

ONWARD ISRAEL

ENRICHMENT & EDUCATION
VISION & PRACTICE RESEARCH REPORT

WINTER 2021



This report was commissioned to assess the impact of the educational vision of Onward Israel, and to offer suggestions for increasing the impact where required. Efforts were concentrated on the Educational Enrichment interventions in Participants’ time in Israel, and less on their living-experience and placements. The report also assumes the **solely** Remote aspect of Onward Israel will fade into painful memory within 12 months, and so will not directly address the educational work done with Participants who do not physically reach Israel (We will briefly address hybrid options later in the report).

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Research

During the research we read through the Onward Israel website, all pertinent Onward materials and guides for Organizers and Partners, and the last four Rosov evaluation reports. We also spoke with:

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The Challenges

THE “WHY” – WHAT IS THE EDUCATIONAL VISION OF ONWARD ISRAEL?

The educational intentions of Onward Israel are fairly clear and shared by all staff spoken to. However a short, sharp, written statement of these intentions, that is easily accessible to Organizers and Participants alike, is harder to come by.

A Participant visiting the home page of Onward Israel will find no reference to any educational vision or intent (this would need to be found under “Resources”). The closest the home page language comes to the ideological and educational intent of Onward Israel is with the phrase: “allow you an authentic taste of modern day Israel”. Digging further, the About page on the site seems to be written only partly for Participants, and partly for potential funders. It is not until its 4th paragraph that it refers to a connection to Israel or to identity-building.

A significant and carefully written 2,000-word document of Onward Israel’s Educational Vision and Goals is on file, and full details on all aspects of the Participants’ educational experience are sent out each year in the Educational Guidelines document. However, within this latter 20-page document **there is no single sentence or paragraph one might point to that succinctly captures Onward Israel’s educational vision.** Of the combination of eight Organizers and Providers spoken with, only two of them could easily identify Onward Israel’s Educational vision.

This presents a challenge to implementing Onward Israel’s vision for three reasons. First, a reader might pick and choose random sentences from the long document, and come out with an arbitrary patchwork of aims. Second, although content areas and trips are carefully spelled out, without a clear idea of Onward Israel’s vision a professional may still create thin, univocal, and simplistic programming. Third, Onward Israel is working with excellent people, nearly all of whom have educational chops: The more understanding and ownership of the educational vision they have, the greater involvement and creativity they might apply to their work.

See the suggestions on page ? and ?

THE “WHO” – RECRUITMENT STRATEGY AFFECTS PARTICIPANTS’ LEARNING

Onward Israel has honed a winning product with a clear recruitment message. This message, from the home page onwards, is couched in sharp and enticing transactional language.

“Opportunities... global experience... competitive edge... success story...” No matter what is said later in screening interviews or in orientation sessions, this individual career-oriented rationale for Participants’ involvement is assumed.

Although Partners are recommended to mention the educational enrichment interventions several times throughout the recruitment and orientation, nearly all Organizers spoken to, attest that there are too many Participants who simply do not hear them! Rather than only blaming Participants’ selective hearing, or on over-eager recruiters, we might also apply this frustration in a different direction: No matter what is said, most of Participants’ key expectations of Onward Israel are exactly right. No one tends to be surprised about spending their time on an internship in Israel with an element of individual living. Why is it that the majority of the expectations are mostly accurate, and other aspects so surprising to many? We might suggest that the Participants are picking up on **an unspoken and probably unintended message: Educational enrichment is peripheral to the Onward Experience.**

This fairly common mis-match in Participants’ expectations places a triple-burden on those delivering the educational enrichment.¹ First, these learners are reluctant to participate. They are on the program to get to know Israel through their own personal experiences, and to develop their own professional competencies. They resent the idea that they must give up what they see as their well-earned free time to go to “some seminar”. Second, the idea that they are forced to attend a certain number of educational enrichment sessions seems to them to go against the drive of Onward Israel – that they are adults with the right to choose their own experiences. Third, these double-resentments lead to an unforgiving demand on the educator to “deliver” something “awesome”.

As one can imagine, running an informal education program for a group of independent-minded young adults who are resentful or even angry about being there, sitting with their arms crossed in judgment, is not the greatest set-up for success!

See the suggestions on page ? and ?

¶ It must be said that this mis-match in expectations affects Participants differently. Organizers report that about a fifth of Participants tend to be keen to absorb all and any educational opportunities available. The “middle” majority are open to be engaged, or at least are willing to be persuaded. Yet Organizers point to roughly a further fifth of Participants who are antagonistic.

THE “WHO” – INDIVIDUALS OR GROUP?

As the Partner handbook makes plain: “The nature of Onward Israel [is] as a highly independent program while also being part of a Group experience.” This combination reveals a creative paradox that has not yet fulfilled its potential. How can Onward Israel best be both a Group experience and an individual learning journey?

There are those Organizers who understand the Group as the main delivery mechanism for learning experiences and for reflection. These either build their entire structure around the Group, or remain frustrated that what they see as an essential educational tool – the Group – is not invested in sufficiently. There are also those who see the Group as a mostly organizational structure, and either do not exploit the Group’s educational potential or chaff at demands to spend time on it. As a result of this lack of clarity on the part of some Organizers, there are challenges in recruiting madrichim with appropriate skills: Given a limited market with few all-rounders, must they choose excellent facilitators, or good logisticians?

At the same time it might be fair to say that most Organizers do not fully address the educational potential of the experience of the individual. While all are fully aware that the internships and living experience in Israel form the lion’s share of Participants’ experience, they do not necessarily see these experiences as learning opportunities that can and should be seen as an integral part of Onward Israel’s educational vision. As the educational philosopher John Dewey wisely stated: **“We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.”**

It may well be that a Group is not the ideal forum for reflecting on everyone’s diverse and individual experiences. In which case, greater investment might be required in developing forms of individual reflection beyond the Group.

See the suggestions on page ? and ?

THE “WHAT” – GOING BEYOND THE CONVENTIONAL

Organizers have commented on the challenges in programming – particularly Israel Now days – when their more edgy ideas have met with pushback from their Partners in Federation and Hillel. While it is clear that the complex weave of Partnerships that Onward Israel has succeeded in creating is central to Onward’s strength, at the same time several instances were noted where the Partnership weave is obstructing Onward Israel’s educational aims.

Even Organizers who have no educational or ideological skin in the game, point to a certain conservatism from some Partners that has prevented them offering the “Wow factor” they believe the Participants seek. Interviewees talked of how “Onward must go far beyond Birthright”. By this they mean that the classic tourist sites and the “advocacy-soft” educational approach that Participants encountered on Birthright is not appropriate for the average Onward Israel Participant who has already been on Birthright. Trips to the West Bank, explorations of Women of the Wall, and touching on political aspects of Israeli society, were ideas that Organizers had raised – precisely because they knew they would appeal to their Participants’ expectation of more than a Jewish tourists’ experience. It was these kinds of activities that were blocked by Partners who have perhaps seen the Taglit experience as a complete educational philosophy, rather than only the opening taste of a thrilling banquet.

See the suggestions on page ? and ?

THE “WHAT” – THE ELEPHANTINE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STORY AND NARRATIVE

Dr Alex Pomson of Rosov Consultants once challenged a group of Israel educators by questioning their visions for success. He suggested that the goal for every learner to “have their own Israel story” was insufficient. “Just as,” he pointed out, “the plural of anecdote is not data, so the plural of story is not narrative.” If one has their own “Israel Story”, this suggests they have a connection to Israel, but it does not necessarily mean they have any understanding of the

place, or might be able to explain Israel and their connection to it, to anyone else. **They have not synthesized their collection of individual experiences into their coherent “narrative” of Israel.**

We might also remember the fable of the elephant that one night approached a village that had never seen an elephant. People went out to meet the elephant, but it was pitch-dark. Without seeing a thing, they were able to stand around the elephant, and touch it. On returning to the village hall, the “observers” described the elephant. One explained that an elephant was a large thick thing like a tree trunk. Another talked of the elephant as a huge heavy flapping leaf. Yet another described a strange wide hose with warm air emerging from one end. **The evening degenerated into a huge argument, each person insisting that the other had not understood the true nature of an elephant.**

There is a possibility that Onward Israel might leave Participants with an in-depth experience of only a certain aspect of the “Israel-Elephant”, unaware that there are other essential aspects others may hold.

The disadvantage of this outcome is that on returning home Participants will find it **hard to express themselves** beyond a circle of people who touched the same aspect of Israel, **might end up arguing with anyone who has touched a different aspect, and - most tragically - will be unaware of the plurality of other stories that Israel’s complexity contains.**

Is there a way that Onward Israel can maintain the options for Participants to individualize their learning, while **also providing them with a shared holistic framework within which to understand and express Israel beyond themselves?**

Alternatively, if this Elephant image smacks too much of “Israel as an objective free-standing never-changing reality that-must-be-learned”, can Onward Israel **make sure that Participants spend more time with those who have a very different story – even in their own Groups?**

See the suggestions on page ? and ?

Suggestions

1. CREATE A SHARP AND CLEAR EDUCATIONAL VISION STATEMENT

Onward Israel should curate a short, precise, repeatable, accessible educational vision statement that could be appropriate for Participants, Organizers, Providers, and Partners alike. It would be rememberable, and would be the same for everyone involved.

Within the staff of Onward Israel there is already something of a consensus on the key elements of this vision. It includes multi-vocality, complexity, current affairs, and what Onward folk call “the roses and the thorns”. (These were the aspects listened for throughout the interviews for this report.) At the start of the research process Ilan and Scott sent over an opening draft of an overall statement of aims:

Onward Israel’s educational agenda seeks to share Israel with our Participants in an adult fashion – through independent living, through professional development, and through educational and enrichment activities that stress a multi-vocal and diverse encounter with both the roses and the thorns of Israeli life and the key issues of the day.

The final section (in bold) speaks to Onward Israel’s underlying educational approach. It suggests that Israel education must **move beyond the perspective of only the teacher and the learner**, that Israel is **most engaging for the learner when its complexities are exposed and explored**, and that in order to learn about Israel as it is **we must engage with the aspects that give us discomfort as well as those that give us pleasure**. (So as to leave room for differing definitions of pleasure and discomfort, we might omit the definite article in “the roses and the thorns”, so as to acknowledge that rose or thorn is a subjective judgment.)

Yet it is the first half of the statement that is even more important to finesse. The first half of the statement refers to the Educational Enrichment as **an integral part of the work of Onward Israel**. Which leads us to our second suggestion:

2. (CREATE A SHARP AND CLEAR EDUCATIONAL VISION STATEMENT) THAT IS ALIGNED WITH THE ENTIRETY OF ONWARD ISRAEL'S WORK

The unintended consequence of the current half-hidden somewhat-vague statement about Onward Israel's specifically educational goals, is that it can be understood in two detrimental ways. The educational process may be seen as secondary, if not peripheral to the Participants' professional goals. Or – perhaps even worse – it can be seen as a form of “bait and switch”, where the Participant feels cheated into an educational program when they had signed on for an internship. For this reason **it is crucial for Onward Israel to imagine and communicate the Educational Enrichment work as an integral aspect of the Onward Israel Experience.**

Following on from a conversation with Renana, whose convictions that the learning must meet the learner where he or she is, rang out powerfully, it might be that some adaptation of the original Limmud mission statement might be of use. The Onward staff might work at crafting a statement in the direction of:

“Wherever you find yourself on your Israel journey, Onward Israel will take you deeper – through independent living, professional development, and challenging multi-vocal educational enrichment.”

This is not offered as the final statement Onward Israel should adopt: It is offered as a possible basis around which management might work. Once the statement (of under 30 words!) is agreed upon, **it should be inserted into all materials internal and external – documents and website alike.** (It should also be recited by staff at all opportunities.) This should allow for an opportunity to flag up this change with the Partners and Organizers alike so as to allow for:

3. LEVERAGE THE LANGUAGE-CHANGE INTO DEEPER WORK WITH PARTNERS

As we have seen, the educational impact of Onward Israel is sometimes undermined by Participants whose expectations are not aligned with Onward Israel's intentions. This misalignment can be traced to the publicity materials, but it can also be traced to the recruitment and screening process – which is primarily in the hands of the Partners. The Partners Handbook refers to the screening process as an opportunity to “determine [if the Participant] will be a good fit for the program, and also to establish expectations about the program itself.”

As we are looking to adjust Participants' expectations, it will be important to give interview screeners the language with which to talk about the educational intent of Onward Israel. Prior to the section on “Structure of the Program” on page 13, there might be a section where the interviewer **states and unpacks the Educational Vision statement**. This approach would also benefit from influencing the Social Media suggestions in the Handbook, so that more complex or challenging posts may be sprinkled in with the Israel promotion currently suggested.

It would then be highly beneficial to **run a workshop with Partners on why the Vision statement has been altered, and what this implies**. This would allow Onward Israel staff to explain the benefits of multi-vocal complex Israel education, and how a “Beyond Birthright” approach will fit Participants best. (“Beyond Birthright” may aim to move beyond introduction or initiation to Israel, and provide a space for meeting Israel's depths and complexities.) Ideally this conversation would be directed into a discussion of how Partners might encourage rather than block the more adventurous ideas for Israel programming. In this way the Organizers back in Israel might find a more accommodating ear.

4. MAKE THE ORGANIZERS AND PROVIDERS YOUR EDUCATIONAL ALLIES

Onward Israel has gathered an impressive Group of Organizers and Providers. With the possible exception of one Organizer, all the people contacted for this report had significant educational backgrounds. While all of them remark upon Scott's excellent support and encouragement in their planning, many of them also find themselves somewhat stymied by the procedural, practical, logistical language of the Educational Guide.

Were the Educational Guide to lead with the language of education, with a clear emphasis on multi-vocality, complexity, and "roses and thorns", this might deliver a double benefit.

First, we know that the requirement to take a Group to the South or to the North will not necessarily lead to a deep complex educational experience if that is not the Organizer's intent. For example, a day trip to Haifa – an inherently complex place – does not necessarily lead to a complex experience. One could very easily take photos walking through the Bahai Gardens, eat humus as a large group in Wadi Nisnas, and hang out on the beach. Alternatively one might spend a day in Haifa touring the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, talking with Arab citizens, learning of the Templars, and meeting with veterans of the Wadi Salib uprising. An obligation to visit a particular place does not necessarily guarantee the educational outcomes Onward Israel is looking for. A clearly stated educational expectation would make it easy for an Organizer to recognize the difference between the two possible Haifa days.

Second, this alteration would give Scott a platform to work with Organizers from first principles, starting with the educational aims before anything else, and may well spark even more creative programming. It may also **add to the motivation of those Onward Israel works with, giving them more room to express themselves as educators and feel more ownership over Israel Now days**, for example. This deeper form of collaboration may easier solve the perceived need of Onward Israel to take over the running of the Israel Now days.

5. CLARIFY AND SUPPORT GROUP-BUILDING

The Group may serve three different functions, simultaneously, or separately.

- It can be an **efficient logistical unit** for coordination and cost-savings.
- The Group may be the easiest and cheapest way for all to gain entry to a particular site or performance, but there might be no obligation for all to travel or experience it together.
- It can be a **forum for educational and personal reflection** in a Group context.
- In this example the Group could be the safe and secure place where Participants share and reflect on the experiences they have had outside of the Group.
- It can be a **delivery mechanism of educational experiences**, where the Group undergoes an experience together as a Group, such as a cooking workshop in a Druse village, after which they may well also process their experiences as a Group.

Onward Israel should clarify for itself which of these functions should be emphasized, or **make sure that each Organizer clarifies for themselves what is appropriate**. This choice – either directed or gleaned – will allow Onward to support each Organizer's particular course of action.

For example, were the decision taken that the Group will indeed be the delivery mechanism of educational experiences, then Onward Israel might mandate that the opening orientation session should have an overnight component. This would immediately establish the Group as the key address for what we are really here for – to go deeper on our Israel journey. Perhaps the subsidy for organizing a Shabbat evening could be doubled if all the Group were invited.

6. FROM EXPERIENCE TO LEARNING – INDIVIDUALLY AND IN THE GROUP

INDIVIDUALLY

As mentioned earlier, an experience becomes a learning experience through reflection. The way in which we can “upgrade” the educational status of the internships and day-to-day life in Israel can be through **emphasizing the place of reflection in their day-to-day journey**.

(As we will explore further in the next point, Covid-19 has shifted the place of online activity in our lives. Rather than suspecting online activity of furthering alienation, we and our Participants have also internalized how it can connect us to others and to ourselves. While some online engagement while in Israel has been explored in the past, the post-Covid internalization of online ubiquity might open up possibilities anew.)

Onward Israel could develop an online prompting system, that requires Participants to regularly think slowly (Daniel Kahneman: “Thinking, Fast and Slow”) about their Israel journey.

A FEW EXAMPLES:

- Take a few minutes to listen to this YouTube of an Israeli song with English subtitles: In what way does its message speak to you? Ask an Israeli friend or colleague what is their response.
- Today is the anniversary of X event in Israeli history [link included]. How have you found this event to resonate in your experience of Israel today?
- How would you say Israelis mark this chag, that is different from home? Are there elements you prefer/reject?
- Upload a photo that symbolizes the way you are feeling about Israel this week.
- Who would you vote for in the upcoming elections? Find an Israeli friend or colleague who plans to vote for a different party and summarize here their explanation why.
- When you stand in line here, what about the experience leads you to like Israel more, and less?

These prompts should be specifically created to require Participants to spend **no more than ten minutes** answering one. What if Participants received 5 prompts per week, and were **obliged** to answer at least three? Perhaps these prompts might be sent out on a large Padlet, allowing for everyone to see each others’ answers, and allowing for multi-media responses. Perhaps Onward

Israel might present each Participant with a designed and printed version of all their responses, as a going-home scrapbook?

No doubt some Participants will answer cursorily, while others will answer fully. But **all will have stopped to think and reflect on Israel several times a week.** This practice will enable their day-to-day experiences, their work hours and their free hours, to become learning material that they process so as to deepen their relationship with Israel.

IN THE GROUP

If the Group has been given a more substantial place in the program, the Group experience itself can enable Participants to appreciate the multi-faceted nature of Israel. The more Participants hear about Group-members' different experiences, different insights, different snippets of information, the more they take deeper steps on their own journey.

First, they begin to move up a level of understanding as defined by educational theorist Kieran Egan. Egan explained in his seminal work *The Educated Mind*, that in their late teens learners will reach the **Philosophical Level of Understanding.** This is when the learner builds for themselves a "take" on the world, a unified approach to how the world should or does work. The next level of understanding that Egan looks for is the Ironic Level of Understanding. This level is where the learner may well hold on to their Philosophic Understanding of the world, but also appreciates that other people have their own Philosophic Understandings that are totally different from one's own. **This level of understanding is the baseline for a pluralistic society and a pluralistic Jewish community.**

Processing one's experiences of Israel with a group of people will of necessity expose the learner to different perspectives, different Philosophic Understandings of Israel, that will bring the learner into a far broader and pluralistic discourse about Israel. This Ironic Understanding will stand the Participant in good stead on arriving home.

Second, **the more the Participant is exposed to different perspectives on Israel within and without their Group, they will begin to learn Israel's true magic: It is endlessly multi-faceted, with infinite room for additional details, complexities, celebrations, and confusions.**

7. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE NEW PLACE OF ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS

In Summer 2019 it was a hassle to organize one short international webinar. By the end of Summer 2020, we just call it zoom. While on the one hand, we are all exhausted by zooming all the time, on the other hand participating in an online video meeting is no longer out of the ordinary nor a technological challenge. When travel to Israel returns, online meetings will continue to be an easily accessible tool to be utilized.

At the very least, a huge amount of expectation-setting and logistical orientation can be done with everyone before their physical arrival in Israel. Even this small shift can affect deep change. It might free up even more time to invest in establishing the Group's dynamics on the first physical day together in Israel. It will also be a useful "contract". If the zoom meetings are recorded, no one will be able to claim "you never told us!"

Taken further, Onward Israel might explore the possibilities of online courses to be taken even while the Participants are in Israel, or started in Israel and overflowing back home. Millennials spend at least 5 hours a day in front of a personal screen – there is little reason to assume they will not continue to do so when in Israel. Why not offer them some more enriching or challenging activities to do while online anyway?

Grey areas

The way in which Onward Israel has succeeded in weaving so many different players together is extremely impressive. Especially in the Jewish world, especially when dealing with a connection to Israel, is nothing short of miraculous that Onward Israel has created an umbrella service for very different federations and Hillels, very different Organizers with hugely varied ideologies, and Participants from near and far, fresh off the Birthright boat or deeply immersed.

At the same time these multiple alliances can make maneuvering difficult, and can mean that **standards are replaced by consensus, and inclusive ambiguity is preferred over the clean edges of clarity.** For an educational vision to have full impact, it is best served by a clarity that does not necessarily please all.

With this in mind, one might point to two grey areas:

1 WILL ONWARD ISRAEL REJECT A PARTICIPANT?

The screening section of the Partners Handbook (p14) points to “What to be on the look-out for”, but does not make mention of “things that rule candidates out”. **Must a Federation or a Hillel accept every single candidate?** Clearly there are criminal and psychological red lines: Are there any educational red lines? Perhaps instead of trying to accommodate the minority who are switched off from educational growth, Onward Israel should refuse them access to this wonderful opportunity at the outset?

Were Onward Israel to declare to itself – “We will take ANYONE and take them several steps deeper on their Israel journey”, this would be a crucial statement and demand honest appraisal. For what happens if the young independent adult involved **does not want to** go anywhere on their Israel journey?

Alternatively were Onward Israel to declare – “We are the experts for enabling people who WANT to go deeper on their Israel journey, and do not cater for those who don’t” – how would

one build a screening process that ensured this?

It seems that Onward Israel has not yet fully decided on this issue, which is itself a decision to accept all.

2. WILL ONWARD ISRAEL REJECT AN ORGANIZER?

Among those interviewed there was at least one Organizer and one Provider who quite clearly do excellent work, meet their own educational goals, and who **entirely reject the idea that Israel education should involve complexity, or multi-vocality**. (Referring back to Egan, they prefer to teach towards their particular Philosophical Understanding, and block the possibility for Ironic Understanding.) In short, **they politely yet clearly ignore the educational goals of Onward Israel**. Another Organizer happily accepts complexity, roses and thorns, and multi-vocality, yet interprets them all in only one ideological direction.

How much work should Onward Israel invest in guiding an Organizer to a different educational approach? When should they give up? **More critically, at what point should Onward Israel acknowledge that an Organizer is simply not a good fit, and cut them loose? Or should Onward Israel never do that?**

Conclusion

Onward Israel has created an excellent name for itself as a pluralistic organization that provides Participants with life-changing experiences, while constantly learning and honing its product. All interlocutors have noted how the great successes of Onward Israel have been connected to the organization's ability to reflect on its own practices, to build on its strengths and to reduce its weaknesses. The comments in this report hope to further this process of growth into the next period of returned travel.