

The Story of Israel Through Hasidic Storytelling: Bridging Reality and Hope

THE EDUCATOR'S DILEMMA

For the American Jewish educator, teaching about Israel is defined by deep confusion. The most common phrase used to express this reality is: "It is complicated." Yet, this phrase has become a tool of silencing. It acts as a shield against difficult questions about politics, shutting down the conversation under the guise of complexity.

Educators struggle with how to cultivate love for something unfamiliar — a place that is not part of everyday life, experienced only through a family visit, a synagogue trip, or a one-time Birthright experience. We face a strict tension: if we introduce complexity too early, initial love cannot form. But if we withhold it, the student's world will collapse the moment they encounter criticism.

This collapse happens because the romanticized vision of Naomi Shemer's *Jerusalem of Gold* — where "the market square is empty" — is shattered by the discovery that the square was never actually empty. To prevent this, we must introduce the complexity. We must teach *Jerusalem of Gold* alongside Meir Ariel's *Jerusalem of Iron, Lead, and Black*, written from the trenches of the paratroopers who liberated the city in 1967.

We can synthesize these challenges into three specific tensions:

- **Falling in Love vs. Complexity:** Introducing fractures too early destroys the capacity for a simple, foundational attachment. Conversely, hiding the tension guarantees that the student's image of Israel will violently shatter later on.
- **The Categorical vs. The Personal:** contemporary discourse about Israel turns human beings into flat objects, erasing personal relationships. One side condemns Zionism as colonialism, refusing dialogue with anyone who believes in the possibility of a Jewish state. The other side instantly categorizes critics as antisemitic, casting them out of the camp. This erases the individual's ability to be a Zionist who cares about Palestinian suffering, or to fiercely criticize Israeli policy while deeply feeling Israeli pain.
- **The Brain vs. The Physical:** The debate is treated as a bloodless academic exercise scored by history and law — whether Palestinians rejected peace treaties or whether Israel fits the legal definition of apartheid. This ignores the somatic reality. It ignores the physical anxiety and sleeplessness experienced by Jews who discovered on October 8th or 20th that

their own communities turned against them. It ignores the somatic contraction of Jews watching the immense suffering of uninvolved civilians in Gaza, leaving them confused about their Jewish values and identity.

To answer these challenges, I propose returning to a unique Jewish genre: Hasidic storytelling. I know this dilemma intimately because it is part of my own life's journey. I believe that the very tool that allowed me to confront that internal challenge, the Hasidic story, can provide a solution for Israel education today.

FROM PERSONAL FRACTURE TO CULTURAL MATURATION

I was raised in a Hasidic community in Israel, a world built from thousands of stories. Each Hasidic master — each *tzadik* — had his own living presence, shaping a unique figure centered on a specific value. I did not need to meet these spiritual ancestors; I knew them and saw the world through their eyes. That is what community stories do: they give children a structure for understanding reality, building an entire culture of love on the narrative.

Yet, within this sensitive culture, as I grew, a deep critique emerged. Every single story was about a man. When I asked about this, I was told first to learn the stories of the men. Once I learned enough to clear myself of ignorance, I asked again. This time, I was told the question was immodest — why would a boy be interested in stories about women? Another time, I was told that generations of *tzadikim* had never asked this, and if I was asking now, the problem was mine. The answers grew more dismissive as the question grew more precise, revealing something profound: I had found a tension the system could not hold.

At this point, I want to step back from my personal testimony and put on my educator's hat. The crisis I experienced regarding the stories of the *tzadikim* and the Hasidic culture of my youth was actually a blessing. It represents a natural maturation process — moving from a childish love for a nurturing community to an adult life where the community narrative begins to dismantle because, by definition, it contains an element of fantasy. Reality is built from internal contradictions, failures, and encounters with the repressed spaces of community. In every generation, new cultural layers emerge that previously had no presence.

The treatment of women is complex. On one hand, Jewish society did not allow women or men wishing to connect with God to detach themselves from the community and create their own separate institutions, unlike monasteries in the Christian or Buddhist worlds. On the other hand, the absence of women's monasteries created a reality where Jewish women never had a "room of their own" to create independent Jewish work. Consequently, among tens of thousands of Hasidic stories, women exist only as background and scenery, never at the center of the narrative.

Yet, in my view, the Hasidic story is a unique cultural creation that contains within itself the solution to the very tension I have described. This is due to the unique characteristics inherent to the genre of Hasidic storytelling.

THE HASIDIC STORY AS PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

The unique power of Hasidic storytelling lies in five features that set it apart from ordinary Jewish folktales:

1. Storytelling Over Historical Truth

The importance of a Hasidic story lies in the narrative itself, in the personality of the Hasid, not in factual accuracy about the historical background of the *tzaddik*.

2. Preserving Tension Rather Than Resolving It

Even when the *tzaddik* triumphs, the underlying reasons for danger and struggle are kept alive.

3. Embodying the Physical

The *tzaddik* performs miracles through his body; sleeping, eating, and smoking are as significant as studying a page of Talmud.

4. Foregrounding the Role of the Storyteller

Whenever my father or rabbi shared stories, they consistently intertwined their own personal connection to the protagonist, making the story both engaging and deeply relatable.

5. Inviting the Listener to Become a Storyteller

In the Hasidic community, the listener can choose to enter the story itself, becoming an active participant through how they listen and respond.

Applied to Israel education, these five principles offer a way out of the impasse. Instead of debates about who started the conflict, participants learn to tell their own personal story of Israel. Instead of resolving the tension between Israeli reality and Jewish hope, they learn to carry it. Instead of abstract ideology, they bring their bodies, their memories, and their particular relationship to the land into the room. And instead of defending a position, they learn to ask the listener a question – inviting them into partnership rather than argument.



Part A: Crafting the Narrative

Part A focuses on building and practicing the story of Israel. It opens with participants sitting in *chevruta* (pairs) to share which story of Israel has impacted them most. Then, they switch pairs to share which story of Israel they actually tell when they are usually asked about Israel. This distinction — between what moved you and what you transmit — is itself a revelation. It exposes the gaps between the story that usually touches us, which is more complex, and the stories we actually tell, which focus on more "perfect," fantasized characteristics.

A facilitated group reflection surfaces what is already happening in the room: that most participants explain rather than narrate, that many stories assert the rightness of Israel's position, and that stories from Israeli-Americans often carry a level of intensity — almost a shout — that physically contracts the listener rather than drawing them in.

The facilitator then introduces four principles for crafting an Israel story:

- The story must contain tension without resolving it.
- The storyteller must locate themselves within the narrative.
- The body and physical presence of the storyteller matter.
- The story must end with a question that invites the listener into connection.

Participants then practice in groups of three, with structured time for storytelling, listener response, and brief reflection.

Part B: The Place — Anchored Cards

Part B deepens the process for groups with more time. Each participant receives four cards, each anchored in a specific place in Israel and corresponding to one of the four storytelling principles:

- **Jerusalem:** With its image of three religions and the contrast between Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold" and Meir Ariel's response, it represents **tension**.
- **The Kinneret (Sea of Galilee):** Evoking the tombs of Maimonides and Rachel, the kibbutzim of Degania, and the Golan Heights, it represents **the storyteller's place within the story**.
- **The Desert (Midbar):** Whose Hebrew root *daber* means "to speak," represents **embodiment** — the land itself speaks.
- **The Israel National Trail:** Where walkers encounter one another on the same path, represents **the encounter between storyteller and listener**.

These cards are not abstract prompts but physical, place-anchored invitations to inhabit the story of Israel from the inside.

CONCLUSION

The discourse about Israel is often described as a crisis of communication — two sides not listening to each other. But it is perhaps better understood as a crisis of genre: we have been trying to have a debate when what is needed is a story. When participants learn to tell their own story of Israel, they do not resolve the conflict between hope and reality. They learn to live within it.



To access the full workshop guide, including the four storytelling cards and presentation materials, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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*You shall
spread out
to the west
and to the east,
to the north
and to the south*

