

Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh
Connecting With Israel Is Like Keeping in Touch with Family
 By Sally Klein-Katz and Paul Liptz

“It’s hard to believe that I made my first trip to Israel only a year and a half ago. The moment I stepped off the bus in Jerusalem, I felt right at home, like I had been there many times before. Perhaps it was the fact that most of the people walking the streets, sitting in the cafes, shopping in the stores were Jewish...I had an instant connection with the people in Israel, yet I envied the fact that they didn’t have to scour the city looking for kosher food or use up vacation days to celebrate a Jewish holiday. They didn’t have to choose between observing Shabbat and attending their nephew’s football game.” -Kathy H.

Connecting with Israel is “instant” when one is there. However, a challenge for most Jewish educators around the world is to engage learners in meaningful ways that facilitate connecting with Israel as part of who they are as Jews. This article proposes that this connection is best established on a human level, leading our Jewish students to understand that “connecting with Israel is like keeping in touch with family.”

The authors of this article believe that the world’s realities in ancient times as well as today require human beings to look beyond their family and social groups as a matter of growth and survival — both physical and spiritual. Interactive forces are part of our personal and collective development. “Peoplehood,” (Am), is the recognition of a common historical experience and the bonds that formed throughout history as a central component in human needs and desires. The Jewish People, (Am Yisrael), goes beyond the restrictions of national identity, incorporating a mélange of historical, religious, cultural, and social identities. After the destruction of the First Temple, there were those who realized that the return of Jews to the land of Israel, (Eretz Yisrael), was a critical component for the growth and development of the Jewish People.

Thus, when circumstances permitted, Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, while accepting that some of (Am Yisrael) would remain in their own countries. From that time, (Eretz Yisrael) became the spiritual homeland, (Moledet), for (Am Yisrael), based on a recognition of the vital need for interdependence among Jews, regardless of where they live in the world. This is highlighted in the phrase from the Talmud Bavli: Shvuot 39a,

(Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh). All Israel is responsible for one another.

Relating on a Personal Level

A group of 9th graders at summer camp in the U.S. this past summer was asked to complete the sentence: Israel] means to me...” In their responses, the major themes that arose were pride, refuge, comfort, a real physical place, and a secure place. “In Israel you don’t have to hide your religion.” “Israel is a place where there are objects and places of religious significance to Judaism, and it has value and history.” “Israel means home to me, a place where I feel comfortable and I don’t have to explain myself and where I fit in religiously.” These teens were connecting on a personal level, recalling their relationships with Israelis, and for some, their own special times in Israel with their families. There were very diverse feelings about Israel in the group; however, it was clear that for most of them connecting with Israel was connecting with the homeland of the

Jewish People,

Moledet shel am Yisrael. As abstract as that may sound, it served as a strong foundation for their further explorations into what it means to them to be Jews.

Am is such an intangible concept, unless one connects with those closest to us as a basis for understanding. All of our students have personal relationships with family or friends on which they can reflect while exploring the meaning of belonging to Am Yisrael

What do family and friends mean to them?

What are the obligations and commitments involved in these relationships? Having close ties to other people includes getting close enough to notice their blemishes, feel vulnerable and passionate, and carefully listen to whatever they have to say. These relationships can enhance our lives by helping us define what is meaningful through experiencing and cherishing common memories, sharing intimate moments — both painful and joyous — and feeling connected and not isolated or alone. By taking it to the next stage and applying their personal reflections to Jewish peoplehood, we can facilitate a meaningful foundation for relating to the Jews of Israel as part of their Am, part of their personal circle of people who matter.

Bayit, Moledet are also a difficult concepts, especially as 65% of North American Jews have never been to *Yerushah*. Our students do have feelings about and connections to “home,” *Bayit*, and may relate to their “birthplace,” *Moledet*.

What does home or birthplace mean to them?

In what ways do their childhood homes influence how they define themselves?

These are usually the settings for their powerful childhood memories, stages for the defining acts that determine who they are and what they believe. As educators, when we facilitate our students of all ages reflecting on what “home” means to them, we prepare them to contemplate their potential connections to Israel, the homeland of the Jewish People,

Moledet shel Am Yisrael, the setting for many of our collective, historical memories, as well as for several significant Jewish holidays.

Relating on a Kehilah Level

An interesting example of a project that “captures the very best features to help ensure Jewish continuity, peoplehood and a strong commitment to Israel,”¹ is *Birthright Israel*, a program for young adults, 18-26, to take their first educational peer-group trip to *Yisrael*. Based on a partnership between the people of *Yisrael* and local Jewish communities around the world, this project has been a major success in connecting people to *Yisrael* during the toughest times. “This trip has made me realize how lucky I am to be Jewish,” said Courtney Harrison, a student at the University of Wisconsin and a participant in the Winter 2001 *Birthright Israel* trip.²

Community (*Kehilah*), involves the understanding that belonging means being there for each other, even if

someone is neither family nor friend. Belonging to a *Kehilah* is a give-and-take relationship. Each member gives in order to receive — some on a minimal level (paying dues) and some giving with all their hearts (our leaders and active volunteers). This definition of *Kehila* can serve as a basis for every learner's exploration of his or her relationship with Yisrael.

1. How do I feel when I am with my *Kehilah*?
2. As a member of my *Kehilah*, what am I personally able to “give” and what do I expect to “take”?
3. What are the obligations and commitments involved in belonging to a *Kehilah*?

Kehila and *Beit Knesset*, House of Gathering or synagogue *Beit Keneset*, are a microcosm of Jewish peoplehood. It is where we learn to relate to diverse kinds of Jewish people (including those with whom we may substantially disagree), while looking after the group's needs and continued existence. It is where we can openly express our empathy for others through action. When we actively contribute of ourselves to our *Kehilah*, we experience the potential power of working together as a group towards a common goal. As Jewish educators, in extending this to Yisrael, we facilitate a more intimate understanding of what it means to actively live as part of Am Yisrael. We demonstrate the exciting dynamics of human relationships within a group, allowing for pain and joy, dreams and reality, belief and questioning. Ideas, beliefs, and values without action remain footnotes in a dusty archive. Substantial action for Yisrael and with Israelis allows for a dynamic relationship with Am Yisrael, one based on obligation, commitment, and passion.

Relating on a Collective Level

“I will never forget the rush of Jewish adrenalin being surrounded by Jews from all over the country standing together in D.C., identifying with the State of Israel. I felt passionate, powerful, and proud in ways that I had never experienced before! I felt transformed and it deepened my personal commitment as a Jew to learn, act, and care more about my people and religion. There was something in this collective voice that gave me hope, ‘Hatikvah!’”
-L. L.

The impact of the collective Jewish voice is often focused on the “power in numbers.” In our context, the impact of the collective voice is also very significant on each of the individuals who join their voices together. Throughout Jewish history, though it may have been acceptable for one to pray or live alone, the Jewish mandate has been to be part of a collective, the quorum (*Minyan*), which is the framework for profound give-and-take relationships. As in an orchestra, through their musical instruments, the musicians contribute their individual voices to the collective effort with extraordinary results. In the ancient Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the *Beit HaMikdash*, the voices of the musical instruments of shofar, harp, lyre, timbrel, lute, pipe, and cymbals added to our collective Jewish historical experience.

As Jewish mentors, we need to serve as dynamic and passionate “conductors” of our part of the orchestra to inspire our students to want to belong and contribute their voices and musical themes to the collective orchestra, Am Yisrael. Within each section of the orchestra, everyone must carefully listen to the others around them. This is a way of thinking about developing relationships between our students and the people in Yisrael, by carefully listening to each other and joining with the voices of the people of the State of Israel *Medinat Yisrael*. In order to become attuned to each other, play off each other, and join our voices together, we need to connect our students with real Israelis. Many of our students may already have these connections, but may

to connect our students with real Israelis. Many of our students may already have these connections, but may not be pursuing them. Their Israeli relatives and friends who may have passed through their lives in school or at camp are the best connections with *Yisrael*. By contextualizing these relationships within a Jewish collective mandate, we can empower our students to reach out to the Israelis they know, simultaneously personalizing and deepening their connections with *Yisrael*.

As a Jewish collective, we need to also keep in mind that the newspapers and television/computer screens cannot and do not intend to represent the essence of *Yisrael*. To base our relationship with *Yisrael* on media-mediated content is to miss its very real meaning to our people. *Yisrael* is made up of real people, filled with diversity and differences of opinion. “The adventure goes on in *Medinat Yisrael*; the task of modern nation building is not finished. The State is a dynamic, living civilization with many exciting challenges yet to be addressed. Israel is not only a piece of our past, it is very much integral to our entire personal Jewish journey.”³ Our challenge as Jewish educators is to engage our students in connecting with the on-going challenges of nation building.

Jewish people around the world, including in Israel, need to be reminded and remain focused on the basic values upon which the state was established, as stated in the Declaration of Israel’s Independence 1948 (issued in Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948 -- 5 Iyar, 5708):

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world... The State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion; will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of the shrines and Holy Places of all religions; and will dedicate itself to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Engaging with *Yisrael* as the “Home” of the “Jewish People” – Recommendations for Action

As Jewish educators, it is our responsibility to develop our own personal relationships with *Yisrael* in order for us to guide our students through their own journey “home.” The authors of this article have published many practical suggestions in the new volume, *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher’s Handbook*. Our main point in this article is the building of personal relationships with real Israelis in *Yisrael*. On a practical basis this could mean:

1. Regular correspondence and telephone calls with this person.
2. Within a mutual relationship, reaching out in concern and support to each other any time something happens (an attack in Israel, 9/11, fires in California...)
3. Caring enough to include the other within our closest circle, marking each other’s birthdays and other special occasions.
4. Getting to know each other so well, that they know on what they agree and disagree.
5. Coming to the point where they feel they have to finally meet!

Through basing these relationships on careful listening and caring, we begin to build towards the approach of “connecting with Yisrael is like keeping in touch with family.” and pbliptz@netvision.net.il

Endnotes:

1. Comment by Barry Shrage, President of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston and found on the UJC website, www.ujc.org.
2. Quoted from UJC website, www.ujc.org.
3. Klein-Katz, Sally, and Paul Liptz. “Engaging with Israel” in *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher’s Handbook*. Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc., 2003.

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