



RATIONALE:

How to Plan and Execute the Most Effective Mifgash

What is a Mifgash and Why Should We Do It?

Mifgash (**mif-gash**, or **Mif-gashim**, meeting(s) or encounter(s), in Hebrew), is a new dimension in contemporary Jewish life. While the word is generic, we use it here to describe direct, face-to-face **contact situations** between Jews from different cultures (countries).

In pre-modern times Jews usually met other Jews only in their immediate surroundings (i.e., the Shtetle, the village or the Jewish neighborhood). The sense of Peoplehood was a spiritual concept mediated through liturgy, artistic symbols and folktales.

In the twentieth century, with the great Jewish migration and the emergence of modern Zionism, masses of Jews shifted their location and lifestyles. With this shift came the possibility of exposure to Jews from other cultures. Still, most of them found new homes and communities that brought them to live among like-minded people.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the distribution of Jews around the world changed dramatically compared to the 19th century. It has now reached the point where 80% of world Jewry is divided between two main centers, Israel and North America, with the rest of the Jewish population scattered in a wide range of countries, languages and cultures.

As the world's Jewish demography stabilized, and with the development of the State of Israel, new opportunities for travel and contact emerged. Specifically, travelling to Israel became a widespread practice among many Jews.

Forms of Israel travel include: educational teen trips, academic study programs, volunteering, leadership and professional development initiatives, etc. In the past 15 years, two large-scale initiatives have been introduced: Taglit-Birthright Israel and Masa – Israel Journey, both responsible for bringing thousands of young Jewish adults to Israel annually.

Other forms of Jewish travel emerged as well, albeit in smaller numbers, including: trips to Eastern Europe with a focus on the Holocaust, trips to places of Jewish heritage such as Spain and Prague, explorations of Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union, exchange programs through Partnership 2000 and more.

Mifgash is that part of Jewish travel that generates a variety of opportunities for direct **contact** between Jews from different cultures. Mifgash is a unique Jewish Peoplehood experience, a product of modernity and new technologies. Today, more than ever in history, Jews can meet other types of Jews through new possibilities for travel and mass communication.

Even though the Mifgash is typically associated with travel, it is not exclusive to the travel activity. A Mifgash can take place in the home community whereby Jews of other cultures visit or reside in the midst of the majority Jewish group (e.g., Israelis living outside Israel, or post-Soviet Jews who recently emigrated). More so, new technologies, specifically live video platforms such as Skype, provide a new form of “face to face” experiences that open up opportunities for contact and dialogue.

Still, the ultimate Mifgash is best exemplified when the parties involved are fully living in their respective cultures, and hence the Mifgash is the ultimate opportunity to expose members of one distinct group to members of another distinct group.

Before we move further into the subject we need to distinguish between two basic Mifgash situations:

1. **Naturally occurring encounters** with little to no intervention by educators or other agents.
2. **Shared intentional experiences** designed by educators and other agents.

Our discussion focuses on the **second form** of Mifgash, that which is planned and implemented by educators and other agents for **designated populations in clearly defined times and settings**. This doesn't mean that we do not regard the naturally occurring encounters as important and meaningful. On the contrary, the natural experience can be very significant and many issues raised in this section are relevant to non-structured experiences.¹

Pedagogic Rationale – Why is the Mifgash Good For Peoplehood Education?

In the Western world we believe that exposure to other cultures is a vital element of “good” education. Moreover, by travelling to other cultures and meeting people and communities from those cultures we can reduce tensions and conflicts and increase tolerance and cooperation.

Intercultural experiences are also perceived as important building blocks for personal growth and skills acquisition, necessary for effective functioning in the global arena.

What about **Jewish** encounters? Encounters (or Mifgash) between Jews from different cultures is a mixture of meeting total **strangers** and finding **lost relatives**.

On the one hand, all parties in a Mifgash share a cultural-religious heritage that includes myths, symbols, texts and customs. But at the same

time, the participants in this intra-Jewish Mifgash are members of distinct (national) cultures, defined by their countries of domicile.²

The pedagogy of the Mifgash vacillates between these two poles: on the one hand, it is assumed that Jews have a pre-conceived notion of kinship, a shared set of values, a common history and a shared vision for the future. The Mifgash in this context is an opportunity to affirm and strengthen the sense of unity and Peoplehood.

But, on the other hand, the participants in the Mifgash, come from different countries, reflecting different national cultures, languages, norms and lifestyles. Moreover, the ethnic composition of Jews is different from one place to another, namely, Israeli Jews are a colorful assortment of ethnicities while Diaspora Jews are more ethnically uniform (in most cases, of Ashkenazi origin).

When planning the Mifgash, we suggest tak-

ing the approach that **cultural differences outweigh a sense of unity**. In other words, let us not rely on the mythology of sameness and imagined unity. We should design the Mifgash as a meeting of people from discrete cultures, albeit with a perceived sense of shared values and common heritage.

The discipline of intercultural education is widespread and decades old. A wealth of practical knowledge and research is available to those who are involved in designing and implementing Mifgash opportunities. Our toolkit draws from this discipline while making the proper adaptations to fit the distinctiveness of the Jewish Mifgash.

In the Peoplehood Pedagogy section of this toolkit, you will find more information about how a Mifgash is an integral part of the Peoplehood pedagogy, and how it provides the best way to teach towards Jewish Peoplehood.

[1] One of the most powerful non-structured Mifgash experience is home hospitality, an opportunity for intimate and personal acquaintance.

[2] The notion of **cultural identity** is often tied to the Nation State, thus cultural identity is correlated with geography, language, political culture, etc. On the other hand, in the era of globalization, there are new forms of hybrid cultural identities coming from variation of gender, class, ethnic and professional sources.

See, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (editors), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London, 1996