Mature Zionism: Education and the Scholarly Study of Israel

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A new approach to Israel education has emerged to counteract what has been a tendency to romanticize Israel by avoiding criticism; it presumes that Israel engagement has much to offer a meaningful Jewish identity, but only when encountered critically, taking into account Israel’s many complexities. However, prevailing scholarly trends may not provide a clear stance on which to base critique and academic criticism may raise hard questions about the very idea of a Jewish and democratic state. This article addresses these concerns by offering a conceptual framework for scholarly study of Israel called “Mature Zionism” in which to ground a critical engagement with Israel that is genuinely educational.

INTRODUCTION

American Jews in their 20s and 30s appear increasingly disaffected with Israel. Although one view correlates this disappointment with limited Jewish exposure or indicators of assimilation into American life, such as intermarriage (Cohen & Kelman, 2007), another holds that it can also be seen among those who have received the best of American Jewish education—alumni of day schools, congregational schools, summer camps, and youth movements; Hillel activists; graduates of Israel advocacy courses; and former participants in short- or long-term Israel programs (Beinart, 2013). A third perspective suggests that this disaffection may be exaggerated; American Jews are seeking to redefine, not diminish, their connection to Israel. A recent Pew Research Center study found, for example, that 70% of American Jews feel very or somewhat attached to Israel, regardless of any concerns they may have.

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have about government policies (Pew, 2013). Yet even this shift appears to address dissatisfaction with American Zionism, albeit in an earlier form. If American Jews initially “mobilized” to help create the Jewish State (Cohen & Liebman, 2000), it is argued, more recent relations are marked by direct and personal “engagement,” as growing numbers travel to Israel, consume Israeli news and culture, and connect with their Israeli peers via cyberspace and through formal exchange programs (Sasson, 2013; Saxe et al., 2009, Sax & Chazan, 2008; Kellner, 2010).

One reason for this disappointment may be what has been a tendency to romanticize Israel, especially among advocates of the mobilization agenda, and to promote a naïve approach to teaching Zionism in American Jewish primary and secondary schools and informal youth groups, summer camps, and educational tours. The term “Zionism” here denotes support of cultural self-definition and political self-determination for Jews in their ancestral homeland, which is best achieved within the democratic framework known today as the State of Israel (Dershowitz, 2003; Troy, 2002). Until relatively recently, Israel has too often been taught uncritically in precollegiate Jewish education, much as Bible was taught before biblical criticism, without proper attention to academic scholarship that raises many hard questions (e.g., Florsheim, 1990; Rivlin & Gevirtz, 2000; Scharfstein, 1994). The interdisciplinary field of scholarly research that considers Israeli history, politics, society, and culture from one critical view or another is known today as Israel studies.

Promoting a romantic view of Israel that eschews research-based critique can foster brittle and fragile associations that stem from rigid and overly simplistic thinking about complex issues. This may have an especially disconcerting effect when students are confronted with that research at the university, which might account for some of the disenchantment. Avoiding scholarship that considers complexity and criticism is considered by many philosophers to be a form of indoctrination, which is often tied to dogmatic beliefs in tension with democratic values. Education, in contrast, promotes the independent judgment required of democratic citizens by encouraging learners to reach their own conclusions based on relevant historical, sociological, cultural, linguistic, moral, and religious evidence. This enables strong associations (Snook, 1972; Alexander, 2015, pp. 91–106). A new, more mature approach to exploring Israel has emerged, perhaps in the wake of the engagement agenda, known as “Israel education”; it seeks to avoid indoctrination by presuming that Israel has much to offer a search for meaningful Jewish identity, as both a subject matter and a location for learning, but only when encountered critically, taking into account Israel’s many complexities (e.g., Grishaver & Barkin, 2008; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012).

According to one influential theory, to achieve such a critical viewpoint, the curriculum needs to be grounded in scholarship (Bruner, 1976; Schwab, 1978). In the present case this would entail tying Israel education to
the emerging academic research on Israel. This is not a simple matter, however, because today’s leading trends in Israel studies embrace conflicting and sometimes incoherent conceptions of criticism, some of which challenge the legitimacy of the very subject matter of instruction under consideration—the idea of a Jewish and democratic state. This may make it as difficult to distinguish the new Israel education from indoctrination as the romantic view that eschews research-based critique.

Justifying this new approach to Israel education, therefore, requires addressing two interrelated questions: First, how is it possible for Israel education to consider complexity and criticism grounded in academic research, given that the relevant scholarly trends may not provide a clear critical stance on which to base this critique? And second, how is it possible to educate toward a positive engagement with Israel, given that the scholarship-based criticism this education requires may raise hard questions about the very idea of a Jewish and democratic state? Philosophers have long been interested in questions of this kind. How, they ask, is one thing possible given certain other conflicting or contradictory things? Addressing these sorts of questions requires what is sometimes called a philosophical explanation—one that removes the apparent conflict by articulating deeper principles based on careful reasoning and nuanced distinctions to put one’s beliefs in alignment (Nozick, 1981, p. 8).

This article offers such an explanation to serve as a conceptual framework for the scholarly study of Israel that can be translated into Diaspora Jewish education at the precollegiate level, inside and outside the classroom (Alexander & Bursztein, 2007). Many of my arguments may also apply under certain circumstances to the education of young Jews in Israel, as well, and to the teaching of Israel and Zionism to college students, including Jews and non-Jews, Israelis and non-Israelis, in university classrooms, cocurricular programs such as those sponsored by Hillel, and educational tours such as Birthright Israel. I call this explanation “Mature Zionism.” It is rooted in a particular conception of criticism. To clarify this conception, it will be useful to distinguish broadly between two sorts of criticism, one cognitive and the other normative, each of which comes in two varieties. I argue that only the second variety of normative criticism, which I call “dynamic” as opposed to “dogmatic,” can serve as a basis for explaining how Mature Zionism can adequately address these two questions.

Cognitive criticism entails standards about whether beliefs that describe the world are or can be true or false. According to one interpretation of the cognitive approach, being critical involves basing one’s beliefs on relevant evidence grounded in “objective” academic research that describes the “facts” about Israeli history or society. Few believe in purely “objective” scholarship today, however, because the idea that researchers can examine the world from an Archimedean viewpoint disconnected from history, language, and culture has never been successfully defended (Oakeshott, 1962; Nagel, 1986);
and this so-called objective view may also reflect questionable interests of power and privilege (Habermas, 1972). Hence, when taught in naïve or unsophisticated ways, even instruction in so-called “objective” facts can fall prey to indoctrination.

Another sort of “critical” attitude in the cognitive domain has emerged as a consequence of this concern about influence and position. Sometimes called “radical” criticism or critical social theory, this view is especially sensitive to oppression and domination. To be “critical,” from this perspective, means to be appropriately suspicious of beliefs used to rationalize excessive economic power or cultural resources. According to one influential application of this form of criticism, the so-called “Zionist project” is presumed to exhibit such excessive power. Examples of these sorts of rationalizing beliefs, therefore, might include arguments in defense of the current state of Zionist affairs espoused by Israelis as opposed to those espoused by Palestinians, Jews as opposed to Arabs, veterans as opposed to new immigrants, or Ashkenazim as opposed to Mizrahim. However, extreme interpretations of this approach to criticism have also been shown to be problematic; they too easily lead to forms of nihilism—the belief that it is impossible to distinguish fact from fiction or better from worse (Alexander, 2012, 2015, pp. 152–55). When employed in an overly simplistic, rigid, or one-sided fashion that is closed to dialogue with alternatives, therefore, criticism of this kind can also lead to indoctrination.

Normative criticism entails ethical standards about whether narratives are more or less worthwhile or actions are better or worse. One interpretation of normative criticism is dogmatic, based on absolute values given from on high, as it were, such as the idea that the land of Israel was given to the Jews by God or that there are universal values grounded in reason. This approach is not subject to revision or change and so can also lead to indoctrination, since it tends to exclude the possibility of alternative perspectives and, ironically, undermines the idea of criticism itself by insisting upon standards that are above critique.

A second more dynamic variety of normative criticism combines a profound commitment to a particular attitude, such as a Zionist point of view, with a willingness to consider alternative orientations and to revise one’s beliefs when appropriate. According to this approach, scholarship in the human sciences, as well as education grounded in such scholarship, should begin with an articulate and defensible normative point of view as a framework for interpretation, which can later be subjected to criticism based on dialogue with perspectives that originate from outside of one’s primary orientation (Alexander, 2015, pp. 39–52). It is my thesis that this dynamic approach to normative critique should be at the heart of Israel education which should be grounded in a mature Zionist perspective that maintains the legitimacy of a Jewish and democratic state but is prepared to consider research-based complexity and criticism.
The article is divided into four sections. In the section “From Romantic Zionism to Israel Education,” I address the first question of complexity in Israel education by discussing some limitations of romantic Zionism, the rise of the new Israel education, and criteria for distinguishing education from indoctrination in which Israel education can ground criticism. I then consider the second question of education toward positive engagement with Israel in the next section by contending that, in dogmatic or exclusionary forms that eschew dialogue with alternatives, the frameworks for teaching Israel grounded in the leading approaches to Israel studies are either too particularistic or not particularistic enough and so run afoul of one or another of these criteria. In the section “Mature Zionism: Liberal Nationalism and Israel Education,” I apply the criteria to the study and teaching of Israel, which leads to a dynamic interpretation of the Zionist narrative, Mature Zionism, as a normative starting point that is open to critique based on dialogue among more inclusive interpretations of these trends. I conclude with some practical suggestions concerning how to teach this mature approach, employing the pedagogy of difference.

FROM ROMANTIC ZIONISM TO ISRAEL EDUCATION

Romantic Zionism

Many Jews are inspired by Jewish power or prominence in the public square that are made possible by a Jewish state: the public celebration of Jewish holidays, the Jewish governance of holy sites, or Hebrew as a national language. I call this “Romantic Zionism.” Although the term may also be related to 19th-century Jewish nationalism, I use it, first and foremost, to denote a love of Israel (Sinclair, 2003). When we fall in love, we appreciate our beloved’s aesthetic or intellectual appeal and generally do not want to consider deficiencies. For a relationship to endure, however, we must come to accept our beloved’s flaws in addition to celebrating his or her positive attributes. This is also true of Israel. After more than 65 years of statehood, it is time for a mature relationship. This is not to say that the romance should end. Part of any educational project is to engender students with love of subject matter (Schwab, 1978, pp. 105–32), and there is much to admire about Israel. In addition to its physical beauty and historic ties to an ancient heritage that sits at the center of several civilizations, the relatively young state has accomplished much, endeavors to embrace high ideals in the face of extraordinary challenges, and serves as an important contemporary embodiment of the aspirations and destiny of the Jewish people. But this new phase should acknowledge Israel’s challenges as well as its accomplishments—not to diminish its legitimacy, but to maintain the relationship over time.
The New Israel Education

Responding to the need for a critical perspective, romantic sorts of Zionist inculcation are being replaced by new, more sophisticated, forms of Israel education, following the shift from mobilization to engagement. The former is associated with instruction about Zionist history and Israeli society in Diaspora Jewish schools, youth groups, and summer camps, too often in a simplistic or one-sided way. The latter is tied to informal education in which complex Israeli realities are encountered experientially, often through educational tours in the country itself. Since the new approach is rooted in a particular concept of criticism, it might be usefully understood in the context of several orientations to teaching ideology—networks of beliefs, customs, and values that govern portions of our lives, such as political or religious traditions—that are grounded in the previously mentioned concepts of criticism (Alexander, 2015, pp. 91–106).

One orientation to teaching ideology examines various political or faith traditions from a critical standpoint, in the cognitive sense of the term, from the “outside,” so to say, as might be seen in university courses that explore governmental systems or religious practices. Faith educators sometimes call this the phenomenological or nonconfessional approach to teaching religion; it entails instruction about religion. Yet, as I have argued, there are serious problems with both of the cognitive approaches to criticism that make it difficult, on these grounds, to clearly distinguish between education and indoctrination in the cognitive domain.

A second orientation seeks to transmit inflexible doctrines, customs, and norms, from “inside” of a political or religious framework, as it were, without subjecting them to rigorous examination according to external standards of one kind or another. Many faith educators refer to this approach as confessional religious initiation or inculcation in religion. It is often associated with indoctrination from a dogmatic normative perspective.

Given these difficulties with both instruction about and inculcation in ideology, a third attitude toward ideological initiation has emerged that offers a more balanced approach to criticism grounded in a dynamic approach to normative discourse. It seeks to foster a positive disposition toward particular defensible beliefs and practices, from the inside, while remaining open to hard questions about them raised by evidence from a variety of external sources based on alternative accounts of criticism, from the outside. Faith educators call this education from religion or openness with roots (Alexander & McLaughlin, 2003; Alexander, 2015, pp. 199–216). An analogue in political education might be seen in forms of citizenship education that favor so-called democratic values, on the one hand, while raising challenging questions about various forms of democratic governance, on the other. The new concept of Israel education follows this third approach. We might call it education concerning Israel from a Zionist point of view, of which there
could be a variety of interpretations, as opposed to *inculcation in Zionism* or *instruction about Israeli society*.¹ It presumes a positive disposition toward the idea of a Jewish and democratic state, but takes what I call the mature, as opposed to romantic, view that, like other human societies, this state may be flawed in a number of ways.

Advocates of the new approach argue that the older more romantic orientation, associated with *inculcation in Zionism* or *instruction about Israeli society*, is often too didactic; it frequently avoids critical examination of complex issues, according to one or another interpretation of criticism. This can too easily slide into indoctrination by advancing a naïve ideology that presents only one side of a multifaceted story. The new approach promotes engagement, rather than disenchantment, with Israel's complex realities, by providing opportunities to connect with them on the learner's own terms. This encourages learners to make meaning in addition to receiving knowledge, the argument continues, in order to integrate Israel into their personal Jewish narratives (Chazan, 2003; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Raviv, 2013).

This way of framing this new Israel education is problematic, however, if criticism is conceived first in cognitive terms. Tying instruction concerning Israel's complex realities to personal narratives could yield interpretations of relevant data that are inconsistent with one another or that do not reflect the requisite attention to oppression or unequal distribution of power. This would make it difficult to articulate cognitive critical criteria to distinguish education from indoctrination, which should in all events be grounded in scholarship. But, as mentioned previously, it is not a straightforward matter to discover the critical criteria for a genuinely educational Israel curriculum in the scholarly study of Israel. Leading trends in Israel studies offer conflicting and sometimes incoherent pictures of the very data suitable for inquiry, let alone the methods and purposes for analyzing them, and some of this scholarship even challenges the very legitimacy of the subject matter in which students are ostensibly to be educated. This may be one reason why a recent study of North American Jewish day schools found the lack of a cohesive curriculum for Israel education based on up-to-date information on contemporary Israel (Pomson, Wertheimer, & Hacohen-Wolf, 2014, p. 3).

The crucial question is whether, understood primarily as making sense of complexity in cognitive terms, Israel engagement can ever be considered education rather than indoctrination. Without an Archimedean point against which to assess multifaceted data or a total absence of domination that does not devolve into a new form of domination in its own right, there

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¹Why, it might be asked, the suggestion that the new Israel education promotes a “Zionist” rather than simply a “Jewish” point of view? This approach, after all, seeks to position Israel within the search for a meaningful Jewish identity. The identity in question, however, emphasizes an attachment to the Jewish people. This emphasis is best captured by the Zionist terminology, it seems to me, which encompasses cultural and political aspects of Jewish affiliation that may or may not be religious.
would appear to be no account of the “real” Jewish state that could meet uncontroversial principles of inquiry into which it is possible to positively initiate learners. Whatever the advantages of this emphasis on complexity and meaning-making over a more straightforward conception of knowledge transmission, conceived cognitively it does not resolve this basic dilemma, since a critical perspective would appear to require distinguishing gradations of fact from fiction, or equality from inequality, according to some defensible criteria, and it is precisely these criteria that seem to be missing in the scholarly trends in the field.

Criteria for Distinguishing Education from Indoctrination

In addition to it requiring a critical attitude, philosophers also tend to agree that education involves initiation into worthwhile knowledge. If academic knowledge cannot on its own provide cognitive standards to critically assess rival narratives, perhaps we should turn to what it would mean for that knowledge to be worthwhile, or to use an expression more common among Israel educators, what it would mean for a narrative to be meaningful (Alexander, 2015, pp. 141–160). Meaning, in this sense, is first a normative category, relating to stories worthy telling, from which our cognitive understandings flow; and assessing the merit of such stories requires that a person comes to identify with strong values that emanate beyond the self—in community, history, nature, or God (Taylor, 1991, p. 40; Alexander, 2001, pp. 141–142).

This analysis also holds for an approach to Israel education that is tied to scholarship. Understanding complex realities that are contested and constructing personal stories based on those understandings may require prior initiation into one or another collective narrative as a framework for interpretation. To reference Barry Chazan’s response to Alex Sinclair’s recent analysis of the concept of complexity in the field (Sinclair, 2014a, 2014b; Chazan, 2014), Israel education is not simply complex, in the cognitive sense of the term; it involves engaging Israel as a positive value as well, from a Zionist point of view as part of a normative vision of Jewish life (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003).

But unless it is possible to differentiate between more and less desirable narratives, conceiving meaning primarily in normative terms will be no more successful at distinguishing Israel education from Zionist indoctrination than the alternative cognitive account that grounds criticism in objective knowledge or attention to power. Distinguishing between narratives that are better or worse from a normative perspective requires differentiating those that are dogmatic from those that are dynamic. The former repel change and counterargument; the latter embrace the best available formulation of ethical and political ideals as we are given to understand them for now, subject to
The distinction between dogmatic and dynamic narratives centers around what I have called the conditions of human agency: that people have the freedom within reasonable limits to choose their beliefs and behaviors, the intelligence to tell the difference between better or worse according to some conception of these notions, and the capacity to err in belief and practice. This notion is essential to scholarship in the human sciences and to education grounded in that scholarship. In the absence of an objective “view from nowhere,” scholarship in the human sciences must begin with a normative “view from somewhere,” grounded in these conditions and subject to later revision based on dialogue with alternative viewpoints (Nagel, 1986; Alexander, 2015, pp. 39–52). Were students not free to choose whether to study such a normative view, capable of understanding basic moral distinctions relevant to that view, and equally capable of misunderstanding or misapplying them, it would make no sense to speak of education in meaningful knowledge, because it would be impossible to understand what it could mean for the scholarship in which that knowledge is rooted to be meaningful. What conceptions of education grounded in scholarship share in common, therefore, is a commitment to the conditions of human agency, and the moral problem with indoctrination is that it undercuts those conditions, which are required for normative judgments to make sense altogether. If scholarship-based education entails nurturing the awareness of the moral potential inherent in each person, indoctrination involves undermining that potential by denying access to the conceptual and emotional tools necessary for its realization (Alexander, 2015, pp. 100–101).

Dogmatic narratives resist human agency, whereas dynamic narratives embrace the freedom, intelligence, and fallibility of human agents (Alexander, 2015, pp. 91–106). The one is prone toward nondemocratic indoctrination, the other to democratic education, in what Karl Popper (1954) called closed as opposed to open societies. The former is prone toward the restrictive attitude that Isaiah Berlin (1969) called positive freedom—the idea that to be truly liberated one must embrace a particular point of view, the other toward Berlin’s liberal-leaning negative concept of liberty—the idea that one’s actions or beliefs should be constrained only to the extent that they interfere with the freedoms of others.

It is possible to educate, not merely indoctrinate, from a Zionist viewpoint, therefore, through experiencing Israel’s complexities in search of personal meaning, provided the interpretation of that ideology is dynamic and open to dialogue with alternative views, based on the conditions of human agency. Similarly, it is possible to distinguish between narratives that are more or less worthwhile, based on an account of what it means for something to be worthwhile, so long as that account is also prepared to engage alternatives in dialogue grounded in the same conditions. Yet in their most...
exclusionary forms, the frameworks for teaching Israel grounded in the leading approaches to Israel studies are no better at establishing normative than cognitive criteria for assessing narratives. Rather, they tend to undermine one or another of these conditions; one because it is too particularistic leading to inculcation in Zionism, the others because they are too universalistic leading to one form or another of instruction about Israel from an overly rigid or one-sided point of view. Let us turn now to an assessment of the major trends in Israel studies to see why this is so.

ISRAEL STUDIES AND ISRAEL EDUCATION

Three approaches to Israel studies in which Israel education might be grounded are especially influential today: national republicanism, critical social theory, and liberal rationalism—one justifying the idea of a Jewish nation-state in historicist or religious terms, another critical of Israel due to unequal power relations, and the third focused on objective facts about Israel and the embrace of universal values. The first two trends are tied to right- and left-leaning counter-Enlightenment orientations, according to terms coined by Berlin (2001), and the third to the so-called Enlightenment project. In their most nondialogical forms, each is subject to Berlin’s critique of positive liberty, which challenges the idea that to be free or have rights one needs to embrace a particular point of view, and hence they are in conflict with one or another of the conditions of ethical discourse—the first view because it is too parochial, the others because they are not parochial enough. However, more inclusive versions of these perspectives, conducive to what Berlin called value pluralism, that are prepared to engage one another in dialogue, can form the conceptual basis for a mature Zionism in which to situate scholarship that can be translated into a critical engagement with Israel that is genuinely educational (Berlin, 1969). I will consider each of the trends in turn before presenting my alternative.

Republican Nationalism

Although themes associated with Zionism reverberate throughout the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic law and lore, the modern movement took shape largely under the influence of 19th-century romantic nationalism. This constitutes a second sense of the term “Romantic Zionism,” which lies within the framework of what Berlin called the counter-Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers such as Immanuel Kant based political association on the autonomy of individuals capable of grounding choices in universal reason (Kant, 1989, 1997). Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, such as Johann Herder conceived political community as rooted in feelings of
belonging nurtured by particular customs, cultures, and languages (Berlin, 2001). This romantic revival of republicanism charged the state with advancing such communities, which have often been understood as the ultimate embodiment of historical human progress (Hegel, 1967, 1977). Zionism, in this view, is grounded in the intense feelings of belonging to the Jewish people which, like every other nation, possesses its own land, culture, language, history, destiny, and, for some, also faith.

Republican nationalists all share a belief that an account of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people is justifiable, but they divide into two different branches that defend it on different sorts of grounds—one rooted in historicism, the other in religion. Secular republicans have often sought evidence for their views in biblical history (Kaufmann, 1972), historical archeology (Sukenik, 1955; Mazar, 1975; Yadin, 1966), or history of Zionism (Laqueur, 2008; Sachar, 2007). This view offers a nationalist interpretation of the messianic idea according to which the liberation of the Jewish people is achieved through human reason acting in history. Those with a religious bent have understood national redemption as the harbinger of Divine redemption, often grounded in the mystical writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (2006).

Unfortunately, both branches breach the first and third conditions of human agency: freedom and fallibility. They reduce freedoms afforded minorities and limit critique to a relatively narrow set of values that would be unlikely to expose deficiencies in the very state established to advance those values. The upshot is that educational institutions influenced by republican Zionism, secular and religious, in Israel and abroad, have often resisted criticism of Israeli society. On its own, this can lead to a closed or dogmatic account of Zionism that is more conducive to indoctrination than education and in which it is difficult to ground a critical approach to Israel education.

This is because, in their more exclusionary versions, both branches of republicanism tend toward what Berlin called a positive concept of liberty, according to which Zionism is concerned with a uniform national definition of identity that enables Jews to take control of their common destiny. Concepts of this kind often distinguish between a person’s actual self and some occult entity referred to as a “true” self, of which one might not be fully aware. A person’s empirical self may indeed feel free, it is argued, but his or her “true” self may actually be enslaved. Those who hold this view often feel entitled to ignore other peoples’ actual wishes, to dominate them in the name of their “real” selves, in the secure knowledge that they would choose such lofty goals as national liberation were they in touch with their otherwise submerged selves (Berlin, 1969, p. 133; Alexander, 2015, p. 113).

Along these lines, Karl Popper (2002) chided historicism for confusing the supposed necessary ends of history with the aims of a society and then remodeling citizens to conform to those ends, a problem to which the
secular branch of republicanism falls prey; and Gershom Scholem (1995) cautioned that both secular and religious interpretations of the messianic idea in Judaism, like other utopian ideals, can too easily be employed to justify oppression. Consider, for example, attempts to impose conceptions of the so-called “New Jew” on various immigrant communities in Israel regardless of whether or not they would choose such an identity (Gordon & Ackerman, 1984; Ackerman, 1991) or efforts to impose a messianic view of the Jewish return to the land of Israel on those who disagree.

Critical Social Theory

A second trend in Israel studies draws on critical social theory—Marxism, neo-Marxism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism—at the heart of which lies a universal concern for the coercive effects of power. A left-leaning form of counter-Enlightenment thought, this trend is sometimes associated with such terms as post-Zionism or the new history or sociology of Israel (Silberstein, 1999). For Marxists, abuse of power stems from inequitable distribution of control over the means of production, while for neo-Marxists it entails unequal access to cultural and ideological resources. According to the postmodern position, it is embedded in all human interactions and institutions, and following postcolonialism, it flows from the imposition of foreign hegemonies on indigenous peoples. The task of scholarship, in this view, is to deconstruct illusions in order to achieve equality, alleviate the burdens of power relations, or remove corrupt colonial influences (Alexander, Pinson, & Yonah, 2011, pp. 1–21; Harvey, 1990).

Most applications of these theories to the study of Israel cite inequalities among Jews and Arabs; between Ashkenazi Jews and other sectors such as Mizrahim, Russians, and foreign workers; or between men and women (Shafir & Peled, 2002). Some challenge prevailing interpretations of Israel’s military involvements (Pappe, 2007). Postmodern analysis raises hard questions about Israeli life by analyzing the many discourses of Israeli politics and culture, without necessarily drawing conclusions about the legitimacy of the Zionist project (Pinson, 2007, 2008). Marxist and neo-Marxist studies, on the other hand, seek to equalize power relations between these various groups, Jews and Arabs in particular, by arguing that Israel should become a multicultural state for all of its citizens in which Jewish culture does not benefit from its current privileged position (Sternhell, 1997; Al-Haj, 1995, 2004; Gur-Ze’ev, 2003). Drawing on postcolonial theory, yet a third approach holds that Israel is a colonial implant that oppresses native Palestinians to exploit local economic and cultural resources for the benefit of Western interests (Said, 1979; Pappe, 2014).

If the republican trend in Israel studies runs afoul of the first and third conditions of human agency (freedom and fallibility), critical social theory
conflicts with the second—the capacity to distinguish better from worse according to some account of these terms. By pointing out that liberation from one set of oppressive circumstances leads only to another, postmodernism itself reveals the flaw in both Marxist and neo-Marxist utopianism and postcolonial nostalgia. But postmodernism’s own idea that that all human interaction entails domination undermines faith in the accepted assumptions about social relations of which postmodernism is itself an integral part. We can be no more confident about postmodern critique, therefore, than we are of the assumptions it calls into question. They all reflect embedded forms of domination. It is impossible to distinguish between better or worse, in this view, according to any conceivable interpretation. Not only will any such account be suspect due to power interests, it will also call into question the very terms according to which we are asked to exercise suspicion.

One source of this difficulty in distinguishing better from worse lies in the fact that many critical social theorists, like many republicans, embrace an exclusively positive concept of liberty. Freedom is available, in this view, only to those who are properly suspicious of injustice stemming from unequal access to power; and those with such access may be denied liberties on the grounds that, were their “true” selves not submerged, they would forfeit those freedoms voluntarily. But unequal access to power does not necessarily lead to injustice, and those with access to power should not necessarily give it up. To distinguish between the just and unjust exercise of power requires a theory of justice independent of existing power relations, which is only possible within the very conditions of human agency and ethical discourse undermined by the incoherence of critical social theory (Walzer, 2006).²

Approaches to Israel education that ground complexity in favorable consideration of critical social theory alone, therefore, are no less indoctrinary than those rooted solely in national republicanism, since social criticism undermines the possibility of a basis upon which to distinguish the merit of one narrative from another, such that fostering positive engagement with Israel, if acceptable at all, would be totally arbitrary.

Liberal Rationalism

A third trend in Israel studies draws on comprehensive or ethical liberalism, which is grounded in Enlightenment thought. Whereas counter-Enlightenment conceptions of reason, republican and radical, work toward or against utopia within history, Enlightenment reason lies outside of history in human consciousness. Enlightenment joins counter-Enlightenment

²Delegitimization of Israel that is grounded in critical social theory, therefore, often presupposes that Jewish sovereignty is unjust in the nature of the case, since it allocates power to a particular national culture, not to the egalitarian masses (Alexander, 2012).
thought in embracing one or another form of absolutism. Republicanism and utopian critical theory—Marxism, neo-Marxism, and postcolonialism—pursue an absolute end to history and postmodernism a total denial of that possibility, while liberal rationalism seeks gradual perfection of society through the implementation of a priori, but no less absolute, reason. Hence, the former deny any distinction between facts and values, since all facts are to be judged according to their congruence with one or another conception of utopia or anti-utopia. The latter, on the other hand, accepts such a distinction between objective social or historical facts and independent value judgments, on the one hand, and universal standards of justice and moral duty, on the other, grounded in one account or another of universal reason (Weber, 1946, pp. 77–156).

According to this approach, empirical facts can be established about Israeli society and history based on an assessment of textual and other relevant sources, ostensibly independent of values or power interest (Eisenstadt, 1967; Stein, 2011; Rabinovich, 2007; Shapira, 2012). It follows, however, that a democratic state that privileges a particular people or culture is deficient, since any truly liberal state must be grounded in universal standards applied to all citizens equally (Pedhazur, 2001; Smooha, 1997). The distancing of younger American Jews from Zionism may be grounded in this view. The universalism believed to guide the politics of American liberals has little room for a republic that privileges a particular national culture.

This view conflicts with the third condition of human agency, that one’s most basic assumptions could be mistaken. Epistemologically, it succumbs to the false idea that human conduct can be examined on the basis of value-neutral techniques unchecked by the contingent realities of history, language, and culture in which they are embedded (Oakeshott, 1962). Politically, universal foundations of liberal justice cannot withstand criticism according to the very criteria they propose to apply elsewhere, since each presupposes the very account of rationality upon which it relies. This results in a vicious circle, commonly known as the fallacy of presuming the consequent, from which there appears to be no escape (Alexander, 2001, pp. 18–21). Additionally, by imposing liberal toleration as a universal ideal, this approach limits the very pluralism it presumes to endorse, since accepting a particular account of the public welfare becomes a precondition for full participation in democratic life (Gray, 2002). Following this line of thought, Berlin’s reservations concerning the excesses of positive liberty were addressed no less to the liberal idea of universal ethics than to the republicans and the radicals (Alexander, 2015, pp. 114–115).

On its own, therefore, an interpretation of liberalism that calls for Israel to become a state of all of its citizens, without any special connection to the Jewish people, cannot ground a non-indoctrinary form of Israel education. The idea of a universal standard of justice and the consequential neutral liberal state that can serve as a criterion for what is to count as legitimate
democracy has not been, and in all likelihood cannot be, demonstrated. Like republicanism and critical social theory, this account of liberalism requires professing positive beliefs about the nature of a just society as a precondition for liberating one’s submerged but “true” self, achieved through the full complement of citizens’ rights, whether or not one’s actual self would choose those beliefs.

MATURE ZIONISM: LIBERAL NATIONALISM AND ISRAEL EDUCATION

If leading Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment forms of criticism are equally problematic, how is such a critical orientation to the study of Israel in which to ground education even possible? One answer can be found in Berlin’s robust value pluralism, which seeks to balance these tendencies. In this view, human life is organized around a variety of historically contingent and often incommensurable cultures, and the task of liberal theory is to conceive a modus vivendi for people of deep difference to live together in peace. William Galston (2002) has called this “diversity” as opposed to “autonomy” liberalism. Neither republican nationalism, nor critical social theory, nor liberal rationalism have a privileged status on the basis of which to assess Israel’s successes or failings, in this view, since these trends are all embedded in contingent historical traditions. This is not to say that we have nothing to learn from them, but that examination of Israel needs to consider a variety of rival perspectives. Learners need to understand the lenses through which we view Israel’s complexities, not only the complexities themselves.

I propose a mature Zionism to frame the study of Israel in which to ground Israel education, therefore, based on value pluralism and diversity liberalism. In this view, Jewish identity entails association with a political community in possession of a national culture that is tied to various interpretations of the Jewish faith, but not merely, or for many even primarily, a religious attachment. Four normative consequences follow from this assumption: (a) Like other political communities, Jews have an inalienable right to differentiate themselves from others through cultural self-definition, as members of a historic people that is heir to a unique civilization, and to both advance and defend their collective interests through political self-determination; (b) this right makes the most sense within a liberal democratic regime that guarantees, among other liberties, the freedom of expression to publically express concerns of all kinds, including about social inequities; (c) also like others, each Jew has the right to live in dignity and free of hate, so criticism of Israel should not rehearse anti-Semitic themes; and finally (d) like members of other polities, Jews who seek a connection to their heritage, especially, though not exclusively, in its formulation as a national culture, can benefit from engaging constructively with the nation-state that seeks
to embody, advance, and defend the collective aspirations of the Jewish people—namely, the State of Israel.

The Right to Self-Definition and Self-Determination

People construct their identities in the mirror of heritages bequeathed to them or with which they choose to associate (Oakeshott, 1989). The very idea of human agency is dependent upon a cultural inheritance, therefore, without which people would be at a loss to figure out who they choose to be. To participate intelligently in public deliberations, liberal states require citizens to define themselves in dynamic interaction with one or more of such inheritances as sources of opinions and judgments. Without a right to cultural self-definition it is difficult to conceive how one could talk of any other rights altogether, since the very idea of human rights is itself grounded in a tradition with which citizens may choose to identify.

For individuals to fully define themselves, however, they require expression of their language, customs, and values in significant aspects of public life, not merely in the private domains of family, worship, or voluntary association. Hence, the individual right to cultural self-definition is inexorably tied to a collective right to political self-determination (Tamir, 1995). Control of relevant arenas of the public domain can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including limited cultural autonomy within a larger political majority, such as the Amish in the United States; or in a binational state, such as the Flemish and the French in Belgium; or through the sovereignty of a national culture within a particular state, such as in the Scandinavian or many other European republics. The right of a group to claim sovereignty in a particular land depends on its historic relation to their culture and their ability to govern according to a reasonable conception of justice that acknowledges the rights of all.

According to this line of thought, the Jewish people can claim the right to sovereignty in the land of Israel provided one or another interpretation of Jewish culture serves as a crucial context within which a significant number of Jews define themselves and that key components of that culture were crafted in or have lasting ties to that land. This is precisely the claim in the opening of Israel’s Declaration of Independence: “The Land of Israel, Palestine, was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first achieved independence, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”

But Jews are not the only people who lay historic claim to this land. A similar claim is made by Arab peoples who lived there for centuries, and who have coalesced during the past several decades as Palestinians. To be consistent, according to this view, any Jewish claim to sovereignty in the land
of Israel must also acknowledge the rights of all citizens within the Jewish state as well as the analogous right of Palestinians to their own national sovereignty in that land. The former is acknowledged in the same declaration, when it states that Israel will “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” The latter is expressed in the idea of “two states for two peoples,” which was behind the original United Nations partition plan, one version or another of which has been endorsed by every government of Israel.

The Demands of Justice and the Right to Free Expression

The strongest moral claim to a Jewish state is democratic, since individual rights make the most sense within the framework of liberal democracy. But neither a universal nor an exclusively ethnic concept of democracy will suffice. The right to self-definition is undermined by the universal view, since it limits choice to those that conform to one or another account of rational autonomy. The right to self-determination is challenged by the ethnic view, since sovereignty depends on the political will to govern according to a conception of justice that grants equal rights to minorities, not only the capacity to rule over territory. A dialectical conception of liberalism is required that negotiates tensions between individual demands, on the one hand, and those of the majority and minorities, on the other. Yuli Tamir (1995) has called a view that balances individual and collective rights, liberal nationalism; I call it liberal communitarianism (Alexander, 2015, pp. 161–178). Grounded in Berlin’s (1969) value pluralism, it is the political theory behind the vast majority of liberal democracies in the world today.

Like every other liberal democracy, Israel’s ideals are tested every day by messy realities and sobering circumstances. However, societies that fail to adopt policies and practices that serve the cause of justice according to some reasonable interpretation run the risk of losing the support of their own citizens, if not also the respect and collaboration of friends and allies around the world. It is the obligation of democratic citizens, both at home and abroad, to keep vigilant watch to ensure that their own societies and others with which they have an affinity live up to high ethical standards and to speak out publically when these standards have not been met.

Yet the proper response to unfair criticism is more, not less, critique of the very views that fail to take the complexity of Israel’s circumstances fully into account. Hence, it is likewise the obligation of every democratic state to guarantee free expression for all of its residents so that public debate concerning even the most controversial issues will be ensured. As a democratic state, Israel should not insulate itself from such criticism, and as a matter of fact, though there are those who would curtail public debate, for the most
part Israeli laws and customs ensure a vibrant and open discussion of almost every issue imaginable.

If according to some reasonable account, the Israeli government, or some element in Israeli society, does not live up to relevant demands of justice, it follows that the government or society should rectify the situation, not that Jews have no right to self-definition and self-determination (Alexander et al., 2011, pp. 256–258.) Injustices threaten the vibrancy of any democracy. Israel should not be singled out for special treatment or held to standards other than those demanded of similar states, but neither should it be protected from critique on the basis of reasonable standards of justice to which other similar states are held to account. Conceived thus, criticism is an act of loyalty, and its suppression undermines the democratic foundations of the state.

Some Jews living outside of Israel are concerned that any discussion of its flaws will be used against the Jewish state. Following an age-old attitude, they suggest that Jews should not air their dirty laundry in public. The right to free expression, they argue, obtains only for Israelis at home, not Jews abroad. It is reasonable to avoid the abuse of public criticism by those who seek to harm Jews or the Jewish state by taking one’s surroundings and audience into account when discussing Israel. From this it does not follow, however, that Jews around the world should keep silent in the face of perceived injustice. All countries are expected to honor the rights of Jewish and other minorities. No less should be expected of Israel. Not only is it naïve in this age of digital communication to assume that there is any dirty laundry about Israel that has not already been aired, the right to free expression and the obligation to publically debate controversial concerns are the very lifeblood of any democracy. It is as much a sign of loyalty for supporters abroad as it is for Israeli citizens at home to exercise their right to criticize.

The Right to Dignity and Freedom from Hate

The freedom to define one’s own identity, to seek sovereignty in order to express that identity in public, and to debate social and other policies are inalienable but not unlimited. They must be balanced against the right of all people to safety, respect, and dignity, and to live free from hatred and aggression. The right to self-definition does not entail a right to beliefs and practices that promote persecution; the right to self-determination does not entail a right to domination; and the right to free expression does not entail a right to defamation. When support for Israel becomes a platform for discriminating, dominating, or disrespecting non-Jews, minorities, or the disenfranchised, it oversteps the bounds of propriety and should be taken to task; and when criticism of Israel is used as a cover for denying Jewish rights or rehearsing anti-Semitic themes, it lies beyond the pale and should be challenged.
Which criticisms of Israel are anti-Semitic? Those that draw on ancient anti-Jewish prejudices—that Jews are clannish and hate non-Jews, lust after the blood of non-Jewish children, have inordinate or magical power with which they conspire to control the world, or are cursed to wander the globe without a home. Consider the assertions that Israel is an apartheid state on the model of Afrikaner South Africa; that Israeli soldiers target innocent Palestinian children; that Israel could resolve the Palestinian conflict if it only made one decision or another, as if the Palestinians bear no responsibility whatsoever; or the total denial of historic connections between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Claims of this sort are not fully protected by the right to free expression because they violate the rights of others to live in dignity and free of hate. The point is to criticize, not legislate, by calling out that those who delegitimize the Jewish state in the name of human rights are violators of the very rights they claim to profess and those who charge Zionism with racism are themselves guilty of racism. Critiques of this kind are sometimes met with the assertion that they silence the critics of Israel. This is a false accusation. Exposure of cultural stereotypes and prejudices should silence expressions of hate, not all criticism of Israel, since disrespect of this kind has no place in the public discourse of a decent society.

Reengaging Israel

If Israel is so ridden with complexity and controversy, why continue to engage it at all? I offer three reasons: one is tied to inalienable rights, the second to Jewish peoplehood, and the third to cosmopolitanism.

First, learning of inalienable rights is intrinsically worthwhile, just as defending them is an obligation of all people of goodwill. If Jews have no claim to national culture and political sovereignty, no one has such a claim, including Palestinians. To defend these rights for Jews is to defend them for all, and to deny them to Jews undermines the very idea of human rights for everyone. Also, denying Jewish political and cultural rights marginalizes Jews who seek a positive relationship with Israel by limiting the avenues of self-identification available to them. For one group to control the ways in which another chooses to be recognized is a classic form of domination.

Second, many Jews today identify more with the history, culture, or destiny of the Jewish people than with its religious faith. Religion is often a source of division within contemporary Jewry. Israel, on the other hand, though by no means a source of unity, remains a salient symbol of the Jewish people at this time, among Jews and non-Jews alike. Those seeking a

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3By the same token, to deny the rights to self-definition and self-determination, as in the campaign to boycott, divest from, or sanction Israel (BDS), is a violation of basic freedoms that are the inheritance of every human being.
connection to Jewish life in one of its most compelling current expressions, therefore, should give serious consideration to constructive engagement with Israel. This is not to say that engaging Israel is the only path to identifying with Jews or Judaism, or to dictate the form such an engagement might take. Jewish life is sufficiently varied and multifaceted to allow for a wide variety of attachments, both in Israel and abroad, and as I have been at pains to argue, engagement does not entail agreement. Rather, an attachment to Jews or Judaism that ignores or rejects Israel distances itself from an important form of identification chosen by the majority of Jewish people in the world today.

Finally, many people have embraced another, dare I say, romantic notion today that “we are the world.” It is possible, in this view, to conceive an entirely cosmopolitan identity devoid of all national, ethnic, cultural, religious, or tribal affinities, which are seen as toxic rather than transcendent. Such an extreme view falsely homogenizes all human distinctiveness into a single—usually secular—identity by denying the most salient discovery of contemporary life—that fundamental fact of pluralism. Rather than celebrating the diversity of human existence, this radical interpretation of cosmopolitanism tends to force people into a uniform mold that undermines opportunities for uniqueness, creativity, and moral sensibility—all of which are best discovered in the mirrors of heritages to which we are heir and through which we choose to create and recreate ourselves. Mature Zionism acknowledges a more measured cosmopolitanism, which holds that our common humanity is discovered in the many ways that we are different from one another.

**CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGY OF DIFFERENCE AND ISRAEL EDUCATION**

How then is it possible for Israel education to consider complexity and criticism grounded in academic research, given that the relevant scholarly trends may not provide a clear critical stance on which to base this critique? And, how is it possible to educate toward a positive engagement with Israel, given that the scholarship-based criticism this education requires may raise hard questions about the very idea of a Jewish and democratic state? At least four consequences follow from the foregoing analyses that allow us to address these questions.

First, all education, worthy of the name, entails initiation into an articulate and defensible normative point of view. Israel education is no exception. However, this process of initiation constitutes an instance of education, as opposed to indoctrination, to the extent that this normative perspective is dynamic as opposed to dogmatic, to the degree that it embraces the conditions of human agency: the freedom of scholars, teachers, and students.
to choose a vision of the good life, to understand basic moral distinctions according to that vision, such as the difference between better and worse or right and wrong, and the capacity to err in their understanding and application of those distinctions. Applied to Israel education, this analysis yields what I have called a mature Zionist perspective. This perspective maintains the legitimacy of a Jewish and democratic state according to multiple interpretations of the Zionist idea, provided they appreciate Israel’s complexities, based on a critical engagement with concrete realities, grounded in a fair assessment of the relevant scholarship.

Second, all education, therefore, involves initiation into what might be called a narrative of primary identity, in which one learns to situate one’s moral compass, as it were—the criteria according to which one can assess the meaning and purpose of one’s own beliefs and practices, as well as those of others. By the same token, Israel education from a mature Zionist perspective needs not only to consider information grounded in the relevant disciplines of Israel studies, but to do so in pursuit of a meaningful personal identity. Experiential Israel education has an especially important role to play in this connection, since it offers a variety of pathways for learners to seek meaningful connections to the realities of Israel as part of their own personal stories.

Third, to maintain a critical perspective without an Archimedean viewpoint from which to assess multifaceted data or a total absence of domination that does not devolve into another form of domination in its own right, initiation into a dynamic narrative of primary identity, such as one or another interpretation of Zionism, is not sufficient. A critical attitude also requires a willingness to engage alternative, even rival, orientations in dialogue. Such an attitude is achieved, in this view, in conversation among perspectives associated with identities to which one is heir or with which one chooses to affiliate, from the inside, as it were, and alternative, even rival, orientations, from the outside, so to say.

Complexity in Israel education may be grounded in any of the scholarly trends discussed here, therefore, provided alternatives are also considered that raise the difficulties entailed in each. This could include, for example, (a) contrasting the republican narrative concerning the establishment of the Jewish state with postmodern accounts of the so-called Palestinian catastrophe or liberal calls for a state of all its citizens; (b) weighing arguments for and against expanding Israeli settlements in what some call the West Bank and others Judaea and Samaria; or (c) considering various perspectives on relations between Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazim and Mizrachim, veterans and new immigrants, or women and men in Israel or strategies used by the Israeli Defense Forces to respond to missile attacks by Hezbollah in the north or Hamas in the south.

Fourth and finally, dialogue of the sort advocated here is not unrestricted. Each position should be subjected to relevant critique from...
alternative vantage points, but participants in the discussion should not be
allowed to deny the legitimacy of one another’s positions or to discount a
colleague’s affiliations or identities. Such a dialogue should not, for example,
include perspectives that deny the right of Jews or Palestinians to political
self-determination or cultural self-expression in their homeland, since these
lie outside the boundaries of human agency by limiting the freedoms of
others. In addition to a personal narrative in which Israel plays a mean-
ingful role, education in Mature Zionism also requires, at the appropriate
developmental stage, a critical literacy that enables learners to distinguish
perspectives that pursue dialogue from those that seek domination.  

Students learn how to discover problems in their own received narra-
tives or in the narratives they have chosen by viewing them from alternative
perspectives. They also learn how to discern difficulties in those alterna-
tives from the viewpoint of one another or from the position of the learner’s
primary or adopted narratives, all within the boundaries of human agency.
Following Jonathan Sacks (2002), I have called this the pedagogy of differ-
ence (Alexander, 2015, pp. 87–138). It is this sort of pedagogy that ought
to guide engagement with Israel from a mature Zionist perspective at the
appropriate level of development, inside and outside the classroom, in the
precollegiate education of Diaspora youth, if not also at the university level,
for Jews and non-Jews, in Israel and abroad.

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4The Palestinian catastrophe can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The most exclusionary versions,
such as those grounded in postcolonial theory or radical political Islam, lie outside the bounds of ethical
discourse because they call for Israel’s destruction. More inclusive postmodern accounts suggest that the
establishment of the state was accompanied by a cultural tragedy for the Palestinian people, without
denying the legitimacy of the Zionist narrative (see Gur-Ze’ev, 2008).


