



Daniella Ashkenazy

Daniella Ashkenazy is a seasoned bilingual Israeli journalist, born and raised in Washington DC, and living in Israel since 1968. In addition to the Chelm-on-the-Med Project, she writes features for the Jerusalem Post, and has written for a host of other Israeli print media, from Israel Scene to Davar and Haolam Hazeh.

What Jewish news outlets for youth get wrong: Why they should provide content to make kids (and their parents) laugh about Israel – instead of making them feel disheartened or angry.

CULTURE

[What's Wrong with Israel education in the Diaspora?](#)

By [Daniella Ashkenazy](#)

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What's the best way to get American Jewish children interested in Israel?

Do we offer children the conflict-driven fears so prevalent in stories geared for adults? Do we present as “model” figures dead or aging politicians like Menachem Begin (z”l) or Natan Sharansky? Why not offer children content that makes them *laugh* about Israel, as opposed to making them feel sad, disheartened, disenchanted, scared, ashamed or angry?

BabagaNewz

The award-winning website BabagaNewz.com offers a representative look at the way Israel has been presented to Diasporic Jewish children. Operating under the auspices of Behrman House, a leading Jewish publisher, BabagaNewz aims to encourage

young people to “explore... Israel, from perspectives that are novel, hip, fun, thought-provoking, [and] exciting[,] and that will encourage them to continue these explorations with the full power of their imaginations and reflections.” It’s populated, however, by pictures of a country filled with old Jewish men with Yiddish accents; preachy, perfect teens; and terrorists ready to kill Jews at every turn.

BabagaNewz’s News section, for instance, is filled to the brim with people trying to kill or maim or abduct Jews. The February 2010 categories are “Terrorism (the Fence)”; “Peace” (really, ongoing Conflict); “Elections” (Israel’s fragmented electorate); “Sderot” (rockets); and “Gilad Shalit” (abduction). In other words, Babaganewz suffers from the same weaknesses that adult news programs about Israel do. It’s conflict-driven.

In the lifestyle section, Jewish youth are treated to profiles of a shofer-maker and an archeologist. BabagaNewz *could* have featured a recent Israeli news story about an 8-year-old kid on a school trip who literally stumbled upon a groundbreaking artifact – a small 3,500 -year-old kiln-fired Canaanite fertility charm that kicked the origins of the ‘Biblical site’ his class was visiting back to the late Bronze Era. The Antiquities Authority took possession of the rare relic, but invited the second grader to spend his next summer working on a dig, in the hopes that he would luck out again. BabagaNewz, however, chose to debut a highly respected but bone-dry archeologist who got her doctorate before most of its readers were born. Others archeologists featured under “Israel Central” are old enough to be their grandfathers. A typical exciting answer to “What’s special about digging in Israel?” is about being able to “physically touch [our] history and see how old our Jewish traditions are.” Wow.

No less inviting are the personalities heralded under the title “Hope in the Holy Land” which banners four hopelessly square Israeli teens. While they are positive and photogenic, these youngsters are hardly dashing or adventurous or capable of captivating the imagination of Jewish youth in the Diaspora. All four are the Israeli garden variety of Goodie Two-Shoes – the *yeled tov Yerushalayim* who doesn’t even *think* about testing parental boundaries or his own limitations. If they have dreams, we don’t hear about them. One describes his most outstanding characteristic as being *michushav* (deliberating or overly cautious) – hardly the stuff the average middle schooler wants to identify with in his wildest dreams. Two others say that their favorite place in Israel is the *Kotel*. Really? If these four didn’t exist I would think the Jewish Agency made them up. Oh, yes – and the cheery cherry on the cake is a profile of a kid who raises money for more ambulances, for mayhem surely just around the corner – just in case surfers skipped the conflict-driven news section.

We Need Humor

Even if conflict-driven, goody-two-shoes content is not a total put-off for young Jews, it can at best only nurture a generation completely out of touch with the Israel of today. I don’t want to see any more young American Jews grow up to be like the well-meaning, middle-aged lifetime supporter of Israel, who when asked why she had gone on *three* solidarity missions in 2001 (at the height of the Second Intifada), replied, “It was like visiting a sick relative in the hospital”!

American Jewry needs to be weaned away from its addiction to Israeli victimology. I've lived in Israel for 42 years, with all the ups and down life can dish up. This well-meaning woman was totally oblivious to the fact that we Israelis live lives beyond the conflict. Even during the Intifadas, people went to work, went shopping, went to soccer matches and simchas and the theatre. Life continues—including the unbelievable but true stories of a bank guard who held up the very bank he was hired to protect, the theatergoer who paid for his ticket to *The Miser* with a stolen credit card, and the wise guy who brought his friend at the Tiberias prison 4 falafels and 45 grams of heroin. We Israelis have special idioms for this state of affairs – the concept of a *shigrat chirum* (routine in an emergency), further epitomized by the Hebrew verb *bochek* – meaning to cry (*bocheh*) and laugh (*tzochek*) at the same time.

Jewish kids throughout America haven't the foggiest idea that Israelis are just like them—just as funny, just as crazy, yes, just as stupid—as young Americans. American kids don't have a real sense of what Israeli life is like because *all* discourse about Israel is so firmly riveted on conflict-driven issues. If it's not the Israeli-Arab conflict, it's marginalized Ethiopian immigrants. If it's not Peter Beinart in the *New York Times Book Review* criticizing the American Zionist establishment, it's Ed Koch or Abe Foxman defending Israel. All of this is conflict-driven, the only exception being a look at Israel through a religious lens (the *Kotel*, or Masada, or *Shavuot* in Israel).

It's time to offer American kids a chance to grasp the humor of Israeli life.

Editor's Note: Danielle Ashkenazy is walking her walk. She has just launched [Chelm-on-the-Med© Online](#), a website that gleans zany news items from the Hebrew press and presents them in English with a signature tongue-in-cheek style. For an example, go to [Chelm demo](#), at [YouTube](#).

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