

# Civics Textbook Wars: Israeli Right Strikes Back

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TEL AVIV—A few years ago on a lazy Friday afternoon, my friend Ronit Vardi—a veteran journalist and longtime resident of this frenetic city perched between the Mediterranean and the Middle East—looked askance when I told her that I was headed to Jerusalem to teach a seminar on Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

“Peter, Peter, Peter,” she sighed, rolling her eyes, shaking her head, and crossing her arms.

“You can have a Jewish state,” she said. “Or you can have a democratic state. But you can’t have a state that is both Jewish and democratic.”

Since then, Ronit—and Israel’s left-wing secular elite to which she proudly belongs—have grown more apprehensive that they are locked in a losing battle with right-wing nationalists, many of them orthodox, over the nature and purpose of the state they share.

The latest round in the struggle over Israel’s political culture was ignited last month by the Ministry of Education’s publication of “To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State.” The new high school civics textbook, five years in the making and more than 500 pages long, was produced under right-wing coalition governments led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but was largely written by non-political professional staff.

The volume was destined to spark controversy. Less expected are the parallels to proliferating textbook and curriculum controversies in the United States.

The impetus for the 2016 edition of “To Be Citizens of Israel” was dissatisfaction with the 2000 original, published under the same title and intended in the aftermath of religious extremist Yigal Amir’s assassination in 1995 of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to instill the democratic and Jewish values on which the country was based.

Instead of educating, the right asserted, the 2000 textbook indoctrinated. It deemphasized Israel’s Jewish character, promoted a secular and progressive interpretation of democracy obliging Israel to become a neutral “state of all its citizens,” and exaggerated Israeli aggression against local Arabs in the 1948 War of Independence while underplaying the invasion by five Arab nations determined to destroy it.

Within days of the new version's appearance, Haaretz, the newspaper of Israel's progressive elite, published a number of harsh critiques reminiscent of the right's attacks on the old version. The 2016 "To Be Citizens of Israel," according to its left-wing detractors, elevates the state's Jewish character while blurring its democratic character. It neglects the narrative of the large Arab minority that is 20 percent of Israel's population. And it barely acknowledges the central divide in Israeli politics: the nationalist right wants to retain large swaths, if not all, of the West Bank territory Israel seized from Jordan in 1967 in the Six Day War—land the right calls by the Biblical names Judea and Samaria—whereas the secular left demands that Israel withdraw from all, or almost all, of what it refers to as "occupied territories."

These debates about civic education, rooted in Israel's distinctive history, complex domestic politics, and daunting security challenges, may seem remote from American concerns. Yet Israel's textbook wars bear an uncanny resemblance to ours.

In the United States, as in Israel, much of the fight takes place under the radar of most parents and politicians. But the fight in both countries is consequential because what is, and what is not, taught about a state's fundamental principles shape students' understanding of their rights and responsibilities, and mold their political expectations and ambitions.

American conservatives have made a strong case that California's new K-12 curriculum, "History-Social Science Framework," is imbued with a left-wing sensibility and proselytizes on behalf of progressive causes. Critics on the right have also faulted the College Board's widely adopted Advanced Placement U.S. history high school curriculum for dwelling on race, class, and gender while sidelining political, military, and diplomatic history. And conservative voices have warned that under the guise of developing a basic outline for all K-12 students in the United States, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is smuggling a social-justice agenda into the country's classrooms.

Although they are called conservatives—and so consider themselves—these American critics are championing a classically liberal approach. It grounds the teaching of U.S. history in study of the nation's founding principles and constructs the curriculum around the debates about those principles—starting with the clash between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the Constitution's merits—that form the American political tradition.

"To Be Citizens of Israel," is written in the same old-fashioned liberal spirit. It is built around Israel's 1948 Declaration of Independence, in which Israel's founders pledge to "foster the development of the country for the good of all its inhabitants"; safeguard "freedom, justice, and equality as envisaged by the prophets of Israel"; and, appealing explicitly to Arab inhabitants, provide "full and equal citizenship." More than a third of the book is devoted to theories of democracy. More than a quarter deals with the structure of Israeli government.

The book persistently directs students' attention to the ambiguities and strains to which Israel's founding principles give rise. Each chapter concludes with exercises that call on students to explore the diversity of perspectives presented, develop arguments, and form their own opinions. The book emphasizes throughout that since its birth Israel has been compelled "to wrestle with its existence as the state of the Jewish people and at the same time a democratic state that is committed to the rights of the national minorities that live in it, in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Independence."

The new volume bears little resemblance to the tendentious monster of its detractors' imaginations. Then again, as former Minister of Education Yuli Tamir told me, the textbook is the tip of the iceberg. A woman of the center-left, Tamir, now president of Shenkar College in Tel Aviv, stressed that the textbook controversy is a proxy for a "deeper debate" about the direction of Zionism and a host of contentious public policy debates concerning Israel's Arab minority, economic inequality, and the West Bank.

Assaf Malach, who teaches at Shalem College in Jerusalem and served as an adviser on the textbook, favored avoiding to the extent possible contemporary disputes, particularly the most consequential one. "The civics curriculum," he explained, "is focused on the basic definitions of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and with the structure of the Israeli regime, and not on political controversies that touch on the Israeli-Arab conflict or the future of Judea and Samaria, even though it is clear to all that these are important questions. For this reason, the previous version of the textbook also did not deal significantly with these subjects."

Nevertheless, the new edition of "To Be Citizens of Israel" equips students to grasp the Israeli-Arab conflict in its fullness and complexity as well as to understand the subtleties of debates about minority rights and class conflict. Not least, the textbook enhances students' appreciation of the blending of principles out of which Israel arose and which continues to sustain it.

You can have a Jewish state. You can have a democratic state. And, with a healthy dose of the truly liberal spirit, you can have a state that is both Jewish and democratic.

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