

makōm מקום
Hak'hel הקהל

Conceptual Conversation: On the Nature of Our Engagements with Israel

Written for the
North American Coalition for Israel Engagement (NACIE)

by

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Introduction of Hakhel

At the end of every shmita period (the fallow year, which occurs every seven years), on the pilgrimage holiday of Sukkot, there is a mitzva to gather all the Jews in Israel and read aloud certain portions of the Torah. Together, these Torah portions represent the quintessential nature of Judaism. In times when there was a king, he was responsible for reading to the people, but in his absence, any leader of the people was obliged to do so. The underlying concept of Hakhel is the establishment of a fixed, cyclical time to re-engage with the true meaning of Judaism. In the same way, these units are designed to help North American Jewish adults re-engage with and explore the essential issues that underpin their relationship with Israel.

Below are listed the six Hakhel discussion units that have been developed to date, each one intended to clarify critical issues of North American Jewish engagement with Israel.

1. Conceptual conversation on: Why Israel?

Is the existence of Israel a privilege or a necessity for the global Jewish community? Why does Israel exist and what are its reasons for existing today?

2. Conceptual conversation on: The longing for Zion.

What is the place of "longing" in Jewish life, in a world in which a Jewish State exists? How do we define "longing"? This unit offers a cultural Jewish perspective on the collective and personal sense of Jewish longing.

3. Conceptual conversation on: Myth and Reality.

Are we interested in engaging with a "mythic Israel" or with the reality of Israel in 2005? Are we comfortable engaging with this reality? What role do myths play in our relationship with Israel?

4. Conceptual conversation on: Engaging with Israel through Culture

Achad Ha'Am conceived of Israel as a Jewish center that will generate a vibrant Hebrew culture. Do you agree with his vision? What is Israel's role in Achad Ha'Am's vision? Does contemporary Israeli and/or American Jewish literature express Achad Ha'Am's dream?

5. Conceptual conversation on: Media's role in shaping our image of Israel

What are the ramifications of constant exposure to media images of Israel on our own perceptions and attitudes? How dominant and powerful is the media in comparison to other sources of information about Israel?

6. Conceptual conversation on: The nature of our engagements with Israel

What are the ultimate (or desired) outcomes of our engagement with Israel? What do we perceive to be the most effective ways of actively engaging with Israel? What role, if any, do we play in Israeli society?



Introduction: On the Nature of Our Engagements with Israel

"...We've spoken about Diaspora Jews sharing in the burdens and hopes of the Jewish People, and, in contrast we've noted with some disdain how some American Jews choose to try to escape from Jewish history. Surely the objective ought to be to encourage Jews from both Israel and the Diaspora to participate in Jewish history as it unfolds – to shape it, to become part of it. In short, perhaps the ideal Israel engagement program is one that combines all four of these elements [Purpose, Power, Participation, Peoplehood]: It involves people from both Israel and the Diaspora using their own power and influence to participate in a project together for some greater ideological purpose."

(NACIE's Philosopher's Retreat, New York, September 2003)

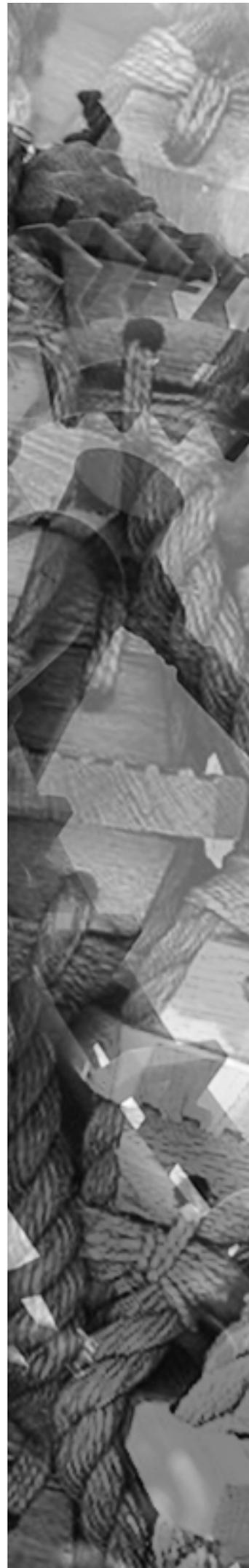
The above is an excerpt from the "Philosopher's Retreat," an intensive meeting held by a small group of Jewish thinkers from Israel and the United States in the summer of 2003 to address conceptual issues relating to the meaning of Israel for North American Jews. This meeting made it clear to all concerned that the task of engaging Jews in a series of discussions about Israel and its role in North American Jewish life should be at the heart of NACIE's mission. A set of educational units (six to date) is being produced as a vehicle for implementing this mission. This particular unit was designed by NACIE, the North American Coalition for Israel Engagement, as part of its ongoing efforts to encourage American Jews to discuss, explore and conceptualize their relationship to Israel.

Assuming that our participants understand and agree with the concept that engagement with Israel is a core component of our Jewish identity*: What is their vision of this engagement? What do we perceive to be the ideal ways of actively engaging with Israel? What are the ultimate (or desired) outcomes of our engagement with Israel? What is the real nature of participants' engagement with Israel? Do their visions of engagement and their reality intersect? How active and/or passive should we be within Israeli society? What is our role, if any, in Israeli society? These and other questions will be at the heart of this discussion.

B'hatzlacha,

Esti Moskovitz-Kalman, Director of Education-Israel, NACIE / Makōm

*Please note: If this assumption does not apply to participants, we suggest that you moderate the session called "Why Israel" and other appropriate educational activities. If, at a later stage, participants embrace the importance of Israel engagement for Jewish identity, this unit may be implemented.



The Activity

Context

This unit has been designed by NACIE, the North American Coalition for Israel Engagement, as part of our effort to encourage North American Jews to discuss, explore and conceptualize their relationship to Israel. This specific unit focuses on patterns of North American Jews' participation in Israel and the rationale which underpins those patterns.

During this activity, we take participants on a journey that allows them to explore their own engagement with Israel and compare their vision of what an ideal engagement should be with the reality of how they materialize the relationship in their own lives. We will then encourage participants to consider the question of engagement from a communal standpoint and from the broader perspective of Israel-Diaspora relations. To close the unit participants will just touch the issues of 'boundaries of influence' in the context of Israel Diaspora relations.

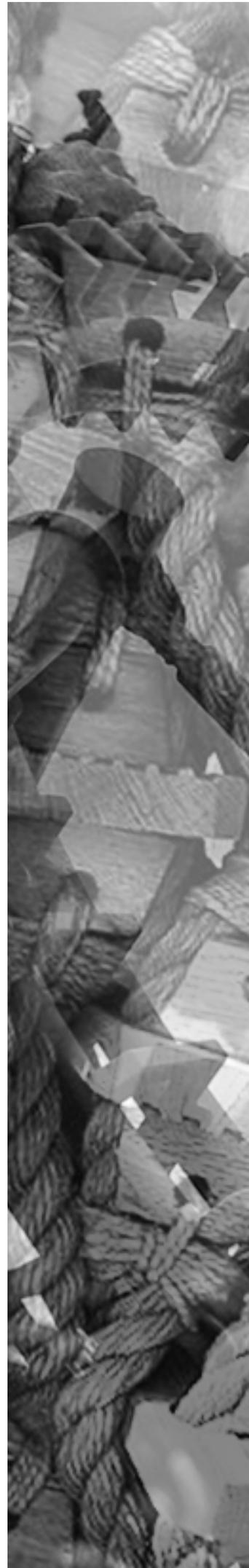
Goals

- To enable participants to explore the patterns, meanings and tensions of their personal engagement with Israel
- To explore and discuss the role of "active participants in the vibrant life in Israel" from a personal and communal perspective
- To encourage participants to reflect on the practical manifestations of their relationship with Israel and its implications
- To examine the collective responsibility of the Diaspora towards Israel and vice versa
- To discuss the limits of Diaspora influence on Israeli internal affairs

Target Audiences

Unit leaders: The conversations in this module require three main skills: a comfort level with the study of both modern and traditional texts; an ability to lead a group in an open discussion, in which each view expressed is accepted, validated, and woven into the overall flow of the discussion; and a basic familiarity with the content matter.

Participants: These conversations are suitable for adults; no prior knowledge is necessary. The participants may include community lay leaders and members of various boards and committees; Jewish educators from all types of frameworks; and/or members of the public, who are interested in exploring the Meta Questions of engaging with Israel. (General comment: The texts used in this session were chosen to fit the general audience as defined above. Based on your participants' profile, you may decide to add or replace the texts used in the unit.)



Structure and duration of activity, by section

I Personal Engagement - This section will include an introduction, an exercise reflecting on the nature of our engagements, and discussion.

(Minimum 45, Maximum 60 minutes)

II Collective Commitment and Responsibility – Involves studying a text taken from the Kinneret Declaration and drafting a group statement of responsibility.

(Minimum 45, Max 60 minutes)

III Boundaries of Influence and Participation - Involves reading a second extract taken from the Kinneret Declaration and an extract from an article by Cynthia Ozick, and engaging in a guided discussion. Depending on the group and facilitator, this part can consist of a 15-minute discussion, in which the facilitator may choose to leave out Cynthia Ozick's text and deal with the issues in a cursory way, or a session lasting 30 minutes or longer if the facilitator chooses to read both texts and lead a more in-depth discussion.

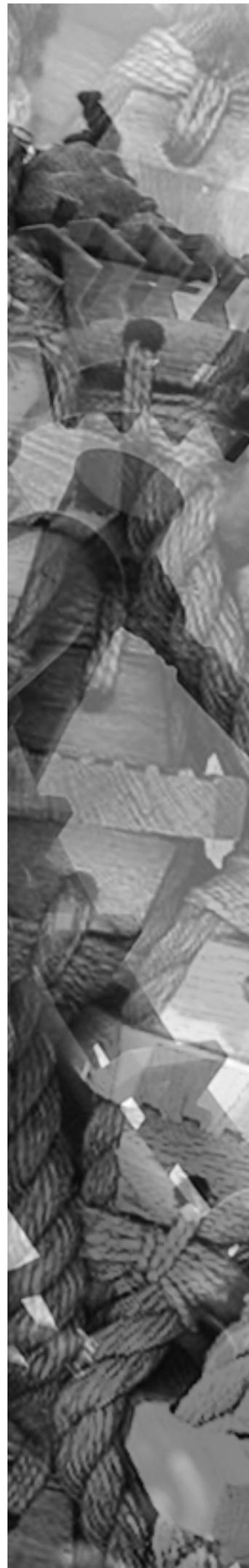
(15 to 45 minutes)

(As you can see from the sample schedule, this unit can be condensed into one unit or spread out over two sessions. If you only hold one two-hour session, the first two sections should each take 45 minutes, leaving 15-30 minutes for the conclusion. If you have two time slots available, you can separate Part 1 (60+ minutes) from Parts 2 and 3 (90 minutes altogether).)

Prepare in advance

- An excerpt from the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel – source #1
(the full text can be found at: <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/MFA>)
- Concept cards – source #2
- The Spectrums of Engagement Worksheet -- source #3
- Kinneret Declaration worksheet -- source #4
(The full text can be found at: <http://www.achrayutleumit.org.il>)
- second excerpt from the Kinneret Declaration -- source #5
- Text by Cynthia Ozick -- source #6
(the full text can be found at: <http://www.haqshama.org.il/en/resources>)

Further readings and background materials



Let's begin...

I. Personal Engagement

Different forms of Engagements

1. The facilitator begins the unit by explaining to the group that this activity offers them a journey to explore their own engagement with Israel in vision and in practice. The session opens with reading together an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel (source #1); this establishes a conceptual and historical framework to the discussion. After reading the source moderate a brief discussion of the following points:
 - What is the main attitude being expressed in this piece?
 - How does it make you feel? What is your first reaction?
 - Is the message still relevant to our lives?

Methods of Engagement: Concept cards

2. The facilitator asks participants what being engaged with Israel means to them in their daily lives? After a short round of answers, the facilitator explains that they will now explore different, practical ways to express their connection with Israel. The facilitator spreads out a set of "Concept Cards" on the floor (ideas for these cards may be found in source #2). Participants are invited to select two cards that best express how they are currently most connected to Israel. They are then invited to select two cards that express their vision of how they would most like to be connected to Israel (perhaps in their future) The facilitator asks the participants to look at the four cards that they have selected and see how these reflect the ways they are involved with Israel. Now the facilitator explains that the group will carry out a shared mirror analysis of their personal involvement in Israel.

The facilitator should emphasize that at this point the participants should relates only to their engagements from the personal and professional perspective.

The facilitator explains to participants that the following short exercise will give them the opportunity to think about the forms of participation and engagement with Israel that they choose. In this exercise, participants are presented with 8 pairs of cards representing 8 different scales/ axis (source 3#). These 8 scales, representing 16 parameters, provide a frame of reference for characterizing forms of engagements and placing them in the broader framework of connections with Israel.

Before conducting the exercise, we recommend that the facilitator reviews the parameters with the participants to make sure they understand their meaning. We offer a few examples here, however, it may be more useful to leave the definition of the parameters somewhat vague, thereby giving participants the opportunity to suggest their own interpretation of each parameter.



Please note: These parameters are intended to facilitate the process of thinking about the nature of engagements. There are no correct definitions, and people may have widely varying opinions about them- different opinions should be respected. Participants should be encouraged to present their perspective to the rest of the group.

At this point, the facilitator can choose from options A or B below:

A. Using masking tape, the facilitator should mark a line across the length of the floor. Then s/he should take the first pair of cards and lay them at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Each of the participants from the group is invited to stand on the spectrum so that their location on the continuum represents the four cards they have selected. For example, someone who has the card "buying stocks and shares in Israel" may place themselves towards the "risk-taking" end of the "risk-taking/safe" spectrum. A person who has selected "participating in a mission" might put themselves towards the "within" end of the "afar/within" spectrum or on the "solidarity" end of the "solidarity/criticism" spectrum.

The facilitator should then ask the participant these leading questions:

- Why did you place yourself at that point?
- Is there a gap between your reality cards and your vision cards?
- Would you rather be somewhere else on the spectrum?

B. Each participant is given a sheet of paper with the 8 scales marked below (source #3):

Active Engagement 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Passive
engagement							
Engagement from	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
within Israel							Engagement from afar
Critical Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
							Engagement of Solidarity
Direct Engagement 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mediated
							Engagement
Risk-taking Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
							Safe Engagement
Engagement which 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Engagement
which Involves Setting Policies							Involves Accepting Policies
Engagement out of							
the box	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
							Normative engagement



Participants should circle the appropriate number on each spectrum. The facilitator can then lead a discussion asking participants:

- How did you position yourself
- Why did you place yourself at that point?
- Is there a gap between your reality cards and your vision cards?
- Do you feel comfortable with your choices?
- Would you rather be somewhere else on the spectrum?

The parameters are:

- 1 Active engagement versus passive engagement
(Writing a check might be considered a form of passive form of engagement by some people, as opposed to attending a rally, while others see it as an active form of involvement)
- 2 Engagement from within Israel versus engagement from afar (Physical/spiritual)
- 3 Critical engagement versus engagement of solidarity
- 4 Direct engagement versus mediated engagement
(Direct engagement refers to personal connections and acts, while mediated engagements are arranged and implemented by a third party or organization either in Israel or North America.)
- 5 Risk-taking engagement versus safe engagement
- 6 Engagement which involves setting policies versus engagement which involves accepting policies.
(For example, contributing money to a designated program or giving it to an organization that sets its own allocation policies.)
- 7 Engaging out of the box versus normative engagement.
(Engaging out of the box refers to finding creative and personal ways to be involved, as opposed to normative engagement with refers to standard paths for connecting to Israel.)

Conclusion of Section I

Until this point, the activity has examined our personal patterns of engagement. Now is the appropriate time to ask participants: “Why do we choose to be engaged with Israel at all? Why do we want to participate and deepen our participation?” One or two of the participants may be invited to share their answers with the group.



II. Collective Commitment and Responsibility

Background:

Until now we have examined the question of engagement from a personal perspective and the different tensions involved. Now the group will examine the question from a broader point of view, as a community and as a society.

The context in which the Kinneret Declaration should be looked at:

Israel is a multi-cultural, pluralistic society that incorporates different, often conflicting, views regarding the best way to fulfill the Zionist dream. Deeply entangled in many serious debates covering a wide range of issues, one may get the impression that Israeli society lacks any national consensus or common denominator upon which the realization of the Jewish State of Israel may be based. In an effort to create a core of understanding and agreement within contemporary Israeli society, a group of Jewish-Israeli leaders from all walks of Israeli life joined forces and formed a Committee for National Responsibility. The committee drafted a working paper, the "Kinneret Declaration" that outlines the most fundamental issues that stir Israeli society and the existing core of national identity, in an effort to chart a shared course of renewal.

The participants should understand that the Kinneret Declaration does not stand alone as a statement, but rather, is clearly supported by actions of the State. For example, the Israeli Army sent a unit into the Sudan to rescue Ethiopian Jews and bring them to Israel. Each year, the Jewish Agency sends hundreds of *shlichim* (emissaries) around the world to promote aliyah and to provide educational services to Diaspora Jewish communities. For the past few years, the Israeli Government has been investing in programs to bring Diaspora youth and young adults on their first organized trip to Israel, and in 2004, began supporting the Masa project, which subsidizes long-term study programs in Israel for Jewish students from around the world. These are just a few of the ways in which Israel fulfills its commitment to Jews in Diaspora.

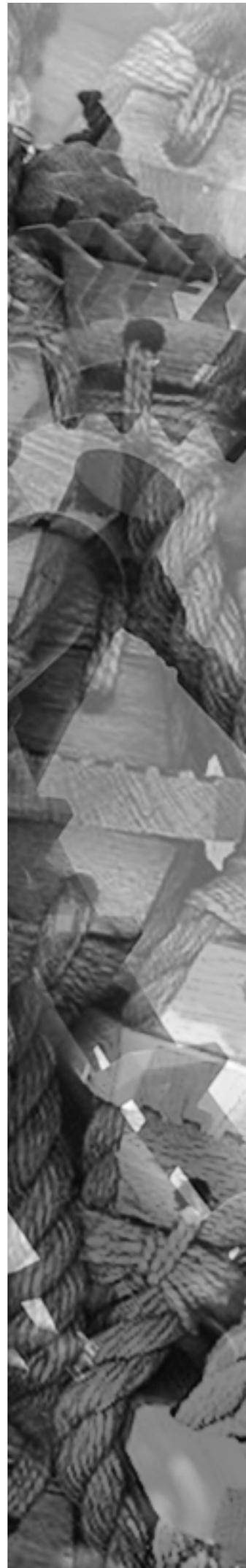
1. The facilitator should distribute source #4 to participants and briefly describe the Kinneret Declaration*. Then read the excerpt either separately or together as a group from the Declaration, which discusses Israel's responsibility towards world Jewry). The facilitator notes that this text offers an interesting interpretation to the first text excerpted from the Declaration of Independence.

The facilitator; they may read it.

The facilitator should initiate a brief discussion exploring the following points:

- What is the main attitude being expressed in this piece?
- In what ways does this text differ from the first text we read from the Declaration of Independence?
- How does it make you feel? What is your first reaction?

* Please find information on the Kinneret Declaration in the additional materials attached. For further information look at the website of the Forum for National Responsibility: www.achrayutleumit.org.il



2. Now, divide into smaller groups. Participants should read the two extracts in source #4 again and then formulate their own parallel statement for Diaspora Jews expressing their relationship and commitment to Israel. The facilitator should also ask the group to spend some time considering the practical implications of their statement.
3. The groups should rejoin and read their statements to each other. It is also possible to have each group write up their statement on a large sheet of paper. These statements are hung on the wall so that all participants can read them. This option is particularly useful when there are a large number of statements – four or more – to share.

The facilitator should lead the participants in a discussion comparing the original section from the Kinneret Declaration with their versions:

- Do the two versions contradict each other or complement each other?
- How do you think the authors of the Kinneret Declaration or the average Israeli might react to your statement?
- What practical implications does your statement have?
- The Kinneret Declaration says: “The Jews of Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora are responsible for one another’s welfare.” Do you think this really a mutual responsibility? please explain

III. Boundaries of Influence and Participation

1. Read the second excerpt from the opening section of the Kinneret Declaration (source #5) aloud: According to this text, Israel is a State belonging to the entire Jewish people, even though the majority does not choose to live in it. This is a unique phenomenon in the world today, since no other country defines the relationship between statehood and nationality in this way. After reading the text- discuss the following questions with the group:
 - Can you give examples of how your life or the life of your community is directly or indirectly affected by decisions taken by the Israeli Government or society?
 - Do you accept the claim that Jewish communities around the world should have a say in certain decisions that are made in Israel, since those decisions may affect their life and well being? Do you think that Diaspora Jews are entitled to influence Israeli internal issues?
 - What are the implications of defining Israel as the State of the entire Jewish People for our discussion on the boundaries of participation?



2. Read aloud to the group from the lines written by Cynthia Ozick and discuss the following questions (source #7):

- Do you agree that “Reflections on the State of Israel have no weight . . . if the writer is not a voting citizen of that state”?
- After listening to Ozick’s words, do you accept her claim that American Jews should have only a minor influence or none at all on the decision-making process in Israel?
- If you disagree with Ozick’s thesis, what kind of influence would you want to have on Israeli internal issues such as security, defense, legislation, and government? Should American Jews be able to affect decisions made on issues related to security and defense such as the peace process or disengagement, or on social issues such as the Law of Return, the definition of who is a Jew, or conversion?
- It seems that Ozick is implying that the North American Jew has a somewhat distant relationship with the sovereign State of the Jews by definition, like a “lower level of belonging to the state” -- Do you agree with this commentary on Ozick?
- Is there an appropriate or inappropriate way to influence or to participate in decision making?

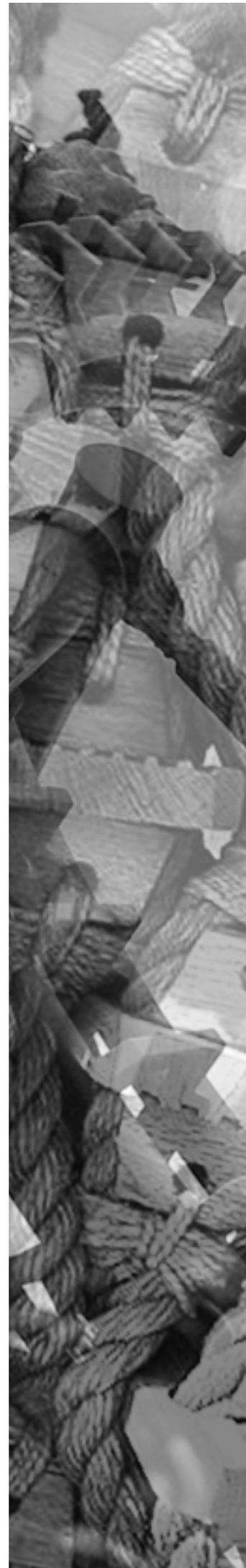
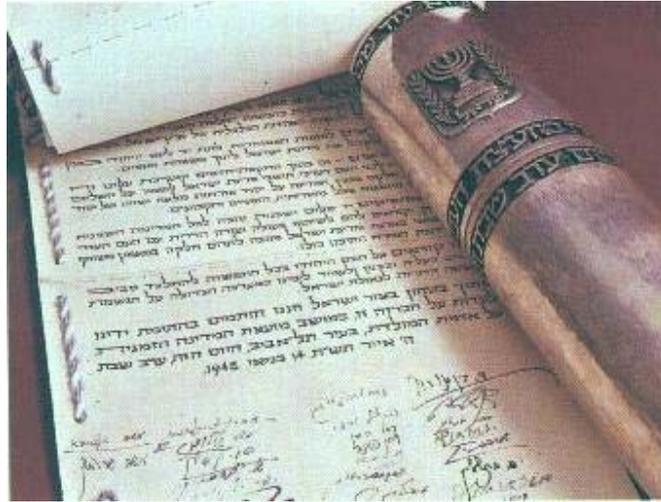


Sources

Source # 1

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz Israel in the task of immigration and development and to stand by them in the great struggle for the fulfillment of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

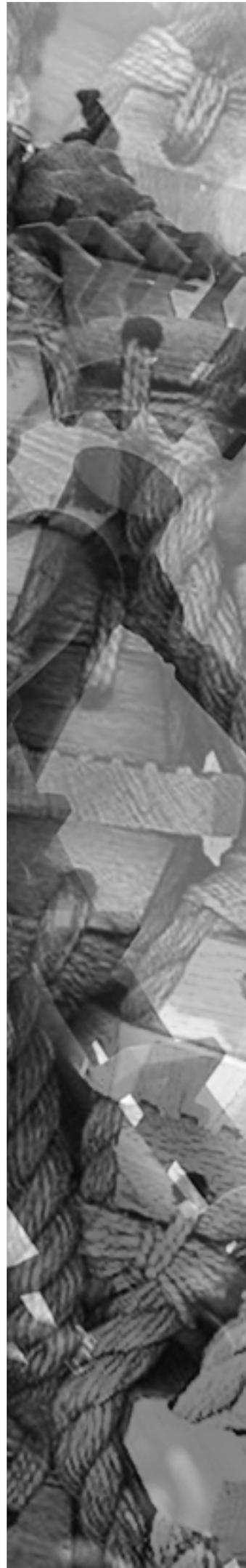
*Friday 14th May 1948 –
Erev Shabbat, 5th Iyar 5708*



Source #2: Forms of Participation – ideas for concept cards

Concept Cards:

- Giving money to fund ambulances
- Giving money to Jewish education in Israel
- Vacationing in Israel
- Taking part in a mission
- Sending children for a year's study at yeshiva or university
- Making aliyah
- Writing letters to the editor in defense of Israel
- Organizing/attending Israeli cultural events in the community
- Reading Israeli literature and listening to Israeli music
- Inviting Israeli lecturers to give talks at the JCC/local synagogues
- Following Israel in the news
- Reading about Israeli history and culture
- Keeping in touch with Israeli family members and friends
- Sending packages to Israeli soldiers
- Buying Israeli products
- Working to support Israeli social justice and peace movements
- Voting for pro-Israel candidates in American elections
- Buying assets or property in Israel
- Buying Israeli stocks and shares
- Investing money in Israel
- Spending part of the year in Israel on a regular basis
- Volunteering in the Israeli Army through the Sarel program
- Other



Source #3:

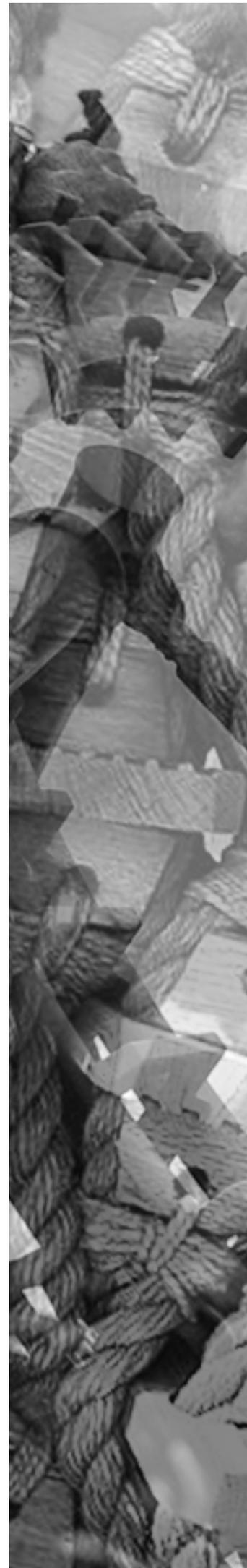
Participation in Israel: Engagement and Boundaries

Analyzing the Nature of Our Participation

Participant Worksheet

Please circle the appropriate number on each scale.

Active Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Passive engagement
Engagement from within Israel	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Engagement from afar
Critical Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Engagement of Solidarity
Direct Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mediated Engagement
Risk-taking Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Safe Engagement
Engagement which Involves Setting Policies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Engagement which Involves Accepting Policies
Engagement out of the box	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Normative engagement

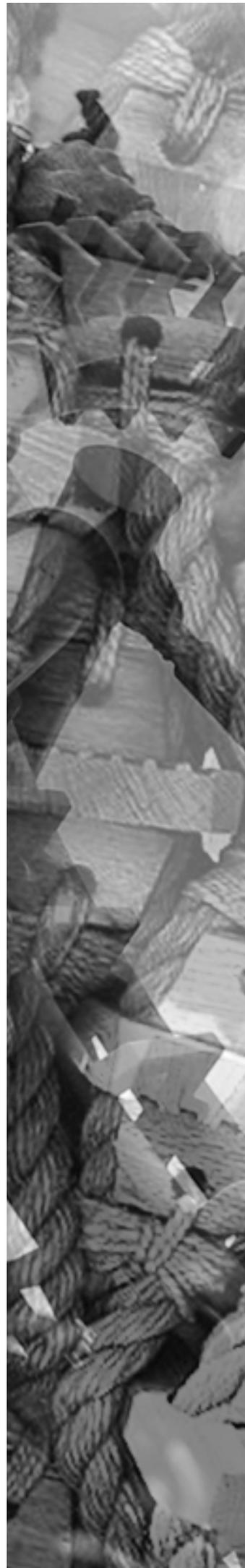


Source #4: An excerpt from the Kinneret Declaration:

The State of Israel has an existential interest in strengthening the Jewish Diaspora and deepening its relations with it. The State of Israel will assist Jewish education in all places in the world, and will come to the aid of Jews suffering distress for their Jewishness. The Jews of Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora are responsible for one another's welfare.

(From the third section: "The State of Israel is a Jewish state")

Now you have read the extract from the Kinneret Declaration, please formulate your own parallel statement for Diaspora Jews expressing your relationship and commitment to Israel. Once you have written your statement, spend some time considering its practical implications.



Source #5: An excerpt from the opening section of the Kinneret Declaration:

We affirm that the right of the Jewish people to lead a life of sovereignty in the land of Israel is an enduring and unquestionable right. The State of Israel fulfills in the land of Israel the Jewish people's right to life, sovereignty, and freedom.

The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, the sanctuary of its spirit, and the foundation-stone of its freedom.



Source #6: By Cynthia Ozick

“Sovereignty, if it is to mean anything at all, must be answerable to the will of voter, not to meditations of Diaspora intellectuals, no matter how impassioned, well-intended or ‘committed’ they may be.

“Opinion from abroad remains exactly that – opinion from abroad, a surrounding buzz, sometimes importuning, sometimes demanding, but always irrelevant to the voting citizens who are subject to the risks of any irrevocable national decision.

“Sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions about the future, based partly on the mandate of the ballot box and partly on the independent thinking of those they have elected. So whatever I say here is, after all, no more than buzz and chaff. If I don’t live in Israel and have no vote, why should any Israeli care what I think? And this stricture applies not only to a private scribbler like myself, but also to the relentless pressures of the heads of significant Diaspora institutions.”

This is the opening paragraph of a lecture in a symposium by Cynthia Ozick; the full text of "The Zionist Imperative: Jewish Culture in Israel - No Apologies Necessary", 3 March 2004, can be found at: <http://www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources>



Additional Materials for the Facilitator

For further reading on the Kinneret Declaration:

- “Israeli Covenant Seeks Consensus,” by Gil Sedan
- A letter by retired General Uzi Dayan
- The original Kinneret Declaration in its entirety

