

Real Talk:

Laying the Groundwork for New Conversations about Israel



By Alex Sinclair

Session 3

***BEYOND ISRAELI DANCING:
Putting Israel Engagement into Practice***

Not For Sale - Educational Use Only

Overview of Session

1. **Summarizing our Position and Setting a Communal Agenda (5 mins)**
2. **Some Other Metaphors to Think About (10 mins)**
3. **What's the Big Idea? – Creating a New Slogan (30 mins)**
4. **Now What? Looking for Low-Hanging Fruit (20 mins)**
5. **A Farewell Gift: Yehudah Amichai's Tourists (25 mins)**
6. **Close (5 mins)**

Introduction to the Facilitator

Hopefully, in the first two sessions, participants have been persuaded of the case for a new view of Israel engagement and have been given (with the Idan Raichel piece) a little taster of how this might look.

However, in cases of educational change, stakeholders usually raise the concern that the new ideas might sound very nice in theory, but how can they actually take place in practice?: in the classroom, the bunk, the synagogue, the community center, etc. In this session, your challenge is to address that concern by taking the conversation squarely into the realm of educational practice.

1. Summarizing our Position and Setting a Communal Agenda

You should open this session by reviewing the understandings reached at the previous two meetings.

- In the first session, we looked at images of Israel that are prevalent in the public discourse of the Jewish community, and suggested that the metaphor of conversation might be a helpful one in pushing the communal discourse to a more profound level of Israel engagement.
- In the second session, we explored that metaphor of conversation, adding to it the layers of "culture" and "questions", ultimately suggesting that Israel engagement in the Diaspora should be a series of conversations about powerful and compelling questions, using Israeli cultural arts as a vehicle.

Then you can offer, in this session, to take this theoretical backdrop and talk about how it might actually affect practice in the particular educational or communal context that is relevant to your group. This will be done through some group work and study, but you first want to throw another few metaphors onto the table that may also be helpful, as we think about Israel engagement.

2. Some Other Metaphors to Think About

The three metaphors listed on the handout don't contradict the metaphor of conversation, but add further layers to make our thinking about Israel engagement even richer.

I'll set out here the rationales for the three metaphors, and you, as facilitator, can decide how you want to get them over to the group. You may want to just explain them somewhat frontally; you may want to put the three words up on the wall in big letters and let participants brainstorm, before drawing the ideas out; you may want to add something of your own.

I hope that by this stage, you also feel more comfortable with this new way of thinking and will wish to put your own "tinge" on the proceedings.

Steve Israel suggests that Israel be seen as a drama:

The metaphor of drama is offered by the outstanding Israel educator Steve Israel. Yes, that is indeed his last name, and was so from birth! Steve is a British-born educator who made aliyah to Israel as a young adult, and is one of the most sought-after educator-guides in the country.

A drama can be: romantic, thrilling, nerve-wracking, and even shocking. A drama invites you, the viewer, into its dramatic set-up: there are characters who you root for, empathize with, dislike, or many other reactions. While you are not actually part of the drama, you can be drawn into it to such an extent that you feel part of it - as the fan bases of successful television soap operas demonstrate. A drama has its quiet moments, and also its cliffhangers.

So when we use the metaphor of drama for Israel engagement, it opens up a set of metaphors, analogies, and representations, which might help us conceive more richly of what it is that we do.

Roberta Bell-Kligler suggests a second metaphor - dance:

Roberta Bell-Kligler is another outstanding Israel educator; born in America, she has lived in the North of Israel for over 20 years and runs the Department for Jewish Peoplehood at Oranim College. Roberta uses dance as a metaphor for Israel-Diaspora relations.

Dance can sometimes be solitary, and sometimes be dual; and it can sometimes be done in a group. There are certain set steps which you can choose to follow, or you can do more of a “free dance”. The steps change according to which type of dance it is, and when you dance, sometimes you dance in concert with your partner, and sometimes you both do your own thing. Sometimes you step on each other’s toes (as my wife will sadly testify).

How can the metaphor of dance help us conceive of Israel engagement from the Diaspora more richly?

The final metaphor that I sometimes like to offer is from the world of sports:

If we conceive of Israel as a sports team, and Diaspora Jewry as its fans, it can be very suggestive for Israel engagement.

While the team-fans metaphor appears at first sight to be a more classic Zionist statement, with Israel in the center and the Diaspora merely observing, things are more complicated than that. Fans can turn against their team during a match, with devastating results for the team’s morale and results. Fans can also lift the team through their vocal cheering and support. Sports fans are truly committed to their team, but that commitment can also be highly critical. There are no bigger critics of a poorly-performing team’s manager than the team’s own fans! And fans are highly involved in the individual players’ performances and even lives, knowing facts, details and statistics about every striker, midfielder, and defender. (Here I give away my own cultural biases. As everyone outside the United States knows, soccer/football is a real sport, as opposed to American football, which is a series of advertisements occasionally interspersed with a bunch of big men bumping into some other big men.)

So the sports metaphor may also help us think about Israel engagement on a deeper level.

Certainly, when one puts these three metaphors together with the metaphor of conversation that we have spent more time developing, it can be very helpful in pushing us to think about how we should or could be doing Israel engagement.

3. What’s the Big Idea? – Creating a New Slogan

Materials required:

Several extremely large pieces of paper, ideally the huge-size post-it notes;

Enough marker pens for a few different colors per group of 3-4 participants;

Masking tape

Before we move onto real tachlis ideas, you need to have the participants recognize that in the age of soundbites, they need soundbites that get at these more complex understandings of Israel engagement. Indeed, participants may even already have raised objections to parts of the previous two presentations, on the grounds that they will be too complex to “sell” to the ordinary Jew.

This short exercise, which will be followed by some time for questions and discussion before moving on to the next segment, should help participants see that it is possible to create soundbites that are rooted in complex ideas.

In educational terms, I would suggest that what you are doing here is not creating soundbites, but having participants work on the “big ideas” or “core concepts” that have emerged from the sessions so far. In a sense, your task as facilitator now is:

to have participants tease out some big ideas that build on insights from the past two and a half sessions.

If these terms are unfamiliar to you, move on to the next paragraph. But if you have some background in or familiarity with the *Understanding by Design* curriculum planning approach, you will appreciate, I hope, that truly powerful and compelling big ideas are usually built on quite complex understandings of the subject matter.

For more on this, see: *Understanding by Design*, Expanded 2nd edition, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (ASCD, 2005).

OK. In practice, what you are going to do now is to split the participants into groups of three or four, and have them work on the exercise in number 3 of the handout. Point out to the participants that the exercise gives quite a lot of room for maneuver – they can do a slogan, or ad copy, for Israel engagement or Israel-Diaspora relations... the core idea here is that they distill the discussions so far into a format that is “sellable” or “marketable”.

Allow participants 15 minutes to work together in their small groups, and then come together for each group to share.

Each group should write or transcribe graphically their slogan onto big pieces of paper, and if possible, these should be stuck around the walls of the room, so that you can debrief this section using a “picture gallery” mode of presentation, with participants standing and moving around the room as each group presents its slogan.

In this segment you should also create opportunities for participants to raise any general questions or issues that are burning for them, although note that the whole segment is timed at half an hour.

4. Now What? Looking for Low-Hanging Fruit

Now that you have some interesting, compelling, exciting, and probably funny, slogans or soundbites up on the walls of the room, you're going to move the participants into the most *tachlis* of worlds: thinking about ideas for actual programs. You've moved them from theory to slogan or ad copy or marketing, and now it's time to move from slogan to program.

The first thing to do is to go through the list of ideas on the handout, explain briefly what each one is about, and then ask for responses, feedback, other ideas, etc. (i.e. have them grapple with the final question on the list).

My thoughts on the list are as follows.

You, as facilitator, may, of course, adopt/adapt/change/etc as you see fit.

a) **Internet**

We don't use the Internet enough.

This is probably the case for all areas of Jewish education, and it's certainly the case in Israel education, which - by definition - needs to be more current and up-to-date than, for example, Bible education.

The first three bullet points in the list all relate to different areas of internet activity. Home pages are an obvious place to start: it is usually an illuminative activity to do a quick go-around of the room and ask people to state what their home page is. Maybe you'll get a couple of Jewish answers - but they'll mostly be cnn.com, google.com, and the like.

You might want to say:

"Imagine how we could transform the face of the Jewish community, if the home pages of Jews were haaretz.com, jpost.com, or similar."

It's hard to imagine how we could do that for Jews as individuals, but schools can easily set their networks to force a Jewish or Israeli site as home page. And the websites of synagogues, JCCs, schools, and other Jewish communal institutions could and should have live feeds from various Israeli sites. These are not difficult, expensive, or time-consuming solutions, but if we were only to do them, they would be extremely effective.

With Facebook and Youtube, I don't have answers to these questions, but they are huge and important questions for us to be asking. Your participants need to realize that if they are not able to understand and deal with these questions, there needs to be someone in their organization who is.

b) Film

The film idea would be a little more expensive, but probably within the range of most synagogues, schools, and communal organizations - perhaps with the help of a donor who would be excited about the project.

If you're a member of a synagogue, you receive mailings at least twice a year, and probably much more often. And every summer, you get a big mailing with all the High Holyday stuff. Imagine if within that mailing you also received a free DVD of the latest hit Israeli movie from the past year. Imagine if every synagogue member received one or two such DVDs every year.

Israeli movies, if you think back to session two, can be an excellent cultural vehicle for getting at compelling conversations about big questions. Along with the DVD, the synagogue member would get a sheet with some guiding questions for discussion about the movie – to discuss with a spouse, parent, child or friend.

Now imagine that synagogue member getting a free DVD twice a year over three years: my bet is that *that person's perception of Israel will never be the same. It will be richer, deeper, more sophisticated, and more attached.*

How much would this cost? For a synagogue of 500 members, at \$10 per DVD, and 2 DVDs per year, it would be \$10,000 per year. This is a significant sum, but not when compared to the synagogue's total budget. I would even suggest that one could raise dues by \$20 to cover it. *In the big scheme of things, the costs of this kind of program are basically trivial, and yet it could have a dramatic impact.*

c) The "Israeli Channel"

This is a package offered (at time of writing) by Dish Network, the satellite TV company. To my knowledge it is not offered by DirecTV or cable. It costs \$20 per month on top of the basic channels package. The channel screens 24 hours a day, and its line-up is a mix of news (live broadcasts from Israel's channel 10 news), current events, sports, and some original Israeli entertainment programming.

The vast majority of its line-up is in Hebrew, so most Jews will not be able to understand it in detail. However, what interests me is the kind of "background noise" that the channel would provide to the lobby of a synagogue, school, JCC exercise room, or Hillel. For the average Jewish consumer walking past a big-screen TV playing the Israeli channel, again, the picture of Israel received over time will be: *sophisticated and nuanced and in many ways "normal"*. Most of the news reports will not be about bombs going off (they'll be about political corruption, which is also a problem, but that's another story!). Budgetarily, this is a basically miniscule cost for most Jewish organizations, but once more, its repercussions are potentially immense.

d) Interest and Peer Groups

We all know young Jews who are studying psychology, or who are into recycling in a big way, or who are budding amateur artists of a particular variety, or who love Harry Potter. For all these interest groups, there are Israelis with whom they would have lots in common.

For the psychology student, we can think about a focused study trip to Israel to meet with peers at an Israeli university; for the recycler, we should be putting him or her in touch with Israeli entrepreneurs who are working in this area in Israel and could use someone like that, whether as an adviser, supporter, or learner; the Jewish artist can find kindred spirits in a variety of Israeli contexts; and regarding Harry Potter, it's nothing less than a crime that the Jewish world hasn't got its act together on this and created informal curricula for Diaspora and Israeli kids on "Jewish values or conflicts in the Harry Potter series" in Hebrew and English, with two-way-translated internet communication components!

These ideas are all, of course, more intensive, from both a budgetary and planning perspective, than the others so far mentioned, but they are all worthy of consideration as examples of the way that Israel engagement could change.

Once you've gone through this list of ideas quite rapidly, you should do a think-pair-share segment in which you ask participants for either reactions or other ideas of their own.

5. A Farewell Gift: Yehudah Amichai's *Tourists*

Tell the participants that you want to end your time together by giving them a gift: the wonderful poem *Tourists*, by Yehudah Amichai, Israel's poet laureate and probably its most successful and celebrated modern literary artist. (With apologies to S.Y. Agnon!) Amichai (1924-2000), you can tell your participants, wrote poems in a colloquial style, and one of his greatest recurring themes was Jerusalem.

Referring to him as "the great Israeli poet," Jonathan Wilson in *The New York Times* (December 10, 2000), wrote: "Amichai's poems are easy on the surface and yet profound: humorous, ironic and yet full of passion, secular but God-engaged, allusive but accessible, charged with metaphor and yet remarkably concrete." (Source: Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda_Amichai). The activity should pretty much speak for itself, given the guiding questions.

Let the participants work in pairs or the same groups as before, for about 10-15 minutes, and then bring them back together and facilitate a whole-group discussion. This segment is timed at 25 minutes, which is not really enough for this rich and generative poem, but at least you will leave your participants wanting more!

6. Close

Your task in these final five minutes is to close the entire three sessions. Below is what I would say; of course, you can do it differently.

There are three core ideas that I hope you now take from these three sessions.

- *Firstly, we need to change the way we do Israel engagement;*
- *Secondly, there are some compelling and convincing arguments for why this is the case and how we might build theoretical scaffolding for such a change;*
- *And thirdly, especially from today's session, there are a variety of exciting, compelling, inexpensive and highly feasible changes that we could make in the very short term that would set this agenda in action. This is a real case of "לא בשמים היא". We can make changes to our organizations, our schools, our synagogues, and our lives, within a matter of days, and those changes can truly make a difference.*

Sometimes, being a change agent is a hard, long slog. I can't promise that being a change agent in Israel engagement will be different in the long run; but in the short run, it's really easy to get started. I hope you have enjoyed these sessions, but ultimately I hope you go away from them and act on them. Making these changes can be done; so I pray that you will now go and do them.

Thank you.

Appendix: Sources for Handout

1. **Summarizing our Position and Setting a Communal Agenda**
2. **Some Other Metaphors to Think About**
3. **What's the Big Idea? – Creating a New Slogan**
4. **Now What? Looking for Low-Hanging Fruit**
5. **A Farewell Gift: Yehudah Amichai's *Tourists* / תיירים, יהודה עמיחי**

1. Summarizing our Position and Setting a Communal Agenda

- Session 1:
We need to move beyond old paradigms which present Israel in unidimensional ways that are often rooted in notions of crisis of one type or another.
- Session 2:
A more effective metaphor for Israel engagement is that of conversation: through creating conversations about serious Jewish conversations, using cultural arts as a vehicle, we may be able to reframe what Israel engagement means for Diaspora Jews.
- Session 3:
Enough talk, real or not! What does this mean in *practice*?

2. Some other Metaphors to think About

- Drama
- Dance
- Sport

3. What's the Big Idea? – Creating a New Slogan

The UJC slogan used to be “We Are One,” which - in the light of our discussions so far - we might now suggest was somewhat unidimensional, unreal, and ultimately counter-productive. The current slogan, “Live Generously”, is a profound Jewish message, but it doesn't have any Israel-specific content or imagery.

Your task:

Come up with a new UJC (or other organization) slogan or ad copy for Diaspora-Israel relations or Israel engagement from within the Jewish community, in which are embedded the notions of: *conversation, unity but not uniformity, dialogical peer-partnership, cultural creativity, and Jewish vision.*

In other words, create a slogan or ad copy (including images/pictures/graphics, if you want) that is authentic to the conversations we've had so far in these sessions. Make your slogan or advert as graphically compelling as possible.

4. Now What? Looking for Low-Hanging Fruit

- Internet:
 - What's your home page?
 - What are the home pages (or bookmarks/favorites, at least) of young Jews?
- Facebook:
 - What do Israel's Facebook pages look like?
- Youtube:
 - How do we utilize it effectively?
- Film:
 - Send a DVD home (Jewish Netflix?).
- TV: "Ha-arutz Hayisraeli" in schools, shuls, JCCs and homes.
- Setting up peer-dialogues, conferences and visits between Diaspora Jews and Israelis with similar interests (Think: psychologists, recyclers, artists, Harry Potter fans...).
- What other kinds of easily do-able programs or ideas can you come up with that are aligned with the educational goals we have explored together?

5. A Farewell Gift: Yehudah Amichai, Tourists

יהודה עמיחי, תיירים

Based on the translation of Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt

Visits of condolence is what they do here.
They sit at Yad VaShem, put on grave faces at
the Western Wall
And laugh behind heavy curtains in hotel
rooms.
They have their pictures taken with our
important dead at Rachel's Tomb
And Herzl's Tomb and on Ammunition Hill.
They weep over our beautiful brave boys
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In a cool, blue bathroom.

בקורי אבלים הם עורכים אצלנו.
יושבים ביד ושם, מרצינים ליד הכותל המערבי
וצוחקים מאחורי וילונות כבדים בחדרי מלון.
מצטלמים עם מתים חשופים בקבר רחל
ובקבר הרצל ובגבעת התחמושת.
בוכים על יפי גבורת נערינו
וחושקים בקשיחות נערוֹתינו
ותולים את תחתונייהם
ליבוש מהיר
באמבטיה כחלה וצוננת.

Once I sat on some steps by a gate at David's
Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my
side. A group of tourists was standing around
their guide and I became their target marker.
"You see this man with the baskets? Just to
the right of his head there's an arch from the
Roman period. Just to the right of his head."
"But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to
myself: redemption will come only if their
guide tells them, "You see that arch there
from the Roman period? It's not important:
but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a
man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his
family."

פעם ישבתי על מדרגות ליד שער במצודת דוד, את
שני הסלים הכבדים שמתי לדי. עמדה שם קבוצת
תיירים סביב המדריך ושמשתי להם נקודת ציון.
"אתם רואים את האיש הזה עם הסלים? קצת מינה
מראשו נמצאת קשת מן התקופה הרומית. קצת
מינה מראשו". אבל הוא זז, הוא זז! אמרתי
בלבי: הגאולה תבוא רק אם יגידו להם: אתם רואים
שם את הקשת מן התקופה הרומית? לא חשוב:
אבל לידה, קצת שמאלה ולמטה ממנה, יושב אדם
שקנה פרות וירקות לביתו.

- *What images from the poem do you find most powerful?*
- *How does the poem resonate with your previous Israel engagement experiences - either in Israel, as literally in the poem, or using the poem more symbolically, outside of Israel?*
- *The “they” in the first line is, basically, “us”: Diaspora Jews.*
 - *How do you feel about Amichai’s critique of Diaspora Jews?*
 - *In general, is he right?*
 - *Could you make a similar critique of Israelis and their attitude to you?*
- *When we visit or engage with Israel, what can we do to become more like Amichai’s ideal tourists?*
- *What can we learn from the poem about the way we relate to Israel from the Diaspora?*
- *What does Amichai’s poem have to do with the messages we send to our communities about Israel?*
- *What does it have to do with the issues we have spoken about in the previous two sessions?*

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Israel of the 21st Century is dynamic, complex, and constantly evolving, just as Jewish identity is dynamic, complex, and constantly evolving. In these fluid times Makom's mission is to empower Jewish communities to develop deep, sophisticated, and honest connections with Israel through both hugging and wrestling.

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