

## **Israel Education Through Encounters With Israelis**

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## Part 1

**When you hear the word "Israeli"** what is your first thought? Is it the New York cab driver who forthrightly shares with you his rather intelligent opinion of the political or social issues of the day? Is it the Hebrew teacher who tried to lead you through the intricacies of a foreign language yet could not quite relate to where you were coming from; or is it that inspiring, dedicated teacher who painted vivid word pictures of all-night horas and flowers blooming in the deserts of a beloved country? Maybe it is the owners of that kosher restaurant which has an express line for other Israelis and a regular line for everybody else; or it is the knowledgeable businessman from whom you recently purchased your computer software update? Perhaps it is the super-heroic character Ari Ben Canaan of Exodus fame; or a neighbor or colleague who often surprises you with his or her different slant on life?

If your associations with the word "Israeli" are extremely varied, that is largely because Israelis themselves exemplify a staggering multiplicity of sub-cultures and personality types. They also represent an exciting way of getting to know Israel better. Israelis are a living, breathing expression of the popular culture and the contemporary issues that shape Israeli daily life. Encountering Israelis, in all the many ways possible, is a vital new form of Israel education which can touch on every field of Jewish education and experience. The best way to meet Israelis is, of course, during a visit to Israel; we will discuss various ways to maximize encounters with Israelis in Israel itself. However, in today's world, Jews in the Diaspora need not wait to travel to Israel in order to encounter different kinds of Israelis in a variety of contexts. Each of the Israelis who visit, live and work in Diaspora communities embodies Israel in his or her own unique way. To fall short of encountering the many pieces of Israel that are manifested by Israelis on the local scene is to miss out on an important way of connecting to that country.

In this Guide we will probe the broad subject of contact between Diaspora Jews and Israelis both in Israel and in your Jewish community. We will describe the instances in which encounters currently occur, present some of the issues which need to be addressed by those wishing to enhance the experience, and recommend specific ways for expanding and increasing the effectiveness of such a potentially rich form of Israel education.

**Learning about Israel** is not easy. This is true for several reasons. First, most conventional efforts to educate Diaspora Jews about Israel involve a largely theoretical process. Because the learners are geographically removed from Israel, educators must struggle to create some knowledge and experience of Israel in the hearts and minds of the learners. This is usually accomplished by using a variety of indirect materials and techniques: books, lectures, films, etc. Even in the best of circumstances, these approaches share the disadvantage of being "Israel-once-removed." All of them attempt to distill for the learner the extremely unique, vibrant, multi-faceted, and dynamic subject that is Israel through means that are indirect. For this reason, Israel education often emphasizes the general rather than the particular, the theoretical versus the concrete, the spiritual versus the down to earth: "Israel-once-removed."

A second challenge to Diaspora Jews trying to learn about Israel is that little attention has been paid by educators to the fact that our two communities of Jews have developed in different directions during the past half-decade. It is not simply that Israel has a distinct modern history or a unique geographical terrain: the realities of building a modern Jewish state have led Israelis to develop along cultural, moral, and philosophical lines that do not converge with those of their Diaspora counterparts. We - North Americans and Israelis - have essentially developed different cultures, an occurrence that has generally not warranted the attention of large numbers of Israel educators. This brings us to "Israel-twice-removed" - the existence of noticeable cultural differences between Diaspora and Israeli Jews that we have largely avoided noticing! Thus, the impression that Diaspora learners acquire about Israel through standard avenues of Israel education is blurred when educational approaches do not take the realities of Israel's people into consideration.

**The inevitably large gap** between "Israel-once-and-twice-removed" and the reality of the country and its people can be observed by anybody visiting Israel for the first time. One cannot help but be surprised by an Israel that does not compare to anything that was learned about it before. Should Diaspora educators and learners therefore give up all hope for a realistic glimpse of Israel in the absence of a visit? We believe that indeed they should not! One need not simply wait for a chance to visit Israel; many different kinds of opportunities exist for sampling Israel in small yet realistic and meaningful pieces. This involves leaving the classroom and moving into the field. It requires sharpening the learner's antennae for the cultural difference that must be recognized and grappled with. It occasions meaningful encounters with Israel as it is exemplified by its greatest resource: its people.

While there is a growing awareness of the importance and desirability of such encounters, this is not always accompanied by the mindset and preparation necessary to render such meetings both meaningful and gratifying.

## **Part 2**

**Encountering Israelis is a mixture of meeting strangers and finding lost relatives.** We share much in common; yet much about the two groups is different. While Diaspora Jews often feel an affinity to Israelis similar to that among members of an extended family, the cultural identity of Israelis is actually somewhat distant, and therefore unknown to Diaspora Jews. We believe that despite the presumption of closeness between Jews the world over and Israelis, significant cultural differences must be taken into account when Diaspora and Israeli Jews interact.

People grow up aware of other cultures. Americans expect Japanese or Mexicans, for example, to be "different." However Diaspora Jews, in part because of their emotional attachment to Israel, tend to blur the key distinctions between themselves and Israelis.

Of course, let us not discount the important notion of One People. Jews throughout the world have many elements in common, including religious traditions, common historical memories, family relations

and mutual concerns. At the time of the encounter itself, the educators' job is to build upon these similarities. Our present purpose is to highlight ways of anticipating and managing likely cross-cultural challenges. In this section, we will draw upon the rather well-developed field in social sciences called "cross-cultural education and training" (sometimes also called "inter-cultural" education and training). Cross-cultural education usually has two stages. The first is developing "culture-general" skills - that is, preparing for encountering other cultures in comparison to ones' own cultural milieu. The second is education for "culture-specific" skills - that is, learning about the specific new culture in question.

Israel education typically creates a certain image of Israelis which is not always realistic or helpful in preparing for the actual encounter. Namely, if Israel education highlights the abstract, mythical, or spiritual aspects of Israel's role in Diaspora Jewish life, the result is that Israelis are portrayed in unrealistic terms. A typical example is the character of Ari Ben Canaan in the classic film, *Exodus*. Most Israelis are not like Ari Ben Canaan, and Hollywood's image of Israelis does not help one prepare for a future encounter.

The most intense form of cross-cultural exposure is of course face-to-face contact. This can occur either when a person meets a member of a different ethnic community in his or her own society, or when traveling to another country. Researchers point out that the setting and other characteristics of the contact - such as duration, purpose, frequency, group composition and relative status of participants - significantly affect the nature of the encounter.

The most important characteristics in cross-cultural literature that apply to encounters between Diaspora and Israeli Jews are: skin color, appearance, social norms, language/communication and religion.

Jews are not generally considered to be a people divided by skin color. Indeed, most Jews who live in the Diaspora are rather homogeneous, namely, from European descent (most exceptions are found in Montreal, France, and South America). Israel, on the other hand, is ethnically diverse - comprised of Jews who came from all over the world bringing with them different physical features, norms, and folkways. Yemenite and Indian Jews, for example, are much darker than Polish or Russian Jews; the recent immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel has turned the skin color issue into an even more explicit matter. Israel education should prepare the students for such ethnic diversity which may otherwise shock them.

Naturally, skin color is only an external aspect of ethnicity. Most Jews who grow up in Ashkenazi communities in the Diaspora are not aware of the possibility of different ethnic traditions within the Jewish community (this circumstance may be changing due to the increasing number of converts to Judaism from various ethnic groups). Israel is a multicultural society with tremendous ethnic variation. Thus, meeting Israelis is also an opportunity to get to know a broader spectrum of Jewish expression. An American Jew visiting Israel during the Passover season might be invited by a new acquaintance to a *mimuna* - a festival traditionally celebrated by Moroccan Jews at the conclusion of Passover - and discover a whole new aspect of the Passover holiday. He or she may be even further surprised to learn

that mimuna has become a national holiday in Israel. Perceiving Israel's ethnic diversity is a key to understanding the country's culture.

Israel is a western society and the external appearance of Israelis is not dramatically different than that of most other people in today's world. Still, there is a discernible Israeli style. The most obvious point is the informality with which Israelis dress. Because their dress code is far more casual than in most western societies, Israelis often "stick out" in places where the standard is different. In addition, there are specific items - such as military attire, sandals, and hats - as well as certain dress habits - such as untucked shirts and open collar buttons - which help to easily identify Israelis.

On the other hand, there are times when we expect to see Israelis in their stereotypical appearance and (surprise!) they are dressed in the latest western fashion, as illustrated by the story about the kibbutznik who married an American Jewish woman. They traveled to the United States to attend a reception in the bride's home. The bride's parents told their friends to dress casually as the kibbutznik son-in-law is not accustomed to formal dress. The son-in-law was told by his friends that he ought to dress up because in America a kibbutz appearance is unacceptable. It turned out that he was the only one who wore a suit and tie while the guests all wore shorts!

Most people are aware that cultures differ from one another in many ways. However this awareness is usually confined to the visible, explicit elements such as customs, manners, gestures, food, and clothing - the mere tip of the "cultural iceberg." Hidden under the water are realms like: communication style, perception of authority, need for personal space, learning habits, planning style, amount of spontaneity, individuality, gender relations, distance and intimacy, work ethic, etc. For example, when riding a public bus in Israel you may notice that passengers, even strangers, do not hesitate to interact with each other, chat with the driver, ask for their favorite station on the bus radio, or tell somebody else to vacate their seat for an elderly passenger. Cross-cultural education aspires to discover the implicit aspects of the other culture. How does one reach the deeper layers? The first step is to be sensitive to their existence and to be alert for their manifestations. It is also important to suspend judgementalism, keeping in mind that although subtle differences may appear strange, they can be a natural aspect of the other person's culture. In the process of encountering Israelis, it is important to remember that the social norms of Israeli Jews differ from those of people elsewhere in the world.

Do Jews have a common language? If so, what is it? Since the State of Israel adopted Hebrew as its official language, the classical Hebrew of pre-Zionism days faded in importance as the universal Jewish language. In its place a modern spoken Hebrew, the language of Israelis (Jews and non-Jews alike), has developed into a new (old) language quite different from traditional Hebrew. Moreover, the revival of vernacular Hebrew as a prominent value in Zionist ideology stood in contradistinction with the tendency of religious Jews throughout the world to restrict Hebrew to the realm of the holy. Hebrew proficiency declined in most Diaspora communities, and usually remained closer to the traditional religious form of the language. In recent years, with increased enrollment in Jewish day schools and more participation in long-term Israel programs, modern Hebrew is enjoying somewhat of a rebound among Diaspora Jews.

So Diaspora Jews and Israelis are linguistically separated. All cross-cultural theories view the language barrier as a major issue, because language is an extremely important commodity packed with high emotional value. It is a source of identity as much as a tool of expression. When Israelis are forced to communicate in English (even when they are fluent in the language), they are at a disadvantage, required to use a form of expression that is foreign. Conversely, even Diaspora Jews with a strong Hebrew background usually find it frustrating to speak with Israelis because their Hebrew language skills allow for only limited self-expression. Other communication difficulties exist which go beyond language. We often underestimate the effect of foreign accent and other nuances of language. Fluency in a foreign language does not always guarantee an understanding of slang, inner codes, rapid speech, intonation, cultural nuance, humor, etc. Differences in dialect can be another stumbling block in a conversation. Cross-cultural communication requires patience, good listening skills, and a relaxed attitude on the part of both partners to the dialogue.

One would think that religion is the uniting force linking Jews to one another, but this is not quite the case. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, North American Jews and Israelis are two people separated by a common religion. Evolving in separate realities, Israeli and North American Jews have developed different modes of Judaism. Liebman and Cohen (1990) argue that American Jews and Israelis have formed two Jewish cultures that have elements that point to continuity as well as those that pull away from one another. While both Jewish populations share such features as Jewish holiday celebrations, the Jewish life cycle, and historical memory, basic terms such as "religious," "secular," "synagogue," "rabbi," and "prayer" are understood differently by North Americans and Israelis. In Israel, where 100 years of modern Zionism have influenced the society's development, a specific brand of Judaism has emerged. Its main characteristics: Judaism is the majority culture of the country; Hebrew is used in both religious and secular contexts; there is a tense interplay between state and religion; and Jewish religious pluralism remains marginal in the society. It is important to prepare North American students for an encounter with a different kind of Jew whose Judaism is constructed in a different way.

In light of these potential stumbling blocks, what can be done?

### **Part 3**

**Meaningful cross-cultural encounters** cannot be taken for granted. Our natural tendency is to avoid people who are different, to stay safely among those who speak the same language and share the same cultural assumptions. As we have discussed, physical proximity does not necessarily lead to easy, positive encounters between different kinds of people. Cross-cultural encounters are most meaningful, and have a diminished likelihood of misunderstanding, when they are carefully mediated in a consciously planned way. We believe that the pursuit of the cross-cultural model is an important new direction in Israel education, both for North Americans and Israelis. It behooves Israel educators to take the initiative in structuring encounters with the greatest potential outcomes. As our tradition teaches us, "Lo somchim al ha-nes" - don't rely on miracles! (B. Talmud Pesachim 64b)

### **INDIVIDUAL ISRAELIS IN THE DIASPORA COMMUNITY AS RESOURCES**

A key initial step for both educators and learners trying to maximize the educational potential of encounters is to recognize that when Diaspora and Israeli Jews encounter each other, a rich learning opportunity is at hand. Israelis are everywhere, and wherever they be found, we can learn from them about Israel.

Indeed, as the modern world grows smaller, one need not wait to go to Israel in order to meet Israelis. Jews living in the Diaspora have more and more opportunities to encounter Israelis throughout the course of their lives. Such encounters can take place in a number of different ways. They may occur in the Diaspora or in Israel; they may be direct person to person meetings or indirect communications; they may be planned meetings which take place in educational or community frameworks; or they can be unplanned, unexpected contacts. The learning may be designed and deliberate, as in the case of a school program, or it can be subliminal and unsystematic, as in the case of a chance meeting at a community event. Often what is learned (or derived) about the person - and by extension the other culture - is valid; in some instances it is not! The reasons that bring Israelis to reside in the Diaspora will often affect the quality of the encounter.

**A considerable number of Israelis** are found in Diaspora communities, both under official and independent auspices. Many work for the Israeli government; others work with Diaspora youth on behalf of Zionist youth movements. Some Israelis live in or visit Diaspora communities of their own initiative for a variety of personal reasons. Some may be completing university degrees; some have moved because of jobs or family; and others came because they were in some way dissatisfied with their lives in Israel.

No precise figures for the number of Israelis living outside of Israel are available, however current estimates are that approximately one half million are abroad at any one time. In past years, a considerable stigma had been associated with an Israeli's personal choice to leave Israel permanently. To leave Israel, called "yerida" (literally "going down;" as compared to "aliya" to Israel, which is "going up") used to considerably conflict with Zionist ideology, which calls upon all Jews to return to, live in, and build the Land of Israel. As the joke goes, if an Israeli enters an elevator in North America that is full of other Israelis and asks "yordim?" ("going down?"), the answer will be "no, no, we're just here for a short while!" As ideological motivations have diminished in many sectors of Israeli society in recent years, so have the tensions over choosing to leave the country.

**Even those Israelis living abroad** whose consciences are clear about their location, still have difficulties to overcome. It is important to be aware that they may be "fish out of water," facing all of the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and language, beginning new employment or a new school, meeting many new people, missing home and setting up a new one, and helping family members to adjust. For example, school cultures in the Diaspora are rather different from what Israeli families are used to. This affects expectations about the relationships between parents and teachers and about the social interactions among the children. One excellent way to initiate a meaningful friendship with Israelis new to your community is to offer to help with some of these adjustments. A family-to-family relationship can go a long way both towards integrating the Israeli family into the community, and providing the Diaspora family with an opportunity to develop meaningful contacts with Israelis. This is

an excellent first-line approach, as it establishes a sense of partnership in the relationship. After all, the next step will be to "utilize" that Israeli (now hopefully a new friend) as a human resource for personalized Israel education.

**Some Israelis found in North American communities** are there under official auspices, as shlichim sent by an Israeli organization for a finite period of time (usually one to three years). A professional shaliah is there for the express purpose of representing Israel in the Diaspora and is no doubt involved in one or more of the following:

- \* working with youth
- \* teaching in a Jewish school
- \* doing public relations for the government of Israel
- \* staffing speakers bureaus on various topics related to Israel
- \* preparing and orienting those planning to travel to Israel
- \* doing high-tech and other research or consulting.

These individuals will consciously behave as ambassadors for Israel, putting into practice some of their training about how to represent Israel and how to function in the Diaspora environment. Even with the preparation they underwent as part of the job, the personality of each ambassador will still come through. Indeed, these people were chosen for their jobs, among other reasons, because of their motivation and congenial personalities. The shaliah or diplomat can also be counted upon to have specific, and usually reliable, information to share about Israel, in an organized and effective way. Each one of course also brings with him or her a personal ideology and a private life, including a spouse, a home, and children. All of these factors enhance this professional and his or her family as an Israel education resource.

A Jewish community can benefit if it can "stretch" these individuals further by attempting to encounter Israel through their eyes and hearts. This may be done in several ways. Rather than relying on a speakers' bureau to send a speaker to present "the party line" on an Israel issue, Israelis from across the political or religious spectrum can be invited to share their varied views and experiences concerning controversial issues. In so doing, it must be remembered that the tremendous diversity of opinion in Israel about almost every issue is as great as the variety of lifestyles and personalities in that country.

Many Israelis live in the Diaspora in unofficial capacities, motivated by aspirations for education, employment, family, or adventure. After completing army service, younger Israeli adults often travel abroad. In some cases an Israeli may be abroad for a very brief visit, as a guest speaker, as a member of a delegation, or for a Partnership 2000 (Israel-Diaspora relations) project. Diaspora Jews may run into such Israelis in social settings, Jewish organizations, stores, or as new neighbors on the block. It is almost impossible to generalize about the nature of such encounters, because they can range anywhere from a brief dialogue between customer and salesperson to a deep and growing friendship. What is

unavoidably true, however, is that each Israeli serves as an often unwitting representative of various aspects of Israel. The great variety of Israelis one meets can lead to a greater understanding of the diversity of Israeli society.

"Unofficial" Israelis can and should also be "stretched" by Israel educators whenever possible. For example, those in business may be good resources for information about investment opportunities in Israel; those interested in music may have fine libraries of Hebrew music tapes and CDs; the sports-minded may enjoy coaching soccer. Israeli high school students can serve as valuable resources for "reality testing" in current events classes, particularly on the question of how accurately Israel is being presented in the media. University students, working in partnership with their Diaspora peers, can provide the necessary information to effectively combat anti-Israel propaganda on college campuses. The fact is that most Israelis like to help and guide others, particularly in areas of their own interest or expertise. In addition to enabling Diaspora Jews to benefit from the Israelis' knowledge, such a process brings Israeli individuals closer to Diaspora Jews.

Israelis in the community may be able to serve as contact people in establishing various types of partnership relationships with Israelis in Israel. These can include twinning projects between schools, informal groups, and organizations; business initiatives; and developing meaningful Israel Experience itineraries. Local Israelis can also be invited to help plan and participate in adult and/or teen seminars on Israel-Diaspora relationships that take place in your community.

## **ENCOUNTERING ISRAELIS IN ISRAEL**

A setting which brings Diaspora and Israeli Jews face-to-face as part of an educational program has come to be called a mifgash (encounter, in Hebrew; plural is mifgashim). Mifgashim are specially designed activities, run by trained facilitators, that encourage meaningful and enjoyable interaction between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. Within the framework of the Israel Experience we can find a multitude of such initiatives. These activities range from intensive seminars, joint excursions around the country, activities around a common issue, social action, sports and arts. When Diaspora Jews (particularly youth) travel to Israel, it is becoming more and more likely that their program will include a mifgash module as part of the overall experience. In a few programs, the Israelis participate in all parts of the trip.

The mifgash with Israeli peers personalizes the whole experience of learning about Israel. It can transform an ordinary touring adventure into a vivid "hands-on" encounter. Through interacting with the Israelis, the visiting youth gain an insider's view of Israeli society and culture. At the same time, the mifgash can enhance young Israelis' understanding of Diaspora Jewry, making it appealing to Israeli educators.

For all of their many rewards, it must be noted that mifgashim are complex and challenging. They add many new issues and dimensions of interpersonal and intergroup interaction that do not exist in homogeneous situations. Successfully mixing Diaspora and Israeli Jews takes careful planning and professional facilitation. Because of the importance of mifgashim to today's Israel Experience, the CRB Foundation established an organization dedicated to this issue. The Charles R. Bronfman Centre for the

Israel Experience: Mifgashim, based in Jerusalem, is available to assist program purveyors and individuals interested in planning and implementing a structured mifgash.

Several important elements need to be considered before undertaking a structured mifgash program:

**When a *mifgash* is being planned**, the organizers need to decide what kind of mifgash will best suit the group. Format, duration, timing, content, and methodology of the prospective mifgash all demand attention. Whatever the design of each individual mifgash, there will be a need for deliberate educational interventions in order to maximize its quality and intensity. Because a mifgash is a complex event that is affected by other parts of the program, we recommend that program leaders work closely with professional at the Mifgashim Centre in their planning process.

***Mifgashim* aim to bring** at least two diverse populations together for a joint activity. Matching the populations properly is an important part of the process. The planners should consider the participants' profiles: age, religious/ethnic orientation, socio- economic status, language skills, predisposition, etc. We are not advocating a harsh selection process, but rather sensible choices of appropriate partners for the mifgash.

**The issue of turf** in encounters between Diaspora Jews and Israelis affects both groups, often in unexpected ways. First, the more obvious "macro" level denotes the particular cultural milieu in which the mifgash takes place: in Israel, in a Diaspora community, or in a third "neutral" country. Although we would expect that participants in their own country would feel more in control of the environment and therefore more relaxed, this expectation is only partially true in practice. This is because the turf issue is also impacted by the "micro" level - that of the mifgash program itself. Although Israel is usually the host "macro" culture, it is ironically the visitors who dictate the language, timing, content and organizational norms - the "micro" culture - of the interaction. Educators should be sensitive to potential feelings on the part of the host-country participants that they have been culturally "dispossessed" by the mifgash program.

**It is vital that participants are prepared** for the mifgash. Orientation programs should include: development of culture-general skills (i.e., how to observe and relate to aspects of other cultures in general - see section II of this Guide), learning about the other specific culture, improving self-presentation skills, information about the upcoming mifgash program, and tips for proper behavior during the program (see Looking Forward to Mifgashim, produced by the Bronfman Centre).

**Running effective *mifgash* programs** requires specially chosen and trained personnel, who are proficient in the unique skills required. These include working in multilingual settings, bridging cultural gaps, and overcoming misunderstandings and hostility. Other staff members should be ready to assist and support the mifgash personnel. At the same time, it should be noted that there is a mifgash taking place among the staff themselves which may illuminate issues of professional cooperation and provide a good opportunity for learning.

**Most *mifgash* programs** include a home hospitality component in which the Israeli participants host the new friends that they met at the mifgash. It serves as an exciting, and perhaps the singular, opportunity

to become intimately acquainted with a home and a family in Israel. The hospitality stage is intense and has some "unknowns." For example, religious issues, such as observance (or non-observance) of Shabbat and Jewish dietary laws, can arise due to a gap between what the guest was expecting and what he or she finds in the host's home. Diaspora youth who are invited to Israeli homes should be properly prepared for this adventure, which has the potential of becoming the highlight of their Israel Experience. (See *Feeling Right at Home*, a booklet featuring home hospitality tips for visitors to Israel, available from the Bronfman Centre.)

**Another way for Diaspora Jews to become acquainted with Israelis** is by participating in one of many volunteer programs in the country. These programs bring volunteers to a town, kibbutz, settlement, or school for sustained contact with a population in need of their services, where they teach, organize social activities, or work in agriculture. Volunteers have the opportunity to get to know some Israelis in their home milieu and can immerse themselves in a particular community. In some cases, volunteers are matched with adoptive families who take the volunteers under their wing. This can lead to a lasting relationship between the volunteer and members of that family.

**Of course**, one need not be part of a specially organized *mifgash* or volunteer program in order to meet Israelis while in Israel. Israelis who visitors meet in Israel may be roughly divided into three categories:

- \* professionals trained to work with visitors
- \* family or friends
- \* the person on the street.

Visitors encounter a full range of professionals who work in the tourist industry, including airport personnel, tour guides, bus drivers, travel agents, and hotel personnel. These individuals are trained to represent Israel, and can usually communicate with visitors in the visitors' own language. Those on educational programs also encounter professionals specifically trained to bring the knowledge, values, and experience of Israel to participants in an enjoyable, and systematic way. Those on organized tours rarely meet people from the other two categories until the free day usually scheduled at the end of the trip or when they do their souvenir shopping.

Some who visit Israel combine their touring with a visit to extended family\* or friends. This often involves a visit to an Israeli home and some sustained conversation, so it is an important way to get to know Israelis and their country in some depth. For those who do not have the contacts to arrange personal visits with Israelis, there are the hundreds of chance encounters through which a people and their culture are encountered bit by bit.

## **ENCOUNTERS THAT SPAN THE GLOBE**

Israelis, real and imaginary, are never fully absent from the lives of Diaspora Jews even when the two groups make no particular effort to interrelate. Newspaper articles, radio, and television reports thrust Israelis (usually famous ones) into Diaspora living rooms. Israeli characters appear increasingly in literature - in translations from the Hebrew and also in the language of the Diaspora country itself -

creating a montage image of Israel and Israelis in the minds of the reader or viewer. The accuracy of this image (i.e. how precisely it resembles the "real" Israel) is difficult to gauge, as it is filtered through the perspective of the publicist, broadcaster, or writer. Even so, educators and programmers should be alert for opportunities to utilize these potential contact points between Israelis and their Diaspora counterparts.

Perhaps the best way to clarify the reliability of the image that Diaspora Jews have of Israelis (in the absence of a visit to Israel) is to develop on-going relationships with real Israelis. It is quite difficult to develop any relationship from afar. We believe that nothing can completely replace face-to-face interaction (mifgashim). However, a lot can be done to foster meaningful ongoing relationships even when direct contact is impossible.

When designing a long-distance relationship, one should take seriously the challenge of managing the possible logistical obstacles. Even with the immediacy of the Internet, indirect communication can more readily suffer from misunderstandings, time lags, and the absence of the personal touch. Much disappointment occurs when an initiative begins with high expectations and then fades due to poor management or lack of follow-up. It is important that there be a person on each side accountable for overseeing the details of the project.

**The most basic** way for Diaspora Jews and Israelis to encounter each other is through simple correspondence. This can be viewed as a "personal indirect" encounter - "indirect" because it is mediated by an electronic or written medium, but personal because it takes place between two individuals who either already have a relationship or who seek to build one. Through letters, faxes, the Internet and/or telephone calls, they remain actively in touch although separated by an ocean. Ideally, this on-going indirect encounter features periodic visits which enhance its intensity and its enjoyability. We encourage the educator to capitalize on the numerous creative ways in which this basic correspondence model can be expanded and developed.

**It is hardly news** that communities and organizations in Israel and the Diaspora can seek out ways to develop on-going relationships. Such relationships are usually multifaceted, involving educational, social, economic, and philanthropic cooperation. One of the earlier endeavors of this kind was Project Renewal, which began in the 1970s and linked Federations and Jewish communities around the world to disadvantaged neighborhoods in Israel. Most of Project Renewal's endeavors were of a philanthropic nature, namely, established western Jewish communities gave assistance to poor Israeli towns and neighborhoods. Since the inception of the Project Renewal concept, there have been many new initiatives, reflecting the changing relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry and also the new technologies in communication. These new modes of relationships create multiple opportunities for educational initiatives that will link Diaspora and Israeli youth.

**Schools in Israel and in the Diaspora** can and do engage their students in projects that will bring them closer to one another. Traditional pen-pal links between schools, youth groups, families, and individuals are obviously still possible. The advent of the Internet has opened up limitless exciting possibilities, including joint learning projects, contests and quizzes, games, correspondence, art projects, and peer

teaching. E-mail pen-pals can write to each other the very same day, exchanging up-to-the-minute reactions to world events or sharing news in Israel in Internet "chat groups" before the news is stale. Acquainting learners not only with each other, but also with the history and migration patterns that have connected Jewish families in past generations.

The 1996-1997 school year saw Israeli public elementary schools well-equipped with computer labs and computers in classrooms. A number of schools may also choose to link up with the Internet, thus opening the road to exciting new possibilities for class projects involving regular correspondence with Israeli counterparts. Even in North American schools which do not have e-mail, there are probably a considerable number of families in each class that can send the messages from home. Although Israeli computers tend to have both Hebrew and English capacity, this is usually not the case in North America; the language of communication would necessarily have to be English. This limits the population of Israeli children who can participate in such programs to those who have begun to study English (from upper elementary grades) and those who speak English at home. In either case, North American children would have to be sensitive to the fact that the language abilities of their Israeli counterparts are usually not up to their level. Additional challenges, from kinks in emerging technologies to the complex nature of activities involving multiple computer links among many participants in two locations, all speak to the importance of expertise and planning on the part of educators.

**Another fruitful opportunity** is provided by Partnership 2000, a new program model that links Diaspora communities (through Federations) to regions in Israel. The Project was launched in 1994 by the Jewish Agency's Department of Rural and Urban Development. It divided Israel into twenty-seven regions, primarily outside the center of the country. Each Israeli region was paired with a Diaspora community, and a steering committee consisting of lay people and professionals was set up to develop a wide range of collaborative initiatives. The idea is that Israeli and Diaspora Jews on each side of the ocean be encouraged to develop an affinity to the people of a specific community or region. These formal relations serve in turn as fertile ground for people- to-people interaction. In addition to the ideas mentioned above, the partners can use a variety of local resources and institutions to develop new ways of strengthening their relations.

Partnership 2000 affords each community and region the opportunity to design their own joint model for interaction based on the characteristics of the parties and their surroundings. For example, if in the Israeli region there is a site having a particular educational model or historical significance, the Israelis can teach the Diaspora community about it. Similarly, if the Diaspora community has some particular significant commodity e.g., university, industry, communal project, this can serve as a resource to the Israeli region.

## **Conclusion**

**Some Israel educators**, those who live or have lived in both worlds, may find it rather comfortable to serve in a mediating role between two cultures. Memories of their own period of adjustment to the newer culture often alert them to the tendencies and difficulties that may need to be addressed when

facilitating cross-cultural programming. Educators less familiar with another culture might seek to broaden their experience through lengthy or frequent, intensive visits. In either case, leaders can prepare themselves in the short term to more effectively facilitate encounters between Diaspora and Israeli Jews by reviewing the cross-cultural literature and endeavoring to heighten their own sensitivity to cultural matters.

**We feel, however,** that in the long term, it is important that the North American Jewish community (as well as its Israeli counterpart) seek to develop professionals who can effectively guide encounters between Diaspora and Israeli Jews. We must begin to formally train our educators for the important role of mifgash facilitator. The curricula of Jewish teacher, leadership, and professional training programs should reflect the awareness that this skill is becoming increasingly important in Israel education. In-service training seminars in Jewish educational and community organizations can be used to bolster the cross-cultural skills of those already in the field. Curriculum materials need be developed for all of these training environments, drawing upon the best practices of the fields of Jewish informal education and of cross-cultural approaches. Only by empowering Jewish professionals to approach this field with confidence and skill will we be able to maximize the mutual educational benefits of encounters between Diaspora and Israeli Jews.

**Our vantage point** in this Guide has largely been that of Diaspora Jews thinking about encountering Israelis. However, it is also now widely held in Israel that Israelis should be encouraged to interact with Diaspora Jews, as a way of broadening their connection to world Jewry. Whatever the formal framework of the encounter, it will work best when both the Diaspora and the Israeli participants are viewed as the "client." What is more, fostering two-sided encounters in which both parties learn about and from each other, is a critical ingredient in a shift to more balanced Israel-Diaspora relations in the future. This stance can lead to the kind of back-and-forth reflections from which fruitful new ideas about Judaism and Jewish peoplehood arise. For example, by speaking to each other about such questions as "How am I as a Jew different from you?" both sides can be led to reflect on such questions as "what kind of Jew am I (in light of my differences from you)?" "What kind of Jewish culture do I come from?" and "What kind of Jewish culture might I wish to be part of developing?" Some observe that through encounter with Jews from other cultures, Israelis are enabled to view their own Israeli-Jewish culture in sharper relief.

**Developing ongoing** active relationships between individuals, communities, and regions through meaningful educational encounters is a challenge that calls for a cooperative effort involving educators, community leaders, and other professionals on both sides of the ocean. The desired aim is collaboration on many levels, including deliberation on important questions of Jewish leadership and future directions. Effective and durable partnerships on the community level and meaningful cross-cultural encounters on the personal level cannot be achieved without the careful nurturing of a deliberate educational process. The outcomes can be well worth the effort. Only by encountering each other in a way that is inviting, dynamic, and meaningful can the Jews of the Diaspora and the Jews of Israel really come to know each other and each other's realities. Only then can we foster the valuable relationships that we seek, and walk together into the next century.

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