

A Revolution in Zionist Education? New Canadian Program Aims to Teach Israel ‘Warts-and-all’

For a group of Reform educators in Canada, the way to make Diaspora Jewish schoolkids love Israel is to be more honest about what’s really going on there

Judy Maltz | New York
Aug 24, 2023



NEW YORK – It’s hard to get Diaspora Jewish schoolchildren to love Israel when most of what they hear about the country outside the comfort of their Sunday school classes tends to spark a mix of discomfort and shame.

Indeed, what is a kid being raised in a progressive Jewish home – as many are – supposed to feel about a place that is often compared to apartheid South Africa and is now being run by a governing coalition of racist, misogynist and homophobic parties?

The dissonance between what these Jewish kids are taught about Israel in their supplementary religious school classes and what they discover when they start doing some research on their own, or simply watching the news, goes a long way toward explaining the growing disillusionment of young Diaspora Jews with Zionism.

For Rabbi Lawrence Englander, a prominent Reform educator from Canada, the conclusion is clear: If the goal is to prevent these disillusioned kids from cutting themselves off entirely from Israel, then the way Israel is taught needs to be changed radically.

“If you want kids to love Israel, then they’re going to unlove it as soon as they learn what’s going on there,” says

Englander, a former chairman of the international Reform movement’s political branch, Arzenu. “So we need to stop talking about getting them to love Israel. Instead, our goal needs to be deep engagement – which means teaching them about Israel, warts-and-all.”

A brand-new program Englander helped create for teaching school-age children about Israel and encouraging “critical thinking” about the country, as he terms it, was introduced in several Jewish supplementary schools in Canada this past year on a pilot basis.

It will have its official launch in the upcoming school year in supplementary religious schools run by the Reform movement across Canada.

“To my knowledge, this is a unique effort in Jewish education,” says Englander. “We strongly feel that this curriculum will produce a sea change for younger generations on how they relate to Israel – a crucial need in Jewish life today.”

‘Israel Disneyland’

The lesson plans that were used in the pilot program will be presented at a special three-day conference scheduled for early next week in Toronto, which will be attended by some 40 teachers and educators from across Canada. Englander hopes many of them will choose to incorporate the new curriculum at their schools.

“I’ve been long concerned about what was being taught or probably not taught in our Reform religious schools,” says Englander, the founding rabbi of the Solel Reform congregation in Toronto. “It seemed to me that a lot of what our kids are being taught is very superficial, a kind of ‘Israel Disneyland’ sort of thing, and many of the teachers don’t

feel competent or confident teaching about Israel because of everything going on there.”

Last year, he enlisted Lee Weisser, the president of Arza Canada (the Zionist arm of the local Reform movement), to undertake a formal survey to see how satisfied children, parents and teachers were with the existing curriculum on Israel.

It turned out not very, to put it mildly.

“Education about Israel was not meeting the needs of our teachers, students and families when we surveyed them,” says Weisser. “Teachers often didn’t have access to materials, they didn’t know how to evaluate materials, they didn’t have time to prepare things, and they were also unsure of their own relationship with Israel and full of questions – and so they didn’t know how or what to teach.”

Upon obtaining the results of the survey, Englander gathered together a group of educators with the goal of creating a new curriculum from scratch – one he says is based more on encouraging questions rather than providing answers, “because there’s not going to be just one answer to many of the questions these kids have.”

The pilot program, comprised of six lessons, was used this year in grades four through six at several schools. But the ultimate plan is to introduce it as early as kindergarten and carry it through up until 12th grade in religious schools not only in Canada but also in the United States, and in schools run by other denominations as well.

The team that created the lesson plan was headed by Dr. Lesley Litman, a Jewish curriculum expert from Hebrew Union College who also consults for the iCenter in Chicago –

an institution dedicated to improving Israel education programs.





“What makes this curriculum unique is that it is geared toward much younger children and is inquiry-based,” she says. “In other words, we’re not coming to these children with answers, but rather, trying to open Israel to them and let them engage with it from the world they know.”

The Reform movement is larger than the Conservative movement in the United States, but that status is reversed in Canada. Most of Canada’s 25 Reform congregations are centered in and around Toronto.

“This program will provide kids with a very different kind of education than their parents and grandparents may have had,” notes Weisser. “In fact, the conversation that emerges from the exposure to different elements of Israeli society is the entire purpose of it, as we see it.

“So, just like Reform Judaism always says there’s more than one way to be Jewish,” she adds, “we believe there’s also more than one way to study Israel.”

Click the alert icon to follow topics:

-  Jewish Diaspora
-  Jewish education
-  Reform Jews
-  Canada