What Israelis aren’t being taught in school, and why

For decades, the Education Ministry has been replacing historical facts with political views that have fateful consequences for the State of Israel

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Our culture is characterized by endless reams of information, which we receive unfiltered, unclassified and lacking a quality-based hierarchy. Access to this data trove allows us to challenge prevailing concepts, but makes it harder for us – since we lack the conceptual and historical “anchors” that withstand scientific examination – to turn that information into knowledge that could improve the reality in which we live.

In this culture, which reveres the here and now, it is difficult to track and understand processes that span many years – at least until the moment arrives that throws the process and its consequences into sharp relief. This is what happened last summer when a poll of Israeli teachers conducted by the Israel Hayom newspaper exposed a particularly grim picture: Some 69 percent of teachers in Israel didn’t know what happened on November 29, 1947. Furthermore, 57 percent didn’t know about the Green Line (the armistice borders fixed at the end of the War of Independence), or how it was determined.

This ignorance of fateful matters is not an accident. It’s the end result of years in which the education system has been under the leadership of ministers from the nationalist and messianic camps. The process taking place in the public education system, driven by these ministers, is composed primarily of two important trends, which determine the political culture and are taking place in the public sphere.

The first trend, and the more important of the two, is the one which guarantees that by leaving out the two key subjects mentioned above, school curricula will not construct a system of concepts, facts and historical processes that could lead to a better understanding of the history of Zionism and the conflict with the Arabs. The resulting void is easier to fill with “historical truths” and change them as required to reflect this or that political necessity – as proven by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent comparison of Hitler and the grand mufti of Jerusalem.

Consigning the events of November 29, 1947, to oblivion creates room for another “truth”: that the State of Israel was established by the power of a divine promise and victory in the War of Independence. The role the international community played in the state’s establishment has disappeared, which allows many to see the United Nations as the embodiment of the claim that “the whole world is against us.” Nowadays, no one remembers the decisive clause in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which bases the diplomatic and legal legitimacy of the new state on UN Resolution 181(II) (the Partition Plan). And who cares that on the Shabbat after the UN vote, a special prayer of thanks was offered at the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv? It opened with these words: “Our father who art in heaven, bless the nations, big and small, who voted on the decisive day in favor of the weakest among the nations, to give it a name and a place in the land of its ancestors.”

Most of those who have heard of the November 29 resolution know only the part that relates to the establishment of a Jewish state. The fact that it also declared the establishment of an Arab state in the Land of Israel has slipped their minds. They also forget that it was David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency and Zionist Congress, who turned to the British foreign minister in February 1947 and wrote, “The only immediate and possible arrangement that has an element of permanence is the establishment of two states, one Jewish and one Arab [...] The Arab community has a right to self-determination and self-rule; we would not even consider depriving them of that right or making less of it.”

Many believe the partition resolution and the state’s establishment were the fruit of Jewish underground organizations’ struggles against the British: In their minds, the part that the Irgun (the prestate militia led by Menachem Begin) and Lehi (another prestate militia, also known as the Stern Gang) played in that struggle grows every year, at the expense of the Haganah (the prestate army of Palestine’s Jews). Few recall that, through 1917’s Balfour Declaration, the British were the first to support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Israel, and that they made sure to incorporate this declaration into the mandate for Palestine they received from the League of Nations in 1922. Even fewer people know that the mandate conditioned the establishment of a Jewish state on it being a democracy with equal rights for all its citizens.

Thanks to former Foreign Minister Abba Eban, the Green Line has been burned into the psyche of many as the “Auschwitz borders.” Only a few know that the Green Line increased the Jewish state’s territory, as previously determined by the partition resolution, by no less than 30 percent. Even UN Security Council Resolution 242, reached after the Six-Day War in 1967, is also considered anti-Israel because it gave rise to the “land for peace” formula and declared that Israel must withdraw from the territories it captured in the war. But most people don’t know that this resolution – for the first time, and in a manner that contradicted Article 2 of the UN Charter – internationally recognized the Green Line as the border of the State of Israel, and laid the groundwork for the signing of the subsequent peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan.

Not many know that, until 1967, the total area of East Jerusalem was less than six square kilometers (2.3 square miles), while many believe that “united Jerusalem,” in all its 126.4 square kilometers, has the same historical, religious and nationalist standing as David and Solomon’s Jerusalem – even though that occupied less than 2 percent of the city’s current area. And who among those who seek to change the status quo on the Temple Mount wants to learn of Menachem Begin’s 1944 promise that the government would “declare the Christian and Muslim holy sites to be extraterritorial”?

Only a few of those who hang Begin’s portrait on their office wall and call for “the Oslo criminals” to be indicted know that the Declaration of Principles (better known as the Oslo I Accord) – which was signed in 1993 by the Rabin administration – was a near-identical copy of the second framework agreement that dealt with the future of the Palestinians, signed by the Begin administration at Camp David in 1978. These two prime ministers understood that a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is only through an agreement with the Palestinians – and not vice versa, as the prime minister says today.

The second trend relates to the replacement of the old with the new. Incorporating nationalist, religious and messianic material into the curriculum, as Education Minister Naftali Bennett does covertly, is easy and convenient when there’s no firm knowledge base to deal with. It’s another expression of the Bennett plan which states that the Land of Israel must change the people of Israel and the State of Israel. He and his brethren are focusing these days on “hearts and minds,” after a series of traumas that came after their messianic camp’s painful collision with the rock of reality. This started with the disengagement from Gaza in 2005, the evacuation of the Amona and Migron settlements in the West Bank in 2012, and the slowdown in settlement construction as a result of international pressure.

In a process that took decades, the number of people who have knowledge of the history of Zionism has slowly decreased, leaving behind an easy-to-fill void. Some have explained this as being due to ideological differences – like MK Nissan Slomiansky (Habayit Hayehudi), who boycotted the 100-year anniversary of Theodor Herzl’s death, claiming that Herzl’s Zionism was not his Zionism. The Education Ministry’s response a few years ago to a query regarding Herzl’s absence from the high school curriculum was similar: “There are different approaches to the study of history.”

The painful truth is that this trend is actually about the opposite process – replacing the new with the old. First, it must be remembered that the ultra-Orthodox education stream, whose percentage of students grows apace every year, has never felt the need to study the history of Zionism, and made sure to preserve “the old” – some of which is anti-Zionist. It is the same in the Arab community.

Second, the Zionism of Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion sought to create a Jewish, liberal and democratic state, a member of the family of nations. Yet current trends show that Israeli-Jewish society is turning to the very same values that secular Zionists previously sought to disengage from.

If these trends aren’t curbed, and if the process isn’t reversed, Israel will be perilously close to realizing Lord Rothschild’s warning to Herzl in 1902: “I should view with horror the establishment of a Jewish colony; such a colony would be Imperium Imperio [a state within a state]; it would be a ghetto with the prejudice of the ghetto; it would be a small, petty Jewish state, Orthodox and illiberal, excluding the Gentile and the Christian.”

The war on the character, identity and future of the State of Israel must be brought to the field of education, which was abandoned by the ruling parties years ago as the price to be paid for establishing a coalition with smaller factions. It’s a long process, but for the minority who still believe in the possibility of another Israel, there’s no other choice but to start rebuilding it once again.