The Maarag Program for Excellence in Jewish, Zionist and Civic Education

Ohad David

Introduction

In his book, *Zionism after Zionism*, Professor Eliezer Schweid, researcher and intellectual, analyzes the ongoing crisis in Jewish and Zionist education in the Israeli public school system. Among other things, he wrote that the religious school system is inspired to educate, endow and shape a way of life and a personal identity. The regular public schools have been instructed not to directly approach education from the moral, ideological perspective, other than to present a simple version of Zionist values. Schweid says that teachers are no longer educators, no longer responsible to morally and ethically advance, nourish and direct their students in preparation for their encounter with socio-cultural
socialization. The teacher's job is merely formal and didactic\(^1\).

The current situation in the public school system indicates the difficulty – some may say the tendency to avoid responsibility – that the Israeli, Zionist school system experiences in filling its central role as a place in which their students can clarify issues of identity, belonging, commitment and responsibility towards Israeli society, the Jewish people and the state, and which builds its students identities as Jews living in the democratic state of Israel.

Faced with this situation, rooted in long-term social, political, economical and technological processes in Israeli society that we will not expand on here, the Maarag Program for Jewish, Zionist and civic excellence was introduced in 2005. It all began with a position paper written by Dani Danieli, then deputy director of the Avi Chai Foundation. The plan of action derived from that position paper lead to a pilot program in six different schools, run by Rachel Pereg, director and founder of Maarag. Since then, the multi-year program has been implemented in a much wider range of schools. This program, founded by the Avi Chai Foundation which continues to support it today, has been a part of the Melton Center for Jewish Education in Hebrew University since 2008, and is currently directed by Shuki Yaniv Elharar. It operates in 30 public schools across Israel in order to lead schools in a multi-year program to promote excellence in Jewish, Zionist and civic education. This article explains the program's goals, presents a general outline of its methods and describes the significance of the program coordinators' work with the teachers in the schools.

Maarag – Vision and Goals

What exactly is excellence in Jewish, Zionist and civic education? How can an elementary school, busy teaching basic information on different subjects, or a high school, completely absorbed in preparation for matriculation exams, strive to achieve such excellence?

Maarag's opinion is that there are two ways of addressing that question: one is to define a school-wide "identity card" which expresses the school's commitment to focusing on its students' Jewish, Zionist and civic identity. The second is to build the principal and teachers' commitment to implementing the different aspects of that "identity card" in the school curriculum and in the staff's work with all of the groups that the school has defined as populations that it wishes to influence – teachers, students, parents, graduates, local municipality representatives, members of the Israel Ministry of Education and others.

The school identity card focuses on the vision, set of values, groups responsible for planning the content that outline all school programs, and the school experts – in other words, all of the methods that will be employed to lead the school to success. This identity card is defined at the first stage of the process, as soon as the school joins Maarag, taking the school's current status into consideration (such as typical formal and informal lesson plans, statements made by the principal and management, booklets published by the school and more), and defining the goals that the school aims to achieve. From that moment on, the school is expected to continuously work to implement its decisions and incorporate them into its routine.

This means:

- **Preparing lesson plans for each subject** – Humanities and social sciences are naturally very significant parts of identity shaping, but we require the school to form a clear affinity between its desired image and the students' quest to understand their identity, with the
lessons taught in practical studies and sciences. The connections and combinations that the program requires to be created between different subjects are no less important, and expose the students to a variety of perspectives on the identity issue that their school is exploring.

- **All areas of school life:** Schools tend to focus on instilling knowledge. In that area, one of Maarag's fundamental principles is to expand the program's content to include Jewish sources of knowledge as they were developed over generations – from Zionist philosophy and history to civic democratic philosophy. Maarag expects its schools to implement their new identities in other aspects as well, such as the physical environment (walls, learning spaces), organizational issues (standing and ad-hoc school committees, mixed age group learning) and others.

- **All populations:** As previously stated, Maarag aims to influence the students' Jewish, Zionist and civic identity. This influence requires the active involvement of ever expanding circles, beginning with the school principal, the school staff, students and their parents, and continuing on to the community that the school maintains relations with. But beyond that, Maarag's vision sees itself influencing the creation of a joint cultural base for Jewish, Zionist and civic education in all schools in Israel. Consequently, cooperation with the local municipalities and the Ministry of Education and their involvement is crucial.

Excellence in Jewish, Zionist and civic education entails the entire school system's creating a wide-ranging, multi-dimensional, meaningful system for the student, which includes giving them a deeper understanding of Jewish, Zionist and civic related knowledge. It stems from a familiar and clear vision, based on interaction between the formal and informal programs and on the relationship between the school and
its community. To reach this level, the school must constantly raise its standards of excellence according to fixed and predetermined criteria, based on the school's starting point. Maarag's approach to excellence is to constantly raise the standards of every aspect of school life.

How Maarag works

Everything mentioned so far makes it clear that schools that join the program commit themselves to a very complex program that requires significant effort. Maarag is not just another school program; it is a program that presents schools with the challenge of "second degree change" – meaning a change that affects the entire school lifestyle by focusing all educational-ideological activity on clarifying issues related to identity. This requires that the decision to join the program be mutual: the school must choose to join and Maarag must choose to accept it. One of the deciding factors for accepting a school is its commitment to placing Jewish, Zionist and civic identity at the top of the principal's educational priorities, as well as its ability to present existing school projects on these topics as a basis for future growth.

When a school joins Maarag, the principal forms a school leadership staff comprised of teachers who teach different subjects, who will be responsible for leading the rest of the staff with the principal's cooperation. Maarag accompanies participating schools for six years – three years of intense instruction followed by three years of less direct involvement. During the third year, the committee for excellence in Jewish, Zionist and civic education visits the school. The committee is led by Yisrael Regev, chairman of the Maarag steering committee and includes a public representative and a representative of the Ministry of Education. The school presents the progress that it has made towards achieving excellence and the committee decides if it is worthy of the award of excellence given at the end of the program's third year.
A coordinator appointed by Maarag works alongside the principal and the directing staff. The program coordinators' responsibility is first and foremost to give the principal and directing staff the tools that they need to build the organizational infrastructure required to achieve excellence in Jewish, Zionist and civic education. Although many of the coordinators are knowledgeable in Judaism and Zionist history, their job is not to teach the material or sources to the principal and teachers. Their knowledge is nevertheless useful and assists the coordinators in two significant ways—first, by allowing them to anchor the organizational changes in Jewish sources, such as teaching leadership methods and practices of great Jewish leaders such as Moses, Herzl and ben Gurion or discussing teachers' connection and commitment to an visionary educational institute based on texts dealing with the connection and commitment of different social groups to Israeli society and to the State of Israel. The second way that the program coordinators use their knowledge is to help the principal and staff select and plan issues of Jewish, Zionist and civic identity that they want to focus on in their school. The coordinator might refer the staff to relevant sources that will add depth to their programs.

The directing school staff's job is to teach the concept and provide the tools to create a holistic organizational infrastructure, utilize these tools, distribute them and help the rest of the school staff make them an integral part of their toolbox. This requires a strict routine of institute-wide training, organized by the directing staff. These training programs teach the staff how to use the tools, expand their knowledge of the topics that the school decides to focus on and outline plans for working with the students.

The coordinator helps the principal and the directing staff who are committed to implementing the tools and creating the conceptual framework within the entire school staff, enabling them to gradually
change their teaching methods. As a result, all of the teachers individually and as a group begin focusing their educational activities on the topics of identity that they have studied and elucidated.

**What Does Work With the Principal and Directing Staff Entail?**

It is clear from what we've described so far that Maarag intends to shape the student's identity, but *the actual work is done with adults as agents of these changes*. I would like to explain some of the most significant consequences of this type of approach that should be considered.

First of all, Maarag focuses on identifying the group dynamics that are constantly in action, and uses them to address the challenges that the school faces. These dynamics exist within the directing staff themselves, between the staff and the coordinator, between them and the rest of the school staff, and frequently change at stages that those with experience in group coordination are familiar with. They experience confusion and uncertainty, display different types of objections and eventually exhibit willingness to study, implement and promote the issues at hand. Therefore, the methods used to guarantee the directing staff's dedication to the change that Maarag makes in the school have to be very carefully tailored to its unique needs, assuming that correct understanding of the group dynamics will make the meetings productive, while misunderstanding them or responding incorrectly to existing dynamics could keep the school from advancing towards its goals.

---

2 All of Maarag's work regarding group dynamics is based on the "magic eight" model which explains the eight stages of how a group evolves. The model was developed by Ruth Peleg, founder and director of Maarag. More information on group dynamics can be found in W. Bion (1989), *Experiences in Groups: And Other Papers*, London: Tavistock Routledge. Hebrew translation by Dvir Publications, 1992.
It is crucial that the program coordinator understand the complexity of the change that the school must make and the different kinds of objections that often arise. Some of the objections are to the type of work that the program dictates to the school, especially the large number of tasks involved in such as significant organizational change. Others are related to the difficulty in changing a paradigm, meaning the need to make a conceptual change that will lead to an organizational one. Teachers are expected to critically examine the school's existing programs and teaching methods and determine if and how they fit the school's new image. They must determine if their content is rich enough and how it intertwines with different subjects and populations. All of these stages involve overcoming complex hurdles presented by staff members who feel – often justly – that they are already doing a good and important job of teaching values without Maarag's assistance.

One example of a paradigm change is a high school's willingness to change the way in which it holds memorial ceremonies. The school agreed to an approach where teachers direct selected students in how to teach and moderate discussion groups focusing on identity dilemmas that arise in relation to the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day, Holocaust Memorial Day and the Memorial Day for fallen IDF soldiers. Adopting this model requires that the teachers enhance their knowledge by reading texts, share the selected identity-related topics with the students, teach the students and direct them. It also requires that they step down from their position of educators in control of their classes and allow student to lead the discussion. Adopting this model and implementing it again and again throughout the year allowed this high school to break the old pattern of how memorial days should be commemorated and build a new paradigm in its place – while maintaining the school's significant core identity. This is an example of how a holistic infrastructure for Jewish, Zionist and civic education is created – from a state in which a handful
of teachers designed the memorial ceremonies which only a few students took an active part in, followed sometimes by a short discussion in class with the homeroom teacher, the school transitioned to a state in which all of the teachers and all of the students participate in discussion groups focused on identity, lead by the students themselves.

A third type of objection that program coordinators deal with is related to the combination of the different Jewish, Zionist and civic-democratic worlds of content. Maarag does not make any morally committing statements regarding the meaning of these three major identity defining points. The opposite is true – Maarag encourages a multitude of different approaches within Israeli society, expressed by the different images selected by the different schools and especially in the way that they are implemented in the school programs. Some of the participating schools are completely secular-oriented and consider Judaism a culture, while others cultivate a more traditional approach. Some see the three points of identity as ideals that complement each other while other focus on the tension between them. Maarag does require that the each school in the program work to influence the students' identity. This requirement obviously raises sensitive issues amongst the teachers on the desired explanation of the three identity factors – Judaism, Zionism and civics. The principal's willingness to place these three factors at the center of all education and ideological school activity, to take on a multi-year process of exploration, along with the staff, of what these terms mean to them and how they support the image and identity that the school defines for itself and implement them in the school programs while constantly learning more about these three areas, is of upmost importance while clarifying the school's identity as an organization. Of no lesser importance is finding ways of overcoming or bypassing objections of this kind to allow the teachers, as individuals, to explore their own identities, give them courage to ask difficult questions and find new ways of defining
their relationship with the Jewish people and their connection to Jewish culture, Zionist history and the Israeli state.

The complexity also requires that the coordinator avoid leading the school according to his personal identity and lifestyle. The coordinators must be attentive to the identity that the school defines for itself and give the principal and directing staff the best tools to implement their goals within their school's routine. The coordinators must set the foundations and build the framework in which the identity issues will be explored, including providing references to relevant sources when necessary. They must not use the power that they have to determine the schools morals and principles in any way. The coordinators must therefore constantly explore and clarify their own identities and define the extent of their responsibilities – when to intervene and when to avoid doing so; when to contribute their own knowledge and approach in order to advance projects and enrich the debate that the school chooses and when contributing their own definitions and ideas could create negative dynamics.

**Summary**

Many schools throughout the country, both elementary schools and high schools which are not members of *Maarag* run a variety of quality programs geared towards defining students' identity. In many cases, however, these programs do not revolve around a consistent moral approach that is coherent to the entire school staff, do not extend beyond a one-time activity limited to a specific group of teachers and students and are not a conscience part of an identity-exploring process.

*Maarag* is unique in that it is helps the school build a holistic, all-encompassing foundation for Jewish, Zionist and civic education which focuses on influencing the participants' identity. *Maarag* assumes that the school is a chaotic organization operating in the very complex and dynamic environment of multiple school subjects, jobs and responsibilities,
populations, outside influences and identities. It is therefore critical to utilize simple tools to create order, help all of the relevant players understand how the school defines itself and help the school build an organizational-ethical infrastructure that fosters identity. Identifying the schools self-definition requires it to verbalize the school's DNA and use it as a kind of a paintbrush to "paint" all corners of the school, therefore guaranteeing that this holistic infrastructure will be built. This is how the school makes a significant change in a multi-year program – not only by providing additional formal instruction, but also by expanding the participants' world of knowledge based on rich Jewish sources to form an important layer in the debate on Jewish-Israeli identity. The program's activities are not just one-time programs, successful as they may be. They create a new way of life. Instead of studying content that is not related to any greater context, Maarag creates a style of learning that is firmly rooted in defined principles which are known and clear to all. Maarag allows schools to operate as closed environments in which citizens of the future clarify for themselves, along with their teachers and parents, how they identify themselves and how they connect to the Jewish people, the Jewish state and Israeli society.