Think of a powerful learning moment in your life. Where were you? Who guided you through this moment? What made it a learning moment and, more importantly, what made it so powerful? Powerful learning can occur anywhere; however, turning a given moment into an important learning experience demands a specific set of skills that include recognizing the potential in the moment and knowing how to capitalize upon it for maximum impact. This piece will explore the characteristics and actions necessary to foster and nurture these powerful learning moments as they relate to Israel learning and engagement.
In considering the potential impact of Israel in educational settings, we need only go back to our own experiences of Israel inspiration — whether on our first tiyul, meeting our first Israeli and hearing his or her stories, or encountering Israel at camp through music and play — in order to understand the power inherent in each of us to create deep connections to Israel and our Jewish selves.

Who is an Educator & What is Considered Educational Activity?
The moment we are in a position to affect another human being’s perspectives, we enter into the role of “educator.” Educators can range from youth group leaders, camp counselors and classroom teachers to Israel trip leaders and rabbis, among others.

Educational activity occurs in a broad array of settings — the classroom, a living room, a patch of grass, a beach and more. Essentially, anywhere learners and educators gather to engage in the work of learning and teaching is considered an educational setting. At the same time, certain venues bring an added dimension of significance to a learning moment, in particular those venues that might be considered “authentic,” in other words, where the learning is lived out in real time and real space.

In his seminal work The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer poses four questions for educators to consider as they go about their work:

a. “What:” What subjects or topics shall I teach?
b. “How:” What methods and techniques are required to teach well?
c. “Why:” For what purpose and to what ends do I teach?
d. “Who:” Who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form… the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, and my world?

Palmer’s last two questions, unfortunately, often drop off the radar screen for many educators, especially as they engage with their students Israel.

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

-Parker Palmer
“What are we teaching [today, tomorrow, next week, next year]?” is generally followed by, “Okay, how can we do this? What will really “grab” the kids?” Rarely is there time or space for an educator to ask, “Why am I teaching this? What is it about this particular issue or subject that compels me to share it with my students?” Even less time is devoted to what is perhaps the most critical question for educators: “What does this topic mean to me? How do I understand this topic or issue in my own life?”

As teachers, whether sitting on the grass at camp or standing in front of a lecture hall of a thousand students, we must address these latter questions. Just as children know how to ferret out inconsistencies in their parents’ thinking, so, too, do students (of all ages, but particularly children and teens) immediately intuit when the educator is feeling some inadequacy or discomfort with the subject at hand, when he or she has failed to address Palmer’s final two questions.

What Is Unique About an Israel Educator?
The Israel educator is subject to everything Palmer says – and more. The Israel educator must:

1. Know the subject of Israel well, including its ancient history, its place in Jewish life throughout the ages, the birth of the Zionist movement, the rise of the modern State, and life in contemporary Israel.
2. Be cutting-edge in communicative techniques that can help present such a multi-dimensional topic.
3. Have a vision of Why Israel? Why does it matter? Why are we educating for it?

But perhaps most importantly, Israel educators must be able to teach from within. They must be able to teach from their own selfhood. They must have “become” Israel and it must be part of their DNA. Like being a Jewish educator in general, teaching Israel must be with “all the heart, soul, and might” of the educator. It is a total act, one which can only happen successfully with the courage to teach from within.

Challenges for the Israel Educator
The challenges facing the Israel educator can feel, and many times are, significant.

1. First, learning the subject matter and staying abreast of new developments can feel overwhelming. The subject is diverse and multi-dimensional, necessitating that we always be in a learning stance. We have to “know “Israel in its totality – from past to present, from culture to foods.

2. Second, as Barry Chazan suggests in his pamphlet in this series, we need to be familiar with the multiple narratives that have been developed within Israel and by those around the world who are engaged with Israel. For example, what may seem like a simple fact may not be simple at all. Every story has its tellers, and raconteurs of these stories have their own way of interpreting and “telling.” “Facts” are everywhere and, at the same time, are elusive. A
textbook, a newspaper article or even a video clip from the daily news may look and feel “factual” or “true” but, on examination, may raise questions more than portray actual events.

The implications for those engaged in Israel education are myriad and serious: when we teach about Israel, we must carefully check and recheck our sources (and ourselves), not only for accuracy but, also, in order to understand the underlying narrative of the writer or teller. We must have clarity on the narrative(s) we bring to the learners. Given the wide range of potential narratives, choosing one may seem daunting. One way to address this is to carefully examine the stance of the educational setting. Such an examination might involve looking at the literature of the institution (school, camp, synagogue, etc.) for mention of Israel, or speaking with the director of the program, a supervisor or fellow educators. The bottom line: intentionality and care in determining what is meant by “knowledge” and into which narrative that knowledge is embedded are key.

A third challenge is to expand the repertoire of topics and perspectives on Israel that are presented to students. Teaching Israel includes teaching Bible, but it’s not just about Bible. Hebrew is central, but does not in itself exhaust Israel Education. Israel Education shares some similarities with social studies, but Israel is more than “the longitude and latitude” or “main products of England or Venezuela.” It’s not a “subject” like any other subject.

Israel is rich in arts and culture (music, dance, literature, theater, visual arts and more) and is a world leader in science and technology (Intel, Motorola, ecology, etc.). The people of Israel are multi-faceted and deeply engaging. The goal isn’t to know all there is to know; the key is to develop the capacity to access the resources and people who can support you in your work. Resources such as www.theicenter.org; www.israel21c.com; www.toldotyisrael.org and www.bjesf.org (among others) provide rich, varied and authentic perspectives into Israel for all ages. They bring people, ideas and places together in unique ways that draw learners into a vibrant, exciting and cutting-edge Israel. It is only after this context has been established for the learner that we can begin to broach more complex topics such as war or the current political and societal issues facing Israel.

As educators, we hold great power to shape and nurture lifelong relationships between our students and Israel. Our own broad perspectives and openness to new learning and insights and our own capacity to draw on a wide range of resources in multi-media are instrumental in determining the depth and endurance of those relationships.

The educator must “resolve their own personal Israel “biography,”... engagement with, and questions about Israel.

Know your end goal. Is the focus a relationship with Israel, Israel as a part of their Jewish identity or understanding “how Israel impacts their lives as Americans?”
The Israel in Me

Unquestionably, the most important factor in Israel education (and in many other Jewish religious and communal arenas) is... THE EDUCATOR.

Israel, in addition to its wide-ranging and seemingly endless subject matter, also raises deep emotions in educators. In a teacher education class on the topic of “Teaching Israel,” the aspiring teachers were asked about their own relationship with Israel. While several students gleefully described their love of Israel and the exciting and engaging visits they had made there, one usually vocal and articulate student was particularly quiet. With some prodding, she described her ongoing sense of conflict around her personal relationship with Israel as well as her ensuing difficulty in projecting an enthusiasm about and love for Israel to her students. In short, she described feeling “like a fraud.”

Israel, even for the most committed Jew, is a complex topic. While it is unreasonable to require educators to have worked out all the questions and concerns they harbor about Israel, it is certainly reasonable to ask educators, before engaging with students on this important topic, to reflect on our own personal Israel “biography,” on our own relationships and engagement with and questions about Israel. Only then can we begin to determine how these affect our work as Israel educators. We all want our students to challenge our thinking but, at the same time, we also want to challenge ourselves BEFORE students challenge us on what we consider core issues of Jewish identity, of which Israel is one.

Palmer describes what he calls “two of the most difficult truths about teaching.” The first is that what we teach will never “take” unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students’ lives, with our students’ inward teachers. The second truth is even more daunting: “We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves.” It doesn’t necessarily take a complicated professional development program to help teachers connect to their inner selves, according to

Authenticity in Israel Education can only be achieved when the deliverer of that education is authentically connected with his or her own feelings and passions about Israel.
As educators, we hold great power to shape and nurture lifelong relationships between our students and Israel.

Palmer. Sometimes it only takes time, solitude, journaling and/or the opportunity to talk with colleagues. Authenticity in Israel Education can only be achieved when the deliverer of that education is authentically connected with his or her own feelings and passions about Israel. This authenticity will then naturally lead one to answer the “why” of Israel Education: Why does this matter to me? Why should it matter to my students?

Israel Education: Skill & Artistry

Educational skill and artistry refer to the capacity of the educator to craft learning experiences that will move the learner, potentially transform the learner. Artistry is the capacity in each one of us to see what is in front of us and weave a unique web for our students and ourselves through which we open possibilities and insights for and with them.

Of the fours questions posed by Palmer, the third question – Why this topic? Why is it important to my students? Why is it important to include in our learning? – is the precursor to skill and artistry. What considerations can guide us as we attempt to answer these questions and to use the answers to create extraordinary and authentic learning experiences for the learner? In artistry terms, if we don’t know the general design of the web we want to weave, we’ll end up with a lot of messy knots. Thus, the first skill is the ability to have a clear understanding of why the learning is important in the lives of the students. So, first and foremost, we have to know our end goal: is it for students to develop an ongoing and deep relationship with Israel? Do we want students to integrate Israel into their Jewish identity? Do we want students to understand how Israel impacts their lives as Americans? All of these are valid goals, and some even overlap. By choosing one, it is then possible to sculpt the learning in such a way as to build toward the ends we have in mind. For example, if the focus is on relationship, we might look to create partnerships with Israeli schools, or use media to introduce students to the lives of their Israeli peers. Or if Israel in Jewish identity is the core goal, one might look to introduce students to the Jewish rhythms of life in Israel and to the impact Israel has on their daily lives here in North America, whether through technology, religious texts or arts and media, for example.

A second skill, also an art, is to know one’s students. Age, developmental needs, geography, the educational setting, current interests and the immediate surrounding community all contribute to decisions about why and how. In looking around at your students, the first question is: why is this important to them (not FOR them, rather TO them)? In other words, why would they care about what we are learning? It is here that the role of authenticity is so critical. Israel must connect to the real-life concerns and interests of the learner.

Knowledge and information must be used to create meaning and to embed that meaning in the lives of the learners. All of this will gather more power when it is well calibrated to the setting in which it is taught. Lis-
tuning to music on the grass on a sunny day at camp demands a different set-up than listening to music in a classroom on a cold January day. The art of the educator is to understand that the setting matters and to take advantage of the uniqueness of every setting.

As Israel educators we have been given an extraordinary gift. There is no more exciting time for teachers and learners alike to be engaging with Israel. Yes, there are complex issues, yes we can be disappointed by some contemporary policies and behavior, but we still live in a time of “wonder and miracles.” Israel, the country and the people, is visceral proof that:

- Dreams can come true
- Human beings can change the world
- Jewish life has responded to its darkest chapter
- We are part of a living, modern Jewish society, culture, and people shaped by diversity, creativity, complexity, and passion.

Perhaps the best model for the Israel educator is not the great “teacher” – but rather the great moreh derech (literally “show-er of the way” in common Hebrew usage “tour guide”). Israeli tour guides are characterized by several qualities: they know the country; they know its history; they are in love with every drop of sand, holy rabbi’s tomb, and ancient arch; and they exude pride, passion, and joy.

Maybe we should be a little like “tour guides.” It is incumbent upon us as Israel educators to remain deeply connected to Israel. It is incumbent upon us to continually update ourselves and seek out resources and people that can provide us with the newest and best of Israel engagement materials. It is incumbent upon us to be keenly aware of who our students are and of the natural connection points between them and Israel and to infuse those connection points with relevant and meaningful knowledge and insights.

It is most incumbent on us to speak, teach, live, and show from within that Israel matters. In the end, it is you, the educator, who has the power and capacity to ensure that the next generation is deeply connected to and enamored with Israel. Start with yourself; keep your love of Israel fresh and based in reality and your knowledge and understanding current. B’hatzlacha!

Notes
2 Palmer, p. 32.

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