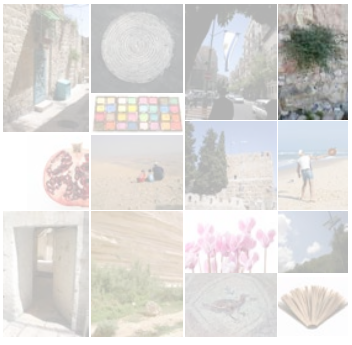
THE ALEPH-BET OF ISRAEL EDUCATION

MIFGASH: Creating the Authentic Relationship

BY ADAM STEWART



The Human Dimension

The twenty-first century development of social networking – Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and who knows what is next – is truly amazing, radically changing the way we interact with each other, and how we share information. What I find most exciting about it is that it sparks in me something that was first seeded over 20 years ago.

When I was sixteen years old, I traveled in Israel for six weeks with Israeli peers. I remember each of these teenagers by name, and if it weren't for the passage of time and human aging, I would recognize them like it was yesterday if they walked into the room. My experience in Israel – the things I saw, the places I visited, and the ideas that I encountered – are forever shaped by those people and they continue to impact the way in which I experience Israel. Like any cohort of friends, as time goes on, I am no longer in touch with many on a regular basis, but the connection lives in my soul and will forever serve as part of the collective, authentic voices that make up "my Israel."

When something momentous happens in the world today, I go to Facebook to see what my friends think. My friends from high school, from college, and from my professional life all form some real and authentic collective of my past and inform how I digest the news of the day. But this is not new for me. Long before the development of social media – when the Internet was still an unleashed dream – I had this same authentic collective on Israel. When something happened in Israel – good, bad, ugly or beautiful – I always contextualized it against the feelings and experience of the Israelis I knew. A phone call, a letter, or even an imagined conversation formed the basis of a continuing authentic relationship with Israel.

In the last 20-30 years, the field of the Israel Experience practically stumbled across an idea – a platform for Jewish learning – that shaped how trips, Israel teen trips, especially, would be formulated over the next decades. *Mifgash*, the people-to-people encounter between Jews in Israel and from other parts of the world provided a new way for young people to experience Israel.

This concept has emerged from a program element to a foundation for a "good" Israel experience, and can be used as a guiding principle in Israel education, wherever it occurs.

What is most instructive about *Mifgash*, what gives it the most potential as a tool to transform Israel education, and what ultimately puts it among the *Alef-Bet* of Israel education is that person-to-person encounter is one of the few methods we have that make an educational experience authentic. Our students – participants, campers, congregants, and on-line learners – are discerning consumers of information and experiences. When we provide both content and experience, we must seek ways to give educational projects authentic voices, so that they – like the experience of traveling Israel with Israelis peers – can form the collective understanding of our students' relationship with Israel.

> "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."
> - Martin Buber

In the Beginning: A Revolution in Seeing Israel & Experiencing Jewish People

Anne Lanski, current director of the iCenter and the pioneering force of *Mifgash* in its infancy over a quarter-century ago, has said, "I didn't find *Mifgash*… it found me." Having been brought up in Zionist youth movements and camps, Lanski was – as a result – bilingual and her identity was bi-national, but in her words, "When I experienced Israel with Israelis, is when I became bi-cultural." As a *madricha* on a community-based teen program which had included Israel participants as an afterthought, she and fellow *madrich* Yossi Nameri understood the power of this encounter and began to forge a relationship that would forever change the face of the Israel experience. Lanski and Nameri went on to establish Shorashim, a first-of-its-kind organization dedicated to implementing *Mifgashim* programs for teens in Israel and from the Chicago Jewish community.

Other teen programs, such as Nesiya (initially a project of the JCC of Cleveland) and Chetz V'Keshet (of the Israeli Scouts, Gadna, and the Jewish Agency) followed suit and built programs – different in scope and intent – but with the *mifgash* between American and Israeli peers as their foundation. The work of these early pioneers was given further credence by the establishment of The Charles R. Bronfman Centre for the Israel Experience: *Mifgashim*, a major philanthropic enterprise which sought to reinvigorate the world of Israel experience as it entered its second generation, and which recognized the intrinsic value of the encounter between Jews from around the world and their Israeli peers.

The endorsement from the Bronfman Centre led to the proliferation of thought, scholarly articles, including at least one dissertation, and the establishment of communities of practice.[1] The longer-term effect was that this practice of "encounter with Israeli peers," which at that time was coined as *mifgash*, was well established in the field of the Israel experience. From the mid-1990s until today, most teen programs have added mifgash as an element to their program, and seek value in the interaction between young Jews from abroad and native Israelis.

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A difference, however, emerged between the programs that had *mifgash* as a core and defining value, and those that began to adapt their programs with a discrete *mifgash* component.

Erik Cohen recognizes and articulates this in a 2000 study of Jewish Agency Israel Experience programs that had a *mifgash* element of anywhere between several days and two weeks. He argues that where *mifgashim* fall short of their potential is through "the objectification of Israeli participants by program planners" and "the widespread perception that *mifgashim* are conducted primarily for the benefit of Diaspora youth."[2] In other words, when *mifagsh* becomes the "program," and the Israeli participants become the "materials," we are not creating authentic learning experiences.

Given the Bronfman Foundation's role in the establishment Taglit-Birthright Israel in 1999, it is no surprise that it has become the most comprehensive experiment in *mifgashim* ever. Hundreds of thou-

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sands of students and young adults have seen Israel alongside Israeli peers, as Taglit-Birthright Israel has established it's own *Mifgashim* department, which works side-by-side with the IDF to recruit and orientate Israeli participants for the ten-day programs. Additionally, the Taglit-Birthright Israel program has stimulated creative approaches to *mifgash* – mostly around subject-interest areas – by offering grants for implementation. The result is a generation of young Jews around the world and Israeli peers who have meaningful personal relationships based on mutual experience in Israel.

One of the things that we have learned from this massive undertaking – and what most who placed *mifgash* at the center of their agenda already knew to some extent – was that young Jews from abroad visiting Israel, were not the only ones impacted by the experience. Studies conducted by the IDF and the Cohen Center at Brandeis University found that Israeli soldiers returning from *mifgash* were "more committed to military service, more committed to their future in Israel, and more committed to learning about their role in maintaining Jewish survival than they had been prior to their *mifgash*." In the same study, ninety-six percent of Israeli participants said the *mifgash* made them proud to be Israelis and to serve in the Israeli army, and a similarly high percentage felt the experience deepened their personal Jewish identity.[3]

Where Taglit-Birthright Israel got it right, and others did not – regardless of the length of time that the *mifgash* took place – was in establishing the relationship between Israeli participants and their peers from abroad. Israeli participants enter the program not as ambassadors, nor with an agenda; but rather as individual Israeli Jews.[4] Israelis and participants from around the world embarked on a journey together each shaping one another's journey through Israel, and together creating for each other authentic voices that began to create, or re-shape, their collective understanding of Israel and Jewish peoplehood.

Taking a Look Again: Redefining What is Mifgash

For *mifgash* to assume its place as a key component of Israel education, we need to redefine how we talk about it and how we can use it as *madrichim*, Sunday school teachers, day school educators, and camp counselors. Two areas relating to *mifgash* in which our emerging field of Israel education needs to do some work:

- *Mifgash* must be built upon authentic relationships between Israeli and North American peers, educators and families.
- *Mifgash* must (and is indeed built to) move beyond the world of Israel experience.

What is an authentic relationship? How do we create that surge of electricity between people that Buber describes as God? When I think back to some of the authentic experiences that I have had as a *mifgash* participant and facilitator, there is one which is particularly etched on my memory. In a group of Americans and Israelis, we discussed in the cool shade of a Jerusalem courtyard how this emerging relationship between us – Israeli Jews and Jewish Americans (we even discussed where we would put the adjective in those labels) – would affect they way in which we continued in our own relationship with Israel and Judaism. At one point, a thoughtful and well-liked American participant remarked that she would never feel the same when hearing news of a tragedy in Israel. Her connection to Israeli friends would make that catastrophe so much more personal. "Yeah," said Danny, the strong, but mostly-silent Israeli participant, "But the difference is: you will cry, but I could die." That poignant remark settled upon the group without pretense and without insult, in a way that only two peoples engaged in an authentic relationship could permit.

As an educator, I found my own authentic voice through *mifgash*. In my early years as a *madrich* on teen programs, I scrambled to accumulate as much information as I could about Israel, Israelis, sites, history, and politics. That collection of information and the passion to learn serves me still to this day, but what defined me – as an educator – was the realization of the limitation of my own voice. It struck me one day in the Old City of Jerusalem, as I listened to one of my co-staff. He told the story of growing up in the Old City, as a secular Jew, at a time when many secular Jews lived side-by-side religious Jews in the Jewish Quarter. He talked about playing hide and seek in the alleys, and recalled the time that "Kippi Ben Kipod", the giant porcupine character from the children's show "Shalom Sesame" came to film an episode. I realized that I could never tell this story.

It was not a disappointing discovery; rather it relieved a burden. It wasn't important how much he (or I) knew about this place, but instead how we knew it. *How* we related this information to participants on the program in the end became more of a function of how we related to the places and to the participants themselves rather than the knowledge presented. Moreover, the complement of both of our voices – American and Israeli – created a far better Israel experience than could have either our voices alone.

How We Move Forward

How do we extend *mifgashim* beyond the world of Israel experience? How is it possible to build a relationship with Israeli peers outside of the immersive experience in Israel, perhaps even not in each other's physical presence? Fundamentally, as Israel educators, I believe that if we don't formulate

an answer to this question, we may be doomed for failure. As critical as providing an Israel experience should be to any Jewish education, and despite Taglit-Birthright Israel making the experience universally available, many Jewish young people will not go to Israel. Building *Mifgash* as a core component of Israel education cannot be relegated then to the Israel experience alone.

In many ways the Jewish Agency has for years tackled this issue through their program of *Shlichut* to communities, youth movements, campuses, and summer camps. The work there is monumental and must be built upon, but at its core is not seen as authentic relationship building. The name itself – *shlichut* – implies a one-way relationship in which Israelis become "tools" for transference of information, culture, or ideas. What we need in our schools, synagogues, and camps is more *shutfut*, partnership between Israelis and Americans in building our Israel education goals.

The excellent news is that the time is ripe for this sort of authentic relationship building. Technological tools are making possible what we could only have imagined even several years ago. Organizations such as the iCenter have arisen to facilitate the development of a field around core principles for the field – The Alef- Bet of Israel Education – such as *mifgash*. Because of programs like Taglit-Birtrhight Israel, more young adults have visited Israel than in the previous decade. Despite consistent detraction, and seemingly insurmountable odds, the connection between Jews and Israel persists in very real and meaningful ways.

How we move forward is as varied and diverse as the people who are coming together to form the field of Israel education. In an age, where authenticity is no longer determined by the supposed "gatekeepers" of knowledge, *mifgash* provides a way for young people to explore and connect with Israel – to make it a "central component of their Jewish identity" in a way that is authentic to them.

- We should be constantly looking for ways to authenticate themes and ideas with *mifgash*.
- Widening the scope of *mifgashim* beyond the Israel experiences will provide us with new ways for our students to have "authentic" Israel experience.
- Our programs should be guided toward a real need to keep alive – and in some cases – rekindle a didactic relationship between young Israeli and North American Jews.

Notes:

1 Minna Wolf, *Adjusting the Boundary: Exploring Identities during Israel Experience Mifgashim*. PhD Dissertation, Melton Centre for Jewish Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, 2007.

2 Cohen, Erik H. *MIFGASHIM: A Meeting of Minds and Hearts*, Journal of Jewish Education, 66:1, 23 – 37, 2000.

3 Sasson, Mittelberg, Hecht, and Saxe, Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, *Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash*, December 2008.

4 Saxe, Leonard and Chazan, Barry, *Ten Days in Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*, Torah Aura Productions, 2008



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