American Jews and Israel: A Relationship in Transition

April 19, 2015

Session Two: The Israel Experience and Jewish Education

Takeaways:

- All three presentations focused on the new trend in Israel education towards “mifgash,” or a direct meeting between American Jews and Israel or Israelis.

- The first two presentations emphasized how the new trend in Israel education is heading towards grappling with Israel’s tensions and ambiguities and away from fostering solidarity. The last presentation focused on a form of Israel education that still seeks to generate solidarity with Israel but that can inadvertently distance participants from Israel as well.

- The first two lectures maintained that new forms of Israel education must provide American Jews with the “meta-skills” and language for going past the typical Israel narrative and exploring some of the more troubling aspects of Israel.

- The final lecture maintained that Israel education, and most specifically Birth Right-Taglit, must not only focus on the Israel connection but also the learners’ status as diaspora Jews. Birth Right-Taglit has failed to instill of a robust version of world Jewish citizenship, or a sense of American Jewish heritage that is coequal with Israel. The presenter, Shaul Kelner, recommended a return to the the Blaustein-Ben Gurion Understanding and more travel programs for American Jews that focus on American Jewish culture and history.

Lecture Summaries:

Moderator: Lisa Grant, HUC-JIR

Bethamie Horowitz, NYU-Steinhardt

Horowitz conducted research in conjunction with the ICenter to determine how Israel educators understood “Israel education.” Data from her informants reveals that many felt that the goal of Israel education should be to foster a connection between the learner and Israel, but not to have the learner take an explicitly political position on the subject. There was much anxiety among her
informants about how to navigate between teaching about Israel without taking a political position. The goals of such an education include: making Israel an integral part of Jewish education, promoting identity outcomes, making such an education learner centered, and, perhaps most importantly, enabling “mifgash” or direct meetings between learners and Israelis/Israel. Many educators felt that mifgas needs take place not only in Israel but also in America.

To conclude, Horowitz felt that a new paradigm in Israel education is emerging, one that no longer seeks to generate solidarity but rather one that is cognizant of the ambiguities of Israel, which is “black and blue” instead of “blue and white.” Horowitz found that many of her informants focus on the student’s discomfort with Israel, using it as a starting point to explore how the learner can explore and come to terms with the tensions of Israel. Examples of current models that represent the new paradigm include JTS-Davidson’s Kesher Hadash program and the “Resetting the Table” initiative.

Yona Shem Tov, Encounter

This presentation described and outlined some of the goals of the Encounter program. Shem Tov founded it with the intention of filling two holes in Israel education: productive encounters between Jews and Palestinians (this, according to Shem Tov, was a major impetus since most Israel education programs mediate the Palestinian narrative through Jewish voices), and between Israeli and American Jews. Encounter brings mostly American Jewish leaders, but also Israeli leaders, into East Jerusalem and the West Bank to meet with a wide array of Palestinians. It draws on the Birth Right-Taglit model of mifgash, of using travel as a way to interpret the subject.

Goals of Encounter include bringing more awareness to the diversity of the Palestinian community, having participants hear from Muslims, Christians, moderates, conservatives, male and female. Encounter is non-partisan in the sense that it does not advocate for its participants to do anything once the trip concludes. The only goal of the trip is to bring more complexity to the participant’s understanding of the conflict. Shem Tov stressed the need to move away from uniform attachment and recognize that we now live in an age of political diversity and division. It is crucial that young people are exposed to fundamental challenges to the stock and trade Israel narrative in safe venues like Encounter before they come into contact with it on university campuses.

Shaul Kelner, Vanderbilt

Kelner discussed his research of Birth Right-Taglit trips, focusing on a few major issues that arise and how Birth Right meets them. The first issue is “staying humanistic.” BR was the product of two trends: the American Jewish community’s anxiety over assimilation following the 1990 NJPS survey, and the felt need following Intifada II for American Jews to rally in support of the Israeli state. The challenge has been to nurture the fact that the participants are also on an
educational journey that a key goal of the program is human growth, which could be undermined by a stark emphasis on serving the Jewish community or the Israeli state. The bulwark for preventing this is for the program’s directors to maintain an educational frame, one that values its service to participants first and foremost, not to a collective.

Kelner then went on to discuss how the inherent distancing effect of travel undermines the objective of fostering a connection between participant and Israel. BR takes people ub a foreign country, and this requires a host of mediating institutions to help participants navigate it (Kelner mentioned how before the participants are welcomed “home” at Ben Gurion Airport, they must go through a passport check which makes clear that they are visitors, not citizens). The problem is, according to Kelner, that while BR has developed a robust vocabulary for speaking about the connection, there is a paucity of language when it comes to speaking about the distancing, by which he means the development of a sense of world Jewish citizenship, of Jewishness in diaspora. BR must provide its participants with a way of comprehending the participants’ coequal status as American Jews.