

When it comes to Israel, what to teach?

For educators, broaching the Jewish state's more controversial issues with students can be a complicated - and rewarding - endeavour

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When anti-Israel student groups on campuses throughout North America began garnering international attention for events such as Israeli Apartheid Week and demonstrations that cast Israelis as evil and genocidal occupiers, pro-Israel students and Jewish groups found themselves on the defensive.

The question was whether these events should be ignored or brought to light in an attempt to discredit them. Years later, anti-Israel rhetoric - some valid and some outright defamatory - persists, and this may have led to a different approach by parents and Jewish educators to ensuring that young people in the community are prepared for claims made against the Jewish state that they may have never been previously exposed to.

In 2013, Richard Bass, a father of two, founded Emet Education, a non-profit that provides a curriculum on Israeli history and current events to private and public school educators.



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One of the incidents that inspired Bass, a public high school teacher, to spend hundreds of hours of his free time to develop a curriculum about Israel was seeing a video of a Palestinian cleric who claimed the Jewish People had no historical connection to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

"It seemed bordering on the ridiculous," Bass said.

But he said when he tried to formulate thoughts to disprove the claim, he realized that he didn't have the knowledge to argue against it.

"I started doing my own research for my own identity, and I spent hundreds of hours until I felt I had something."

It occurred to Bass that for students who go through the Jewish day school system, as he did, and are taught from a young age to see Israel as the land of milk and honey, they might also find themselves at a loss for words when confronted by claims that paint Israel in a negative light, both on and off campus.

"I've sat at tables with people who have told me stories about the education they got - significant Jewish education - and then went to university and heard the claims of the other side, and then they started fighting for the other side," Bass said.

"There are two sides, and students need to know which part of the other side's narrative needs to be acknowledged as true."

Russ Klein, head of school at Vancouver's

King David High School, said he is committed to accurately presenting Israel's history and both sides of the conflict.

In addition to teaching the undisputed facts about Israel's history and the Jewish connection to the land throughout high school, King David offers a Grade 12 course dedicated to the conflict and an annual trip to Israel for Grade 8 students.

"We go to the famous sites from the 1967 war and the 1973 war, and we have lots of discussions around that," Klein said.

He said it's important to remind people that even the most progressive countries in the world have problems.

"[Canada has] people living in poverty. We have First Nations people without running water. We've got all sorts of issues. In the late 1940s, when 600,000 Arabs left what were their homes [in what is now Israel], there was an equal number of Jews that were kicked out of Arab countries," Klein noted.

"We're open to discussion about whether there should be settlements in the 'occupied territories,' or 'disputed territories' - whatever language you want to use. We debate those things in class... We teach our kids to be critical and to say, 'What is really going on here?'"

In Winnipeg, Gray Academy of Jewish Education head of school Lori Binder and Judaic studies department head Avi Posen both said Israel education is a big part of the school's vision and mission.

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Should educators be shying away from touchy issues?

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Binder said when she went through the Jewish day school system in Winnipeg, from nursery until graduation in 1991, Israel was not presented to her in as in-depth a way as it's presented to students today at the junior kindergarten-to-Grade 12 school.

"It was a different time... but as an adult... you know better, you do better," she said.

Binder said Israel education is taught from JK until graduation, but "the crescendo I guess, is a full-year course for all our Grade 12 students in a course called Israel advocacy."

Posen, who teaches the eight-year-old Israel advocacy course, said he doesn't "shy away from any of the touchy issues... There is a big unit on the Palestinian refugee issue and on UNWRA, and on the creation of the Palestinian refugee issue, and how it has been prolonged until today and how different international bodies are dealing with it. That comes up again and again through current events."

Alon Dotan, a shaliach from Israel who is co-director, along with his wife Shanie Ora Dotan, of Federation CJA's Israel Engagement Initiative in Montreal, said one of the programs the initiative has developed for Grade 10 students, called Israel Update or Café Dilemma, examines Israeli current events.

"We want it to be an open conversation... Sometimes it's OK to feel something that is less than positive about Israel," Dotan said.

"We always tell them, 'You live in Quebec, and I'm sure you feel like you have issues with Quebec.' It's the same thing. We are



Montreal's Israel Engagement Initiative co-directors Shanie Ora Dotan, far left, and Alon Dotan, far right, with six shinshinim.

Israelis, but we have problems with Israel. It's normal, and it's OK... The opposite of caring and being a part of something, is being indifferent, and if we are unable to have a deep discussion about something, then we become indifferent to it. We look at this as a relationship. And with every relationship, there are positive things and not so positive things."

Dotan said the focus is on education rather than advocacy.

"Education... is an internal conversation. Advocacy is a person against the world. So if you're approaching students, you want to approach their internal conversation and focus on them and their process... There are better ways to support Israel and be connected to Israel than to be Israel's lawyer."

Matt Reingold, a Jewish history teacher at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, conducted a year-long study last year of 40 Grade 12 students enrolled in courses about Israeli society and the Arab-Israeli

conflict. The study explored how students made sense of two events that occurred right before the founding of the country.

For the past four years, Reingold has taught his students about Tochnit Dalet – a plan by the Haganah in 1948 to take control of Palestine and to defend its borders before, and in anticipation of, an invasion by Arab armies. The plan also called for the conquest of Arab towns and villages inside and along the borders of the area allocated to Jews according to the UN Partition Plan.

He's also taught students about Deir Yassin, a controversial and heavily debated event during Israel's 1948 War of Independence when Irgun and Lehi fighters attacked a Palestinian Arab village, which resulted in the killing of a disputed number of Palestinians.

Reingold said when he travelled to Atlanta in 2015 for a conference on Jewish education, he recalled that other teachers from schools throughout North America "were blown away" when they heard TanenbaumCHAT teaches its students

about those events.

He said the reaction made him question whether TanenbaumCHAT was doing the right thing.

"In our desire to be historically accurate, in our desire to be transparent, were we having a short-term gain for a long-term loss? As much as I want to be a history teacher, I want them to care about Israel," Reingold said.

"I was curiously concerned about how learning about controversial events in Israel's past was impacting on student identity and association with Israel."

Reingold concluded that while students expressed discomfort learning about these events, they also expressed a tremendous appreciation about having learned them, for reasons ranging from wanting to be more prepared for life on campus to being able to build a stronger relationship with Israel.

"They appreciated hearing that Israel isn't the perfect thing they had always been taught," Reingold said.

"For some students, learning about these events actually strengthened their identity with Israel and they talked about how they had a more complete portrait... Others spoke about how it allows them to see Israel in a real way for the first time."

Reingold admitted that there was a small group of students for whom this new information was a "turn-off."

"The honest researcher in me has to acknowledge that of the 40 kids, there were two or three who said, 'This has negatively impacted how I think about Israel. This isn't my Israel. This isn't what I want to be Israel.'"

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For the most part, the study showed that while learning about some of Israel's blemishes was a disruptive moment in their learning, the students found ways to integrate Israel's controversial actions into their overall picture of the Jewish state.

"It rocked the cart, but it didn't overturn the cart," he said.

Posen said that based on his observations, presenting Israeli history and current events from both sides of the narrative does not affect the students' love and passion for the country. "If anything, it deepens it," he said.

"Too often you have people who look narrowly at the issue, and then they get to university and they hear something they've never heard and... suddenly their whole world is flipped upside down. But I feel that preparing them in advance and showing them both sides, both perspectives, while differentiating between history and narrative, is very beneficial."

Binder said feedback from alumni who have moved on to post-secondary schools has been nothing but positive.

"Our students have come back to tell us that [it] helped them utilize their skills to create change through the experiences they had on a variety of campuses," she said.

Dotan said that while it's important to

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We want it to be an open conversation... Sometimes it's OK to feel something that is less than positive about Israel

Alon Dotan, Montreal's Israel Engagement Initiative

give Jewish youth the tools to express their complicated feelings about Israel, the education must be age appropriate.

"[It's important] to bring the positives and make them fall in love with Israel and then be able to criticize it. We can't jump into the middle of the heat, or you'll get burned," Dotan said.

Reingold said some of the students who participated in his study expressed anger about not having been taught about controversial events earlier in their Jewish education.

"I was very surprised at how many of the students wrote about how disappointed they were – not that their vision of Israel was shattered, but why didn't they learn about it sooner," he said.

Klein said the way King David presents Israel education is still evolving. "One of the things we're trying to evolve into doing is to try to find out how to do more of it in the younger grades," he said.

Ayelet Bercovich, registration manager for Canada Israel Experience/Taglit-Birthright Israel and a mother of three children – aged 10, 8 and 5 – who are enrolled in public school, said educating her children about Israel is a priority.

She said she hasn't yet thought about how or when they should be exposed to the more complicated issues related to Israel's history and the conflict.

"I'm not going to instill a 70-year history on a 10-year-old and an 8-year-old. I just say that there are a lot of people who think that Israel shouldn't exist as a country, but we do, and whatever happens in Israel, just know that when we go there, we'll be safe," Bercovich said.

Whether or not she'll make a point of providing them with the Palestinian narrative, she said, "I would want them to be correctly informed, so whether that is coming from me, or from someone else who would do that, absolutely.

"I do try to be delicate, but the most important thing is to develop a love for Israel, from very young, to show them that Israel is a special country to so many people and not just the Jewish People."

Bass, who has two children enrolled in Jewish day school, agrees that the material presented to elementary school children must be age appropriate.

"My kid is in Grade 3, and I don't think he needs to understand the Palestinian narrative at this point in time, but by the time he gets to high school or even late middle school, if we don't start presenting some of the claims of the other people, I think it does an absolute disservice to what I think is the goal of education," Bass said.

"We don't support Israel to the extent of ignoring things that are true. My kids will never be brought up that way, because that is not how I teach."

Bass said he is very committed to sharing different narratives about the conflict – up to a point. "If one side says there is zero archeological evidence that there were Jewish people in Jerusalem, and I have a list of 27 evidentiary things, that is where their narrative ends. I'm not going to continue to present their narrative, because at that point in time, the facts don't always support both sides," Bass said.

"When liberties with the truth are taken, that's where I draw the line." ■

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