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When Learning Moments Become Teaching Moments: Reflections of a Canadian Jewish Educator

Why a career in Jewish education?

I was born one year after the Holocaust in Europe and two years before the establishment of the State of Israel and spent much of my youth mourning and celebrating those two events respectively. I had the sense, though, that the great moments of twentieth-century Jewish history had passed me by and that my life would be lived as a passive object of that history, not as one of its writers. Indeed, as a student of Hebrew literature in my early twenties I was much influenced by Chaim Hazaz's short story, "The Sermon" (*ha-Drasha*), in which the anti-hero, Yudka, bemoans the fact that Jewish history is done to us. He claims we have become objects and, in his Zionist fervour, he yearns to be a subject.¹

My chosen career as a Jewish educator was my humble attempt to do Jewish history by teaching a new generation of Jewish youth about their rich heritage of languages, literature, values, and spirituality. My Canadian commitment to that goal was exemplified by directing and teaching in an experimental Jewish day high school in Toronto, founding and directing McGill's Jewish Teacher Training Program, directing Camp Ramah in Canada, and eventually directing Toronto's Board of Jewish Education.

In pursuit of such a career, I enrolled as a student in the joint program of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and Columbia University. The Teachers' Institute at JTS was an academic program designed to train Jewish studies teachers for Jewish educational institutions. Undergraduates in the Teachers' Institute had the option of a year's study at Mechon Greenberg in Jerusalem, a teacher training program sponsored by the Jewish Agency and named after Chaim Greenberg (1889–1953), an early Zionist activist and ideologue. While I had attended Zionist schools and camps, I had not yet been to Israel.

And so, in 1965–66 as I turned twenty, I spent a year studying in Israel. That year had a profound influence on the educator that I would become. What follows are some memories of that year interspersed with reflections on the impact of that year on my career as an educator. In 2016, I wrote an essay titled "5726 (1965–66) The Year that Changed My Life." It was a reflection, fifty years later, on that wondrous year of study. This essay draws from that earlier piece—later published in the *Canadian Jewish News*—and adds recollections tracing my move from learning to teaching, a dynamic that resulted in my career in Jewish education.²

My Israel experience started even before the program began. With limited financial resources, I funded the trip overseas by working on a luxury student tour of Europe and Israel. I was in charge of daily prayers and taking special care of a few of the more challenging students. The tour included two Mediterranean cruises, which meant that I arrived by boat. I have a very clear memory of my last night on that

Zim boat before the morning arrival in the port of Haifa. I thought of my mother, of blessed and wonderful memories, who had died a young woman just five years previously. She was a First World War orphan from Korets, Ukraine, who always spoke, and sometimes sang, lovingly about Israel. Some of my earliest memories are of her conversations with me about the new state. I felt I was making this trip for her, and openly cried on deck thinking about how much she would have wanted to see this place I was about to experience. Some Yiddish song about “What will you do in Palestina?” kept rolling through my head.

During the tour I ended up in the hospital in Tiberias for some minor surgery. There I came face to face with the gap between my diaspora Hebrew and the modern language of Israel. I had developed heartburn from all the medication I was given following the surgery. Not knowing the word for heartburn or indigestion, I exclaimed, *bo'er li ha-lev* (my heart is burning). The nurse and doctor came running, ready to take drastic action, and only some tricky gesticulations on my part calmed them down.

Until the age of fourteen, I had attended Toronto's Associated Hebrew Schools with its emphasis on *ivrit be-ivrit* and continued with private Hebrew studies while at a public high school. A constant emphasis on Hebrew literacy not only pervaded my early years at school but also at Camp Massad and Camp Ramah, and eventually at college. But the incident at the hospital highlighted the importance of the language when connecting with Israel and triggered the zeal with which I would pursue Hebrew studies that year.

While the Tiberias incident might have been the trigger, my increased mastery of the language that year was due to our Mechon Greenberg Hebrew instructor who was uncompromising in insisting that we students speak Hebrew when our natural tendency was to shy away from revealing our North American accents. We spent a great deal of time reciting words with an Israeli *resh*. My own progress in fluency inspired me in later years to emphasize the critical importance of Hebrew literacy. I'll state it here and again below: identity deals with the past and the present, while literacy provides a future.

In all my later years of educational work, especially at the Canadian Camp Ramah as director, I would not compromise on the place of *ivrit* in any pedagogic setting, formal or informal. Fluency, however, requires motivation. What can be accomplished, when there is real motivation, is exemplified by three moving encounters I had during my years with the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC): one encounter in Tunisia and two in the former Soviet Union.

On my first trip to Tunisia's island of Djerba, I met David Kiddushim. As a young man in the 1940s, Kiddushim had been introduced to Palestinian spoken Hebrew

upon meeting a soldier of the British Army's Jewish Brigade. Nobody in Djerba spoke modern Hebrew at that time and Kiddushim became fascinated by the idea of introducing it to the island. In pursuing that idea, he would become the Eliezer Ben-Yehuda of the island. Since the education of boys was strictly controlled by the local rabbinate, David decided to open a girls' school with all instruction in Hebrew. He started with Jewish sacred subjects but eventually added general subjects as well: all taught in Hebrew. An extension of that school still exists today and is, to my knowledge, the only day school outside of Israel with total Hebrew immersion in all subjects. The graduates even pass the Israeli *bagrut* (matriculation exams). As a result, most Jewish women in Djerba speak fluent Hebrew. Kiddushim's excitement about spoken Hebrew and his motivation to introduce it to the island has had a profound impact on the lives of those women and their connection to Israel and the broader Jewish world.

In the nineties, I was in Moscow interviewing candidates for a Jewish education program at the Hebrew University that was jointly sponsored by the JDC, the Jewish Agency, and Hebrew University. One of the candidates being interviewed was a woman from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The interviewers were surprised by the level of her Hebrew. An engineer in a factory, she told us that soon after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the plant manager announced that Russian would no longer be spoken at work. All future communication would be in Uzbek. It was a moment of self-recognition. She decided that if she were going to learn a new language, it would be Hebrew, and that day signed up for a Jewish Agency *ulpan*. The diligence with which she had applied herself was evident in the confidence with which she spoke Hebrew.

I visited many Jewish Agency *ulpanim* in Kharkiv, Novosibirsk, and elsewhere. One saw parents, grandparents, and children all in the same class. An American colleague of mine, visiting Kharkiv in 1990, asked a local Hebrew teacher how his newly acquired Hebrew was so much better than his own after many years of study in America. The answer was *בארץ לא לראית* (But you didn't learn in Kharkiv). In the nineties, counting ex-Soviet Jews both in the FSU and already in Israel, there were probably more people learning Hebrew than at any other time in the history of the Jewish people. For those preparing to emigrate, they were motivated by their upcoming aliyah, but there were some who simply wanted to reconnect with their lost culture.

In North America, where the motivation is not as strong, the challenge of teaching Hebrew was, and continues to be, greater. New pathways needed to be developed. Especially in those cases where fluency was not a realistic goal. In supplementary settings for example, I promoted the curricular option of Hebrew language culture rather than Hebrew speaking. Teach the students to read the Hebrew alphabet (in itself, a stumbling block) and then teach key words, songs, phrases from the Bible and *siddur*, Israeli slang, Israeli food, and some fascinating etymologies. But don't attempt

speaking or reading fluency with only a few hours a week with unmotivated students. If the students get a grounding in the culture of the language, they will be better equipped to achieve fluency, if so motivated, later in life. If, however, attempting the impossible frustrates them at an early age, Hebrew might be the one subject they never want to encounter again. In both day and supplementary school settings, and in informal settings such as camp, my own love of Hebrew motivated me to encourage and support creative pedagogic innovation in the teaching of Hebrew.

Mechon Greenberg was spread out over three locations in the Baka and Talpiot neighbourhoods of the Jerusalem of 1965. We studied on Rechov Shimshon, we ate on Rechov Reuven, and we slept in Pension Carmi on Rechov Ein Gedi. Our dormitory was the last house on the border of the no man's land that separated us from Jordanian Jerusalem. If your laundry blew across the fence, you didn't venture out to retrieve it. Our North American contingent of students arrived in September, the middle of the academic year for the South American students who were attending the *machon*. They studied all day at Greenberg. We spent half the day there and the other half at the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University.

There was some culture shock. The room I shared with an American student was so small that only one of us could get out of bed at a time. Hot water for showers was only available for a few hours on Friday, the idea being that a shower, once a week before Shabbat, was sufficient. In the Jerusalem winter taking a cold shower every day, as was our custom, was a challenge. Some of us learned to shower less and others devised complicated rituals involving kerosene heaters.

I had a Lambretta scooter, which I had purchased in Naples and brought over on my last boat trip of the summer. This gave me the mobility to properly tour the small city that divided Jerusalem was in 1965. It also permitted me the odd road trip to Tel Aviv to visit a couple who had adopted me on that boat from Naples to Haifa. I had no family in Israel and that couple became my link to Israeli life since most of my time was spent with other foreign students.

My culture shock of 1965 in Israel reminds me of a course I took at Columbia with Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist. It was a course on cross-cultural communication and the sessions were demonstrations of both successes and failures in communicating information and values across different cultures.

My paper for that course was a tape of a *se'uda shlishit* program that I used to do at Camp Ramah for campers of all ages. We would set up dinner Saturday, late afternoon, in a separate dining room. The lights were dim. As Shabbat ended, I taught a *nigun* and told Hasidic (or neo-Hasidic) tales. I taped the program in my dormitory room without the requisite campers and used that as my course paper. It was cross-cultural communication, and I think I got a decent grade. It did involve a per-

sonal meeting with Professor Mead at her office in the Museum of Natural History: some more cross-cultural communication. She spoke of some work she did years earlier on the *mikva'ot* of Brooklyn.

In my first year of teaching (1968–69), I taught in both day and supplementary schools in Toronto. The principal of the afternoon school asked me to give a professional development seminar on teaching prayer. None of the teachers were Toronto-born. All of them were either Israelis (mostly secular) or Holocaust survivors (somewhat traditional). I decided to light the room with candles, set up incense, and begin the session by teaching them the Hare Krishna Hare Rama mantra. They mostly went along, but with some level of shock. I kept chanting until someone asked what was going on and what this had to do with teaching prayer. Hare Krishna is a form of prayer, just not ours. It might even qualify as *avoda zara* (forbidden worship), but that precisely was the point. *Kri'at shema* and the *Amidah* are as foreign to most kids in a supplementary school as Hare Krishna was to these teachers. The very first pedagogic fact one must appreciate on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday afternoon is the distance between the students and the curriculum of any Hebrew school. And all that was before social media. First recognize the gap and then strategize to bridge it by starting where the students are. That's some pedagogic wisdom I picked up from my own culture clash in Israel, from Margaret Mead, and from many classroom failures when I didn't take cross-cultural dynamics into account.

One bit of cross-cultural communication I picked up in post-Soviet Siberia became a challenge to my creative staff at Toronto's Board of Jewish Education. The Sunday schools that popped up across the former Soviet Union in the nineties weren't just for children. Parents would drop off their kids and then enter a classroom for their own Jewish education, a portal to all that had been denied them in Soviet times. In Toronto, we created the Mishpacha Institute, which encouraged Russian, Israeli, and native Canadian families to include themselves in their children's encounter with Jewish learning.

Of all the wonderful experiences I had in my year in Israel, what excited and motivated me the most was the high quality of teaching by the very best instructors in Jerusalem: teachers speaking Hebrew where it is the language of the street, not just the synagogue; instructors teaching subjects in the very land of their origin.

My studies at Hebrew University included a Bible course with Nechama Leibowitz. Her approach to text was based on close reading and profound respect for traditional exegesis along with an emotional attachment to sacred text, so different from the highly rational, scientific study at JTS, which I also valued for its intellectual integrity. It was Nechama who taught me that both were possible and that, indeed, the mix of cognitive analysis and emotional identification was a holistic perspective with which I could best identify. There were dramatic moments in her class when she would

reveal her innermost feelings and the depth of her connection to the text. Once, when teaching Exodus 6:2–9, where God tells Moses how he will deliver the Jews from their Egyptian enslavement and bring them to the land of Israel, she arrived at verse nine: “And Moses spoke thus to the Israelites, but they did not heed Moses out of shortness of breath and hard bondage.” She was visibly shaken by the fact that the Israelites could not heed the lofty words of God because of their hard work and their shortness of breath. She emphasized that *qotzer ruah* is not impatience as in modern Hebrew, but literally, shortness of breath or even emphysema, the disease of slaves. To this day, I love teaching that text to Israelis so that they can see the brutal etymology of a term they use so differently. And, over the years, I have found several new meanings in that text as I teach it again and again. In training teachers, I have used this text to discuss Moses’s pedagogy here at the beginning of his career as *Moshe Rabbenu*, our teacher. Perhaps his delivery of God’s message was not as effective as it might have been with more experience on the job. How does one, raised in Pharaoh’s palace, communicate with weak and tired slaves?

It was Nechama’s passion for the text itself and her innate pedagogic skills that inspired me in later years to search for ways that children could connect to the emotional content of the biblical narrative and not merely with the rational study of text. Years later, while composing the part of my doctoral work that I called “Midrashic Drama,” I was inspired by her combination of rational analysis and emotional identification.

“Midrashic Drama” was part of my doctoral dissertation at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. In my Ed.D. program I developed four models of Jewish learning (MOJLs) based on the work of Professors Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil in their book, *Models of Teaching*. My four MOJLs were Hevrutah, Midrashic Drama, Organic Hebrew, and M’korot, dealing, respectively, with peer coupling, biblical narrative, Hebrew in early childhood, and history via primary sources. Both at McGill’s Jewish Teacher Training Program and later at York University’s Jewish Teacher Education Program, I taught these MOJLs at retreats sponsored by those universities. Students in these programs not only benefited from the content of each MOJL, but also learned the lesson that each subject deserves its own unique pedagogy.

Midrashic Drama uses theatre improvisation games and exercises to expose the emotional content of a biblical story to children and teens. While studying Genesis Chapter 2, the creation of Adam and Eve, with one’s brain, there are improvisational exercises that open up the story to one’s heart. The same is true of the meeting of Jacob with his brother Esau in Chapter 33 of Genesis, along with many other biblical tales that have strong emotional content waiting to be experienced. The basic premise of the MOJL approach is that Bible is not arithmetic, and history is not Hebrew grammar. Each discipline has unique pedagogic models for teaching it effectively. As an educator I was looking for a way to enable students to connect emotionally to

the Biblical narrative at the same time as they were connecting to it rationally: the kinds of experiences I had in the classes with Nechama. Her close reading of the texts to reveal all possible meaning and nuance that the text alone provides, along with attention to earlier commentators who had a similar technique, inspired all my later teaching.

But there was something else about Nechama that inspired me throughout my career. It was her care and concern for each individual student. I learned the obvious lesson that a class of twenty-five students had twenty-six individual souls in it (including the teacher), each of which was unique. As difficult as it is to teach each soul with respect for its uniqueness, the attempt must be made. I came to see the unique in each as a form of *kedushah*, since I think the word *kadosh* is best translated as unique—better than sacred or holy. Perhaps one or two of those student souls might even recognize the uniqueness of their teacher's soul.

During one of my summers working at Camp Ramah in Muskoka, two girls in the oldest division had become rebellious to the camp and its program; impossible to discipline. There was talk of sending them home, and I decided to see what they were about. I met with them and they treated me like everybody else at camp: horribly. But I kept meeting with them, easy as it was, since they didn't participate in any camp activities, including compulsory Jewish studies classes. I finally found out that they loved music and that they had no access to a record player for records they had brought to camp. I found a portable phonograph and asked them to teach me about the music they loved. Since I had never developed a taste for popular music and knew nothing about the latest hits, I was pleasantly surprised at the quality of both the music and the lyrics. It was mostly Simon and Garfunkel. A relationship developed between them and me, and eventually they became reasonable campers, although still with attitude. After camp, one of them sent me the *Scarborough Fair* album as a gift. Hundreds of campers and dozens of counsellors, and each one is a unique story, a tale that is our responsibility to discover. Nechama had modelled that.

Professor Zwi Werblowsky taught comparative religion at the Hebrew University and was the dean of the Faculty of Humanities. He taught a seminar on Jewish mysticism. I was nineteen years old and had a total of only three semesters of college behind me, but I wanted into that advanced course. The other students were all older and had some background in the subject matter. When it was my turn to lead the seminar on an assigned topic, I asked permission to do so in English. Since all of the readings were in English and my spoken Hebrew was still elementary, it seemed like a reasonable request. At the next class, Werblowsky asked my fellow students for permission to have "Mr. Epstein speak to us in a language other than our holy tongue!" That Hebrew thing again! In spite of that remark, I could still appreciate the breadth and depth of Werblowsky's scholarship and was especially grateful for a field trip Easter eve to Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion to hear a traditional Easter Vigil service in Latin.

Werblowsky pointed out the chanting of *Shirat ha-Yam* (in Exodus 15:1-19) in Latin, as the Catholic Church came out of the mourning of holy week to the joy of Easter Sunday. Quite the *Motza'ei Shabbat* (end of the Sabbath) for a young Jew from Toronto.

I must also mention a specific room that also had a lasting effect on my own abilities as a student during my year in Israel. The Jewish Studies Reading Room at the National Library, on the Givat Ram campus, was where I became a real learner. I was not a natural reader, nor did I come from a family of readers. In both high school and my first years at college, I found it quite difficult to concentrate on assigned readings, and I showed little interest in novels. It was in that reading room, inspired as I was by the content of my courses, the pedagogy of my instructors, the obvious devotion to research I witnessed around me, and the help that I could get from scholars in the next seat, that I came to see myself as a student capable of real research. My Greenberg Talmud teacher was usually at the back of the room, working on his own doctoral research, but always willing to help. Nechama Leibowitz would enter, smile, and offer assistance. A few times she recommended articles that she hoped would broaden my scholarly perspective. That reading room became sacred to me, and I have visited it since with some degree of reverence. Several years ago, when I requested a meeting with Dr. David Weiss Halivni (z"l), I was pleased to meet him in the reading room at his customary seat. It was like a pilgrimage.

Needless to say, an educator must have interests beyond the four cubits of Jewish life. That Latin rendition of *Shirat ha-Yam* in Gregorian chant stuck with me. In subsequent years at college, I visited St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, a Trappist monastery, mostly to tape the music of their prayers. At the time, the chant was still in Latin. Trappist monks are silent except for prayer, and I was taken by the spirituality of the place. After one of my visits, a professor of mine at JTS seemed concerned about my newfound interest in another faith. I admitted that I wondered why we Jews didn't have a setting like the monastery where we could retreat into an oasis of spiritual reflection. His immediate response was that we do and it's the weekly twenty-five hours of Shabbat. To this day, I love church music: Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Armenian, and so on. Sometimes, other cultures can help one to appreciate one's own.

My openness to other environments was especially helpful in my JDC years in Morocco, most of the eighties. I was there first as a *conseiller pédagogique*, an educational consultant to the Jewish schools partially funded by the Joint. Later, I became the JDC resident country director of Morocco. Ashkenazi Jew that I am, I had to quickly learn a new Jewish culture and appreciate that I was living in a Muslim kingdom: two new realities for me. Music, food, languages, gestures—it was all new and fascinating. My work with the schools, youth groups, and camps could not be effective until I learned more about the history of the community, its unique culture, and its place in an Arab-Berber Muslim country.

JDC workers in the field bring their culture with them in their baggage and confront the other cultures they have come to assist. Conflicts occur. When I think back to the intellectual atmosphere of the Judaica Reading Room at the National Library in Jerusalem, I remember the tiny school library I established at one of the Jewish schools in Casablanca. Morocco was originally an oral/aural culture. The digital world has changed that over the last few decades, but in the 1980s there was less appreciation of the written word. Muslims prayed without a book and even Jews, who had much more to say in lengthy prayer than their Muslim neighbours, prayed mostly from memory. Memory was much greater than in our literate culture. While memorization had been rooted out of much Western education, I came to appreciate that the large bodies of information that the Moroccans had memorized gave them immediate access to and full ownership of the material that they could call on at will. I visited many homes in Morocco, even those of professionals, where no books existed. I learned a term new to me, *aliteracy*. *Aliterate* folks are those who can read, but don't. Their reading skills are limited by the lack of practice. Was I to impose a library with both novels and non-fiction on a culture that read very little?

JDC workers of that period were warned by our CEO, Ralph Goldman, to respect the culture and values of the host community we served. He would quote Exodus 2:14, in which a local Israelite slave in Egypt challenges Moses by saying, "ךָמֵשׁ יִמְרָ" (Who appointed you as our judge)? Goldman's *mi samkha* was always in my head and heart every time a conflict of values occurred. In the end, I did impose a library on one of the schools. I met with the teachers to explain how the library could be used in their daily teaching. The next morning one of the teachers came to my office to explain that most of the teachers I met with had never read an entire book. Eventually, the library came to be used, and in this case the imposition was warranted. In another situation, that of corporal punishment, my values were less respected. After a talk of mine on the subject, one teacher proudly asserted that he never hit a child for a wrong answer, only for bad behaviour.

All pedagogy is an imposition on the mind and heart of a student. Do children care if $2+2=4$ or if there's a difference between *osher* (happiness) with an *aleph* and *osher* with an *ayin*? New knowledge has to find its proper place in the inner world of students, or it will never get integrated and will be quickly forgotten. It's the obligation of the teacher to find a pedagogy that facilitates that transfer by bridging the gap with care and skill.

Gabriel Haim Cohen was my Tanakh teacher at the Machon. Gabi, as he was known by all, taught us some of the megillot and the Book of Jonah. He had mastered New Criticism, a literary approach to the Hebrew Bible that had us analysing the intricacies of biblical diction and grammar. In his Swiss-accented Hebrew, he was a teacher *par excellence*. I have been using his techniques ever since and recently completed a radical commentary on Esther that was originally inspired by his insights.³ I came to

know Gabi and his wife Nechama, and in later years as JDC country director in Morocco, I sent North African students to Mechon Gold, which he then directed. I even brought him to North Africa to lecture to the local teachers in a training seminar.

Gabi's teaching stayed with me throughout my career. When I ran an experimental high school in Toronto in the early seventies, I taught Tanakh among other subjects. I decided to teach a course on *Shir ha-shirim* (Song of Songs), but I had never studied the book in my own training. It was simple enough to apply Gabi's methods to a fresh text. With *Shir ha-shirim* there was the added exegetical adventure of exploring the literal text (*peshat*) alongside the rabbinic interpretation. My students were exposed to the poetic adventure of reading different meanings into one text. From teaching teenage students, I moved on to training teachers at McGill University, but I always maintained my own study of biblical and rabbinic texts. I could not faithfully instruct teachers how to teach Jewish texts without maintaining that discipline for myself, hoping my trainees would follow suit. Many did. Two of my former students, Professor Laura Wiseman and Dr. Dan Held, encouraged me to write this reflection on my career as a Canadian Jewish educator and on my modest contribution to the landscape of Canadian Jewish education.

Some years after my eighteen-year stint at the Joint, I was invited to Moscow to consult a group of actors who were transforming themselves into a Jewish theatre troupe. They were all professional actors who had recently come to identify with their Jewishness and their Judaism. They decided to merge their new enthusiasm with their acting careers. As it happened, they had already created a short play based on *Shir ha-shirim* and they asked me to teach the text in order to expand their understanding of the Song. Ever since my first encounter with the text while teaching it to those teens I mentioned, I had continued exploring it and had acquired an overflowing collection of books, essays, art, and my own notes on this tantalizing megillah. I was ready, but were the actors ready to be exposed to the original Hebrew with its challenges and secrets, and to interpretation that went way beyond the erotic *peshat*? Every time I introduced some verses, they recited them in Russian by heart and I recited the musicality of the original Hebrew. They were surprised to learn that the second verse of Chapter One moved from third person to second person, since that got lost in the translation. Was that a plea for intimacy, and how would that nuance be acted out on stage? I introduced them to meanings they could not easily decipher, and they taught me what a skilled actor can do with lines so beautiful, even in Russian. All thanks to Gabi Cohen.

When I tell people that Yehuda Amichai, Israel's greatest poet of the last years of the twentieth century, was my poetry teacher at Mechon Greenberg, there is some level of disbelief. But in 1965, Amichai was still struggling to earn a living from writing and teach he did. We surveyed a great deal of early Zionist poetry, the modern poetry of his contemporaries, and some of his own. We were fortunate to hear his poems read

by the author, and we came to appreciate his views on literature, religion, and politics. He taught us that modernity's rejection of religion was, at least, a recognition of religion as a force, but that an indifference to religion or an ignorance of its power was not feasible for him.

Every night God takes his glittering merchandise out of his showcase

holy chariots, tables of law, fancy beads crosses and bells

and puts them back into dark boxes

inside and pulls down the shutters: "Again not one prophet has come to buy."⁴

Years later when I stayed at the Inbal Hotel in Jerusalem, where Amichai swam daily, we renewed our relationship. I invited him to speak to my colleagues at the Joint, but by then his bitterness about certain aspects of Israeli society was overwhelming. I prefer to remember the young writer and his passion for all that was poetic.

I'm a bit of a poet myself. I enjoy composing sonnets, even though the only one that ever got printed was published in a running magazine!⁵ Teaching poetry with its sometimes-multiple meanings is a thrill. Students can give themselves the same licence of interpretation that we know from the ancient writers of midrash. I have, on occasion, told my students my version of how it came to be that a central message of *Parashat va-Yera* (Genesis, Chapters 18–22) is the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim* (hospitality), given that many more significant events take place in those five chapters: the destruction of Sodom and Gomora; Abraham's moral plea to God about that pending destruction; the miraculous birth of Isaac; the *Akeda* (Binding of Isaac); and so on. I imagine the following scenario many centuries ago. An itinerant preacher arrives in a village in the Galil. It is Thursday and the fellow has not eaten a real meal since the previous Shabbat, when he was fed well in another village. He enters the sole synagogue of the village and hopes someone will invite him home for dinner and a place to sleep. That doesn't happen; not Thursday eve, not Friday morning, and not even Friday eve for a Sabbath meal. When asked to preach Shabbat morning, the *parashah* (weekly Torah reading) being *va-Yera*, he decides to make the most out of Abraham's gracious hospitality in Chapter 18, verses 1–8, to remind the congregation of the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim*. The lesson caught on. Jewish poetry in the making. Providing students with a portal to their own interpretation gives them licence to Jewish creativity.

Wanting to encourage creativity and innovation in the teaching community, one of my first projects as director of Toronto's Board of Jewish Education (1999–2009) was a program for Jewish school teachers called Etgar (challenge). We offered a modest stipend to teachers who were interested in designing new curricular materials. A variety of exciting and innovative proposals were made and an external committee

of senior educators evaluated them for acceptance or rejection. One project was so successful that it required extra funding for eventual publication as the book *Telling Our Story: A History of the Jews in Canada to 1920*.⁶

Will I surprise you more by saying that Aharon Appelfeld was our prose teacher at Mechon Greenberg? Years later, when I used to encounter him at his favourite cafe in Jerusalem, I still saw the young Appelfeld, as so different from Amichai. Appelfeld's horrendous Holocaust years were etched on his face and on his soul. He was quiet, reserved, and shy. Already married, he invited us to his modest apartment for tea. He was thirty-five years old and had survived the Shoah, but he was already writing the masterpieces that made him one of Israel's most accomplished authors. We had no idea who this shy teacher really was.

Meshulam Tochner, an expert on Shai Agnon, taught us a course on the renowned Hebrew writer, who lived around the corner from our dormitory. We used to see Agnon at the local grocery store, but we never had the nerve to introduce ourselves. We once asked Tochner about Agnon's story, "The Handkerchief" and misunderstanding us, he quoted every reference to a handkerchief in all of Agnon's work. It was sad to learn that Tochner died before Agnon received the Nobel Prize in 1966.

All this talk of literature reminds me of a fresh responsibility at the Joint once we entered the USSR in 1989, and later, as we dealt with the Jews in the new countries of the former Soviet Union. For years the Joint had been funding a secret program called *Sifriyat Aliya*, Russian translations of Judaica and Zionist literature smuggled into the USSR via quiet partners in the operation. With glasnost and perestroika, it was now possible to expand the program, both in production of new material and enhanced, wider distribution. As JDC's director of Jewish education, I was given the challenge and the budget to do just that. We created small libraries of books that introduced new communities to their literary heritage and prepared many thousands for their new lives in Israel and elsewhere. We knew that Russians were avid readers. At conferences I witnessed books being consumed in one night. For some distant communities, these libraries were their very first portal into Jewish life. Working with the Israeli creators of *Sifriyat Aliya*, we added both a traditional and Reform siddur, the Bible, modern Hebrew literature, and most impressively, Judaica for Russian-speaking children. We added much colour to our children's books, in contrast to the drab Soviet texts we encountered. Our Russian-language animated books on Megillat Esther, the Haggadah, Shabbat, and the holidays were both eloquent and elegant.

At one point my staff and I met with one of our librarians, a recent Russian immigrant trained in Russian literature. We explained that we wanted to translate much more contemporary Israeli *sifrut yafa* (belles-lettres). Our librarian protested the use of that term. There are no Israeli belles-lettres! Only Russian and French literature qualifies for that term, she insisted. We laughed. She was serious. Some of the books

we produced and spread through the many time zones of the former Soviet Union are volumes of pride in my personal library.

Our small library preceded my first trip to Khabarovsk, in the Russian Far East. At a lunch with the leadership of the newly organized community, a woman toasted me and the JDC, thanking us for the books which she described as the first window into Jewish life for these Jews, very distant from Moscow or Kyiv. She identified the siddur as a prayerbook but wondered why we had inserted a Christian book inside the siddur. I explained that she was in error. They had been visited by a Jew for Jesus missionary, but we were not that. What was she talking about? She insisted that this short book of six chapters was too elegant, too noble, too humane to be Jewish. It must be Russian Orthodox. Finally, I determined that the book in question was, in fact, in the siddur after the Shabbat afternoon prayer service: *Pirkei Avot*. She and her colleagues were surprised to learn that the book was theirs, all theirs, and has been for a very long time. They found a diamond in the desert, and now they understood that they own it.

While the Mechon Greenberg year of study was sponsored by the Jewish Agency, not once during the year were we ever subjected to any form of propaganda, nor were we encouraged to make aliyah. What convinced me to link my life to Israel and eventually to make aliyah were two moments during that year. The first was a walk on Mount Zion, where I saw a Yemenite Jew working in a pit. We began to talk, both of us in halting Hebrew, and he asked me who I was. I explained in the negative that I was not Israeli as an excuse for the state of my Hebrew. And he said, "And am I an Israeli?" I realized that moment that my passport had little to do with who I really could be. The second moment was at Yad Vashem on Yom hashoah in 1966. We had been given tickets for the annual memorial ceremony, and in the midst of the proceedings, a contingent of soldiers from different units converged on a floor map of Europe, taking up armed positions on the sites of concentration camps. I was initially offended, thinking that such militarism had no place in such a ceremony. But in looking around me at other faces, some of which were surely those of survivors, I soon realized the significance of an army and a state that was formed too late to save millions of Jews. These two moments and the deep study of many forms of Jewish creativity linked me forever to both the Jewish people and its state.

The Birthright program that offers college-age Jews around the world a free ten-day trip to Israel is a success. Hundreds of thousands of young Jews have taken the trip and studies show that the experience does strengthen Jewish identity. Despite the fact that much of that identity will remain shallow for those participants who have not complemented the experience with some degree of Jewish knowledge, the Birthright team can be proud of their contribution to diaspora Jewish identity. The fear in the wake of the Pew Center's 2013 study, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," of course, is that if young Jews cease to identify as Jews, our numbers will decrease

rapidly through assimilation, intermarriage, indifference, and disaffection. These are the fears of those who are mostly concerned with “Jewish continuity,” the UJA slogan of past years. While identity is necessary, it is clearly not sufficient, and “continuity” speaks lamely of “more of the same.” Creative growth, a blossoming of the Jewish spirit, will not come from the “just Jewish” crowd. Deep literacy, a knowledgeable identification with our literature, history, and values—this is what is critical to the continuation of the creative aspects of Jewish civilization. Jewish identity without Jewish literacy is a dead end. Without literacy, Jews have no tools with which to transmit our culture and values across generations.

It is the combination of identity and literacy that will lead to pride and courage: pride in the history, values, literature, culture, and enormous achievements of our tiny people, and courage to create a better future for Jews and the wider world by continuing our track record of creative accomplishments. We have always been innovative in our adaptation to new circumstances. Our transition from slavery in Egypt to landowners in Canaan was the first major adaptation, and it became a primal lesson for future life-critical and transformative shifts: from captivity in Babylon to centuries of a full cultural and spiritual life in what is now Iraq; from a central faith, based on a sacrificial cult in Jerusalem, to a decentralized local religion flourishing in thousands of communities around the world; from a pre-Enlightenment isolated and insulated religion to a modern string of secular achievements in all the disciplines and arts of western civilization; and from a homeless nation suffering from the vilest forms of antisemitism and genocide to a thriving “start-up nation,” the State of Israel.

Young diaspora Jews could be attracted to long-term programs in Israel that promote literacy. Thousands of young people are already taking advantage of such programs, but the challenge is to both increase the numbers dramatically and to offer quality experiences that couple a variety of approaches to Jewish identity with profound Jewish literacy.

By combining the vivid memories of an exciting year of study in Israel with reflections on five decades of work in all aspects of Jewish education, I hope that I have successfully described the dynamic of how learning moments become teaching moments. My contributions to Canadian Jewish education at Toronto’s United Synagogue Day School and Beth Tzedec Synagogue, McGill University, Camp Ramah in Canada, Toronto’s Board of Jewish Education, and York University were fuelled by learning moments with extraordinary teachers in Israel and elsewhere. I must end by remembering an American mentor who, along with my other teachers and supervisors in Israel and elsewhere, modelled the learning-teaching dynamic: Professor Joseph Lukinsky (z”l). Rav Joe didn’t teach; he learned in front of his students. Throughout my career I endeavored to have my learning shape my teaching. I hope my students learned that trick.

1

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2

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