

makōm מקום

Israel. In Real Life

Real Talk:

Laying the Groundwork for New
Conversations about Israel



By Alex Sinclair

Session 2

***BEYOND "WE ARE ONE":
Creating New Conversational Sparks***

Not For Sale - Educational Use Only

Overview of Session

1. **The photos of Alex Levac (30 mins)**
2. **Conversation, Culture, and Questions:**
 - (a) *Theodore Zeldin, Conversational Sparks (10 mins)*
 - (b) *Robbie Gringras, Wrestling and Hugging (10 mins)*
 - (c) *Moshe Greenberg, Visions of Jewish Education (10 mins)*
3. **A brief example: Idan Raichel and the Immigration Problem (30 mins)**

Introduction to the Facilitator

In this session, the goal is to take the new understandings reached in the first session, buttress them with some compelling theoretical foundations, and give a couple of examples of how Israel engagement could look different in practice on this basis.

1. The Photos of Alex Levac (30 mins)

Start by reminding participants of the images we looked at last time and the word associations that emerged from them. The images that Jews see about Israel often produce associations of terror, war, pain, anguish and poverty. We will start this second session by looking at some different pictures. These pictures will not only break the ice and help us get to know each other a little more - but also, in comparison to the pictures from last time, set up very different word associations.

The next phase of this activity requires participants to browse through about 40 photos by the Israeli photographer Alex Levac. You can find a selection of Alex Levac photos to download and print at the following website:

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA+Publications/Photo+exhibits/Our+Country+-+Photographs+by+Alex+Levac.htm>. You can also

use photos from two of his wonderful books, "Ayin LeTzion" and "[Haaretz Shelanu](#)" ("Our Country").

You can choose how to have the participants do this browsing. If you have the space, the best way is to spread them all out on a big table or several tables and let participants wander around looking at them. If this not possible, you can give them in smaller piles to groups of 2-3 and ask them to look, then pass to another group. If you really want to invest energy in preparation, you could have them stuck up on the walls to create a gallery effect.

Before you get them going, you can explain to participants that Alex Levac is a famous photo-journalist and photographic artist in Israel, whose work appears as a weekly column in the *Haaretz* newspaper and has been exhibited all around the world. He has an eye for the absurd, for the surprising, for the terrifying, for the hilarious, for creative frictions, tensions and juxtapositions.

Have the participants look at the list of questions on the handout and then spend 10 minutes browsing. As the handout says, they should eventually pick one that they have something to say about, in relation to any of the questions listed or any other question not listed!

After they have each picked one, ask some people to share. This segment can go on for an hour if you're not careful, because the photos are all so rich and generative, and everyone will want to speak. If the group is small, there may be time for everyone, but otherwise you will have to restrict it. Each photo has embedded within it a whole narrative about Israel - you could write a PhD thesis on each photo's issues! And indeed, that is the point. As each participant shares their thoughts about their chosen picture, you should try to emphasize the following themes that will probably recur:

- Juxtapositions between: old/new, religious/secular,
- Judaism/Christianity/Islam, man/woman, happy/sad, calm/danger... etc., etc.
- The diversity of Israel that is represented in the photos.
What does an Israeli look like? You can't answer.
- The tension between the particular and the universal. There are some photos that could have been taken anywhere in the world (e.g., Spiderman at the urinal). But there are some that could only have been taken in Israel.
How does the collection of photos as a whole help us get at the tension between Israel being "like anywhere else" and being unique?
- Humor. There is tons of funny stuff in the photos! Israel is funny!
- Particular burning issues. These will come out of the group's selection as a whole. People may focus on the "ordinary" place of the military in Israel (e.g.: the dog tied to a tank, the girl with her hand on her boyfriend's gun); or the place of charedim in society (e.g.: the charedi man looking at the poster of the woman with big breasts, the Ethiopian Jew in a sea of charedim); or the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict (several examples); and so on...

Ultimately, after what has never failed to be an amazing and wonderful sharing session with these photos in the dozens of times I've done this, you want to ask the participants: *How is this conversation that we've just had different from the conversations that come from the three photos that we started with last time?*

Clearly, the answers are to do with complexity, diversity, three-dimensionality, etc. But you must also make the point that this complexity etc. has resulted in a powerful and compelling and meaningful conversation about Israel. Therefore, the basic point of this activity is to demonstrate that commitment can come from complexity.

Therefore this is the big idea here:

- *Complexity can lead to commitment.*

(Versus the “old” view that commitment must come first, and only then can we permit complexity.)

If you succeed in getting that big idea across, you've won!

2. Conversation, Culture & Questions: (a) Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation* (10 mins)

Your task in this next segment is to paint a brief theoretical backdrop for the ice-breaking activity you have just done.

Can we think about why precisely the Alex Levac photos are so successful in an Israel education context?

I suggest, and hope you will suggest too, that our new mode of Israel engagement should be:

- **Conversation**, using the mode of **Culture**, about ultimate Jewish **Questions**.

This sentence should be stressed and, ideally, written on a whiteboard or flipchart in front of the participants. It constitutes the *core big idea* about this new mode of Israel engagement.

The mode of this segment will be more frontal than the previous facilitative work with the photos. For each of the three quotes, your task as leader will be to have participants focus on them and then set out a few ideas that flow from them.

Firstly, Theodore Zeldin:

Zeldin is a British writer and intellectual, whose recent work has focused on questions of human interactions and relationships. If we want to use the metaphor of conversation for our work in Israel engagement, Zeldin teaches us several important things in this excerpt. Firstly, conversation is a meeting of *different* minds. Jews from Israel are not the same as Jews who live around the world: they are different! You've got to repeat that at least once to the group. We have to stop feeling pressure to be the same. “We are one” was a very nice slogan in certain ways, but it whitewashes the differences between Jews who live around the world and Israelis, and those differences can sometimes be generative and wonderful. This leads us to another big idea about conversation which you should also write on the flipchart or board:

- *Unity is not the same as Uniformity.*

We have to stop falling into the trap of thinking that American Jews and Israelis can be united *only* if they are the same. A conversation with someone who is exactly the same as you can be reassuring, but quickly becomes boring. *A conversation with someone who is committed to the same broad ideas as you, but views those ideas differently: now that's a good conversation.*

That leads us to the second point that must be made about Zeldin: his notion that *conversation leads to creativity*. Conversation is not just about getting to know the other person; it is about creating something new with that other person. That is why conversation with and about Israel and Israelis can be so powerful: it helps create newness. In an ideal world, Diaspora Jews and Israelis will be having these kinds of conversations on a regular basis. But even in my-Jewish-community-only contexts, we can create these kinds of conversations with Israeli texts (using the term “text” in its broadest possible sense) and *create newness* in those conversations.

2. Conversation, Culture & Questions: (b) Robbie Gringras: “Wrestling and Hugging” (10 mins)

How, though, do we: engender, facilitate, trigger, and create those conversations? These kinds of conversations are perhaps alien to many of the Jews with whom we work, and with whom we hope that the participants of these seminars will work in their turn. You can’t just hit someone on the head and say: “Change the way you talk about Israel”. You have to create the vehicle within which such conversations will naturally flow.

That is where cultural modes and artifacts come in. As the educator and artist Robbie Gringras notes, cultural arts are by definition complex. By definition, good culture brings the viewer, listener, or reader into an engagement with complexity, irony, the multi-faceted nature of things, and so on. That is why cultural arts (whether high or low) are different from propaganda. But cultural arts are not just complex and ironic; - they are also affectively attractive and enjoyable, in and of themselves. We love to read, view, or listen. That's why Alex Levac's photos, with which we began this session, are so powerful: they are attractive and compelling in their own right. They are not a means to an end; but an end, in and of themselves. Even if we were not interested in Israel *a priori*, we would find something enjoyable, interesting, and compelling in the photos; they are high quality cultural art.

Thus, cultural arts become an amazing vehicle that can engender the kinds of conversations that interest us. Think back to some of the juxtapositions, tensions, burning issues, and so on, that the Alex Levac photos raised for us. There is no way we could have got at these issues through a learned essay. Well, perhaps we could have, but it would have taken longer, and not been nearly as much fun. Furthermore, the photos work for different age groups in different ways, and for people with different levels of previous Israel background.

- *Cultural arts are quick but powerful entrance points into complex conversations, which can be used for people from multiple backgrounds and developmental levels.*

2. Conversation, Culture & Questions: (c) Moshe Greenberg, in *Visions of Jewish Education* (10 mins)

There is, though, another reason why the Alex Levac photos are so powerful. It's because they get us to talk about certain kinds of conversations. Indeed, Zeldin also critiques (elsewhere in the book from which that quote was taken) the kinds of shallow talk in which we often find engage: *That's not really "conversation"*.

In thinking about conversation in Israel Education, we can be helped by the great Bible scholar and Jewish thinker, Moshe Greenberg; born in America, son of Simon Greenberg, a well-known Conservative Rabbi and scholar, Professor of Bible at the University of Pennsylvania, and, after making aliyah, a key faculty member for many years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This excerpt is from his essay in the book *Visions of Jewish Education*, edited by the late Seymour Fox, Daniel Marom, and Israel Scheffler, in which they asked several scholars of Judaism - Greenberg among them - to write essays outlining their vision of Jewish Education.

At the heart of Greenberg's vision is the notion that the human being is a creature with spiritual needs, second only to those of food, shelter, health and procreation. Humans are by nature spiritually curious animals, constantly driven to find meaning in the world, to only a slightly lesser extent than we are driven to find food. In the quote that you'll now read out loud with the group, we see Greenberg talking about what some of these spiritual needs are. Human beings, according to Greenberg, simply can't stop themselves from grappling with these kinds of questions. It's part of what makes us human. For Greenberg, any form of Jewish education that does not create opportunities for the learner to grapple with these kinds of questions is missing the mark. Whether we are teaching Bible, Talmud, Prayer, or Amos Oz, it needs to be with an eye to these questions.

What does Greenberg's vision of Jewish Education have to do with Israel? I would argue that the issues suggested by Greenberg are the sort of thing that must be the subjects of the conversations we engender in our Israel engagement work. The questions won't be exactly the same as the ones that Greenberg suggests, but they'll be the same genre; what philosopher of Jewish education, Professor Michael Rosenak calls: "ultimate questions". Using Greenberg's questions as a springboard, we can imagine powerful Israel education asking such questions as:

- *What does it mean to be a Jew today?*
- *What is the role of the Jewish people in the world?*
- *How can Judaism function and flourish in a sovereign national setting? What does a Jewish policeman, beach, or hospital look like?*
- *How can our ancient texts and traditions speak to the problems of the modern and post-modern world?*

These kinds of questions are, ultimately, the ones that lie behind Alex Levac's photos. The juxtapositions, tensions, and oddities are all cuts into a bigger cake. And, to return to Zeldin's gastronomic metaphor, that's the cake that needs to be the centerpiece of the banquet.

3. A Brief Example: Idan Raichel and the Immigration Problem (30 mins)

In the final part of this session, you'll move from this theoretical grounding back into the world of practice. In general, when doing this kind of work with participants who work in the world of practice, it's crucial to come back continually to that world. If you run out of time and don't get to this last piece, the session will be damaged at its core – not just cracked at its edge.

The first thing you should do is play the opening part of Idan Raichel's song **Bo'i**. It is absolutely crucial that you play the "*girsah m'leiah*" (full version) not the "*girsat radio*". This is track 2 on the album, not track 10.

Before playing the song, say to the participants: "Imagine that we weren't at a session on Israel engagement and that I was just playing you some music without background. Where do you think this music comes from?"

Then, play the first *1 minute 58 seconds* of the song and press Pause right before the "*bo'i*" chorus comes in. You must press pause *before* any Hebrew is heard! (You may want to practice this a few times, in order to get the cut-off point right.)

Solicit a few ideas from the audience. No doubt people will suggest: Africa, India, Ethiopia, etc. Do not comment; instead, go straight in to the Tom Segev piece.

Tom Segev is a well-known and well-renowned Israeli historian and journalist who was one of the first academics to publish analyses of fresh archival material that was opened in the 1980s, material that cast doubt on many of Israel's "sacred cows". He was thus one of Israel's first "Post-Zionists". (For more information on Segev and the problematic term Post-Zionism, you could read my article *Towards a Conservative Jewish Educational Approach to Post-Zionism*, which appeared in *Conservative Judaism* in 2006. OK, enough tooting of my own horn. Moving swiftly on...)

In this extract, we see Segev writing about the discrimination faced by Mizrahi immigrants to Israel during the 1950s. This discrimination had been known about on some level throughout Israel's history, but the books of Segev and others shocked Israeli society by exposing the level of official sanction, and even initiation, that discriminatory policies enjoyed.

Have the participants read the extract in pairs or threes, and think about the questions for 5-7 minutes. Then, call the group together, and ask: "How do you feel right now as a Jew?; how do you feel right now in terms of your engagement with Israel?" The chances are that people will not be feeling great about this text: ashamed, annoyed, embarrassed, and so on. Don't pursue these adjectives once you have elicited them. Instead, go straight back to the Idan Raichel song. (You need to rewind the song 20 seconds or so, then play it again.)

The participants will now hear the song move from the Amharic section into the Hebrew section. Play the song the whole way through. If you are able to, you should display images of the group from the band's website using an LCD projector; or, second best, you may pass round the CD cover insert for the participants to look at.

At the end of the song, you should explain a little about Idan Raichel. The chances are that some of the group will already know or have heard of Idan Raichel. The main points they need to know are that: Idan Raichel is an Ashkenazi Israeli who formed a band called the Idan Raichel Project; the group contains Ethiopian Jews and the music that they perform is deeply influenced by Ethiopian and African music, as well as the standard Western music traditions. Furthermore, many of his songs contain lyrics drawn from the Bible and other Jewish textual and liturgical traditions.

You will be running out of time at this stage, so you will probably only be able to direct the group's attention to the questions asked of the song. You should suggest to participants that the band is in some ways a cultural-musical response to the social problem of Ethiopian and other Mizrahi immigrants. The integration of their musical traditions, language, and voices, together with the use of the word "Project" in the band's title, certainly point in this direction. If you have time, you may wish to elicit the participants' responses to these ideas, and you may also wish to highlight the other educational ideas for the song that are written on the handout. But these are not essential to the flow of the session.

Of course, the basic point of the brief song activity and its juxtaposition to the Tom Segev text is that they both get at the same understandings and issues, but in totally different ways. While the Segev text can be debilitating, depressing, and distancing - leaving the reader feeling alienated from Israel, angry with its mistakes, and disengaged - the Idan Raichel activity raises the same issues, but with opposite results.

Listeners will, first of all, be beguiled by the song's beautiful and catchy music and lyrics. It's just a really fantastic song. Well, I think so, anyway. The educational component of the listening will bring the participant into thinking about the place of Ethiopians in Israeli society; a realization that their voices have not previously been heard, literally and metaphorically, and that the group is therefore *an act of social protest*. Rather than being debilitating, though, the exercise is invigorating, because it approaches the problem not merely from a descriptive perspective but from a perspective of social change. The listener may also emerge with a fresh personal perspective on the place of Ethiopian Jewish culture in his or her own Jewish identity, and perhaps resolve to rectify this omission in some small way in the future.

In short, this is an example of using Israeli **culture** to engender **conversation** about powerful Jewish **questions**. It's an example of Israel engagement that is complex, sophisticated, in touch with the realities of Israel, but also compelling and affectively powerful. The photos of Alex Levac, and the activity on Idan Raichel, show that *it is indeed possible to have an Israel engagement that can create commitment through complexity*.

That's the message you want participants to leave with. Next time, we'll think about how what we've learned in these first two sessions can actually lead to real, do-able change on the ground in *your* segment of the Jewish community.

Appendix: Sources for Handout

1. The Photos by **Alex Levac**

2. **Conversation, Culture, & Questions**

3. **A Brief Example: Israel as Coercive Melting Pot vs. the Joys of Global Jewish Multiculturalism**, using the music of **Idan Raichel**:

Bo'i – Idan Raichel

1. The Photos by Alex Levac

- *What images in any of these photos connect you to Israel?*
- *What images in any of these photos alienate you from Israel?*
- *Which photos do you find:
surprising/challenging/funny/scary/interesting/wonderful/horrible/etc?*
- *How are these images different from the standard kind of images we see of Israel?*
- *What Jewish or human questions do you see being grappled with in these images?*
- *What conversations about: the purpose, vision or goal of the Jewish People in the world today could be started by any of these photos?*
- *Which of these images represent conversations about Israel that already go on in your synagogue/school/community/etc?*
- *Which of these images represent conversations about Israel that you would like to create in your synagogue/school/community/etc?*

*When you have browsed through all the photos,
please pick one – just one! –
that you have something to say about, in light of the above questions.*

2. Conversation, Culture, and Questions

(a) Theodore Zeldin, Conversation: How talk can change our lives

Conversation... is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards. That's the part that interests me. That's where I find the excitement. It's like a spark that two minds create. And what I really care about, is what new conversational banquets one can create from those sparks.

(b) Robbie Gringras: "Wrestling and Hugging"

[The cultural arts can be] "an educational form that aims to hit our mythic and our ironic levels of understanding simultaneously."

(c) Moshe Greenberg, in: Visions of Jewish Education

[Greenberg writes of:]

"the hunger of the learner to know "whence he came and whither he is going".

[It's a need to attain some kind of understanding about what it means to be a human on planet earth: questions about:]

"the purpose of life; the struggle with death; the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the invisible and the meaningful, the individual and his community, his community and other communities; relationships within the family, between man and woman, parents and children; the relationship to the trades and professions – how does one support oneself?; the relationship to success and failure, to hope and despair."

3. A Brief Example:

Israel as Coercive Melting Pot vs. the Joys of Global Jewish Multiculturalism, using the music of Idan Raichel

Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*

Aharon Avraham Kabak, a teacher and author, wrote about the differences between children whose parents had come from Russia and Galicia, who were “a storehouse of mental energy and intellectual talents,” and children whose parents had come from Yemen. Of the latter he said, “The Yemenite child, after so many generations of idleness, penury, abjectness, and servility under the fierce Yemenite sun, brings with him, together with Oriental sharp-wittedness and wiliness, a tendency for delusion, negligence, slowness of movement, with bodily lethargy and weakness of the nerves.”... According to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, “We Jews have nothing in common with what is called the ‘Orient’, thank God. To the extent that our uneducated masses have ancient spiritual traditions and laws that recall the Orient, they must be weaned away from them, and this is in fact what we are doing in every decent school, and what life itself is doing with great success. We are going to Palestine, first for our national convenience,” he wrote, and second, “to sweep out thoroughly all traces of the ‘Oriental soul’.

- *Did Israel save Yemenite Jews physically, but destroy them culturally?*
- *Can we understand how and why this happened, bearing in mind the historical context?*
- *What did it mean to be a new Israeli Jew and why did the Yemenites threaten that image?*
- *How could early Israel’s leaders and educators have done things differently?*
- *What lessons can we learn from the Yemenite experience for the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel today?*
- *How much Ethiopian Jewish culture makes its way into Israeli culture?*
- *How much do you know about Ethiopian Jewish culture?*

Bo'i – Idan Raichel

בואי – עידן רייכל

Come, give me your hand and let's
go,
Don't ask me where.
Don't ask me about happiness,
Maybe it'll come too.
When it comes – it will fall on us like
rain...

בואי, תני לי יד ונלך,
אל תשאלי אותי לאן.
אל תשאלי אותי על אושר,
אולי גם הוא יבוא.
כשהוא יבוא – ירד עלינו כמו
גשם...

Come, let's hug and let's go,
Don't ask me when.
Don't ask me about a home,
Don't look for time from me,
Time doesn't wait, doesn't stop,
doesn't stay...

בואי, נתחבק ונלך,
אל תשאלי אותי מתי.
אל תשאלי אותי על בית,
אל תבקשי ממני זמן,
זמן לא מחכה, לא עוצר, לא
נשאר...

- *What in the music – both tune and lyrics – do you find surprising? Familiar? Challenging? Jewish? Western? Israeli?*
- *How does this music compare with your conceptions of Israel? How are the pictures of the group different from the usual images you see about Israel and Israelis?*
- *For some, Idan Raichel is presenting a new, different face of Israel: What messages are you hearing in the music?*
- *Does this music make you feel like you more or less in common with modern Israelis? Why?*
- *What would you like to ask any of the people you see in the pictures?*
- *What are you learning about Israel from the group's biography and purpose?*
- *Have you encountered this Israel before?*

[PS: this is a great song to empower young people in their feelings for Hebrew, showing them that many words that they already know (e.g. יד, גשם, בית, זמן) can help them “hear their way around” this song. Other Idan Raichel songs also have powerful narratives embedded in them, such as **Hinech yafah**, which is a love song using lyrics from **Shir HaShirim**.]

