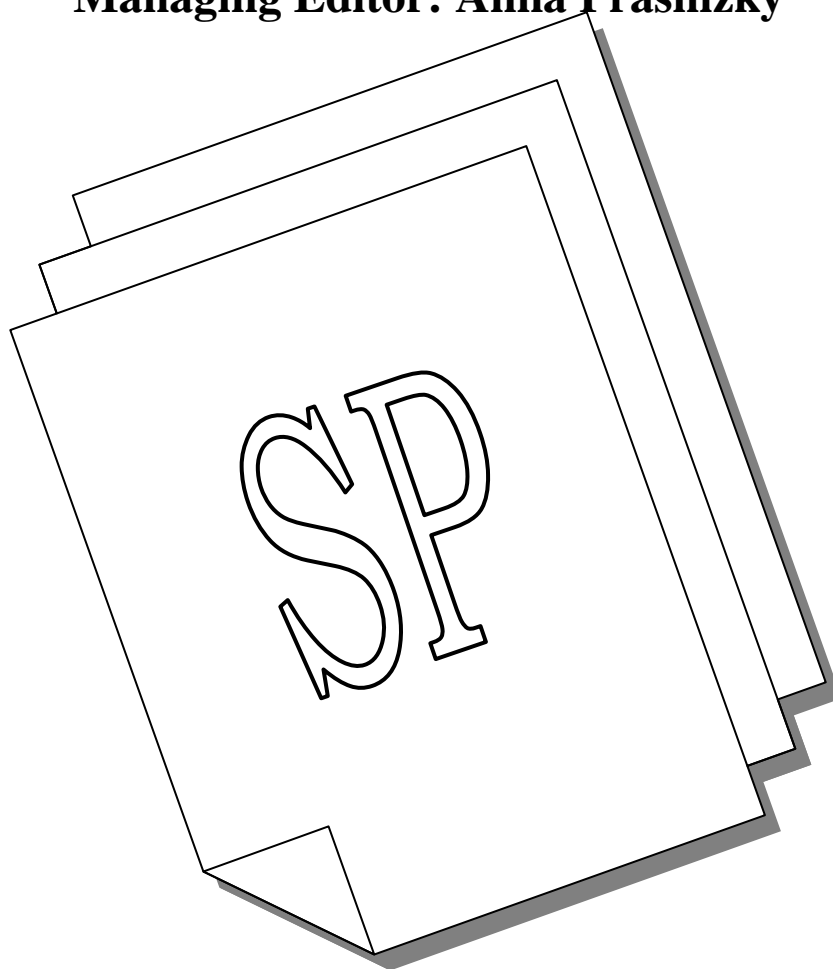


# *Sociological Papers*

## **Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Lessons and Challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora**

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# **The Israeli School as a Venue of Socialization for Israeli-American Children**

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## **Abstract**

Based on the ethnographic case study of the Israeli School in Lexington, MA, the authors discuss the role of formal and informal venues of transferring the Israeli identity from immigrant parents to their American-raised children. The analytical framework draws on the "holy trinity" of The People, The Land, and the Book as foundations of modern Israeli identity. The study showed that structured after-school activities can have a tangible effect on preserving Hebrew proficiency and the Israeli culture when they are supported by the creation of informal islands of Israeli socialization at home and in different enrichment venues for the children.

## **Introduction**

David Ben-Gurion (1969), the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, referred to the Jewish "holy trinity" as being composed of three elements: The People - the Jewish people, The Land – the State of Israel, and The Book – the Bible. These three elements reflect the complexity of the Jewish-Israeli identity: the Jewish people is comprised of millions of individuals all over the world, while their ancestral homeland is located in the State of Israel, and the Bible belongs to all of them – secular, orthodox, conservative, and reform. This multifaceted identity is challenged when secular Jewish Israelis emigrate and resettle in the countries of the Diaspora, permanently or for long periods.

Thousands of Israelis move to the United States each year, typically for work- or education-related reasons. One of the challenges some of these “American-Israelis” (secular Israeli Jews living in the US) face is how to maintain the Israeli identity of their children who very quickly adjust to the American culture. This task entails questions about the meaning of an “Israeli identity” outside of the State of Israel and the best ways to preserve that identity far away from the homeland of their Jewish heritage.

This paper explores these issues through a case study of the Israeli School of Lexington, a private afterschool program serving Israeli families living in Lexington, Massachusetts and other surrounding towns northwest of Boston. The Israeli School's

objectives are to teach and sustain the use of the Hebrew language and Israeli culture through the study of Jewish history and biblical stories, as well as celebration of Jewish and Israeli holidays. This elementary-level school was established in 2002 and in 2013 included 47 students and 6 teachers.

To understand the American-Israeli identity issue in a context, we begin with a background on Israelis living outside of Israel, the challenge of maintaining their Israeli identity abroad, and the educational solutions the American-Israelis offer their children. Then we describe the Israeli School, followed by the study's methodology, findings and discussion.

## **Identity Dilemmas among Israeli Émigrés**

Between the years 1990 to 2010, approximately 270,000 Israelis emigrated from Israel, with about 170,000 of them going to North America (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010). While this emigration is part of a global phenomenon of voluntary migration between developed countries, it challenges the national identity of these Israelis. National identity is defined as the feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group or a country, a framework which provides us with a land in which we are at home, a history which is ours, a heritage of culture and a moral agenda (Poole, 2003).

The formation of a national identity begins in the family with bedtime stories, songs, games, a mother tongue and cultural symbols, by which we experience, imagine, dream, and become aware of ourselves and of others. Identity formation is also supported by other socialization agents and learning settings (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). Emigration affects the feeling and concepts of national identity, particularly for members of a small nation like Israel with a turbulent history and strong attachments to its contested territory, universal military draft and deeply ingrained notions of patriotism. Let us see how the three main anchors of Israeli identity are affected by emigration.

**The People.** Living in Israel means for its natives living in a Hebrew-speaking country, amongst Jewish people (who constitute 75% of the Israeli population), using Jewish calendar and celebrating Jewish and Israeli holidays. Israelis believe that Israel is the homeland of Jewish people around the world and most of them (87%) support the Law of Return which grants citizenship to every Jewish person immigrating to Israel. Most Israelis (73%), also feel that while they have a common destiny with Jews in the Diaspora the Jewish people outside of Israel are a different nation (Arian & Keissar-Sugarmen, 2011).

Thus, when immigrating to the US, where local American Jews have a veteran community of similar ethno-religious origin but do not share the same national past, Israelis experience a 'double exile' from both their homeland and their ethnic group (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010). In addition, American-Israelis face three main ideological streams in American Judaism – Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, with which American Jews may or may not identify. American Jews also present different levels of observance within each movement, some of them as low as among secular Israelis (Ben-Rafael & Chaim-Refael, 2006). The Bible as a sacred/formative book or at least as a cultural baseline is common to all.

**The Book.** Most secular Israelis agree that the Jewish people would not exist without Judaism and that it is important to celebrate Jewish holidays in traditional ways, but they do so selectively. Most secular Israelis perform the Jewish rituals such as

circumcision, bar or bat mitzvah and traditional Jewish burial. They also celebrate the Jewish holidays Israeli style. Most of them say that the Bible and other classical Jewish texts are important and should be studied, but only a minority does so (Arian & Keissar-Sugarmen, 2011).

For American Jews, Judaism is the foundation for activities and community organizations. Most provide some form of Jewish education for their children either in a day school or supplemental study of Hebrew, Bible, Mishna, Talmud, prayer, and more (Ben-Rafael & Chaim-Refael, 2006). For secular Israelis, however, the Bible loses its status as the pillar of faith (Shapira, 2004). Despite Ben Gurion's vision of the Bible as the core of the Israeli nation, secular Israelis see it mainly as a historical reservoir from which each family chooses its favored holidays, customs, traditions and symbols. In the Israeli public arena, these chosen representations usually emphasize the land of Israel rather than Judaism and/or its holy texts (Ben-Rafael & Chaim-Refael, 2006). When emigrating to the US, the American-Israelis carry those cultural selections and emphases with them.

**The Land.** Emigration from Israel clashes with Zionist ideology and is perceived as a failure of the idea that all Jews have to gather in Israel. In addition, emigration from Israel may entail the emotional load of guilt and harming Israel's national strength by weakening its population base (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010). The special feeling Israelis have towards the land of Israel came to the fore in a comparative study conducted on Israeli and Japanese immigrants in Canada (Magat, 1999). The study found that Israelis maintain a strong "territorialized identity" perceiving themselves as existential sojourners who tell stories of return to Israel and often compare their new home with the nation-state of Israel. In contrast, most of the Japanese immigrants, whose identities are less territorial, were able to focus on their new home as the basis for their daily activities. They compensated for the loss of their homeland by devoting energy to their families.

The combination of the three pillars of the Israeli identity, along with personal variables such as the length of stay in the US, gender, education, occupation and socioeconomic background, affect the encounter of Israelis with the American culture (Tubin & Lapidot, 2008). An additional factor that shapes immigrants' assimilation and identity dilemmas is whether or not they have children. According to Sommer (2010), having children evokes identity issues when the children start to explore their identity compared with their peers and surroundings. Being forced to face their children's questions about their emerging identities helps the parents raise and resolve their own identity issues.

Transferring a sense of "Israeliness" to their children, however, is an ongoing struggle for most Israeli immigrants. In the early 1990's, Rosenthal & Auerbach (1999) found that 70% of Israeli immigrants to the US identified themselves as Israelis, spoke Hebrew at home, rejected the idea of Americanizing Hebrew names, and hoped to "return someday to Israel." They also found that only 6% of the children identified as Israeli, despite Jewish education that most of these children (57%) received in Jewish kindergartens, day schools, and Yeshivas. Similar findings were reported ten years later, in a study that found that the efforts invested in preserving the Israeli identity of the second generation (US-born children of Israeli parents or Israeli-born children brought to the US before age 12) by creating an "Israeli bubble," eventually fell apart with the children still getting Americanized (Lev Ari, 2008).

One solution for preserving a sense of Israeli identity is enrolling the children in Hebrew language classes, social programs (e.g. youth movements), and Israeli supplementary schools where families can pass on their distinct heritage and language to their children within close communities of Israeli expatriates. Few such schools have been established and sustained across the US, one of them being the Israeli School of Lexington (Zeder, 2008).

### **The Israeli School in Lexington, MA**

The school was established in 2002 for the reason clearly described by Zeder (2008):

*When Raveetal Celine and her husband, Graham, moved to the Boston area from Israel in 1999, their young daughters settled nicely into their new life — a little too nicely, Celine felt. The girls' Hebrew began slipping away, and their American friends were crowding out Israelis. Concerned that her daughters would lose their Israeli identity, Celine sought a solution, but Jewish day schools and congregational schools seemed too religious, too American and too expensive. So Celine got proactive: She co-founded the Israeli School of Lexington.*

The problem of children losing their Hebrew was common among other Israeli families, which prompted them to join the Israeli School. The parents who founded the school, mostly mothers, spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to keep their children's Israeli identity. "We were all career women who took this issue very seriously. We established the Israeli School as a start-up," recalls one of the founders. The mission was to emphasize the Hebrew language, Israeli culture and Jewish holidays. In addition "since we celebrated the holidays, it also linked the families and created an Israeli community within the Israeli School." While board members, school principals, teachers and families come and go, for the last 10 years the school has maintained its original goal of providing Israeli educational services for American-Israeli families.

The school provides two hours of classes once a week, on Thursday afternoons. Students range in age from five to ten and are divided, by age, into grades "K" (kindergarten) through five. There are six to ten students in each class. The curriculum is incremental so that in each subsequent grade the students get an advancing load of the curriculum subjects and the Hebrew language, both spoken and written. For example, in the kindergarten the focus is on fluency of self-expression through the use of Israeli songs and stories, along with reading and writing the Hebrew alphabet letters. In the 1<sup>st</sup> grade the students learn how to connect the letters and use the Hebrew vowels to create whole words, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade - how to rhyme, read and write simple stories, including those from the Bible. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade they expand the reading and writing abilities through the use of short stories, poems, parables and legends, posters and comics. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, the enhancement of their Hebrew reading and writing abilities is complemented by elements of civic education (Israeli government system, elections, immigration to Israel, geography, etc.) and a growing pool of concepts in Judaism. All studies draw on Hebrew literacy and integrate the Jewish and Israeli holidays.

The main books and learning materials are based on the Israeli Ministry of Education's recommendations, with adjustments made in line with the students' mastery of Hebrew, the only language spoken in class. The lessons incorporate a lot of hands-on, enjoyable activities (singing, dancing, playing, art projects, etc.). The

students receive homework and present their progress by means of class projects and performances. All teachers are Israeli and native Hebrew speakers. Although most of them do not have teaching certificates, the majority have prior teaching experience, either in Israel or in the US. The staff conducts monthly meetings for curriculum planning and assessment.

At the time of our study in 2013, the School was serving 35 families and 47 students. Parents' ages ranged between 35 to 50 years old. Six parents were Jewish American, two were Christian American, and the rest were Israelis currently living in the US. Most parents have higher education and work in the hi-tech industry or academic institutions. About 80% of the families have been in the US for more than five years.

Lev Ari & Renbhun (2010) found that more than half of American Israelis maintain a synagogue membership, with more than 40% attending services at least once a month. Six out of ten donate to Jewish causes. It is reasonable to assume that most of the Israeli School's parents do not belong to this majority, but, instead, represent a sub-group of American-Israelis wishing to preserve their children's Israeli identity. Accordingly, the research questions are:

*How do parents of children at the Israeli School construe their Israeli identity and its components?*

*How do these parents perceive the role of the Israeli School in preserving their children's Israeli identity?*

## **Methodology**

This study is the work of two co-authors. One is a sociologist of education currently in the United States on a one-year sabbatical. Her niece attends the School. The second is the current Principal of the Israeli School. This constellation prompted us to combine two research methods: ethnography and instrumental case study (Stake, 1995).

This mix allows the first author to make participant observations, spending two hours a week with other parents at the "couches" (a sitting area where the parents gather and wait for their children while school is in session). This author spent these weekly sessions interviewing many of the parents and chatting with several siblings that are either too young or too old to be enrolled in the School. The administrative position of the second author allowed us to gather all the data needed for the case study.

Combining two research methods raises the issue of an emic/etic distinction (the insider view of reality vs. the outside scientific observer) and the issue of meeting the rigorous criteria for qualitative methodology: reliability, transferability, trustworthiness, and applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to address these issues and obtain rich ethnographic data while uncovering the underlying relationships pertinent to the studied phenomenon (Stake, 1995), we applied the principle of data triangulation by employing several tools and information resources. We carried out *participant observations* during the following holidays and ceremonies: Sukkot, Hanukkah, Tu Bi'Shvat, Purim, and Yom Ha'Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). We also *gathered documentation* related to the curriculum and school norms and conducted *semi-structured interviews* with the principal, three board members (whose children are enrolled at the school), four other parents, and the two school founders. The interview guide consisted of a set of open-ended questions asking informants to reflect on their identity, relationship with Israel, and the

functions and goals of the Israeli School. In addition, reflective short interviews were conducted for twelve weeks with parents and students about ongoing events. The data were collected from October 2012 through March 2013 and all interview materials were transcribed.

We also applied *Directed Content Analysis* (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Data analysis was performed according to the research questions, looking for similarities while allowing for new and additional perspectives. To avoid bias towards the evidence supportive of our conceptual framework, and to enhance researchers' alertness to contextual aspects, we used a critical review discussing contradictions and different interpretations arising from the data and the literature until agreement was reached. Following the principle of *rich description*, we infused the text with typical citations to allow direct access to original data and interpretation as much as possible within the confines of this paper.

## Findings

Overall, it was found that the informants are very certain about their own Israeli identity, while facing its erosion among their children. They see the Israeli School as a good, albeit limited, answer to this challenge. The findings are presented according to the research questions about the Israeli identity, its components and relation to the Israeli School. All names and identifying personal details have been changed to maintain the informants' anonymity, except the number of years they have been living in the US stated in brackets.

## Israeli Identity

Israeli identity has been found to be safe and secure among the informants themselves, regardless of how many years they had spent in the US or what other nationality they hold. As presented by Sasha, a Russian Jew who immigrated to Israel at 17 and came to the US five years ago for postgraduate studies at Harvard:

*I have already embraced three identities and three continents. I don't miss Russia... maybe the smells and the seasons. We left it like a foreign object leaving the body... Adjustment in Israel was tough, but we felt a sense of belonging and being at home. Nobody can take the Israeliness back from me. They can take my Russianness or the Americanisms, but they can't take my Israeliness. This is my birthright because I am a Jew. I was educated in Israel, got married and had a child there. Other countries can say 'you cannot be our citizen' but not Israel. The Russians took my passport... I didn't want to belong to a country that doesn't want me... The People and the State are very important values that are worth sacrifice, but neither Russia nor the US deserve it. I am willing to pay taxes here but not to sacrifice my other goals.*

Erik is struggling with his identity, compared to other members in his family:

*I am an Israeli Jew by tradition, but I've been here enough time (15 years), so I am also American. My wife is American... personally, I don't consider myself an American, but as a family, we are not "returning to Israel in a year or two." We are here.*

Iris (7 years) is very sure of her Israeli identity, despite her concern with Americans' perceptions of it:

*At the beginning I was worried, didn't know if Americans around me love or hate Israel. But they actually don't care... I make an effort to avoid Hebrew, so they won't hear the RRRR and CHCHCH, I didn't want to be rejected, to be different... but yes, I am an Israeli. Even when I'll get the American citizenship after seven years here, I am still an Israeli, and they (the Americans) consider me Israeli, although they can't tell by my accent.*

Ten-year-old Rina (2 years in the US) has already obtained an American accent when speaking Hebrew, but explained why she is an Israeli: "I am less strict and organized than my American friends. When I asked a friend to come over, she asked that my mother sends an email to her mother 'about this issue and how it will go.' They are so formal."

In general, all the informants report a strong Israeli identity that is rooted in the Hebrew language, the holidays, the songs and memories of home. This stands out especially in comparison to their children, who are usually proficient in English and much less so in Hebrew, and manifest American cultural traits such as politeness and good behavior. Meirav (14) describes it like this: "My five-year-old child is super-American... on our last visit to Israel she asked me why other children were staring at her. She is not used to the Israeli direct gaze." She goes on to add: "I am an Israeli. All my friends, relatives and family are Israelis. I haven't got any other identity except the Israeli one. Not even the American."

When we approach the interview data applying the values of the People, the Land, and the Book, and the Israeli School's role in their transfer to the next generation, things become more complicated.

**The People.** The sense of belonging, strong ties, and positive feelings about Israeliness and Israelis surfaced repeatedly in the interviews. Ruthi, only two months in the USA, enrolled her five-year-old son in the Israeli School and brings her younger son to wait with her every week. They came to the US for four years and, based on discussions she had with other American Israelis, she understood "how important it is to convey to the children the knowledge of who they are, where they come from, and to preserve what they have."

All interviewees mentioned the importance of Hebrew. "People that are coming for a short while... think they can preserve the Hebrew... But the children quickly assimilate and start speaking English at home." Several parents said that they have tried to use other methods. Gili's (10) 5 year-old son used to have an Israeli e-teacher in a virtual classroom. Every Saturday he had a lesson and managed to learn all the Hebrew letters. But Gili missed the celebrations, the holidays and the community. Other parents mentioned the lack of skills needed to teach Hebrew to their children: "You are not a teacher. You have to learn how to teach Hebrew and then do it, and still it's hard and boring." (Sasha, 5)

In addition to the language, the content of what is taught is also important to the parents. Some parents, for example, felt that it is important to commemorate Yitzchak Rabin Memorial Day at the School while others found it unnecessary; one mentioned that the formal Hebrew textbook contains some uncommon words, but all agreed that the Israeli culture is very important: "All this business of celebrations and performances that they are doing in front of the parents and in the classroom, it adds interest and fun - things that the Hebrew language itself can't convey." (Erik, 15 years)



It seems that the main task of the parents and the School is to allow the children to assimilate into the American culture without losing the Israeli one. As Iris (7) explained:

*At home we speak Hebrew, but at the supermarket we switch into English; and when friends come it's English only. I don't want my children to feel like outsiders. My husband immigrated as a child with his parents from Russia to Israel, and he hated when they spoke Russian to him in front of his friends. Eventually, today, he doesn't speak Russian and he regrets it. So we watch Israeli television programs like "A Star is Born" (the Israeli version of American Idol) and the kids love it. They listen to Israeli singers like Gidi Gov, Arik Einstein, Miri Mesika. They recognize the singers and song names, but they aren't different from their friends because they also listen to local music.*

The Israeli School aims to immerse the students in the Hebrew language, which serves two purposes. One is to strengthen their language skills enough so that they can enjoy visits to Israel and what it has to offer, to fully develop relationships with family and friends still living there. The second is to lessen the children's (potential) feelings of alienation in America.

"There is no struggle to turn these kids into Israelis, it's a lost cause," says Iris (7), "but the School makes a lot of effort to make the Israeli culture accessible to them through language and friends. They shouldn't feel like the only Israeli child in their peer group. They should know that there are others like them and not to be ashamed of their origins." Another angle on minority status is added by Sasha (5): "In Russia, when you are the only Jew in the class, this is enough to create a sense of anti-Semitism. Here, a kid knows he is a Jew, and in the Israeli School he gets more confidence... so he doesn't feel like an alien."

The idea of exposing the children to the Israeli culture is also discussed by Erik (15), who connects it to his relationship with his children: "The Israeli School is the exposure to the Israeliness, to the secular Jewishness. Israeliness is the language, the celebrations, the holidays. It is important because it is my identity... their heritage... their family in Israel – their grandfather, grandmother, aunts."

The idea that the School reinforces the connection to the Israeli people *and* to the parents themselves is voiced by Meirav (14): "They like to attend [the School], they like the friends they meet there. It echoes the things that they hear at home. It connects them to their parents' identity." Sasha (5) adds: "When you give them the feeling that Israel is a good place, happy and pleasant like the Israeli School, it associates Israel with goodness."

In addition to seeing the role of the School as an "identity preserver" and an "affinity enhancer," the parents also realize its limitations, as Iris (7) explains:

*There are parents that over-estimate the role of the School, assuming that if they take the children out, all their Israeli identity will evaporate. I see it differently... [my daughter's] Israeli identity will not rise or fall because of the Israeli School... education starts at home... One can't attend a school two hours a week and speak Hebrew or develop an identity... Either it will be at home or not at all... I think that my daughter's Israeli identity will stay with her forever, as long as I support it...*

In summary, the Israeli School is perceived as strengthening the links of the second generation to the people of Israel in many ways: it enforces and enhances the Hebrew language so that they can stay connected with their Israeli family and friends; it infuses them with the Israeli holidays, celebrations and norms so they can relate to their parents' memories and feelings; and it creates a community in which they can find other children in the same position. The School also has a role with respect to the Land of Israel.

**The Land.** The Land of Israel appeared as a theme in two ways: (1) the eventual return to Israel and (2) service in the Israeli Army. As found in other studies (Magat, 1999; Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010), it is very hard for Israelis to admit that they have left Israel forever, even when the decision has already been made. Iris (7) also exemplifies this ambivalent feeling: "If I could return [to Israel] for two years and then come back here, I would happily do so. This is funny because when we came here I said it was only for two years." As for the question of whether they see themselves returning to Israel, Erik (15) explains:

*If we had an opportunity... we are not looking for one, but if there was an opportunity, we would consider it... The problem is that the government benefits geared towards repatriation are minimal and intended for people who are returning permanently, and all the privileges are in this direction... but if I think about returning, benefits like a tax-free car or refrigerator are unimportant... I'm looking for an opportunity to come back and see if we can rebuild our lives there... something like a Sabbatical... but I have a home here, a mortgage, our cars, and work...so it is not very practical.*

An interesting perspective on the subject is provided by David, a Christian American, who spent last year with his family in Israel for his doctoral studies. Their 5 year-old daughter became fluent in Hebrew, so in order to preserve and improve her language (but without religious education) they enrolled her into the Israeli School.

*It may be because of the 'Diaspora negation.' If you grew up in Israel with the idea that all Jews should come to Israel, it is tricky to establish an Israeli community in the Diaspora. Only as something temporary that leaves the door open. If a return to Israel is not an option, then it is not an Israeli thing."*

The Israeli School's role in the matter of return to Israel is to help keep all options open, as stated by Sasha (5): "The Israeli School gives a balance between getting along with the surrounding society and keeping the Israeli identity... so you will always have the opportunity to return to Israel."

An additional subject that relates to the Land of Israel is the service in the Israeli army. As Iris (7) explains:

*Many children here want to serve in the Israeli army because they view it as heroic. The Israeli School should present the subject in a realistic manner, so that the children understand that in Israel you have to serve in the army, but it comes with many difficulties and dangers. When they understand this, they become less excited."*

Sasha (5) believes that exposure to the Israel culture will help to draw a more realistic picture:

*We know Israeli families here that speak English at home and repress any reminder of Israel, and sometimes they are surprised because their children have discovered their Israeli heritage and start exploring it. Then it can develop in several ways: becoming anti-Israeli or going back to Israel, and even joining the army. Usually these young adults get excited about Israel even more than their Israeli peers, and they like the idea that at the very moment that they land at the Ben-Gurion airport, they can become Israeli citizens.*

It seems that the State of Israel, with its promise of immediate citizenship and a sense of belonging, but also a requirement of compulsory army service, is a source of both attraction and worry. Even those couples who have definitively decided that there is no question of going back to Israel don't deny the possibility that their children might, one day, choose to live there. But if and when that happens, it would be unlikely to reflect religious reasons.

**The Book.** The Book (the Bible, its related texts and traditions) represents the Jewish religious heritage, which is observed only selectively by the School's families. "The Israeli School was established to serve secular Israelis that wish to raise their children as Israelis, and who feel uncomfortable with the religious education offered by the American-Jewish community" (School Principal, 10 years in the US). In general, the interviewees seem to differentiate themselves from American Jews on two bases: the Hebrew language and religion.

*The Hebrew Language* - The interviewees do not consider the Hebrew taught in Hebrew schools and Sunday schools of the typical American Jewish community to be "real" Hebrew. The level is very basic, it is prayer-oriented, and the American accent is a strong deterrent. This attitude was expressed by Meirav (14): "My children attended a Jewish summer camp. They had a lot of fun, but when they came back home and sang 'David, Melach Israel' in a heavy American accent, it took me a while to realize what song it was." Erik (15) answers the question about the possibility of sending his children to a Jewish school as follows: "The level of Hebrew there is much lower than they know and are exposed to at home... The difference between the Jewish schools and the Israeli School is the teaching of culture and heritage versus religion." On the other hand, when discussing the idea that Americans might send their children to the Israeli School, he states: "The American Jewish community won't send their kids here. For a family that doesn't speak Hebrew at home it is very difficult. They return home with homework in Hebrew, and there is no one to help them."

*The Religion* - Another factor that drives the Israelis away from the American Jewish schools is the religious content. The obvious reason for this is that secular Israelis, those who do not attend a synagogue and observe religious rituals, are not looking for the services provided by the American Jewish community. "We enrolled our daughters at a Jewish school for a trial. An amazing school, but we couldn't accept the fact that they had to pray twice a day... I didn't even get married in a Jewish ceremony in Israel. I don't do this kind of thing" (Meirav, 14). In addition, because of the Orthodox domination in religious and political life in Israel, most Israelis are only familiar with Orthodox Judaism, while Reform and Conservative movements very common in the USA (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010) seem strange to them. As Meirav explains:

*We grew up in Israel in the Orthodox genre. It is irritating, but at least it is direct and to the point. Here, we went with a friend to a Reform ceremony, and it was so long and tedious, and I didn't recognize any of the songs. Even the lyrics I knew were sung with a different melody.*

Jewish rituals and holidays are also celebrated very differently by the American and Israeli Jews, and the Israeli School offers a familiar secular version. As Meirav (14) recounted: "We have tried to celebrate with local Jews and couldn't. I can't do a Passover Seder in English... here [at the Israeli School] it is what I know and what I am used to." Iris (7) said in a similar manner:

*We only started celebrating the Jewish holidays here in the Israeli School... My daughter asked why don't we have a Christmas tree... and it made me think, it is not my holiday. We celebrate Hanukah... So we started lighting Shabbat candles at home on Friday nights... here is the first time I made hamentaschen and sufganiot (Israeli doughnuts)...*

In summary, our case study revealed that the three components of the People (Hebrew), the Land (a faraway homeland), and the Book (Jewish traditions and Israeli customs) combine at the Israeli School to create an educational environment that reflects the parents' Israeli identity and supports the emergent identity of their children. Notably, though, our research has uncovered an additional method of transferring national identity from parent to child.

## **The Israeli School and Beyond**

The strong Israeli identity of the Israeli School parents appears in the data as part of a complex set of opposing tendencies: Israel-Diaspora, staying-returning, secular-religious, Hebrew-English. These dichotomies left us with the feeling that there was more to it; that the Israeli School has a greater function than just teaching Hebrew and providing a place to celebrate holidays and festivals. Spending time with the parents each week "on the couches," we realized that the space itself reproduces an Israeli "essence." It is not just an oasis where families can pass on their distinct heritage and language to their children (Zeder, 2008), nor an "Israeli bubble" that creates an alternative Israeli space (Lev Ari, 2008). It is a microcosm created when Israelis do what they know how to do best: simply, be Israelis. According to Bourdieu (1990), identity develops within the habitus, a generative scheme of binary oppositions which help to construct the world and produce the right behavior in different situations (Jenkins, 1992). The parents, by their very nature and in unconscious ways, seem to reproduce some of the Israeli binary oppositions that echo Israeli characteristics, as demonstrated below:

*Temporary vs. Permanent.* We found that the parents have invested a great deal in sustaining the Israeli School but, for the past decade, they could never be sure if it will stay open the following year. They volunteer their time and efforts beyond what is requested, while also negotiating small financial contributions; they very much enjoy one another's company and friendship, while often mentioning their close relations with the Americans. As Meirav (14) describes: "I miss having Israeli friends. I have American friends. The American friendship is different. Not less – they will do anything for me, but it is based on different codes."

*Cohesiveness vs. Fragmentation.* While it seems very clear who is 'Israeli,' and all are very welcome, the interviewees constantly refer to numerous internal divisions: between this School and other Israeli Schools in the area; between the Israelis who

speak Hebrew with their children and those who have switched to English; between the families that came for a short stay in the US and those living here much longer; between academic/hi-tech workers and the others, and so on. As portrayed by Erik (15):

*The Israeli community has them all. There are those that came only for a short time as doctoral and postdoc students; there are those who came due to company relocation and are not yet sure – they talk about return but stay on, and there are the families that are definitely here to stay...*

*Institutionalization and Improvisation.* On the one hand, the Israelis have learned the American way of institutionalization and community building by establishing a tuition-based school. On the other, they don't see the Israeli School as a necessary core of an Israeli community in the US. Iris (7 years) explained:

*The Israeli community is what we have here (in the Israeli School). But this will be over if we won't keep in touch... as long as new members join, there will be a community... If nobody will join, it will end, vanish. The School's future is always uncertain because the families need a community... but Israelis struggle to overcome their own prejudices against one another.*

And Erik (15) added:

*The Utopia is that we [the Israeli School] will be a more central part in the local Israeli community, but practically, because it is a voluntary organization and takes a lot of our time (the board members), we don't have illusions. The priority is to keep the School running, enlist enough families every year, and maintain a good academic level for the children. We don't have the time to broaden our role in the community beyond this task... on top if it, the Israelis would often say - we are paying tuition, why should we also volunteer?*

These sometimes contradictory tendencies and opinions reflect feelings and attitudes that are common in the Israeli culture, called by Yair (2011) "the code of Israeliness." For example, after 2,000 years of Jewish heritage and 100 years of Zionism, Israelis are still uncertain of their future existence; they are willing to selflessly serve their country but also expect it to take care of them; they have plentiful creativity but lack consistency and discipline, and so on. Along the same lines, Kamir (1999) describes the Israeli cultural narrative as "trust me, everything will be OK" (smoch al'ai, ihi'e beseder) that presents at the same time responsibility and carelessness; communality and loneliness; fluidity and permanence; and the search for quick fixes without adequate resources. If these trends indeed characterize the Israeli culture that is reproduced at the Israeli School, it could influence preserving the next generation's identity. Not because these characteristics are deliberately taught, but because they create a social environment in which the children naturally absorb the Israeliness.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the role of the Israeli School in supporting the Israeli identity among the children of secular Israelis who have relocated to the US. We found that the Israeli School does it explicitly, through the (exclusive) use of the Hebrew language and the Israeli culture-focused curriculum, and implicitly by reproducing an Israeli cultural space that allows parents and children to experience and practice

Israeliness. These findings underscore the key aspects of Jewish-Israeli identity preservation in the Diaspora: the importance of the Hebrew language, the parents' Israeli identity, and the reproduction of the Israeli space.

*The Hebrew language* was found to be the key for identity preservation. Not the language of the Bible and prayers, but the actively spoken and written Israeli Hebrew. Although the parents realize that two hours a week are certainly not enough, they find the Israeli School to be an important foundation for keeping and improving their children's Hebrew, so the children can enjoy relationships with their Israeli relatives and their visits to Israel.

One corollary of our findings is that, in many ways, the Israeli School's focus on Hebrew and the Israeli style of celebrating holidays could potentially act as "bridging capital" to the local Jewish community. According to Gold (2006), some American-Jewish organizations do appreciate the potential contributions of Israeli immigrants to Jewish community life and are making a greater effort to attract Israelis. However, to further develop this potential, the Israeli Schools would have to extend their effort to attract American Jews with a limited Hebrew proficiency. The connections that would be formed between the two communities could be of great benefit to both. Establishing and managing the School has allowed American-Israelis to practice institutional development American-style and equipped them with the skills for developing a vision and a business plan, establishing a board, collecting tuition, raising money, paying the teachers, and running the school on a volunteer basis. These skills allow the Israelis to better understand the American Jewish community and might, over time, encourage more cooperation. Further study should explore the collaboration efforts between the Israeli immigrants and the local Jewish communities.

*The Israeli Identity of the Parents.* As found in this and other studies, the Israeli immigrants identify themselves primarily and principally as Israelis. (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010; Harris, 2012) Unlike Uriely (1994), the authors of this study don't see this as 'rhetorical ethnicity' but more as transnational identity. According to the transnational view, no conflict is necessary between geographic space and social identity; Israelis, like other immigrants, can link together their societies of origin and settlement (Harris, 2012). Other studies have already found that there is a connection between the parental attitudes towards Israel and the next generation's identity (Lev Ari, 2012; Casey & Dustmann, 2010). But the mechanism that sustains strong Israeli identity among the expatriates is not yet clear. Our findings suggest that the combination of the People, the Land and the Book, as well as the concept of a 'double diaspora' (from their homeland and their ethnic group) (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2010) contributes to the strength and resilience of the Israeli identity. In turn, this identity manifested in the creation of the Israeli School may exert a powerful effect on the preservation of the double or transnational identity by the second generation Israelis.

Further study is needed to clarify the dynamics between identity resilience and its components. Not all immigrants maintain such a resilient identity, or manage to transmit it to their children. Rumbaut (2002), for example found that the share of homeland identity attachments among the 1.5 generation (foreign-born children who immigrated as 12 - 17 year-olds) from Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Latin-America, and Asian countries to the US is estimated at under 10 percent of the total. The highest share of homeland attachments was found among the Mexicans who have a large immigrant population and a long border with the US. In comparison, 1.5

and second generation Israelis, who represent a tiny immigrant community faced with the uniqueness of the Hebrew language, were found to score on average 4 (on a 5-point ascending scale) for the item “feels Israeli” (Lev Ari, 2012). The consistent reproduction of the Israeli social and linguistic space can explain some of these findings.

*The Reproduction of the Israeli Space.* Former studies have found that Israeli immigrants create a variety of strategies to cope with their craving for Israel: consuming Hebrew-language media; attending Israeli social events, restaurants, nightclubs and celebrations; joining Israeli associations and youth movements; working with other Israelis; sending their children to Israeli-oriented religious, language, recreational, daycare, and cultural/national activities; hosting Israeli visitors; and making frequent trips to Israel (Gold, 2006; Lev Ari 2008).

In its current shaky position, it is questionable if the Israeli School could serve as the foundation of an Israeli community - as an “Israeli town” or “Little Israel.” It is not even clear if the Israelis themselves want such a community at the moment. But even in its modest and limited state, the Israeli School has been found to be an appropriate solution to maintaining national identity, at least for the community that established it.

The unique contribution of this study is in revealing the underlying Israeli culture of the Israeli School that supports the structured educational efforts. The parent gatherings at the school, the informal discussions, the family-like relationships, as well as tolerance towards the children’s Israeli ways of behavior such as running in the corridors and loud speech, offer additional elements of Israeli socialization. While this environment provides the children with the firsthand experiences of Israeliness, it also helps the parents nurture their Israeli identity and thus slows down its erosion. In this way, not only does the Israeli School help preserve the children’s identity, but also enhances it among their parents. Further ethnographic study that delves deeper into the characteristics of such spaces in other Israeli Schools can better explain how it creates and sustains the children’s identity.

The current study has some apparent limitations: the small number and selective nature of the interviewees, the shortage of observed time span, and the single-school case study limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore this study should be seen as a pilot that fosters new insights and raises new questions and propositions for further research (Eisenhardt, 1989). Our findings indicate that future research on the resilience of an Israeli identity among American Israelis (including the role of Israeli Schools) can be informed by the framework symbolically represented by the trinity of the People, the Land, and the Book.

The study has also several practical implications. *First*, it is important to support Israeli Schools. Few such schools are currently available in the US (Zeder, 2008). However, based on our case study, it seems that they are beneficial for maintaining the Israeli identity among American-Israeli immigrants and their children. We therefore suggest that Israeli consulates and other interested organizations should support such schools. *Second*, the schools such as the Israeli School of Lexington can be instrumental in building bridges with local Jewish communities, especially among secular Jews who are more interested in the Hebrew language and Israel rather than religion. Some effort is required on both the American Jewish and expatriate Israeli side for such initiatives to succeed, but it seems rather possible. *Third*, the very existence of an “Israeli space” enhances such school’s educational and emotional effect. However, to allow for this type of space to emerge, the school should

encourage it by providing simple but necessary items, such as parking, a comfortable sitting area, and a welcome climate. Such supportive efforts, by Israeli consulates, local communities, and within the school itself will all contribute to improving the effectiveness of such schools in preserving the Israeli identity.

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