



## The Philosophers' Retreat

### Exploring the Place of Israel in the lives of American Jews

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*MAKOM's origins are in a bold endeavor to grasp the contours of contemporary Jewish attachments to, and alienation from, Israel. The Philosophers' Retreat (2003) was an attempt to capture and make widely available an assessment of the state of the field of Israel engagement. This document has been used in schools, synagogues and in leadership training programs. Such thinking drives the work of the MAKOM network and it is refined continually in light of emerging developments. MAKOM is a partnership of Jewish communities and the Jewish Agency.*

#### Introduction

In September 2003, Alan Hoffmann, the Director General of the Jewish Agency's Education Department, convened a small group of philosophers, educators and community lay leaders to begin a process to explore the place of Israel in contemporary American Jewish life. Participating in the conversation were three major figures from the world of academia: Prof. Moshe Halbertal (Hebrew University), Prof. Arnold M. Eisen (Stanford University), and Prof. David Ellenson (Hebrew Union College). They were joined by Marion Blumenthal, a prominent and highly respected Jewish lay leader and Chair of MAKOM, Dr Ami Bouganim, the Jewish Agency's Director of Research and Development in Jerusalem, and Jonathan Boyd and Esti Moskovitz

Kalman, MAKOM's educational directors, based in New York and Jerusalem.

MAKOM was conceived by Hoffmann in the context of the Palestinian Intifada that broke out in September 2000, and continues to shake Israel and the entire Jewish world today. Following the years of the Oslo Accords and the lengthy negotiations that culminated at Camp David and Taba in 2000 and 2001, the outbreak of violence and terrorism in Israel prompted several responses. The organized establishment of the Diaspora community - the federations - tended to immediately jump to Israel's defense, using the contemporary images of Jewish suffering to highlight Israel's plight, and to raise funds to support victims of terror.

Their campaigns seemed to mirror those of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, which similarly drew on Jewish suffering (in Israel, the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, etc.), and called upon Diaspora Jews to join in the task of building the Jewish State. In a similar vein, in the aftermath of the horrific suicide bombing at the seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora held mass demonstrations in support of Israel, in an attempt to build a sense of Jewish unity around Israel's plight.

Whilst all of these efforts were undoubtedly important in their own right, they prompted a quiet internal debate within many Diaspora Jewish organizations about whether the campaign messages of the post-Six Day War period were still appropriate today. The combined forces of the peace process in Israel and the intermarriage figures in the Diaspora in the 1990s had begun to bring about a shift in campaign and fundraising language that tended to be much more positive and value-based, even though, throughout this period, the Jewish educational cause never really captured widespread communal interest. Not surprisingly, the return to the language of crisis created concern amongst some Jewish educators, not least because many organizations were raising funds on the back of terrorism in Israel whilst simultaneously continuing to attempt to encourage young Jews to participate in Israel Experience programs. The paradox was stark.

Furthermore, the messages of solidarity and unity from the community's establishment masked the opinions of large sections of the Diaspora Jewish community. Several pieces of research in the 1990s had noted declining levels of attachment to Israel, but it wasn't until the outbreak of the Intifada that those trends began to fully penetrate Jewish consciousness. Whilst some shifted towards the political right, many on the political left struggled to reconcile Ariel Sharon's policies with their own liberal values, in spite of the apparent failure of the land for peace formula.

According to Cohen and Eisen's *The Jew Within*, most moderately - affiliated Jews in the US were somewhat confused about their attachment to Israel before the intifada; the outbreak of violence only seemed to compound this confusion further. Most disturbingly, in stark contrast to what happened in 1967, Diaspora Jewry stopped visiting Israel - indeed, American participation in the Israel Experience, which had never been particularly high in the first place, dropped by a staggering 92%. In essence, the fear of indiscriminate terrorism proved to be a much more powerful force than the value of *ahavat yisrael*.

Furthermore, anti-Israel sentiment in the media and on the university campus resulted in a rise in antisemitism - particularly in Europe - and brought about new challenges and difficulties for Jews everywhere. Particular communal

attention started to focus on the fact that many Jewish students are poorly equipped to deal with anti-Israel threats. Intriguingly then, the political situation served to ensure that Israel was receiving widespread coverage in the international media, and therefore, by extension, in the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere. The very fact that the situation positioned Israel in such a prominent place in people's day-to-day lives, offered the Jewish educational world a chance to open up questions and ideas for Jews to explore. The very fact that the numbers of organized tours to Israel declined so rapidly, served to pose the question of how to induct young Jews into Israel in the new context, and offered an opportunity for Jewish educators in Israel to take some time to reflect on the purpose, or perhaps even the very essence of Israel education. In light of all of these circumstances, Hoffmann began to conceive of MAKOM, a new initiative whose purpose would be to rethink how to approach Israel education.

The meeting in September was one of the first steps in this task. Hoffmann invited the individuals together to consider how the intifada, and all the emotions and opinions it had sparked and uncovered, had affected Israel education. It was clear that the traditional Zionist paradigm was under attack - the notions of Israel as the safe haven for the Jewish People, the solution to antisemitism, the ingatherer of the exiles, the savior of Judaism and Jewish culture, etc., were all being

questioned, not only in the Diaspora, but in the State of Israel itself.

Whilst each of these pillars of the classical Zionist idea was showing signs of decay, no new pillars were being constructed to replace them to ensure that the entire Zionist enterprise didn't come crashing down completely. This was Alan's mode: to check the state of the existing pillars, and to resolve whether to repair them, or replace them. The deliberations on these two days were intentionally designed to avoid the realm of educational practicalities; they were rather to focus entirely on the philosophical relationship between Israel and American Jewry, in both its historical and contemporary contexts. The themes and the issues that were raised over the course of the two days are outlined below. They are divided into two separate sections to reflect the two days of the retreat.

## SECTION ONE

### 1) Defining the Problem: The Relationship between American Jews and Israel

A guiding assumption punctuated the two day 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. While they may be familiar with parts of Israel - particularly the small section of Jerusalem that stretches from Rehavia to Talpiot and closely resembles the American Jewish community - they appear to have little connection with contemporary Israeli culture, and are often deeply ambivalent about, or even alienated by Israeli politics. Fundamentally, it was claimed, many amongst this group appear to lack a comprehensive Jewish worldview that integrates Israel into their own personal sense of Jewishness. If this is the case amongst the committed core, how much more so must it be applicable to the majority of American Jews?

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 American and Israeli Jews - Americans are largely Ashkenazi and Western, whereas Israeli society is becoming more and more Middle Eastern.

As a result, the differences tend to be emphasized when American Jews encounter Israeli Jews - 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 amongst some American Jews that they don't count 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; 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 provoke limited interest in the American Jewish community.

When analyzing this concern in greater sociological and historical depth, a number of factors were identified as possible causes or related issues. On a "*kishkes*" level, it was felt that many American Jews are actually profoundly connected to Israel, but their day-to-day connection is both distant and superficial. No more than an absolute maximum of 42% of American Jews have actually visited Israel. Israel rarely features as a central subject in American Jewish literature. In spite of countless significant changes in American Jewish liturgy since 1948, very few of those changes reflect the reality of the State of Israel's existence. And Israel is rarely mentioned in American Jewish theological

writings - it barely features in Heschel, Soloveitchik makes only very occasional references to it, and it is utterly peripheral in Borowitz.

Furthermore, even **American Zionism itself is dramatically different to Classical Zionism.** When Louis Brandeis brought political Zionism to the United States, he translated it to make it more palatable to American Jews. He removed the whole concept of *shlilat hagolah* (negation of the Diaspora), because the idea that American Jews couldn't live a full Jewish life in the United States made little sense to them. Moreover, he argued that Zionism was designed for those Jews without a home and without opportunities - i.e. not for American Jews who have both. According to Brandeis, Zionism in America was far more concerned with enabling persecuted Jews from around the world to find a home in Israel, than encouraging American Jews to make aliyah.

Not dissimilarly, Solomon Shechter issued a courageous endorsement of Ahad Ha'Am's cultural form of Zionism in 1906. Again the concept of *shlilat hagolah* was absent, and in Shechter's writings, Judaism as a religious tradition was to be revived in the Diaspora with the help of the Hebrew cultural revival taking place in Israel. As he argued, Israel would create Jewish culture, but American Jews would take responsibility for maintaining the religious tradition. To prove the point further, Mordecai Kaplan believed that the role of Zionism was to help Jewish civilization throughout the world.

So, in short, on an ideological level, American Jews have never been Zionists in the same way as Israeli Jews.

Indeed, not only was aliyah-based Zionism not about American Jews, it was almost anathema to the American Jewish story. Historically, in contrast to the classical Zionists, American Jews elected to flee from persecution in Europe - to effectively "escape from Jewish history". On this level, they were extremely successful - they did escape Jewish historical forces, and the traditional rules of *galut* (persecution, nonacceptance, powerlessness, etc.) simply didn't apply in the United States.

During the first few decades of the State's existence, and particularly in the post-1967 period, the purpose of Israel was often to demonstrate in the clearest possible way to American Jews that *Am Yisrael Chai* - that the people of Israel is alive and well, and a force to be reckoned with. It enabled them, in the aftermath of the Shoah, to once again stand up and be proud of their Judaism. However, it may be that Israel's current situation and public profile threatens this comfortable position, and represents "Jewish history knocking on the door," and almost forcing American Jews out of their historical comfort zones. Paradoxically, if Israel were to achieve normalcy, as it appeared to be doing during the 1990s, American Jews might be able to continue to escape from Jewish history, but would lose one of the key tools that many use to construct their own

identity and sense of pride.

Today, the young and engaged members of the American Jewish community are more marked by their levels of spiritual activity than their connections with Israel - according to research conducted by Steven M. Cohen, approximately 50% of American Jews are spiritually active in some way or another, in contrast to only 33% who feel very connected to Israel. Whereas a generation ago Jews connected to Judaism through the doors of Israel and the Shoah, today there is a **reverse causality**: attachment to Israel appears to rise only as attachment to Judaism deepens.

In some respects, young Israeli Jews mirror young American Jews. They also no longer feel instinctively anxious in the way that the post-Shoah generation did, and in spite of the growing tensions in the world, don't feel anywhere near as vulnerable. Similarly, Israeli and American Jews in the 1950s and 1960s regarded their Judaism as being connected to nation-building; the contemporary generation in both places no longer feels this. Indeed, the reverse causality described as an American phenomenon in the paragraph above, is equally an Israeli Jewish phenomenon too. It is unclear whether this reverse causality ought to be regarded as an opportunity or a threat. Is it problematic that American Jews have begun to define themselves more and more religiously, whilst simultaneously developing less and less interest in having a cultural connection with

Israel? Should we be concerned that they appear to need traditional Torah more than Amichai's poetry to fulfill their own spiritual needs?

One clear distinction ought to be drawn between Israel and American Jewry. Israel is fundamentally a **collective** project, whereas American Jewry is increasingly focused on the **individual** and his/her quest for personal meaning. This difference seems to challenge our ability to create a common discourse. Investing in Hebrew teaching in the United States might help to enhance the scope for a conversation to take place, but ironically, if American Jews were to become Hebrew speakers, they would actually be saying something about their Jewish identity that they don't want to say - namely that the collective informs who they are as individuals.

## 2) The impact of generational change

It was striking to note how the post-1967 generation's experience of Israel differs from the experience of Jews who were shaped by 1948 and/or 1967. Where the older generation grew up experiencing the thrills of independence, and the tension and drama of the military victory in 1967, Entebbe and Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the younger generation is unable to draw on similar moments. Indeed, for anyone born post 1967, their formative experiences have been the Lebanon War, Sabra and Chatilla, both intifadas, the Gulf War and the assassination of Rabin.

As a result, their Israel is very different to that of their parents and grandparents (see appendix 1).

### 3a) The pillars of Israel, and the question of a shared international Jewish theology or philosophy

If the consecutive generational experiences of Israel are so vastly different and dynamic, is it possible to define the structural fundamentals of Israel that cannot be effected or influenced by the dramatic winds of changes in the Middle East over the years? What can we say about the guiding foundations of Israel that remain as powerful today as they were in 1948?

Three core pillars were identified:

- i) Israel is the only place in the world where the Jewish People has decided to take its political fate into its own hands;
- ii) Israel is the only place in the world in which total Jewish space exists;
- iii) Israel is the only place in the world that creates the possibility of a vibrant Hebrew culture.

The question that immediately emerged was whether Diaspora Jews could be involved in any way in any of these three pillars. If these are the three principles upon which Israel stands and Diaspora Jewry has no direct involvement with any of them, this formulation might simply represent a conversation stopper.

Alternatively, perhaps these three pillars could be used as a basis upon which to help design a positive form

of Judaism that would work for all of world Jewry. The establishment of the Jewish State is the greatest success story of the Jewish People - the problem might be that we simply haven't yet developed a general Jewish philosophy or theology that underpins it and can be applied to Jews everywhere.

Of course, the very distinction between Israel and the Diaspora - or certainly between the classical Zionist ideas of statehood and exile - may no longer apply in the way it once did. If Diaspora is understood as the experience of homelessness, few, if any Jews are homeless today, so there is **no such thing as the classical Zionist notion of Diaspora any more**. Indeed, the only thing that seems to define the Diaspora today is *yom tov sheni!* The reality is that American Jews have taken themselves out of the cycle of *galut* (exile) and *geula* (redemption), so that the time paradigm - the idea that exile is a temporary phenomenon that will be solved in time by the redemptive process - is completely irrelevant. Given this shift, the challenge to create a **philosophy of Israel that could become an international Jewish philosophy** - if it is indeed even possible - may be the vital task of the contemporary generation.

What might this new philosophy include? Zionism was an attempt to improve the political fate of the Jewish People, much more than it was the kind of cultural project Ahad Ha'Am had in mind. Nevertheless, Israel does have a huge cultural advantage over the

Diaspora. It has created a Hebrew reality, it invests state funds in it through education, and it reproduces Jewish cultures. However, it is still unclear what sort of Judaism will ultimately emerge from Israel, and this ambiguity only reflects the greater ambiguity around the question of what we really want Israel to do for American Jews.

Does Israel need American Jewry? How can American Jews contribute to the Jewish State? Four levels of contribution were suggested:

- i) Israel needs American Jewry's support - indeed, this is a life and death issue. Without American Jewish financial, political and moral support, it is questionable whether Israel can survive.
- ii) We ought to be working towards the notion of Peoplehood, and the idea that we will be recognizable as one people.
- iii) America needs Israel to ensure the continuity of the American Jewish community.
- iv) American Jewry is a source of demographic potential for Israel.

Perhaps the bottom line is that the Jewish People, both in Israel and the Diaspora, have a **joint responsibility for the reproduction, deepening and enrichment of Jewish civilization**. The challenge is to see whether we can develop a shared notion of Jewish literacy.

### 3b) Challenging the pillars

Are the three pillars outlined above correct? As the participants in the retreat reflected on the earlier thesis, a critique began to emerge. It was argued that the first of the pillars - taking fate into our own hands in our own land - is actually a somewhat mythical notion. The State of Israel is not entirely in control of its own destiny; indeed, it is significantly dependent upon the American government and the American Jewish community. It is certainly easy to argue that the existence of the State of Israel gives the Jewish People more power than they have had in at least two millennia, but it would be incorrect to assume that the fate and destiny of the Jewish People is now totally in the hands of the State of Israel.

Furthermore, we should not necessarily assume that political self reliance is the best strategy to maintain the future of the Jewish People - there is a tendency today to assume that it is, but a strong critique of Zionism existed in the first half of the twentieth century, and has certainly started to re-emerge in recent years. The dominant view - in the Jewish world and around the retreat table - was that the idea of a strong, Jewish, self reliant entity is certainly a good thing, but it was argued that it is always important to consider the cost of self reliance. Part of Israel education ought to involve recognition of the fact that self-reliance means paying a very serious price; we should continually seek to learn what that price is, and recall

why we were and are willing to pay it.

The second pillar - the creation of total Jewish public space - is also somewhat problematic. Israel is certainly a different space from the Diaspora, but the notion that it is a singular and all encompassing Jewish public space no longer holds (if it indeed ever did), because there are so many different expressions of Jewishness that exist there.

And the third pillar - the creation of a vibrant Hebrew culture - was also considered inaccurate. While there is certainly a continuum of Hebrew culture from Bialik to Agnon to Amichai and beyond, Israel today is actually a multi-cultural space. It is not simply the place where a singular vibrant Jewish culture develops; it is also a place where other cultures exist and grow.

Following the critique, the three pillars could be rewritten as follows: "Israel has taken upon itself a great historical responsibility - to create one place in the world...

- i) ...where the Jewish People benefits from, and pays the price for its attempt to take its political fate into its own hands;
- ii) ...where Jewish public spaces exist;
- iii) ...that creates the possibility of vibrant Hebrew cultures.

The task today must be to bring Jews from Israel and the Diaspora into this challenge, so that they can all be involved in it."

It was noted that the pillars could be equally true for Israelis as for American Jews, and perhaps they should be utilized as a tool for the conversation between them. One of the emerging questions was whether the discussion ought to be about the place of Israel in (i) American Jewish life; (ii) Diaspora Judaism; or (iii) contemporary Judaism?

Even with the original text amended in this way, a core issue remained. It was claimed that many American Jews simply don't want to enter into the challenge. Indeed, it is the absolute opposite of what they want. American Jews, as was stated above, want the myth of Israel, not the reality, and any attempt to bring them into the reality is likely to fail. Perhaps the only solution is to find some common neutral ground for Israeli and Diaspora Jews that doesn't touch on the realities of either place, but rather focuses on either shared interests and commonalities or differences. Jewish educational encounters between Israeli and Diaspora Jews don't need to focus only on the *m'shutaf* (shared); they can equally explore the *shoneh* (differences) if it will serve the purpose of helping each to understand the other.

### 3c) What can Israel offer American Jews?: an initial take

If the assumption above is correct - that American Jews don't want to be involved in the realities of contemporary Israel - is there anything Israel can offer American Jews that would help to strengthen the partnership?

Two ideas were suggested:

i) American Jews have to care about the future of the Jewish People as a whole. Only once they have reached that level will it become self evident that they have to care about Israel, as it is impossible to care about the present and future of the Jewish People without caring about the fate of Israel. Therefore, Israel has to offer American Jews an opportunity to engage in a profound conversation about Jewish Peoplehood;

ii) Israel has the potential to offer American Jews fundamental experiences that strengthen the notion that it is good and beneficial to be Jewish in a way that American Judaism can never hope to replicate. Israel should seek to help American Jews to value these experiences, so that Israel becomes a source of meaning in American Jews' lives, and American Jews increasingly begin to seek out these types of experiences.

#### 4) In search of an overarching conceptual framework: model one

On reflection, it appeared that four possibilities had been suggested that together might form an overall framework around which to build an Israel education agenda.

The first is **psychological** - that Israel has the potential to help American Jews think about and reflect on the nature of their identity. The second is **theological** - that we ought to be working to create a new Jewish theology that takes into consideration the

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establishment and the ongoing existence of the State of Israel. The third is **political** - the notion that we should work towards the creation of a genuine political entity or framework that has a compelling vision to unite the Jewish People. And the fourth is **philosophical** - that we ought to bring Jewish thought into a multi-disciplinary discussion to position Israel as a source of meaning. In relation to this fourth point, it was argued that for Judaism to be genuinely meaningful, it has to speak to the issues of the present day. Judaism and Jewish thought has to be fully engaged in contemporary issues, and currently tends to avoid them.

Reflecting on the political nature of the State of Israel and the religiosity/quest for meaning and Jewish relevance amongst American Jews, it was suggested that Israel should not be seen as a religious problem. Questions like "what is a Jewish State?" and "how should a Jewish State handle power?" etc., are all questions that are informed by the religious imagination. The real challenge of Israel is about the connection between politics and religion, and the problem seems to be that no one really tackles it.

#### 5) "Competing bets" and "high stakes"

Up to this point, the conversation had focused primarily on the nature of American Jewry's relationship with Israel, but Israeli Jewry's relationship with Israel is clearly a closely connected issue. Indeed, it could be argued that Israel and

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America are competing bets on the future of the Jewish People. By living in America, American Jewry is making a choice, and is hedging its bets that Jewish life is sustainable in the long-term. Israelis are similarly making their choice, choosing to believe that Jewish life is more sustainable there.

One of the vital differences between the two bets is that life in Israel is “high stakes”, or in Durkheim’s words, “the serious life” - it involves much more tangible opportunities and risks than life in America, where the choices one makes tend to be more bland. Put simply, living in Israel is much more dangerous than living in America. Given this reality, should Jewish education lie to Jews? Should it convey images of Israel that are soft and mythical in order to encourage them to come, or should it convey the reality in spite of the risks that may hold? One opinion was that we ought to embrace the world of “high stakes” - all successful Jewish educational initiatives turned up the heat on the difficult issues. By working in this way, people are brought into the real conversation, rather than a synthetic one. An alternative perspective offered was that the challenge may be to think through and re-convey the tension between this real conception of Israel, and the notion of Israel as a tourist destination where Jews can live a normal and happy life.

## 6) Section one: summary

From the initial description of [Philosophers’ Retreat / Boyd & Moskovitz](#)

American Jewry, four key points should be noted:

- i) American Jews don’t want to become Israelis;
- ii) American Jews are not in exile;
- iii) American Jews do not see any existential deficiencies in their lives;
- iv) American Jews see Israel as their life force- as proof of the resilience of the Jewish People.

From there, the conversation shifted to consideration of the two political, historiosophical and cultural means of living as a Jew in the contemporary world. American Jews say that they have their solution to the question of how to live a Jewish life in the contemporary world, which they believe is both Jewishly and politically preferable to living in Israel. They are attracted by the exciting experiment going on in Israel, but are happy to watch how things unfold from the comfort of the United States. This is somewhat puzzling. It’s a kind of empathetic look at a completely different experience that American Jews are neither part of, nor share in.

The second key issue that was discussed grew out of American Jewry’s direct experience of Israel. The question of what Israel is - when it is not embroiled in the upheavals of politics - was posed; i.e. what is the Israel that we wish to talk about? In exploring that question, an attempt was made to articulate and clarify the structural basis of the State of Israel. Ultimately, the question posed was:

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given that Jewish life in Israel is very different to Jewish life in America from both a political and religious perspective, how can the Israel experiment (comprised of self reliance and political control as a people in their own land, public Jewish spaces, and authentic Hebrew cultures and language) be an effective part of the personal imagination and experience of the American Jew?

Interestingly, during the course of the discussion, it was unclear what the overall objectives of the conversation were, and what expectations existed among the participants. There was an assumption that Israel ought to be central in Jewish life in the Diaspora, even though there was agreement about the notion of "competing bets" - that each community was betting that its way of Jewish life was sustainable. Perhaps diversification is the best option?

In spite of this, two key possibilities were discussed. On the basic level, there was an eagerness to engage in the important Jewish endeavor of enabling American Jews to care about Israel by reestablishing their feelings of brotherhood and family. On the higher level, there was a shift into the realm of *ki mitzion tetzei torah* - into the realm where lots of things come out of Israel (both good and bad) that can impact American Jewry, so it is in their interests to get involved in shaping what happens there.

The basic level argues that

American and Israeli Jews can benefit from one another in terms of Jewish civilization; the higher level notes that Israel defines much of Jewish life everywhere because it is the public face of the Jewish people, so American Jewry is called upon to be part of it. The basic level is *brit yeud* (covenant of faith) and it speaks of two experiments - that there are only two viable ways for Jewish civilization to survive in the modern world. The higher level is *brit goral* (covenant of fate) - it fundamentally understands the interdependence of American Jews and Israel as a simple fact of Israel's existence, and it argues that we are a people and our collective fate is tied up in Israel existence.

## Section Two

### 7) The place of complexity

American Jews rarely appear to engage in sophisticated discussions about Israel. There is a great deal of emphasis on *hasbara*, which is important but often simplistic, and is unlikely to achieve the task of genuinely locating Israel in the hearts and minds of American Jews. Indeed, there is a fear of complexity - those American Jews who are aware of post-Zionist literature and the findings of the new historians, etc., tend to be anxious of it. Judaism in America is often very personalized and individual - its role is to make me feel good - so younger American Jews are turning away from Israel when it becomes difficult for them to feel good about the place. Indeed, modern western

culture has created a norm out of 'the comfortable life', where deep engagement in anything is burdensome. Israel's legitimacy appears to have become dependent upon its moral perfection, which is outrageous. The question is whether young American Jews can be engaged in a serious conversation about Israel that brings them into the complexity, and allows them to become "critical participants." In short, can the conversation shift from *hasbara* (advocacy) to *havana* (understanding)?

However, idealization of Israel is a critical part of American Zionism - Israel without idealization on both sides will be a very different place to the one we've known so far. As a result, the question would perhaps be better expressed as how to enable American Jews to engage with Israel when politically it is in a moral quandary.

### 8) The problematic nature of spirituality

The growing trend to express one's Judaism in a spiritual way - both in America and Israel - was viewed as both apolitical and ahistorical, "soft religion" to the core, and extremely problematic for Israel education. Spirituality tends to emphasize self-meaning, and is far less concerned with assuming responsibility for, and commitment to the political wellbeing of the Jewish People.

One of the retreat participants shared a recent experience when a Reform Jewish educator had pointed

out how difficult it is to work with converts who come from traditions that don't have a notion of "the land". Whilst this raised a problematic issue in and of itself, the more disturbing concern came from a comment made in response to it - that maybe a time had come to craft a Judaism without land. It was suggested that this kind of opinion is one of the stops on the spiritual track.

### 9) Myth, reality and the place of longing

One of the recurring themes throughout the two day retreat was the issue of myth and reality - whether to focus primarily on Israel as mythical place (in the way Jews did during the two thousand years of exile), or to embrace its contemporary complexity and "high stakes" nature.

As this issue was explored, there was some discussion about where the myth of Israel came from. Its roots appear to be primarily in religious practice and the liturgy, and the realities of present day Israel challenge the liturgical myth in a way that is often extremely bewildering. Perhaps the challenge today is to seek out a connection between the liturgy and reality?

One of the key mythical ideas related to Israel is the notion of "longing". Historically, the Jewish People longed to return to Zion, and wrote lovingly about it in a whole host of Jewish texts. But what does it mean today to long for a State that actually exists? Longing is a

critical idea in Judaism - without it, there may be room to seek our physical survival, but Judaism as a whole is condemned. It may be that reawakening the feelings of longing amongst Jews in Israel and the Diaspora is important because it will help people to envision Israel.

Of course, it may be that longing in and of itself is not enough. Perhaps it is love of Israel that is the critical factor without which we cannot survive. If this is true, the emerging question is whether it is possible to educate towards love?

In response, it was suggested that today, when Jews talk about Israel, they talk about both the reality and the myth. The problem may be that we neither can, nor do we want to separate them. The Zionism of *Sefer Devarim* (Deuteronomy), for example, maintains on the one hand that God gave us the Torah so that we could create a just and ideal community and society based upon our values rather than someone else's, and, on the other, that presents something akin to a totalitarian state that bangs on the table and speaks of getting rid of the Canaanites. The reality in Israel today concerns how a living Jewish People that has started to build a vibrant Hebrew and Jewish culture, can thrive in a way that the Diaspora cannot match, whilst working out how to shun some external influences and embrace others. Trying to separate these visions of Israel from these realities would be both helpless and foolish - indeed, it is a dialectic or paradox that we ought to welcome.

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On the Jewish notion of longing, it was counter-argued that this idea was not simply about Israel, but rather about the creation of a better world. The point of the Jewish People's existence is to do something, and longing for redemption is part of the driving force that encourages this.

Nevertheless, it was argued that it is still possible to long for Israel, despite the fact that the State now exists. Its very existence ensures that all its debasements are on public show, but it is still possible to long for the State to handle its political responsibility to care for the political fate of the Jewish People in a prudent way - to perform that goal in a good way so that we are able to look ourselves in the mirror afterwards. At this stage, it's still not clear if Israel can do that. It's also possible to long for Israel to be a place where different cultures can exist side by side, where minorities can flourish, and where the state deals with all favorably. But these ideals are challenged by some harsh realities - both the physical survival of the Jewish People, and the constitutional survival of the democratic state are in question.

### 10) What does Israel have to offer American Jews: a second take

One of the key issues today is that, given these harsh realities in Israel, we still need to consider what Israel has to sell to American Jews? In attempting to sharpen the thinking discussed earlier, it was argued that Israelis have taken on a

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responsibility for the whole Jewish People - i.e. to establish a self-sovereign reality to look after Jews worldwide, and to build a state that will allow for Jewish culture to flourish. For both of these objectives, Israelis are paying a huge price. But they are doing it not only for themselves, but also for Diaspora Jews, so Israelis want Jews around the world to share in the hard labor of doing this. Diaspora Jews don't have to live in Israel, but Israelis are calling on them to **share in the burden and the hope** of this worthwhile, most daring, complicated endeavor of Jewish life. Serious Jews, it was claimed, cannot avoid sharing in this work.

In contrast, the American Jewish experiment in living as a Jew in the contemporary world is tied up with the privileged position American Jews find themselves in. It may be important that American Jews recognize just how privileged they are. It may also be important that they recognize the shortcomings of the American Jewish experiment - that it doesn't create Jewish public space, it speaks in English, and it doesn't have a state machinery that supports the creation of Jewish cultures. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to argue that American Jews are in "exile" in the way that that term has been traditionally understood.

However, the very notion of being in exile always provided Jews with an alternative paradigm. So Israel today should continue to play that role - it should be regarded as an alternative experiment that can be

learned from. Indeed, that is the role Israel has been playing - it has helped American Jews to feel more pride in their identity, and has heightened the fullness and presence of Jewish life in the States. However, that in no way suggests that Israeli Jews cannot learn from American Jews too. In short, American Jews should see Israel as a necessary, worthwhile project, and should find ways to share in its burdens and hopes.

What does "sharing" mean? How can American Jews share in the task? Three suggestions were offered, ranging from the most basic to the most sophisticated:

- i) to find ways to participate on a basic emotional level in the joys, sorrows, burdens and hopes of the Jewish People;
- ii) to offer political support and lobbying on behalf of Israel;
- iii) to try to make an impression on Israeli society by shaping reality so that it evolves in different and better ways.

It would be a mistake to suggest that one's Jewishness should be dependent upon sharing the burdens and hopes of Israel. Rather, the objective should be that part of one's own Jewish self definition becomes to share the burdens and hopes of the Israel experiment. One's religious life may be an important part of this. On the most basic level, Diaspora Jews in the deepest sense of that term (i.e. people who claims that Judaism is a Diaspora religion) should recognize that they are talking from a

privileged 'non exile' position (i.e. they are not in exile in the traditional sense of that term). On a more serious level, they should ask whether their own religious life is transformed in any way by the existence of an alternative paradigm

- i.e. how the existence of Israel has served to make American Jewish life richer, fuller, more embodied, etc.

### 11) The limitations of conceptual frameworks

One of the core objectives of the whole two day retreat was to begin to develop a conceptual framework, or several conceptual frameworks, which could help to guide MAKOM's future educational practice. At this point in the deliberations, however, it was suggested that the kind of conceptual frameworks we were looking for may be limited, because the type of bond that is desirable is created in the same way as one creates a bond with one's children. The question of how to build that intimacy is probably beyond any conceptual framework. Structurally, it may simply be useful to recognize that Israel has two advantages over the Diaspora: (i) it created Jewish public space that it has to assume responsibility over; and (ii) it has a State machinery that allows for the development of Jewish cultures. Perhaps one of the keys for success will be to look at what can be gained from these facts.

### 12) Building relationships and familiarity

It was pointed out that no real

attempt has yet been made to structure a reciprocal exchange between Israel and Diaspora. If the objective is to create higher levels of familiarity between Jews in Israel and America, perhaps we should be calling for more opportunities for Jews from Israel and the Diaspora to speak to one another and to meet one another. The only way we can ensure that our children have an emotional connection with one another is if they have regular opportunities to do this. If they are actually part of a 'family', it happens naturally. In short, *mifgashim* are critical.

It was pointed out that people often tend to establish bonds very quickly when they are placed in unfamiliar circumstances. The kind of intimacy that is desirable can also probably only be created if it is contextualized properly - people need to fully understand why they have been brought together.

### 13) Bringing the core ideas together: the four 'P's'

Up to this point it was noted that four key ideas (the four 'P's') seemed to have been discussed, which together might serve as an overarching framework:

i) **Peoplehood**: the idea that we are one people involved in two (or more) separate but inter-connected experiments in how to live as a Jew in the modern world. Our fate is tied to developments in both places - if Israel were to cease to exist, it would be a disaster to American Jews; if American Jewry

was to assimilate, it would be a disaster for Israel. We have much to learn from one another, and the best way to do this is through spending time with one another and developing familiarity;

ii) **Power:** traditionally, the Jewish People has been powerless. Today, we have both sovereign power in the State of Israel, and greater political power than we ever dreamed was possible in the United States. One of the great challenges of the contemporary period concerns how the Jewish People ought to use this newfound power.

iii) **Participation:** 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 about how American Jews chose 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.

iv) **Purpose:** traditionally, Israel was always tied up with our sense of longing and purpose - it was a central motif in our messianic dream. One of the things we may have lost since the establishment of the State of Israel is that notion of 'longing', hence the increasing levels of questioning about the purpose of Jewish life, why be Jewish, etc. Israel has to exist to do something; Jews have to exist to do something, both on a particular and universal level - i.e. to do something both to/for ourselves and

to effect change in the wider world. In short, perhaps the ideal Israel educational program is one that combines all four of these elements: 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. Through this process, we not only get to know one another better thereby strengthening the bonds between us, we also further the particular and universal aims of Judaism and the Jewish People.

It was added that all four of these ideas should not be absolutes, but should rather be presented as parts of a continuum - i.e. peoplehood versus individuality, controlling our destiny through power versus accepting our destiny through powerlessness, participation versus escape, Israel as source of purpose versus Israel as insignificant to my being.

#### 14) Reflections on the four 'P's'

Are these four ideas any different from our current understanding of Israel education? One difference is that the idea of a continuum moves us from a position of certainty to one that is more ambiguous than it used to be. The second key difference is that this articulation claims that American and Israeli Jews are actually much more similar than we really thought in the past. Israelis used to see American Jews as the caretaker of the Jewish museum. American Jews allowed Israelis to talk to them in that way, because they realized that Israelis

needed to believe that in order to carry on. Israelis saw themselves as the Jews of the future, and whilst American Jews thought that was silly, they let Israelis believe it.

This new conception calls for an end to all of that. Instead, we ought to have a shared sense of purpose, that our shared power ought to be used prudently, and that both sides need to see something larger than themselves to participate in, in order to get involved. This moves us away from Israel as the central pillar and towards the ideas of peoplehood and reciprocity, and challenges American Jewry's current notions of what it means to be Jewish - i.e. that Israelis are, by definition, more Jewish, and that to be a Diaspora Jew means to choose a hyphenated identity as a matter of principle. One cannot argue any more that Israel is a greater degree of that which American Jews are a lesser degree. If Israel = better, we should all be there. This formulation has been the key problem of Diaspora Israel education to date.

Of course, many Israelis may not view things in this way - rather than regarding themselves as more 'Jewish' because they live in Israel, a significant proportion see themselves as simply 'Israeli'. Perhaps this is part of the conversation that needs to take place.

A question was also raised about whether Peoplehood was actually the fundamental of the four 'P's', and whether the other three were subcategories. Furthermore, this

model seems to point towards a discussion of both the differences and the similarities between American and Israeli Jews, but perhaps the desirable and workable model of Jewish Peoplehood is one that principally explores the differences. This is not 'we are one' - it may rather be about taking the three pillars described above, and asking both sides to look in the mirror in order to explore difference. It was counter argued that the conversation actually needs to be complex. It had to be made up of several contrasting elements - competition, pluralism, authenticity, honesty, humility, etc.

#### 15) On centrality and the legitimization of the other

As the discussion moved away from the notion of 'centrality' and towards the idea of 'Peoplehood', the retreat participants took a moment to consider whether that was definitely the desired direction. In response, it was noted that while the word 'centrality' may be wrong, it would be a mistake to go to the other extreme and say that there is a Jewish People comprised of various communities, e.g. in LA, New York, Tel Aviv, Paris, etc., and that all are of equal weight. A qualitative difference does exist between Israel and the rest of the world. To some degree, it depends on which disciplinary lens one looks through. When we relate to Israel theologically, it is undoubtedly more important than the Diaspora. Politically too, it is more central today than Diaspora Jewish organizations. However, culturally,

Jewish creativity is clearly possible in both places, and historically, the Diaspora experience has probably had a greater impact on the nature of contemporary Judaism than Israel has.

Nevertheless, the shift away from 'centrality' and towards 'Peoplehood' was not seen as a revolutionary step, but was seen as being very different from what has existed in the past in terms of the conversational tone. The new conversation is the complex meeting between liturgy/longing and the reality. Those inside of and committed to the conversation are likely to welcome the complexity of it; those outside of it, or on the border of it, will find it frightening.

The strongest critique of centrality that was expressed called for a much greater sense of political and cultural humility. It was considered impossible to claim with any certainty today that the future of the Jewish People resides in Israel, and equally impossible to claim that it resides in the Diaspora. So, politically, structurally, it is foolish to come with declarations if one looks at the situation honestly. **Diversifying investments** is the best policy. The Diaspora cannot be a mere footnote - we need to recognize the political interdependence that exists between Israel and American Jews. Indeed, the life of Israelis would be diminished without the existence of Diaspora Jewry, and certainly without the Diaspora Jewish historical existence. The core issue is to accept the importance of the

Israel project, but in a humble, honest and pluralistic way, on both the political and cultural levels.

It was pointed out that Emil Fackenheim once argued that the loss of either community could be compared with losing one child of two. Life continues in the other one, but it is diminished in ways that are impossible to understand in advance. Nevertheless, Israel does and always should maintain some kind of centrality or primacy because of its theological position.

Some were concerned about whether Israelis could legitimize two different ways of living Judaism. They wondered whether it is really possible to articulate a Jewish public discourse that legitimizes both Jewish experiences. The Diaspora may be a great political model that created and maintained Jewish identity for 2,000 years, but not all Diaspora Jews have the privilege of living in the United States today. So what can each side realistically concede to the other?

A few concluding comments were made. Perhaps, it was suggested, we could make more demands on American Jews - that there are certain things one is obligated to do as an American Jew. Maybe one of the things that is currently missing in Israel education is an opportunity to examine the nature of Diaspora Jewish life in light of the existence of the State of Israel. A theory was proffered that in the same way that the religious spectrum and denominational clarity has become

increasingly grey, so we should accept a similar lack of clarity on the Israel/Diaspora continuum. Next, it was noted that, if most American Jews are convinced of their own inauthenticity (i.e. religiously, authentic Jews are orthodox, and nationally, authentic Jews are Israelis), most American Jews already see themselves as 'less than'. Therefore, there's a pre-education that needs to come before Israel education. Finally, concern was expressed about how the many intermarried Jews who are involved in American Jewish institutions might deal with the Peoplehood idea. People come into Judaism because of religion, not Peoplehood. Perhaps, it was suggested, Jewish literature might be a valuable source for educating around this issue, as much of it captures the ambiguity.

## 16) Summary

Reflecting back on the two days, a number of important ideas were raised. For the sake of user-friendliness, we shall list the ones that emerged for us in order to help move the conversation forward. The explanations of each idea are not necessarily direct reflections of what was discussed, and are included only for the sake of aiding understanding.

i) **Myth and reality:** the ongoing debate of whether to teach Israel as myth or Israel as contemporary reality, or some combination thereof.

ii) **Jewish history knocking on our**

door: the idea that, historically, American Jews attempted to escape from Jewish history, unlike Israelis who chose to embrace it. Now, the situation in Israel is overflowing into American Jewish life, causing American Jews to feel that Jewish history may be catching up with them.

iii) **The sociological portrait** of American Jewry's relationship with Israel: profound emotional and mythical connection (which has served to make American Jews proud of their Judaism), but very distant day to day real connection.

iv) **Classical Zionism and American Zionism:** notion that key differences existed between them: American Zionism removed *shililat hagolah*, and regarded its purpose as being to help homeless Jews - not American Jews - to find a home in Israel.

v) *Shililat hagolah*: the ongoing debate about the place of the Diaspora in Jewish life and thought, and how the continuing existence of both the State of Israel and Diaspora Jewry affect Jewish identity in both places.

vi) **Centrality of Israel:** is Israel at the center of the Jewish world, a community like any other community, or some middle position between these two poles? Is there a difference between theological centrality and other types of centrality?

vii) **Longing:** what is the place of longing in Jewish life in a world in which a Jewish State exists? We

used to long for the return to Zion; now that has happened, what replaces it?

viii) **Generational changes** in perception: The pre1967 generation grew up with strong images of mythical Israel that felt real; the contemporary American generation is growing up with more complex images that are much harder to integrate comfortably and positively into one's Jewish identity.

ix) **Power and powerlessness**: the contrast between the position of world Jewry before the establishment of the State of Israel, and after it, and the growth of Jewish political power in the United States. How should we use the power we have?

x) **Israel as Jewish public space**: one of the key features of Jewish life in Israel that creates feelings of Jewish openness and creates opportunity for Hebrew and Jewish cultural expression.

xi) **Israel as Hebrew and Jewish culture**: Ahad Ha'Amian notion that a Jewish center in Israel would create a vibrant Hebrew culture, which would in turn serve to enhance Jewish culture worldwide. Hebrew culture hasn't penetrated American Jewish life - can it do so?

xii) **Is America galut?**: if galut is traditionally understood as exile, homelessness and powerlessness, can America really be described in that way? Is galut a place or a condition?

xiii) **Peoplehood**: are we one people? Can we create that sense? Does the notion of Jewish Peoplehood diminish the notion of Israel's centrality? Is Peoplehood about shared similarities, or the dignity of difference?

xiv) The four 'P's': **Peoplehood, power, participation and purpose**: are these four concepts the fundamentals of the new paradigm - one people using its shared power to participate together to achieve a shared purpose?

xv) **A shared cultural literacy, theology or philosophy**: is it possible to create a shared philosophy of Jewish life based on shared ideas as a means of enhancing our collective sense of Peoplehood?

xvi) **Israel as site for identity clarification, reinforcement and meaning**: should this continue to be Israel's purpose for Diaspora Jews?

xvii) **Israel as high stakes**: the idea that Jewish life in Israel is harsh and real, that Israel is at the forefront of Jewish life, for good and for bad. In contrast, American Jewish life appears peaceful, safe and secure, also for good and for bad.

xviii) ***Brit yeud and brit goral***: are American Jews tied to Israel simply through the sharing of faith and religion, or because their fate is intrinsically connected to Israel's? What kind of covenant is desirable? What kind of covenant is teachable?

xix) **Israel: disembodied place, or**

**personally embodied force?:** American Jews tend to see Israel as a distant geographical place, rather than an internal force that obligates them in some way.

xx) From *hasbara* to *havana*: the proposed need to move the conversation about Israel away from *hasbara*, and towards a more nuanced and complex discussion designed to help engage the individual.

xxi) **Can American Jews participate in Israel?:** the question of whether American Jews need more of a stake and say in Israeli affairs, and if so, how?

xxii) **Spirituality:** the idea that spirituality is the absolute opposite of taking destiny into one's own hands, and the issue that the current trend towards spirituality demonstrates a move away from responsibility for and commitment to the political wellbeing of the Jewish People.

xxiii) Living in the contemporary Jewish world: **competing bets?:** are Israel and the American Jewish community simply two separate but interdependent experiments in how to live as a Jew in the contemporary world?

xxiv) **Reverse causality:** from "Israel to Judaism" to "Judaism to Israel" in one generation: the post-1967 generation found Judaism through its more fundamental connection to Israel; the contemporary generation finds Israel through its more fundamental connection with Judaism

Jonathan Boyd served as the North American Director of Education for MAKOM at the time of this retreat. Esti Moskovitz-Kalman was the Israel Director of Education at that time, and is today the Director of Education for the MAKOM network.

### **MAKOM - the Israel Engagement Network**

*MAKOM is the Hebrew word for place. It is also a name for God. Resonating with both the earth and the heavens, it symbolizes our efforts to renew the place of Israel in Jewish life. Through a network of labs, local leaders - in travel, education, the arts and religion - are mentored to create the compelling content needed to build the field of Israel engagement for our times. MAKOM is a collaborative initiative of the Jewish Agency's Education Department, Jewish community leadership and philanthropic partners.*

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Appendix 1

Generational Change in Israel Engagement - Future Trends?

Pre-1967 Generation	Post-1982 Generation	Post-2000 Generation
Israel is primarily experienced as a vital and dynamic place	Israel is primarily experienced as a dying and desperate place	
Israel is more about me and the future, than my parents and the past	Israel is more about my parents' & grandparents' generations than about me	
Israelis are young, strong and sexy - they convey a totally different and appealing image of what it is to be a Jew today	Israelis are arrogant, aggressive and even unethical - they convey an image of Jewishness that lacks spiritual depth, subtlety and meaning	
Unlike my parents, grandparents and generations of Jews going back throughout history, I can actually go freely to Israel	My parents and grandparents could go to Israel; it's no big deal for me to go. Visiting doesn't make me feel like a pioneer - the pre-1948 reality has become increasingly distant	
Israel enables me to draw a remarkable connection between Judaism, the land and the text	My connection with the land is undermined by the decline of socialism and the kibbutz movement, and the media and 'revisionists' who challenge the sacredness of the landscape	
I feel totally connected to all the faces on the bus - everyone's Jewish here	I feel totally suspicious of all the faces on the bus - who is the terrorist?	
Israel embodies Jewish community - the kibbutz, the local <i>makolei</i> , etc. In America, community is starting to dwindle; in Israel it is vibrant	The community spirit that was embodied by the kibbutz feels outmoded and anomalous - even to Israelis	
Israel is Jewish time and Jewish space as lived by a Jewish majority	The notion of a Jewish majority lies in direct conflict with the more widely accepted liberal ideas of pluralism and multiculturalism	
Israel ties me into Jewish history - I feel like I'm part of the Jewish historical collective here, and I'm participating in the unfolding story of the Jewish People	When participating in Jewish history meant creating the first Jewish State in 2000 years, it was thrilling; when it involves occupying land & persecuting a minority population, it starts to lose its appeal	
Judaism is alive in Israel - you can join thousands of people on a Shavuot pilgrimage to Jerusalem; you can feel the sanctity of Yom Kippur simply by walking through the streets	Judaism is coercive in Israel - it fails to recognize alternative interpretations, and queries my right to practice my type of Judaism	