations with Jewish life. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, former President of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ),

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It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.

– Albert Einstein
noted in a sermon on his organization’s 2001 Biennial, “Many of our parents look upon religious school as a punishment for being young. Too often in their eyes it is the castor oil of Jewish life, a burden passed from parent to child with the following admonition: ‘I hated it, you’ll hate it, and after your Bar Mitzvah, you can quit.’” Formal education is not joyful for all participants, and even when it is, it needs to be reinforced to be effective. Thus, informal educational programs, such as camps, youth groups, and Israel experiences, are extremely important. If formal educational settings are “the castor oil of Jewish life” for some, informal educational programs are the honey, substituting a sweet taste to accompany the efforts to transmit the same cultural knowledge and skills. By using a fun setting to model the same history, culture, traditions, and rituals as are taught in formal educational settings while encouraging participants to try on new practices and behaviors, teachers can help participants learn by focusing on what they enjoy about the subject matter rather than the chore-like frame Rabbi Yoffie described. Perhaps more importantly, they encourage participants to engage in Jewish culture and to consider what it means to them to be Jewish. Whichever route one takes in Jewish education, the effect of building cultural capital remains clear: the more Jewish cultural capital one accumulates – the more salient one’s Jewish identity is likely to be.

**Personal & Social Identity**

Identity salience, in social psychological parlance, is the probability that a particular identity will be invoked in a specific context. Each of us has multiple personal identities that consist of a series of meanings attached to the roles they enact in the course of our day-to-day lives. These identities can be arranged hierarchically, with more salient identities more likely to be enacted. The salience of any given identity is determined not only by one’s investment in constructing the identity but also by the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards offered by enacting it and the degree to which one’s self-esteem depends on enacting the identity well.1 Similarly, every individual also has multiple social identities, each consisting of a series of meanings attached to their membership in the specific groups or social categories to which they

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**The challenge of Israel education...**

is to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge and channel that joy into ahavat Yisrael—both the country and the Jewish people.

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Exposure to Israel, along with the Israel experience, can affect Jewish identity, ...[turning] “Judaism from an abstract collection of values into a concrete, salient identity.”

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Cultivating Jewish cultural capital is key to enhancing the salience and evaluation of an individual’s Jewish identity.
belong. A strong, positive evaluation of one’s group typically leads to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, in turn reinforcing the self-concept.²

Cultivating Jewish cultural capital is key to enhancing the salience and evaluation of an individual’s Jewish identity. It is difficult to imagine intrinsic or extrinsic rewards of Jewish identity outside of the context of Jewish cultural capital that makes Jewish history, culture, and peoplehood meaningful to the individual. Within this context, however, the rewards become clear. Time and resources expended in accruing Jewish cultural capital create social networks that are more densely Jewish. The creation of numerous social connections with other Jews who are substantially similar to oneself in ways one deems particularly important tends to increase commitment to one’s Jewish identity.³ In order to maintain and reinforce the social network, one becomes more likely to engage in Jewish activities, increasing the salience of Jewish identity by promoting greater engagement in Jewish activities⁴ as well as making commitment to such activities more consistent over time.⁵ In turn, in order to maintain a positive self-concept and a strong, positive evaluation of the group, opportunities available outside the group are increasingly judged as less beneficial or congruent with one’s own goals and desires. Indeed, as Jewish identity becomes more salient, one will more actively seek out and even create social situations that support decisions to focus increasingly on Jewish social contacts and activities.⁶

An individual for whom Jewish identity becomes highly salient views the world through a Jewish lens. Where one lives becomes a question not merely of the general affordability of necessary goods and services, proximity to work and/or school, and social networks, but also of the availability of Jewish goods and services and social networks. Interest in social activities and organizations increasingly becomes in part a function of the Jewish content of the activities and the Jewish character of the participants. How one behaves is influenced increasingly by Jewish values, traditions, ethics, and even laws.

As with cultural capital, theories of personal and social identity rely on an iterative and interactive process to strengthen Jewish identity. The more time, effort, and resources are invested in Jewish identity, and the more opportunities for the identity to be tested, the stronger it becomes. By unifying abstract learning, social and ritual behavior, and ethnic history into something tangible, Israel can increase the effects of cultural capital and the mechanisms of identity development exponentially.
Why Israel Experiences are Powerful

The Land of Israel is historically both a central literal and figurative space of Jewish identity. Jewish children, even those with limited education, learn to recognize Israel as the land of their ancestry and heritage. It is the place where most of the stories they learn from Jewish history took place and it is reinforced by the prominent role that Zion and Jerusalem play in the liturgy they are taught. Israel is a central focal point in the process by which children acquire the shared meanings by which their community defines Jewish life and culture.⁷

But the benefit of purely cognitive knowledge is limited. For Jews who live in modern-day Israel, this is no obstacle. Tangible, visceral connections to Jewish history are so ubiquitous that even mundane tasks—eating, breathing, and speaking—become infused with Jewish meaning, and specifically Jewish acts are elevated. Diaspora Jews have no such connection in their daily lives, but upon experiencing Israel for themselves, they develop a concrete understanding of what was previously only an abstract impression of the special Jewish quality of Israel. Shaul Kelner, observing the effects of Israel tourism on Taglit-Birthright Israel participants, notes:

Taglit’s tourists commonly spoke of Israel in terms that highlighted its uniqueness as a site of ancient Jewish roots: “When [the tour guide] mentioned that Abraham and Isaac and David were part of the history of the city,” one person said during a visit to Jerusalem, “it felt like it was everything I was taught as a kid coming to life. This is where Judaism really happened – beyond any textbook.”⁸

What matters most is not the content per se. Neither the past history of the Jewish people nor the general components of Jewish rites and traditions change based on one’s current geographic location; rather, the place itself is the key feature because it changes the way people think about Jewish history, rites, and traditions. In any Jewish educational setting, the degree to which participants’ Jewish identity is affected depends on the strength and internal coherence of the messages they absorb in context and the degree to which those messages are consistent with their previous knowledge and attitudes.⁹ But in the Diaspora, the backdrop for the messages is an abstract location, and so the messages are not evaluated as stringently. Israel, by contrast, provides a concrete setting against which to evaluate the messages—the very setting in which Jewish history occurred and from which Jewish traditions were originally derived. By reifying participants’ connection to Israel, the Israel experience draws upon their Jewish cultural capital, provides a powerful new context to elaborate upon it, demands that they consider the implications of their previously accumulated knowledge in fine detail, and makes their Jewish identities more salient.

Perhaps more importantly, an Israel experience provides an opportunity to develop first-hand impressions of the modern State of Israel, rather than relying on often faulty anecdotal reports, stereotypes,
The great power of Israel to develop Jewish identity remains only abstract without personal experience.

and generalizations. Authentic experience helps one distinguish between simplistic depictions of Israel in the media and old narratives of Israel as a survivalist enclave for Jews escaping the Holocaust and anti-Semitism around the world and more nuanced, accurate descriptions of a thriving, multicultural society at the forefront of advances in science and technology. If done well, such experience will allow individuals to understand the vibrancy of Israeli society, as well as the ways in which Israelis confront universal as well as Israel-specific issues of inequality, conflict, and sustainability. First-hand exposure to both the triumphs and challenges of Israel not only corrects mistaken impressions and promotes expertise with respect to Israel, but also encourages more detailed examination of every aspect of one’s prior knowledge. In turn, this heightened scrutiny tends to increase the salience of Israel and Judaism in the construction of one’s personal and social identities.

But of course we cannot exclusively rely on the actual experience of Israel. It is delimited in time and space. But we can co-opt Israel education in many ways to strengthen the Israel dimensions of identity development. One important dimension of this process is the inter-personal relationship between young Israelis and overseas peers. Identity is strongly affected by peer relations and contemporary patterns of social networking enable maximizing this process. As one of the other pamphlets in this series emphasizes, language plays a shaping role in identity development. Language as linked to Israel experience and Israel education are a force of great potential. In addition, arts, culture, and immersive networks offer additional arenas for an identity development that draws upon and strengthens a Jewish and Israel identity. The ability to make this happen in practice is the artistry of the Israel pedagogue; the theoretical potential for Israel education as a force in identity development is a lesson strongly suggested by thinking and research in the social psychology of identity.

Epilogue
The ineffable quality of Israel – the sense that even mundane tasks are infused with Jewish meaning when performed in Israel – is summarized in a widely unrecognized axiom of Jewish life: where one is Jewish affects how one is Jewish. Identity is affected in myriad ways by changing social contexts, and the effects of exposure to a context other than that to which one is accustomed can, and often do, have long-lasting effects.10

Jewish identity is no different. Given the unique context of Israel as the only Jewish-majority country in the world, the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, the location of much of the foundational history of Jewish culture, and the most important area of common cultural ground shared by Jews of all cultures and walks of life around the world, exposure to Israel the place and the reality should be expected to have profound effects on Jewish identity.
Theoretical exposure, however, is not sufficient to overcome the abstractness that second- and third-hand exposure to Israel provides. The great power of Israel to develop Jewish identity remains only abstract without personal experience. The Israel visit and the ancillary personal, cultural, and linguistic ties provide the greater detail and concrete connection necessary to stimulate deeper consideration of prior knowledge, more nuanced understanding of learned concepts, and greater salience of Jewish personal and social identities. It draws upon one’s prior learning and experience and expands upon in ways that would not be possible in any other context, and is therefore a powerful tool to turn Judaism from an abstract collection of values into a concrete, salient identity.

Notes
7 The social learning perspective defines socialization as the process by which children learn the shared meanings of the groups in which they are reared. Variation in meanings gives groups and subgroups their distinctiveness, and learning the shared meanings of one’s own group encourages in-group identification. See Shibutani, T. 1961. Society and Personality. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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