

makom מקום

Israel. In Real Life.

Windy Places: The Journey to Disparate Landscapes

By Yonatan Ariel, Executive Director

Jewish Travel to Israel has a long and potent history. "Windy Places" makes the case for a burst of creativity to be brought to bear on the field to ensure that the itineraries and experiences are appropriate for both Israel and Jewish identity as they have emerged in today's complex world. This article appeared in "MASA - Time for a Journey" (JAFI 2006).

*"All the world's a stage, and
all the men and women
merely players; they have
their exits and their
entrances; and one man in
his time plays many parts."*
William Shakespeare¹

*"My roots are in two
disparate landscapes"*
Leah Goldberg²

The Grand Tour

The tradition of young people leaving their home to visit the sources of their culture was well-established in middle-class Europe in previous centuries. It was known as the grand tour, a prolonged journey. The core of the idea was that a classical education was incomplete if it merely contained

bookish proficiency on a cognitive level. What was necessary were the seductive, compelling encounters, tastes, smells, sounds, and sights - in other words, the experiences - of the 'other'. It could serve as a counterweight to the more constrained and ossified contemporary mores and ethos that surrounded the young person. Yet, the other was not totally alien to what the traveler knew, even if it was remote. It was somehow bound up with the roots of the home culture with which the person was by now intimately familiar. It provided the chance to broaden cultural horizons and to encounter and embody humanity in glorious color, warts and all.

Indeed there was an element of the tour which was less than the elevated exposure to the profound philosophical ideas of democracy, renaissance and the like: it was an opportunity for the adolescents to

¹ William Shakespeare, As You Like It

² Leah Goldberg, Pine, in Selected Poems, 1976

experiment with various kinds of stimulating physical activity, and not infrequently to meet the darker sides of societal relationships.

Pilgrims and Tourists

Masa is a bold attempt to make a Jewish grand tour available for many. So what might we see as the cognitive space for young Jews who come to spend an extended period of time in Israel? I would like to suggest that Leah Goldberg's beautiful formulation of having roots in disparate landscapes is apposite for our times too. She wrote the poem "Pine" filled with wistful yearning for the land that she had left behind and yet conscious of the way in which two cultures and horizons had shaped her life. It might serve us well to see that a journey to the sources of a strand of one's inheritance provides the possibility of exploring all strands. It is an opportunity to thicken some slithers of memory, knowledge and experience of Israel and Jewish Peoplehood and to provide the wherewithal for those to ripen and mature. It is a journey into identity and community.

And yet here too there is a conundrum. One insightful observer of the contemporary scene is Zygmunt Bauman, the eminent sociologist, who has lived in three different countries. One of his most compelling essays is evocatively titled: "From Pilgrim to Tourist - A Short History of Identity"³. His claim

³ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist - A Short History of Identity" in Questions of Cultural Identity, ed. Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay, 1996

is that the modern world gave us cause to think that we knew from where we had come and to know to where we go (the pilgrim). We knew too that the journey could be exciting, tempting and building. We could strive confidently towards the future secure in the belief that progress was linear and that, as the song says, "Things can only get better". And yet due to the many negative undercurrents of modernity, that have been relentlessly revealed to us during the traumatic course of the 20th century, we now live in an era of the "tourist", as opposed to the pilgrim. A tourist moves forward, backwards, sideways and round again. She or he wanders in and out of settings and cultures, juggling constantly between different facets of identity, without the pilgrim's certainty of direction and destination. We "each play many parts" is the poignant resonance identified by Shakespeare's commentary on the human condition. We strive to make meaning for ourselves through the persistent negotiation of our dynamic, changing worlds leading us to adopt varying orientations in differing circumstances. Bauman writes of this difference:

"Pilgrims had a stake in the solidity of the world they walked; in a kind of world in which one can tell life as a continuous story, a sense-making story... The world of pilgrims - of identity builders - must be orderly, determined, predictable, ensured; but above all it

must be a kind of world in which footprints are engraved for good... Modernists strove to make the world solid by making it pliable, so that identity could be built at will. They...turned the space in which identity was to be built into a desert. And a desert does not hold features well. The easier it is to emboss a footprint, the easier it is to rub it out. A gust of wind will do. And deserts are windy places."

Disparate Landscapes

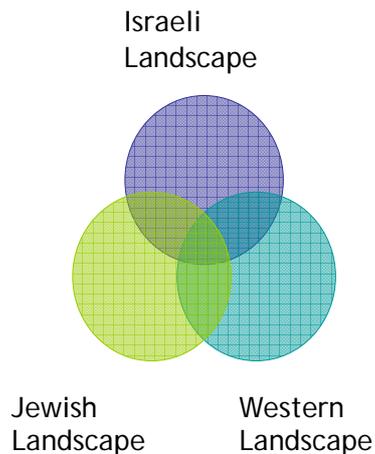
I contend that the work of Masa is occurring in "windy places". It is an age of multiple identities that call for reflexivity as to which combinations of stories and metaphors, knowledge and concepts, and behaviors are appropriate for this time and place. And this occurs with the awareness that whatever the appropriate response in one setting it is no guarantee that it will be similarly attuned for the next encounter elsewhere or at a different time.

These existential circumstances are fertile ground for the educator as education can be conceived of as the "initiation into worthwhile pursuits", in the felicitous phrase of philosopher Richard Peters.⁴ Careful consideration of what may be deemed worthwhile and why is the essence of educational responsibility. In what way are the experiences that we shape

worthwhile? Why might certain texts, encounters and trips have precedence over others? What are the criteria for making something worthwhile? We have the opportunity to open profound horizons for the participants and thus we have a weighty task to justify to them, ourselves and a range of educational and cultural authorities why we have so privileged specific horizons.

Whereas Leah Goldberg wrote of two disparate landscapes, it is my submission that young Jews embarking on a Masa today are more than likely to be wrestling with three landscapes, cultures and modes of personal and collective expression. Let us use as an example a participant from the United States of America: s/he will have the experience in three overlapping yet distinct spheres. The Western-American; the American-Jewish; and the Israeli narratives will be present as the participants explore the intellectual, social, cultural and behavioral nuances of Israel. Indeed Israel itself is a wondrously complex and multicultural tapestry. So in the journey there will be inevitably both tension and harmony, often at one and the same time. These conditions carry the rarest potential to enable Jewish educators who are specialists in Israel and Jewish Peoplehood education to creatively respond to both Bauman's "tourist identity" and to Peters' "worthwhile pursuits".

⁴ This formulation is from Richard Peters, *Ethics of Education*, 1966.



The Israeli landscape is filled with evocative content on every conceivable human level. It is a setting of human drama - with romance, comedy, tragedy and irony. Israel excels at presenting tragedy and romantic heroism because of the momentous events that have occurred here over several decades. Yet, as Israel matures, and a more balanced human drama develops what should we be presenting on the level of irony and comedy too? This potency of content, coupled with the age and life stage of the participants, in an arena of distance from family and home carries awesome responsibility for the educators and the planners.

Peters cautions us to "respect the autonomy of the learner" and so our mode of education must scrupulously avoid determining the outcome, even as we offer models of what is worthwhile. We should not fall prey to the temptation that the only way to commitment is through imposing intellectual censorship and the unnecessarily narrow range of what is deemed appropriate conceptions of "the

good life". While tourists on short visits often go only to the "front regions" of society, Masa participants should be encouraged to explore the "back regions" too⁵. This will enable them to see the undercurrents, the real contours of the society and culture played out in the lives of Israelis from a multitude of perspectives that highlight the complexity of ideas and relationships. Deep inside there are many of the most challenging and stimulating concerns of humankind viewed through compelling Jewish lenses. Such a mode of engagement is appropriate to the identity world of the participants and to the contemporary Jewish condition.

Cultural Reasoning

One intriguing way of approaching this is a significant modification of an erstwhile popular educational methodology known as values clarification.⁶ The claim of the designers of the method was that values are adopted in three possible ways: a) through modeling desirable values and behaviors; b) through reward and punishment for desirable values and behaviors; and c) providing people with the opportunity to sift through the options and to commit on their own. In the development of this third method participants were encouraged to reflect on their values in a three stage process.

⁵ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956

⁶ See Louis Raths, Merrill Harmin, Sidney Simon, *Values and Teaching*, 1966

Firstly, they were to choose those values from amongst options to which they wish to commit, after consideration of the alternatives and their consequences. Secondly, they were to prize the values by declaring their commitments and defending them to others. Thirdly, they were then to act on those values repeatedly over an extended period of time. In this way the claim was that people would indeed be more committed than if their parents and teachers merely modeled appropriate values and dished out prizes and admonishment for desirable behavior. Whilst the methodology has been roundly criticized for being relativistic, I think that it might well be appropriate to speak of a more sophisticated version that we shall call cultural clarification or cultural reasoning. In such a scheme we may be able to balance stimulating people to adopt worthwhile pursuits that we are largely responsible for shaping with the moral imperatives to respect the autonomy of the participants.

Let us for the sake of shorthand say that culture is a complex interplay of four elements:

- Knowledge, concepts, ideas, language
- Values, ideals, attitudes, beliefs
- Stories, memories, symbols, myths
- Customs, habits, rituals, behaviors

The journey to disparate landscapes enables a brushing up against

alternative formulations and expressions of culture different from those with which you are familiar. Those encounters can be stark and give one a "shock of recognition" that all people of the world do not think and act like you. Or they can be subtle, slowly seeping their way into the consciousness with the dawning realization that there are profound alternative categories for organizing one's cognitive and social map. These categories are not amenable to easy classification, and yet work their influence in tantalizingly powerful ways. The possibilities for living the tension of connection (with its necessary compromises built into the warmth of fraternity) and conviction (with its sense of driving purpose that marks your group out from others) is the outcome of a skillful Masa.

The process of journey as cultural reasoning⁷ proposed here would help make the implicit become explicit. It would turn a process which risks becoming evangelical and indoctrinatory, into one which is educational and empowering. Yet it is far removed from suggesting that whatever you want to do or commit to is acceptable. It encourages the participants to wrestle with different ways of celebrating and commemorating, with alternative moments that are worthy of being marked and signified. It is a way of looking at the educational work of the journey

⁷ See Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, 1986

as stimulating people to navigate the most constant tension in our world - the tension between loyalty and liberty. To what do I owe or wish to give my loyalty? Over what concerns is it critical to my sense of self to mark out my liberty? It is a way of giving them the cognitive tools to navigate on their own and in clusters through the similarities and differences in and between cultures. This way they can accrete a sense of evolving identity, through complex moral and cultural reasoning that inspires them through life.

Learning in Circles

By providing the rich backdrop of at least three landscapes we are truly reflecting the complexity of the world in this global era. If we were to frame Masa as two landscapes we would fall prey to the hard, aggressive disjunctures that characterize much of our current discourse: either/or. We speak of either American or Israeli; either Jewish or English; either secular or religious; and either universal or particular. However if we artfully design a rich variety of quality programs that emphasize the complexity in a serious, though not somber, mode we will avoid those untenable positions and truly provide educational experiences worthy of our times. That is a long way from rampant relativism. Rather it is an expression of worthwhile pursuits that ennobles the participant.

Deena Metzger writes evocatively that:

"Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. If you're lost you really start to look around and listen."⁸

Cultural clarification can be an engaging route to getting lost. And the search for home will yield a higher level of confusion. In the windy places of our multiple identities the Jewish, western and Israeli landscapes can make a signal contribution on the journey towards inheriting the future.

Yonatan Ariel is MAKOM's Executive Director. He lectures widely in the fields of Contemporary Jewry and Experiential Education.

⁸ Deena Metzger, Circles of Stories, Parabola Vol 4:4, Winter 1979

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.

633 3rd Ave, 21st Floor, New York NY 10017 T: 212-339-6080 E: makom@jafi.org
Kiryat Moriah Jerusalem 93557 T: +972-2-621 6348 F: +972-2-621 6149

