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TRAVELING TOWARD THE SELF WHILE VISITING THE OTHER
Israeli TALI School Educators on a U.S. Study Tour

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A well-structured study tour of the United States can be an important educational tool for Israeli educators. The tour described in this article affected the participants in three ways: as Jews, as Israelis, and as educational leaders in their own schools. The trip was a transformational experience that lay the groundwork for change.

American Jewish travel to Israel has become an accepted and expected building block for increasing Jewish identification and increasing Jewish pride (Cohen, E., 1986; Cohen, S., 1986, 1989; Cohen & Wall, 1993; Herman, C., 1995). But is there an Israeli equivalent? What happens when Israelis visit Diaspora communities on planned educational tours?

Little is known about the short- or long-term impact of such visits (Kelman, 1993). In fact, for a host of historic and ideological reasons, Israelis have long assumed that they have little to learn from their American Jewish counterparts. While hundreds of thousands of Israelis travel to the United States, they are almost exclusively tourists. They visit the usual sites, skipping over any real contact with American Jewish life today. Increasingly, however, through initiatives coming from Partnership 2000, the American Jewish Committee, Mifgashim and more, Israelis are visiting America for the purpose of discovering the American Jewish community on its terms (Cohen, E., 2000; Ezrachi, 1994; Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997).

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A group of seventeen Israeli educators from the TALI school system set out for eleven days in May, 2000, to learn more about being Jewish in America. The TALI school system is part of the Israeli secular public school system and was founded in 1976 by parents and educators identified with Conservative Judaism. Among these founding parents were former Americans who sought to blur the classic secular-Orthodox dichotomy and create a school that would teach Judaic subject matter in an open and pluralistic educational environment (Breakstone, 1997; Tavory, 1998). TALI is an acronym for "enriched Jewish studies." In addition to devoting more school hours to Jewish studies, the TALI approach is one of engaged interaction with subject matter, values, and practice. Today, there are 60 schools with TALI tracks or full programs, as well as 45 TALI pre-schools throughout Israel.

Because the TALI system is part of the secular school stream, the teachers and principals are overwhelmingly secular. Secular Jewish ideology is identified with the historical and cultural aspects of Jewish life. Israeli identity and Jewish identity are seen as confluent (Herman, S., 1970), adding the national dimension. This ideology has transformed the Jewish holidays into national col-

lective myths, removing God and ritual observance. As a result, "most of those born and raised in Israel whose education has been secular, have actually become estranged from Jewish tradition to the extent that synagogue life is as foreign as church or mosque ritual" (Shokeid, 1988, p. 127).

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the impact that a short-term trip designed to impart an understanding of pluralistic approaches to Judaism in American Jewish life and education has on a group of Israeli TALI school educators. It asks what happens when Israelis, highly identified with the collective cultural and historic aspects of Jewish life, encounter American Jews, whose Judaism is personal, denominational, and based on religious observance. It explores how an educational study tour to learn about American Judaism through the lens of Jewish education might influence educational leadership and initiatives among TALI school educators.

Data come from the participants themselves and through participant observation. Each member of the delegation completed a pre-trip questionnaire detailing his or her goals and expectations for the trip. During the trip, frequent group processing sessions took place during which extensive field notes were taken and later analyzed. After the trip, participants completed a written evaluation and then met about two months later for another group processing session where notes were recorded and subsequently analyzed as well.

The trip had three stated purposes:

1. Expose the educators to the variety, diversity, and creativity of American Jewish organizational life and the challenges of living a Jewish life in an open and pluralistic society
2. Create a community of learners among the delegation, with the goal of articulating a vision for strengthening the Jewish identity of all who interact with TALI schools—students, parents, teachers, and staff
3. Create a cross-cultural exchange of ideas, resources, and curriculum between Israeli and American Jewish educators

Although the number of professional development trips to the United States for Israeli educators has grown, virtually nothing has been published yet about Israeli professional development experiences in the United States. This study attempts to build on our understanding of the potential for building programs that foster genuine cross-cultural learning and stimulate new thinking for enriching Jewish education both in Israel and in the United States.

The U.S. study trip was an intense short-term experience for a group of people with some sense of shared purpose, but who worked in diverse settings throughout Israel. How much personal transformation can be expected from such a brief encounter? Studies suggest that well-planned retreats, residential, or travel experiences do have strong potential for fostering the critical reflection and dialogue necessary to spark a process of change (Cranton, 1996; Fleming, 1998). This trip was structured to ensure ample time for both. In addition, foreign travel can create disequilibrium and the irritant of uncertainty that are necessary to recast and reframe meaning. It separates people from role and routine and places them in an unfamiliar setting that gives them the opportunity to see themselves in a different light than they do at home (Leed, 1991; Turner, 1973). Travelers try on different personae when they are away from their ordinary existence. If they internalize the change upon returning home, it becomes an essential part of their being (Leed, 1991). In such situations, the individual's subjective reality has been altered through the experiences of the journey.

As noted, however, personal transformation was seen as a means to the greater end of precipitating organizational change among the TALI schools participating in the study tour. This process is even more fragile and complex than the process of personal change.

Vision must be shaped and shared by a broad base of constituents. In other words, it cannot emerge from top leadership alone, but must evolve through the dynamic interaction of the various stakeholders in the organization (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 1993; Sarason, 1996). School change must be a collaborative, interactive, and systemic initiative suitable to the given context and culture, where, as Fullan (1993, p. 78) writes, "each setting is prepared to work through its own complexity." Even the most powerful short-term retreat or travel experiences can serve only as a catalyst for change and not the means. Whether and how members of the delegation translate their personal experiences on the trip into their own organizational setting; how they build coalitions of teachers, parents, and students; and how they work to change the core values, beliefs, and attitudes underlying their school culture will determine the ultimate degree of change. This study can only touch on the beginnings of that process.

THE TALI GROUP

The group consisted of seventeen educators (principals, specialists, and senior teachers). Three participants defined themselves as modern Orthodox, the balance as secular. Most of the group were veteran principals. However, some were relatively new to the TALI system. One participant was a veteran nursery school teacher. Almost all were born in Israel. With the exception of one participant from the Ukraine, none had an extensive educational background or formal training in Judaic studies. All were graduates of teachers seminaries, where the rudiments of Hebrew literature and Bible are part of the training. Prior to the trip, none of them had significant exposure to American Judaism or the American Jewish community.

The delegation participated in five full-day orientation sessions in Israel in the months preceding their departure. These sessions offered an overview of the American Jewish community, an introduction to the different denominations and organizational life in the United States, history and sociology of Israel-Diaspora relations, and, finally, time for dialogue and reflection on issues of American Jewish identity, Zionism, and personal identification. Israeli and American academics, rabbis, and communal leaders lectured and led group discussion.

In addition to participating in these five sessions, most of the principals in the group were in the midst of the two-year leadership development course at the TALI Principal's Center. This course is designed to help them translate the core TALI principles of open and engaged interaction with Jewish subject matter, values, and practice into the daily life of their schools. It focused on three central dimensions of Jewish identity: building Jewish knowledge, understanding what is at the core of Jewish education, and appreciating Judaism as a way of life. Participants began these sessions wondering out loud what they would have in common with American Jewish educators and what they could learn from American Judaism. By the last session they appeared to be eager and open to the intense immersion they would experience on the visit.

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The trip was designed to provide the TALI educators with an in-depth overview of liberal Judaism in America, as seen through the lens of Jewish educational initiatives. As such, the majority of time was spent visiting a variety of Jewish day schools and other educational settings. Secondarily, it strove to situate the development and functioning of American Jewish education in the broader context of a pluralistic American society. Thus, a number of educational and cultural programs were planned to offer the delegation experience with the mainstream of American life.

The delegation began the trip with three days in Boston. During this time, they visited three Jewish day schools and a public middle school with a Jewish principal. In addition, they met with representatives of the Boston Bureau of Jewish Education to get an overview of the structure of the Jewish community in Boston in general and of Jewish education

in particular.

The remaining time was spent in New York City and its environs. As in Boston, the central experiences were built around visits to Jewish day schools in New York City and its suburbs. They met with school leadership and faculty to discuss each school's educational philosophy, goals, and pedagogic objectives. At two different schools, groups of parents spoke with the delegation about their decision to send their children to a Jewish day school and their own role in school governance and support.

In addition to school visits, the delegation met with religious, educational, and organizational leaders within the American Jewish community, including Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Dr. Steven Bayme, of the American Jewish Committee, and Dr. Alisa Kurshan, Director of the Task Force on Formal Jewish Education at the UJA-Federation of Greater New York, as well as members of that Task Force.

The third component of the trip included educational workshops on teaching about God and Jewish ethics, a professional development program at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and participation in a weekly Talmud study session with a group of rabbis from the four main streams of American Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform. In addition, the itinerary provided opportunities to experience pluralistic expressions of religious worship in two different religious services. The first formal experience took place on Friday night at B'Nai Jeshurun, a dynamic, creative, and welcoming synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that attracts well over 1,000 worshipers on any given Friday night. The delegation took on more of an observer status at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

In addition, virtually everyone in the delegation had what could be described as a spontaneous religious experience during a reflection session that occurred in the chapel of a large Reform synagogue in suburban New York. This chapel is nestled in the woods, and its design conveys a sense of entering sacred space. The reflection session was preceded by an inspiring conversation with one of the rabbis of this congregation, Shira Milgrom. Rabbi Milgrom described two aspects of her life that revealed the possibilities, challenges, and rewards of living in a world that honors and embraces a multitude of perspectives and forms of Jewish expression. First, she described her efforts to create a nurturing, religious environment that encourages development of a serious relationship with Judaism and with God. Then, she used her decision to send her own children to an Orthodox day school to illustrate the possibilities American Jewish life offers for mutual respect and cross-denominational learning.

Rabbi Milgrom's talk, combined with the serenity of the environment, seemed to open a door for many, if not most members of the delegation, into a new way of viewing the world. As one member later wrote, "In that chapel, there was no *mechitza* (barrier) between God and people."[1] Participants began to recognize the dissonance between their assumptions about American Judaism and what they were seeing in schools and in conversation with American rabbis and educators. Both Orthodox and secular members of the delegation expressed intense emotions as they began to grapple with what each of them could do to bring this atmosphere of potential, choice, tolerance and mutual respect, and spirit and love of God back home to their personal and professional lives. The questions and possibilities raised for the first time in this peaceful chapel continued to reverberate and grow in form and substance throughout the rest of the trip.

The delegation consisted of dedicated professional educators with well-established careers in the Israeli public school system. Despite their expertise in school management, curriculum, and pedagogic theory, this visit was filled with many firsts. They had never

[1]All quotes from TALI delegates are cited anonymously.

participated in a professional development program focused on how to teach about God. Many had never seen *tefilah* as an integral part of the school day. They had never seen a group of interdenominational rabbis sit together on a weekly basis simply for the joy of studying Talmud. They had never worshiped in an egalitarian service.

The group saw many firsts inside the classrooms they visited as well. Several were particularly impressed by the various approaches to curricular integration between Hebrew and English and between Jewish and general studies that they saw in practice at several schools. Their verbal and written comments suggest they were excited, intrigued, moved, and also discomfited by much of what they saw. In the language of Mezirow (1990) and Brookfield (1987), these experiences were "disorienting" or "trigger" events that challenged members of the group to reconsider the assumptions underlying the concepts, beliefs, judgments, and feelings that shaped how they heretofore made meaning. Then, during the frequent group processing sessions, the participants were able to reflect critically on their observations and experiences and began to reshape their perceptions about American Jewry and, more importantly, about themselves. Without these opportunities for reflection, the disorientation or dissonance caused by these many new experiences might have precipitated a momentary "leap" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) outside of their frames of reference, without more substantive change.

Mezirow's (1990) theory of transformational learning posits that growth occurs through a process of critically assessing the assumptions that shape one's world view. This is exactly what occurred on this trip. As the group members processed their experiences, they began to understand that their role was not to copy the American Jewish experience, but to learn from it, to take the positive values embodied in religious pluralism, community involvement, and commitment to the Jewish people and translate them into practices that fit within their school community and Israeli society.

THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

Three themes of change appear to be germinating among the delegates as they work to absorb and build upon the lessons learned on their journey: (1) the impact of the trip on the self as a Jew, (2) the impact of the trip on the self as a member of the community, and (3) the impact of the trip on the self as an educational leader in their own school and in the broader Israeli society.

The Self as a Jew

At numerous points during the preparatory sessions and the trip itself, participants echoed an observation often articulated in the literature about the dichotomous nature of Jewish identification in Israel (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983; Liebman & Cohen, 1990). They expressed the sense that the Orthodox hold a monopoly on Jewish expression in Israel and that anyone who does not identify within the Orthodox camp is defined as secular. On a professional level, most educators in secular schools choose not to deal with issues of Judaism because it is so difficult to define a common sense of reality. "In Israel, we created borders, and they came with a price," said one of the observant participants toward the end of the trip. "Today, I understand that we (the Orthodox) have locked secular Jews out of finding their own sense of Jewish identity."

This in-depth exposure to pluralism prompted different kinds of reflections for the Orthodox and secular educators on the trip. For the Orthodox educators, the trip raised the question of how to reconcile their advocacy of choices in Jewish expression that are inconsistent with *halacha* and their own personal beliefs. On the one hand, one Orthodox principal marveled at the range of choice American Jews seem to have regarding Jewish expression; on the other hand, she knows many of these expressions are forbidden according to Jewish law. Ultimately, she realized she could accept the legitimacy of the other point of view without having to change her own beliefs or behavior. (See Daloz (1986) for a discussion of the role of dialectic process in personal transformation.) She noted: "The visit helped me

understand one of TALI's central principles, which is pluralism. Seeing the liberal Jewish life as it is taught and lived did something to me. We are used to the framework of "*aseu vtr vzf*" (*ka'zeh ra'eh v'kadesh*—you don't touch it because it is holy). Here, choice is valued and respected."

Thus, she determined that her job as a TALI principal is to help chart a middle path. She said, "I don't need to convince the Orthodox to change. It's my task to present more choices to my secular students and their families so that they can reconnect with Jewish tradition, on some level. The choice is theirs. It's up to me to present the options."

For the secular educators, exposure to American Jewish education seemed to increase self-awareness about their own lack of Jewish knowledge and experience. As one principal remarked, "How can I introduce prayer into my school if I've never prayed myself?" Rather than feeling paralyzed by this lack of experience, however, she is trying to figure out how she can gain the personal knowledge and comfort with prayer both for herself and to translate into school practice.[2] Likewise, others in the group are finding ways to slowly increase their own Jewish literacy and to bring that to their teaching and leadership. One principal noted, "I no longer feel like an empty disk. I'm now beginning to discover my Jewish identity." One of the teachers in the group remarked, "I never thought *I* would be standing in front of a group giving a D'var Torah, but I am!"

The Self as a Leader

The visit to the States brought the delegation in contact with leaders in the American Jewish community: school principals, rabbis, educators, Jewish professionals, and active lay people. They met highly committed people invested in serving their communities, giving of their free time and energy to build their institutions. These meetings served an important function for the Israeli educators. One principal noted: "In the U.S. I came to understand that I am not only a principal but a leader. It is not enough to build one's school but one must reach out to the community. If we stay within the perimeter of our school, we will never have an impact. I now know that one can have influence beyond the school community to the greater society."

Two months after their return, the educators reflected on how the trip had strengthened them as leaders. One said, "I now understand, more than ever, how critical it is for a principal to lead her school so that the school can influence the community beyond in the direction of increased Jewish values. I must dare to push my school forward along with my staff and the parents." Many commented on a number of changes they had already put in place or were anticipating for the coming school year. One noted: "By the end of the school year I assigned more teachers to the TALI Leadership training program, and met with parents and teachers in order to expand the role of TALI education in our school. I also expanded the notion of communal activities by running family events connected to Jewish themes." Another principal spoke about initiating a dialogue with parents about instituting a policy about boys, and perhaps the girls as well, wearing *kippot* during *tefilah* and Jewish studies classes. She also described finalizing plans to organize a *Rosh Hodesh* program at a nearby synagogue for the TALI classes in her school that will include *tefilah* and a study session with the rabbi.

The Self and Community

While the educators were deeply impressed and moved by what they saw in the United States, they also understood that the American form of liberal, pluralistic Judaism would not fit in Israeli society and culture. Rather than taking specific ideas or "prescriptives" for action home with them, they took home concepts that they will need to translate into the Israeli idiom and contexts. These con-

[2]Learning about and experiencing prayer are now components of the TALI Principals' Center course in leadership development.

cepts include a strong sense of collective responsibility for the preservation of community and the spirit of giving. "In a place where individualism is paramount and alienation is a feature of American life, I was surprised to discover the role of community in meeting the individuals' needs, both in the Jewish and Christian community," offered one participant. Another said, "I finally understand the meaning of the word 'community.' The great irony is that the state of Israel is one great community that lacks some of the basic communal values."

While the delegation heard far more about the successes of the American Jewish community than its failures, there were opportunities for frank and open encounters. Parents, teachers, and school leaders shared their fears and hopes. One delegate wrote: "We were exposed to the process. We met parents who were founders of a new school. They formulated the vision and recruited the staff and resources for their school. They continue to support and be involved with the school and the administration. They admitted that they did not have all the answers. They were still growing. We felt their strength."

During their visits to Jewish day schools, which are funded almost entirely through Jewish communal funds and private contributions, the Israelis saw the value of giving put into practice. This concept crystalized at one of the schools where its principal asked the group, "How do you get to a situation where people want to give more than they receive?" In response, one of the principals remarked: "The spirit of giving that we saw manifest among American Jewry is still lacking in Israeli society. Members of a community must be able to transcend their own personal interests and contribute to the collective well-being of the group."

While community cooperation within each school was strong, the delegates also observed the minimal intra-school cooperation in the United States, even among the Solomon Schechter schools, which are all affiliated with the Conservative movement. One principal said:

> It really bothered me that people spoke about communal responsibility, but this seemed restricted to each local community. No one spoke about creating learning communities among different schools. This is one area where our American colleagues could learn from the TALI system and experience. We should find a way to create a framework to work together.

The strong community base for Jewish education in America helped many in the delegation reshape their perspective on the purpose of the TALI system. One principal who has just a TALI track at her school commented, "I used to try hard to present both options in my school as equal. Now I understand that we need to change the whole school to the TALI system." Another remarked:

> When I saw that American Jews are enthusiastically working toward ensuring the continuity of the Jewish people, I understood that the TALI system is not just a project, but a way of life. The entire Israeli school system should embrace this approach. We have the feeling here in Israel that we are strongly rooted in our Judaism, but in fact, we are out on a limb. I see a great threat to our existence if we don't provide the next generation with opportunities to connect to their Jewish heritage and culture. Therefore, we need to go out and recruit a large number of schools where Judaism will be taught from a pluralistic point of view.

Two months after the trip, one of the principals summed up the general sense of the group in these remarks:

> I returned home with a great respect for what American Jewish educators are doing to build and sustain Jewish identity even though confronted with widespread assimilation. I used to think such a thing could never happen in Israel. I thought simply by the fact that we live in Israel, we were Jews and that this would be enough for the next generation as well. As a result of this visit, it became clear to me that this is *not* enough. I see how Israelis today

break with their roots, especially after their army service. Oddly, far away from home, I saw our difficulty and our challenge. I want to work on behalf of my country in the same way that American Jews are working to preserve their own Jewish identities.

The U.S. visit affirmed the idea that community is a core value of the TALI system. It also strengthened recognition of the need to involve the community in the process of school advancement and development. An assistant principal said, "I want to work together with our students and parents to involve them in asking the questions and finding solutions that will allow us to build a pluralistic Jewish community that fits with our Israeli values and culture."

Already a variety of initiatives are being taken by these delegates to shape their TALI schools into stronger Jewish learning communities. Several principals are planning to continue or begin study through courses at the TALI Principals' Center. Several plan to send teams of teachers and administrations to professional development programs at *Machon Schechter* as well. A number noted plans to enrich ongoing programs in family and parent education with Jewish sources. One described a dialogue group that she has been facilitating between religious and secular parents who are just starting a new TALI school for their children. After a year of conversation, they recently decided that they too need to study alongside their children.

All of these changes are still at a fragile, nascent stage as might be expected so soon after their return. However, they suggest that the educators are going through a thoughtful process of deliberation to determine how best to adapt and expand upon the experiences and lessons from their trip. Their awareness grew about how essential their own personal growth is to the directions they take as educational leaders. They also understand that they can take steps to change curriculum and programs even as they continue their own personal journey of discovery. Further, they appear to understand that change cannot be a solitary journey and that they need to include their colleagues, staff, and parents in the process as well.

CONCLUSION

The delegation's reactions to the wide variety of Jewish lifestyles manifest in American Jewish life had both personal and professional dimensions. Seeing many different alternative models and approaches to Jewish learning within and across denominations led them to conclude that Israeli models of Jewish education can be developed that might reconnect secular Jews to Jewish study and tradition in a spirit of choice.

The trip helped all the members of the delegation redefine themselves as leaders. They saw the power of the TALI system for bringing greater exposure to Judaism to secular Israelis, and they understood the need for building broad-based teams of teachers and parents to support and direct the necessary change initiatives. They also saw how essential it is for their personal and professional growth to continue their own Jewish study, so that they can model Jewish expression with integrity.

All of the participants noted the essential role of community in building a Jewish school and how important it is to translate this concept to an Israeli context. Delegates took on a sense of personal responsibility for bringing a fuller understanding of liberal, pluralistic Judaism to the community of TALI school leaders and educators. They also believed that Israeli and American Jewish educators have a mutual responsibility to support and sustain liberal Judaism as a rich and meaningful option for expression throughout the Jewish world.

The degree to which these beginning change initiatives can be sustained remains to be determined. According to Mezirow (1993, p. 189), social change requires a three-step process that begins with critical reflection. This is followed by establishing a "feeling of solidarity with others committed to change." Lastly, one has to determine what steps are necessary and appropriate to accomplish the

change objectives. Study programs at the TALI Principals' Center provide these professionals with the needed time and separation from the immediacy of their schools to undertake just such reflective practice.

Certainly, the group itself bonded into a cohesive unit on the trip. They share a firm resolve that they need to serve as change agents to further their mission of enriching Jewish identity and knowledge in their students and communities. Many of them will continue to meet and study together over time through professional development programs and courses offered at the TALI Principals' Center. Thus, they have a group of peers with whom to discuss and develop ideas. What they need to build, however, is a team with whom to work on planning, implementing, and supporting the change within their home school communities. Many of the principals observed how much better the trip would have been for their school if they had been able to bring members of their staff along. As Sarason (1996) has pointed out, enduring change can be sustained only if teachers, administrators, and often parents work together to plan and implement the systems and structures to direct the change effort. This requires a shared sense of urgency and a wide base of support for the change, as well as direct involvement in the change effort. To truly make a difference in the culture in their school communities, building this base through staff development and collaborative change initiatives must be the next steps. This process has begun as well, as evidenced by an increased number of teacher/principal teams participating in professional development programs at the TALI Principal Center.

Based on this research, it appears that a trip to the United States is an important educational tool for Israeli educators. Ultimately, the delegation left rejuvenated and strengthened in their evolving Israeli Jewish identity. They took home ideas and aspirations for making significant changes in their schools. And they have begun to take tentative steps toward building the coalitions, planning groups, and learning environments that may support and sustain their initiatives. This program serves as a source of study and as a model for enhancing the opportunities for mutual learning among Jewish educators in Israel and the Diaspora and for anyone committed to improving the relationship between the Jewish people.

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