

**How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions**  
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

# Preparing to Fly: The Eighth Grade Trip to Israel

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**“Mom! Don’t you think it’s odd** that we have to go to school today?” Jeremy stuffed his books into his schoolbag while he called downstairs.

The response of Sandra, his mother, was well-rehearsed. “Oh really? And what would you do by yourself at home! Just because you’re going to Israel on Sunday, they don’t have to give you another two days’ vacation. You just had ten days off for Passover.”

Sandra did in fact wonder whether the 8<sup>th</sup> graders wouldn’t be climbing the walls at school these next two days, a two-day interlude between the Passover break and their trip to Israel. But she didn’t want Jeremy and his equally restless pals to be left hanging out at the mall.

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In the back row of their mini-van, Jeremy chatted with his class-mate Diana, a long-standing member of their carpool. The two of them had attended Gesher, a Community Jewish day school, since they started kindergarten. They were one of the last classes to have started 1<sup>st</sup> grade in the JCC of Northern Virginia before the school moved to a purpose-built campus in Fairfax. Because the two of them lived so close to each other, and had started kindergarten together before that, they had been joined at the hip for most of their lives. It would be funny not to go on to the same high school. Their trip to Israel was a kind of final rite-of-passage for their class of 18, most of whom were dispersing in twos and threes to different high schools. Diana was heading with a few friends to the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School about an hour away in Rockville. Jeremy had been admitted to one of the top public schools in the state, if not the country.

The fact that both Jeremy and Diana had headphones wedged firmly in their ears didn’t stop them engaging in what passed for conversation.

“What about Mike getting in to Jefferson? It’s great that you’re going to be there together.”

“Yup!”

“Have you spoken to him?”

Thankfully, her two younger children showed no signs of back-to-schoolitis as they devoured their Cheerios. Sandra had her eye on the clock. Living in on the edge of Alexandria, VA, she knew it would take them half an hour to get to school, going against the traffic. Then, she’d have to turn right around and get to the Justice Department building for a meeting at 9:00. She did not enjoy it when it was her turn to car-pool.

Jeremy had basically known what his mom would say. He’d asked her the same question at least five times during the Passover break. Still, he thought to himself, you never know when you might get lucky. Parents could be funny like that.

“On Facebook...Have you?”

“Saw him in synagogue.”

“No!? What were you doing there?”

“We were at the same *bar mitzvah*.”

“Oh...cool.”

Their conversation, continuing in the same eloquent vein for much of the journey, was interrupted by their arrival at school. They were running late. As soon as they peeled themselves out of the car, they had to drop their bags at their lockers and run straight to the *Bet Knesset*, slapping high-fives with various friends along the way. The service was just getting under way.

Standing in front of the *aron kodesh* between an American and Israeli flag stood Dr. Zvi Schoenburg, Head of School for the last nine years. Dr. Schoenburg was the person most responsible for launching the school’s Israel trip. When he’d been appointed, there was no longer a middle school at Gesher; he’d embraced the charge to re-launch one, making it clear that he’d look to run a trip to Israel once they enrolled their first 8<sup>th</sup> grade class.

Talking in Hebrew, as he always did when addressing the students as a group, he welcomed back the assembled 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from their Pesach vacation. Over the years

Jeremy found that he understood more and more of Dr. S's announcements, but he still occasionally missed the point. Of course, at this moment the point was clear. Everyone turned to the front and recited the Pledge of Allegiance and *Hatikvah*, before Jessica, one of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students, led the *tefillah*. Jeremy flipped open the Art Scroll *siddur* he'd picked up from the shelf on his way in.

It was kind of strange; although Jeremy liked going to synagogue with his parents about as much he liked going to the dentist, there was something almost enjoyable about some of the times they prayed together in school. The *Bet Knesset* was always full of light even in the winter. Their music teacher Rabbi Tonti always knocked out great tunes on his guitar at the beginning and end of the service. Because it was a small, round room, you could see everyone's faces, and when people caught the mood, it felt a bit like *tefillah* sometimes did at camp. He'd never admit it to anyone, but it was something he'd miss next year.

After a spell of daydreaming, Jeremy looked up to see that Mike, the boy who was going to Jefferson with him, was up to read Torah today. He did OK, as he usually did, but now that his voice had broken he did sound a bit like a frog. That certainly didn't help his sex appeal.

After the reading, Karen — Mike's sister actually — came up to read the prayer for the State of Israel and for Israel's army. With their trip starting in about 75 hours, when he last

counted that morning, Jeremy was quite pleased that they were putting in a few words for Israel's safety. It couldn't do any harm to ask for a bit of divine protection. As Karen read, it did seem as if Jeremy wasn't the only member of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade paying more attention than usual.

Before they wrapped up the service for the day, Dr. S reminded them that they had now started to count the Omer. He was in the middle of talking when a little guy from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (who had come in for the last part of the service) put his hand up to ask a question. Jeremy squirmed. It was his little brother, Chuck. You had to admire his pluck, but really, he didn't have to draw attention to himself like this! He wanted to know whether the Israelites had counted the Omer in the desert as well. His question then set off a number of other questions from his fellow 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. It was kind of cute, and it did mean that they'd get to math a few minutes late. He'd have to thank Chuck for that later.

Dr. S fielded their questions and then got to the last part of the service, and the reason why the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade had joined the older grades of the school today. He was handing out *siddurim* to students who had joined the school this year and hadn't taken part in a *chagigat hasidur* with the rest of the grade. All of this meant that when this small ceremony finished, Rabbi Tonti led them in a rocking version of *siman tov umazal tov* as they headed out to class.

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As the day went on, there were a surprising number of teachers who carried on with their lessons as usual without paying any attention to the fact that they'd be taking a two-week break while the class was in Israel. Other teachers found different things to do as a one-off in between the *Pesach* break and the Israel trip.

In their Hebrew class with Morah Graciela (who also taught Spanish to some of them), they had fun rehearsing what they'd say if in Israel they got separated from the rest of the group and had to ask for directions to find their way back. That's when they realized that quite a few students had no idea where

they'd be staying in Israel other than that they'd be in Jerusalem for a few days and also spending a night in a Bedouin tent. How were you supposed to ask directions to a tent; it could be anywhere? And Jerusalem was so big, you couldn't just go up to someone on the street and ask, "*slicha, eifo bet sefer Gesher?*" ("Excuse me. Do you know where the Gesher School is?") If you asked someone in the north of Israel, they might send you to Kibbutz Gesher. Morah Graciela showed them where that was; nowhere near where they were going. It was all very confusing, and of course a couple of the girls used it as a chance to get hysterical about what they really would do if they were lost.

That cracked everyone up. They were arriving in Israel with what was generally regarded as very good Hebrew compared with most other day school kids they knew, but some of them were clueless about where they were going.

The one difference from a regular school-day was in the afternoon when Jeremy and Shoshana, a fellow 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, went to visit the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The idea was that different pairs of 8<sup>th</sup> graders would be going to Israel as *shlichim*, basically on behalf of each of the younger grades. They'd be taking *tzedakah* with them from the class so as to be a "*shaliach mitzvah*" (doing something good on someone else's behalf) and they'd be taking messages from these classes to put in to the cracks of the Kotel. The class wouldn't be handing over these things until a special ceremony at *Kabbalat Shabbat* at the end of the next day. Today they were visiting the class so that their sponsors could get to see who their *shaliach* was, and to answer any questions the students might have for them. The plan was that while they were in Israel, the younger grades would follow their progress, like "Where's Waldo."

Jeremy remembered many years of going through this exercise from the other point of view, that is, when meeting the older students who were travelling "on behalf" of his class. He remembered looking forward to when it would be his turn to come visit the class like some kind of film star. He knew that some of his friends had actually stayed in the middle school because they didn't want to miss their chance to go to Israel. They'd be happy to pass up on the pre-trip visits to the other classes, but it would be a shame not to get a chance to go on the trip itself.

Shoshanna was much more patient than Jeremy with some of the questions they had to answer. Perhaps that was because she had a younger sister in the class. Some of the questions were mad:

"How tall is the Kotel?"

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The following day Jeremy didn't ask his mother if he had to go to school. At the end of the day there was going to be a special *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremony to send them off on the trip. He liked the idea of finally getting to be one of the people sitting at the front rather than each year being one of those sitting further and further towards the back.

Jeremy wondered how they were supposed to know the answer to that if they hadn't been yet.

"Will you stop at those fruit-sellers by the side of the road? And if you do what fruit will you buy?"

Jeremy was polite. He never said no to melon, but what difference did it make whether they stopped or not. Why did it matter?

One boy asked an interesting question that made him stop and think: "What are you most looking forward to during your time in Israel?" Of course, he had thought about that before — it was a list he'd made in his head many times — but now they were so close to going, he wasn't sure any more. Probably "swimming" in the Dead Sea, but he'd heard that they'd be visiting a museum where you basically have to find your way in the dark as if you were blind. It was supposed to be incredible.

Strolling slowly back to his class once they'd been released by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, he thought to himself how so many of his experiences at Gesher seemed to lead up to this trip. They stretched all the way back to his first *Yom Haatzmaut* in the school when the 1<sup>st</sup> grade took an imaginary flight to Israel, with passports, dinner trays, and an imaginary visit to the Kotel. There had been the fun experience a couple of years later when they had moved on to the new campus and the whole school had been involved in painting a mural for the Israel courtyard at the center of the school. Their work still looked pretty good six years later, although the younger kids probably had no idea what it was or that the flower-bed in the middle was supposed to look like a map of Israel. Everywhere you looked around the school there was some reminder of Israel. It had never struck him before that it was so normal to see so many pictures of Israel around the school that you almost didn't notice them.

Before then, and annoyingly, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade had another regular day of school. There was one teacher who certainly wasn't going to let them take it easy.

Mrs. Nachbar was one of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Jewish studies teachers. She taught them modern Jewish history, and she probably

worked them harder than any other teacher he'd ever had. In just two classes a week, she managed to teach Jewish history from the time of the Enlightenment until the Gaza disengagement. As the class got to learn, Mrs. Nachbar was the daughter of Holocaust survivors and devoted about a third of the year to teaching about that period before moving to the study of Zionism and the recent history of the State of Israel.

Jeremy had lost track of the number of times that his mom had told him how lucky he was to be taking this course. Some of the things they did were college-level, she said, like their unit on Yiddish humor or some of the comparisons they had to make across historical periods, say, between the Jewish situation in 1945 and 1967, or between a letter they studied that Mrs. Nachbar's own aunt had written from the Warsaw ghetto before she was killed and the letter a young woman from England had written before she died fighting for Israel's independence in 1948.

Mrs. Nachbar had told them that today's class would be an *aliyah* fair. The students were expected to present research they had completed about a place in Israel where an emigrant might choose to live. As always, Mrs. N had provided them with a ton of material to explore. Some of these places were over the green line and some of them were inside the green line. Mrs. N had taught them that this meant that some of these places were in the West Bank and some of them were not. At the same time, they had to talk about an Israeli political or social movement. Jeremy had been assigned to talk about the town of Raanana and also about the Women in Black movement. Diana, his car pool buddy, had been given a place called Alon Shvut, along with the Women in Green. Everyone was expected to present a short speech and to prepare a poster that included slogans and bumper stickers associated with their movement.

As often happened with Mrs. Nachbar's class, they were thrown into action the moment they entered the classroom. There was some Israeli rap video playing on the screen at the front of the class; it was cool music. Jeremy caught that it was something to do with fish. There were separate orange and blue streamers strung across the classroom, what Jeremy recognized from a previous class as the different colors of the settler and peace movements. And then there were fancy dress

accessories on a table at the back that they were asked to pick out according to where they were living and the movement they were representing. The "religious" people from the West Bank towns got to put on cool stuff like big false beards and sidelocks. People from other places in Israel got tie-dyed tops and soccer shirts.

Before they started with their presentations, Mrs. Nachbar told them how excited she was for them to be going to Israel. She wanted them to know that it wasn't like going to Mexico on vacation; they were going home. They were lucky to have two homes. She wanted to make sure that when they came back they told people about it, and about the energy they'd experience in Israel. Over the last few months she'd taught them about why Israel is vital to us as Jews. Telling people all about their wonderful trip: that, she said, was Israel advocacy.

Quickly moving on, Mrs. Nachbar put a couple of quotations up on the screen, one from one of the *Nevi'im* and one from someone else about Jews returning to Israel. She then turned to members of the class, arranged on different sides of the room, to come up to the front to make their presentations. After each presentation, the class launched in to chants of "we want peace now!" or "no peace with Arabs!"

When it was Jeremy's turn, he came to the front to read what he had found out about the Women in Black. He talked a bit about Raanana too. He'd been fortunate; he'd been given an incredible amount of material about the town in English. There was also a lot of information about the Women in Black movement. Jeremy understood that the movements they'd been assigned weren't directly connected to the places in their presentations, but he wondered if there wasn't some kind of association between them anyway. He wondered also if they were going to Raanana on their trip, or any of the other places that people had presented about.

He was the last person to present. They ran out of time after that before everyone had a chance to give their talk. When the buzzer went they all came forward to hand in their work, and then had to "hurry" to their next class. In fact, nobody really hurried since at long last this would be the final class of the day before their send-off ceremony.

At 2:30 the whole school gathered in the open room, really the corridor, at the back of the school. This is where they came together every week for *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Other than the dining room and gym, it was the only area that could comfortably hold all of the school's 180 students along with teachers and some of the parents who came in at this time. With floor-to-ceiling windows running along one wall, it looked out onto a green play area behind the school and the woods beyond that surrounded the campus. This week, the space was set up with two rows of chairs facing the rest of the room, where there were enough seats in rows to accommodate the whole school.

Rabbi Tonti started to play a funky song on his guitar — *Yachad!* — as the different classes made their way in. The music drowned out the excited chatter. By the time the 8<sup>th</sup> graders took their places at the front facing the rest of the school, the room was full and most people were singing along. With more parents present than usual, it certainly felt like a festive occasion.

Jeremy looked out with a smile. It was a lot better sitting up at the front at the center of attention than sitting in one of those back row seats with the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades. In those back rows it was usually hard to hear even when people at the front used a microphone. Looking along his row, he could see that he wasn't the only one enjoying the attention.

Dr. Schoenburg stepped forward to the microphone. In Hebrew, he explained what a significant moment this was, being able to gather to wish a *nesiah tovah* to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. He himself was especially pleased to be travelling the following week with the group; it was something he didn't get a chance to do every year. He was hoping that everyone in the school would be thinking of the group during their travels just as they would be thinking of everyone back at school.

He invited to the microphone a woman who served as the *shlichah* from Israel to Northern Virginia Jewish communities. She told everyone how she was going back to Israel herself in a few months after two years in the area. Speaking in English, she explained that she had brought a small gift for each of the students who were travelling: a map of Israel to help them find their way (handy for those girls worried about getting lost, Jeremy thought), and a small notebook with the label "*ani ohev Yisrael*" (I love Israel) for taking notes about their experience. She continued to talk for some time while Jeremy's mind

wandered to what he still needed to do at home before leaving on Sunday morning. He hadn't yet prepared his travel music mix, and time was running out. He also needed to make sure that his younger brother completely understood when and how to feed his iguana. When he went to camp last summer, his parents had almost starved the poor thing.

He was brought back to attention by Dr. S thanking the *shlichah* for her kind words. Turning to the assembled group, Dr. S said that it was now time for a representative from each class to step forward to bring to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade what he called their *kvitlach* (their messages for the Kotel) as well as their *shaliach mitzvah* money.

Shyly at first, starting with the youngest grades, students from each class took turns to come forward. Many got a hug in return from their chosen 8<sup>th</sup> grader. Jeremy didn't like the idea of hugging the little girl who came up from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade so he simply thanked her and shook her hand.

By the time this procedure had been completed for all of the grades, there seemed to be a lot of students talking among themselves. Many had stopped paying attention to what was going on at the front. Again, however, they quieted down, this time when Morah Graciela, the head of Judaic studies and Hebrew, stepped up to the mic. She too spoke in Hebrew, explaining how, as in previous years, she was really pleased to be giving each travelling student a gift from the school. Producing a Geshet gift-bag from behind her back, she pulled out a small travelling *siddur* inscribed with good wishes from the school. She hoped that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade would put these to good use during their travels and in the years beyond. Then, with the help of one of the other teachers, she gave a bag to each of the students. Finally, she had two more bags left, for Dr. Schoenburg and for Ms. Rosenberg, one of the general studies teachers who'd also be chaperoning the group (and travelling to Israel for the first time). From these bags she pulled out some Israeli foot-cream from the Dead Sea that she was sure would be useful after the long treks they'd be taking during their two weeks away.

The noise level among the middle graders at the back started to rise again, but as before they became quiet once Dr. S came to the mic. Speaking slowly in Hebrew, he introduced everyone to the idea of *tefillat haderech*, a blessing you make when about to set off on a long journey. He asked the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to find the

relevant page in the *siddur*, and then turning to the rest of the school, he asked them to join in saying the word “*shalom*” whenever he signaled to them. He explained this is a prayer where “*shalom*” appears a number of times; so often, it was clear what we’re asking for.

As he began to recite the *brachah*, Jeremy carefully followed inside. “*yehi ratzon milfanecha...*” (May it be Your will...). Whenever Dr. Schoenburg waved his hand, the cry of “*shalom*” got louder and louder. For a few moments, it really did seem as if the school had come together to wish them farewell. That was nice!

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## School Strengths that an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Even an Exceptionally Bright One) Might Not See:

The Gesher School does not have any special advantages when creating an intense and sustained experience of Israel education for its students. It’s true that in recent years a family has stepped forward with financial assistance to help all students go on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade trip, but the school’s finances are as challenged as most when it comes to funding programs. Recruiting dynamic and qualified faculty is always a challenge too. Located on the southern side of Washington, DC the school is a significant distance from Rockville and Silver Springs, the main centers of Jewish life in the greater Washington area. The school does benefit from its proximity to Washington and the activity that surrounds the promotion of Israel in the city, but this does not translate into a stream of resources flowing into the school. Given its proximity to the nation’s capital, the school environment is surprisingly apolitical.

In colloquial terms, one could say that the school’s commitment to Israel education is sustained by sheer will. More formally, it is the consequence of the planful actions of a small number of professionals. First, those of the head of school, Zvi Schoenberg, without whose initiative and perseverance the capstone experience of the trip to Israel may never have been launched six years previously, or certainly abandoned by now. His personal connections mean that the other two schools whose students accompany Gesher to Israel are those where he previously worked. This partnership reduces the

At the end of the *brachah*, Rabbi Tonti picked up his guitar and led the school in to the usual sequence for *Kabbalat Shabbat*: *Shalom Aleichem*, and then on to the *brachot* for wine and challah. Somehow that all felt like a bit of an anticlimax after the send-off they had just received.

By the time *Kabbalat Shabbat* was finished, everybody — and not just the 8<sup>th</sup> graders — was ready to fly. By Jeremy’s count they now had about 40 hours before take-off. It was time to rev their engines.

per-head cost for the Gesher students, and makes the experience much more widely accessible.

Schoenburg’s determination to speak in Hebrew almost every time he addresses the school as a whole makes a very strong statement about the importance of the Hebrew language in Jewish life and as a means for connecting with Israel. This is no small matter given that he himself originally learned Hebrew as a foreign language. His commitment to Hebrew is fully consistent with the constancy and care with which he seeks to integrate Israel into the life of the school.

In a small school, the director of Hebrew and Judaic studies has an outsize influence too. Graciela Granek, a highly skilled educator, drives the infusion of learning about Israel across the curriculum and across the grades, in Hebrew and in English. She can facilitate opportunities for professional learning about Israel for the whole staff, whether in the United States or in Israel itself. Her comfort in three languages — and in the teaching of three languages — models for students and faculty the easy integration of Israel and America.

Finally, there is the contribution of Ann Nachbar, the creator and purveyor of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Jewish history program. Nachbar is an outlier, she is self-taught when it comes to teaching about Israel; she’s a lawyer by training, and is not proficient in Hebrew herself. But she is passionate about delivering a curriculum with a consistent and clear message. In her own words: her goal isn’t simply “*to broadcast the ‘centrality of Israel in Jewish life.’ It is far more: I want to give the kids a conceptual framework for understanding the importance and*

*complexity of power. I want them to understand why it is vital that Jews have power — why Israel is vital to us, as Jews — and I want them to appreciate the complexities of exerting power in democratic Israel.”*

She might not always hit the target in the learning experience she provides for students, but ultimately she exposes Gesher students to a richness of materials and a range of ideas that few 8<sup>th</sup> grade students experience in other schools. She gets the students to think and to argue. Parents and teachers treasure what she brings to the school.

These exceptional contributions overlay a school and community culture where allegiance with and connection to Israel is

widespread and pervasive, even among those in the school community whose broader political leanings might suggest a less sympathetic stance. Gesher families have selected a Community Jewish day school where Israel is a palpable component of the physical environment of the school and a strong element in its rhythm of Jewish rituals and programs. Families don't stick around if they experience discomfort with such things.

What is so remarkable about this school is that none of this seems exceptional. It is assumed that this is what a Jewish day school should be like, without any special fuss or acclaim. This school is simply going about the business of Jewish education with Israel at its heart.

### Questions for Further Consideration:

1. The Gesher School appears to anchor Jewish identity in the relationship to Israel. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?
2. For all of its planfulness and creativity in providing students with an experience of Israel education, educators in the school feel that they could do still better in these matters. What examples do you find in this case of opportunities missed and of opportunities seized when it comes to Israel education?
3. How do you think these students will feel about Gesher and about Israel five to ten years down the road?
4. How does Israel education in general, and the trip to Israel in particular, serve to catalyze the curriculum and unite the school? Are there other Jewish values or practices that you can imagine playing such a catalytic role for day schools?
5. What do you think of the way in which the school presents Israel? What do you think are the core messages and values about Israel that the school seeks to convey?
6. What constellation of stakeholders coalesces at Gesher to make the school's vision of Israel come to fruition? Are there any clues in the case about how this has come about?
7. Does Israel play a different role at a Community day school than at a denominational one? How does this difference manifest itself?
8. At Gesher, there are many ways in which Israel provides the glue holding people together. How unusual do you think that is?
9. While this case highlights the place of Israel at Gesher, are there other features of the school that strike you as making a special contribution to the quality of its Jewish life?