Landscapes of Collective Belonging:

Jewish Americans Narrate the History of Israel After an Organized Tour

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When the National Jewish Population Survey (1990) found a 52% intermarriage rate between 1985-1990, Jewish leaders panicked. As they searched for solutions, some argued that pilgrimage to Israel could strengthen Jewish identity and address the perceived intermarriage crisis (Chazan, 1994; Goldberg, Heilman, & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002; Kelner, 2010). These leaders saw ethnic pilgrimage as a solution to the problem of Jewish ethnic dissolution.

Studies of Jewish pilgrimage to Israel have found that the trips are successful in fostering ethnic and national belonging (Chazan & Koransky, 1997; Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe, 2012, 2014; Saxe, Fishman, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2013). Such findings describe the effects of the trip, but they don’t explain them.

The present study draws on studies of collective memory (Bruner, 1996; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1994; Zerubavel, 1995) to explore the effects of Jewish pilgrimage to Israel on Jewish day school school students who have already been exposed to several years of Jewish education. If pilgrimages work by breathing life into stories of the collective past and anchoring them in a physical landscape (e.g. Halbwachs, 1941/1992), one would expect to find changes in the way students tell those stories upon their return. These changes would capture some of the effects of pilgrimage. To explore this hypothesis, I observed 14 Jewish day school students on a class trip to Israel. I
interviewed them before and after the trip asking them to tell me “the whole history of the State of Israel.”

Specifically, this study addressed three questions:

1. How do students’ accounts of the history of Israel change after travelling there?
2. How is Israel’s history taught on the trip?
3. What is the relationship between students’ post-trip accounts and those they encounter on the trip?

With one exception, before the trip, accounts fell into three categories with respect to narrative: *chronicle* (n = 8), *exile and return* (n = 1), and *conflict* (n = 4). *Chronicles* listed events in chronological order. In these accounts, the only connection between events was succession in time. *Exile and return narratives* begin thousands of years ago. They tell the story of the Jewish people exiled from their ancient home and their constant struggle to return. In such accounts, modern Zionism represents a continuation of a three thousand year process. *Conflict narratives* began in the late 19th century. They tell the story of a group of European Jews who fled persecution and immigrated to Palestine. There, they encountered an indigenous population, Palestinian Arabs. In such narratives, the students moved back and forth between Jewish and Palestinian perspectives, weighing the competing claims of each side.

After the trip, eight students (n = 14) changed the narrative structure of their accounts. It seemed that for four of the students who had told *chronicles*, Yigal’s guidance crystallized their fragmentary accounts into a meaningful story. They added connections and episodes that transformed their *chronicles* into narratives. Furthermore, all four students who told *conflict* narratives before the trip, told *exile and return*
narratives after the trip. Of the three students I interviewed who did not participate in the trip, none changed their narrative structure during the second interview: one told a narrative with no structure, and two told conflict narratives.

FIGURE 1. Change in Amy’s narrative structure after the trip.

This study suggested that pilgrimage may assist students in constructing historical narratives. Before the trip, most students told chronicles. After the trip most told coherent narratives. Half the students adopted the narrative structure that Yigal articulated throughout the tour, i.e. exile and return, to organize their accounts. A two week trip seemed to teach a coherent narrative, something many classroom history educators fail to do (Calder, 2013; Shemilt, 2000, 2009). Yigal’s ability to communicate a coherent historical narrative stands as an admirable accomplishment.
It is hard, however, to feel entirely at ease with Yigal’s approach. To be sure, historical narratives can foster collective belonging in a way that rigorous history with its meticulous source work cannot. But as Yerushalmi (1982) famously argued, historical narratives that support collective belonging often fail to hold up in the face of rigorous historical scrutiny. A coherent, historical narrative, then, is a double-edged sword. They impose structure on disparate elements and allow order to emerge from chaos. They enable one to understand how and why events follow from one another and to plumb the significance of those events. But in their very coherence, they become like those optical illusions that hide words in the white spaces between inkblots (Figure 2). Once one sees the words, one can never return to seeing only inkblots. Once we impose a narrative structure, we may find it difficult to see other options.

**FIGURE 2. Mail Box (Hofstadter, 1999, p. 67)**

**Narrative structures** connect disparate elements and knit them together in powerful and memorable ways. However, their very coherence poses an intellectual threat. The more airtight they become, the more liable they are to become tools of close-mindedness and predispose one against alternative views. Instead, we fit new facts into the narrative rather than fitting the narrative to the facts (Wertsch, 2008). Whatever the value of the Israel trip, it taught students a single narrative as authoritative and indisputable. It remains to be seen whether history educators can square this circle. Can
they provide enough of a narrative framework to make history meaningful without closing off opportunities for students to engage in their own inquiry?

References


Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.


