Voices from the Global Educational World:

Collecting Perspectives, Questions, and Practical Directions as We Move Forward

For both health and economic reasons, the current crisis is presenting us with an enormous educational change, particularly in the field of Israel engagement. The global pandemic has effectively led to the suspension of the most important tools available to us today: educational experiences, face-to-face encounters, and the work of shlichim. All these areas have slowed down, some more than others, and it is impossible to know how long this situation will continue. This reality, even if it is temporary, has led us to try to reimagine our field under the assumption that the main tools that have proved successful over recent decades are now unavailable. What form will engagement, Jewish education, and Israel education take in a world where basic assumptions are being undermined and familiar practices no longer offer a solution?

We propose forming a conceptual global round table that will enable us to amplify the needs and approaches that are emerging around the world. The round table will provide a tool for shaping new educational strategies in this era. The round table will not involve a physical meeting, of course, at least in the first stage. Instead, we have in mind the image of a “writing desk” to which we will invite 30-40 leading educational and communal figures from Jewish communities around the world to express their communities’ ideas and needs.

Background

The Corona virus crisis has caused significant disruption that has challenged some of our most basic assumptions as human beings, Jews, members of communities, and individuals committed to Jewish education and to the connection between Jews around the world. The new conditions the Jewish world is facing require us to update our approach and to formulate a new strategic perception for the work of the Jewish Agency and many other organizations around the world:

• Many communities in different countries are coping with the most serious health crisis we have seen for a century. A mixture of mourning processes and feelings of fear and uncertainty in the face of the disease are sparking complex and challenging emotional situations. The health crisis has created a need for isolation and social distancing, which in turn impose a reality in which human contact is a rare commodity. We understand that this contact cannot always be available, is not available equally for all, and is not present in the ways we are accustomed to rely on.

• A serious economic crisis, whose ramifications are already becoming apparent in various Jewish organizations, but whose full scale remains unknown. This crisis will undoubtedly influence – and to an extent even shape – the educational field in the years to come. Needs are already changing now and they will change further; philanthropic focuses are being redefined and large and small organizations have already begun cutting budgets.

• An unprecedented rise in Antisemitism that is influencing many communities, and will continue to do so.

• Damage to the connection with Israel and to Israel education. Firstly, the perceived importance and urgency of this sphere will decline as local needs become more urgent. Secondly, the practical ability to participate in activities and frameworks reinforcing the bond with Israel has been significantly impaired due to the restrictions on movement and the need for social distancing. Thirdly, economic damage will significantly limit the ability of the Jewish Agency and other critical organizations to create high-quality connections, as has been the case until now.

• Some political systems have become unstable in a manner that has a direct impact on communities.

• Relations within the different streams in Jewish communities are becoming increasingly complex and the gulfs in Israeli society are also becoming more apparent. With the exception of a few discussions at the leadership level, the current reality is liable to lead to a shift in the Jewish world in Israel and elsewhere to a more sectarian mindset that does not draw on diverse voices and fails to pay sufficient attention to other populations.

These conditions raise serious questions and challenge basic assumptions. Relevant questions concern decentralization and centralization in the Jewish world; the work of private foundations versus that of communal umbrella organizations; the integration of educational work and themes; and the nature of the relations between Jews around the world and Israel, as well as between Jews from different communities.

Project Description

As an important component in developing an educational strategy and adapting the Jewish Agency’s work to meet the current challenge, we are issuing a global invitation to engage in joint, creative thinking with the goal of identifying concrete solutions. The Makom team will contact 30-40 leaders, educators, and workers in diverse fields and geographical areas in order to collect practical insights. These insights will be collated and disseminated to decision makers in order to serve as a foundation for developing an educational strategy that combines the need to reimagine practices in the field with a broad understanding of the subject and its needs. The insights will also be presented in an external document that we will share widely as part of the process of positioning the Jewish Agency as a platform for a global connection that encompasses important voices from across the Jewish world.

Project Goals

1. To create a body of knowledge that will serve as a foundation for developing strategy through the crisis and as it recedes. In keeping with the processes of participation that have characterized the Jewish Agency’s strategic process thus far, this project will provide access to perspectives and voices from the leadership in the field, in a manner that will facilitate the extraction of critical insights for our strategic thinking process.

2. To position the Jewish Agency around the global Jewish table as a platform for global educational thought. The process of collecting the knowledge and the manner in which it will be published will facilitate the creation of a network of educational and communal leadership committed to the process that views the Jewish Agency as a central partner. The role of the Jewish Agency in creating collective Jewish learning that crosses geographical, organizational, and ideological borders is critical to ensuring a prosperous educational future for the Jewish people.

3. To create a body of interesting, diverse, and profound knowledge. The knowledge that will be collected will enable us to contribute to communities, federations, and various organizations that are facing the need to rethink and develop strategy in a time of uncertainty.

Method

The Makom team will contact 30-40 leading figures from around the Jewish world. All the participants will be presented with an identical question, which they will be asked to answer in one page (approx. 500 words) or less:

For several decades, Israel engagement has relied on face-to-face experiences and Israel trips. Unfortunately, it seems that for the foreseeable future, these strategies will be incapacitated. If these cannot be relied upon, how should the field of engagement with Israel and the Jewish people look like in this new era?

In your answer, please also relate to what we need to make sure that we do not lose as we are making necessary transitions.

If you choose, you can touch upon what are the main disruptions you are seeing or hope to see, what educational or organizational frameworks should be re-thought at this moment and to share any thoughts about audacious ideas you have for moving forward.

The Jewish Agency enjoys a unique position as an organization with a longstanding commitment to the prosperous future of the Jewish people and to the bond between global Jewry and Israel, and a unique character as an organization with a broad geographical dispersion that is sensitive to diverse forms of Jewish life. This unique position does not merely enable us to set out on the process of gathering collective knowledge, but demands that we do so.