



Creativity in Coalition

Building community momentum for Israel Education

By Yonatan Ariel

Creativity in Coalition suggests that to build momentum for change in Israel education requires bringing diverse people with varied strengths together. It advocates the kinds of skills and attributes useful for the coalition to succeed and highlights the emotional challenge of change in this arena. This presentation was originally given at a MAKOM network meeting.

Welcome from Jerusalem. The late Prime Minister Menachem Begin was fond of calling it 'Jerusalem DC' to show that we too have a DC - David's Capital. It is from here, with all the many layers of meaning that I have been asked to reflect on the nature of a Community Coalition for Israel Engagement. I will relate to a) the need for change; b) why change processes often fail; c) how to go about building a coalition; and d) what this particular coalition needs to consider as its remit.

The need for change

One of the challenges in thinking about Israel Education is to define the problem. What might be the root explanations as to why North American Jews appear detached from Israel and world Jewry? Some suggest that the problem is really organizational - if only the Jewish Agency was more efficient, if only the Federation world was more responsive, then program initiatives

would surely be more successful at galvanizing interest and support.

There are those who say the issue is the media - if only CNN and the national media were more accurate in reporting what goes on in Israel then Jewish attitudes would surely be different. There are those who say it is a moral issue bound up with Israel's behavior and that until the Israeli government pursues policies that are more actively geared to ensure that Israel is both a Jewish and democratic state, rallying Jewish support will always be difficult. There are those who say that it really comes down to Hezbollah and other rejectionist leaders in the Arab world that make it so political, and therefore unspiritual, to be engaged with the Jewish state.

Another suggestion is that the problem is really educational - the real problem, you see, is that we do not know how to teach Hebrew

effectively with the result that the Jewish People cannot share the common language in which key sources have been written. Others say it is educational because we are not good at arranging *mifgashim* (people to people encounters) to the extent that we might do, so that people have an image of Bibi and Barak as their sense of Israel, instead of an image of Eyal and Ayelet. There are those who say that it is about the entirety of Jewish education - because Jewish education as a whole does not really succeed in capturing the imagination of everyone in our generation, so why should Israel education be any different?

I want to suggest that whilst all of these may well be accurate in their appraisal the core location of the problem is conceptual - it is the problem of the *paradigm*. We no longer have the clarity which tells us the need of the hour, around which the Jewish People can unite. Following two generations of existential threats that galvanized us all, we are bemused to find that we face choices for action that inevitably alienate significant sections of our people. At the time of the establishment of Israel and in 1967 and again in 1973; the massacre at the Munich Olympics; the 'Zionism is Racism' resolution at the UN; the dramatic rescue at Entebbe; and the campaign to 'Let My People Go' from the Soviet Union - throughout this period the challenges are crystal clear. Israel has to maintain a very effective armed force and build within the society the commitment to be part

of that armed force and to meet whatever financial burdens are associated with it, in order to protect the emerging state and Jews wherever they are around the world. For Jews in the Diaspora the task is equally clear - to provide emotional, financial and political support and advocacy. It is so clear what we have to be about!

I suggest that the problem of Israel education today is that we are not clear what the need of the hour is. It is not self-evident. And because we had no need to define the needs of the hour we stopped the discussion of ends. We held the conversation about means, and we elevated the conversation about means to the status of ends. So for Federation Jews, if you ask 'how was your last year?' they will reply - 'it was a fabulous year, we were up in donations.' Now I'm not against raising money but I think it is a mistake to put the conversation in a place which speaks of raising money as opposed to raising Jews, building communities, cementing ties with Jewish communities worldwide, or bringing something else significant to the world.

The same is true of Israel. Defending Israel was the end, yet we too raised the means to the level of ends. We necessarily concentrated the discussion on which units our children served in, the tragedies of fallen soldiers and therefore the conversation about the type of society we wanted to build was less than poignant - it seemed an unnecessary luxury. Cumulatively, we have lost the

ability to talk about ultimate goals, higher order purpose and compelling narratives.

I agree with the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg who already in the 1960s said he had a nightmare that Russia would let all the Jews go, that Israel would find oil off the coast of Ashkelon solving the financial needs, that every antisemite in the world would drop dead - because then, what would all the Jews do? So much of our community infrastructures, so many of our community activities, are bound up with those things. *I suggest that the Jewish People as a People is under performing and not realizing its true potential.* This has speedily followed a couple of generations when we outperformed and achieved amazing things for ourselves, for justice, and for human beings worldwide.

At this point we are under performing. If that is the nature of the problem in part, then the solution will emerge from considering -- what is the Jewish People for? My personal answer is that the Jewish People's goal is to enthrone justice in this world. The role of the State of Israel is to be the home of the sovereign Jewish laboratory, in which we can experiment as we go about the noble endeavor of the Jewish People leading the fight to have a just world.

What might enable our People to realize that engaging and lofty purpose? The methodology is to launch a great conversation among

the Jewish People. It's a conversation of the Jewish People, by the Jewish People, for the Jewish People, as to what we, as a People, should do in the next generation. If that is the case, how can the narrative of Israel, the narrative of Jews and Judaism, and the narrative of America, engage each other, challenge each other, reinforce each other, and embrace each other? That is a matter for the Jewish People as a whole.

Our task is to try to bring everyone into that conversation - to have a very different dialogue and conversation as to what we are truly about. It is a task of the highest importance and without taking up the challenge it is hard to see how our educational and cultural initiatives can flourish in enabling Jews in America to engage with Israel and the Jewish People.

Why Change Fails

Given that I have outlined such a challenge it is important to recognize why attempts at change frequently fail. There are many strategies, tactics, programs and rules about how to affect change. Here, though, we are talking about cultural transition, which is one of the best definitions of education I know. Cultural transition is a long slow process. It follows few rules and is the result of a range of forces that exercise a pull on the emerging dynamic situation.

We often fail at change because we fail to realize that it is such a process of cultural transition. It involves three key processes, all of

which are very upsetting for those involved: The first is **'bidding farewell'**. Letting go of a whole mode of being that has dominated and shaped a generation is profoundly painful for those who have invested and constructed their identity in what they do currently. So we must find a way to help people to say goodbye to the mythic assumptions and practical endeavors that guide and represent the way they do things at the moment.

The second phase is **'embracing uncertainty'**. This is an 'in-between' liminal state where we are not yet something else but we have already left what we were. It is usually characterized by ambiguity, doubt, confusion and discomfort for most people. This is part of a natural process. Our role may well be like the assignment taken by our great ancestor. Having already left bondage in Egypt, Moshe led the Jewish People in the wilderness, long before they arrived in the Promised Land. But the good news is - look what happened in the wilderness! Ultimately, that is where the Ten Commandments were given - not in the Promised Land but in the wilderness! There, in the 'in-between' state, we can find the creativity and energy to enable a transition to take place really. It is troubling, but it can also be the most ennobling.

The third phase is **'relearning re-commitment'**. This too is difficult, because we must begin believing, belonging, and behaving, to use Mordecai Kaplan's phrase, in a new way. One's sense of competence

and value is at risk and under threat because we are not as accomplished as we once were - because it is a new way of being.

Most attempts at change fail because insufficient attention is paid to the dynamics of these three phases. We usually underestimate the emotional wrench that such change entails, and the core group - enthusiastic proponents of the change - neglect to acknowledge what is required from others and the elaborate and complicated process that they went through to arrive where they are now. Committed advocates, being as they are, are also unlikely to see the genuine flaws in their design and often mistakenly conflate honest reservations to a plan with a dogged persistence to the old paradigms and ways of doing things. Attending to the dynamics of change and its emotional challenge in the field of Israel education is of paramount importance.

Putting together a coalition that meets the challenge

We are now in a position to reflect on how to go about putting together a coalition which would perhaps meet this challenge in each community. In discussing education there are often comparisons with medicine. Medicine is not solely an intellectual, academic, theoretical discipline, in the same way that education is not - they both draw extensively on academic research and theoretical frameworks yet both are really tested in practical endeavor. If medicine strives to heal

the body, then education seeks something equally noble - to address issues of morality, of character, of commitment, of social attachment, of identity. These are profound things that have been and should be the subject of endless philosophical speculation. Yet we are interested in their place in the real world.

The task of community coalition building is to think not in terms of surgery or administering aspirin, but in terms of acupuncture. In such a view there are several sensitive points in the human body that if pressed appropriately yield remarkable results throughout the body, and certainly in many places distant from the original input. We are not Jewish Darwinists, only believing in the survival of the fittest Jews. We aspire to reach every Jew. How can we find those key pressure points which transform the entirety of the community system? My assumption here is that if we find enough axial pressure points and put in resources (ideas, personnel, and funds) we will attain our goal of getting the community involved in the conversation.

I can identify six pressure points that are required and they are my suggested component parts of a creative community coalition:

Firstly, *policy makers*. We need to engage those people who are able to take a decision and shift resources from one priority to another. Resources are people's time and energy, funds, and ideas. How might we deploy these resources in an alternate way that

will more readily make a difference? In today's Jewish communities policy makers are located in Federations and Foundations. We need both the lay and professional leadership who are in a position to shift resources consonant with an alternative way of doing Israel Education.

Secondly, *thought leaders*. We need too to engage those who are able to help articulate what it is that we wish the Jewish People to be about and what role Israel should play in the next generation. To respond to some of the big questions I posed earlier we want the brightest of our people to wrestle with questions of substance. We are here looking for intellectuals who will say 'the next generation's involvement with Israel and the Jewish People is critical for us, we care about Israel and the Jewish People.' What might they be able to say in regard to models of American Jewish identity that value an integral relationship with Israel? One might include academics, rabbis, and cultured people whose intellectual prowess enables us to take this conversation to a different level. They have rarely been asked by Jewish communities or the State of Israel to enter into that conversation openly, and creatively.

Thirdly, *trainers*. As our aspiration is to involve every Jew in the great Jewish Peoplehood conversation we know that we must invite every educator and community worker into the conversation. They are not only members in their own right, they are also our gateway to Jews. The fastest and most profound way

to reach them is through those trainers who are responsible for *training other educators and lay leaders for the community's institutions and infrastructure* - rabbis, teachers, youth workers, federation professionals, early childhood educators, adult educators and lay board members. Initial training and in-service training must happen in a different way. We need to review these courses and get them to a different place that encourages every trainee to articulate a personal stance on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Peoplehood. Only then will they be in a position to guide the exploration of other Jews in these topics. Ultimately we want every organization and program, formal and informal, to be thinking differently in regard to Israel and the Jewish People.

Fourthly, *demonstrators*. As part of our coalition we need *those people who run demonstration sites*. I am looking for those that run a fabulous school or synagogue, a really innovative book club, a community center or are doing something intriguing in the cultural arts. It matters less which institutions they run than that the leaders of those institutions are visionaries, willing to take risks, willing to say 'we must go beyond business as usual'. Lee Shulman from the Carnegie Foundation uses the phrase 'existence proofs.' We need existence proofs that if we do it differently we can make significant strides forward and that we are going to win many important things for ourselves. Policy makers,

thought leaders and trainers also require these sites, to show examples of how education can be conceived and practiced differently.

Fifthly, *social entrepreneurs*. The pace of change in the world and in so many areas of life is frantic. This can be daunting. Yet there are those that have the aptitude and the character to identify the new niches and the emerging opportunities. They often have a combination of impishness, lack of respect, mental fertility and endless drive. Some of these are "wild cards" - you just do not know what will come of their initiatives. But they might strike gold! Having these kinds of folks in the conversation keeps everyone on their toes and conscious of and alert to possibilities that have not yet been pursued.

Sixth, *communicators*. The last axial point in my community coalition is *those people who are responsible for shaping public discourse around Israel and the Jewish People*. This category is often the hardest to identify and locate as they can be so varied. It matters less what institutional affiliations these communicators have, what matters is whether their abilities and personalities connect key ideas to the public realm. Think of journalists, such as Tom Friedman. Think of Elie Wiesel, who I like to call a 'magisterial influence'. When Wiesel speaks on the life of the Jewish People - his voice is heard. Who are the 'magisterial influences' in your community? There is another

category of such communicators - *those in the community who set the chattering classes alight*. Their names are not necessarily known to everyone, but they are influential around their dinner tables as they are able to excite and motivate. This group ensures that the enterprise is not insular and the province of a small group of trusted insiders. It spreads the news that something of import is afoot and that we should all of us give it our attention.

A community coalition made up of these five types of pressure points looks very different to the way most of us think about community coalitions. If your aspiration is truly system wide, you need all five of the pressure points, and there may be more that I have not considered. Yet, I am convinced that we need these five around the table in order to truly address the gravity and enormity of the challenge that we face.

What the coalition needs to address

During the process of assembling the coalition and for its initial phase the group needs to address four items at least.

Firstly, *Purpose* - why do we need to do this? The coalition needs energy and drive and much of that will come from a burning sense that something must be done about the particular set of issues that matter in Israel education. It is clearly juxtaposed with the sense that someone wanting change circulates

a memo expecting change to happen as a consequence of their hierarchical position. This is about lighting a fire - so on this issue what is it that should set us alight? How does someone light a fire?

Secondly, *Portraits* - what do we desire to create? The coalition needs to take on the hardest challenge of all: to articulate what it will feel like, look like, and smell like, as we move forward towards attaining our goal. One of the biggest dangers of any change process is that people end up talking too much and saying too little. We must say something substantial and so our thought leaders should be enticed to read and write in order to eloquently express compelling pictures of what we hope to create.

Thirdly, *Plan* - what do we need to do? The coalition needs to build a step by step plan of action. Many people declare victory too soon - so be very wary of that. Don't over promise and under deliver - do the opposite - under promise and over deliver! Whilst striving to be comprehensive, the plan, after initial stages of thoughtful reflection, must not shirk from initiating activities from which we can all learn. Given that life-cycle events are so absorbing for many human beings, the plan might include asking 'how can Israel and the Jewish people live at a *brit milah*, a *bat-mitzva*, a wedding or a funeral?' What would it take for the President of State of Israel to send a greeting to all newborn Jewish children saying 'congratulations on

your choice of parents and welcome to the Jewish People?' The plan has to balance a variety of critical factors that touch the intellectual, the affective, the behavioral, the spiritual and the symbolic.

Fourthly, *Participation* - what is your part? The coalition needs to widen the circle of participation so that people from a variety of backgrounds will sense that this is something of significance for them too. It will be mainstream, but with an 'edge'. One big danger is that we will end up with a thin consensus that is so *parve* that it does not say anything very much to anyone. Whilst refusing to settle for anything less than substantial conceptions of Jewish identity, many of which might clash with each other, the coalition should also monitor itself on whether there is an ethos of participation. We need to approach people and urge them to be part of this, by presenting less of a crisis "to be saved", but more of a challenge "to be joined".

A final word

Abba Kovner was one of my heroes for his feats in the Vilna Ghetto, as a published poet, as an educator, and in establishing the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv. He said: "I am aware that spiritual distress is that much harder than material distress, and today, how much more so. Because it is difficult to be a Jew and not be haredi. It is difficult to be a Zionist and not belong to Gush Emunim. It is difficult to be a man and not have a guru of your own. And I am all of these."

I too am all of these, and I believe that the majority of the Jewish People are all of these as well. When I think about Israel education I think of Israel as Am, Eretz, Torah, Medina, Tzur, Herut, Knesset, and Klal Yisrael in the belief that *Netzach Yisrael Lo Yishaker* - *the Eternity of Israel will not be forsaken*. I do not want to artificially constrain our rich, exotic web of associations partly because it seems an inaccurate reading of Jewish tradition and personal experience, and partly because it can serve us well as we create something important. A compelling narrative woven from these different threads will be beautiful, engaging and uplifting.

The work is hard and frustrating but risky and genuine - the best kind there is. *Behatzlacha*.

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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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