

# Hak'hel הקהל

## Conceptual conversations: **Israel – Myth and Reality**

Written for the

North American Coalition for Israel Engagement (NACIE)

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טבת תשס"ה January 2005

# 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**

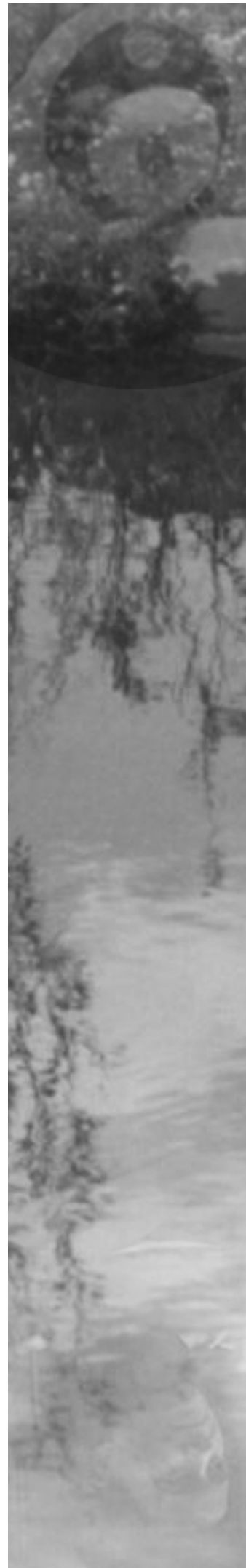
Achad Ha'Am conceived of Israel as a Jewish center that will generate a vibrant Hebrew culture. Do you agree with his vision? What is Israel's role in Achad Ha'Am's vision? Does contemporary Israeli and/or American Jewish literature express Achad Ha'Am's dream?

**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: “Myth & Reality”:

“In essence, **American Jews today appear to be much more closely connected to the Israel of myth than the Israel of reality.** Indeed, Israel’s reality has increasingly tended to alienate American Jews: the Israeli political system doesn’t work like the U.S. system does, and Americans often neither understand it, nor feel comfortable with it.... Israelis are often regarded as rude, rough, not heimish, and even embarrassing. Religiously, the progressive elements of American Judaism don’t appear to count for much in Israel, which creates a sense among some American Jews that they don’t count in Israel either. ..And finally, there are vast cultural differences – the army is certainly a core formative experience for Israelis which Americans are largely unable to share...”

(NACIE’s Philosopher’s retreat, New-York, September 2003)

The above is an excerpt from the “Philosophers’ 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 related 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.

This unit, Israel: Myth and Reality, focuses on the essential nature of our perception of Israel. From the earliest stages of our Jewish education, we are exposed to multiple sources of information, each painting its own portrait of Israel. Some portraits reflect a mythic image of Israel, while others create a detailed and realistic image of the Israelis’ everyday life. These images mediate our emotional and psychological engagements with Israel. Through this unit, we will discuss and reflect on these perceptions, and try to better understand how our mental portraits of Israel are influenced by the concepts of Myth and Reality.

This unit has already been piloted in the Jewish community of San Francisco, and has subsequently been refined to reflect the comments and insights of those who participated. We hope that your feedback will be used to improve the unit for future users.

B’hatzlacha,

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



# The Activity

## Context

“A guiding assumption punctuated the two-day (Philosopher’s Retreat) debate: that there was something fundamentally flawed in the way American Jews generally relate to Israel. The problem wasn’t limited solely to those on the fringes of the community or beyond; rather it was claimed that even the future leadership of American Jewry, in spite of all the time many have spent on organized programs in Israel, have an ambiguous relationship with the place...”

In essence, **American Jews today appear to be much more closely connected to the Israel of myth than the Israel of reality.** Indeed, Israel’s reality has increasingly tended to alienate American Jews: the Israeli political system doesn’t work like the US system does, and Americans often neither understand it, nor feel comfortable with it. There are growing ethnic divisions between North American and Israeli Jews –Americans are largely Ashkenazi and Western, whereas Israeli society is becoming more and more Middle Eastern. These differences tend to be emphasized during face-to-face encounters between American and Israeli Jews – Israelis are often regarded by their American counterparts as rude, rough, not heimish, and even embarrassing.

Religiously, the progressive elements of American Judaism have not gained wide acceptance in Israel, which creates a sense among some American Jews that they aren’t accepted or welcome in Israel either. Furthermore, the religious context in the United States differs dramatically from Israel: American Jews tend to regard religion as a good thing, and respect the fact that the state protects their freedom to practice it; secular Israeli Jews typically regard religion as negative, coercive and threatening, and are grateful that the state protects them from it. And finally, there are vast cultural differences. The army is certainly a core formative experience for Israelis which Americans are largely unable to share, and even when aspects of Israeli culture – novels, articles, songs, poetry, etc. – are translated into English, they arouse limited interest within the American Jewish community.

A broader sociological and historical analysis identified a number of possible causes for this rift, as well as several related issues. On a “kishkes” level, many of the Philosopher’s Retreat participants felt that **North American Jews are actually profoundly connected to Israel, but on a day-to-day level, this connection is both distant and superficial.** No more than 42% of American Jews, at an absolute maximum, have actually visited Israel. Israel rarely features as a central subject in American Jewish literature. In spite of countless, and highly significant, changes in American Jewish liturgy since 1948, very few of those changes reflect the reality of the State of Israel’s existence.

When we come to engage with Israel today we need to ask ourselves – Do we agree with the statements and assumptions which were made during the Philosopher’s Retreat last September in New York by a group of North American and Israeli Jewish thinkers? If we agree, then what implications does this have for our engagement with Israel? Is it just a superficial engagement? Is it an engagement only with the Holy Land and not with the modern State or vice versa? Is our engagement with Israel an ever-evolving



relationship based on changes in reality, or does it lie beyond the “here and now”? These questions and others will form the basis of our discussion as we use sources from Israeli culture to understand to what degree we engage with “mythic” Israel and to what degree we engage with the “realistic, day-to-day” elements of Israel.

The nature of Jewish perceptions of Israel is a fascinating theoretical issue, but more important, it is critical when we begin to explore how individual Jews actually engage with Israel. When preparing to facilitate this unit, you may want to consider how the conversation will be affected by whether participants have or have not been to Israel? What kind of an impact does a visit to Israel have on the nature of people’s perceptions of Israel? Is that impact lasting or not? Has the media played a role in recreating a “new” Israel? If so, what is that image? Is it one of “myth” or “reality”? How is the engagement with Israel shaped when reality turns into myth (“Bombs in the streets of Jerusalem”)? And vice versa – how do different engagements influence people’s perceptions of Israel?

## Goals

### Meta Goal:

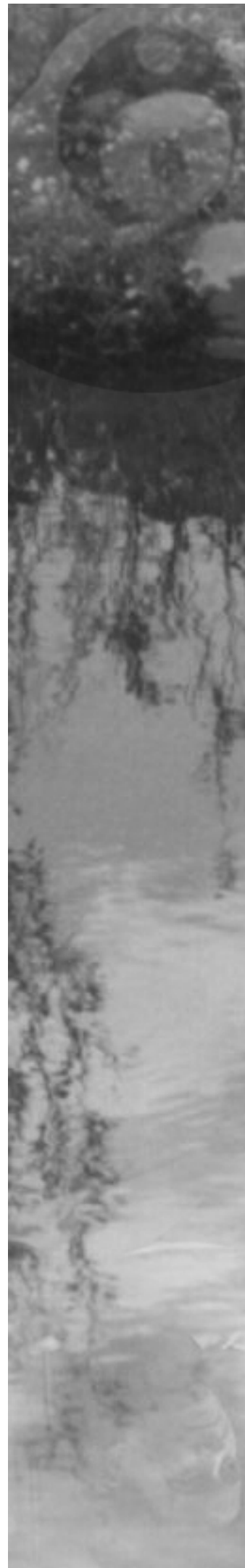
To engage in a conversation that encourages participants to reflect on the nature of their perception of Israel (“mythic” image versus “realistic” image), and how that perception affects the actual engagements they have with Israel.

### Goals:

1. To encourage participants to reflect on the nature of their connection to Israel
2. To encourage a conversation that allows participants to reflect seriously upon their connection to Israeli culture
3. To explore the nature of a “connection to Israel based on myth” versus a “connection to Israel based on reality”
4. To broaden the participants’ insight into the complex relationship between North American Jewry and Israel, based on the “myth-reality” framework
5. To discuss the implications of perceptions of Israel (“myth-reality”) on actual engagements

## Target Audiences

**Unit leaders:** The conversations in this module require three main skills: a comfort level with the study of 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

1. Introducing the topic and distributing the source booklet (10 minutes).
2. Reading together Naomi Shemer's song and the Stickers song (5 minutes).
3. Discussing the songs, using "Further questions to explore the concepts" section (15 minutes).
4. Dividing into pairs to read sources and discuss the questions following each text (30 minutes).
5. Reassemble the group and ask participants to report (20 minutes).
6. Conclusion: Reading together the last source and discussing the unit as a whole (10 minutes).

## Advance Preparation

A copy of the source booklet for each participant, which includes:

- Source #1: Lyrics of "Jerusalem of Gold" by Naomi Shemer
- Source #2: Lyrics of "The Stickers Song" by Dag Nachash
- Source #3: Excerpts from Israel in our Lives: Basic Issues and Philosophical Guidelines by Rosenak and Eisen
- Source #4: Excerpts from Aviad Kleinberg's article, "In Her Dreams," Ha'Aretz (the entire article can be found in the "Myth & Reality – More Materials" file
- Source #5: Excerpts from The Art of Travel by Alain de Botton

You may replace or add any other sources from the bibliography list (attached to the end of the unit) or any other relevant text.

## **MATERIALS NEEDED-**

Working space, blank poster papers, and markers

Let's begin...

1. Introduce the conversation (you may want to use the context introduction above). Please note that for this session, Israeli culture has been selected as the gateway for the discussion about "myth and reality"; you may decide to change that gateway and use alternative texts (perhaps from the bibliography at the end of the unit) representing different facets of life in Israel that illustrate the same issue.
2. Begin the big group discussion. Hand out the booklets and read aloud together Naomi Shemer's song and "The Stickers Song" by Dag Nachash (you may want to play a tape of the songs). Discuss the questions prepared for each of these sources.

### **"Jerusalem of Gold"**

- What characteristics of the mythic Jerusalem does Shemer write about?
- How do you feel when you hear this song?
- What associations does it have for you? (You may want to write these down and compare them later with associations of "The Sticker Song.")
- Is Naomi Shemer describing your Jerusalem? Circle the words or phrases that describe your relationship to Jerusalem.
- What would you want to tell Naomi Shemer about her song?
- Why do you think it was, and still continues to be, so popular?

### **"The Stickers Song"**

- What characteristics of the real Israel does Dag Nachash sing about?
- How do you feel when you hear this song? What images or emotions does it create for you?
- Is Dag Nachash singing about your Israel? Circle the words or phrases that describe your relationship to Israel.
- What would you want to say to Dag Nachash about the song?



Note that Naomi Shemer and Dag Nachash present two different ways of looking at Israel. One reflects a mythical understanding of Israel, as ancient, holy and ethereal, and the other relates to Israel as a real place, confused, violent and gritty.

- Continue to explore the concepts of myth and reality by discussing the following questions: What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach towards viewing Israel? What does the myth add to our understanding, but what do we lose when we focus on it? What does a realistic picture of Israel have to give us, and what do we lose by it?

This is a crucial part of the discussion – this is where participants will create the shared language that will underpin further discussion throughout the session. Please note that any distinctions between myth and reality should not be presented as black or white but rather as two ends of a continuum.

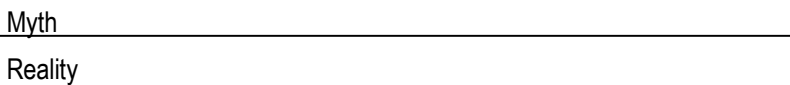
**Further questions to explore the concepts:**

Make a list of characteristics that are generally associated with “myth” and “reality.” How do you relate to these two concepts?

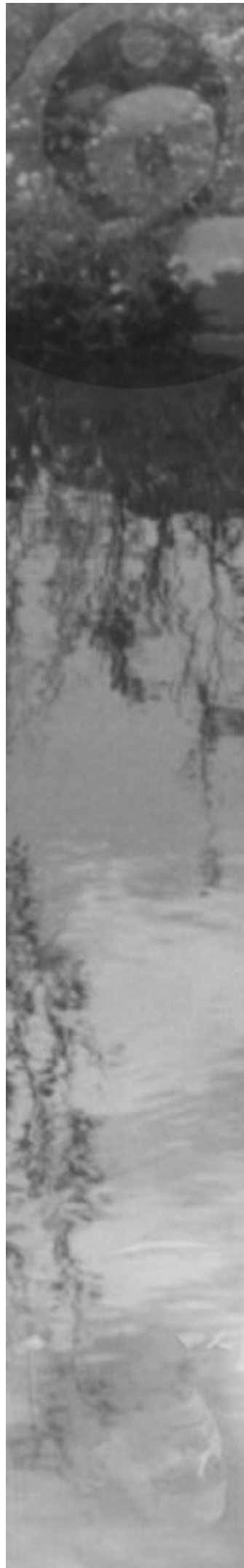
Below are several examples; feel free to disagree and to add your own.

Myth	Reality
Ideal/imagined	Concrete
Old	New
Offers no opportunity for personal involvement or responsibility	Allows everyone to get involved and take responsibility for the situation
Etc.	Etc.

If you look at “myth” and “reality” are being two ends of a continuum rather than binary opposites, where would you plot your own approach to Israel on the continuum? Please explain.



(You may want to draw this line on the board and ask people to come up and draw an X marking their position on the continuum.)



4. Divide participants into pairs and ask them to read sources #3 and #4 in the booklet ("Israel as the Land of Jewish Culture," in *Israel In Our Lives: Basic Issues and Philosophical Guidelines*, by Michael Rosenak and Arnie Eisen, and excerpts from Aviad Kleinberg, "In Her Dreams," *Ha'Aretz*) and discuss the questions following each text. (If you feel that source #3 is too long, you can mark/delete parts and shorten the text, and if you want to hand out the full article in source #4, it can be found in the "Myth & Reality – More Materials" file.) As the pairs work together, circulate among them and observe which issues seem to be most intriguing.
5. Reassemble the group and ask participants to report on one of the questions that they discussed. Your choice of the discussion question could depend on the issues you heard were important to them during their work in pairs.
6. Conclude the unit by reading together the source #5, excerpt from *The Art of Travel*, by Alain de Botton, and discuss the following questions:
  - For those who have been to Israel: How did you feel when you came to Israel for the first time? Overwhelmed, disappointed or surprised? For those who have not yet been to Israel: What are your expectations from Israel?
  - How did you deal with or overcome those reactions?
  - Can a person prepare for an experience of Israel, so that the disappointment/surprise is minimized? How?

Summarize the unit (if you still have time, you may want to ask participants to say something about how they understand what we just did, or something about where they plot themselves on the myth-reality continuum now, at the end of the discussion).



# Resource Booklet – Myth & Reality

A) Introduce these two models of culture taken from Assaf Inbari's article on the culture of the river and the culture of the pond (source #3). The original word Inbari uses is *shlulit* in Hebrew which translates to *puddle* in English; we have chosen to use the less pejorative word *pond* instead. We suggest that you read the source together, either quietly or aloud, and ensure that participants understand the main differences between the two models. B) Now divide the group into pairs or trios. Each participant should receive the following resources:

1] The model for analysis (source #3)

2] The worksheet (source #2)

3] The literature sources booklet, which includes excerpts from contemporary Hebrew literature written in Israel and American Jewish literature written in North America (sources #4 and up). If your group includes many participants and/or you have more time, you can use selected texts found in the "Culture: Additional Materials File." The booklet includes too many texts for the group to read in the

given timeframe. We therefore recommend that the facilitator assign three specific texts to each group: one long North American text, one long Israeli text, and a song of your choice.

The small groups should begin their work by reading through the description of the models (source #3), making sure that they fully understand it; the facilitator should be on hand to answer any questions. Next, they should take the first literary text they were assigned and read it together. The ensuing discussion should be guided by the questions in the worksheet (source #2). The group will then repeat the exercise with their second and third literary texts if time permits.

## III: Report Back

All the small groups should now reassemble, with each reporting back to the whole group: What text did they read? Who was the author? Summarize the text.

- Was the text interesting? Can you relate to it? (If not, why?)
- Did the text seem to fit more with the "river" or the "pond" model? Why?



- Is it an Israeli or an American piece? Is it likely that this piece could have been written somewhere else? Why?

(If you are short on time, you may want to ask each group to answer just one question.)

After all the groups report back, take the conversation to the macro level by asking:

- Which model (“river” or “pond”) do you find it easier to relate to or identify with in Israeli culture?
- Would you say that Assaf Inbari’s model applies to American Jewish culture as well? Do you find this model to be helpful?

## IV: Conclusion

You may choose from among two options below to conclude the session; the other may be used for follow-up activity through an e-mail thread/list serve with the participants.

Option A: Facilitate a summary discussion based on some of the questions below:

- Do we expect Jewish-Israeli culture to be similar to our own? Can we understand or connect to a culture that seems remote from us?
- Do you agree or disagree with the following claim: “Israel will stay relevant to Jews in the Diaspora only as long as it remains unique as a Jewish culture. The moment that it becomes a mere mirror of the American Jewish community or the British Jewish community, it will lose its special attractiveness and effectiveness.”
- Is it our responsibility to make the effort to find ways of connecting with Israeli literature or culture? In terms of a broader perspective: What do I do as an individual or as a community when engagement with Israeli culture is neither easy nor comfortable?
- What role does Israel play in the different models of “river” versus “pond” found in Israeli literature? In North American Jewish literature? Can you compare these roles?

Option B: Re-read the excerpt by Achad Ha’Am on Israel as a spiritual center for the whole Jewish people (source #1) aloud and discuss one or more of the questions below:

- Does Israel really play this role today (consider culture, education, literature, Jewish identity, Jewish renaissance, theater, language, music, art) If yes, in what ways? If not, why?

- How do you relate on a personal level to Jewish-Israeli culture? What examples of this culture are you familiar with? How comfortable are you when it comes to Israeli culture?
- What pieces of culture would you/do you bring to your community in America? Why these pieces as opposed to any others? (You may relate to content and to different forms of culture such as dance, poetry reading, book clubs, theater, music, etc.)
- What unique role could Israeli culture play in engaging with Israel at home or in school?



# Sources

## Source #1: “Jerusalem of Gold,” Naomi Shemer

“Jerusalem of Gold,” written in 1967 by a young songwriter, Naomi Shemer, was first performed by Shuli Natan on Yom Ha'atzmaut as part of a Hebrew song festival. Its longing for the Old City of Jerusalem resonated with Israelis, and the song became an instant hit. After the Six Day War, Naomi Shemer added the last two verses, and the song was transformed into an anthem celebrating Israel's victory.

### Jerusalem of Gold (\*)

Lyrics: Naomi Shemer

Mountain air as clear as wine  
And the fragrance of pine  
Is carried on the evening breeze  
With the sound of bells.

And in a deep sleep, as of tree and rock  
Imprisoned within her dream is  
The city which stands alone  
And in her heart, a wall.

Jerusalem of gold, of copper and of light,  
Behold, I am a violin for all your songs

How the wells have dried up  
The market place is empty  
And no one visits in the Temple Mount  
In the Old City

And through the caves in the rock  
The wind howls  
And no one goes down to the Dead Sea

By way of Jericho.

But when I come today to sing to you  
And to crown you,  
I'm as small as your youngest child  
And as the last of the poets.

Because your name scorches the lips  
Like the kiss of a flaming angel  
If I forget thee, Jerusalem,  
All of gold.

We've returned to the wells,  
To the market and the square  
A shofar sounds on the Temple Mount  
In the Old City.

And in the caves, in the bedrock  
Thousands of suns flash  
We'll again go down to the Dead Sea  
By way of Jericho.

(\*) We could not receive copyright permission to print the Hebrew words and therefore include only the English translation in this unit.



## Source #2: “Stickerim” (“The Stickers Song”), Dag Nachash

Dag Nachash is a relative new, highly successful, funk-rap band in Israel.. The lead rapper and lyricist, Shaanan Street, exemplifies what one might call a patriotic protestor. His lyrics are full of Jewish awareness, Zionist zeal, and social concern, together with a raging critique of current affairs in Israel.

### Stickerim

Lyrics: David Grossman

A whole generation demands peace  
Let the army win  
A strong nation makes peace  
Let the army mow'em down.

No peace with Arabs  
Don't give them guns  
Combat's where it's at, Bro  
Draft 4 all, exemption 4 all  
Ain't no despair in the world.

Judea and Samaria is here  
“No Fear”-Messiah's here  
No Arabs, No bombs  
Supreme Court endangers Jews.

The nation with the Golan  
The nation with the transfer test in Yirka  
My friend you are missed.

Holy Blessed One we vote 4 U  
A direct vote is bad  
Holy Blessed One we are  
Jealous for you  
Get jealous and die!

How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)

Can be swallowed?  
Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).  
Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
My name is Nachman and I stam, stam,  
stammer.

How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)  
Can be swallowed?  
Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).

Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
Thank the Lord I breathe, and so...

A religious state:  
The state's gone  
Whoever's born benefits  
Long live king messiah  
I'm secure in Sharon's peace.

Hebron always was  
Always will be  
Whoever was not born,  
Missed out  
Hebron of forefathers  
Peace transfer  
Kahane was right.



CNN lies, need a strong leader  
Nice going on the peace  
Thanks for the security  
We have no children for unnecessary wars.

The left helps Arabs  
Bibi's good for the Jews,  
Sentence Oslo criminals  
Us here, them there  
We don't desert brothers.

Uprooting settlements splits the nation  
Death to the traitors  
Let the animals live  
Death to values!

How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)  
Can be swallowed?  
Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).

Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
My name is Nachman and I stam, stam,  
stammer.

How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)  
Can be swallowed?

Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).

Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
Thank the Lord I breathe, and so  
How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)  
Can be swallowed?  
Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).

Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
My name is Nachman and I stam, stam,  
stammer.

How much evil  
Kama Ro'a (ro'a ro'a)  
Can be swallowed?  
Efshar livlo'a (lo'a lo'a).

Father have mercy, Father have mercy  
Thank the Lord I breathe, and so

To liquidate to kill to banish to  
Deport to sanitize to  
Imprison death  
Sentence "no fear" to  
Wipe out to annihilate  
To cut off to burn.

...all because of you, my friend....



**Source #3: Excerpts from Israel in Our Lives:  
Basic Issues and Philosophical Guidelines,  
by Michael Rosenak and Arnie Eisen  
(published by the CRB Foundation, The Joint Authority for Jewish  
Zionist Education, and Mifgashim)**

Israel as the Land of Jewish Culture

**Jewish Culture/Religion in the Eyes of Israeli Jews**

“...We have already mentioned Ahad Ha'am, the Zionist leader who envisioned a modern, largely secular, “reworking” of Judaism that would have its real address in the spiritual center to be established in Eretz Yisrael. Ahad Ha'am's conception, of course, reflected the world at the beginning of the century, when there was no fax or e-mail, no cheap travel nor the affluence to make such travel frequent, and no pervasive and electronically omnipresent “Western culture” in Jewish life. Yet, despite these developments, Israel still does largely understand itself as such an Ahad Ha'amian “place for Judaism,” though different groups within the country have different understandings of what a Jewish “place” should be like. After all, Israel is the only country in the world where the Jewish Sabbath and festivals are the official days of rest, where the Hebrew calendar is recorded on public documents together with the Gregorian one, where Hebrew is spoken and the Bible is an integral part of the public school curriculum, where the public school is, except among Arabs, a Jewish school. On Yom Kippur the country still comes to a standstill and Purim brings with it a carnival atmosphere. And Israel, culturally if not politically, sees itself as “there” for all Jews, the entire “Jewish people.” And yet, given the realities of the contemporary world, Jewish culture in Israel is not really as Ahad Ha'am envisioned it.

“For one thing, Orthodox Jews, whom he considered a vestige of medieval life, play a vastly larger role in determining what counts as Jewish culture than he could have imagined. Much of the communal and visible Jewish cultural action is where they are: in religious settlements, in religious happenings like the dancing at the Western Wall on Simchat Torah, in legislation designed to protect the Jewish character of Israel. This legislation includes the maintenance of rabbinical courts, the unavailability of civil marriage, and the by-laws of most municipalities that prohibit public transportation on Sabbaths and festivals. Much of this, and especially the legislation, is condemned by its opponents as clerical. It is said to drive secular, or religious but non-Orthodox, Jews away from Judaism.

“... So, the Jewish religion one sees in Israel, at least in its public manifestations, is predominantly different from what the non-Orthodox Israeli Jew associates with significant cultural and spiritual life, though it is what s/he associates with religion. Religion is often incomprehensible to Israelis, even primitive. Yet it is sometimes perceived as exotic, a plausible and tested address for existential leaps into faith and community.”

**Israeli Culture in the Eyes of American Jews**

“Here we come to a paradox: to the degree that Israeli culture is authentically Israeli, growing out of the Israeli reality and responding to its particular circumstances, it will be inaccessible to most American Jews.



To the degree that it partakes of the universal modern culture of the west, it will be accessible - but not especially Israeli and so not a worthy part of an Israel experience. It is reassuring to learn that the paintings on the wall at the Tel Aviv galleries look very similar to those on view in New York and San Francisco, but it makes one wonder why one needed a "spiritual center" in order to create this culture, Jewish only indirectly, perhaps not even in name. Why - except for superficial purposes of adorning one's home with Israeli goods - would one want to import such objects to America?

"On the other hand, to the degree that Israeli culture takes place in Hebrew, on stage or on the page, or reflects an experience of the world not shared by Diaspora Jews, it will remain opaque to Diaspora sensibility, and reduce the sense of connection. The alienation may be all the greater if the culture on view is Jewish and yet strange. There is no quick-fix overcoming of this problem; myth is more easily appropriated than the particularities of reality, including cultural reality.

"One element of the Israeli scene, however, can be immediately grasped: the public character of Jewishness - Purim on the streets and on the busses; the singing and tinkle of silverware from a thousand succot; the peace of Shabbat in Jerusalem; the calendar mirroring Jewish rather than gentile rhythms; the presence of kippot and kapotes. American Jews cannot but notice that religion is a vital part of Israeli culture. The fact surprises and perhaps upsets them. ... Collective Jewish culture appears strange. It reminds American Jews how far they have traveled to reach this place, Israel. The fact of public Jewish culture is overwhelming to them. It is a feature that they struggle to process while in Israel; they may well wonder upon returning to America whether it can in any way find a parallel there, and if not, how much they will miss it...."

#### Questions:

Do you agree with Rosenak's description of how American Jews relate to Israeli-Hebrew culture? What elements of Israeli culture do you relate to (contemporary music, books, films, slang, etc.)? Which elements do you find foreign?

How do you respond to, or deal with the gap between the mythic, ideal conception of what Israel could be, and the concrete reality?



## Source #4: Excerpts from Aviad Kleinberg, "In Her Dreams," Ha'Aretz, July 2, 2004

Israeli society also has to deal with questions of myth and reality. After Naomi Shemer's recent death, the Israeli media was full of articles praising her as an icon of Israeli mythic culture, as well as critiquing this aspect of her work. Read this article from Ha'Aretz newspaper.

### In Her Dreams

"... Naomi Shemer was our guide to the home that we could miss wholeheartedly, to the dream house on the top of the hill, with 'a big fireplace' and 'a constantly burning fire' and 'seven windows and a high chimney' and 'a grapevine climbing straight from the orchard' and 'carob and fig, too, of course.'



"Naomi Shemer was always described as the preeminent representative of some authentic Israeliness of the pre-globalization era. But why was the house atop the hill perceived by us as an authentic expression of Israeliness? How did this house with the tall chimney and the perpetually burning fire get here at all - to this hot country, where at most there are several (relatively) cold weeks a year? Because the Eretz Israel that Naomi Shemer creates for us in her songs is a mythic entity in which there is little public housing and sour perspiration and settlers and lines for the bus and pollution and television and parking headaches and unemployment and rudeness and flaring tempers. ...



"...Naomi Shemer's dreamland is a beautified version of the 'the valley' of the 'good old Land of Israel' of Kvutzat Kinneret. Not many people in Israel have experienced those moments and those feelings from which she weaves this dream. It is therefore surprising to see to what an extent people like me, for whom Shemer's experiences are totally foreign, are stirred by the words with which she describes them, to what an extent we are all captivated by her dream 'in the slumber of tree and stone.'

"Culture means dreaming others' dreams. The native, pastoral Israel of Naomi Shemer and the dusty, asphalt-covered, immigrant Be'er Sheva of my childhood are as night and day. In Be'er Sheva, the mail did not arrive in a peppy red car but in the hands of tired and sweaty postmen; I have no idea what a shepherd's rucksack is (the Bedouin who grazed their herds nearby didn't have any rucksacks); I don't know what this maluah is whose scent wafted over the water; I cannot tell the difference between a field of clover and a bed of midget corn or between an acacia and a sorrel. My parents, who were not on such familiar terms with the native flora, made do with generic definitions – 'a pretty flower,'

'some kind of bush,' 'a thorn.' But Naomi Shemer's songs still thrill me. During the years I was studying abroad, all it took was for me to hear one of Naomi Shemer's classics for my eyes to fill with tears....

"...Something in Shemer's images is growing ever more distant, is evaporating before our eyes, as in the beautiful song that Shemer wrote in 1977, 'A Sign That We Have Not Yet Arrived.' Again and again, the poet asks her anonymous interlocutor if he sees the sights that she cherishes, and again and again, he replies in the negative: 'I don't see a thing, I don't see a thing.'"

Aviad Kleinberg is a professor of history at Tel Aviv University. Translation by Anne Pace

**Questions:**

What implications does this window into an Israeli dispute over myth and reality have for our discussion? In what way is the Israeli conflict over Israel's myth and reality similar or different from the North American discussion over the same issue?



## Source 5: Excerpt from *The Art of Travel*, by Alain de Botton. NY: Pantheon, 2002

### Chapter 1 – On Anticipation

“One question revolves around the relationship between the anticipation of travel and its reality. I came upon a copy of J.K. Huysman's novel *A Rebours*, published in 1884, whose effete and misanthropic hero, the aristocratic Duc des Esseintes, anticipated a journey to London and offered in the process an extravagantly pessimistic analysis of the difference between what we imagine of a place and what can occur when we reach it.

“Huysmans recounts that the Duc des Esseintes lived alone in a vast villa on the outskirts of Paris. He rarely went anywhere to avoid what he took to be the ugliness and stupidity of others. One afternoon in his youth, he had ventured into a nearby village for a few hours and had felt his detestation of people grown fierce. Since then, he had chosen to spend his days alone in bed or in his study, reading the classics of literature and moulding acerbic thoughts about humanity. However, early one morning, the Duc surprised himself by an intense wish to travel to London. The desire came upon him as he sat by the fire reading a volume of Dickens. The book evoked visions of English life which he contemplated at length and grew increasingly keen to see. Unable to withhold his excitement, he ordered his servants to pack his bags, dressed himself in a grey tweed suit, a pair of laced ankle boots, a little bowler hat and a flax-blue Inverness cape and took the next train to Paris. Because he had time to spare before the departure of the London train, he went to Galignani's English bookshop on the Rue de Rivoli and there bought a volume of Baedeker's *Guide to London*. He was thrown into delicious reveries by its terse descriptions of London's attractions. He moved on to a wine bar nearby frequented by a largely English clientele. The atmosphere was out of Dickens: he thought of scenes where Little Dorrit, Dora Copperfield and Tom Pinch's sister Ruth sat in similarly cosy, bright rooms. One customer had Mr Wickfield's white hair and ruddy complexion and the sharp, expressionless features and unfeeling eyes of Mr Tulkinghorn.

“Hungry, Des Esseintes went next to an English tavern in the Rue d'Amsterdam, near the Gare Saint Lazare. It was dark and smoky there, with a line of beer pulls along a counter, which was spread with hams as brown as violins and lobsters the colour of red lead. Seated at small wooden tables were robust Englishwomen with boyish faces, teeth as big as palette knives, cheeks as red as apples and long hands and feet. Des Esseintes found a table and ordered some oxtail soup, a smoked haddock, a helping of roast beef and potatoes, a couple of pints of ale and a chunk of Stilton.

“However, as the moment to board his train approached, along with the chance to turn dreams of London into reality, Des Esseintes was abruptly overcome with lassitude. He thought how wearing it would be actually to go to London, how he would have to run to the station, fight for a porter, board the train, endure an unfamiliar bed, stand in queues, feel cold and move his fragile frame around the sights that Baedeker had so tersely described – and thus soil his dreams: 'What was the good of moving when a person could travel so wonderfully sitting in a chair? Wasn't he already in London, whose smells, weather,



citizens, food and even cutlery were all about him? What could he expect to find over there except fresh disappointments?’

“Still seated at his table, he reflected, ‘I must have been suffering from some mental aberration to have rejected the visions of my obedient imagination and to have believed like any old ninny that it was necessary, interesting and useful to travel abroad.’

“So Des Esseintes paid the bill, left the tavern and took the first train back to his villa, along with his trunks, his packages, his portmanteaux, his rugs, his umbrellas and his sticks – and never left home again.”



# Bibliography

## **Bibliography for additional reading:**

The following readings present facets of mythic and real Israel. They do not necessarily use the terms “myth” and “reality,” but they all relate to different understandings of these concepts.

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- Morris, Benny, “The New Historiography: Israel Confronts its Past” in *Zionism: The Sequel*, edited by Carol Diamant, Hadassah Books 1998

