The Big Idea for Jewish Education:

A Mission Driven Insight

Rona Milch Novick, PhD

Dean, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration

Yeshiva University

UnitEd Advisory Committee

Throughout days of visits, meetings and discussion, I was overwhelmed – but not as I expected, by sadness. There was loss, devastation and gripping evidence of cruelty. But as we considered Jewish identity and Jewish education, what I experienced consistently was greatness, grandeur, resilience, heroism, and connection. I experienced a powerful ephiphany about Jewish education, Jewish leadership and Jewish identity building. We have been thinking too small. We need to embrace the “bigness” of the Jewish experience, the depth and impact of our story, the extraordinary nature, power, culture, and character of Jews as a people.

Mission activities confirmed this growing insight. Sarit Guzman, whose son Ben was killed in Gaza shared the uplifting letter he wrote his parents before his death. Ben’s optimism, commitment, maturity and yes, pride and happiness was extraordinary, especially knowing his parents would be reading it only if he perished. Sarit, no less impressive, gave voice to the strength of Jewish belief and belonging. It has become the custom for people to line the road to the funeral of the fallen. Sarit said “I saw the flags and thought, straighten your back, raise your chin and be proud to be a Jew, because we are fighting evil and we are good”. She admits her sadness, her brokenness, but closed with the “big” statement - “We break and we fall, but we stand.

In Ofakim, previously “a city of people” now renamed as “a city of heroes”, local high school students toured the neighborhood attacked on October 7th  with us. Practicing their English, at each place a citizen fell, they shared the story of the person lost. A tall, athletic teen shared the story of his brother-in-law. Tears ran down his face as he explained how he is trying to be there for his small nieces, to help in his brother-in-law’s absence. Another teen walking with me said that if he were a parent, he would not allow his child to have a phone, because he would want to protect his child from the images Hamas has been circulating. Responsibility, courage, and community permeated our visit, amplified by the dedication of the Ofakim educators who helped the city survive against all odds.

At the center for the Hostage Families, Dr. Zohar Raviv, the international vice president of education for Taglit-Birthright Israel, further convinced me that we need to think and act bigger. From his call for pedagogy that goes beyond binary discourse, to his compelling plea to understand that the Jewish event was not what happened *to us* on October 7th, but rather what happened and is happening since. “We cannot sustain a healthy Jewish body on a diet of tragedies”, he explained. Perhaps the most powerful of Dr. Raviv’s big ideas was the mandate to move from being storytellers to storybearers, those who have a stake, a vested interest, those who see the story as their own.

During the mission, I thought frequently of a visit to an Israeli farm years ago. The young farm owner couple hired troubled Israeli teens exclusively, many who had failed in school settings. The teens had to build their own shelters, and contribute to all farm operations. One teen who was in charge of two flocks of sheep, and by all reports, was doing an amazing job, was asked how after failing in school he could be so successful. In broken English he answered “School was too small for me. Here it is big. If I don’t care for the sheep, they will die”.

My lesson learned from this young man, and from experiences on the mission, is that Jewish education and Jewish identity building must be big, meaningful, and it must matter. We need every lesson, every setting, every educator to be infused with the greatness of the Jewish story. We need our classrooms to display the Jewish timeline around the ceiling of the room, demonstrating the grandeur of Jewish life across centuries. We need every learning task and activity to connect to this greatness – we learn the aleph-bet so we can read the Torah for our Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but also to access the language that Jews have used to celebrate, converse, think and debate through the ages. We need to learn about the modern state of Israel as it belongs in a story arc that begins with Avraham Avinu. If we are to be relevant and impactful for today’s and tomorrow’s Jews, we need to be proud storybearers, owning and sharing our place in this big, phenomenal, amazing, and still being written, Jewish story.