



A Jewish cemetery in the foreground and the Dome of the Rock in the background. It's important to understand, and teach students about, the complexities of Israel.

EDUCATION

What is Zionism and how do you teach it?

THE Australian Jewish community is often referred to as one of the more strongly Zionist communities in the Diaspora. A previous Israeli ambassador to Australia once told me that when he “got the Australia gig”, his appointment was met with envy among his diplomatic colleagues.

Australian Jews wear this badge with pride. We identify with Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people, as a democracy in a troubled region, as a constitutional and parliamentary democratic state in which all citizens have equal rights under the law.

But what does it mean to be a Zionist, and what does it mean to be an educator in such a community?

To put it in context, it is important to note that the use of the Z word is an accepted term here in Australia, without criticism or judgement in many corners. I am sorry to say that in other parts of the Jewish world, it is not so accepted.

Anyone who does not believe Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland ... does not fit into our Zionist pluralism.

To have Zionism Victoria and the Zionist Federation of Australia among our leading communal bodies is unusual in global Jewish communities.

Last month I attended a wonderful event organised by CSG, our community security group, which was a joint event with Victoria Police, thanking them for their support of our community. The Deputy Commissioner himself used the Z word proudly, and without fear of controversy or condemnation.

This was refreshing.

In the community I come from, such use of the term, and such proud ownership of the word is unusual. My previous

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principalship was of a Jewish high school in London, and as a new school, it was an especial and unique opportunity to set a school's ethos. I was determined that in the school's reception there should be two giant flags intertwined – the Union (British) Flag and the Israeli flag.

When I mentioned what we were going to do in a meeting, there was an opinion – a minority opinion, but an opinion expressed nevertheless – that it would be inappropriate to put a flag that outwardly expressed Zionism in a public setting. People might question our students' commitment as British citizens, it was suggested, and what if some people did not identify with Zionism?

Nonsense, I said. Schools cannot be all things to all people – we stand for certain things, and we are proud to stand for those things.

And more than that, words can be hijacked. There are people out there who choose to attach false meanings to words. Using the word “Jewish” to mean stingy with money, or “Muslim” to mean terrorist for example. The same is true for those who wish to discredit the word Zionism by insisting it means something violent or colonialist. It is important as Jews that we don't buy into this subversive shaming and be proud of our values and identity.

And in any case, what is Zionism? Zionism is quite simply this. The belief and identification with Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. No more and no less.

We can add in extras, such as comparing to other faiths and groups who have their own countries and why can't we? We can look at Israel as a lone democratic state in a dangerous neighbourhood. We can look at Israel's freedom of religion, of speech and so forth.

But in my opinion these are distractions. Healthy distractions, but distractions nevertheless.

So what is Zionism? Again, it is the belief and identification with Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. No more and no less.

Now within that framework, how do we as educators teach Zionism? How do we do this uniquely at a school such as Bialik College in Melbourne, or our pluralistic partner JCoSS in London? If to be a pluralist is to embrace, teach and respect diverse views, what are the boundaries of our Zionist pluralism?

Well, with younger children, it is rather different than it is with older ones. For younger children, we do want to wave the flag, eat the falafel, sing the songs. We want to establish a love and identification.

But at the same time, Israel is not heaven. It is not a Garden of Eden. And while we leave politics to a later stage in their education, we also want to normalise Israel. Alongside its many wonderful features, like any other country Israel has a sustainability and recycling challenge, a water problem – which country in a desert does not? And in common with the rest of the developed world, Israel has challenges with affordable housing, cost of living, transport and all those other challenges that a normal country faces.

We also teach this.

Last term I had the privilege of attending a year 9 Zionist seminar, a year before those students go on their life-changing Chavayah experience to China and Israel. The love of Israel, the strengths of Israel, its spiritual and practical place in the Jewish world is central to the seminar.

And so are some of the political nuances. Two peoples on one land is discussed. We heard first hand from a Jewish educator who grew up in Gaza before his family was forced to withdraw along with all the other Jews in 2005, and we struggled with both the Israeli and Palestinian narratives around that.

We learned about the wars Israel has faced – and losing just one of them would have resulted in its annihilation. And we learnt about rival claims to Jerusalem and the land.

Israel is a land of milk and honey, and it is also a land of complexity. As educators we have a responsibility to embrace that complexity and prepare our students for that complexity as they grow older.

Do we get it right all of the time? Who can make such a claim? Not so long ago I faced criticism for exposing our senior students to a speaker from the right wing, and in the same year from a speaker from the left wing. My conclusion was that getting some criticism from the right and the left in equal measure probably meant that we had it about right.

And in any case, personally, I quite like hearing from people I disagree with, and our senior students are similarly able to think and react critically to all sides of a debate. And just as we hug and struggle with our Australian identities – so is it healthy as older students and as young adults to struggle with our belief in God – whatever you may conceive Him (or Her) to be – or struggle with, and hug, our Jewish practice, or our lifestyles.

But does that mean anything goes? Absolutely not. Pluralism is not anarchy. Anyone who does not believe, and espouse, Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people does not fit into our Zionist pluralism.

Educators must not just teach about Israel's complexities because it is the educationally responsible thing to do. They must do so to ensure that our students develop a mature, honest and loving relationship with Israel, much like the unquestionable love we have for a family member, warts and all.

It's a love with depth, respect and realism.

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