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Liberal Jewish identity and the pedagogy of Israel education

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Abstract
Recent studies have emerged arguing that reification of Jewish identity has obscured creative efforts regarding what Jewish education should be. We agree with this critique when conceiving of identity psychologically or sociologically, but not ethically. Based on our phenomenological inquiry into the pedagogical content knowledge of twenty exemplary Israel educators from the United States, Israel, Australia, and Canada, we outline a pedagogy of Israel education for deepening liberal Jewish identity when conceptualized from an ethical perspective. We argue that Israel education represents a countercultural form of Jewish education as it aids learners in embracing distinct visions of the Jewish good beyond the liberal-religious paradigm and that Israel education be prioritized within Jewish education to empower students to develop "thick" ethical Jewish identities from Jewish sources.

Keywords Israel education · Teacher knowledge · Jewish identity · Jewish education · Pedagogical content knowledge · Ethical identity

1 Introduction

As the majority of American Jews successfully integrated into American society in the second half of the twentieth century and began to eschew traditional Jewish practice, the concern for sustaining Jewish identity became a focus of Jewish educational efforts (Charmé et al., 2008). This concern was especially pronounced in liberal Jewish institutions associated with the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements, and to a lesser extent the left wing of the modern Orthodox movement (as opposed to the various branches of mainstream Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Judaism). Liberal Jewish stakeholders, communal leaders, researchers, and educators sought to confront the challenge of what they began to describe as Jewish continuity by strengthening Jewish identity through

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Jewish education (Herman, 1977; Levisohn & Kelman, 2019). Many studies proliferated as a result that examined the impact of Jewish education on Jewish identity as conceived by these liberal Jewish institutions. This engendered a robust discourse on the meaning of liberal Jewish identity and the impact of different formal and informal Jewish educational interventions on successive generations that were becoming increasingly distant from Judaism and the Jewish people (Charmé et al., 2008; Dashefsky & Lebson, 2002; Horowitz, 2002).

These studies have tended to conceptualize Jewish attachment through empirically oriented psychological or sociological lenses (Cohen & Eisen, 2000; Herman, 1977; Horowitz, 2002; Kelman et al., 2017), which tend to emphasize observable behaviors and practices and empirical evidence of attitudes as markers of individual or group affiliation (Silberstein, 2000). Empirically oriented psychological inquiries focus on personality development through individual cognitive or emotional perspectives on Jewish life. Data-based sociological studies highlight the impact of various social settings, institutions, dynamics, and experiences on feelings, opinions, and actions (Cohen, 1995; Herman, 1977; Silberstein, 2000). Most studies on Jewish identity combine psychological and sociological approaches by examining empirical data sets. This research identifies and distinguishes linear levels of Jewish identity ranging from "weak" to "strong" or evaluates Jewish identity based on various metrics such as opinions regarding Israel, the desire to date or marry someone Jewish, having Jewish friends, belief in God, or positions on certain Jewish values. These studies also analyze individual or group religious participation in Jewish life, including synagogue attendance, holiday and Shabbat observance, dietary practices, organizational affiliations, and frequency of visits to Israel (Alexander, 1997; Cohen, 1995; Levisohn & Kelman, 2019; Wertheimer et al., 1996).

However, little attention has been paid by Jewish identity researchers to what is sometimes called an *aretaic* or ethical conception of identity, which follows Aristotle (2004) and his intellectual heirs, such as Moses Maimonides (2022) and Bernard Williams (1985), in emphasizing conceptions of what it might mean to live a good life. This aretaic orientation might share some affinities with more hermeneutically inclined psychoanalytic approaches to human identity (Erikson, 1993, 1994a, 1994b). In a recent philosophical iteration of this aretaic approach, Charles Taylor (1992) follows Lionel Trilling's classic analysis of the modern condition in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Taylor calls this modern interpretation of the Aristotelian tradition an "authentic" conception of the self, in which authenticity refers to being "true to oneself". According to Taylor, identity was not an issue for people until the individualism of modernity made it one. The quest for a meaningful life became central to human existence when people began to live in economic and physical safety and security, and, due to accepted ideas of the Enlightenment, no longer had a required attachment to something larger than themselves. An ethical identity, in this view, provides individuals the opportunity to make determinations about their individuality while in conversation with something bigger than themselves, such as, history, citizenship, culture, helping those in need, or God (Taylor, 1992). Implied in the concept of a modern liberal Jewish identity is that being Jewish is a choice. Jewish identity conceived ethically facilitates individuals in conceiving of their authentic selves being rooted in various expressions and conceptions of Jewishness (Alexander, 1997, 2001).

Without distinguishing empirically oriented psychological or sociological approaches to identity from those that are conceived in terms of aretaic ethics, some scholars have recently questioned the accepted view regarding the need for Jewish education to

emphasize Jewish identity as part of a strategic objective to ensure Jewish continuity or survival. Prominent among such critics are Jon Levisohn and Ari Kelman (2019), who argue that studies promoting Jewish education as a tool to strengthen Jewish identity as part of a broader goal to impact Jewish continuity misunderstand or misrepresent the complex nature of identity formation and its intersectional nature. Levisohn and Kelman (2019) characterize these studies as problematic, claiming they encourage educators to focus their efforts on identity markers embodying amorphous survivalist aims lacking meaning, which stifles the potential creativity of meaningful practice. As Jewish education "must amount to more than an effort to move the needle of some composite called 'Jewish identity'" (Levisohn & Kelman, 2019, p. XI), the authors argue that educators should redirect their efforts from Jewish identity outcomes toward matters such as facilitating strategies for Jewish growth (Zelkowicz, 2019), teaching Jewish linguistic proficiency beyond Hebrew (Benor & Avineri, 2019), encouraging Jewish cultural engagement and civic activism (Kelner, 2019), initiating learners into particular Jewish practices (Levisohn, 2019), or promoting adopting Jewish sensibilities (Moore & Woocher, 2019).

Arguments such as this may be convincing when it comes to educating toward psychological and sociological aspects of Jewish identity, because such efforts may encourage mere practice and superficial affiliation. However, this critique fails to consider what it might mean to facilitate learners' embrace of distinct visions of the "good life" as understood from a Jewish perspective (Alexander, 1997). The psychological and sociological concept of identity that Levisohn and Kelman criticize as a goal of Jewish education is a thin—as opposed to a thick—form of Jewish identity. Following Clifford Geertz's (1973) adaptation of Gilbert Ryle's (1949) distinction between thick and thin descriptions, Michael Walzer (1985) distinguishes between moral arguments rooted in thick particular cultures and history and thin universal approaches based on rational, Kantian conceptions of the self. Applying Taylor's (1992) formulation of identity as an identification with a moral ideal, one can distinguish between identities that are deeply rooted in specific cultures (a thick form of identity) and identities that may appear to be culturally connected but lack a conceptual commitment to or understanding of a distinct vision of the good (a thin form of identity).

This is not to say that empirical psychology or sociology are not concerned with morality per se. However, they tend to articulate normative issues from a *deontological* perspective that emphasizes how a learner's understanding of rational duty develops (Kohlberg, 1981), conceived *universalistically*, in terms of Kant's (1997, 2002) categorical imperative, not *particularistically*, in terms of local visions of what it might mean to live a good life. Walzer's (1985) distinction between thick and thin, however, emphasizes cultivating learners' personal virtues from an *aretaic* perspective of ethics (Alexander, 2015b; Frankena, 1973). Such an approach promotes virtue development within specific communal contexts and traditions (Carr & Stuetel, 1999; Alexander, 2016). While deontological moral frameworks—often employed in psychological and sociological educational approaches—emphasize universal principles, they may foster weak identity connections unless complemented by aretaic considerations that help students develop substantive visions of meaningful lives worth pursuing within specific cultural or values contexts (Alexander, 2015b).

While Levisohn's and Kelman's critique fairly addresses the problems inherent in dedicating Jewish educational efforts toward Jewish survival and continuity and evaluating the success of such endeavors through sociological or psychological impact studies, their conclusion as to whether Jewish education should focus on Jewish identity at all may

be exaggerated. They do not consider that conceptualizing Jewish identity as a thick form of ethical identity, rather than as a thin empirically oriented psychological or sociological idea, can help young Jewish learners determine whether and how to incorporate Jewish belonging, culture, and tradition into their own personal visions of the good life.

It is our contention that of all the diverse subfields, subject matter areas, and foci of Jewish education, Israel education, properly conceived, can best initiate learners living in liberal contexts into Jewish visions of the good life (Alexander, 2015a; Davis & Alexander, 2023, 2024) and thus a thicker, ethical form of Jewish identity, conceived from an aretaic perspective. It can provide learners the opportunity to engage with diverse visions of the good Jewish life as they determine who they want to be and how they want to live.

1.1 The current study

This study presents what Israel education teachers themselves know about educating ethical identity from a liberal Jewish perspective by outlining a pedagogy of Israel education for deepening Jewish identity conceived in that way. To understand how Israel education teachers believe their teaching contributes to cultivating students' liberal Jewish identities, we conducted a phenomenological "wisdom of practice" study of the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of exemplary Israel educators in English-speaking Jewish high schools. Based on our findings on four components of Israel education teachers' PCK, we outline a pedagogy of Israel education for deepening liberal Jewish identity when conceptualized from an ethical perspective. We argue that Israel education represents a countercultural form of Jewish education that provides students with opportunities to supplement their Jewish identities beyond the structurally fixed liberal-religious contexts of their communities by also embracing the liberal-nationalism common in conceptions of Jewish life in Israel. We urge stakeholders interested in deepening ethical identity from a liberal Jewish perspective, in which Israel is an integral value, to include more courses and experiences oriented towards contemporary Israel as learners develop their own authentic visions of the good life out of Jewish sources.

1.2 Israel education and promoting ethical conceptions of Jewish identity

Jewishly affiliated high schools associated with various denominations of liberal Judaism—such as Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, Pluralist, and Non-Denominational—employ a dual "general" and "Judaic" studies curriculum (Pomson, 2011). In the United States these are non-state, independently funded institutions. In the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, they are considered faith schools serving particular religious communities, not common schools serving youngsters from diverse religious backgrounds, and may receive various forms of state funding. The dual curriculum seeks to navigate the tension of liberal Jewish education for transmitting Jewish cultural understanding and affiliation while preparing students for democratic life. Judaic studies curricula include a range of subject matter courses depending on the denominational affiliation of the institution, which may include courses on Hebrew language, Bible, Jewish Law, Jewish History, and Israel education (Alexander, 2018). As interviewees in this study taught in a range of Jewish denominational affiliations, the scope, frequency, and focus of the Judaic studies curriculum differed. However, all institutions, no matter their ideological positioning,

offered quarter, semester, or yearlong Israel education courses. This reflects a tradition in Jewish schooling to emphasize Israel education as a curricular feature of Jewish education in liberal, English-speaking countries such as the United States (Attias, 2015; Chazan, 1978, 2004, 2014; Dinin, 1944; Kuselewitz, 1958).

As Jewish high schools are mostly non-state, independent institutions, there are no standardized Israel education curricula. While there are centers of practice that support and provide guidance and resources for Israel education teachers and Jewish schools (Davis & Alexander, 2023), each teacher designs their own course curricula or utilizes a curriculum previously developed by colleagues. Israel education curricula overwhelmingly, although not exhaustively, concentrate on a chronological and thematic exploration of the history of modern Israel, beginning with the rise of the Zionism movement. In addition to history, Israel education teachers also design their curricula from the perspectives of politics, religion, culture and society. Most courses devote one, multiple, or a whole curriculum on conflicting narratives of the Arab Israeli Conflict. Israel education teachers also spend significant time exploring themes regarding Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, issues pertaining to Jewish life and religion and state, and the diversity of non-Jewish Israeli society (Davis & Alexander, 2024).

While the literature on Israel education varies in its focus, ideologies, and models for implementation (Chazan, 2004; Chazan et al., 2013; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Grant et al., 2012; Hassenfeld, 2016, 2018; Horowitz, 2012; Isaacs, 2011; Pomson & Deitcher, 2010; Pomson et al., 2009; Reingold, 2017, 2018; Saxe et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2006; Zakai, 2014, 2022), there is near unanimous agreement that a distinguishing characteristic of Israel education is to impact the Jewish identity of the learner (Davis & Alexander, 2023). The content areas of Israel education to help learners conceive of their Jewish identities should be rooted in academic scholarship on Israel, which can be found in the discipline of Israel studies (Alexander, 2015a; Davis & Alexander, 2023). However, the teaching of this subject matter is not conducted from a neutral perspective about groups of people with which teachers and students have no affiliation. Israel education promotes various normative positions of the Jewish good. However, to embody education as opposed to indoctrination, contrasting traditions and viewpoints must be presented as viable alternatives as well. Israel education conceived this way provides students the opportunity to define their own vision of the good Jewish life as they form their own identities in conversation with conflicting narratives. This allows them to make autonomous choices while embodying a vision for how groups of people with different identities can coexist. Such an approach involves teachers applying a "pedagogy of the sacred" to initiate students into distinct value sets or perspectives and a "pedagogy of difference" such that this initiation occurs in dialogue with opposing visions of the good (Alexander, 2001, 2015a; Byrne, 2014; Davis & Alexander, 2023; Noddings, 1993).

This educational approach to ethical identity conceptualization is based on Isaiah Berlin's (1969) notion of diversity liberalism and Jonathan Sacks's (2003) idea of the dignity of difference. Berlin's philosophy seeks to create a political theory that allows people with different and sometimes incommensurable values and traditions to coexist in shared spaces by being in dialogue with one another. Sacks argues for the holiness of people's differences reflecting the uniqueness and intentions of the divine creator and for humanity embracing distinctness as a sacred value. Israel education teachers very often adopt a pedagogy of the sacred and of difference rooted in diversity liberalism and the dignity of difference to provide students with an educational framework to embrace a vision of the Jewish good

while encountering perspectives challenging the identity choice in front of them (Alexander, 2015a, 2015b; Davis & Alexander, 2023).

1.3 Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and the wisdom of practice study

PCK represents the combination of the content and pedagogical knowledge needed for teachers to successfully engender student understanding (Shulman, 1987). While the literature identifies multiple components of teachers' PCK in an array of subject matter disciplines (Berry et al., 2016; Grossman, 1990; Dorph, 1993; Lampert, 2001; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991), many scholars believe that PCK consists of four key categories—knowledge of purpose, curriculum, instructional strategies, and student understanding (Wu et al., 2019). This study investigating Israel education teachers' PCK to deepen students' liberal Jewish identities reflected this scholarly consensus. Our findings outline four components of Israel education teachers' PCK for cultivating students' ethical Jewish identities, (1) knowledge of purposes, (2) knowledge of instructional strategies, (3) knowledge of curriculum, and (4) knowledge of student understanding.

The wisdom of practice study has transformed into a prominent method to investigate PCK, by exploring the PCK of exemplary practitioners to help both new and veteran teachers develop and refine their practice (Shulman, 1987; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991). Some criticize this approach's applicability to impact educational research because of its prioritization of excellent as opposed to average educators. However, the wisdom of practice focuses on teaching that is "good enough" (Lightfoot, 1983) that can be replicated by others (Cohen & Holtz, 1996). The exemplary Israel educators interviewed for the current study represented examples of "good enough" teaching that could impact the practice and scholarship of the field.

2 Methodology

Utilizing snowball sampling (Patton, 1990), twenty exemplary Israel education teachers in the United States, Israel, Australia, and Canada participated in two individual, ninety-minute, semi-structured, phenomenological Zoom interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The teachers in the United States, Canada, and Australia taught at independent, non-state Jewish high schools affiliated with various denominations of liberal Judaism. In Israel, the teachers worked at independent, non-state Jewish study abroad institutions that offer semester-long programs for Jewish high school students from the English-speaking diaspora. Similarly to Jewish high schools outside Israel affiliated with various liberal Jewish denominations, these institutions also include a semester-long Israel education course.

In addition to teaching Israel education, many of the teachers also teach general history, Jewish history, and Judaic studies courses. While their credentials ranged from university, graduate, and doctoral degrees, as well as rabbinic, teaching and tour guiding in Israel certifications, Israel education teachers are not uniformly trained to teach in their field. Israel education teachers arrive to their positions through a mixture of their recognized pedagogical and content expertise and their passion for teaching the subject matter. The twelve male and eight female interviewees, ranging from their late 20's to their early 60's, were employed or formerly employed by Jewish high schools representing four

Table 1 Teacher details

Name (Pseudonym)	Country of Teaching	Denomination of Institution
Alan	Israel	Community Pluralistic
Alex	USA	Community Pluralistic
Alexa	Australia	Reform
Arielle	USA	Modern Orthodox
Brian	Israel	Community Pluralistic
Daniel	Daniel	Reform
Devora	Australia	Community Pluralistic
Efraim	Israel	Community Pluralistic
Haim	Australia	Modern Orthodox
Hannah	USA	Modern Orthodox
Jacob	USA	Community Pluralistic
Jesse	USA	Community Modern Orthodox
Joey	Canada	Community Modern Orthodox
Jordan	Canada	Community Pluralistic
Julian	USA	Community Pluralistic
Liel	Canada	Modern Orthodox
Molly	Australia	Community Modern Orthodox
Shayna	Israel	Reform
Shifra	USA	Modern Orthodox
Tal	USA	Community Pluralistic

distinct religious affiliations—Community Modern Orthodox (2), Community Pluralistic (9), Modern Orthodox (6), and Reform (3).[1] For demographic details about the interviewees, please consult Table 1.

To understand the phenomenon of teaching Israel education, the primary author of this paper implemented a transcendental phenomenological data collection and analysis scheme capturing participants' experiences, a process known as *horizonalization* (Moustakas, 1994). Redundant or overlapping statements were eliminated by assessing whether each statement was essential for understanding the experience and could be clearly labeled (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The remaining statements were organized into meaning units and themes for each participant (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Textual descriptions of

[1] Descriptions of denominations:

Community Modern Orthodox: Ideologically committed to a Modern Orthodox practice of Judaism, the student body of these schools do not all identify with or practice Judaism according to a Modern Orthodox ideology. Such schools do not provide as many courses devoted to traditional Jewish learning as Modern Orthodox institutions.

Community Pluralistic: These schools are not affiliated with a Jewish denomination, the student body primarily comes from non-Orthodox backgrounds, and levels of religious observance and practice vary within the institution.

Modern Orthodox: Most students in these schools come from families that identify and practice Modern Orthodox Judaism. Reflecting a commitment to Modern Orthodoxy, these institutions require students to engage in an extensive Judaic Studies curriculum and participate in daily communal prayer. While some schools maintain various versions of gender separation, other operate as fully coeducational institutions.

Reform: These institutions identify with the values, ideology, and practice of Reform Judaism. Most students' families attend Reform synagogues and ideologically identify as members of the Reform movement.

what participants experienced and structural descriptions of *how* they experienced it were developed. These descriptions were synthesized into a combined textual-structural description for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, all individual descriptions were integrated into a generalized account that captured the essence of the experience, specifically the wisdom of practice of exemplary Israel educators, which ultimately informed this study's findings regarding the PCK of Israel education to deepen students' liberal Jewish identities.

This article summarizes one segment of a three-part wisdom of practice study on the PCK of Israel education teachers. The forty interviews of the twenty teachers were conducted from the winter of 2021 through the summer of 2022, examining different aspects of the data. One study investigated their PCK of the discipline; another study considered their PCK of ethical identity education as it relates to teaching their subject matter. This study examined their PCK of Israel education and the cultivation of liberal Jewish identity.

To gain insights on the experience of the interviewee (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), a significant portion of the first of two interviews concentrates on the personal identity of the participant. What emerged was the relevance of our sample specifically for this article on Israel education and the cultivation of liberal Jewish identity. While not seeking to identify teachers that embrace any distinct type of Jewishness, every teacher interviewed, as well as the institutions in which they taught, embraced various and diverse forms of liberal Jewish identity as a vision of the good life. This cultural background tied to liberal Jewish identity was referenced throughout teachers' interviews.

The ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Haifa reviewed and approved the research. Written consent was obtained from the participants. In the interview excerpts reported, pseudonyms are used for the participants and their educational institutions.

2.1 Positioning

The primary and secondary authors of this study are not neutral observers of Israel education. In addition to being scholars of education with a disciplinary focus on Jewish and Israel education, we are also educational practitioners and former students of institutions similar to those where the interviewees were employed. As is common in qualitative research, we bring certain preconceptions, some of which we have articulated in previous works. However, our cultural knowledge enriched our perspective and proved beneficial in deepening our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3 Findings

The PCK that participants demonstrated for cultivating ethical versions of liberal Jewish identity among their students can be divided into four categories. (1) The first refers to their knowledge of the possible purpose of engendering Jewish commitments and deepening connections to the "real" Israel. (2) The second addresses their knowledge of the available curriculum for teaching four of the primary topics fundamental to navigating Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. These include the diversity of Israeli society, issues of religion and state, Jewish identity beyond religion, and conflicting narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. This navigation requires highlighting different perspectives through the use of diverse primary sources (Israeli music, multimedia, and texts). (3) The third

category of PCK demonstrated by the participants considers their knowledge of instructional strategies for discussion-led pedagogy (such as using texts and multimedia as conversation triggers, student-driven discussions, and after-class activities and conversations, debates and dilemmas, and use of personal stories and guest speakers). (4) The fourth and final category of knowledge demonstrated by the participants has to do with student understanding as to students' limited knowledge of modern Israel and their capacity to handle the complexity of this subject matter.

3.1 Knowledge of purpose

While teachers exhibited a range of political, religious, and epistemological approaches to Israel, they all shared orientations to the subject matter as integral to their roles as teachers of Israel in a Jewish High School to cultivate learners' conceptions of what it means to be Jewish and for them to critically consider what Israel means in their Jewish visions of the good. Participants articulated the aims of their discipline to deepen students' liberal Jewish identities by strengthening their personal and collective commitments to Judaism and the Jewish people with a nuanced and mature educational approach to a complex Israel.

3.1.1 Engendering Jewish commitments

Participants utilized their courses to help students decide what, if any, Jewish commitments they would make in their lives. Brian stressed a focus on "Jewish commitment, commitment to the Jewish people." Jacob stated that teachers "help them [students] on their own Jewish journeys" as they are "trying to construct their own story." Alan expressed his desire for each student to "take his or her Jewishness seriously and give it due consideration and make a positive effort to make choices in their lives that reflect their own Jewishness." This commitment was framed as having students feel part of the collective memory or history of the Jewish people. As one teacher put it, he wanted students to feel, "Wow, I'm not just an American, I'm part of a very, very, very ancient people that goes back thousands of years" (Daniel).

3.1.2 Deepening connections to the "real" Israel

> Participants framed Israel as a subject matter to be evaluated for how it could be integrated into students' Jewish identities.
> The identity piece is really important, when it comes to trying to have a connection to the state, what it means to them." (Alex)
> The perspective that I really want for my students . . . is, "what does Israel mean to you and your Jewish identity?" (Tal)

Many participants referred to this connection specifically as helping their students develop Zionist narratives in conversation with the complexities of Israel. Arielle had her students take "a deeper, multidimensional look at Israel, its history, current events, achievements and challenges." Daniel wanted his students to be "proud that Israel is the Jewish state…even despite all our faults." Teachers wanted their students to develop a "mature Zionism" (Jesse) or identify as "nuanced Zionists" (Shifra).

Following a similar theme in research literature on Israel education (Grant, 2007; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012), teachers emphasize fostering deep connections to Israel through

engaging the "real Israel" as opposed to a mythic version of the country. Applying pedagogies of the sacred and of difference (Alexander, 2015a, 2015b; Davis & Alexander, 2023), teachers aim for students to be rooted in their own understanding of their *sacred* Jewish story through learning about their connections to the modern state of Israel, but only by being in dialogue with critical perspectives and narratives regarding Israel that are *distinct* from one another.

3.2 Knowledge of curriculum

3.2.1 Fundamental curricular topics to navigating Israel as a Jewish and democratic state

Participants emphasized exploring Israel as a Jewish and democratic state from various angles, perspectives, and topics of conversation because the subject of Israel offers an opportunity for students to explore an ethically thick version of Jewishness endemic to a liberal democratic environment. Educationally exploring issues related to Israel's Jewish and democratic character roots students in a rich Jewish story that provides distinct visions of the Jewish good outside the liberal-religious paradigm that tends to promote thinner identities. This countercultural approach emphasizing teaching Israel to conceive of a liberal Jewishness outside the religious paradigm empowers students to make educated choices about what they find sacred Jewishly for themselves while being in dialogue with perspectives on their own Jewishness and Israel that are different (Alexander, 2015a; Davis & Alexander, 2023). The main topics covered in navigating the subject of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state as it relates to the liberal Jewish identities of the learner were (i) the diversity of Israeli society (ii) issues of religion and state, (iii) Jewish identity beyond religion and (iv) conflicting narratives of the Israeli Palestinian Conflict.

3.2.1.1 Diversity of Israeli society The diversity of Israeli society focuses on Israel's Jewish and non-Jewish populations. Alex described "taking various ideas about Arab Israelis in the culture and breaking those big themes down." Haim emphasized the importance of teaching about the diversity of Israeli Jews, specifically concerning classes on *Mizrachim (*Jews of Middle Eastern Descent) as "the most important topic that we do in this course" to distinguish between the homogenous Jewish culture of his community and the more heterogenous one common in Israel. Shayna stated that learning about the diversity of Israeli society gave students a "broader narrative specifically of Jewish identity" to supplement their understanding of what it means to be Jewish with alternative conceptions of Jewishness.

3.2.1.2 Issues of religion and state Learning about religion and state was featured as a topic to help students grapple with dilemmas of how a country can be both Jewish and democratic. Participants believed the topic served to deepen liberal Jewish identity as students learned about how certain laws in Israel directly contradicted liberal values they may have held dear to their own Jewishness. The issue came to the fore when students learned there is no civil marriage in Israel. Jordan stated how he introduced the topic: "They can't marry a non-Jew in Israel.... I'm not telling them if this is good or bad. They've [students] made the decision."

Learning about religion and state issues encouraged students to come to potential stances of their own in how to define what it means for Israel to be both Jewish and democratic.

> They have to really think about, "Wait, what does it mean to be the Jewish state? Who actually is Jewish? Like what's our goal here?" (Hannah)

3.2.1.3 Jewish identity beyond religion Navigating the conceptualization of Jewish identity beyond religion helps students understand Israel as a Jewish and democratic state by tackling how Israeli Jews identify Jewishness outside of religion (See Biale, 2020; Yehi-Shalom, 2020). Teachers emphasized helping students contrast their liberal religious Jewish identities with that of the liberal nationalism that sits at the heart of Zionism by discussing how being Jewish is not just being part of a religion.

> [Students] forget the thread that Jewish isn't exclusively a religion. From class to class, they keep forgetting… I just constantly ask a very simple question, "Well, what do you mean by Jewish?" (Tal)

In teaching about navigating Jewish identity as not being strictly about religion, participants had students conceptualize the establishment of the state of Israel beyond Judaism. One thing they focused on was the identity of the early Zionist leaders.

> With these early Zionists, we think that they're saving Jewish. And they think that they're saving Jewish, through Zionism, but they're not all religious for sure. So that's the most potent angle I've done. (Tal)

They also taught about the Israeli Declaration of Independence, asking students,

> Do you know God is not mentioned once in the Declaration of Independence?'… They discover that they can be wholly Jewish and they don't have to be religious. (Alexa)

In addition, they discussed the impact of emancipation on modern Jewish life.

> We learn about what happened when Jews in Europe were all of a sudden given civil rights and citizenship and… they didn't have to dress differently or speak a different language…What does it mean that you have the freedom to be a Jew in many different ways? (Daniel)

Reflecting the *Mature Zionism* model of Israel education (Alexander, 2015a; Davis & Alexander, 2023), Israel educators emphasize this topic as it provides an opportunity to supplement the liberal-religious Jewish identities of their students with the liberal-national conception common in Israel. This pedagogic focus on supplementing the default liberal religious assumptions of Jewish identity with a consideration of liberal nationalism can also be found in some Israeli general state schools, which serve cultural, humanistic, secular Jews. The children of religious, observant, orthodox, Jews in Israel usually attend religious state schools. However, in contrast to many Diaspora Jewish schools where the default assumptions of Jewish identity entail a liberal form of Jewish religion, the default assumptions of Jewish identity in Israeli general state schools entail liberal nationalism. Hence, teachers in these schools who embrace this pedagogic focus seek to have students consider religious tradition in addition to citizenship in a Jewish and democratic state as part of their vision for what it could mean to be Jewish (Cohen & Ben-Zvi, 2020; Cohen et al., 2023). Although Palestinian perspectives have made their way into many liberal Diaspora Jewish schools (Davis & Alexander, 2024), those viewpoints are, unfortunately to our mind, less prevalent in Israeli state schools (Gur-Ze'ev, 1999; 2003).

3.2.1.4 Conflicting narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Participants exposed students to conflicting narratives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, while remaining rooted in an orientation identifying Zionism as a sacred value. As Arielle stated, "they are both true narratives for those communities (Jewish/Israel and Arab/Palestine), I want that take-away, but I'm not trying to get kids to throw away their thing."

They focused on various topics. Regarding the peace process, Alex reported "using Oslo as a case study to understand the Israeli point of view." Daniel stated, "We talk about refugees. We definitely talk a lot about the Palestinian narrative," Julian reported "talking about the settlements… to understand the plight of the Palestinians.'' They talked about the Occupation:

> What does it mean to have this drive, and feel so connected to *Yehuda v'Shomron* [Judea and Samaria], but at the same time, what are the other perspectives, where does Occupation come in, and what is this doing to the daily life of Palestinians?" (Shifra)

Regarding the two-state solution, Haim stated:

> We focused on the Two State Solution as the main option for resolving the conflict. We'll look at other options at the end, but most of the course is dedicated to the Two-State Solution.

They also discussed the demographic challenges to Israel sustaining its character as a Jewish and democratic character if it controls all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, as Molly explained.

> Just that they have to understand that it's impossible, under any government, to have all three [Jewish, democracy, all the land]. What all three would mean. So, you go into really what does it mean to be a Jewish State, and a majority Jewish. You put the different scenarios to them…You can choose any two [Jewish, democracy, all the land], they can choose any two.

3.2.2 Highlighting diverse perspectives through diverse sources

Teachers' countercultural approach emphasized utilizing curricular resources highlighting Israeli Jewishness beyond liberal-religious conceptions and challenges to Israel as a Jewish democratic state regarding the status of the country's Arab national minority and conflict with the Palestinians. They utilized diverse curricular resources, specifically music, multimedia, and texts, for students to learn about Israel and to consider how such content may integrate with their own liberal Jewish identities.

3.2.2.1 Israeli music Teachers showed the evolution of Israeli society from a secular to a more traditionally influenced and diverse one through its music. They taught about how Israeli pop music has changed from the European rock style of Gidi Gov and Arik Einstein to the more Middle Eastern-influenced style of Omer Adam. Haim stated, "That transition really demonstrates that idea that Israeli society is much more *Sfardi* than *Ashkenazi.*" Following this theme of learning about the diversity of Israeli society through the experience of *Mizrachim* (Jews of Middle Eastern descent) in modern Israel, Arielle, Jesse, Liel, and Shifra showed students a music video from the band *A-wa*, a group of women singers of Yemenite origins who sing in Arabic about their families' struggles

integrating into Israeli society. Daniel explained how listening to Israeli music leads to greater understanding and builds connections.

> I want the kids to get turned on to Israeli music because I think it's more than just music, I think with the Hebrew language and modern Hebrew culture, I think you can understand Israel a lot better by listening to Hebrew Israeli music.

Teachers used music as a curricular resource to teach not just contemporary society but also Israeli history, as "every conversation about Israel from pre-establishment, the state, until now has a musical piece that goes with it" (Shayna).

3.2.2.2 Multimedia Participants utilized a variety of multimedia sources to bring a diversity of perspectives on modern Israel as a means for students to learn the subject matter and connect and be inspired by it, as one teacher said, to "give a little bit of emotion through those videos" (Haim). Molly reported that students, after being shown a video on the miracles of the Six-Day War, responded, "Oh my God, that's my country. That is the country you know that we also call home." Israeli films like *The Other Son* were utilized to introduce dilemmas of the conflicting narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, because it "opens up a lot of dialogue and trying to understand how it's literally an accident of birth, basically, which side you're on" (Devorah).

Educational videos explaining the history of modern Israel were used to augment the teacher's voice. Alex, Daniel, Haim, Hannah, Liel, Jesse, Joey, Julian, Molly, and Shifra utilized content from the Jewish educational media organization OpenDor Media (https://opendormedia.org/). Molly said, "the OpenDor media stuff I love because it's quick and it's snappy, and it gives them an overview." Israeli television shows were used to teach about issues in Israeli society. Arielle, Jordan, and Shifra praised the show *Arab Labor* for it being entertaining while being informative about the position of the Arab minority in Israel.

> I showed them episodes of *Avodah Aravit* [*Arab Labor*]. We spoke about how we use satire to comment on Israeli society and what does it mean for that community [Israeli Arabs] to be like insiders/outsiders. (Shifra)

Audio was also utilized to emphasize important content and expose students to multiple perspectives. Daniel used a recording of a sermon from an American rabbi discussing Israel after the Yom Kippur War, because "it goes exactly to these questions about Zionism, about *Or Lagoim* [being a light upon the nations], about leadership, about accountability and responsibility, about moving forward from a crisis" (Daniel). Shifra used "different podcasts… to see different sides" of the political spectrum on Israel in the American Jewish community.

3.2.2.3 Texts Primary source documents were utilized by teachers for students to analyze the essence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Such texts focused on the challenges for Arab citizens of living in Israel as a national minority. Jordan used the farewell column of former *Haaretz* writer and creator of *Arab Labor* Sayed Kashua, as "it's one of the only texts where I would say like the room gets silent for." Teachers shared poems to highlight the Palestinian perspective of longing for homeland. Shifra described a student's reaction to such a text: "Oh, this sounds like a *Rav* (Rabbi) Yehuda Halevi poem." Embracing a pedagogy of difference to empower students to conceptualize their own identities, teachers utilize texts presenting Palestinian perspectives to chal-

lenge students to grapple with their own relationships to the value of homeland for their autonomous visions of the good.

> The Israeli Declaration of Independence and the recent nation-state law featured prominently in Israel education curricula.
> What does it mean to have in our Declaration of Independence, like this notion of equality and stuff like that? And how does that play out when we talk about non-Jewish citizens of the state and like, "Why is it a tension? Why is it not simple? It isn't simple to just say, yeah, give everybody citizenship." (Arielle)
> What kind of country should Israel be? What's the deal with the Nation-State Law? Do you agree with it? Do you not agree with it? Do you understand why there's controversy over the Nation-State Law? (Jordan)

This content was not meant to just be absorbed. Teachers utilized the texts to compel students to come to stances on the very nature of Israel and if and how Israel should be a Jewish and democratic state. Jesse said the texts prompted "a discussion about, what's more important, the democracy or the Jewish aspect of trying to find a balance between both."

3.3 Knowledge of instructional strategies

3.3.1 Discussion-led pedagogy

Discussion-led pedagogy facilitated students absorbing content knowledge, increasing their understanding of the subject, and developing their stances on issues relating to modern Israel with a focus on the country's Jewish and democratic character. Such an instructional strategy not only embraces the freedom of students to identify a *higher good* (Alexander, 2001) but provides them with a supportive environment to grapple with what they identify as sacred as they learn about perspectives challenging the value of their own Jewish identities (Byrne, 2014; Davis & Alexander, 2024; Noddings, 1993).

3.3.1.1 Texts and multimedia as conversation triggers Texts and multimedia triggered class discussions on issues relevant to the liberal Jewish identities of students, causing them to reflect on how they "think about Israel" (Jordan). After reading poems like Bialik's *Al Heshechitah* (On Slaughter) or Hannah Szenes's *Eili Eili* (My God, My God), teachers asked students questions about how the texts resonated with them and what impacted them emotionally (Alexa). Op-eds were used to bring in multiple viewpoints to spark conversations on different perspectives about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Alex). Visuals like political cartoons, videos, and images—whether "light" or "spicy" in nature, as one student put it (Liel)—catalyzed discussions to grapple with how Israelis and Palestinians were thinking about issues, to bring in nuanced perspectives, and to have students reflect on their emotional reactions. The trigger, no matter the method used, emphasized Zionism, religion and state issues, or the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict to have students reflect on their liberal-Jewish identities as they related to Israel. Teachers encourage such conversations to cultivate students' spiritual intelligence to grapple with dilemmas of *higher goods* (Alexander, 2001). Arielle summarized this discussion strategy:

> Our dream is that the conversation in class kind of models that they're going to be different kids in the class and some kids are going to say like, "Oh yeah, of course, the *Rabbanut* [Israeli government-administered rabbinate] should be in charge [regarding issues concerning religion and state], like, how else can we have a Jewish state?" And then another kid will say, like, "Yeah, but that's so really, that's ridiculous. Like, what about all those liberal values? What about the non-Jews and what about the secular Jews? That's just going to turn them off."

3.3.1.2 Student-driven discussions Teachers preferred students to drive classroom conversations to give them "the space to figure it out on their own" (Alex). As one teacher put it, "If I'm lucky, I can do very little talking" (Julian). Another teacher echoed this theme, "I let the students direct where the discussion is going to go, and I might bring it back if there's certain specific points I want to hit" (Shifra).

3.3.1.3 Activities and discussions after class Participants encouraged students to continue the conversation after school to help with subject matter learning, build understanding, and facilitate stance development. Generational assignments—focused on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict or issues relating to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state—encouraged students to find out what their parents or grandparents "think about it" (Tal). Asking family members their opinions helped students to think for themselves what their personal connections were to Israel and "where they're coming from" (Alex). Liel, Molly, and Shifra asked students to share their family stories to prompt conversations on personal connections to Israel. Positioning students' personal connections to the content encouraged learning and stance development, because students saw themselves as being individually rooted within the content: "That connects you [the student] to the story. You're [the student] part of the story" (Alan).

3.3.2 Debates and dilemmas pedagogy

Debates and dilemmas concentrate on issues in Israel that personally relate to students living in liberal Jewish communities. Jordan explained the utility of Israel as a pedagogic tool in deepening liberal Jewish identity:

> The case of Israel just offers a so much richer opportunity [as opposed to teaching contemporary North American Jewish life] for talking about what does Jewish identity mean, that I think you can just engage in really nuanced-thoughtful-complicated conversations and… push them [students] to think in new ways about what their Jewishness means to them.

Hannah described a debate exercise:

> They [students] did a walking debate where they had to pick which side of the room they were on, if they support the mission of Women of the Wall or they're opposed. And then the kids in the middle are conflicted and the goal of each side is to get the kids to move to their side.

Teachers utilized debates and dilemmas to have students define their "red lines" (Alan) or to make a "value judgment" (Brian) on contemporary dilemmas of being Jewish. They encouraged students to grapple with their individual Jewishness as they learned about the role of Judaism and the establishment of a modern Jewish society in Israel.

> In a sense it's the same dilemma every time, but it comes in different clothing again and again. I want the kids fundamentally to be thinking about making Jewish choices. (Alan)

3.3.3 Personal stories and guest speakers

Participants used personal stories and guest speakers as pedagogic tools to help with the knowledge and connection goals of their courses. Personal stories aided students in learning the subject matter as "it takes concepts and it makes them real" (Haim) and gives the teacher more legitimacy among students to be teaching the material as "it comes off as more authentic" (Daniel). As Devorah described it, "you're bringing your connection to a place, to the people, and then they can then relate." Teachers utilized personal stories when teaching complex content. As to religion and state, a teacher shared, "I had to go to Cyprus to get married because I didn't want to get married by an Orthodox Rabbi" (Daniel). Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Shifra reflected with her students on visiting Hebron with her religious gap year program in Israel, "I felt that the school was presenting one opinion the whole time and I'm like, 'what's the other side?'" Tal discussed being Jewish as a national or religious identity when he shared with his students about how he would be a secular Jew if he had grown up in Israel like his cousins, in order to "reinforce one of the most consistent themes in the entire course," which was how Americans "tend to identify Judaism in religious terms…and that's not necessarily the case in Israel."

> Participants brought in guest speakers to make Israel more relatable and authentic and to build connections and reinforce subject matter learning.
> There's Israeli teachers [at the school] and I schlep them in, "Come and talk about Seventy-Three [referencing the Yom Kippur War], when you were the only woman at the Suez because you were part of Arik Sharon's [former Israeli general and politician who eventually became prime minister] strike force and you had nowhere to pee, so you went behind a bush, in the Sinai." I want them [the students] to know that that's somebody, that's *Morah* (Teacher) *Shulamit* who they get *Ivrit* (Hebrew) education from, but they [students] never had that conversation [about her experience during the Yom Kippur War] with her. (Liel)

Embodying a countercultural form of Jewish education, teachers facilitate different discussion and encounter pedagogies to encourage students to conceptualize themselves as insiders on navigating the tension of liberalism and Jewish identity in Israel. Such a strategy encourages students to root their Jewish identities in a vision of liberalism that counters a propensity for preferencing the right to choose a vision of the good over any particular set of Jewish values and traditions. Engaging various topics related to liberal-nationalism in Israel empowers students to supplement their liberal-religious Jewish identities as they conceive of what type of Jewish life they wish to live (Alexander, 2019; Sandel, 1984).

3.4 Knowledge of student understanding

3.4.1 Limited knowledge of modern Israel

Participants emphasized that their students had limited content knowledge when it came to modern Israel. As Hannah explained, "I'm not surprised by what they know at this point. Initially it did. But again, I very quickly learned that they know nothing." Whether lacking

historical knowledge, such as being unfamiliar with "what the Six-Day War was" (Hannah), or political knowledge, like not understanding "what a coalition is" (Tal), student knowledge guided Israel educators' pedagogic and content choices. Given students' limited knowledge, teachers maximized the time they had with students "to expose…students to as much as possible in the time that we got" (Brian) to empower students to grapple with how the subject matter related to their Jewishness. Filling in gaps of knowledge was not just for the sake of having the subject matter expertise but also to empower students to choose who they wanted to be when it came to their authentic visions of the good Jewish life. Shayna described this approach as "having content to back it up and knowledge to back up who they are."

3.4.2 Student capacity to handle the complex subject matter

Participants framed their choices on what and how to teach modern Israel based on their understanding of whether students "can handle" (Liel) or "can't handle it" (Shifra). Jesse contemplated whether students would "be able to understand this [material]" and "how would I unpack it for them." To achieve the goal of presenting nuanced content to help students conceive of their Jewish identities as they related to Israel, teachers recognized they were limited in content they could introduce based on the cultural backgrounds of the students. Therefore, they took into consideration students' parents and communities so students "are in a place where they can hear everything else that's going on" (Shifra). They recognized that their effectiveness to help students root themselves in their own distinct visions of Jewishness and connections to Israel while being in dialogue with perspectives that were different was based on the authenticity and relatability of the course to the students.

> Important that all students feel seen and heard based on where they are at, and setting a space where everyone is respected no matter different opinions and knowledge bases, and no one is feeling frustrated. (Shayna)

4 Discussion

The findings in our study illustrate how teaching about Israel in Jewish education can involve pedagogies of the sacred and of difference by initiating learners into distinct Jewish visions of the good in dialogue with alternative perspectives. Israel education helps students adopt ethically thick versions of Jewish identity, which contrasts with the psychological and sociological approaches criticized by Levisohn and Kelman (2019) that tend to encourage thinner identities. Participants integrated their knowledge of purpose, curriculum, instructional strategies, and student understanding to aid their students in defining for themselves whether they found being Jewish meaningful; if so, why; and how Israel fit into that story. From these examples of educating for Jewish identity, ethically conceived, as opposed to psychological or sociological understandings of identity, two crucial points become apparent regarding the possibility of deepening liberal Jewish identity through Israel education. Both points counter Levisohn and Kelman's (2019) claims that the education for Jewish identity should be redirected because it stifles more creative strategies for fostering Jewish growth, engagement, and practice. First, Israel education represents a form of countercultural Jewish education to aid learners living in liberal-religious Jewish contexts to conceptualize their authentic Jewish selves in conversation with the liberal-national

Jewish paradigm prominent in significant parts of Israeli society. Second, education about Israel, both as a land and a state, is central to facilitating students in developing distinct, Jewish visions of the "good life."

4.1 Israel education as a countercultural form of Jewish education

Emancipation, whereby Jews received political rights for the first time, and the Enlightenment, which led to questioning the authenticity of divine authority, resulted in the prominence of a liberal-religious Jewish identity rooted in ethical liberalism taking form that preferred the right to choose how a meaningful Jewish life should be lived over any Jewish and distinct vision of the good (Alexander, 2019; Sandel, 1984). As a result, Jewish education across the denominational spectrum, withstanding communities rejecting modern conceptions of Jewishness, committed itself to deepening what became the predominant form of organizing Jewish life. This was a Judaism stripped of its political identity, which endorses visions of the good that prioritize the liberal values of freedom, equality, and liberty as essential Jewish values, even if they are not distinctly Jewish (Alexander, 2012, 2019).

While this conception of Jewishness empowered Jews in the countries represented in this study to succeed at high socioeconomic levels and to gain societal acceptance as cultural, economic, and political elites, it has proven to be less successful at sustaining and promoting distinct Jewish visions of the good life beyond the value of liberal toleration (Alexander, 2001, 2015b, 2019; Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1992). Those promoting Jewish education as an enterprise to advance Jewish behaviors, attitudes, and connections not only promote thin psychological or sociological approaches to identity but, even if they considered ethical conceptions of identity, would most likely base such conceptions in a philosophy of liberalism that finds it challenging to help learners conceive of distinct Jewish visions for themselves. Israel education (as a subfield of Jewish education), when addressing identity from an ethical lens as practiced by this study's exemplary Israel educators, who use a pedagogy of Israel education to deepen liberal Jewish identity, can help learners conceptualize their authentic Jewish selves beyond the confines of the liberal-religious paradigm by also embracing the liberal-national Jewish context prominent in Israel.

Israel educators explained how teaching Israel facilitates students' conceptions, definitions, and understandings of their "Jewish journeys" (Jacob), their "commitment to the Jewish people" (Brian), and the meaning of being part of a "very, very, very ancient people" (Daniel). Teachers ask students to grapple with a fundamental question of their identities, "What do you mean by Jewish?" (Tal). This is a countercultural form of education. It aids learners in reconceptualizing a higher ideal for Jewish living beyond their community's embrace of the liberal-religious paradigm and provides Jewish students with versions of authenticity that are distinctly Jewish. Engaging with Israel, especially as to issues relating to its Jewish and democratic character, frames how students can conceive of their own liberal Jewish identity by embracing distinct visions of the Jewish good beyond comprehensive liberal values, such as the liberal-national paradigm prominent in the Jewish state.

The potential for such a countercultural approach toward Jewish education to succeed may rely on whether students encounter distinct visions of Jewishness rooted in collective identity consistently throughout their Jewish education, not just during their Israel education courses or experiences. However, Israel education courses may not be enough to counter this understanding of Jewishness. As one teacher summarized this challenge, "[Students] forget the thread that Jewish isn't exclusively a religion. From class to class, they keep forgetting." Addressing the non-religious, collective aspects of Jewishness in

liberal Jewish education has become especially important since the events of October 7, 2023 and the ensuing war, during which the very idea of Jewish national identity and the right of self-determination for Jews in their ancestral homeland has been challenged among progressives around the world (Alexander, 2024). If Israel education is the first- or only-time students in Jewish high school settings are presented with an intellectual and emotive opportunity to supplement their own visions of the Jewish good beyond the liberal-religious paradigm prominent in their local contexts by engaging alternative conceptions like the liberal nationalism of many Jewish Israelis, then the potential for Israel education to contribute to deepening liberal Jewish identity may be limited.

4.2 Israel education as central in developing distinct, Jewish visions of the good life

The pedagogy presented in this study highlights the importance of featuring Israel education as an integral element of all liberal Jewish education frameworks in formal and informal settings. The Israel education teachers we interviewed believe that teaching towards an ethical Jewish identity requires emphasizing Israel as a subject matter, regardless of its complexities and challenges. They identify Israel as a key subject matter for students in conceptualizing their liberal Jewish identities. As one teacher put it, "The perspective that I really want for my students... is, what does Israel mean to you and your Jewish identity?".

Our empirical research on teaching corroborates a central feature of Jewish history, which is distinct Jewish visions of the good life have always embraced the centrality of the land of Israel. Themes of national liberation, a return to Zion, and rebuilding of Jerusalem have been prominent features of Jewish liturgy, ritual, and the holiday cycle for millennia. Jews extol national liberation on Hanukkah and Passover and lament collective tragedy on fast days such as *T'sha Ba'av* (the 9th of Av).

But the centrality is not just because of the historical and theological importance of the land. It is also tied to the state of Israel, even when led by an illiberal government. Some liberal Jews may advocate dissociating Jewishness from its collective nature due to disagreements with policies promoted by an illiberal Israeli government and the perceived behavior of Israel's army—such as the push by the most recent Netanyahu government to weaken the independence of the judicial branch or Israel Defense Forces (IDF) actions in the Gaza Strip responding to the Hamas massacre of Israelis on October 7—or ideologically rejecting contemporary Zionism for a purported disregard of liberal values. However, those within Jewish life who argue that criticisms of Israeli treatment of Palestinians and anti-Zionist perspectives should be prioritized over the wide variety of Zionist and Israeli voices in Jewish education may unintentionally be supporting the centrality of collective identity and homeland to liberal Jewish visions of the good life by arguing for distinct visions of the Jewish good in relation to their views on Israel. And non-Jews who advocate prioritizing critiques of Israel's relation to Palestinians in Jewish education, may be seeking to impose forms of identity on Jewish youth that they may or may not otherwise wish to embrace. This could well be seen as precisely the sort of colonialism toward Jews that Israel and the so-called Zionist project have, falsely to our mind, been accused of perpetrating against Palestinians (Said, 1979).

Even if illiberalism may be spreading in Israeli society and Israeli government policies may advocate certain illiberal positions, disconnecting liberal Jewish identity from modern Israel and Zionism is unwise because, in contrast to Jews living in liberal-religious contexts outside of Israel, liberal Jewish Israelis do not lack distinct visions of the Jewish good.

This can be seen in liberal Jewish Israel's embrace of the Israeli flag, the Declaration of Independence, and *Hatikva* (the national anthem) as the symbols of the mass protest movement in 2023 against what they saw as the government's antidemocratic legislative agenda. It can also be seen in the mass mobilization of these protestors on October 7, within hours of the Hamas attacks, to join the IDF reserves and protect Israel and to lead civic efforts to provide civilian services not supplied by the government. This description of liberal Israeli Jews does not make a normative prescription on Israeli society and politics. Rather, it emphasizes the centrality of Israel to liberal Jewish education by pointing out the contrast between Liberal Jewish Israelis' vision of the good with their counterparts outside of Israel.

4.3 Implications of the study

If one conceives of Jewish education as being about transmitting valuable knowledge (Dewey, 1916; Peters, 2010; Plato, 2008) to help learners conceive of their authentic visions of the Jewish good (Alexander, 2001), Israel education is central to such a process. These cases of best practice that draw on the professional knowledge of exemplary Israel educators form the basis for a countercultural pedagogy that should be replicated throughout the various institutions that seek to provide a liberal Jewish education effectively navigating the tension between transmitting Jewish cultural understanding and affiliation, and democratic citizenship.

Jewish educational researchers should investigate how additional subject matter courses, curriculum, or content can help students understand different conceptions of Jewish identity beyond the liberal-religious Jewish paradigm. Scholars and practitioners of Jewish education should evaluate whether the curriculum and pedagogies utilized in courses and experiences dealing with Israel deepen behaviors and attitudes associated with liberal-religious Jewish identity. They should also explore how teachers of non-Israel focused courses can pedagogically aid students to conceptualize distinct visions of the Jewish good in conversation with the liberal-national paradigm prominent in Israel to help students determine an authentic version of themselves out of Jewish sources. This countercultural approach to Jewish education emphasizes the possibility of a liberal-national Jewishness that compliments a liberal-religious Jewish identity. It provides students with an opportunity to conceptualize how they think about being Jewish, what it means to them, and where Israel fits into their lives. This encourages the development of an ethically thick liberal Jewish identity.

5 Conclusion

Complementing the work of Barry Chazan (2016) with his relational approach to Israel education and Gil Troy's (2023) identity Zionism as a framework for the field, this study provides insight into how Israel education provides Jewish education with a vehicle to deepen liberal Jewish identity when conceptualized as an ethical identity. When experienced as the countercultural form of Jewish education that we propose, Israel education can allow students to engage distinct Jewish visions of the good life outside the default liberal-religious paradigm prominent in liberal, English-speaking countries and be exposed to liberal-national conceptions that provide meaningful opportunities for thick, authentic Jewish identity development.

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