

The AVI CHAI Israel Foundation

# ASSESSING NEEDS AND DIRECTIONS FOR JEWISH EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY IN THE STATE (NON-RELIGIOUS) SCHOOL SYSTEM

Executive Summary

Draft for Discussion

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This report is based on an investigation initiated by AVI CHAI Israel during the second half of the 2010/11 school year. It aims to provide an updated picture of Jewish education in the state (non-religious) school system, to assess its needs, and to consider possible directions of activity in this field (until the Foundation ceases its activities in 2020).

The following document is a summary of the full report, which can be viewed together with its various appendices on the AVI CHAI website: [www.avichai.org](http://www.avichai.org).

We wish to thank the many people who took part in preparing the complete report: researchers Dr. Gili Schild and Moti Bar-Assouline of the Hizun Institute, Dr. Nurit Chamo of Tel Aviv University, Dr. Yigal Rosen of Haifa University, and Dr. Pnina Schor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; district administrators; officials of the Pedagogical Secretariat; the Director of Society and Youth at the Ministry of Education; education department heads of various local authorities; heads of organizations that promote Jewish education in the school system; and school principals throughout Israel. All of these individuals took the time to present to us a complex and intricate mosaic, shaped by decision makers and educators in the field.

### **Jewish Education – What is it?**

The concept of “Jewish education” has attracted various interpretations that entail different operative directions. What is Jewish education? Does it refer to the acquisition of specific disciplinary knowledge on Jewish subjects, such as Bible, Jewish oral law, Jewish thought? Or does Jewish education entail an educational process rooted in values, and as such, is pertinent to all fields of knowledge, both formal and informal, rather than identified with particular subjects? Does Jewish education view the Bible as “a guide to life” or is does it view Judaism as a culture?

Given that “Jewish education” has been interpreted in various ways, each with its particular operative implications, we will not attempt in this document to present a comprehensive or authoritative definition. Rather, we would like to address and assess the operative implications of the different concepts of “Jewish education” that are articulated and applied in the field. As part of our recommendations for possible new directions, we note the importance of conducting a broad and in-depth discussion to clarify the meaning of Jewish education in the state school system. For now, in this report we choose not to limit or narrow the meaning of Jewish education. Instead, we would note a few important aspects to which the concept refers:

- a. Teaching content related to Judaism and a Jewish way of life, via the following subjects: Bible, Jewish oral law, Jewish thought, Hebrew language and literature, Jewish history, as well as other related subjects, such as geography and civics.
- b. Developing a positive affinity to the Jewish heritage and culture.
- c. Integrating between knowledge and awareness, as well as between learning and identification.

## Educational Policy in the Field of Jewish Education: A Brief History

The field of Jewish education in the state school system in Israel has been on the agenda of education policy-makers since prior to the establishment of the State. Over the years, a number of committees dealt with this subject from various perspectives:

- **The Talmi Committee** (1944): presented an attempt to transition from an ideology of “Diaspora-rejection” to a new discourse on Jewish awareness;
- **The Arnon and Shmueli Committee** (1956-7): proposed broadening the content of Jewish studies to include the history of the Jewish nation in recent generations and a cultural approach to the Jewish tradition;
- **“The Center for Cultivating Jewish Awareness”**(1970s): sought to decrease the level of alienation among graduates of the state system toward their Jewish heritage;
- **The Shenhar Committee** (1994): identified several challenges and needs within the school system – e.g., diverse student identities and a lack of teachers able to work in the field – and recommended that interdisciplinary curricula be developed that focuses on four themes: Jewish and universal values, Hebrew language and literature, Zionism, and the land of Israel. In addition, the committee noted a need to match the Jewish world-view of the teachers responsible for Jewish education with the Jewish perspectives of the students (and their parents) who are the system’s “consumers.”

An assessment of the implementation of the Shenhar committee’s recommendations<sup>1</sup> identified successes as well as difficulties and missed opportunities. On the one hand, the committee succeeded in placing the importance of Jewish education on the public agenda, which led to the establishment of various non-profit organizations and programs aimed at deepening Jewish education within the framework of the state educational institutions. On the other hand, although in the years immediately after the committee’s report, the Ministry of Education allocated resources, such as supervision days, training hours, etc. to the state schools to implement the Shenhar Committee’s recommendations, the window of opportunity generated by the committee’s report was exploited only minimally to expand the number of qualified teachers in this field.

- **The Sagi Committee** (2008): sought to identify and consolidate steps toward implementing the Shenhar Committee’s recommendations. The committee recommended establishing a broad cultural approach to Jewish sources from all generations and eliminating any hierarchy of value between texts (a principle that evoked much criticism). As with Shenhar, this committee emphasized

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<sup>1</sup> Rash, N., Ben-Avot. A. (5756, 5757, 5760). *Evaluation Report on Deepening Jewish Education in the State Sector Following the Shenhar Committee*. Jerusalem: The Institute for Cultivating Education, the School of Education, the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

a number of principles, such as: maintaining relevance to the student's world, cultivating Jewish and humanistic values, studying in *havrutot* (small groups), strengthening personal experiences, and developing open and dynamic study materials.

Following the Sagi Committee's recommendations, the staff responsible for implementing the Shenhar report developed a new program to teach "Tarbut Yisrael" (Jewish Culture) in state middle schools. The program aimed to help students strengthen their Jewish identity, while creating a foundation for a common language of Jewish-Israeli culture. For the first time, the Ministry of Education allocated hours for teaching this topic: one weekly hour in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

- **The Ish-Shalom Committee (2010):** was charged with the task of defining the subject of "Tarbut Yisrael." The committee formulated an approach that included: developing pluralistic Jewish awareness; creating a sense of affinity and belonging to the people, state, and culture of Israel; and cultivating a moral commitment to humanity by imbuing knowledge and shaping lifestyles. Following the committee's recommendations, a comprehensive study program was developed to span from 4<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grades, to be taught in two weekly hours during each of these grades. This program is being gradually introduced into the state school system.

As with the previous committees, the Ish-Shalom Committee also drew criticism, mostly because of the lack of consistency and continuity in the texts studied and the eclectic nature of the program.

## Main Questions Guiding the Assessment

The primary questions that animated our effort to assess the state of Jewish education in the *mamlachti* school system were the following:

- What visions and approaches to Jewish-Israeli education currently exist in the school system?
- What is the Ministry of Education's policy toward Jewish education?
- What are the qualifications and quality of the personnel teaching Jewish subjects?
- What is the state of the current curricula for teaching Jewish subjects?
- How do schools implement the Ministry of Education's policy and how is Jewish education expressed in schools?
- What does the school system currently need in order to strengthen Jewish education?

## Methodology

To answer these questions, data was collected from multiple sources:

- a. Interviews: with school principals, senior officials in the Ministry of Education, and directors of organizations promoting Jewish education in the school system.
- b. Telephone survey: with principals of state elementary and secondary schools.
- c. Survey of hard data: from various sources, such as the virtual research room of the Ministry of Education.
- d. Analysis of evaluation reports: from assessments initiated by AVI CHAI for programs operating in the school system, in order to identify significant insights.<sup>2</sup>

## Chapter Two: Assessing Key Aspects of the State School System

This chapter summarizes the information collected within the assessment framework. We have organized the data around six rubrics, which encompass key aspects of Jewish education in the school system. Regarding each of these rubrics, we outline the current picture and sketch what constitutes the desired situation, as reflected by interviews and survey data:

- Teachers of Jewish subjects
- Principals (elementary and secondary)
- Study materials for Jewish subjects
- School-intervention programs
- Experiential education
- Local municipalities

At the end of our presentation of the “current” and “desired” situation relating to each rubric, we also present the primary insights of the Foundation staff, as they emerged from the assessment.

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<sup>2</sup> **Interviews:** the interviews with senior staff in the Ministry of Education and in several Teacher Colleges were conducted by Dr. Nurit Chamo. Interviews with school principals were conducted by Dr. Pnina Shor. The interviews usually included at least two interviewers (the researcher and one or two AVI CHAI staff members). **Telephone survey:** The telephone survey, based on a structured questionnaire for principals, was conducted by the Hizun Institute, led by Dr. Gili Schild and Moti Bar-Assouline. **Survey of hard data:** The survey of data from various information sources such as the virtual research room of the Ministry of Education, internet sites, etc. was conducted by the Hizun Institute. **Analysis of evaluation reports:** conducted by Dr. Yigal Rosen. These reports are available in Hebrew on the AVI CHAI website ([www. avichai.org](http://www.avichai.org)); plans also exist to upload English versions of the reports.

## Teachers of Jewish Studies

Discussions and interviews about the role of teachers in Jewish education raised three main issues, which are elaborated on below:

- The relevance of the teacher's Jewish identity
- The qualifications of teachers of Jewish studies
- The role of professional training and development

### A. The Teacher's Jewish Self-Identity

**The current situation:** Most of the principals interviewed believe the teachers' ability to cultivate their students' Jewish identity entirely depends on the teachers' personal background and Jewish identity. As a consequence, in many schools, the field of Judaism is given to "the 'religious teacher on staff,'" or at best, to someone who is more traditionally "connected" to Judaism on a personal level. A large number of schools rely on external organizations, such as "The Centers for Deepening Jewish Identity" to teach Judaism in the school. These centers, mostly belonging to the religious Zionist movement, operate through NGOs supervised by the Ministry of Education in a large number of local municipalities across Israel. Activities are held in hundreds of schools – elementary and secondary – and are led by post-high school girls during their National Service (who receive supervision). In essence, these girls are responsible for Jewish studies in a large number of state schools, which further contributes to the students' identification between "Judaism" and "religious Jews." Thus, students are likely to equate Judaism and religiosity, and to view the school staff as educational models who have very little to say about Judaism.

**The desired situation:** The Shenhar Committee presented an alternative vision to the current situation: *"The key to changing the present condition is returning the responsibility for education to the society and community from which the students come... The situation where... a society outsources the task of educating its sons and daughters to contracted people willing to take responsibility, but whose intentions totally contradict the beliefs and opinions of its members, is an abnormal situation that inevitably brings conflict or avoidance. The school system needs to...encourage the secular public to express its values, develop its culture, assess its accomplishments, and meet its younger generation."*

**Our insights:** Measures should be taken to restore the field of Jewish studies to the responsibility of the school staff, and out of the hands of organizations outside the system. In addition, steps should be taken to sever the identification between the personal religious identity of a teacher and the desired qualifications to teach Jewish studies – to prevent situations where only religious figures serve as mediators of Judaism. The aim should be to convey to the students of the state system the notion that they are part of the Jewish family, irrespective of the extent to which they fulfill religious *mitzvot*.

## B. The Qualifications of Jewish Studies Teachers

**The current situation:** In secondary schools, professional teachers for Jewish subjects generally are responsible for teaching Jewish content (for example, Revivim graduates, graduates of the Hartman Institute, graduates of the Oranim Midrasha, the Schechter Institute, Achva College, etc.). In these schools, hours allocated for “Tarbut Yisrael” are generally given to these professional teachers as their responsibility. In schools that lack professional Jewish studies teachers, principals often give responsibility for Tarbut Yisrael and other Judaic subjects to the homeroom teachers or to other teachers, based on various considerations, without any connection to the teacher’s field of expertise.

In elementary schools it is almost a given that Jewish subjects, including Tarbut Yisrael, comprise a broad field that should be taught by the homeroom teacher, who in any case teaches most subjects. On the one hand, this situation solves the question regarding the identity of the teacher of Jewish subjects, but on the other hand, the role of personal religious identity mentioned above can arise, given that many of the teachers in the elementary school system lack adequate training in Jewish content (see next section “Professional training and development”).

A number of additional relevant points emerged from our assessment:

- In practice, raising questions of Jewish values and identity with students fits best with the role and responsibilities of homeroom teachers, rather than instructors of specific Judaic subject(s).
- When teachers who are not trained to teach Jewish subjects receive training in this field, the experience often awakens their desire to deepen their knowledge; some eventually make a career change and become professionals in the field.

**The desired situation:** An important question is whether Jewish studies refers to subject matter disciplines that should be taught by teachers who are experts in Jewish thought, oral law, Bible, literature, etc. Or, alternatively, are we discussing a broader field that addresses significant questions relating to values and identity? If the latter, then the subjects are more appropriately taught by the homeroom teachers or by the social education coordinators, irrespective of the subjects they teach professionally. School principals and teachers are concerned with this question, as are the policy makers at the Ministry of Education, who have yet to decide upon this issue.

**Our insights:** It seems a worthy goal to invest in teachers who can study Jewish subjects in-depth and who will be able to convey the values inherent in the study materials to their students in Jewish studies classes, in homeroom sessions, and with their colleagues.

## C. Professional Training and Development

**The current situation:** In Jewish studies, two types of training exist – pre-service training for “teachers-to-be” and professional development programs for teachers already employed in the system. The pre-service programs for training young teachers (such as Revivim at the Hebrew University, Ofakim at Tel-Aviv

University, Kibbutzim College, Achva College, and Kerem Institute) train only a few dozen teachers a year, due to the intensity of the training and the significant financial investment in each student. Programs offering continuing professional development on Jewish subjects (e.g., at the Hartman Institute, the Schechter Institute and the TALI Foundation, Oranim's Midrasha, PISGA centers belonging to the Ministry of Education, and the Tarbut Yisrael Ministry department) reach much larger numbers (several hundreds) and aim to professionalize the current teaching staff without investing the level of resources required for pre-service training. Evidence from the field suggests, however, that significant differences exist in the quality of these professional development programs.

Our assessment also identified additional points worth noting:

- About one third of those who teach Tarbut Yisrael (Jewish Culture) in elementary schools do not receive any training in this subject, as compared to 15% who do not in the secondary schools;
- Among the elementary and secondary school teachers who do receive training, one third do so at the Ministry of Education's PISGA centers;
- Secondary school teachers significantly outnumber elementary school teachers as participants in professional development programs offered at various institutions (e.g., at colleges and universities, or at Ministry-sponsored continuing education programs);
- With the exception of professional development programs provided by the Ministry's Tarbut Yisrael department, almost no training programs on Jewish content exist for elementary school teachers.

**The desired situation:** Two thirds of elementary school principals and up to 48% of secondary school principals cite a need for additional professional development opportunities on Jewish subjects for teachers. The need for comprehensive and broad training is even greater in elementary schools, where the lack of training background for teachers is more prevalent than in secondary schools, and also because a single (homeroom) teacher is usually responsible for most of the subjects taught in class.

**Our insights:** The data clearly point to the very significant need for high quality training for teachers already employed in schools, particularly in the elementary system. While a number of organizations offer quality and intensive programs of professional development in the secondary schools, and provide options for principals seeking continuing education courses, in the elementary school system, with the exception of the TALI Foundation, hardly any organization trains principals and teachers at the level and scope that exists for secondary schools.

## Principals

**Current situation:** From the data collected in our assessment, most principals are aware of the importance of dealing with Judaism in both formal and informal school frameworks, and most cite the need to address questions of Jewish-Israeli-Zionist identity as part of their educational vision. At the same time, about two

thirds of the principals surveyed noted a need for deepening studies of Judaism in their school and said the current situation in their school is unsatisfactory.

Despite the relevance of the above to both elementary and secondary school principals, we found a significant difference in our interviews between secondary and elementary school principals regarding the depth of inquiry into Judaism. Out of 21 secondary school principals interviewed, 10 participated in continuing education courses in the field of Jewish-Israeli education, and an additional 5 were exposed to the field in other academic frameworks. On the other hand, out of 13 elementary school principals interviewed, not one participated in any professional development related to Jewish content, even though two were connected to the field from previous activities.

**Desired situation:** An effective program of Jewish education in school depends on the principal recognizing the importance of the field and working towards strengthening it in school. Jewish education appears as a central goal in the mission statements of most state schools; however, this declaration needs to be translated into educational practice. The need exists to train principals to lead this effort.

**Our insights:** Given the crucial role that principals play in the effective implementation of school programs, and given that almost all principals agree regarding the important role that Jewish education should play in their schools, principals should be targeted in order to mobilize their support and to ensure effective training for their teachers.

## Study Materials and Tools

**Current situation:** The field of study materials and tools for teaching Jewish subjects is saturated with diverse options, both at the elementary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of Education, the various content organizations, school-based intervention programs, and even some schools themselves, are all developing study materials that match the various educational visions prevalent in the school system today.

Regarding internet-based material, *Mikranet* is the only site specifically directed to the school system; however, a number of sites for the wider public can be useful for teachers, such as *Midreshet*, *Piyyut*, and *Pshita*. In addition, websites belonging to various organizations operating in the field of Jewish education, such as Meytarim, ORT-Shorshei Israel, TALI, Morasha, and Hartman, provide content and ideas for teachers, and also serve as a platform for online continuing education programs. Two new sites related to Tarbut Yisrael will soon be launched: the *Seventy Faces* site, a collaboration between Meytarim and ORT; and a site specifically designed for teachers, the result of a collaboration between CET, the Hartman Institute, the Posen Foundation, and AVI CHAI Israel.

**Desired situation:** All those interviewed cited a variety of high quality options for teaching and study materials in the field of Judaism, in addition to the various organizations' ability to respond to the system's changing needs. Some expressed a wish for internet sites such as *Mikranet* for other Jewish subjects, as well as a site addressing civics education from Jewish-Zionist perspectives.

**Our insights:** A wide variety of teaching and study materials on Jewish subjects is available. Likewise, organizations in the field demonstrate an ability to respond to the changing needs in the school system. As such, no particular need to invest in producing written study materials exists. At the same time, additional work is needed to provide for changing technological needs and to develop websites on Jewish-related subjects not yet available online.

## School-wide Intervention Programs on Jewish Education

**Current situation:** Over the years, a number of organizations have been established to fill a vacuum in the school system and to provide support for quality and meaningful Jewish studies. A wide variety of organizations operating in schools exist in this field, and their ideological orientations range from Orthodox to secular liberal approaches to “Jewish identity.” This situation raises several concerns:

- It demonstrates the lack of a clear policy by the Ministry of Education, which in turn generates an ideological vacuum that various players can and do fill.
- Outside organizations influence not only the study materials but also the ideology and messages conveyed to students about Jewish studies, life, and traditions.
- A principal’s selection of an outside organization to provide educational services is not always motivated by worldview or ideology but often depends on the basket of (free) services the school receives from that same organization.
- Often, a number of organizations operate in the same school that do not necessarily collaborate and may even clash with each other’s work both on an ideological and organizational level.

**Desired situation:** Some see the ideological diversity between organizations intervening in the school system as a sign of a healthy, democratic, and pluralistic society, while others argue that it is a sign of educational chaos and a lack of professional responsibility toward the Jewish education of children in the state system. If more schools developed curricular and extra-curricular educational programs themselves, adapting them to their needs, concerns about the appropriateness of outside organizations intervening in the system would become irrelevant.

**Our insights:** Empowering school staffs and properly training them will promote wiser consumption of services offered by intervening organizations. Ideally, intervening organizations can serve as centers for updating study materials, and for creating and disseminating advanced tools and methods for teaching and studying.

## Experiential Education

**Current situation:** A number of principals and policy makers cited the value of informal, experience-based programs related to Jewish identity in schools. They pointed to programs such as study trips, family roots

projects, kabbalat Shabbat and holiday programs, and more. In addition, yearly school trips, which used to constitute primarily social experiences, are used in some schools as a platform for contending with Jewish-Israeli content.

A large number of interviewees positively noted the “Israeli Journey” (*Masa Yisraeli*) program offered by “*Mibereshit*,” a week-long tour that crisscrosses the state of Israel. During the journey, students engage in a process of addressing questions regarding their Jewish and Israeli identity. The journey was cited as a “peak experience” at many schools, although it also attracted criticism for its high cost and the reputed ideological agenda of the organizers.

**Desired situation:** Most of the principals and policy makers interviewed mentioned the need for experiential learning outside the formal curriculum, as a significant component of Jewish-Israeli education. All of the teachers and principals claimed that a single study trip (outside the school) has a greater effect than many hours in class. In addition, the interviewees called for additional options to the existing programmatic offerings.

**Our insights:** The need exists for experiential programs to help students in the state system clarify and strengthen their Jewish-Israeli identity. These programs should provide for educational experiences that are held outside the school premises, and their content should match the Jewish educational world-view of the school. A significant experiential program will need to be highly subsidized (funded by the Ministry of Education, among others) to ensure its attractiveness, given the subsidized nature of existing programs.

## Local Municipalities

**Current Situation:** Five directors of education departments from different cities in the country were randomly chosen and interviewed. They all stressed the importance of creating a comprehensive municipal program on Judaism that engages the city’s entire school system. They even noted this goal as an active part of their professional agenda. The educational directors described various ways of implementing this goal: in some cities, the municipalities entered into an agreement with the Hartman Institute to work either with all schools in the city, or with a selected group, in the hopes of gradually expanding the circle. In other cities, the subject of Jewish education was addressed in an eclectic manner, without a guiding hand integrating the work being done in the field in a continuous and consistent way.

**Desired Situation:** The interviewees agreed that a municipal program has the ability to enhance the schools’ work in Jewish studies. All of the interviewees noted that even if all of the schools in a city deal with Jewish subjects in reasonable fashion, the system would benefit from a clear and consistent educational program that begins in pre-school, continues to elementary school and on through high school. To create such a continuum, collaboration and open channels of communication need to be established between the directors of the various educational institutions and systems in the city.

**Our insights:** Directors of municipal education departments comprise a high quality group that can have a significant impact on what is being done in the city’s schools. Investing in this influential group can leverage

the work being done in the city schools to a significant degree and help create a shared, unified, and consistent narrative for the entire target population of the city's school system. Although the Hartman Institute appears very active on the municipal level, nearly all the department directors cited a lack of partners for providing high quality training programs for their elementary school staffs.

## Chapter 3: Conclusion

The process of assessing current needs and potential directions of activity has shown that almost everyone involved in the state school system views Jewish education as a crucial component in strengthening the Jewish-Israeli-Zionist identity of Israel's students and their connection to the state of Israel and its heritage. Alongside this widespread recognition, our assessment also identified a number of weaknesses in the system, which we review below:

**A Vision for Jewish Education:** A general lack of coherence and agreement characterizes the various players involved in the school system regarding the goals, content, guidelines, and characteristics of "Jewish education." Although reaching a consensus in the school system is unrealistic, the need exists to sharpen concepts and encourage educators to clarify their stance vis-à-vis basic questions of principles and pedagogy.

**Teachers:** Teachers hold the greatest responsibility for students' experience of Jewish life and studies in school. As such, it is incumbent to invest in teachers so they can teach Jewish subjects with breadth, depth, complexity, and passion. Teachers already employed in the system should be developed, and the supervision and facilitation provided to them should be augmented. Although this need exists for the entire school system, the need is particularly salient in the elementary schools.

**Principals:** Principals generally express an interest in and awareness of the high importance of enriching Jewish studies in their schools. This desire should be leveraged: principals should be included in the process of developing their teaching staffs in Jewish subjects.

**Local Municipalities:** The education department directors in local municipalities can significantly enhance the Jewish educational work being done in their schools and create a shared narrative in the form of a municipal-wide program that emphasizes the continuum from elementary through high school. Organizations exist that provide services on the municipal level for secondary schools, however, similar organizations for the elementary schools in local municipalities are sorely lacking.

**Study materials:** No need exists for significant investment in creating written study materials. At the same time, additional work is necessary to develop internet sites on Jewish studies, particularly for "Tarbut Yisrael" and civics. Internet sites can encourage an active community of teachers and help support online continuing education courses, similar to the *Mikranet* model.

**Experiential components:** Additional experiential programs should be developed in the field of Jewish studies, similar to the “Israeli Journey” model and other experiential programs.

## An Invitation

AVI CHAI Israel’s assessment is intended to serve as an invitation to policy makers at the Ministry of Education, to principals and teachers, to the organizations operating in the field, and to all others for whom Jewish education in the state school system is important, to read this report and partake in addressing the challenges that the state school system faces today.

Beyond the insights and ideas raised here, there is room for thinking “outside the box” about additional directions in the field. There is also room for developing strategies to connect ideas related to Jewish values with thinking about the future of schools in an era of advanced technology. The readers of this report are invited to enrich the discussion with their own suggestions. In every respect, the time is ripe, and the people in the field demonstrate a willingness and desire for action.