



Peoplehood Papers 34

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**The Rifts Within Israeli Society –
How Should World Jewry Respond?**



Between a Whisper and a Megaphone: Supporting Young Israeli and American Jews in Speaking Heart to Heart

Becky Voorwinde

In my work with young American Jews, I've come to observe that many describe questioning as an essential aspect of being Jewish. Yet, even as they cherish the rabbis and teachers who instilled in them a Jewish love of asking questions - *ma nishtana?* - there's one domain these same young people often report that they've been discouraged to question - Israeli politics and Israeli internal affairs.

Some young American Jews find this taboo around questioning Israeli affairs to be logical and others find it limiting. For those who find this taboo logical, they most commonly see the role of American Jews as one of supporter and protector - avoiding topics that would be insensitive to the unique security and geopolitical challenges that Israelis face. For those who find this taboo limiting, they most commonly see the role of American Jews as one of truth tellers - focusing on themes of justice and inclusion. The tone of discourse is drastically different depending on the attitude one holds: Respectively, one uses a whisper, the other a megaphone.

However, in the eyes of most Israelis, the authority to opine is one-directional. If you ask them whether they believe American Jews should *also* have a say in Israeli affairs, they typically say no. But, if you ask most young Israelis whether Israeli Jews should have a say in Jewish American affairs - for example, a public condemnation of intermarriage or assimilation - they typically say yes. Perhaps these attitudes about who can opine on what issues are rooted in a cynicism towards the role that conversation can play as a catalyst for change. Instead, "having a say" is seen as armchair speculation - a form of judgment without any productive outcome.

This paradox of who and what can and cannot be questioned has proven especially tricky when conducting joint educational programming for young Israeli and young American Jews. We must be vigilant in how we design these encounters in order to avoid two extremes - on one end, conversations that are unfettered and insensitive; on the other end, conversations that lack substance and purpose. To ensure that these encounters are focused on topics of importance - we must prize candor and honesty in

both directions and we must provide participants with the necessary skills and mindset to have productive conversations.

As educators we must encourage and support American Jews and Israeli Jews to speak heart to heart.

In our educational work at The Bronfman Fellowship, we approach encounters between Jewish Americans and Israelis as a meeting of equals. For four decades, we have brought together young Jewish leaders from North America and Israel with an aim towards long-term relationships and to cultivate a sense of *areyvut* (mutual responsibility).

Here are several approaches that we have developed and adapted over the years, in order to foster a more honest and trusting dynamic between Israelis and Americans.

1. **Seek and offer greater context.** In 2019 we changed the name of our joint seminars from "*Mifgashim*" to "Context Seminars." We realized that much of what we were providing in these joint seminars is a wider perspective – greater *context*. Successful joint encounters are ones in which each participant can gain greater understanding of the "other", while also more clearly understanding their own society.

The new title of these seminars signals to participants that they should seek to understand the context from which someone else is speaking and that they should aim to explore the background and context of complex topics and issues as a prerequisite for greater understanding and problem solving.

The word context comes from the Latin for "to weave together," a powerful metaphor for the work of Jewish pluralism: to create an intricate quilt that reflects and beautifies the many distinct threads that make up the Jewish collective, without tearing any connections nor valuing some above others. The *weaving together* is the task of Jewish peoplehood.

Our joint seminars are situated within the explorations and travel that each cohort undertakes in both their own home country and the other country. When our Israeli fellows visit the US each spring, they visit Jewish communities that look very different from their own and hear from guest speakers who challenge their perceptions. Because they have accessed more context about the Americans' realities, they are primed for richer and more energetic interactions with their American peers.

For example, I recall an especially poignant discussion at a Context Seminar when an Israeli fellow, who had been raised all his life to believe that Reform Jews are one step away from leaving Judaism, referenced being challenged by seeing the vibrancy of Central Synagogue in Manhattan and meeting with Rabbi Angela Buchdahl. This then reopened a conversation about personal status in Israel. Whereas months earlier

in a conversation with the Americans, this Israeli fellow resisted the conversation, he now listened closely and sensitively as an American fellow of patrilineal descent explained her pain in not being “counted” as Jewish at the Kotel. His overall opinion did not change; but changing minds is not the goal. The enhanced context enabled him to feel and express empathy for his American friends and to better understand how personal status issues in Israel also impact American Jews.

2. **Emphasize asking questions and listening.** If you believe that the person you are speaking with is your equal and worthy of care, then you must find a way to speak honestly with that person while limiting moralizing or judgment. Likewise, if you trust that the person speaking to you is your equal and sharing from a place of care, then you must find a way to listen to them without defensiveness or judgment.

“Listening in a way that creates trust means opening oneself - one’s inner world - to the voices and experiences of others. And, by doing so, taking the risk of being changed by coming to know them,” (p. 142) writes Carol Gilligan and Jessica Eddy in their essay *“The Listening Guide: Replacing Judgment With Curiosity.”* We have developed a series of workshops that provide participants with tools for listening and asking questions, allowing them to practice and develop these skills before the joint seminars. We directly address the immense responsibility and risks associated with listening and give participants the space to recognize the rewards that can come from deep listening.

Our participants also practice asking one another open-ended questions. The power of open-ended questions transformed an especially difficult group conversation in the summer of 2023, during Israel’s democracy protests. The discussion began with our Israeli students sharing their opinions on the proposed Supreme Court reforms. These were complex and challenging issues for Israelis to make sense of and discuss with one another. The Americans asked open-ended questions as a follow-up, many of which had the beauty of coming from a wisely “naive” standpoint. For young American Jews, these issues can sometimes appear clearer because they’re looking at them from afar with less emotional weight. This led to intense but helpful cross-talk between the Israelis as they tried to answer the Americans together.

A powerful moment came when an Israeli in favor of judicial reform who spoke limited English struggled to translate his complex idea. An Israeli who strongly opposed judicial reform jumped in and carefully translated, checking back multiple times to make sure she was felicitous to his intended meaning. She seemed to have more empathy for the “other side” as a result of struggling to make clear his point. And, after the session she told one of our educators that she didn’t think a conversation like that would have been civil or even possible between the Israelis

had the Americans not been there to add more openness and curiosity. It was a beautiful moment of pluralism at work.

3. **Explore shared stakes.** The dynamic between those who live inside and outside Israel has been both fraught and essential throughout Jewish history. Sometimes the power between them has been more or less equal; at other times, it has been asymmetrical.

Fellows study together examples and sources from throughout Jewish history. They explore the question of authority and power, center and periphery, and dependency and interdependence as they compare Talmudic stories from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. They analyze the famous exchange between Jacob Blaustein and David Ben-Gurion from the 1950's. And they grapple with art, literature and poetry on topics of shared interest. Through these sources we invite participants to directly discuss questions like: *Do American Jews owe political allegiance to Israel? How much responsibility does Israel have for American Jews? What expectations do we have of one another today? What kinds of legitimizing do we seek of our Jewish identities from others?*

Inviting participants to search for a new paradigm for the relationship between Israeli and American Jews empowers them to develop a sense of responsibility towards the future of the Jewish people. It gives permission to see these relationships as ever evolving and to see themselves as part of this story, so they can create a vision for what it can be in the future.

Towards a New Dynamic: Heart-to-Heart

Since October 7, Jewish communities worldwide have been grappling with profound pain, fear, and division. For many young Jews, the old paradigms of discourse between American and Israeli Jews no longer fit. They are searching for something deeper—an opportunity to understand, to ask hard questions, and to build trusting relationships. Strengthening the skills of listening and question-asking in advance of and during encounters between Israelis and Americans allows participants to gain more context and understanding and enhances a willingness to take into consideration the needs and experiences of others when solving the problems of today and shaping a future with creativity, resiliency and the value of Jewish peoplehood.

Becky Voorwinde is the CEO of The Bronfman Fellowship, a pluralistic Jewish leadership network with over 1500 members across the US and Israel. Becky serves on the non-profit boards of M2: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education and Assembly. She resides in Brooklyn with her husband Michael and their three children.

The Peoplehood Papers provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific topic.

For past issues: <https://www.jpeoplehood.org/peoplehoodpapers>

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