

How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions

20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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A School That Places Israel at Its Center

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Overview

The attention that Golda Och Academy devotes to the state of Israel and its importance in shaping Jewish identity is, in and of itself, impressive. The school's deep dedication is reflected in numerous trips for students and staff, the amount of class time and personnel allotted to Israel, a history of Hebrew language instruction, and an allegiance to Zionism. But the story of Golda Och becomes even more amazing when you learn that today's intense focus emerged almost by accident. This case study shows that, as the author says, "when a school's leadership has a clear set of values and the commitment to enact those values, large and unexpected consequences may follow."

Unique People, Intense Focus

At Golda Och Academy in central New Jersey, Israel is the defining feature of the school's Jewish culture. A long-time affiliate of the Solomon Schechter network and the oldest continually functioning Conservative Jewish day school running from grades K–12, Golda Och has built its school around various forms of Israel education for students, staff, and the extended community. Emblematic of this approach are the following notable steps:

- Golda Och's high school students go on *two* trips to Israel, one during their first weeks of 9th grade and the second during the last months of their senior year. This brackets their high school careers with immersive experiences in Israel.
- The school organizes heavily subsidized trips to Israel for teachers and support staff to encourage them to relate Israel to their work in math, science, English classes, and even during recess.
- It employs two full-time people whose sole task is to work as Israel educators, one in the school itself and one in Israel to oversee the school trips.
- Golda Och also utilizes the talents and energy of several on-campus *shlichim* and Israeli high school graduates who participate in a year-long service program that brings three Israeli teens to the school annually.
- It has a twinning program with an Israeli school in a development area and arranges for reciprocal student visits to

each other's homes, thereby forging bonds between American high school students and their Israeli peers.

- And from grades 3 to 12, students are able to join Israel advocacy clubs that encourage an activist approach to Israel.

How has all this come to be? What is its value in today's world? The answers to these central questions lie in Golda Och's unique people and their intense focus, which came about almost serendipitously.

Who Does Israel Education at Golda Och?

The Primary Leadership for Israel Education

The linchpin in this story is Joyce Raynor, who has served as the school's Head since 2006. Before that, she held various teaching and administrative positions since 1984, including principal of the high school for 16 years. She has spent time living in Israel and has strong personal commitments to Israel and to the Hebrew language. The school she heads, founded in 1965, has long taken its seniors on three-month trips that cap their high school experience, a program now known as *Neshama*. But as she candidly admits, the impetus for the 9th-grade trip (known as *Na'ale*) grew out of mundane needs in the mid-2000s. The school had a small 8th-grade class, and she was seeking a means to retain those students for the high school. Her goal initially was to create a unique experience that would help incoming 9th graders have positive feelings about being in a small class. Secondly, the trip could serve as a bonding opportunity for the holdovers and the incoming students attracted from other schools. It quickly became clear to the school leadership, however, that the dual trips created a new dynamic. The trips helped the school reconsider its mission by bracketing the entire high school experience and serving as a unifying theme for Golda Och Academy.

The second indispensable building block of Golda Och's Israel education came somewhat through serendipity. PEJE, the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, was offering grants to schools interested in hiring a change agent. Joyce Raynor and her team decided to apply and to designate the slot for an Israel educator. Thus was born the partnership with

Lilach Bluevise, a native Israeli, who had previously been a Hebrew language instructor and then headed the Hebrew language department in the school. With the grant, Joyce Raynor was able to carve out a new position. Bluevise is now the full-time Israel education director for the entire school, a role she assumed in 2002, first on a part-time basis and then full-time, once Joyce Raynor was able to budget for the new position.

Bluevise meets regularly with lower school teachers to follow up on how they integrate Israel into the curriculum. Her primary work, though, is to supervise the visiting Israeli contingent, meet with parents, develop Israel-oriented curricula, and organize each year's *Na'ale* and *Neshama* trips. She is constantly speaking with students in the hallways (always in Hebrew) and in Israel clubs, working with the teaching staff, overseeing the Israel trips, and reaching out to parents to prepare them for their children's trips and keep them posted while their children are in Israel. She is an indispensable partner to Joyce Raynor and a full-time advocate of Israel engagement at every level, in every classroom, and in as many extracurricular programs as feasible.

It is important to note how the few measures the school took to further its Zionist mission — applying for a grant and devising a 9th-grade Israel trip to retain students — have had huge consequences. The school didn't envision the results from the outset. Rather, the outcomes developed organically as the school embraced an ever-more-ambitious Israel focus. It is doubtful that Israel would have become front and center if the school and the larger community in which it is situated had not already held strong views about Israel's importance in shaping Jewish identity. Those commitments were exemplified by the school's tradition of sponsoring *Neshama*, the three-month-long 12th grade trip. Golda Och Academy also had a history of strong Hebrew language instruction and an allegiance to Zionism.

But through a series of innovative and somewhat risky steps to strengthen those efforts, Joyce Raynor opened new opportunities for Israel education that she herself concedes were not part of a master plan. The moral of this story, perhaps, is that when a school's leadership has a clear set of values and the commitment to enact those values, large and unexpected consequences may follow.

Returning now to the personnel who further Israel education, we may note the efforts of different people who have coordinated Golda Och's *Neshama* and *Na'ale* trips on the ground. The most recent person to hold this position is in Skype contact with the leadership of Golda Och, maintaining a relationship that intensifies when students are visiting. Together with Bluevise, the Israeli director does not just plan every phase of those trips, adapting them each year to suit the particular character of the student cohorts visiting Israel. The two also provide daily briefings online to parents to keep them well informed about where their children have spent the day and the types of issues they discussed. The school's educational goals are ambitious, and therefore it invests in two full-time Israel educators to ensure a high-caliber program and support for parents.

The Supporting Staff

The supporting staff for these Israel educators includes several Israeli emissaries temporarily based in New Jersey. One is a *shlichah* attached to the local federation who spends part of her time in the school. And then there are a number of so-called *ShinShinim*, gap-year students who have graduated from Israeli high schools and are deferring their military enlistment to work in the United States and perform a year of service (hence the acronym for *shnat sherut*). These 18-years-olds define their role as embodying day-to-day Israeli life for Golda Och students. As one of the visiting *ShinShinim* volunteers put it, "By being here, we are making living connections to Israel."

When the *ShinShinim* meet with lower school students, they primarily offer informal education, such as teaching them the games Israeli youngsters play during recess and leading song and dance. In the middle and upper school, they speak in classes, explaining the geography of Israel, preparing 8th graders for their *Neshama* trip, and debriefing the 9th graders upon their return. They help staff Israel clubs that meet on some mornings during the *tefillah* (prayer) slot. And they staff extracurricular programs that expose Golda Och students to contemporary Israeli life.

The members of the school's formal teaching staff are critical players, too. At all levels of Golda Och Academy, teachers are strongly encouraged to integrate Israel into many facets of their work. Precisely to increase the likelihood of teaching

moments devoted to Israel, Joyce Raynor raises special funds to send staff members on heavily subsidized, eight-day trips to Israel. During their time there, teachers report, they see new ways to connect their curricula to aspects of Israeli life.

For example, thanks to her trip to Israel, a science teacher was receptive when Bluewise suggested that students replicate the experiment astronaut Ilan Ramon was to perform on the ill-fated voyage of the space shuttle *Columbia*. A geometry teacher thought to include geometric forms students see in Israel as part of her teaching about angles and shapes. Before 9th graders embark on their *Na'ale* trip, their English teachers assign them to keep a journal while traveling. Even the Spanish teacher reports learning things in Israel that now can be included in the classroom experience. And a learning specialist says that by going to Israel, she discovered new ways to address learning difficulties that have helped her work with Golda Och students. Even non-teaching personnel, such as development and admissions staffers, participate in the trip to connect them to the larger educational purposes of the school and enable them to develop a visceral understanding of how Israel functions in the life of Golda Och Academy.

The school's promotional literature makes it plain just how important Hebrew is to its overall mission and why. In fact, Hebrew appears as the first item in the school's description of its curriculum, which says, "Hebrew is the language of the Jewish people and the heart of the Jewish soul." It then goes on to explain:

The Hebrew language curriculum in the high school aims to create a love for and knowledge of modern Hebrew in its linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts. Students continue to develop and practice their competencies in Hebrew and, as Hebrew language abilities increase, greater emphasis is placed on literature and literary analysis. We empower our students to express themselves creatively and intellectually in Hebrew and to use Hebrew during their high school Israel experiences.

The school, in other words, consciously builds upon the Israel trips as a means of demonstrating to students and the parent body the utility of Hebrew as a living, spoken language.

Golda Och employs two Hebrew language programs that are heavily oriented to modern Israeli Hebrew: the TaL AM and NETA curricula. Each contains material about modern Israeli culture, such as poems, short stories and other works of fiction, essays, and news articles. Given that almost all Hebrew language teachers are Israelis, they can help bring these facets of contemporary Israel to life. During their daily Hebrew language classes, students are expected to use Hebrew only; middle and lower school classes, for example, are conducted in *ivrit be'ivrit*. (In high school, some Jewish studies classes are conducted in English.)

To be sure, not all students can attain the highest proficiency levels, which is why classes are divided into three groups. The most proficient have a rich enough vocabulary to argue for their positions in Hebrew and interact with students at the Shalom Hartman high school in Jerusalem and their Israeli host families during their school trip. Those placed in the two less-proficient levels have a somewhat weaker grasp of the language. What helps motivate these students is knowing that they will return to Israel toward the end of high school. Having spent a brief period in Israel for the *Na'ale* trip, all students receive a taste of what life in the Hebrew-speaking environment of Israel is like, and many come back energized by having had sufficient mastery of the language and vocabulary to converse. This spurs students to work harder at their language acquisition. In short, the school regards Hebrew as, first and foremost, a language to gain entree to Israeli life.

Israel is brought into the curriculum by the Jewish studies faculty, too. To cite but one example, Rabbi Michael Monson is a high school Jewish studies teacher who prepares students for their trip to Israel. He teaches them about the Jewish custom of empowering a fellow Jew to serve as a *shaliach lidvar mitzvah*, an emissary designated to fulfill a religious commandments — in this case, disbursing *tzedakah*. Before the students embark on their school trip, he gives each some money to donate to Jewish causes in Israel.

He also uses the trip as a teaching moment to stimulate thinking about larger Jewish concerns that he will explore with the students upon their return. And so he challenges them to form their own views on the meaning of Israel as a Promised Land. Quoting from the text in Genesis where God makes a commitment to

the descendants of Abram, Monson notes the promise embedded in the text: “To the North and South, to the East and West... I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.” As his 9th graders depart for Israel, he challenges them to consider this passage and its promises, ultimately pressing them to consider whether they feel personally that this land was given to them and what sense they make of such a promise.

One of the teachers most directly involved with formal Israel education is Adam Schapiro, the instructor of a one-semester course on the history of Israel that’s offered in the half-year prior to the departure of the *Neshama* class. Schapiro is adamant that the course is not designed to foster Israel advocates. Rather, it gives students the tools to comprehend what they will see in Israel, and particularly the historical context through which to view contemporary Israeli life. The course, based upon another developed by Professor Ken Stein of Emory University, employs primary-source documents and current-events reports that touch upon Israel. The virtue of this course is that it offers a systematic history of modern Israel to complement the experiential emphasis of the actual school trip. However, some voice the criticism that the class might be of greater use to students at earlier stages of high school than during their last academic semester.

Teachers in the lower grades are enlisted in the enterprise of Israel education, too, albeit for less-formal instruction. As is the case in other Jewish day schools, during their kindergarten year young pupils are given a lunchbox-size satchel and a “passport” to take on a figurative year-long journey through Israel. They board an El Al flight and buckle up for the trip. When they land, they receive mementos at every stop they make. The fact that this “trip” is central to the kindergarten experience speaks volumes about the tone the school aims to set from the outset.

In the next grades, students at Golda Och learn to play the same games, read the same stories, and eat the same snacks preferred by their Israel counterparts. Needless to say, in preparation for Jewish holidays, Israel figures prominently not only in situating the origins of holidays but also in discussions of what takes place during them in contemporary Israel. There is also a formal, sequenced curriculum developed by Bluevise and taught by the *ShinShinim* to the lower grades.

The annual capstone day devoted to Israel is held on *Yom Ha’atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day, when the entire school engages in special activities. One interesting way the school models its commitments to Israel is by enlisting older students to run programs for younger ones. In 201X, the thematic focus of the day was “Israel Counts.” So middle schoolers quizzed lower school students about different numbers that figure in Israeli life, such as the number to call to reach the police.

The School’s “Twin”

Golda Och relies upon two additional sources of support for its Israel programming. One is its twinning program with a high school in Merkhavim, a small community of *moshavim* near the Gaza Strip. (The specific location is connected to the partnership the Jewish Federation of Metrowest New Jersey forged with communities in that area of Israel.) During their time in Israel, the 9th-grade *Na’ale* participants spend three days in that high school and with the Merkhavim community to connect Golda Och students to their Israeli peers. Both schools then encourage continuing communication among students via Skype, emails, texting, and social media. Tenth- and 11th-graders maintain contact with their Israeli peers by engaging virtually in projects co-designed by faculty at both Golda Och and the Merkhavim high school. The *Na’ale* visit is reciprocated in December of each year, when 12th graders in the Merkhavim school visit Golda Och and are housed in students’ homes. A few months later, during the *Neshama* trip, some Golda Och students return to Merkhavim and stay with their “Israeli families” for a week. Much of this is spontaneous, but teachers at both schools also plan some collaborative activities.

Parents

Rounding out the groups of supporting players is the parent body at Golda Och. Though hardly monolithic, the parents almost all support the emphasis on Israel education. True, at times there has been some grumbling about insufficient attention to Israel’s warts; but Golda Och does make an effort to include multiple perspectives about Israel.

Both the school’s head and board members report that there is far more parent dissatisfaction with the balance between

Jewish and general studies — roughly 50–50 in the lower school, but down to a 35–65 percent spread in middle and high school. Some parents would like more attention to Jewish studies, and some want less. Parents have also been known to complain about other emphases of the school, saying that, for example, it does not offer enough high-level math instruction or AP classes.

But Israel's place within the school's programming is not a source of much parental discontent. Parents' strong support is manifested in several ways. They encourage the Merkhavim connection and pay for the Israel trips, whose cost is above and beyond tuition. Families house visitors from Israel. And for the most part, they encourage their children to participate in *Na'ale* and *Neshama*. Some families go further and schedule a family visit to Israel over the Passover holiday when their 12th graders are on the *Neshama* program. It is not hard to imagine that in other environments, the financial and other sacrifices would elicit howls of protest from parents. But the school has sponsored at least one of the Israel trips for more than 35 years, so parents know what they are signing up for when they choose Golda Och. Presumably, those who want no part of the emphasis on Israel do not enroll their children there. Still, the overall impression one receives after speaking with parents is that they appreciate and support the school's focus on Israel education.

The larger community reinforces this orientation. The Jewish Federation of Metrowest New Jersey has built strong connections to Israel without equivocation. And the Jewish population that Golda Och draws upon has strong peoplehood allegiances. Quite a few are descendants of Holocaust survivors; others, for a variety of reasons, appreciate the school's pluralism on many issues coupled with its steadfast allegiance to Israel. The fit between Golda Och's aspirations and its local community, let alone its parent body, is strong and works well.

So, to return to the opening question, who does Israel education at Golda Och? Virtually everyone associated with the school.

How The School Articulates Its Goals and Evaluates The Impact of Israel Education

This, then, invites another question: What do all these players want Israel education to achieve?

The answer that various stakeholders generally offer is that the school aspires to foster a sense of identification with, and allegiance to, the people and state of Israel. Since identification and allegiance are feelings, much of the emphasis in the lower grades is on building affective connections to Israel. In the upper grades, the more cerebral approach is designed to deepen students' understanding of modern Israel's history and complex challenges. Even so, much of the emphasis in high school and even the *Neshama* trip is on fostering identification and stronger bonds to Israel, and on developing students' ability to articulate how Israel is a core aspect of their Jewish identities. This emphasis is dramatized by the deliberate decision to focus the *Neshama* program not on frontal learning but on exposing students to many facets of Israel and maximizing the time spent delving into the big questions of what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century.

In high school classes at Golda Och, students are exposed to more formal education focused on Israel gradually, and here the goal is to offer a nuanced approach. In part this is motivated by the range of views families hold; it would not fly to offer a highly partisan approach. Another motivation is the awareness that a one-sided presentation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might prove counterproductive. Students would likely rebel against a view of Israel that is too rosy.

But most important, Golda Och, like many other day schools, must contend with the tension between the critical thinking it strives to nurture regarding all kinds of questions and the ways in which Israel is presented. Any disconnect between the critical outlook most classes encourage and an overly one-sided approach to Israel's dilemmas would likely repel students.

Parents' Views of the Focus on Israel

For these and other reasons, the school works hard on balance. For example, during the 2012–2013 school year, it screened three movies for high school students, including *The Gatekeepers*. This somewhat controversial movie portrays

former heads of Israeli intelligence services who are critical of the role they themselves played and also of policies regarding Palestinians. As a trigger for a discussion with parents about what they were prepared to have their children view, the school presented an excerpt of the three films, including *The Gatekeepers*. Almost all parents were all right with exposing their children to controversial subject matter about Israel. “Confuse them,” one parent said. The value parents place upon developing children’s thinking skills trumps concerns about exposure to Israel’s complexities.

To be sure, some parents and students would like the school to lean in a still more critical direction; they feel that its portrayal of Israel whitewashes and offers too much of the Israeli government’s official view. One instructor speaks quite openly of some families’ disappointment about the school’s tilt. This teacher suggests that the school encourages a particular approach to Israel that downplays some, though not all, of Israel’s weaknesses. “Students from families on the left feel that the balance is not maintained,” the instructor says. “The underlying message is one of allegiance to Israel.”

The same point is confirmed by the mother of one recent alumna when she describes how her daughter has criticized the school for its ideological slant and attributes her joining a campus JStreet chapter as a reaction. From the mother’s perspective, this case hardly represents a failure of the school, and, if pressed, the school leadership probably would concur. Again, the school seeks to walk a fine line: to encourage engagement with Israel but avoid insisting that students assume the role of advocates if they are unprepared to do so.

When assessing the impact of the Israel trips, parents speak of the positive identification fostered during the *Neshama* program, with its strong emphasis on building Jewish connections and creating an environment where a broad range of views are aired about all kinds of Jewish questions. The Israel trip intentionally enlists Israeli counselors with diverse perspectives to stimulate such exchanges. Rather than foster confusion, the result of *Neshama* is to deepen students’ self-understanding as Jews. One parent reports that before the 12th-grade trip, her son seemed indifferent not only to Israel but to his Jewish identity. Upon his return, he was much more engaged. Now a college student, he attends religious services at Columbia University’s Hillel with some regularity. Another parent claims to

see big differences between Golda Och students and Birthright alumni: “Our students could not wait to go back to Israel.” Still another mother says the twinning program creates an intense relationship; her daughter spends time while in Israel with her Merkhavim family.

Despite claims that the school does not engage in Israel advocacy, some note that their children are eager to do such work as alumni. “They know how to defend the state of Israel, and they want to defend it,” remarks another parent.

Student and Alumni Views of the Focus on Israel

During a conversation with high school students, positive opinions of Israel surfaced. What do they associate with Israel? Most commonly, their answers included family, Jewish homeland, a rich history and culture, innovative technology, Israel as a home for every Jew, a place to discover religious history, and a fun place. When asked what they thought the school would like for them to answer, the same students responded homeland, an innovative place, the only democracy in the Middle East, “Israel is there for us,” and “the place of our biblical roots.” However, the students did claim that they feel some pressure from the school to become Israel advocates and that the school expects them to stand up for Israel.

When asked how they judge their success with Israel education, the school’s leaders pointed to the number of alumni who are in Israel at any given moment. In fact, on both student and staff trips to Israel, visitors from Golda Och are brought together with those alumni as a means of affirming the school’s values and achievements. Golda Och administrators keep tabs on how many college-age alumni go on gap-year or junior year abroad programs in Israel, and the school even tracks how many return to Israel for summer or other vacation trips. (Among the 12th-graders who graduated in 2009 and took the time to complete a survey, 78 percent said they had gone back to Israel for some kind of trip over the past 3-1/2 years, and nearly one-fifth of those who graduated in 2012 had already been back to Israel by April 2013.)

When alumni take the trouble to spend time in Israel, Golda Och believes the effort it invests in Israel education is validated. Similarly, alumni who participate in Jewish campus leadership positions and eventually in Jewish organizational life are regarded as success stories.

Is Israel Education Only About Israel?

The purpose of this case study is not to tout the Golda Och approach as a model to be emulated by all, or even by some, other day schools. What Golda Och has achieved is not feasible for many others (although the school's clear-eyed focus on its mission is something worth considering).

To begin with, Golda Och has benefited from some large philanthropic gifts that most other day schools can only envy. As a result, the school has been able to create special funds to finance Israel education, trips to Israel by staff members, subsidies for families who require aid to cover the cost of trips, support for its Israel educators, and more. The mere idea that a day school could run a heavily subsidized trip to Israel for its staff members, including nonteaching personnel, sets the school apart. Joyce Raynor has officially announced her retirement as of June 2015, but on her wish list, she identifies organized parent trips to Israel as the next major stage of the work promoting Israel education. These are luxuries few schools can afford. It bears asking, though, whether some of Golda Och's fund-raising success is attributable to its Israel focus. Perhaps the school's mission is enticing to donors because it is so consistent with the aspirations families have for their children.

Along these same lines, it's possible that the focus on Israel education is a boon because it unifies families with little else in common when it comes to Jewish commitments. The function of Israel education may therefore transcend what it does for students; it also welds together a parent population that otherwise is far from monolithic. It might be argued that as a Solomon Schechter school, Golda Och families are tied together by a strong allegiance to Conservative Judaism. But that is not the case. Though the majority of students come from homes affiliated with Conservative synagogues, the actual practices within those homes vary greatly. And families of secular Israelis and Russian immigrants add a layer of complexity when they do not strongly identify with the Jewish religion but do find that the school's Israel orientation resonates. As one of the top administrators conceded in describing the entire school population, "These students come from liberal families. Talmud and Bible are not as important to them. The school community can commit Jewishly to history, Hebrew, and Israel." Connections to the Jewish people and Israel serve as common

denominators in ways that religious observance does not.

When questioned about what they see as the highest priority of the school, students tended to be quite penetrating in their analyses. A small sample of high school students, for example, listed — in rank order — allegiance to Israel, *tikkun olam*, and commitment to the tenets of Conservative Judaism. To raise these issues is not to question the school's decision but to note the reality of American Jewish life today: Strong commitments to Jewish life, other than to Israel, are hard to find. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the school's leadership and board when they focus sharply on Israel education. But that does not detract from the probability that Israel serves as a glue for a school community that otherwise lacks cohesiveness.

And are there also downsides to this commitment to Israel education? One might ask what a day school sacrifices when it devotes so much time to Israel and the modern Hebrew language. One answer is the study of Jewish texts — Bible, rabbinics, and liturgy. Compared to most other non-Orthodox day high schools, Golda Och has a strong track record in teaching these subjects. Yet even some high school students note that they learned about Jewish liturgy mainly in synagogues, not in school. The point: There are trade-offs, and Golda Och has made them intentionally.

Another trade-off is with Advanced Placement classes. Simply put, because the second half of the 12th grade is spent in Israel, year-long AP classes are not feasible for seniors.¹ But given the many questions posed of late about the wisdom of having high school students take AP courses, this trade-off may be a small price to pay.

In addition, among some of the teaching staff, there is grumbling about the amount of time devoted to Israel at the expense of the general studies curricula. Despite the school's strong efforts to bring the entire staff on board in support of its Israel-oriented mission, and despite the trips for staff members,

¹ Note that not all seniors participate in the Neshama program. During 2013–2014, 36 of the 43 seniors did attend. But a number deferred the trip because they intended to spend a gap year after high school in Israel; some played leadership roles in United Synagogue Youth and therefore could not take off for three months; and a few may not have been ready for the intensive trip with peers and the separation from their families. Those who do not go on the Neshama program have the option of doing a three-month internship locally.

tensions persist for the simple reason that there is only a limited number of hours per day for instruction. Some teachers feel constrained by the time the strong focus on Israel takes up.

Some have also criticized the school for devoting so much time to current events in Israel that U.S. news gives scant attention. A parent reported that her high school-aged son was perplexed when there was little or no discussion of the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings even though care was taken to discuss the causes of terrorist attacks in Israel. Whether such tunnel vision is the norm or an aberration could not be ascertained from a brief school visit. A countervailing narrative came from a different mother about her son, a college graduate who joined the Peace Corps to work in Ukraine. He came to realize that he was in Ukraine *because of* the Israel course he took — a course that helped him understand the larger Jewish world and, by extension, the world itself. In his view, the school gave him a sense of how there are many different cultures and how the cultures intersect with one another. Thus in the view of some in the school, Israel may lead to a greater sense of responsibility not only for fellow Jews but also for the world at large.

Interestingly, some current students make the same point. They, too, see a connection between advocacy for Israel and caring about other causes. One student stated that for her, “advocating for Israel means advocating for other causes — such as gay rights.” Several students noted the interplay between the orientation of the school toward Israel and its efforts to nurture students who care about all human beings. As one said, “The school wants us to become decent human beings. They push us to become caring human beings also for non-Jews.”

The message is also driven home through the school’s insistence on maintaining the twinning program with the high school in Merkhavim. The match is hardly a natural fit. To put it bluntly, students at Merkhavim generally come from homes where Judaism is celebrated differently because most are of Mizrahi origin and tend to be poor. Golda Och students generally come from upper-middle-class Ashkenazi families and wealthier homes that officially identify with Conservative Judaism.

After their senior year, the American students drift apart from their Israeli friends. But the character of each school is still reflected in the lessons it teaches — for Golda Och, a sense of kinship for people who are different, and for the Merkhavim school, an understanding of the pluralism of the Jewish world and the many different kinds of Jews who make up the Jewish people.

The Dual Messages of Golda Och’s Approach

The intensive investment Golda Och Academy makes in Israel education thus serves a number of complex purposes.

First and foremost, the school seeks to create vigorous connections with the people and nation of Israel. By exposing even the youngest students to visiting Israelis — teachers, *shlichim*, *ShinShinim* — and evoking a living, breathing Israel where special games are played, songs are sung, dances are danced, and food is consumed, the school creates a visceral link to an active culture. As students reach higher grade levels, their knowledge of Israel expands. And through trips to Israel and visits from Israeli high school students, the people, language, culture and complexities of Israel come to life at Golda Och.

But as a day school serving a primarily liberal Jewish population, Golda Och also communicates more subtle messages — about ways the school community can bond around Israel even if its range of families remains diverse in other regards. While addressing a liberal Jewish parent body, Golda Och encourages its students to absorb other lessons about how to care for all human beings. Even as it forges strong linkages to the state of Israel and allegiances to support Jews in Israel, it prompts students to help fellow human beings of all kinds.

Students read the implicit messages Golda Och delivers with acute sensitivity. From their perspective, the school is about balancing particularistic Jewish commitments with concern for universal causes — a dual message that the school’s leaders affirm as a correct reading. Israel may indeed be at the center. But the concern for other kinds of Jews and non-Jews is not peripheral; it, too, is central.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. To what extent does your own school strive to deliver Israel education? What are the goals of Israel education in your school? What are the primary vehicles for doing so?
2. How does your school mobilize to do Israel education? Who are the key players, and how much is the supporting cast involved in this effort? Can a school overdo its emphasis on Israel?
3. What are the pluses and minuses of building a Jewish educational program around Israel education?
4. Would a sharper focus on Israel education strengthen or weaken your school? How so?
5. What other types of focus, besides on Israel, are possible in a pluralistic environment?
6. Where else in your school, aside from discussions of Israel, does having strong value commitments and being open to alternative perspectives operate in tension?