

MIFGASHIM



The Charles R. Bronfman
Centre for the
Israel Experience:
Mifgashim

A RESOURCE PUBLICATION FOR THE FIELD OF ISRAEL-DIASPORA ENCOUNTERS

MATTERS

Volume II
Winter 1996

Finding Their Voice:

Israeli Youth After the Rabin Assassination



Photo: Shari Zakari

by Nava Hefetz

The voice of Israel after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin was, without a doubt, the voice of Israeli youth. It was the teens who set the tone of the country during the seven-day mourning period, responding quickly to the tragedy and expressing their grief with emotion and sincerity, while adults seemed simply overwhelmed. As the rest of Israel was paralyzed during those tragic days, refusing to believe that a Jew could kill another Jew — especially the Prime Minister — the only fresh air one could smell, the only hope was the youth.

Their mourning was a combination of rituals, old and new, religious as well as secular. Thousands of youth flocked to the square where the assassination took place, expressing the only traditional Jewish mourning they knew: lighting candles and sitting on the floor. Within one night, the entire square was covered by a carpet of flowers and candles. The only prayers one could hear, though, were modern Israeli songs; the only Kaddish recited was the mournful ballad of an Israeli pop idol. Thousands of letters and poems were written over the course of the following week, on the city hall walls, on the cement blocks and the ground of the plaza, and on the huge, spontaneous memorial erected on the exact site where Rabin fell to his death.

The powerful response of Israel's youth was noted throughout the world, no more so than during the funeral, when the eulogy of Rabin's 18-year-old granddaughter, Noa Ben Arzi, became a landmark in its own right. And yet the youth did not stop at emotional rituals. Reacting spontaneously, they began to organize themselves, as dialogues and discussions with the "other side" — right wing and religious youth — began to form in the square itself. Youth felt the urge to speak, to come to an understanding with those who do not think like them, to succeed where they felt adults had failed. They were looking for answers, and for new directions. In the weeks following the assassination, Israeli youth movements were deeply involved in encounters with peer groups from all over the country. They assembled in order to find a new understanding, to plan memorial services, and to start campaigns denouncing violence.

Nava Hefetz is a Project Director at the Centre.

continue on page 7

Welcome to Matters II

Producing the second volume of any publication can be difficult. And so I am delighted to report that production of *Mifgashim Matters*, Vol. II, went quite smoothly. This is due, in part, to the positive feedback we received on the first issue. Readers commended its exposure of the rich world of *mifgashim*, the variety of work being done in the field, and the potential for the future. And this — the wealth of opportunity for Israel-Diaspora links in a rapidly changing global

Jewish community — is precisely our message. With all the complexity, and all the options that go along with it, we are here to help.

Our invitation for you to react and contribute to our newsletter is a sincere one. In the true spirit of *mifgashim* — dialogue, exchange of thoughts, and cooperation — please feel welcome to interact with us by phone, fax, e-mail, or face to face, geography permitting. We look forward to hearing from you.

Elan Ezrachi
Executive Director



Mifgashim programs bring South American and Israeli youth to the Rabin gravesite.



Israel in the Private Sphere of Jewish Identity

by Steven M. Cohen

Why are younger American Jews less attached to Israel than their elders, and what can be done about it? This question is one that has been troubling a good number of policymakers and practitioners in the Jewish communal world for several years. Like many phenomena in social life, the apparent distancing of younger American Jews from Israel is “multi-determined,” or, in simple terms, there are lots of reasons.

One place to look for an answer is Israel itself. Until 1992, several observers suggested that the Israeli government’s hawkish policies were driving dovish American Jews further away from Israel. But, truth be told, no such evidence emerged from my many surveys for the American Jewish Committee. Indeed, throughout the 80’s and into the early 90’s, American Jewish attachment to Israel held steady through changes in government and policy.

Any explanation focusing on unpopular aspects of Israel, however, (and there are certainly others aside from hawkish security policies) does not explain why younger people, *davka*, are more distant than their elders. The survey evidence shows a gradual and steady decline in Israel attachment as we move down the age ladder, an effect present among all age groups.

So if Israel itself is not to “blame,” then who, or what, is? I suggest that we look not at Israel, but at American Jewish identity and the changes now underway in that identity.

To elaborate, it makes sense to divide Jewish identity into two spheres: the public and the private. The public sphere includes organizational activity, philanthropy, political advocacy, and, until now and for most Jews, feelings of attachment to Israel. The private sphere refers to matters pertaining to the family, ritual activity, prayer, education, cultural pursuits, and, interestingly, the synagogue.

In broad terms, while indicators of the private sphere have been holding steady, even as intermarriage increases, the public sphere has been in decline (“decline,” or “climb,” refer to relative

differences between younger and older Jews, not over-time data which are very hard to come by). Inflation-adjusting giving to UJA-Federation campaigns has been in decline for about 20 years; young people are much less likely to join Jewish organizations (one organization, whose identity shall be protected, found that the median age of dues-paying members is: deceased!); and, commensurate with all this, attachment to Israel among younger adults is down as well. Meanwhile, the practice of home rituals — Passover *seders*, *kashrut*, Sabbath candle lighting, etc. — has been holding steady, as has synagogue membership and attendance. Involvement with intensive Jewish education has been climbing, particularly enrollment in day schools and university Jewish studies classes.

The problem is that Israel is hitched to the wrong wagon these days. The primary

“We need to search for ways to make Israel meaningful, salient, and central within the very personal spaces of Jewish identity that seem to be emerging as more significant for American Jews.”

modes of relating to Israel — philanthropic activity and political advocacy — are less compelling now than in the recent past. Israel is both wealthier and more secure, undercutting the urgency of the plea for money and mobilization. Conventional pro-Israel activities take place within the realm of large organizations, which these days are out of fashion. Americans are generally favoring private pursuits, befitting generations raised on four or more hours of television daily, and are now mesmerized by the possibility of forming “community” and establishing fast friendships over the Internet with people they have never seen. In short, America and American Judaism are becoming more personalist, and more individualist, much as Charles Liebman of Bar-Ilan University observed several years ago.

If all this is so, then the answers to the question as to how to make younger Jews care more about Israel will need to come in, and from, the private sphere. We need

to search for ways to make Israel meaningful, salient, and central within the very personal spaces of Jewish identity that seem to be emerging as more significant for American Jews.

What does this mean? Frankly, I’m not sure. One thing I would do in order to find out is to study very closely the ten percent or so of American Jews who have constructed a meaningful and compelling personal relationship with Israel. How did they do so? I suspect it was through visits, getting inside Israeli homes, and establishing or strengthening relationships with Israelis who were accessible to them — American *olim*, business associates, colleagues, family, and so forth. Letters, then telephone, and now e-mail have served to sustain and cement these relationships. These American Jews subscribe to the *Jerusalem Post* and/or the *Jerusalem Report*, and they do give to the campaign, but giving is a minor expression of their feelings for Israel.

I know some of these American Jews with strong personal ties to Israel. When my family and I made *aliyah* in 1992, some folks we knew in the States were mystified; some were proud; but a few were actually jealous (in a nice way). We were, and are, closest to the jealous ones. They’re the ones whose kids we host in our home on *Shabbatot*; they’re the ones who manage to come to Israel often; and they’re the ones who write us, call us, visit us, and still think, sometimes seriously, of coming to join us permanently.

Somehow, by enhancing the meaning of Israel in very personal terms to larger numbers of American Jews, we will manage to expand the several who are jealous of the few who currently make *aliyah*. Somehow, we need to explore what a “personal meaning” of Israel consists of and how it is nurtured. My sense is that creating extended encounters between Diaspora and Israeli youth is, indeed, one critical and effective vehicle in injecting Israel into the private sphere of Jewish identity.