

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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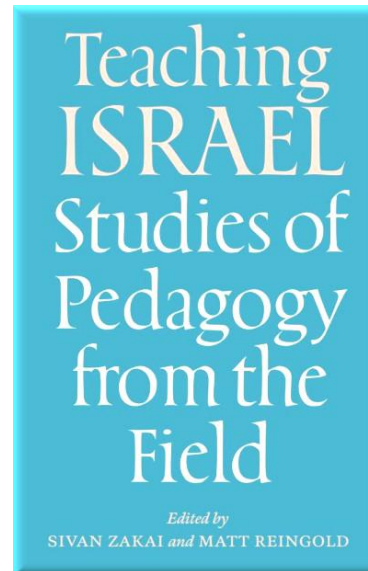
Zakai, S., & Reingold, M. (Eds). (2024). *Teaching Israel: Studies of pedagogy from the field*. Brandeis University Press.

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My concerns in writing this review of *Teaching Israel: Studies of Pedagogy from the Field*, carefully edited by Sivan Zakai and Matt Reingold, likely echo the concerns of some of the teachers either interviewed for or authoring chapters in this book. How can I possess enough knowledge to delve into such a complex topic in today's political climate? Given the timeline for publishing an edited book, this text, published in 2024, was surely written and ready for press before the full implications of the Hamas attack and hostage taking in Israel on October 7, 2023, unfolded. Thus, I have been plunged into studying a text about pedagogical approaches to teaching about Israel across a wide range of students, instructors, and milieux. While I will begin by stating that both the introduction by Sivan Zakai and the conclusion chapter by Matt Reingold are excellent in terms of giving structure, explanation, and meaning to the variety of chapters the reader encounters, including some focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the current existential threats to both Israel and Gaza could not possibly have been included. This has created a conundrum for me as a reviewer.



For many of the potential readers of this book, the questions are even more fraught: what shall I teach and how should I teach it? How will I help my students make sense of the current events they see on the television: the demonstrations, within Israel, both supporting and protesting government policy; the newspaper and social media articles condemning Israel, of all places, of genocide; protests on college campuses; in U.S. cities; and the rising tide of anti-Semitism world-wide. The curriculum expert's age-old question generally refers back to Herbert Spencer in 1875 here paraphrased as "What do I want my students to know and be able to do when they complete their studies?" has now become my focus for this review. What do the teachers in these chapters want their students to know, understand, value and be able to explain or defend when they are discussing the modern country of Israel?

Sivan Zakai states in her introduction: 1. Israel as a subject matter unites and divides (p.11), and 2. Teaching Israel as a political endeavor unites and divides (p.13). As the editor mentions, this can be true of many countries at this time in the world's history; however, Israel is acknowledged as a political lightning rod almost whenever the topic is mentioned. To approach the task of "teaching Israel," the editors have divided this text into four sections: Part I: The Reflective Teacher; Part II, Using student voices to examine teacher choices; Part III, Navigating the teaching of politics and the politics of teaching; and Part IV, When teachers learn. As stated previously, the range of students covered in these chapters is huge — from preschool through adult education. For example, the first chapter focuses on teaching about Israel as a case study in migration in a college setting with non-traditional students. One pedagogical tool the professor uses is to have her students draw maps of the Middle East. Not surprisingly, these maps vary widely not only both in terms of the territory mapped but also in terms of the names of locations on these maps. This small assignment opened students to intense discussions in class as to the veracity of these maps. The second chapter, authored by a professor at the Marine Military War College in Quantico, Virginia, focuses on Israel in terms of understanding strategic defense and military issues. There is also a chapter (8) on activism and identity, teaching about the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement in a college political science class. These together with discussions within chapters about teachers' reticence to even engage in this material was quite enlightening. The introduction, the conclusion and all 13 chapters in between have extensive reference sections that can be used by the reader for further research.

In fact, it is these very reference sections that I found quite interesting. As I read the references for each chapter, a very clear pattern emerged. I was able to quickly divide the references into sources that focused specifically on Jewish education, often the same or similar citations in each chapter, and those that focused on curriculum issues or what is commonly referred to as "best practice" in instruction. I was familiar with most of these latter sources and they do focus on instructional excellence. To illustrate, Chapter 10 focuses on a pre-school simulated trip to Israel that is apparently common to Jewish day schools and Hebrew or religious schools throughout North America (personal communication, Rabbi Debbie Stiel, September 2, 2025). The simulation reminded me of the *History Alive* program used by many social studies and history teachers in a variety of grade levels (<https://www.teachtci.com/>). The issues in this chapter focus on the fact that while the activity may have been fun for the students, the focus for the researcher was if the teachers had formulated learning objectives for this exercise and its developmental appropriateness to achieving these desired learning outcomes (see e.g., Tyler, 1949). This, as in several other chapters in the book, simply reveals best pedagogical practice regardless of subject matter.

Where the chapters become more complicated, they trend to older students, primarily high school age, involved in the study of Israel in their Jewish Day schools, community-wide Hebrew high schools or beginning college years. The problems these chapters bring into focus include student's Jewish identity given the political reality of Israeli law (Chapter 4); the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially today (e.g. Friedman, 2025; Vilk, 2025), and antisemitism in their public schools and on their college campuses. The point is made that some of the problems surrounding this teaching is that there is a huge range of feelings about these topics by teachers, parents, and

embodied in school curricular goals. There are many stakeholders and deep divisions within the respective communities. Navigating these curricular waters is quite difficult for teachers who are not even certain where they stand on some issues. Now they have been charged with leading class discussions and preparing class materials on a very controversial topic. Teaching controversial topics has always been a problem (Oliver & Shaver, 1966). It is crucial that the authors of several of these chapters note that it is important to be honest with young people when discussing controversial issues and truthful when answering their questions and challenges. Students know when a teacher is lying or obfuscating, and it creates alienation in the classroom. A focus on ensuring educative lessons and experiences is of extreme importance, especially on controversial topics (Dewey, 1938).

One suggestion is that even while centering on political events, it would also be helpful to add materials on culture (e.g., movies, books, and music) to help students understand that Israel is more than just a war-torn country; and Israelis have a vibrant culture that contributes to the world in science, technology, educational advances, medical research, and the like (personal communication, Rabbi Debbi Stiel, September 2, 2025). Chapter 7 on Kivunim, a gap-year program, is a wonderful illustration of these ideas. While the students attending this program are living in Israel, they must study both Hebrew and Arabic; and they travel widely both within Israel and to several Diaspora communities – Spain, Portugal, India, Germany, Eastern Europe – to learn to celebrate the diversity that comes with being Jewish and with Israel. As a sidenote, this chapter mentions the importance of Jewish youth learning Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people throughout the world. It occurred to me that rarely is conversational Hebrew taught to young people in America; they are taught “prayer” Hebrew to enable Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals. I spoke with my daughter-in-law, a Jewish professional currently employed by an organization trying to change this policy, and she confirmed that teaching conversational Hebrew would enable young people to engage with the music, movies, and the like that I mentioned above (personal communication, Sara Rostolder Mandell, August 12, 2025). Then students could read and understand for themselves about the complexity of issues in Israel.

Given that both of my grandchildren are in high school, have been to Israel on a 3-week vacation, attend a Jewish summer camp, and attend a community-wide Hebrew high school, I asked my daughter-in-law what she wants the children to know and learn about the current situation in Israel. Her answer was very clear: “When you love a place, you work to change it for the better. There are no excuses for current Israeli government policies.” I bring up this topic because one chapter is a discussion of teachers’ goal of having their students form a relationship with Israel. The author of this chapter questions whether anger at Israel for its current policy constitutes a relationship. That teacher, my daughter-in-law, and two Rabbis whom I interviewed agreed: Anger can be a legitimate response to the current situation and teachers must accept authentic responses from their students or trust will be lost. Thus, maybe an addendum, a supplement, or a Volume 2 is needed to address the current situation.

In conclusion, I found this book to be well researched, interesting, and most of the chapters well written enough to not make the reader feel bogged down in academic language. I learned many things as I read the chapters. I often found myself in the position of the teachers in the chapters: I did not know or understand enough to write

a cogent review. Hopefully, I solved this problem by undertaking a series of four personal interviews with knowledgeable people and a semi-structured list of questions. My wish is that this book does the same for those teachers either interested in or charged with teaching about Israel, i.e., that it helps them on their search for pedagogically meaningful experiences for themselves and their students.

The Book's Contents

Introduction (Sivan Zakai)

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2. Navigating Complexities: Teaching Israel Studies in the Professional Military Education Context (Amin Tarzi)
3. Voices on the Page and in the Room: A Pedagogy of Jewish Text Study in Israel Education (Joshua Ladon)

Section II: Using Student Voices to Examine Teacher Choices

4. Complex Texts and Complex Identities: Helping Students Navigate Personally and Emotionally Resonant Topics about Israeli Society (Matt Reingold, Alexa Jacoby & Benjamin Day)
5. Into the Intimate Discourse: Rachel Korazim as an Exemplary Israel Educator (Diane Tickton Schuster)
6. Knowledge, Connection, and Stance: Toward a More Enduring Israel Engagement (Jonathan Golden & Yoni Kadden)

Section III: Navigating the Teaching of Politics and the Politics of Teaching

7. Cultivating Critical Inquiry about Israel: Teaching Israel in Our Time (Bethamie Horowitz)
8. Activism and Identity: Teaching (About) BDS in the Israeli-Palestinian Relations Classroom (Mira Sucharov)
9. Barriers to Entry: Exploring Educator Reticence for Engaging with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Keren E. Fraiman)

Section IV: When Teachers Learn

10. "What are We Doing?": The Pedagogical Questions of Jewish Early Childhood Educators and Teacher Educators (Sivan Zakai & Lauren Applebaum)
11. Teaching Who They Are: Understanding Teachers' Connections with Israel and How Those Enter into the Classroom (Laura Novak Winer)
12. Nurturing Jewish Consciousness: Utilizing Values at Synagogue Supplementary Schools to Teach Israel (Ezra Kopelowitz & Abby Pitkowsky)
13. A Kite on a String and a Box that Opens: The Challenges of Transformative Professional Learning for Israel Educators (Lauren Applebaum)

Conclusion (Matt Reingold)

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About the Reviewer

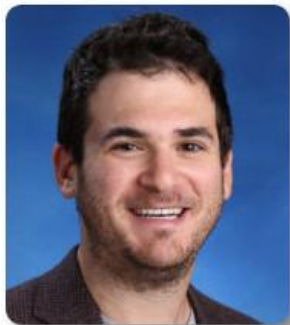
Barbara Slater Stern, Ed.D., is Professor Emerita in the Department of Middle, Secondary and Mathematics Education at James Madison University. She taught Advanced World History and AP United States History for 12 years as well as Black History and European Culture Studies during her high school teaching career. At the university level, beginning in 1995, she taught a variety of courses including Foundations of American Education, Methods of Teaching Secondary Social Studies, and Curriculum Theory and Issues. Prior to full retirement in 2021, she wrote and co-wrote numerous journal articles and book chapters on technology in social studies education, the history of teaching history, and teaching controversial social issues. She served for 3 years as Associate Editor and 6 years as Editor of *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, the journal of the American Association of Teaching and Curriculum. Barbara has published two books on social studies education.



About the Book Editors

Sivan Zakai, Ph.D., is the Sara S. Lee Associate Professor of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles. A thought leader in Jewish and Israel education, Dr. Zakai is the director of the Children's Learning About Israel Project and co-director of Project ORLIE: Research and Leadership in Israel Education. She also serves as a senior editor of the *Journal of Jewish Education* and as a member of the faculty at the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute.





Matt Reingold is a practitioner-researcher of Israel education. He teaches and serves as the cohead of the Jewish History Department at TanenbaumCHAT in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *Gender and Sexuality in Israeli Graphic Novels: Contested Masculinity and Independent Femininity*; *Reenvisioning Israel Through Political Cartoons: Visual Discourses During the 2018 – 2021 Electoral Crisis*; *Jewish Comics and Graphic Narratives*; and *The Comics of Asaf Hanuka: Telling Particular and Universal Stories*.



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