



## Wrestling and Hugging

Alternative paradigms for the Diaspora-Israel relationship

By Robbie Gringras

*Wrestling and Hugging advocates for the value of criticism in a committed relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, and suggests educational strategies to accompany this alternative paradigm. In particular we draw attention to the riches of Israeli arts, whose multi-dimensional form allows for inspiration as well as critique.*

Singer-songwriter Aviv Geffen once wrote a song, a lament at the end of a love affair that might be seen to summarize the relationship between North American Jewry and Israel:

There's been a collision between  
Imagination and reality  
There are casualties.

The first glow of the love affair is over. There has been a terrible collision between our dreams and reality. We must now determine whether the relationship has ended, or whether it must now simply mature.

The early idea of Israel, the mythology of the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, lit up our imagination. Through Israel we would save our souls, we would save the Jews, we would save the world. But then our collective imagination collided with a hard, complex, Middle Eastern

reality. Not at all surprisingly (what did we expect?) the imagined Israel has been limited, if not battered beyond recognition, by the reality of life in a young, endangered, and confused new State. There are casualties.

The truth is, that imagination clashes with reality all the time. It is not a tragedy, nor a comedy: it is life. In our lives we imagine the future, we make wonderful plans, we dream possible dreams, and in the end these imaginings meet with reality and emerge changed. It happens to us with our kids, at our jobs, in our marriages. What is required is for us to see the sparks that fly up in this clash between imagination and reality as **illuminating opportunities**, rather than as 'casualties'.

### Hugging Israel

The relationship between North American Jewry and Israel has not

traditionally allowed room for clashes. For too long this historic relationship might be characterized as 'hugging'. From the Diaspora we have become used to hugging Israel. **We give Israel warmth, love, and support - with our eyes closed.** The hugging has served both sides well. It has allowed Israelis to play baby, waiting to be fed by rich Americans; and it has allowed Americans to avoid facing the fact that their baby has now grown up.

The past few years have finally allowed us all to wake up. The Israeli media, always happy to ridicule American Jewry and to protest any American comment on Israeli affairs, suddenly became terribly indignant when Americans stopped visiting during the second Intifada. Israelis felt unhugged. This was new. And American Jewry has found it impossible to maintain its mythic, binary, us-and-them, bad-guys good-guys approach to Israel. Even if blasting CNN headlines couldn't change their minds, then internal reports such as "Israel in the Age of Eminem", and the complex drama of the withdrawal from Gaza spelled things out. Imagination has indeed collided with reality. We are now in need of new paradigms, new ways of understanding our relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. Hugging is not enough.

I would suggest we need to shift from hugging to 'wrestling'. Just as its biblical echoes suggest, wrestling with Israel requires an effort, a fight, a struggle. But it also demands an intimacy and a

commitment. The time has come for us to wrestle with Israel in the dust, in the night, and, yes, sometimes in our pain. I believe that this paradigm not only offers us a truer reflection of an adult relationship, but that it also points towards a more useful pedagogical direction. **It may well be that teenagers are more liable to get excited about wrestling with the Old, than embracing or supporting it.**

### Mythic Connections

For Israel is old, in their eyes. We are beginning to work with a third generation of people for whom Israel's birth precedes their own. Israel is as much a given as walking on the moon. It is established, and as such it is 'establishment'. Further than this, we are working with a generation of students whose gut connections with Israel are very different from our own. My generation grew up with still-fresh images of the Six Day War, with the moral clarity of the Yom Kippur War (only bad guys attack on a fast day), with the heroics of Entebbe, and the hope of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. These were the unmediated 'myths' that I received growing up. But later generations have had to contend with the ambivalence of Sabra and Chatila, two Intifadas, two Iraq wars, the assassination of Rabin, and suicide bombers and house demolitions. **Their mythic connections to Israel are ambivalent, non-existent, or negative.**

Israel educators had a far easier time with my generation. Our mythic understanding of Israel was

clear, strong, and positive. Israel was 'us', and Israel was 'good'. Israel was worth wrestling for. If latest surveys (and common sense) are anything to go by, these central tenets are missing among our youth. In "The Educated Mind" Egan plots out the ideal educational development from the foundations of binary black-and-white concerns of mythic understanding, through to the heights of ironic understanding, where we are able to appreciate the plurality of a world in which different people hold different beliefs and philosophies. I would suggest that many of our students are lacking the foundations when it comes to Israel education. They lack the gut connection to Israel. Call it love, call it belonging, call it blind attachment - they don't have it. They operate in the heights of ironic understanding, fully appreciative of the relativity of all things, but they have no mythic grounding. In a world of multiple perspectives, the only perspective they lack is their own. **Can we expect anyone to wrestle over a place they have no gut connection to?**

### **Either-or approaches**

One approach would be to adopt the general philosophy of Birthright, and to begin with a concentrated injection of 'belonging'. For anyone who has witnessed a Birthright Mega-Event, it is difficult to argue with the overwhelming power and energy of 3,000 young Jews from around the world celebrating their commonality in Jerusalem. There is a fire and a hysteria in these Mega-Events that shoot straight to the gut, creating a form of 'instant-  
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belonging'.

The difficulty is that the Birthright approach is not appropriate to all, and can do no more than mould students into the hugging stance. For anyone who has not been touched by Birthright, the application of the 'myth-first' approach entirely lacks credibility. A student who lives in the ironic sphere of understanding, who sees CNN and is familiar with non-Zionist narratives, will regard an educator who only offers 'the land of milk and honey' and '*Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*' as a laughable propagandist. We can't sell the *hora* to someone whose burning questions are about Israel's nuclear capabilities or the rights of Palestinians.

Another approach would be to start by addressing the questions raised by CNN. This too only addresses half of the problem. As long as our students remain outside of the mythic Israel, as long as they do not feel they 'belong', why should they be engaged by Israel advocacy? Even if Alan Dershowitz persuades them of Israel's 'case', will they now see themselves as the People of Israel, or simply as Supporters of Israel?

We need to find a way of doing both. We need to find ways to address both the gut and the mind, to strengthen the myth and to acknowledge the irony. The time has come for us to accept that while **a life without myth is a life without belonging, belonging without critique is lifeless**. We must allow for the 'wrestling' in our relationship with Israel, and we

must find strategies for wrestling to become part of our pedagogy.

The moment we allow ourselves to do this, we will not only begin to appreciate various advantages to this approach, but we will also find that Israel itself offers us some extremely useful tools in our work.

### Wrestling with community

The moment we embrace the concept of commitment through wrestling, we also open the way to addressing a burning issue within the North American community at large. That heady mix of modern technology, founding philosophies of the 'pursuit of happiness', and the confines of politically correct 'thinking', have led to an entirely new definition of community. We are now members of virtual communities. Virtual communities are not virtually communities: They are community's opposite. I join a virtual community on the internet in order to interact with people who share similar ideas to me, have similar knowledge, and similar interests. If at any stage my interests change, or I find myself at odds with members of this community, then I will leave this community and join a new one. These are communities of comfort that offer no challenge. These are not real communities. They are certainly not Jewish communities. Jewish communities are made up of different generations and different types. These communities share myths, but not necessarily opinions. Jewish communities invented the idea of '*machloket leshem shamayim*' - the idea that argument

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can be sacred.

The Jewish community in the United States has become infected with the virus of the virtual community. Consensus and comfort have become valued way beyond controversy and challenge. But consensus can lead to suffocation, and comfort can lead to a lack of commitment to one another. Leading Israeli funk-rap band HaDag Nachash came out with a popular song called "*Rak Po - Only Here*". Its chorus goes:

Only Here  
I feel like I belong,  
Although  
I'm angry about the corruption...

We might go further, and suggest that the proposition ought to be "Only Here I feel like I belong, and *therefore* I am angry..."

If I don't care about a community, I will never get angry about the way it operates. Anger, grappling, wrestling, only emerges from commitment. **Commitment is not only defined by what we agree on, it is also defined by what we argue about.** This is an issue that, while crucial in our approach to Israel education, is also a key issue among North American Jewry in general.

The second advantage to engaging Israel through wrestling and not hugging would be the way in which we might be free to reinvent the Jewish hero. Israeli heroes of old were towering personalities, demi-Gods who were handsome with an eye-patch, powerful with only one arm, inspirational with fly-away

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hair. They were presented as flawless and untouchable.

But flawless demi-Gods can never make mistakes, and they can rarely be emulated. For both these reasons, the founding heroes of Israel might now be educationally counter-productive. The heroes of old kept the Diaspora at a distance, leaving no room for the Diaspora to think it might be able to contribute (other than financially), and they made us unforgiving. Human beings make mistakes, but demi-Gods are divinely responsible for everything. A more human Israeli is more approachable, easier to empathize with, easier to forgive. As Jewish educators we know this. Even Moses, liberator of our people and confidant of God, was no saint. Midrash tells us his grave was hidden, so we would not turn it into a shrine. According to the text, **Jacob did not wrestle with an angel: he wrestled with a man.** Our grappling with Israel will lead to a humanity and an intimacy that our relationship has been lacking.

### Inspiration through the Arts

But what about inspiration? If we must reduce Israel to its non-heroic, to its flaws and its problems, we might make it more approachable, but we risk also making it ugly or even repulsive. How would this bring about a stronger connection with Israel? Is it possible to wrestle with Israel's flaws, whilst at the same time strengthening our gut connection?

I would suggest that one effective approach would be to look to Israeli

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popular arts. Israeli culture - pop music, movies, literature that Israelis know and enjoy - this has become our most valuable educational resource. The arts have always aimed to provide an emotional experience. More than anything else, a successful arts event will have engaged us in our guts. But at the same time the valuable arts event will have challenged our thinking. To return to Egan, the arts can be seen as **an educational form that aims to hit our mythic and our ironic levels of understanding simultaneously.**

When HaDag Nachash played Limmud UK, there were great concerns that their subject matter - economic woes, security issues, corruption - would overwhelm the experience of the audience. (In this sense the fact that a simultaneous translation of all the songs was to be projected above the stage, left educators more worried, not less!) But the worriers had forgotten about the embodied experience of a live rock concert. Though the subject matter might have been troubling, the fact that people were jumping up and down in excitement, dancing to the rhythms, laughing at the band's antics - all this led to an extremely positive and inspiring experience. The audience was engaged by the **energy and vitality of wrestling.**

The arts also speak many languages at the same time. The words to Eti Ankri's hit song "Millions" read as a searing political poem about the gaps between rich and poor.

And there are  
millions like me  
rolling around the  
streets - Mortal folk  
With no money -  
not worth a dime  
Today it's me  
Tomorrow it's you  
No money - not  
worth a dime.

It is only in listening to the gentle half-reggae rhythms of the song itself, or even watching the video clip as this beautiful woman rides around the streets of Israel on the back of a wagon smiling and strumming her guitar, that we can appreciate how the song is far more than just its words. **It is complex, self-contradictory, full of love and rage. Like life.** It teaches us that there is a beauty in wrestling.

Now that the Israeli film industry has moved beyond cheap comedies and war movies, we can turn to Israeli movies to introduce us to human beings. *Tragedies of Nina* presents us with a delightful collection of individuals, young and old, grappling with life and death in Israel, with immigration, with love, with religion, with fashion, creativity, and with growing up. The movie makes us laugh and cry, and **presents Israel's complexities and problems as riches, rather than 'casualties'.**

More than anything else, the Israeli arts are self-advocating. We do not need to argue for the value of Israel-wrestling. We can simply show it. Israeli artists are engaging with their country, sometimes

criticizing, sometimes raging, but they do so in such a talented and courageous way that we cannot but be inspired. When imagination and reality collide there are often casualties, but there is also a huge amount of creativity and vitality. Israeli arts bring us inside the dance, inside the passionate wrestling over the soul of this country, in such a way as to touch us deeply and infuse us with energy for the struggle.

### Postscript: After the Second Lebanon War

Though the fundamental game remains the same, we can see how the recent war in the North has shuffled a large number of the cards I was playing with. In a form of blessed regression, many US communities have returned to hugging poor little Israel - defending her to the hilt in public, and pouring astonishing amounts of money into emergency funds. In a sad but positive shift, I believe that Israelis have - perhaps for the first time - been genuinely moved by world Jewry's generosity and support. In a strange and paradoxical way, it seems that the war has led to Israelis and Americans feeling closer.

Perhaps we've all of us internalized the nostalgic image of Israel the Baby in need of hugging and comforting without too many questions being asked. It is perhaps inevitable. I believe we do, many of us, in Israel feel terribly vulnerable and hurt after the summer. It's been

important to feel Uncle Sam's Jews giving us some TLC. But is this the form of relationship we wish to perpetuate?

Our tradition tells us of the sun and the wind arguing over who is more powerful. They wager on who will force the man to remove his coat. The wind blows a gale at the man, who battles and fights and clutches his coat ever closer to him. When the sun takes her turn, she simply shines and strokes the man's back until he willingly slips off his coat.

As a people we are familiar with the notion of struggling to keep warm, struggling for sustenance in the face of a hostile environment. Will we now manage to appreciate that Israel's *internal* whirlwind is just as challenging as the storms swirling outside it, and demands just the same form of energetic and dynamic response from us all?

October 2006

Tishrei 5767

Robbie Gringras is Makom's Artist-in-Residence. He is a British-born Israeli educator, writer, and performer.

