



ACTIVITY

Preparing for a Mifgash (Encounter) with Israelis

Materials and Equipment Needed

- Several large pieces of paper, hung on the wall
- Markers
- Projector and screen, with a computer and an internet connection, to show two short video clips

Time Needed

60-90 minutes, depending on the size of the group and their previous knowledge of Israel and Israelis.

Goals

The following activity is designed to prepare a group for a meeting with a group of Jews from another background. In this case it is particularly focused for Americans before they meet Israelis, but could also be adapted and used with other populations.

1. To help participants understand the nuances that exist in different definitions of being Jewish, and particularly to expose the fact that Israelis and diaspora Jews tend to understand being Jewish in different ways.
2. To provide some historical background context about the formation of Israeli Jewish identity and how it came to be as it is today.
3. To allow participants to articulate stereotypes they have about Israelis and anticipate stereotypes they expect Israelis to have about them, in order to recognize and confront them.
4. To excite participants about the upcoming Mifgash and prepare them to take advantage of it.

Directions for Activity

1. **What type of Jew are you?** (15-20 minutes)

On a large piece of paper at the front of the room (or next to the facilitator in the circle), write the question “What type of Jew are you?” Ask participants to suggest labels or terms that they use to define themselves as Jews. They might say ‘Conservative’, ‘Ashkenazi’, ‘Non-denominational’ and many more. Don’t worry if people don’t like labeling themselves; the point here is not to judge the labels, just to list the ones that are relevant to them.

Then hang up another large piece of paper next to your list. Now ask participants to give examples of how they express their Jewishness. Write down what they say on the second paper, connected to the label they have already suggested. So, for example, someone who said they were “Reform” could then say that one of her expressions of Judaism is having a Passover seder. Write down Passover seder and connect it with a line to the label “reform”. If someone who labels themselves “orthodox” also says Passover seder, that is fine. Connect both labels to the same action. Add a lot of different Jewish expressions to the list and connect them to the types already mentioned.

Ask participants what they notice from this exercise.

2. **Israeli Jewish identity today** – some core concepts and events (15-30 minutes, depending on background knowledge of the group)

In this section of the program you will give participants an overview of some of the key events in Israel’s history, and how they have led to the reality of Jewish identity in Israel today.

If you are not familiar with some of these issues, look at the following resources or ask a local Jewish educator for help:

1. The blog “Religion and State in Israel” provides contemporary news in all these arenas:
<http://religionandstateinisrael.blogspot.co.il>
2. For info about the “Status Quo” that established the law allowing some Jews to study Torah rather than serve in the IDF: <http://countrystudies.us/israel/46.htm>
3. Every ten years the Israel Democracy Institute does research into the Jewish identity of Israeli Jews. The latest research can be found at:
http://en.idi.org.il/media/1351622/GuttmanAviChaiReport2012_EngFinal.pdf

Key events and information you may want to share with the participants:

1. Ben-Gurion and the “Status Quo”
2. The legal status of the non-orthodox movements in Israel.
3. Who are Israeli Jews?

Tell the group about the following: In the Guttman Report (referenced above), Israeli Jews are divided into several types:

- Haredi (ultra-orthodox)
- Orthodox
- Traditional
- Secular (not anti-religious)
- Secular (anti-religious)

Look at page 30 of the report and explain these categories to the participants. On page 30 you will also see how Israelis define their observance of mitzvoth. Look at Figure 8 on p33 of the report. See what you can learn from the correlation, or lack of it, with the categories.

Discuss with the participants:

1. What do they learn about some of the definitions that are relevant to Israeli Jews?
2. How are they different or similar to the labels and definitions that you already used?
3. What does this tell you about Israelis? What more do you want to know about them, when you meet?

At the end of this discussion, show participants the short video by Avraham Infeld, the “Birkat”. You can find it at <http://www.5leggedtable.org/en/legpage/israel>

Allow a few minutes for comments and thoughts on the video.

3. **Stereotypes** (15-20 minutes)

Now, stick up two more large pieces of paper stuck on the wall. Label one “Israelis are ...” and ask the group to brainstorm some words that describe Israelis. Add all the stereotypes or labels that you can think of. Don’t worry if they contradict each other, and don’t feel required to explain or justify. Participants might say “Israelis are ... friendly/pushy/not good at following the rules”.

After this, on the second piece of paper, write “Israelis think we are ...” and finish the sentence. The participants might say “They think we are ... rich/religious/lazy”.

After you have made your lists, ask participants what they learn from these lists. Have they learnt anything new about themselves or the Israelis they will be meeting? What do they want to find out about them? (make a list). What stereotypes do they want to counter?

4. Final Words (5-10 minutes)

Sum up with what you have learned about Israelis, and what you expect to learn from the upcoming mifgash. You could look again at the first list you made of labels. What labels and expressions of Jewish identity do you expect to find amongst the Israeli group? What do you think will be the same and different for them? Encourage participants to ask the Israelis real questions about themselves, and to share their own thoughts and beliefs.

Good luck!