Cameras

The invention that has intrigued me most is the camera. To this day, I do not understand how it works, but I think it is a magical invention. Things are “out there” – in space, on the street, or in the house – and by pushing a button on a once rather bulky, now svelte black or silver “box,” that “thing” can be transferred onto a piece of paper or computer screen. Tooth fairies and superheroes may be stretches of the imagination, but a camera with its lenses seems to be the ultimate miracle.
I once met the remarkable photographer, essayist, and teacher Susan Sontag, who explained that photography is as much about the person taking the picture as the picture itself. A photograph depends not so much on the “thing” out there, but rather on the person holding the camera, the spot where he or she is standing, and the angle from which he or she is shooting.

The educationist Parker Palmer has said, “We cannot see what is out there by simply looking around. Everything depends on the lenses through which we see the world. By putting on new lenses, we see things that otherwise would be invisible.”

**Narratives**

The lenses paradigm is related to what is today popularly called ‘narratives.’ Narratives are ways of looking at the world, and according to this approach, in ‘education’ we don’t teach facts, knowledge, history or geography but rather diverse versions (narratives) of how facts, history, or geography happen. Narratives are not falsehoods; they are rooted in empirical facts, observation, and reflective research by scholars, and are organized and presented to help us as individuals find meaning in our past and present.

Diverse narratives: [Israel] education today is not about “facts, knowledge, history or geography but rather diverse versions (narratives) of how facts, history, or geography happen.”
Lenses, Narratives & Israel Education
There are few subjects that are more camera – and narrative – related than Israel. There are few ideas, sites, and things that invite more diverse photographs than Israel. One photographer could take a picture of the Western Wall in Jerusalem and have it emerge as an other-worldly journey in spirituality. Another person, standing at a different spot, could produce a snapshot of elderly men in garb from several prior centuries, mumbling strange incantations – with nary a woman in sight – and have it emerge as an outdated relic of a yesteryear religion.

The camera story and the narrative theory are critical for Israel education. There are diverse narratives about the Zionist movement, the establishment of Israel, and contemporary Israel. The most dramatic conflicting narrative versions are clearly between Israel and her neighbors, but within the Jewish world too there are conflicting narratives. (Remember the Western Wall? The two pictures just described were taken by two Jews who see the Wall in dramatically different ways.)

Israel today lends itself to diverse vantage points, perspectives, and “tellings” of the story. Indeed, the diverse pictures of Israel are in some ways the essence of life in Israel. The richness of Israel is that everyone is a narrator and everyone is a photographer – and how do we teach that?

Three Goals of Lenses & Narration in Jewish Education
We have three tasks concerning lenses and narratives in Israel education.

1. Our first task is to help our young learn the core narratives that Jewish history and life have promulgated and accepted – rooted in both objective realities and research by historians.

2. Our second task is – over time – to teach that one wonderful aspect of Jewish life has been its openness to diverse narrations and narrators – to a tradition of commentary, debate, and discourse which, when effected properly, is regarded as l’shem shamayim – “in the name of Heaven” (i.e. a praiseworthy activity).

3. Our third task is to help our young learn to become narrators and photographers on their own – to give them the tools to see alternative pictures and hear diverse narratives and, hopefully through their own pictures and stories, to understand a Jewish narrative that speaks to them.

It is not good to start Israel education as “first aid” in the young adult years. We would be better served by a developmental educational process beginning in the early years through high school so that by young adulthood our young people are well-equipped photographers on their own.

Teaching Five Core Israel Narratives
There are five core Israel narratives that our young should have the opportunity to meet and learn in their formative years. Understanding these core narratives during their early years will enable our young to deal with conflicting narratives as they grow older. If they do not begin with core narratives as
part of their youthful legacy, it will be difficult for them to intelligently deal with complex narratives as young adults. It is our educational mandate and responsibility as Jewish educators to teach (not indoctrinate) some core narratives about Israel and the Jewish people.

The teaching of these narratives should reflect the best of Jewish scholarship and research. It should be based as much as possible in primary Jewish sources, and it should be pedagogically accessible and interesting.²

Narrative I: Eretz Yisrael & The Covenant
The first core narrative is the origin of the Jewish people and its ethos in Eretz Yisrael – Land of Israel. According to this narrative, the Jews as a people originated in the ancient Land of Israel; its early history is almost exclusively related to Israel; and the evolution of its core heroes and values is in Eretz Yisrael. The sagas of the Patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt, the vision of the Prophets and their religious-ethical creeds, the monarchies, and the Temple culture are all Eretz Yisrael-based. This entire narrative is wrapped in a grand narrative often denoted as “the Covenant.”

This narrative is best studied with original Biblical texts such as Genesis 17:8, Genesis 35:12, Exodus 20:12, Amos 9:14-15, Psalm 137: 5-6, and others.

Narrative 2: Memory & Hope
The second narrative is the transformation of a land- and cult-centered Israelite religion into rabbinic Judaism. This narrative is the remarkable saga of Jewish teachers and leaders over the ages and across diverse lands transforming Am Yisrael into the Jewish religion. In this narrative, Jews become part of a religious community existing, in varying degrees of accommodation, in diverse host countries while preserving core values, behaviors, and texts of former days. Central to this story is the ongoing remembrance, citation, and longing to return to Zion. While out of Israel, the Jewish people used ritual (breaking a glass at weddings, using the words “Next Year in Jerusalem” at the end of the Passover Seder), prayer, poetry (Yehuda Halevi), and law (diverse rabbinic and Talmudic statements) to keep Eretz Yisrael and the value of Shivat Zion (returning to Zion) as a lynchpin of Jewish existence. When Bnai Yisrael were forced out of the Land of Israel, they retained Eretz Yisrael as a powerful spiritual force in the re-engineering of a Jewish life.

The key documents here are Talmudic and rabbinic literature, the prayer book, literary and philosophic writings (e.g. Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 110b, and Baba Batra 60b and 158b, Vayikra Rabba 34:7, Midrash Tehillim 105:1, Rashi on Genesis 1:1, the Shema, the Amidah, and Birkat HaMazon from the siddur). Many of these sources are collected in Tuvia Book’s For the Sake of Zion: Pride and Strength through Knowledge: An Educator’s Guide³.
Narrative 3: Shivat Zion – Returning To Zion
The third narrative is the emergence of a modern movement in the late 19th to early 20th century for physical return of the Jewish people to its ‘homeland.’ The pre-Zionists (Hess, Kalischer) and the Zionists (Herzl, Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky, A.D. Gordon, and Rav Kook) weaved a narrative that proposed that Jews could only find haven, creativity, sustainability, and dignity by physically returning to their ancestral homeland. The phrase was always “to return” and the methods were political, economic, and practical. This movement regarded the Jewish people not as a group of outsiders invading foreign territory but as an indigenous people returning to its original home. The pinnacle of this narrative is the establishment of a Jewish State, recognized by the world community on May 5, 1948.

The most effective statement of this narrative is the Israel Declaration of Independence (Megilat Haatzmaut). This document is a rich resource that should be studied on its many levels by young Jews. The original writings of Zionist thinkers presented in Arthur Hertzberg’s The Zionist Idea (Hess, Pinsker, Herzl, Achad Ha’Am, Bialik, A.D. Gordon, Ben-Gurion, Weizmann, and Jabotinsky) are also useful texts for this narrative.

Narrative 4: Medinat Yisrael
The fourth narrative is the story of a modern Jewish state engaged in the saga of building a contemporary society for millions of Jews from all over the world as well as several minority populations, while at the same time living in a “neighborhood” of perpetual confrontation and conflict. This narrative unfolds in art, music, industry, pop culture, government, politics, education and all those elements which comprise modern societies. It is about the challenge of being contemporary and being ‘Jewish’ about what being ‘Jewish’ means, about being ‘Jewish’ and also being inclusive of minorities that comprise the society. This narrative is a love story, an adventure story, a drama, a comedy, and at moments a tragedy. It is a story new to the Jewish experience and as such is characterized by all the excitement and complexity of new ventures and experiences.

The best “text” for this narrative is clearly the visit to Israel. The more than half-million young people between the ages of 13 and 26 who have visited Israel since statehood and have experienced the narrative and photographed it with their own eyes bear testimony to the richness of this text. Unfortunately, this number constitutes a minority of world Jewry. In lieu of the visit – or in preparation for it – the task of Israel education is to create the best live, dynamic, attractive resources to make contemporary Israel come alive.
In this context, it is useful to co-opt Howard Gardner’s notion of multiple intelligences and to suggest that a diversity of “cameras” should be used. Some young people will be ignited by music and others by literature; some by architecture and others by food; some by heroes and others by events; some by politics and others by people. Beyond the trip – which is unquestionably the pedagogic technique par excellence – a host of diverse resources now exist or can be created.

**Narrative 5: Clal Yisrael**

Above all else, for our children to develop a personally resonating relationship with Israel, it will be through the diversity of voices that represent the Jewish people. These voices will represent the narratives of the Jewish people of yesterday, today and tomorrow. These stories will not just be grounded in the existential dimensions of philosophical, religious or political life, but exist on the beaches of Tel-Aviv, the forests of the Galil and the hills of Judaea. They will also be found in the cities of New York, Buenos Aires and Melbourne – because together these constitute the entirety of Clal Yisrael and the relationships of Jews worldwide regardless of their physical geography.

The best “texts” for this narrative span multiple generations, locations, and formats. They will be found in a Yehuda Amichai poem, a Hadag Nachash song, and in a random café where Jews sip coffee, talk and play shesh besh.

Most importantly, the story of Clal Yisrael has yet to be completed and the most important text might yet to be articulated. It is probably resting somewhere in your classroom, summer camp or Egged bus, waiting for you to offer the opportunity to release the narrative and include it our perpetual and ongoing story.

**Alternative Narratives**

The five narratives sketched here are not the only narratives. As noted, there are alternative political narratives. The issue of alternative narratives is not only between Israel and its neighbors. Within Israel and Jewish life, there are diverse opinions and discussions about elements of the core narrative.

How do we deal with alternative narratives?

Our responsibility as Jewish educators is to teach a core consensus Jewish narrative which will be a basis of the “tool kit” of young Jews from an early age. We do our young adults a disservice by not equipping them at an early age with some appropriate “tools” (narratives). At the same time – and over time – it is important to indicate that there are alternative narratives. Gradually, we should familiarize our young with some of the differences. As part of this process, it is legitimate to indicate why we believe

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in the Jewish narrative and what we regard as the inaccuracies of the other narratives. Our mission need not be teaching other narratives, but it certainly is our place to show how our narrative differs.

The idea of different perspectives is not foreign to children – even young children. They grow up in a multi-cultured, multi-religion, multi-country world. They know from an early age that there are different ways of being Jewish, and they know there are different races, cultures, political parties, and sports teams. We do ourselves a disservice by not indicating there are other perspectives: young people often feel cheated or deceived when they learn about them in their later years. Again, it is not our job to engage in a full-fledged comparative political science seminar in conflicting narratives. We have a narrative that we accept as reasonable, compelling, and legitimate; it is our role to present it in as open and engaging a way as possible.

In teaching the core narrative, we have a unique opportunity to teach something important both about Judaism and about critical thinking. Judaism is a religion, culture, and civilization that has encompassed and encouraged diverse views on many matters. It is a culture that, on the whole, has encouraged critical thinking and discussion. Critical thinking is not a skill reserved for math, science, and general studies. Our ancestors were among the creators of critical thinking.

It is important that Israel educators be comfortable “in their own skin” with the core beliefs in a Jewish narrative. Like all narratives, parts are very convincing and compelling, and others make us uncomfortable. (The American narrative too encompasses both grand and problematic chapters.) Belief in the grandeur of the Bible does not mitigate some difficult passages for us and for the rabbis throughout the ages.

As our young approach adolescence and young adulthood, we should be teaching them how to become “photographers” and “narrators.” We should be transmitting to them the critical, analytic, and reflective skills to read, discuss, debate, and consider alternative narratives so that, ultimately, they have the ability to create their own narrative.

Notes:
2  A useful resource for explicating these narratives is the volume The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives (edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1986)