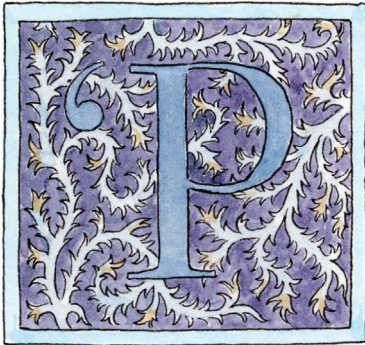


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(Israel) Educators

Is the American Jewish community suffering from the Dunning-Kruger effect?



OLLY PUT the kettle on, we'll all have tea." This endearing 19th-century nursery rhyme is catchy, but one is left wondering, "Put the kettle on what? What's in the kettle? Why do you need to put the kettle on to have tea?"

E.D. Hirsch Jr.—American literary critic and educational theorist—reminds us that these questions are left unsaid and the answers taken for granted. Millions of people sing this nursery rhyme, unconscious of the background knowledge one needs in order to understand this song.

If this is true regarding something as benign as these nine words, what about when it comes to Jewish identity, Zionism, and Israel education? What are Jewish communities "singing" while taking for granted? And, perhaps more important, what shared knowledge do we think we have but don't?

In the May 2017 edition of Yeshiva University's student newspaper, *The Commentator*, the outgoing president, Richard Joel, shared one of his memorable epithets. He talked about the importance of investing not only in *klei kodesh* (vessels of holiness, metaphorically referring to rabbinic leaders) but also in lay *kodesh*, referring to the responsibility of non-rabbinic teachers and leaders to be knowledgeable, skilled, and Jewishly erudite.

The value of an educated public can hardly be overstated, specifically as it relates to the conversation about Israel and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, a topic often discussed with breathtaking levels of ignorance. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Berkeley professor Ron Hassner reported on a survey conducted of “250 students from a variety of backgrounds across the U.S.” When asked about the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” chanted frequently at rallies, “most said they supported the chant, some enthusiastically so (32.8%) and others to a lesser extent (53.2%).”

These stats were very disturbing, but even more disturbing was the fact that “only 47% of the students who embrace the slogan were able to name the river and the sea.” He went on to point out other painfully embarrassing ignorant moments, such as the fact that “less than a quarter of these students knew who Yasser Arafat was (12 of them, or more than 10%, thought he was the first prime minister of Israel).” And, “asked in what decade Israelis and Palestinians had signed the Oslo Accords, more than a quarter of the chant’s supporters claimed that no such peace agreements had ever been signed.”

Ironically, Hassner’s article offered some hope to the “pro-Israel” world when he concluded that “after learning a handful of basic facts about the Middle East, 67.8% of students went from supporting ‘from the river to sea’ to rejecting the mantra.”

What a difference a bit of knowledge makes.



Notwithstanding the absurdity of protesting something one fundamentally doesn't understand (and, broadly speaking, advocating genocide), the members of Jewish WhatsApp groups mocking these college students may well be throwing stones in glass houses, unaware of their (and our) own gaps in knowledge.

Over the past six years, I have made it my mission to ensure there is a campaign of education about Israel and Zionism for the next generation. In my community lectures, from Sydney to Miami, I often reference a quotation from Mahmoud Abbas: "From 1947 to the present day, Israel has committed 50 massacres in Palestinian villages and cities — in Deir Yassin, Tantura, Kafr Qasim, and many others — 50 massacres, 50 holocausts. And until today, and every day, there are casualties killed by the Israeli military." I then ask the audience what they think of Abbas's comments. "They're hideous!" People shout. "Antisemitic," many scream. I agree. But when I ask: "What happened in Deir Yassin? What happened in Kafr Qasim? Do you have any clue what he is talking about?" Blank stares.

On a visit after October 7 to one of the premier Jewish high schools in the country, the principal informed me that many of the students "can't locate Gaza" on a map. One Modern Orthodox middle school shared that more than 75 percent of their students had "a strong emotional attachment to Israel," but when asked to define Zionism, a full 60 percent wrote, "I don't know what Zionism is."

How can we look at ourselves in the mirror and ask our young people to represent Zionism when they do not know what Zionism is? And if they don't know what Zionism is, how could they ever distinguish between that of Jabotinsky and that of Weitzman? Do they

know the history of 1936–1939 and how it informs the narrative of October 7? Are they able to think through the Hebron massacre of 1929 and have the ability to identify historical through lines and intellectual themes as they relate to Sheikh Jarrah and the May 2021 fight between Hamas and Israel?

How can we bemoan the ignorance of those who oppose Jewish statehood if so many in our own community lack such basic knowledge of the competing narratives about its founding? As a community, what is our responsibility?



In 1999, psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger published a landmark study exploring the gap between people’s actual knowledge of a given topic and their confidence in that level of knowledge. It turns out that when a person knows nothing about a topic, he is often quite aware of his ignorance. But when he knows something, not a lot, he is overly (and erroneously) confident in what he thinks he knows. This is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect.

In their landmark study, Dunning and Kruger reached this conclusion:

When people are incompetent in the strategies they adopt to achieve success and satisfaction, they suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it. Instead...they are left with the mistaken impression that they are doing just fine....The same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognize correct judgment. To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter.

In other words, they saw that Charles Darwin was right when he argued in *The Descent of Man* in 1871 that “ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.” This can afflict any of us who have some competence in a given area but linger at the middle-knowledge level—we can fall into a trap of thinking we know much more than we actually do. It’s at that point that our confidence trumps our competence and we are not aware of it. As David Dunning himself has quipped, “The first rule of the Dunning-Kruger club is you don’t know you’re a member of the Dunning-Kruger club.”

This self-assuredness has plagued the Jewish community before. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik essentially said as much in his 1973 essay “The ‘Common-Sense’ Rebellion Against Torah Authority,” pointing out the unwarranted confidence of those who make religious legal decisions for themselves without consulting rabbinic authorities. They suffer from the Dunning-Kruger effect (by definition, without even realizing it).

These self-styled “poskim” (Jewish legal authorities) concede their lack of formal training in Jewish texts and sources, but they insist nonetheless on their right to decide fundamental religious questions on the basis of “common sense.”...“Hokhmah” (wisdom) refers to specialized knowledge and scholarship which are acquired by extensive and detailed study. “Binah” (understanding) is the capacity to analyze, to make distinctions, to draw inferences and apply them to various situations. When “binah” is combined with “hokhmah”, we have the especially gifted and creative thinker. “Daat” (knowledge) deals with common sense, basic intelligence, and sound practical judgment. [Parenthetical translations added.]

Although Rabbi Soloveitchik did not reference the Dunning-Kruger effect specifically, he was describing the very same impulse,

present in all of us, to hold and advance our convictions without the requisite background. And for this, Rabbi Soloveitchik's solution was to temper our conviction, our certainty, with humility.

While humility is a great virtue, I submit that the Dunning-Kruger epidemic in our community today requires a more aggressive treatment. What Rabbi Soloveitchik sought to address 50 years ago was the excess of confidence. In Israel education today, I propose the opposite: Bring the knowledge base up rather than the confidence down. For that, I suggest three areas of focus, the three C's: Curiosity, Content, and Courage.

1 | *Curiosity*

Wharton organizational psychologist Adam Grant has described our society as one with an “advocacy surplus and inquiry deficit.” Julia Galef describes it as placing a “soldier mindset” over a “scout mindset.” A soldier mindset is one in which we seek out evidence to fortify our views. In such an approach to knowledge acquisition, reasoning becomes defensive combat, a tactic to stave off defeat. A scout mindset is one that seeks evidence that will make our map more accurate. With this approach, reasoning is exploratory, an opportunity to revise our misconceived mental maps.

In 1982, Mortimer Adler created the Paideia Proposal, an “essentialist” curriculum underscoring 12 principles of foundational education. One of these principles is “that the primary cause of genuine learning is the activity of the learner's own mind, sometimes with the help of a teacher functioning as a secondary and cooperative cause.”

This principle highlights the educational value of appealing to the learner's “intrinsic motivation”—engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable (as opposed to “extrinsic motivation,” engaging in an activity as a means to an end). The key, therefore, to engaging the

learner's own mind is to spark her internal curiosity. Often we hear that young people are disaffected and apathetic, but in my career — both as a school principal and an executive at an educational media company with a mission to teach the world about Judaism and Israel — I have found the opposite. When we present ideas slightly discrepant from learners' existing knowledge and beliefs and we incorporate surprise and incongruity into the learning experience, young people respond with genuine curiosity.

Once there is curiosity, a learner will be intrinsically motivated to explore the wide contours of dispute that exist within a given topic, something our communities have sometimes shied away from when it comes to Zionism and Israel. As I wrote in *The Lehrhaus* in 2021:

It's time for a *Mikraot Gedolot* approach to Israel education. What do I mean by this? Pick up a volume of *Mikraot Gedolot* and flip to any page. You will see a few lines from the Torah; the remaining 90% of the page is filled with debate and discussion about what these lines mean....Now imagine a *Mikraot Gedolot* of Israel education that included the perspectives of diverse thinkers like Benny Morris, Anita Shapira, Martin Gilbert, Daniel Gordis, Yossi Klein Halevi, Micah Goodman, and Francine Klagsbrun....Let's showcase the exciting wide contours of dispute that exist within Zionism, Israeli history, and current events in Israel, so our students can appreciate each topic's complexity and engage with diverse viewpoints.

The appearance of these different perspectives on the page deepens a learner's curiosity while providing the means to satisfy it. For our communities to be culturally literate in the issues that matter to us, exploring these diverse voices is not a luxury but a necessity. We can utilize the tools of intrinsic motivation to hook our audiences

and get them intrigued to learn more. That is the first step. The second step is content.

2 | *Content*

Another of Adler’s Paideia principles is “that schooling at its best is preparation for becoming generally educated in the course of a whole lifetime, and that schools should be judged on how well they provide such preparation.” Schools now have tools such as Unpacked for Educators and The Jewish Education Project and resources like the iCenter (to name a few) to ensure that the next generation of teachers is well versed in the history of Israel and Zionism. For educators, we have the tools we need.

But it’s reaching the rest of the community, particularly young professionals, that poses a challenge. Writing in these pages in Autumn 2021, Daniel Gordis offered an inspired vision:

Imagine a Jewish world re-embracing Jewish and Hebrew literature, in which first hundreds and then thousands of American Jews were reading at least snippets of important works, and then conversing about them across communal, congregational, and denominational lines....What if we knew that the congregation down the block — different denomination, dissimilar politics, a wholly other worldview — was studying the same concepts, the same texts? Would there not be power in that shared experience, not only in continuity but in unity as well?

To be sure, I would argue for a maximalist definition of “Jewish and Hebrew literature”—one that includes the philosophy of Zionism, the history of antisemitism, and the story of the Jewish people from antiquity to the modern State of Israel. Think of it as Birthright Israel

Education. And in an age of ubiquitous media technology, what would it take for us to harness platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify to realize this vision?

Let's chart it out: In the United States there are approximately 5.7 million Jews. If we focus on the 26 percent who are age 18–34 — 90 percent of whom are not ultra-Orthodox — that is a target audience of 1.3 million young Jews. At Unpacked, a leading Jewish and Israel education content provider that I help run, we produce engaging digital content modules that can provide a basic Israel education in as few as five hours. That comes to 6.7 million hours of content. At a cost of \$4.90 per hour, minus production costs that have already been sunk, we're looking at a distribution cost of \$2.40, coming to \$16 million. Targeted advertising to reach those 1.3 million young Jews, according to our internal data, would increase our ad costs substantially, by 45 percent, bringing us to \$18.5 million. Ensuring that five hours of educational videos like “The Secret Agreement That Shaped the Modern Middle East” (about Sykes-Picot and the San Remo conference) and “Did Israel Take Over Palestine?” will entail a lot of retargeting and building data-tracking platforms and content funnels, increasing the total cost, conservatively, to \$20 million. Twenty million dollars to teach every young Jew in America about Israel.

3 | *Courage*

Curiosity and content are necessary but not sufficient. For our communities to grow intellectually and spiritually we need courage, courage to confront the difficult elements — intellectual, spiritual, and experiential — of the ongoing Zionist project that is the Jewish state. Menachem Leibtag, founder of the Tanach Study Center, has become famous among Jewish educators for suggesting that the best educational philosophy comes from an Israeli construction-site

sign that says, *Sakana kan bonim* (Danger, we're building here). In the place of danger, that's where we grow, that's where we build, that's how we make sure our intellectual and spiritual muscles do not atrophy.

Having engaged with thousands of young people in my work, I have found that we need to trust them more. We need to allow them to explore, to get messy, to ask tough and seemingly dangerous questions, to engage in identity development. For example, many alumni of Jewish day schools experience Yom Yerushalayim in Israel for the first time at age 18. This can be a meaningful day for many reasons, inviting these young adults to feel the goosebumps from Israel's miraculous victory in 1967, to witness the celebratory elation of returning to their ancient capital, and to feel proud that the Jewish people have accomplished what many thought was genuinely impossible. But it can also be a complicated day, bringing into sharp focus the many difficult challenges that came with Israel's victory 57 years ago, for Israeli domestic politics and for many Palestinians, who refer to 1967 as the "Naksa," i.e., the setback. A yeshiva student who sings Hallel on that day with joy and gratitude but also sees antagonism against Palestinians in some of the marches and dances throughout Jerusalem — marches I've attended many times in my life — should be encouraged to explore those conflicting feelings. That is how we build lay *kodesh*. Here — *davka* here — we are building.

This kind of building takes courage, on the part of educators, students, and, significantly, funders. We need our funding communities to invest in digital education so we'll have the courage to continue these conversations. And we need our education communities to exhibit the same courage by providing us with the content and creating space in school curricula to focus on Zionism, Jewish identity, and the story of Israel.

If we provide this paradigm of the three C's—Curiosity, Content, and Courage—our lay *kodesh* will be armed with that well-earned confidence, not of the Dunning-Kruger variety, but one warranted by their depth of knowledge. *