

Canada, News

A new curriculum at Reform synagogue supplementary schools in Canada aims to teach students more about Israel than ‘flags and falafel’

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By Alex Rose



Reform synagogues in Canada are introducing a new Israel curriculum to their supplementary schools this year that intends to teach students to engage with and understand Israel rather than telling them how they are expected to feel about it.

In its inaugural year, the curriculum will be aimed at students in grades 4, 5 and 6, and the theme will be “shared spaces.” The team behind the curriculum designed six sessions this year, and hope to make 12 for next year.

Israel education needs a drastic redesign because the current strategies end up alienating young Jewish people, said Lesley

Litman, project manager for the new curriculum, and the director of Hebrew Union College's executive master's in Jewish Education.

“What attracted me to it is the fact that it was for younger kids. We tend to focus on middle school and high school. It's too late. If you look at the research... kids are ready at a much younger age to engage deeply with Israel.”

Younger kids are typically given a superficial introduction to Israel, which she calls “flags and falafel” because it focuses on simple cultural touchstones without addressing any of the more difficult or complicated aspects of Israel's existence. The research shows that not only are younger kids ready to engage more deeply with Israel, but also that failing to meet this need actually undermines their future relationship with Israel.

“People say ‘They can't know anything bad about Israel, first they have to love Israel. And then we'll teach 'em the hard stuff.’ And that's backfired,” said Litman. “Because kids know about the hard stuff, but we don't make space and create frameworks for kids to know what Israel is in a deep and real way.

“That doesn't mean that eight-year-olds are going to talk about the conflict, but they know something's going on, so they're going to have questions, they're going to be curious. So the question was how to create a curriculum that would make space for kids to get a broader and deeper understanding and insight into Israel as a place, and not just a political entity, and not just flags and falafel.”

The new curriculum project was conceived by Rabbi Lawrence Englander, rabbi emeritus at Solel Congregation of Mississauga, Ont., which he founded in 1973, and an adjunct rabbi at Temple Sinai in Toronto. He has also served as the chair of Arzenu, the political voice for reform, progressive and liberal Zionism at the World Zionist Congress.

Rabbi Englander began to worry that young Canadian Jews were distancing themselves from a relationship with Israel, and he thought that the educational practices may have been part of the problem. He began reaching out to Jewish educators, and found they shared his concerns.

He contacted Lee Weisser, president of Arza Canada, the Canadian arm of Arzenu, and they began by identifying the main flaws in current Israel education and designing a new curriculum to address them. To that end, they assembled a team of educators from across the country and hired Litman to run the project.

In its first year, the new curriculum has already attracted 32 participants. Each participant will receive a handbook and access to a Google Classroom with information on the six sessions, all of which can be modified at the discretion of the educator, depending on age, context, and other factors.

Keren Kayemet L'Israel provided \$40,000 for the first year of the initiative, which covered almost all of the costs. However, the project is looking for more funding next year, with expected costs coming in at \$100,000 as Rabbi Englander and his team hope to

double the output from six sessions to 12. They also hope to eventually expand it to cover all age groups, and even create programs for adults. A conference in Toronto, scheduled from Aug. 27-29, will introduce it to participants.

So how did Rabbi Englander and the rest of the team create a curriculum that satisfied their educational goals? Litman identified three principles that guided the creation of the new curriculum.

The first is meeting the students where they are. For grades 4, 5 and 6, that means asking about the spaces they interact with in their lives, what it means to share those spaces with others, and what kind of issues can arise when different people need to share space.

The next principle is introducing the students to a more robust vision of Israel, instead of the “watered-down” version they usually get. That means looking at the different groups of people who share the space of Israel, what their day-to-day life is like, and what their interactions with each other might be like.

The final principle is establishing the relationship between Israel and the young Jewish students in Canada. The kids won’t be taught that they’re expected to love Israel—because that has backfired in the past—but they will be taught that Israel is a space all Jews share and are connected to.

Rabbi Englander knows that some people may be skeptical of the new curriculum, because they feel that it is not concerned with

promoting love for Israel. However, he says that the research shows the best way to promote a sustainable, loving relationship starts with open and honest education.

“I’m not excluding love. I’m saying that the love will come through engagement. You don’t start with a love and you say, ‘here’s a country, you got to love it,’ because that’s proven to be non-productive,” he said.

“Unfortunately, I think that’s where a lot of Jewish education institutions are stuck. They’re still saying, ‘we have to love Israel no matter what, that’s who we are as Jews.’ And that message isn’t going over, it’s not working. So that’s why I’m saying we start with engagement. And if we start with engagement, if you want people to engage with anything, they have to learn about it.”

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