

Welcoming Dr. Benji Davis to Azrieli

This fall, the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration welcomes Dr. Benji Davis as Assistant Professor of Jewish Education. Dr. Davis is both a scholar and practitioner. His research in philosophy of education, teaching sciences and Israel education has appeared in leading journals, and he was recently honored with the Harold Wechsler Award for Emerging Scholars from the Network for Research in Jewish Education. Beyond academia, he has contributed to major initiatives in Israel education and brings a passion for teaching and learning.

Tziri Lamm, a second year doctoral student, sat down with Dr. Davis for a conversation about his journey, his scholarship, and what excites him about joining the Azrieli community.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your path into the field of education?

I have always been both a student and an educator. After high school, I spent a year in Israel. In college, I was involved in every Jewish activity I could find, and Aliyah was always part of my plan. After graduating, I moved to Israel, joined the army, and while serving, I started speaking to Birthright groups. I was 24, still in uniform, shaved head, and suddenly teaching about Israel.

That led to teaching in gap year programs, yeshivot, and seminaries, focusing on Zionism, modern Israel, and the conflict. I pursued an MA in Jewish Education at Hebrew University and discovered I loved not just teaching, but also learning about teaching. That pushed me to a doctorate at the University of Haifa, with Professor Hanan Alexander as my advisor and mentor.

My early research asked: what does “Israel education” actually mean? Different communities - Orthodox, pluralistic, scholars, practitioners - use it differently. I analyzed the concept philosophically and identified seven models of Israel education. My dissertation then explored how teachers actually adopt these different approaches and teach about Israel in Jewish high schools across the English-speaking world. No one had really investigated what do teachers know pedagogically and within their content knowledge about teaching Israel, not as Israel studies, which is the study of modern Israel as one could study modern America or modern France, but really the study of Israel from a Jewish educational lens. Israel education focuses on why Israel has meaning and purpose and value in the life of a Jewish learner.

For me, the key has always been bridging theory and practice: clarifying ideas and then examining how they play out in real classrooms, shaping Jewish identity and education.

Q: How have the last two years shaped the urgency or direction of your work?

Its relevance has become much more heightened. I taught in a lot of yeshivas, seminaries, and for the Israel piece, it used to be that many wanted me to just kind of do a schmooze at like 9:00 at night. Now it's become much more central.

The challenge is that the topic of Israel isn't Limudei Kodesh - it's not why someone would come to Israel for the year. Whether it's a YU-affiliated yeshiva high school or a pluralistic community school, Israel is not the central component of a Jewish education. I think it's very interesting that across those different denominational settings the study of Judaism as a religion is really the heart of the Judaic studies curriculum, and Israel kind of sits outside of it. Judaic studies is really the study of a religion. It's the study of Judaism and the why, the how, the where, based hashkafically on where the institution and the community comes to. The challenge for Jewish education in the English-speaking world then is where does modern Israel, where does Zionism, where does modern Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood fit into it?

Then I moved to DC last year with my family for a postdoctoral fellowship, and I noticed “Stand with Israel” signs in people’s yards in my very Jewish neighborhood. At first, I was very confused. Why would people put a sign up in their yard that says, stand with yourself? Because if you're Jewish, you're a part of Am Yisrael. It didn't really make any sense. Then I saw weekly rallies for the hostages on a nearby bridge, with hundreds of people holding Israeli and American flags. It gave me goosebumps. I realized this was their way of saying Am Yisrael Chai. The challenge is how to integrate that sense of peoplehood into Jewish education. This question has always mattered, but today it feels urgent. Educators and stakeholders are asking seriously: how do we do this? How does it fit?

Q: How would you describe your approach to teaching and learning?

Real learning happens when students create knowledge for themselves. If they’re only memorizing what they’ve been told, it won’t stick. The sense of agency for the learner is of utmost importance. My teaching philosophy has always been, how do you position the learner to create knowledge? You have to get them to be a stakeholder in the learning process. And that means that the learning is very dialogical. It's very rooted in dilemmas and ethics and values. And for the learners to create questions for themselves and then for them to seek out those answers.

Whether I’m teaching high school students or doctoral candidates, I want them to feel the learning is theirs, not mine. Today’s students have endless access to information, but deep learning requires wrestling with values and big questions. That’s what I aim to cultivate in the classroom.

Q: Can you tell us more about the classes you’ll be teaching this fall?

I’ll be teaching two courses. The first is for doctoral students: a capstone that begins their dissertation journey. We’ll work on developing questions, methods, and understanding what a dissertation looks like. Having just completed my own PhD, I have a lot to contribute to people that are just starting out.

The second, which will be a lot of fun for me, is a master's elective on teaching Israel and Zionism. I'm excited for this—it's the first time I'll be able to bring together my scholarship and practical experience for students preparing to teach in day schools. Whether someone wants to teach religious Zionism, modern Israeli history, the Arab-Israeli conflict, or current events, the goal is for the course to provide both theory and practical tools.

Q: What excites you most about joining the Azrieli faculty?

What excites me most is joining a chavurah of scholars—a mission-driven group, each with different perspectives but all working toward the same goal. Everyone's on the same page of why we're doing what we're doing, there's a shared language and a culture, and we all really learn from one another and have a lot to add to one another.

It's also very exciting to be a part of an institution where I get to be back on the Hebrew calendar again. I made Aliyah at 22 and lived in Israel for 15 years. Living in the States wasn't part of the plan, but last year I got an amazing opportunity to do a post doctoral fellowship at George Mason University, which is just outside Washington DC. After one year, I feel like I'm leaving Galut and coming back. Joining YU is a shivat Tzion type of feeling for me.

Even though I'm very familiar with YU from my work with Nefesh b'Nefesh and from teaching in shana b'aretz programs, this is my first time actually at Yeshivah University. I'm very humbled and honored for the opportunity.

Q: Outside of academia, what inspires you?

My wife likes to say I'm lucky because my work is also my hobby. I love teaching and writing, but outside of that I enjoy food and sports. We loved the culinary scene in Jerusalem, so moving to the DC area was an adjustment. I also have three young daughters, so most of my time outside of work is being an Abba. Otherwise, I like going to shul and schmoozing with my friends like anyone else!

Q: Where can people find your work if they want to learn more?

My [first article](#), adapted from my MA thesis, became a lead piece in a special issue of the *Journal of Jewish Education* on Israel education with responses from eight scholars. A [piece](#) about the “you never told me” phenomenon - how teachers prepare students for critiques of Israel on campus was published in *Contemporary Jewry*, and I was also published in the *Journal of Religious Education*. I have a chapter in a book coming out about education after October 7th. I've also written for [Lookstein](#) and other [non-academic spaces](#).

I have an organization [IMPACT Israel Education](#) through which I teach and consult. I'm also currently part of a project with the Jewish Education Project on reimagining Israel education—so stay tuned for that.

We are thrilled to welcome Dr. Benji Davis to the Azrieli community and look forward to his teaching, scholarship, and contributions this fall.

Responses have been edited for clarity and length.