

THE STEINHARDT  
FOUNDATION  
FOR JEWISH LIFE

# CONTACT

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ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT  
BEYOND HASBARAH

**Eli Valley**

Editor

**Erica Coleman**

Copy Editor

**Yakov Wisniewski**

Design Director

## THE STEINHARDT FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH LIFE

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**Phone:** (212) 279-2288

**Fax:** (212) 279-1155

**Email:** [info@steinhardtoundation.org](mailto:info@steinhardtoundation.org)

**Website:** [www.steinhardtoundation.org](http://www.steinhardtoundation.org)

For media inquiries about The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, please contact Dan Gerstein at [dan@dangerstein.com](mailto:dan@dangerstein.com).



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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

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## ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT BEYOND HASBARAH

For decades, Israel engagement in North America hewed to a narrow narrative line. If not overtly political, the methods of engagement frequently had politics just beneath the surface. Engagement meant understanding Israel's importance to the world Jewish community as well as its right to exist — both in a general sense and in relation to the events of the day. This often turned engagement into a reactive enterprise — how the community could shore up support for this policy or for that war, and how Israel's actions could best be presented and explained.

The reasons for this were understandable. There was a widespread perception of Israel being under siege and a general sentiment that Diaspora communities could serve as Israel's ambassadors. Moreover, a fear of losing young Jews to waves of anti-Israel agitation spurred campaigns to arm them with Israel's side of the story. But ultimately, such efforts were a misuse of both Israel and of American Jews. As the conflict became more nuanced and information more widespread, the Hasbarah method — explaining Israel through public relations — came to be discredited by a more sophisticated population of American Jews, particularly among the younger generations. In many cases, engagement was turning people away.

Birthright Israel helped to change the paradigm. No longer was Israel widely perceived as a vessel to protect and explain, but as a place to inspire. Participants didn't shy away from political issues, but generally speaking, politics did not define the program. Instead, the historical, spiritual, emotional and cultural aspects of Israel have taken forefront in an immersive experience that has galvanized a revolution in Jewish education and fostered a new way of approaching Israel engagement.

Moving forward, in what other ways can Israel Engagement innovate to inspire and connect people to Israel? How can the community foster connections to Israel among Jews across the spectrums of politics, culture and observance? How can Israel engagement succeed long after — and indeed before — one has visited Israel? The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore new ways of engaging American Jews with Israeli culture and life. In so doing, they offer new perspectives and dimensions for those seeking to build greater connections between Israel and America and to strengthen the Jewish experience worldwide.

*Eli Valley*  
Eli Valley

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# BIRTHRIGHT EXCEL

## THE NEXT STEP IN ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

A dozen years after the establishment of the most revolutionary Jewish education vehicle in recent history, it is time to take stock of Birthright Israel and identify ways to reinforce and expand its achievements.

One of Birthright's most poignant lessons is that in the eyes of world Jewry, Israel is not only a place of strife or a source of ambivalence, but also a wellspring of inspiration and pride. Studies of Birthright alumni show that immersive experiences in Israel — encounters with its ancient civilization and with its modern-day culture — help build and reinforce Jewish connections among those who had never been to Israel before. The experience opens participants' eyes to new ways of Jewish belonging and to a sense of Jewish Peoplehood difficult to experience and comprehend outside the state. Israel, it turns out, is a phenomenal resource for identity enrichment among American Jews. But its potential has only begun to be tapped.

Why is this important? Because most of our other efforts have failed. For generations of American Jews, synagogues and Hebrew schools have only deepened their alienation from Judaism. Most non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora do not feel a sense of being insiders to the tradition. When they find themselves in the company of Orthodox Jews, it's as if they are experiencing a foreign culture. Contrast that with Jewish life as it is experienced in Israel: a full, modern sense of belonging and engagement that spans the spectrums of religion, culture and ethnicity. In Israel, being Jewish is not related to knowledge of *halacha* but to a shared sense of Peoplehood. It's automatic and instinctive. They feel it so much that they're ready to die for it.

Although it would be impossible to bring that totality of Jewish living to Amer-

ica, it is time to provide American Jews with a broad spectrum of Jewish enrichment experiences that position Israel as an anchor of Jewish consciousness and connections.

With this in mind, I am supporting the development and implementation of Birthright Excel, a new Israel internship and engagement program for college Juniors and Seniors, whose first cohort launched this year. In some ways, Excel is the inverse of Birthright. Birthright is for everyone: the well-educated, not well-educated, committed, not committed. This was crucial for a program whose objective was to strengthen Jewish Peoplehood and to bind global Jewish communities more closely with Israel. Where Birthright's reach is all-encompassing, Excel's is narrow: it focuses on the best and the brightest of our young adults, individuals whose academic excellence indicates their potential to be leaders in a wide variety of fields.

Excel provides participants with ten-week internships at some of Israel's most accomplished companies that have earned the Jewish state the moniker "Start-Up Nation." Whether Checkpoint, Ernst & Young or Giza Venture Capital, each enterprise has put Israel at the cutting edge of global innovation in finance, technology, consulting and social media. Eventually, we hope to expand these internships beyond private enterprise to include law, medicine and perhaps other areas such as education and government, where there are meaningful potential overlaps and benefits for both sides.

The program is exceptionally rich. Participants are not simply interning at companies. They meet with many of Israel's elites in the business, military and government sectors, and they are already building lasting connections with their Israeli counterparts and peers. Many of Excel's participants are experiencing Israel for the first time. I am astonished at how much the Israeli sponsors have achieved in creating a diverse range of Israeli encounters and experiences for

Excel's initial cohort.

The program is helping to bind Excel participants to Israel in a profound way. They are immersed in Israeli life, in the Hebrew language and in the internal workings of an Israeli enterprise at the exact point in their lives when they're making serious transitional choices. When alumni return to the United States, they will be part of the Birthright Excel Think Tank, which will meet regularly in New York City and Washington, DC, to provide opportunities for discussion, professional development and mentorships between participants and leaders in finance, the government and the Jewish community. The Think Tank will further reinforce a shared sense of purpose between international and Israeli companies, and between Diaspora Jewish leaders and their Israeli counterparts.

Hopefully, Excel will create a deep and lasting bond between participants and their host companies — as well as in the friendships and connections built during the experience. My dream is that over the long term, this bond will help weave a meaningful sense of Jewish unity that does not presently exist between Israel and Diaspora communities. After a couple of generations, when hundreds or even thousands of participants have experienced Birthright Excel, we will have helped usher in an elite group of Americans with an inside view of Israel, its most influential citizens and its contemporary Jewish life and culture. If we accomplish this, we will have achieved something truly transformative.

I should emphasize that as the elite of the Jewish community, Birthright Excel participants will go on to leadership positions both in their professional lives and in the Jewish community itself. Where they go, others will follow. This vanguard of Jewish leaders will be an invaluable arrow in our quiver as we work to strengthen the American Jewish community through its intractable bonds with Israel. ■

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**Michael H. Steinhardt** is Chairman of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

# BEYOND BIRTHRIGHT: MAKING ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT LAST

by CHARLES EDELSBERG and DAWNE BEAR NOVICOFF

**B**irthright Israel is the phenomenon of a generation. It is an inspired idea that has succeeded far beyond what its munificent founding philanthropists envisioned. In a masterfully designed young-adult, liminal peer experience, hundreds of thousands of young Jews are sparked to experience Israel — notably, its people and mythical landscapes — in deeply meaningful ways.

Birthright presents the Jewish world with unprecedented opportunity. A growing body of research shows that the ten-day, immersive experience alters the sights of an impressive number of its participants. The challenge now confronting the community is to amplify an illuminated awareness that Birthright trip participants — and their peers — acquire world views that result in increasing numbers of Jewish adults who are palpably committed to ongoing Jewish learning and the enduring well-being of Israel and the Jewish people.

We see new evidence that the community is increasingly focusing its attention on fostering teen and young-adult Israel engagement. Our operating hypothesis is that the most promising path to a Jewish identity which includes a lifelong commitment to *Am Yisrael* emerges from a personal connection to Israel. In this regard, we conjecture that multiple immersive experiences in Israel are most likely to engender a person's belief that a relationship to Israel is an essential part of that individual's Jewish identity.

The growth of MASA Israel Journey holds promise for increasing the number of young Jews who are committed to Israel. MASA reports that in 2011 it will support 6,500 North American adults to participate in an array of long-term, Israel-based programs — academic study, internships and Jewish service learning. While we do not yet have a comprehensive approach to understanding and assessing what these experiences mean to their participants, previous studies (e.g., Steven M. Cohen & Ezra Kopelowitz,

*Journeys to Israel: The Impact of Longer-Term Programs Upon Jewish Engagement & Israel Attachment*, MASA Israel Journey, 2010) indicate that immersion in substantive programs positively influences one's connection to Israel. Moreover, it appears that a shorter-term immersive experience followed by one of greater duration leads to an even stronger association with Israel.

An obvious critical facet of providing young Jews with the motivation to develop an awareness of and interest in Israel as elemental to his or her Jewish identity is a continuous flow of formal and experiential educational experiences. On campuses across America, Hillel and the Jewish Agency for Israel have cooperated to place 50 *shlichim* as resources for Israel engagement. These Israel Fellows complement a growing fare of Israeli arts and culture programs that are finding their way onto the academic calendar. While we do not have exact figures on the numbers of Jewish students enrolled, nor on the effects of the coursework on students, the dramatic increase in the number of Jewish Studies centers and programs bodes well for adults possessing enhanced knowledge of Israel. In addition, this year, Hillel International launched the Center for Israel Engagement designed to bring Israel education resources directly to campuses by training staff, developing standards of excellence for Israel programming, and providing support for Israel education and engagement on campus (see next page).

Of course, thousands of young Jews encounter Birthright Israel *after* college. Birthright Israel NEXT was developed as a platform to connect post-college Birthright alumni and other Jewish young adults with one another. NEXT endeavors to present alumni with myriad opportunities to continue their journeys in ways that are individually meaningful and relevant.

On this point, Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, who have touted the positive effects of the Birthright trip since its inception, recognize that Birthright's success is conditional: "Whether the impact of the program can be sustained once participants return to their home community is the key issue for the future... If Birthright Israel alumni can remain knowledgeable supports of Israel — not advocates per se, but individuals who care about the society because they see themselves as part of it and have a stake — the program will more than have justified its creation and the substantial resources necessary

to maintain it" (Italics ours.) (*Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*, Brandeis University Press, 2008).

We believe Birthright Israel should be viewed as the spark to ignite thousands of young Jews on their individual Jewish journeys of discovery. For some participants, the Birthright Israel experience awakens an interest in deepening their knowledge of Judaism and in connecting with their Jewish peers. Others are inspired to seek greater knowledge about an engagement with Israel.

In looking back upon the eleven years since the founding of Birthright Israel, one could argue that the pervasive conversation about Birthright's contribution to a veritable revival of Jewish engagement among young adults has, in turn, precipitated heightened awareness of the need for the development of a bona fide field of Israel education.

Capitalizing on this new reality, a field of Israel education has begun to emerge, led by the work of the iCenter, the Israel Education Resource Center. The iCenter has just released standards for K-12 Israel education. It is certifying 20 students with Masters Degrees from six institutions of higher education in Israel education. The iCenter has brought fresh funding to the field and is becoming an engine fueling the field of Israel education. It is creating the impetus for a continuum of Israel education experiences offered more broadly across the Jewish adolescent and teen landscape that, in turn, could spur a more Israel-engaged teen population and ultimately lead to a more deeply engaged young-adult population.

Today, organizations working in the Jewish young-adult arena encounter increasingly greater numbers of Jews who have participated in an Israel experience and have been deeply affected by it. These organizations have an extraordinary opportunity to move young Jews along in their journeys of discovery. We believe that multiple enticing options for young Jews to experience self-initiated, personally relevant Judaism offer the most promising path to engagement. Unlike Birthright trips, where individual identity is necessarily subordinated to both group and trip hegemony (Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*, NYU Press, 2010), individual Jews who choose to find meaning with those who have shared interests is a *sine qua non* of community building. Ultimately, it is from this relational Judaism that Israel engagement is most likely to emerge. ■

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**Charles (Chip) Edelsberg, Ph.D.** is the founding Executive Director of the Jim Joseph Foundation, an \$800 million-dollar private foundation whose mission is to support education of Jewish youth in the United States. JJJF is an avid supporter of Birthright Israel and Birthright Israel NEXT. **Dawne Bear Novicoff** is a Senior Program Officer at the Jim Joseph Foundation. Prior to this, she served as Director of Israel & Overseas Planning and Programming at the Jewish Community Federation in San Francisco. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors.



# ENGAGING WITH A WORK IN PROGRESS:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON ASHLEY

**I**n November 2010, Hillel announced the formation of a new Center for Israel Engagement to meaningfully engage more students with Israel and to enhance their understanding and connection to the Jewish State. In August, we spoke with Sharon Ashley, Director of the Center for Israel Engagement, to learn more about the goals, outlook and direction of the Center.

**CONTACT: How does the approach of the Center for Israel Engagement differ from Hillel's past approach to Israel engagement?**

**Sharon Ashley:** Hillel is now looking at Israel in a more holistic way. The mandate of the Center is education, engagement and advocacy. We still believe we need to

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*Sharon Ashley is Director of Hillel's Center for Israel Engagement.*

elevate the conversation in the advocacy sphere, but there was a realization that not all students are interested in straight-up, traditional advocacy. So the mandate is to bring a fuller, more textured Israel experience to students and to find new avenues of meaning for them to engage with Israel in ways that have personal resonance. Israel is a dynamic, exciting place, but it's also a messy, noisy place. All of that needs to come into the package of what Israel is. Israel is a work in progress, and I would love students to be engaged with that work in progress.

I will add that I think that education and engagement are precursors to advocacy. My goal for the Center for Israel Engagement is to weave Israel more naturally into the conversation in Hillel and in the wider campus culture. Any time you do that, you are positioning Israel in a much more positive way, and therefore

you're acting as advocates for Israel. It's a softer advocacy perhaps — this doesn't invalidate the need for serious proactive initiatives about issues such as delegitimization — but it means we're thinking about Israel all the time and not just responding to crises, and not just on *Yom Ha'atzmaut* or on Falafel Night. It means that Israel is going to be a more natural part of how we experience Jewish life.

**How do you plan to innovate beyond the traditional sphere of advocacy?**

We're creating two signature programs: *Focus:Israel*, a year-long Israel course that will bring the content and texture of Israel to 24 Hillel professionals across the country, and *Centers for Excellence*, in which we've selected four campuses, after a highly competitive process, to serve as campus laboratories for superlative, innovative and creative Israel programming and

as benchmarks of what staff and students should be doing in order to drive Hillel's Israel agenda. And we're not just talking about Israel, but working with Israelis. We've placed 50 Israel fellows on campus who bring a living, breathing Israel to students in new and different ways.

Beyond that, the Talk Israel tent initiative is a new program launching this semester. Twenty campuses are putting up tents for two days in September to engage in civil discussion about the challenges Israel faces with the looming Palestinian UN vote and the changing Middle East landscape — what it means for Israel and what it means for students who have questions and not answers. It's a venue where we welcome the conversation, because the Center for Israel Engagement aims to educate not only the serious student leaders on Israel, but also students

The point is not to engage in polemics but rather to wonder about what the challenges mean — and not necessarily to determine the answers to Israel's pressing questions right now. We will talk about the political situation, what is the Hamas Charter, what is the Palestinian UN Resolution if we can get it, what is the Declaration of Independence of Israel, that Israel strives to be a shining democracy in the Middle East — but there are still going to be questions. This is Hillel's attempt to take back the space. To say it isn't about the noise, let's have a conversation.

**What do you say to people who will argue that with the Hamas Charter, and saying that Israel is striving to be a democracy, they're Hasbarah tents?**

There will be more documents than those. But I will be bringing primary sources for

Israel in that sense. Having said all that, there are still going to be students who have questions. So this isn't a tent that says if you want a one-state solution you get to throw your weight around saying that. But I don't want to stifle conversation before it begins. I want to welcome students who say, "I support Israel, I just don't understand it." I want to give them a venue as well.

My goal is not to alienate people. I can't guarantee that, but that is my goal. I do feel that the conversation has been stilted so far. I think that people aren't necessarily able to have questions for fear of alienating somebody or being alienated. I'm hoping that that's not going to be the case here.

**What will the Center for Israel Engagement say to students who might feel that Israel is not a part of their Judaism, and they would prefer that the main Jewish student organization not touch it?**

I don't think any of us — and I've lived in Israel for over 30 years — I don't think we have it all mapped out yet, necessarily. I would like to offer a new way of thinking about Israel to students who say "I have no connection to Israel." They can turn it down in the end. I don't want to force them to love Israel. But I do want to bring it to them in new and interesting ways so they can know what they're turning down. I'm not sure they do yet.

I think in 1948 something changed in the Jewish experience. There's been a distancing of American Jews from Israel over time, and it's not just because left-wing students don't agree with Israel's policies. It's because they don't connect to it. They're disengaged. I would like to engage those students in conversation. What I would say to them would be: "My politics are not important, but I've been living in Israel for a long time, and every time I vote I don't necessarily get the government or politician I want, but I still believe in Israel. Israel is a work in progress, and all these years later, I am still excited about being part of a country that is still evolving." That is something I think students can be a part of as well, they just need to find the way it resonates for them.

There are a lot of things wrong with America, but students don't turn off from America. I'm not trying to pretend Israel doesn't have warts. Israel has warts. But if you look at any person or any country, it is a combination of good and bad. I believe that Israel can be seen through a wider lens as well. And that's my role, to bring that wider lens to the campus. ■

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*Israel is a dynamic, exciting place, but it's also a messy, noisy place. All of that needs to come into the package of what Israel is. Israel is a work in progress, and I would love students to be engaged with that work in progress.*

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who don't always feel welcome in the conversation because they don't know enough or they think differently or they have questions. They're still welcome.

**In the recent past, campus discussions and debates on these issues have often devolved into shouting matches. How do you hope to accomplish respectful and civil discussion?**

There can't be a bouncer at the door, but the rules of the tent are civil dialogue. It's not a Hyde Park moment. It's not for soap-box pamphleteering and advocating, but for civil conversation. University codes of conduct will be posted in the tents. Hillel staff knows how to engage students in conversation and can ensure that when it gets too heated, it tones down, stops or veers to another direction. So if someone comes and says "I don't support Israel," he or she is going to have to listen to someone who says Israel is in the family of nations and isn't going anywhere. Neither one is allowed to yell at the other, and we'll have trained facilitators on the premises to manage the conversations and keep them civil.

people to read and determine what their position on the issue is. I am not bringing advocacy materials to the table. I am not saying Side A is good and Side B is bad, and this is why. There are certain facts out there. We need to understand them, to contextualize them and to figure out what they mean in the context of 2011. Not every document is a Hasbarah document. Some documents are just facts that you need to figure out what to do with. Nothing is going away in the Middle East. This is a moving story and we need to figure out how to approach it. This is what Israel is doing as well. It's trying to figure out how to deal with the challenges it faces.

**So if B'tselem wants to include materials?**

It is not an advocacy tent for the left or the right. So if you are a partisan organization of either side, this is not the moment for you. You are welcome to sit around and talk, but not to argue your case.

I will say another thing. Hillel believes in a viable Jewish state that is a member of the family of nations. We have guidelines that explain that we are unabashedly pro-

# ISRAELI TRADITIONS & HEBREW: A PATH TO JEWISH & ISRAELI IDENTITY

by JENNIE STARR

I am part of a Jewish community that celebrates Jewish holidays through Israeli traditions, that believes a working knowledge of Hebrew is helpful to be able to relate to Israel and that is passionate about staying connected and supportive of Israel and of Israelis living here.

At a time when Jews in large numbers remain unaffiliated with synagogues, enrollment in Jewish day schools is at risk, and favorable impressions of Israel are at an all-time low, we are finding that American Jewish communities can be strengthened through Israeli language, culture and traditions.

The Tarbuton, an Israeli Cultural Center in San Diego, focuses on nurturing Jewish and Israeli identity and providing Jewish education for the next generation. It provides a Jewish community and Jewish education for American Jews and Israeli Americans who have opted out of organized Jewish life but who relate to both Israeli culture and Hebrew as a second language. Some Israeli cultural activities are conducted in English and bring the community together to enjoy Israeli films, dance and literature, while others are conducted in Hebrew and provide a home for those who are most comfortable in a Hebrew-speaking environment. They also provide a path for those interested in developing proficiency in the Hebrew language. All the programs are geared toward developing a love and passion for Israel.

**JEWISH HOLIDAYS ISRAELI STYLE**  
Given the opportunity to join others who cherish Israel and/or speak Hebrew, this community gathers in large numbers, generally outdoors, for celebrations resembling holiday traditions in Israel. They meet at long tables to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and share traditional foods of pomegranates and fish. *Pesach* seders

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**Jennie Starr** is the Director of the Tarbuton Israeli Cultural Center in San Diego. She is a member of the San Diego Israel Advocacy Forum and the AIPAC Council. She is a passionate advocate of Hebrew language proficiency in both Jewish and public school settings, lending her hand to found a Hebrew Language Charter School in San Diego and advocating for Hebrew-language instruction in San Diego public schools. The Tarbuton is a project made possible by the Community Innovation Fund of the Jewish Federation of San Diego County. <http://www.tarbuton.org>.

with tables of pot-luck meals and homemade *Haggadot* are not uncommon. For *Lag BaOmer*, we celebrate at a bonfire with potatoes strung together, playing guitars and singing Israeli songs late into the night. *Tu b'Shvat* involves planting trees, taking nature hikes and educating children about the seven species.

There is a method to this madness. It means that *Masoret*, or tradition, is important to people. It means that finding a community that celebrates together is important. And it means that if the right balance is struck, this community would prefer to be Jewish together than not. To that end, finding ways to celebrate Jewish holidays Israeli style can create and sustain a meaningful Jewish community and preserve Jewish life.

I experienced one of my favorite Tarbuton *Tu b'Shvat* holidays at a camel dairy. Located in a wildfire area of San Diego County, the dairy had lost many trees in a fire the previous year. The owner, an Israeli-American, invited the community to spend *Tu B'Shvat* there and to help replant some of the trees he had lost in the fire. I did not know until we arrived that he had rented a tractor and dug massive holes for the trees, which he had purchased and placed beside them. When our group of more than 200 people arrived, we spread across his beautiful, hilly property, several families along each hole and tree. In the quiet backdrop of the moment, I looked up in the sky, took in the laughter and hard work of the children with their parents, and felt the holiday in a way I never had before. This was *Tu b'Shvat*, Israeli-style. As we sat over our picnic afterwards and I watched my children laughing and running in the outdoors, I felt truly blessed.

**HEBREW LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**  
It turns out that Hebrew is also important. Why? Because for many, Modern Hebrew is important to feeling connected to Israel. To that end, we take Hebrew education seriously and weave in Israeli classic children's stories and instructional materials authored for secular use in the public schools in Israel. These materials connect our children not only with the literature that is taught to Israeli children, but also with well-known authors who are a part of Israeli history and life.

For this mixed community of Americans,

Israeli-Americans and Israelis, we serve a niche that provides support for families and adults who want to make Aliyah, for Israeli-Americans returning to Israel and for children who have transitioned from day school to public school. We are able to support both beginners and native Hebrew speakers. Separately, we offer after-school bilingual and beginner classes on the campuses of public elementary schools, and we support the creation of a local Hebrew Language Charter School. All of these options provide opportunities for the Jewish community and the general public to learn Hebrew as a modern, living language for conversation, engagement and connection.

**ISRAELI CULTURE: MUSIC, DANCE, FILM, LITERATURE & THE REST**  
Finally, for some in the community, food, music, dance, film and literature create meaningful connections to Israel and to each other. Children join our Israeli Dance and Singing Troupes and learn about current and classic Israeli singers and the diversity of contemporary Israeli music. It means the world for



parents to hear their children sing the classic songs that they sang themselves as children and to share with them the history of the songs and the singers. Adults join in our *Moadon Seret* (Israeli film group) and *Moadon Sefer* (Israeli literature group) and see Hebrew-language Israeli performances.

There are significant benefits to building community in this way. First, a segment of the Jewish population will engage in Jewish life when it is meaningful for them and their families. Second, a passionate, Israel-oriented, Hebrew speaking community will almost certainly support Israel and stay connected to Judaism. Finally, we believe this type of community can have an impact on the local non-Jewish population, providing it with opportunities to learn Hebrew and appreciate Israeli culture as well. ■

# PROGRESSIVE ZIONIST ENGAGEMENT WITH ISRAEL

by KENNETH BOB

David Ben-Gurion, who later became the founding Prime Minister of Israel, was the leader of the Labor Zionist movement that led the pre-state Jewish Palestine community and provided the core values to the emerging state. It was not a coincidence that when it was necessary to establish communities to define and protect the future borders of Israel, the socialist kibbutz and its cooperative cousin, the moshav, were the chosen formats. In short, at the time of the establishment of the state and for years to come, progressive Zionism was synonymous with Israel. Progressive Zionists fully supported the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine that recommended the division of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab.

These founding pioneers would find it inconceivable that, today, many in and out of the Jewish community identify Zionism exclusively with right-wing political views that oppose a two-state solution and view ideological settlers living in far-flung West Bank settlements as today's true Zionist pioneers. This perception is propagated by the right in both Israel and the Diaspora. In the United States, some American Jewish organizations and leaders actively promote the delegitimization of progressive Jewish and Zionist organizations, suggesting that expressing views in opposition to Israeli government positions is equivalent to being anti-Israel and disloyal to the Jewish people. Synagogues have been threatened with withdrawal of financial support for holding events that promote views critical of official Israeli government policy. Jewish Community Centers have drawn criticism for screening films about the challenges faced by Israeli Arab citizens.

The left, however, is not blameless in this situation. There has been a tendency to cede the field to the right and opt out of the Zionist debate. Young Jews, turned off by the image of a theocratic, recalcitrant Israel, are developing new forms of a communal Jewish identity that avoid the "Z word" and relegate Israel to a minor role in their lives. The recent Repair the World study on young

Jewish adults showed that while a large majority of respondents engage in some sort of volunteer activity, only 1 percent of respondents cited Israel or Middle East peace as the primary focus of their volunteer work (Chertok, F., Gerstein, J., Tobias, J., Rosin, S., & Boxer, M. *Volunteering + Values: A Repair the World Report on Jewish Young Adults*, 2011).

This trend, if not addressed, could have a far-reaching impact on the future of Israel-Diaspora relations and American Jewish support for Israel.

The American Jewish community has to acknowledge and embrace the fact that the Middle East conflict is complicated, and it has to affirm that one can be a Zionist and disagree with Israeli government policies. The same is true about the concerns for the strength of Israel's democracy and the discouraging state of religious affairs in the country. To be a Zionist means to celebrate the successes of Israel and to try to help fix that which needs repair. Instead of ignoring these differences of opinion within the community, financial and logistical communal support should be provided to initiatives that address these issues.

This is important not only to ensure long-term, ongoing Diaspora engagement with Israel, but also because the very people who are disengaging from Israel are critical to a central communal initiative currently underway. There is a consensus in the organized American Jewish community regarding the need to combat the campaign that questions the legitimacy of Israel. These attacks, by and large, emanate from the left and include no small number of Jews.

Who better to fight this battle than progressive Zionists who speak the language of the left? To enlist their active involvement, those leading the charge both on a national level and in local communities must be willing to support those who employ effective language and tactics, even if it creates discomfort or conflict with more right-wing members of the communal coalition.

The question remains: How do we create a personal connection for liberal American Jews with Israel today?

One approach is to develop opportunities for Diaspora Jews to engage with the progressive activists of Israel. The good news is that there are a large number of Israeli grass-root activists who share liberal

values with their Western counterparts and who are engaged in a wide range of areas that can capture the imagination of young adults — and older adults as well. These include groups that:

- address the social and economic rights of Arabs in Israeli society;
- work towards government recognition of the Jewish liberal religious streams;
- meet the needs of the LGBT community in Israel;
- deal with the social gap and growing economic insecurity;
- continue the co-existence work between Palestinians and Israelis;
- defend the human rights of all Israeli citizens and residents;
- establish urban kibbutzim drawn from participants in Israeli and Diaspora Zionist youth movements who work in the field of education as the new pioneers of Israeli society.

There are a variety of structures that can be utilized to enable engagement between these Israeli and Diaspora cohorts. They can include service-learning programs for Diaspora groups visiting Israel as well as scholars-in-residence from Israel visiting the Diaspora. Bidirectional internship placements can be facilitated between groups so that each can learn about the mission and organizational culture of their counterparts. The Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization could recruit *shlichim* (emissaries) and teachers from among the ranks of these Israeli social activists. Their interaction with the local Jewish communities where they work could serve to expand the picture Diaspora Jews receive of the reality in today's Israel.

The massive social justice protests in Israel this past summer reinforce these potential opportunities. The societal problems that were exposed by the activists can be framed as challenges to young adults in the Diaspora. Instead of ignoring the protests, as most American Jewish organizations did, the Jewish community should engage with Israelis involved in the struggle and look for the partnership opportunities they present for the global Jewish community.

Progressive Zionism, a world view of how Jews can realize their national aspirations in a socially just manner, is as relevant today as when Ahad Ha'am, Berl Katznelson, Ben-Gurion and others brought these ideas from Russia to then Palestine. The 21st Century version of this ideology, linking *tikkun olam*, Jewish values and Zionism with reaching a secure and just peace with Israel's neighbors, can and should be an important part of the Diaspora Jewish community's connection with Israel. ■

**Kenneth Bob** is the national president of Ameinu, the progressive Zionist organization ([www.ameinu.net](http://www.ameinu.net)). He serves in a variety of communal roles, including as a member of the World Zionist Organization Executive and as a member of the Jewish Agency Board of Governors.

# TURNING POINTS

## STORIES FROM YOUNG JUDAEA

by NATHAN WINKLER, MICHAEL SANIEOFF, and ALE KLACHKO

**W**hat is the critical ingredient that motivates young adults to engage with the Jewish people? Following are three stories of participants in the Young Judaea Year Course, the veteran post-high school program in Israel with a strong Jewish educational component and an emphasis on volunteering. Two hundred fifty North Americans, from youth movement graduates to teens who have never taken part in Jewish group activities, join the program every year.

**Nathan Winkler, 25, is a graduate student at Columbia University. He took part in the 2004-5 Year Course.**

When I flew from New Jersey to Israel for the first time, I knew one word of Hebrew and could count the number of Jewish friends I had on a single hand. Sitting on the bus from Ben Gurion airport to Jerusalem, I looked out the window at signs written in characters I couldn't even sound out, and I was satisfied to know that I was in for the adventure I wanted.

The winter before, I was at a job fair, advertising a backpacking program. Sitting next to me were the "Zionist crazies" — or at least that's what I thought of them at the time — pushing Young Judaea. The volume at the fair was low, so we started talking. Needless to say, the Zionists were much better at their job than I was, so I went to Israel for a year.

I traveled from Kiryat Shmona to Dimona and learned my way around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem better than I know New York. I learned so much about Judaism that I actually started to believe in it, culminating in my reading a Torah portion to celebrate my Bar Mitzvah in Jerusalem, and in my decision to start putting on *tefillin* every day.

Among the best parts of my trip were the stories of the people I met.

Young Judaea gave me the option of working on a family's moshav in the Galilee for two months. The father was born on the moshav to parents from Romania who survived Auschwitz. The mother came from Tunis to Israel with her mother and six siblings in 1969. When I was living and volunteering in the slums of south Tel Aviv I met Alex, 15, from Kazakhstan, whose apartment was filled with books in Hebrew, Russian and English. In the Ethiopian community in Kiryat Gat, I listened to a young Ethiopian rabbi talk about seeing electric lights for the

first time. I met a 30-year-old Hungarian named Denes who hadn't discovered he was Jewish until he was 12. Hearing people's stories was moving, and taught me that for us, rules of history don't apply.

After I returned from Year Course and completed Freshman year, I studied at a yeshiva for nine months. When I returned, I met my future wife, and we have since been blessed with a baby boy. We're Sabbath-observing Jews and active members of the Jewish student community.

**Michael Sanieoff, 20, is an undergraduate at Boston University. He took part in the 2009-10 Year Course.**

When I first came to Israel on Year Course, I thought I would be doing a little work here and there, with a tiny bit of studying and a lot of time at the beach. I would never have guessed that I would be working at a falafel stand. I always had a little something for food, and when I heard that I could work at a falafel restaurant, I jumped at the opportunity. What would be a better way to meet Israelis?

My boss introduced me to what was going to be my best friend for the next three months, the fryer. After that, he took me to see the falafel maker. You throw the falafel mix into the machine, you flick a switch, and then falafel balls drop into the scorching hot oil like rain falling into a lake. After some time, my boss said he wanted to teach me how to make my first falafel sandwich. I had been waiting for that day like a boxer who couldn't wait to take a swing at his opponent's face. There are many steps to this beautiful craft. The first step is the cutting of the pita. It should be a gorgeous curved line on top. The next step is spreading just the right amount of hummus. Next you ask if the customers want hot sauce, *harif*, and if they do, you know they're real Israelis. You always put in five mouth-watering falafel balls. There are many optional additions: fried eggplant, salad, tahina and hardboiled egg.

I fell in love with working at the counter. I spent three months at the falafel stand, and not only did I learn how to make breathtaking falafel, but I came out more mature from the experiences. It was the best feeling for me just making sandwiches and feeding the people of Israel.



**Ale Klachko, 20, is currently serving in the IDF. She took part in the 2009-10 Year Course.**

I went for the chocolate. I had no interest in gap year programs, but a recruiter from Young Judaea had set up a stand to explain the Year Course, and he was giving out chocolate. So as I munched away, I mentioned to the recruiter that I intended to study drama in college, and I wouldn't consider any Year Course program that lacked a Performing Arts track. There just so happened to be such a track. I decided to go for an interview. It sounded like fun.

When I arrived in Israel, I found myself getting involved and falling in love with the country. On Yom Kippur, I lay down on the road that was empty of all cars. I loved the idea that everyone, religious or secular, respected and cherished this day.

Israeli scouts lived with us Americans, and every two weeks they held scout nights. At one of these, they invited a representative of the Israel Defense Forces. I felt totally confused. The Israelis were all talking about going into the army, and I realized that was what I should be doing too. Part of me wanted to stay and enter the army, and part of me wanted to go back to my life as an actress in the US. I called my parents, crying, but they said they couldn't help. I would have to decide myself.

Army life is tough at first — both being told what to do all the time and adjusting to the Israeli way of thinking. I was assigned a position in the Jordan Valley war room, dispatching soldiers to respond to terror attacks. Soon I'm going to be re-assigned as a shooting instructor. I finish in a little over a year, but I'm already thinking of extending my service.

One of the most important parts of becoming an Israeli has been living on Kibbutz Berot Yitzhak, as a lone soldier, and being adopted into a religious family with seven children. I'm an only child, and now I have all these adoptive brothers and sisters to give me advice and support me. I'm also lucky to have supportive parents back in the United States who respect and encourage me even though it's hard for them to be so far away.

I'd still like to study drama — there are good departments at Israeli universities. But for me, the future is here. ■

# MOVING BEYOND HUGGING AND WRESTLING

by YONATAN ARIEL,  
ROBBIE GRINGRAS and  
ESTI MOSKOVITZ-KALMAN

“**Hugging and Wrestling**” that liberating yet annoying catch-phrase, is all our fault. Here at MAKOM, a project of the Jewish Agency for Israel, we coined the phrase in 2005 and then promoted and promulgated it until it was adopted throughout the Jewish world.

Given the increasing complexity of both Jewish identity and Israeli society, we argued that a thought-free, instinctual, nonjudgmental relationship with Israel was neither healthy nor possible. Deliberately using a biblically Jewish concept, we pushed for an appreciation of “critique” as an expression of commitment.

Its time has passed. We’re moving on.

When we coined “hugging and wrestling,” we observed that Jews found themselves unable to voice their concerns about Israel’s behavior. They either saw themselves as traitors or were treated that way by others, and they could not find a space inside the community that allowed them to process their qualms about Israel in an intelligent and nuanced fashion.

Times have changed. Israel has since undergone a couple of wars and a couple of elections. New directions in Jewish identification have taken root; a new President has been elected; and technological advances mean that making one’s voice heard is no longer a problem. While nuance may still be lacking, no one now lacks a platform to wrestle with Israel.

We’ve begun to recognize fresh fault lines in the North American Jewish community’s relationship with Israel — fault lines that seem to be obscured by the ways “hugging and wrestling” has been interpreted.

## IT’S NOT ONE OR THE OTHER

The slogan was perceived to set up a dichotomy: Either one critiques, or one praises. Where we wrote “and,” others heard “or.” Yet one of the reasons we’d chosen the image of hugging and wrestling was precisely its ambiguity.

We had aimed to suggest that life is complex; that our relationship with Israel is complex; and that while some critique can be an expression of support, some support might also contain a veiled critique.

We had heard of a well-respected organization that split its Israel programming team into two groups: One to plan programming that “wrestled” with Israel, and the other to

plan programming that “hugged” Israel. That wasn’t the idea.

## IT DOESN’T SPLIT LEFT OR RIGHT

We also learned that people were happy to choose one or the other and put it down to politics. Apparently, if one is Orthodox and right-wing, then one must hug Israel and suspect all wrestlers. And if one is left-wing, then one cannot but wrestle and ridicule hugging. As if right-wingers had no critique of the disengagement from Gaza, or left-wingers had no appreciation of gay rights in Israel, or human beings had no innate need to both celebrate *and* challenge.

It seemed as if organizations had no problem agreeing with the complex demands of hugging and wrestling in theory, but in practice, people were becoming experts in only one or the other. Furthermore, elements of wrestling that occurred in the community were difficult to differentiate from plain enmity.

## WRESTLING SHOULD BE UNCOMFORTABLE

We began to identify an interpretive pattern: No one had ever been in a real wrestling match.

When physically wrestling, the chances of losing one’s balance are very high. Yet we began to notice that Israel-wrestling, by contrast, entailed taking and holding an immovable stance. More detached referee than wrestler.

That wrestling risks losing one’s balance is what makes it educationally fertile. It requires not only that I critique Israel, but that I also allow Israel to critique me. So far, it seems that this dialogical challenge has been mostly avoided.

## THE WAY FORWARD?

Perhaps the time has come to sketch out programming practicalities. At MAKOM, we work according to five key approaches, or androgogies (pedagogies for adults!).

### 1. ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

We must engage with what is burning inside the participants. If we marginalize the Israel-related issues that are of central concern to our participants, then we risk marginalizing Israel for them. This approach requires courage, honesty and optimism.

### 2. LOCAL VISTAS

There is no one size fits all. Every country and every community has its own cultural assumptions that influence the ways in which it may engage with Israel. These must be addressed and incorporated into the programming. Great programming for San Francisco may fail in Philadelphia and never pass muster in Toronto.

### 3. MULTI-VOCALITY

We do not believe in presenting both sides, we believe in presenting many sides. One’s understanding of issues will always be strengthened when placed in dialogue with different understandings. Yet the need to present a multi-vocal Israel is not just a matter of educational technique: It is a much truer representation of Israel’s complex nature.

### 4. A JEWISH CONVERSATION

When engaging with modern-day Israel, we must draw on and refer to wise Jews and their writings throughout the generations. In this way, we place Israel in the context of Jewish civilization and ensure that Israel will not be an optional add-on, but rather a central element of our Jewish lives.

### 5. EMPOWERING

Programming must point to opportunities for participants to make a difference. It can never be enough to learn intellectually about Israel’s flaws without being introduced to the organizations and people who strive to fix them.

It is this final androgogy that we see as crucial. Hugging and wrestling is a dynamic image, but one that doesn’t necessarily move you anywhere. As *Forward* columnist Jay Michaelson has noted, “It has become simply exhausting to maintain the ambivalence, the hugging and the wrestling, the endless fence sitting” (“How I’m Losing My Love For Israel,” the *Forward*, September 25, 2009). We suggest that successful engagement with Israel leads people to slip off the fence and work to better, not batter, Israel.

At the Delegitimization seminar that we ran for more than 100 leaders at the Global Jewish Forum of the Jewish Agency, we combined small-group text study, speakers from different political traditions and a specially written play that called on participants to address the censorship dangers of a belligerent campaign against delegitimization. The viewer’s guide that we produced in parallel with the release of the film *Waltz with Bashir* includes *Bet Midrash* study sheets, contemporary texts and open questions emerging from the characters in the film. “The Sermon Sparks,” produced for Rabbis wishing to increase the quality of their references to Israel from the pulpit, touches on sensitive topics together with references and links to outstanding Israeli NGOs that are working to better Israel.

It is this form of “responsible engagement,” with the emphasis on “response,” that we strive towards in our arts programming, our media, our workshops, our curricula and our consultations. ■

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**Yonatan Ariel** is the Executive Director of MAKOM. **Robbie Gringras** is the Artist in Residence of MAKOM. **Esti Moskovitz-Kalman** is the Deputy Director and Director of Education with MAKOM. [www.makomisrael.org](http://www.makomisrael.org).

# DOING GOOD IN THE WORLD, IN AMERICA AND IN ISRAEL

by BEN MURANE



There can be no doubt about the enthusiasm that young Jews possess for social-justice issues. Like American youth at large, young Jews are civically engaged. They identify their Jewish values as nearly synonymous with American values. It's no surprise, then, that the Jewish social-justice sector is engaging a commanding portion of young Jews. There are Jewish initiatives across the full spectrum of social causes: workers' rights, women's issues, the environment and many others.

Whereas the central themes of past generations of Jewry have focused on existential issues, this generation is asking a new set of questions: "What do I do with my privilege, power and affluence? Is Jewishness contributing to my impact and significance in the world?"

This presents interesting consequences when we seek to engage young Jews with Israel. For a variety of reasons, engaging this generation with the homeland of the Jewish people has proven elusive. The latest evidence is the first study of young Jews' volunteerism, *Volunteering + Values* by Repair the World, which revealed that Israel as a cause is ranked fourteenth on a list of respectable goodwill concerns (Chertok, E., Gerstein, J., Tobias, J., Rosin, S., & Boxer, M. *Volunteering + Values: A Repair the World Report on Jewish Young Adults*, 2011). Dozens of studies describe this distancing from Israel and a plethora of theories explain why.

In our work at New Israel Fund, we believe there is a missing link between the passion of young American Jews for social justice and existing Israel engagement opportunities. And we've found that bridging the gap between Israel and social justice allows for many more young Jews to relate to Israel.

"Engagement" has traditionally consisted of advocacy efforts to defend Israel's standing,

and financial support has always been raised for hospitals, schools and religious institutions in Israel. But these causes typically avoid policy and criticism of Israel's elected lawmakers. This is at odds with a generation accustomed to critical treatment of its government and of the global community.

Also, education about Israel often focuses on the miracle of Jewish statehood and avoids thorny issues such as Jewish-Arab disparities or Orthodoxy's role in state religion. Many feel that such "airing of dirty laundry" could damage Israel's tenuous standing. But this has been widely acknowledged as a great disservice to students, who discover difficult topics later in life, often during debates about Israel's legitimacy. They feel misled and let down. Israel — a country like any other, with social ills of its own — fails to match their idyllic childhood vision.

This last point is particularly important. According to a study by Frank Luntz, *Israel in the Age of Eminem* (The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2003), young Jews want more opportunities to think and question on their own terms; they reject groupthink; and they are suspicious of voices they view as partisan. The report also recommends that discussion of Israel relate to American parallels and invite American participation.

How do we overcome these challenges? How do we foster a relationship that encompasses an imperfect reality?

First, we must encourage open discussion of even uncomfortable issues. In early 2008, the education department of the Jewish Agency approached the New Israel Fund to produce an event, reaching "beyond the choir," for young Jews engaged in social justice but not in Israel. Together, we created an incredibly successful dialogue series facetiously titled "Love, Hate and the Jewish State." The events feature no speakers or prescribed conclusions, merely a space for Jewish youth to process their many conflicting feelings. The four pilot events saw 300 participants who were otherwise not likely to engage with Israel. It was cosponsored by eighteen Jewish social justice, online and spiritual groups, most of which studiously avoid Israel topics. The response from participants and partners was electric, emotional and often transformative. We witnessed firsthand the severity of their

unmet needs for open discourse.

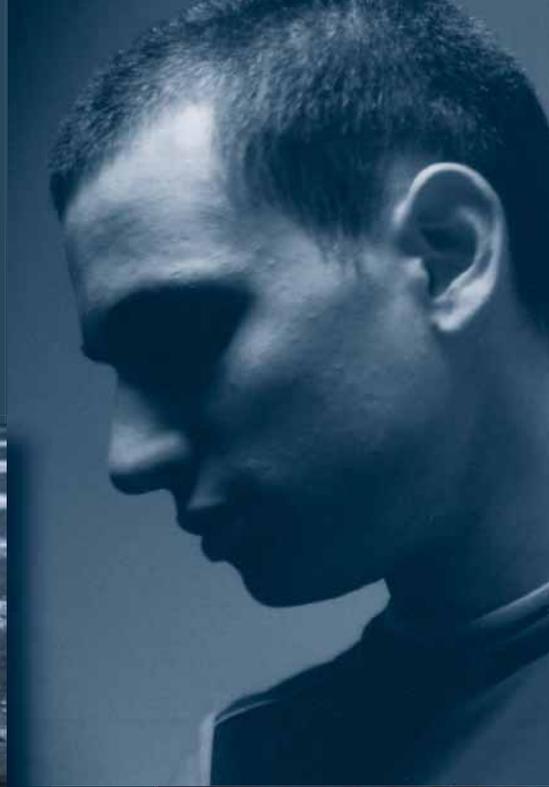
Second, we must include a robust conversation about improving Israel within our Israel education. Between 2008 and 2009, Taglit-Birthright Israel provider IsraelExperts partnered with us to conduct a half-dozen trips focusing on social-justice issues. In addition to visiting sites like the Western Wall and Masada, participants also met with Israelis active in social issues. They discovered that a desert Bedouin shantytown without water or electricity was a world away from the skyscrapers of Tel Aviv. Under different circumstances, making comparisons to the poverty of New Orleans could be quite risky for Israel. But here, the experience translated directly to Hillel trips in which participants volunteered in Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. The shared-value bonds they built with Israelis were far more powerful than photos of Masada at sunrise.

Finally, we need to provide opportunities to participate in improving Israel. Groups like Otzma, Yahel and New Israel Fund offer year-long programs sponsored by MASA to serve Israeli communities. Some of these programs involve direct services like teaching, and others involve interning at the Israeli equivalent of the ACLU. Back at home, there are many creative ways to remain engaged. This year, some 100 American Jewish lawyers joined their Israeli colleagues in recommending that the Knesset reject a bill that would negatively impact the freedoms of migrant workers. At the invitation of Israeli activists and organized by the New Israel Fund's young leaders, Americans were given a chance to support Israelis in a shared cause. Again, this experience was more generationally meaningful than sending a check or planting a tree.

These approaches bridge an otherwise awkward gap between Israel and social justice. They provide heretofore absent paths for engagement for the chief interests of young Jews. And when confronted with instances of Israel's shortcomings, participants are neither surprised nor disappointed. Instead, they are inspired by Israelis working for a better society. They become active participants in the ongoing project of the Jewish state. And even more important, they actually help Israel become a better, more equal and more desirable homeland for all its inhabitants. ■

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**Ben Murane** is the Director of New Generations in New York, New Israel Fund's vibrant 20s and 30s activist community. New Israel Fund is the leading organization promoting social justice and equality for all Israelis.





# ARTup NATION

by Yael Miriam and Edoe Cohen

*By taking advantage of the resources available in Israel, Omanoot Education brings the Israeli arts community's diverse and nuanced perspectives on important Jewish and Israeli issues to the larger public.*



**Clockwise from top left: photograph by Israeli photographer Avishai Finkelstein, still from the Israeli short film "Draft," still from the Israeli film "Ushpizin," Israeli band Hatikva 6.**

**W**hat can an Israeli reggae song teach our children about God and spirituality? What can a short film about an Israeli teenager's struggles with his father on the eve of his induction into the Israeli Defense Forces teach American Jewish teens about adolescence, responsibility and relationships? What can an Israeli photographer's series of photographs of her diverse extended Israeli family add to the Jewish identity of a young college student in New York? According to Omanoot, a lot.

Omanoot Education is a non-profit organization that provides educators with tools for exploring Israel through the arts. This new organization, based in both Israel and North America, opens the door to Israeli culture by offering Israeli arts-based lesson plans to educators around the world, making it easy and inexpensive to incorporate Israeli arts into their classrooms. By taking advantage of the resources available in Israel, Omanoot Education brings the Israeli arts community's diverse and nuanced perspectives on important Jewish and Israeli issues to the larger public.

Omanoot Education's lesson plans can be found along with art content on Omanoot.com, a new web portal that markets Israeli film, music, visual art and literature. Omanoot's team of educators develops the lesson plans and often tests them in classroom settings before market-

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**Yael Miriam**, Omanoot Education Creative Consultant, is a New York City based performance artist and educator. A former Dorot Fellow, she has written and performed in numerous theater productions and films and developed empowerment education curricula and art workshops throughout the United States and Israel. **Edoe Cohen**, Founder and CEO of Omanoot.com, produced a number of Israel-related culture projects while studying at Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He founded Omanoot while serving as a Legacy Fellow in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

ing them on the site. To date, the lesson plans, which have been used in numerous outlets across North America, including day-school and after-school programs, camps and young-adult educational settings, have received great feedback and appreciation across the board. Jessica Lissy Trey, a teacher from the Han-nah Senesh Day School in Brooklyn,

*By exploring both Israel and international Jewish Peoplehood through diverse artistic media, we hope to catalyze an expansion of thought as well as an opportunity, particularly among young adults, to connect to Judaism.*

wrote to us, “I wanted to let you know that we started the ‘Adi Nes’ Omanoot lessons today with 6th–8th (grade) and they were fantastic! Everyone participated and shared ideas — they were REALLY engaged!”

As the glare of the mainstream

media focuses on Israel’s politics, it is easy to lose sight of the many achievements and advances seen through Israeli art and culture. Israel’s films have won three consecutive Oscar nominations, and its music and visual arts have earned international recognition. Both the Israeli and Jewish worlds are making their marks in these fields, allowing for

new ways to connect and empower Jewish identity and engage with critical issues.

Omanoot Education’s mission is to encourage art as a means for learning and for a deeper dia-

logue within the Jewish community about Israeli culture and society. Israeli art is thriving, but as of now it is a minimally tapped resource in the education and non-profit worlds. We would like to see this change by allowing educators access to the arts as well as guidance on facilitating

conversations around many hot-button issues. Throughout time, within both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures, art has served as a conduit for thoughtful exploration and empowerment. Omanoot Education aims to use Israeli art to develop greater engagement with the international Jewish world and with the full spectrum of Jewish identities.

Through various perspectives and previously unheard narratives, art can be a powerful educational tool that supports individuals and communities in their explorations of the diverse questions facing the Jewish people. In its multiple forms, art is a universal language that allows empathetic engagement and understanding. By exploring both Israel and international Jewish Peoplehood through diverse artistic media, we hope to catalyze an expansion of thought as well as an opportunity, particularly among young adults, to connect to Judaism. This connection can open up a new and invigorating way to be Jewish. ■

## ISRAEL AT ITS CORE

BY ETTY DOLGIN



**O**n a recent field trip in Chicago, children enrolled in the Hebrew-immersion program at Moadon Kol Chadash (“A Club with a New Voice”) noticed the American flags flying over various sites — post offices, banks and schools — and turned to ask their teacher, “But where are the Israeli flags?”

That such a thought should occur to these children may convey just how central Israel is in their education. Engagement with the country, in fact, is at the curriculum’s core — whether achieved through formal or informal means.

Since its inception in 1989, Moadon Kol Chadash has made engagement with Israel a priority. In 2004, it created Gan Gani (“My Own Preschool”) to extend this emphasis to a Hebrew-immersion program serving children from the ages of eighteen months to four years of age. To live, speak, act and even eat as though you are living in Israel — what is the best way to implement this?

First and foremost in this plan is the language spoken: Hebrew. A second crucial factor is in the school’s environment: the décor is defined by photographs, maps and artwork that evoke Israel — all but transporting the teachers and students there. Add to this Israel-themed games, cooking, music, dance

and creative Israeli activities, and the effect is comprehensive.

Israel is an important element in Jewish identity. One fourth-grader at Moadon Kol Chadash regarded Israel as the most important — for in it were comprehended the other key elements: history, the Torah, Hebrew and the future. (Now thirteen, this youngster still feels the same way.) Moreover, as he added then, “Just listen to the name *Jerusalem* — might it not be spelled *Jewrusalem* — i.e., where the Jewish people live?”

A final anecdote may suggest the sense of Israel as both destiny and destination that our students feel. In a game in which they create rows of seats on a make-believe plane, the children are asked where the plane is going. The answer is always “Israel.” ■

*Etty Dolgin is Director of Education for Moadon Kol Chadash. [www.moadonkolchadash.org](http://www.moadonkolchadash.org).*

# ABOUT THE WORD

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

In a certain sense, this issue of *CONTACT*, which explores the possibilities of engaging North Americans in the Israel experience beyond advocacy and Hasbarah, is a continuation of our Spring issue, which explored the potential of Hebrew in America. The notion of Americans mastering Modern Israeli Hebrew is in effect a component of Israel engagement; speaking Modern Hebrew is inextricably tied to an appreciation and experience of contemporary Israeli culture and life. Israel advocacy, on the other hand, is about promoting the rightfulness and position of something beyond oneself; it is “about” Israel. Israel engagement beyond advocacy and Hasbarah aims to incorporate elements of Israeli life and culture in the lives of American Jews on a regular basis. In its best expression, it is not just a way of engaging Jews “about” Israel but finding ways for Americans to “live” Israel wherever they might be.

For far too long, Israel engagement has mostly entailed ways for Jews to gain a positive sense of and commitment to the State of Israel with the effect that Jewish life ends up being lived vicariously. The goal has been that one identifies positively with this Jewish place over there without incorporating the content of that place — its language, calendar, food, music and art — into one’s real lived experience. From an historical perspective that is certainly a missed opportunity.

It took 50 years after the founding of

the State of Israel before a program like Birthright was conceptualized with the goal of bringing a taste of Jewish sovereign life to unprecedented numbers of Jewish young adults in order to effect a tipping point in the consciousness of a generation. One would have thought that after a 2,000-year wait, Jewish leadership would have realized the imperative of getting as many young people as possible on such a trip earlier than 1999. But even then, the bulk of the Jewish establishment was resistant to the notion that exposing Jewish young adults to a free Israel educational trip experience could have a multiplier effect on participants’ Jewish identity and commitment. Now that the value of this program is clear to almost all, it is still not obvious to many that the components of contemporary Israeli life can constitute elements of content and substance for American Jewish life.

Return trips and internship experiences like Birthright Excel can help make normative the sense of ongoing relationship and contact between Israelis and Americans. Programs that advocate learning and speaking Hebrew with the spirit of an Alliance Française for the Hebrew language can ultimately make these relationships profoundly deeper using language as an immediate access point to the life and culture of Israel. A robust program for exchange between American and Israeli academics centered on extended time in Israel for American opinion makers provides additional promise. Strategies of making Israeli art and music far more accessible in

the American cultural landscape need to be explored.

What do we lose by admitting that the miracle of a sovereign, Jewish, Hebrew speaking culture and society in the land of Israel can contribute positive elements of culture, language and life to our American Jewish experience? Is there a subtle Diasporism afoot that negates what Israel has to contribute out of a fear of our own negation? At a time when Israelis are finally beginning to give up on the concept of the negation of the Diaspora (*Shelilat HaGolah*) that had been a central pillar of classical Zionism, a broader Zionism is now possible. An Israel engagement agenda whether for young adults, Birthright alumni, school-age children, seniors, boomers, youth or teens that imagines new programmatic platforms for American Jews rooted in contemporary Israeli life might very well constitute a new and expanded Zionism. This Zionism draws on the Zionism of Mordecai Kaplan, Achad Ha’Am and A.D. Gordon, seeing the existence of Israel not as its end-point but as that which enables the revitalization of Jewish life everywhere. This Zionism does not negate the Diaspora with the requirement that all Jews emigrate to Israel or ultimately face Jewish oblivion, but envisions a vibrant Jewish life outside of Israel inspired and influenced by the language and culture of contemporary Israel. Perhaps as we build new possibilities for Israel engagement beyond Hasbarah, it behooves us to see that enterprise as the next step in the building of a greater and expanded Zionism. ■

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*Rabbi David Gedzelman is the Executive Vice President of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.*

**The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life**

6 East 39th Street  
10th floor  
New York, NY 10016

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experiences that  
position Israel as an  
anchor of Jewish  
consciousness and  
connections.*

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT