

# The Peoplehood Papers 23

November 2018 | Kislev 5779

## The Israeli Diaspora – a Peoplehood Perspective



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# **The Israeli Diaspora – a Peoplehood Perspective**

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## From the Editor

In recent decades, for both historical and ideological changes in its self-image and the change in attitude of Israel and Israelis, the Israeli diaspora has emerged on the Israeli and Jewish screen as a legitimate diaspora.

One of the aspects that make the Israeli diaspora different from the rest of the Jewish diaspora, is that it is not a homegrown entity, but rather a fairly new historical phenomenon. The case of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora is unique in the diaspora field because it was the story of the diaspora creating the State. In that respect the Israeli Diaspora fits more the classic diasporic model.

The implications in identity terms are that for the rest of world Jewry, the relationship to the State was anchored in a sense of Peoplehood that preceded the State. For the native Israelis settling abroad, the challenge is to develop their own collective identity as an Israeli diaspora. If for world Jewry the sense of peoplehood also included a collective ethos and a historical communal framework the Israeli community needs to develop those in its own authentic terms.

This challenge poses serious existential questions for the Israeli Diaspora such as:

What is its ethos?

Is it part of the Jewish diaspora or a unique standalone entity with pragmatic ties to local Jewish communities?

What is the long-term vision and what is the desirable and realistic communal vision?

What is the educational vision?

What is its potential role vis a vis Israel and vis a vis the Jewish community?

This collection of essays aims to explore some of the unique aspects and challenges of the emerging Israeli diaspora. More than trying to answer these questions it aspires to engage in conversation. Putting on the Peoplehood lens offers an opportunity to explore the Israeli community's role, identity and potential both for its own members and the broader Jewish world.

I would like to thank our articles' contributors and our partners in assembling this collection of short essays - the Israeli American Council, and in particular Aya Shechter.

Please share your thoughts with us at [info@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:info@jpeoplehood.org)

Shlomi Ravid



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## A Journey to Community and Peoplehood

**Shawn Evenhaim**

Like most Israeli Americans, we grew up in Israel and moved to the U.S. for what we thought would be a few years. We soon realized that we don't understand how to live in the diaspora like our Jewish American friends. After we had our firstborn, it became clear that we weren't returning to Israel anytime soon. It meant that we had to start investing in Jewish life and community in our new home.

Before the IAC was established, there was no Israeli-American community or leadership. My communal involvement started in the Jewish American community as part of a Jewish day school, where I eventually became president of the board.

I always believed that Israeli-Americans could be a bridge between Jewish Americans and Israel, but to do so we had to get involved, show leadership and reach out to Jewish Americans.

We had to lead by example to show that Israeli-Americans could be a valued part of the Jewish American community. This is one important reason why I serve on the boards of Birthright, the LA Jewish Federation and Kadima Day schools and remain involved with many other organizations. It is important that we change the old perception that Israeli-Americans don't care, don't give and don't see ourselves as part of the community, mainly because we are not here to stay.

Every time I have gotten involved in an organization, four things happened. First, the perception of our community changed. Second, more Israeli Americans got involved. Third, I was able to make a difference by bringing my Israeliness to these organizations. Fourth, I was able to build many bridges.

I had the honor and privilege to lead the IAC and as it expanded from a small L.A.-based organization into a nationwide movement. My leadership roles within the Jewish American community were instrumental in helping us to execute this expansion across the US.



We are in the midst of a moment where the Jewish family must unite. A few weeks ago, Jewish Leaders from North America gathered in Israel to explore both the challenges and opportunities facing the Israel-Diaspora relationship with the theme of "*Let's Talk*." The IAC has all the tools to facilitate this important discussion and bring solutions to the table for the most pressing issues facing the Jewish people and its relationship with Israel.

The unique element of the Israeli-American community is that we are not afraid from confrontation and that we have the courage to deal with whatever dangers may present themselves. For instance, we will lead the fight against anti-Semitism and the BDS movement. This kind of hate is nothing new. And it not just a threat to Israel or to Jews, it is a threat to America.

For the past 11 years, we have learned, experienced and accomplished so much. Yet, our journey as a community has just begun and we have much work to do. We must come together to ensure that our next generations will forever remain connected to their Israeli and Jewish identity and to the State of Israel. It is our duty to strengthen the Jewish community and the unbreakable bond between the U.S. and Israel, ensuring that this relationship is always supported by Americans on both sides of the aisle.

**Shawn Evenhaim is is an Israeli-American philanthropist, chairman Emeritus of the IAC and current Chairman of the IAC for Action. He is the chairman of the Birthright Planning committee and a board member, and L.A Jewish Federation Board member.**



## Israelis in the Silicon Valley

**Ronit Jacobs**

When the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto was under construction, a small number of unique Israeli community leaders had a vision. They understood that for Israeli and Jewish American communities to come together in the Bay Area, each first had to have a strong core in its own right. Only then could they find each other, and at an even more aspirational level, create synergy as a hybrid community of nearly unmatched potential.

That said, when the ICC@OFJCC was formed in 2009, Israelis had little in common with their American cousins in the local communities, and little interest or meaningful opportunity to coningle. Further, while the American Jewish community had decades of local cultural heritage and institutions, Israelis, dynamic as they may be on the world stage, had no sense or experience of what community in the diaspora might look like. Despite their local concentration in numbers, Israelis were scattered as a group. “Community” as we know it, wasn’t even on the radar screen.

At the same time, while Israelis in America maintained a strong bond with Israel, they watched their children growing up in the US with no real connection, and to their dismay, devoid even of the most basic concepts of a Jewish identity. In short, Israelis had found their dreams in professional opportunity, but a much more nuanced outcome in terms of their identity and their children’s identity.

The ICC@OFJCC set out first to create an Israeli hub for Israelis to live and feel aspects of their old home, Israel. The OFJCC was the first in the US to build a dedicated community department for Israelis as part of an established Jewish American organization. It offered a venue for Israelis to congregate as Israelis, to continue learning in their native tongue, and perhaps most importantly, to offer their children a chance to taste and enjoy secular Israeli-ness. Gradually, concepts and experiences of Judaism in a non-threatening environment, i.e. non-denominational and pluralistic, were added to the activities in addition to Israeli arts and culture, lecture series, Israeli commemoration days, celebrations, and more.

In time, those who came from Israel's severely polarized Jewish world, often with nothing short of revulsion for religion, found that pluralistic Judaism was a hidden but surprisingly fundamental part of their being. Curiosity was replaced with thirst, and non-denominational Jewish holidays began to draw "oversold" crowds. Non-denominational Jewish classes sprang up, and within remarkably short order, a thriving, vibrant center of secular Israeli and pluralistic Jewish culture grew out of the ICC@OFJCC, and with that growth, an upward spiral of ever more content and cultural activity.

With the goal of a strong Israeli cultural center well underway, the second step was within sight – synergy between the communities. Given the vision and support of the OFJCC leadership as well as the Israeli community's realization that vibrant cultural life was possible in the diaspora, each started to become more curious about the other. Jewish Americans could see the potential strength and remarkable dynamism of Israeli culture, and Israelis could see a place for themselves and their children, even though so far from their roots.

Today, the ICC@OFJCC hosts more than 25,000 people a year and does cutting edge work with the local Israelis and their families that include programs for second generation Jewish identity, community building, bridging and celebration of secular Jewish holidays, as well as creating the platform for anything Israel. This includes Gvanim Program, our leadership program that explores issues of Israeli-Jewish identity, Jewish values and Israeli culture as well as deepening their awareness of and connection to local Israeli and Jewish communities, Begeg Kefet, the Hebrew school for Israeli kids (and now Americans as well) and the ICON high tech conference (2014). It also is building up the programming that connects Israelis and American Jews. The ICC initiated the extremely successful Z3.0 Conference, which is dedicated to an open, civil discussion of tough but essential questions about the relationship between Israel and Jews worldwide.

In addition, breaking several myths about Israeli attitudes towards philanthropy and financial participation in community projects, the ICC@OFJCC is proud of the fact that Israelis self-fund all Hebrew language programs and activities through continued growth of contributions directed to ICC@OFJCC and direct support of the OFJCC.

The ICC@OFJCC demonstrates both the thirst and opportunity for Israelis and Jewish Americans to grow and prosper together as part of a positive and constructive building block – temporary for many as it may be – in the greater US fabric.

**Ronit Jacobs is the Director of the Israeli Cultural Connection at the Oshman family JCC in Palo Alto**



## Israeli Americans Today

**David Mallach**

The Israeli-American diaspora took a long time in coalescing. The dual rejection that it experienced did not lead to community collective but rather to fragmentation and a low profile. On the one hand, for many decades they were seen as 'Yordim' in the eyes of Israeli society, and American Jewry saw them as deserters from the national enterprise. The central institutions that linked Israeli and American Jewry – the Israeli Government, Jewish Agency, JNF, etc. – all did their best to marginalize this community. As with any minority-majority relationship, individuals could enter, but the bulk of Israeli-Americans were kept at a distance.

The response in most immigrant communities that are not welcomed is to come together as their own entity. Many examples of such immigrant behavior exist. Where Israeli-Americans differ is that they were viewed negatively by their own country, received little encouragement from their fellow citizens and their own government denigrated them. So, they scattered and tried to enter American society as individuals, in many cases seeking to enter Jewish life, but rarely forming cohesive Israeli groups.

This has made the entry process far more difficult than one might have wished, because, ironically, by seeking to enter American Jewry on an individual basis they did not challenge the narrow view that it was fine for American Jewry to be here but once someone chose to be in Israel, all the descendants belonged only there. These factors led to the delay in the Israeli-American community coming together and in being accepted by mainstream Jewry.

Thankfully, the atmosphere changed both in Israel and the US. Extended/permanent departures from Israel became normative, among all segments of Israeli society. More significantly, a disproportionate number of National Religious, the backbone of contemporary Israeli Zionist ideology, have come to America. In America, the growing presence of foreign born throughout American society, including the Jewish community, and the decline in the centrality of Israel, have created a broad opening for Israelis as an immigrant community.

The confluence of these factors has given the impetus to both Israeli American organizations such as the IAC and many efforts by synagogue, JCCs, etc. to create programs that are tailored to meet the needs of the Israeli-Americans as a collective. It is the willingness to see the Israeli-Americans as a collective that marks the most dramatic shift in American Jewish attitudes and allows the Israeli-Americans to begin to play a significant role in American Jewish life.

It is unlikely that this Israeli-American community can survive as a distinct entity without affiliating with American Jewry, it is far too small and dispersed geographically and culturally. It needs to have, and one is beginning to see, the conversation not on their role with regard to Israel or the political landscape, but their place within and in relation to America and American Jewry. Such a role will provide them with both institutional support and a collective identity to nurture the participation of the future generation. The sense of comfort with a majoritarian Jewish identity, fluency in Hebrew, the global outlook as immigrants, and the fresh perspective as outsiders, can all benefit American Jewry.

The resident Israeli-American community has come to accept that few will ever move back and that their children are going to be Americans. It is up to them as a community to decide on what terms their children will integrate into American life and this conversation must take place for them in order to define their place in America.

**David Mallach serves as Executive Vice-President of United Israel Appeal, a subsidiary of JFNA, and has previously worked in the Jewish communities of Philadelphia, MetroWest, NJ, and greater New York City. In each community he has worked to bring about greater involvement of the Israeli-American community in the federations, synagogues, JCC's and other agencies of organized Jewish life.**



## A Living Bridge: Sparking Passion by Loving Israel

**Adam Milstein**

In the last few years, our Israeli-American community has grown dramatically in size and impact. The IAC has a wide range of programs reaching hundreds of thousands of people in tens of states, an annual conference with thousands of attendees, and a sister advocacy organization that is successfully bringing bipartisan support for the US-Israel Alliance in D.C. and across the country. It's safe to say that we've succeeded in achieving our original goal of organizing, activating, and engaging the Israeli-American community in Los Angeles when we were founded more than ten years ago.

So where do we grow from here?

We are the premiere organization when it comes to revitalizing the Jewish community with Israeliness—our vibrant and diverse culture, our native language of Hebrew, our willingness to take risks in pursuit of innovation, our deep and inspired pride in our Jewish heritage, our unconditional love for Israel, and our courage to stand up against the enemies of the Jewish people. This unwavering love for Israel is key not just for the Israeli-American community, but for the broader Jewish community. Now that we are a major Jewish organization, our ability to lead and promote this key issue is vital.

We know that for Israel to be strong we need a strong and supportive Jewish community worldwide. It's up to us—those who live in the Diaspora—to unconditionally support the State of Israel by building bridges between the people of Israel and the people of America. We don't just speak Hebrew and English; we speak Israeli and we speak American.

We have a unique ability to communicate why Americans must support a strong Israel because of our personal experiences—the years we've spent living, learning and working in our Jewish homeland, our understanding of sacrifice from our army service, and our connections with family and friends who live in our Jewish homeland. Our community uniquely possesses knowledge and experience of Israel's history, politics, accomplishments, culture, and character.

Because of this, the onus is on us, as Israeli-Americans, to serve as the living bridge between the United States and Israel. We have made great progress on this front, with unprecedented activism from the Israeli-American community to garner support for a strong U.S-Israel relationship. Yet, we still have only activated a fraction of our community's capacity — and have a long way to go to realizing our full potential.

Thousands of years ago, Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, If I am only for myself, who am I? And if not now, when?"

These simple words drive me every single day, reminding me that our responsibility to make our communities strong cannot be left for others and cannot wait until tomorrow. By fully embracing the joy and responsibility of working to strengthen the Jewish people and the pro-Israel American community, my life has been enriched in more ways than I could have ever imagined.

Now, our strong, activated, and engaged Israeli-American community is more focused than ever. From the teenagers participating in IAC Eitanim to the community leaders in IAC Gvanim, to the children in IAC Keshet to the college students of IAC Mishelanu, to the thousands of families attending IAC Shishi Israeli shabbat dinners. Our next step is to harness our collective strength and collectively embrace our roles as communicators who are strengthening the relationship between our two countries.

I know that—just as we have succeeded in building our organization, and as we continue to succeed in growing our organization—we will succeed in strengthening the relationship between the people of Israel and the people of the United States, and we will succeed in bringing our love, passion and unwavering support for Israel to the broader Jewish American community.

**Adam Milstein is an Israeli-American philanthropist, entrepreneur and the chairman of the Israeli-American Council.**



# The Five Elements of IAC Communities

**Shoham Nicolet**

Our story is the story of Israelis, who came to America. Many didn't plan to stay. Most remained deeply connected to Israel, as they became proud Americans. Today their families represent about 10% of Jewish America. The IAC's story, is a story about trailblazers who coined the term "Israeli-Americans", and founded fast-growing community with Israel in its heart to

ensure a strong Jewish and Israeli identity for the next generations. With the support of Dr. Miriam and Sheldon Adelson, the story became a coast-to-coast bestseller. Joined by thousands of supporters and volunteers, the IAC became one of the leading Jewish American organizations.

Our vision is to build a coast-to-coast community with Israel in its heart and *Israeliness* in spirit.

What does *Israeliness* mean? Is it relevant for the second and third generations of Israeli-Americans or for non-Israeli Jewish Americans? How does impact our community leadership?

This article presents our five elements of *Israeliness*.

## **Hebrew and Israeli Culture – עברית ותרבות**

Hebrew is the soul of *Israeliness*. It is this sound you hear on a busy NYC street, or a shopping mall in LA, and feel for a second as if you landed in Israel. It is OUR language, and it makes us feel like one people. It is our connection to the stories of our ancestors, while also sparking innovations for the future. It is at the core of our identity, and part of the IAC's unique DNA. It is the most effective tool we have to fulfill our mission to connect the next generation to their Israeli and Jewish identities.

The sound of Hebrew is everywhere that the IAC is present, and it is part of our community's unique value proposition. As Israelis, it is a gift we have and share with the many Jewish Americans who strive to connect to Hebrew.



The participants in our programs are 20-50% non-Hebrew speakers, and we make sure Hebrew will not alienate them. The IAC has developed a unique formula to mix Hebrew and English, making sure anyone can connect to our ecosystem with no language barriers.

### **Love for Israel – אהבת ישראל**

Israel is the core of *Israeliness* and the IAC. There is no *Israeliness* without Israel. It is where all the elements of *Israeliness* were born. This is where we were born as a nation more than 3,000 years ago, and it is the “startup nation” building the future. It is not only a source of Israeli identity, but also a source of Jewish identity. Connecting our community, and especially our next generations to Israel, is vital for our future.

In recent years, the gap between Israel and Jewish America has widened. We believe, Israeli-Americans and *Israeliness* can be instrumental in achieving a future where the Jewish people and the Jewish State are strong, resilient and interconnected.

First, Israeli-Americans speak both “Israeli” and “American” and can bridge the many cultural differences between Jews who live in America and those who live in Israel.

Second, while trips to Israel are the best way to connect to Israel, an IAC experience is the next best way. We create “Israel-like spaces” here in America — the best examples are our annual national conference and our Celebrate Israel Festivals across the nation.

Third, *Israeliness* is loving Israel regardless of politics. The IAC community has a very wide spectrum of political views. While we love to debate any issue, our personal political views do not change our love and desire to support the country of Israel.

### **Activism – אקטיביזם**

*Israeliness* is about taking action, especially in the face of threats against our community. The IAC was born out of an urgency to support Israel in times of military conflicts. Since then, our communities have had to step up and take action on the new challenges of hate movements, growing anti-Semitism, and attempts to delegitimize the State of Israel. Our action often inspires the rest of Jewish American community to join us.

### **Jewish Heritage – מורשת יהודית**

Without Jewishness, *Israeliness* will not survive in future generations. In Israel, at noon on a Friday, you know it's Friday. On a Saturday you don't need to look at a clock, you can feel Shabbat in the air. When kids go to school on Purim they know what holiday it is. The density of the particles in the air changes in Yom Kippur. You don't get that same sense in the U.S.

If we are not active and don't ensure that our children know what Purim is and the meaning of Shabbat and Yom Kippur, they won't know.

At the IAC we strive to make Jewish heritage and traditions accessible to anyone, regardless of their affiliation. We created a new formula, combining Jewish traditions and Israeli culture into an experience that connects both Israeli and Jewish Americans of all generations.

We introduce, in many cases for the first time, families to basic Jewish traditions such as Kiddush in our "IAC Shishi Israeli". Jewish text also has become one of our core tools for our community leadership building in our "IAC Gvanim" and beyond.

Jewish Values are an important part of our heritage. Loving the other, mutual responsibility and a culture of giving are core Jewish values that we adopted into our organization and community.

#### **Innovation & Entrepreneurship – יזמות וחדשנות**

*Israeliness* is the ability to create something out of nothing with very few resources. It is always striving to challenge and reshape paradigms. It is what makes Israel a "startup nation." As community builders, we provide social entrepreneurs with tools such as design thinking to help them lead change.

It is also a universal language among the next generation and we make a use of that. For example, our cutting-edge program IAC Eitanim connects teenagers to Israel and their hybrid identity through innovation and entrepreneurship.

These five elements are interconnected and multifaceted. They serve as the building blocks for our activities and programs. They inform the hybrid identity of our next generation. And we believe they can be a game changer across Jewish communities in the United States. Shoham Nicolet is the Founding and present Chief Executive Officer of the Israeli-American Council (IAC). Shoham is a Co-founder of several Ed-Tech ventures and philanthropic initiatives, with unique expertise in project-based learning, educational technologies, and online collaboration

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# It's Time for the Israeli Diaspora to Step Up and Assume its Leadership Role!

**Netaly Ophir-Flint**

It seems that the Jewish people are currently living in the best of times and in the worst of times, to borrow the famous phrase from Charles Dickens. On one hand we are seeing the most flourishing time in Jewish history. Two large and thriving Jewish communities in Israel and North America living in relative prosperity and security (even against the backdrop of the tragic Pittsburg shooting).

Yet at the same time, the Jewish people, seem to be more divided than united. The passing of the Nation-State law, the breakdown of the Kotel Compromise, the backlisting of Reform and Conservative Rabbis by the Israeli Rabbinate, and other similar event, seem to be exacerbating this divide even more. The recent GA's "Let's Talk" theme, seems to indicate the desire and almost desperate cry to improve lines of communication and get the different parts of the Jewish people talking to each other.

In this fractured reality, there is one group that has the unique leadership capacity to cross boundaries and build bridges in order to strengthen our Jewish Peoplehood, but seem to be consistently overlooked and under-appreciated – this is the Israeli Diaspora and specifically those Israelis living in North America. **They are - by far - the best positioned to be 'Frontier Guides' and help bridge growing gaps between the two largest Jewish communities.**

Why is the Israeli diaspora so uniquely positioned? Well, because they encompass three inherent traits that almost no other population in the Jewish world have today:

First, they inherently embody Jewish Peoplehood, even if they do not know how to explicitly articulate it. By virtue of the fact that they live with one leg in both their local and Israeli communities, the Israeli Diaspora – and particularly the second generation – implicitly understand what it means to be part of a global people.

Second, they are bi-partisan by nature, generally voting based on issues and not on party affiliation. This is particularly important in a world where it seems like the Israeli

community is pulling right and the American Jewish community is pulling left causing the perception that an enormous crater is opening up between them.

Third, they are bi-lingual – not only in the literal sense that they speak both Hebrew and English – but also in the cultural sense that they speak ‘Israeliness’ and ‘Amerikait’ (aka ‘Americanism’).

Armed with these inherent traits, the Israeli Diaspora naturally fit into the role of what the Adaptive Leadership Framework calls ‘Frontier Guides’. As Prof. Dean Williams of Harvard’s Kennedy School so eloquently states in his book *Leadership for a Fractured World*, Frontier Guides have the capacity to do three things: (a) Go to the boundary frontiers to meet with the other to discover shared values; (b) be a voice of calm and encouragement to their own group; and (c) play a mediating role by serving as an “interpreter” of the other group’s behavior, sacred values, and aspirations to their own group and vice versa.

What this practically means is that the Israeli Diaspora living in the United States has an important leadership role to play vis-à-vis Israelis living in Israel and vis-à-vis American Jews living in America.

On the Israeli side, the most important leadership role that the Israeli Diaspora has is helping widen the often too narrow and paternalistic Israeli lens in order to ensure that Israel serves as the Nation State of the entire Jewish People.

On the American side, it means breaking the ‘Zionism vs. Liberalism’ dichotomy that many American Jews tend to place on Israel and to help create more nuanced conversations that show the shades of grey facing Israel’s reality and the mindset of many Israelis.

However, for a number of sociological reasons, stepping up to this leadership role is not trivial for many Israelis living abroad. Hence, there are several things that we can communally do to help them assume this critical and almost historic role. These includes:

**Infusing the Israeli diaspora with Purpose** – Leadership is often driven by a sense of deep purpose. For years, not only did the Israeli diaspora not have a sense of purpose, it was shamed into feeling traitors and back-turners on their country. This is the time to move beyond the old stereotypes and outdated language and to help infuse the Israelis with long-term vision and mission.

**Helping this community look beyond the horizon and stop being so preoccupied with itself** – For many of the reasons stated above, Israelis living abroad have often found themselves in survival mode – preoccupied with integrating into their new surroundings,

finding ways to educate their children in the values they feel are important, and struggling to maintain connections with their family and friends in Israel. However, this narrow, insulated view, is beginning to change as more and more Israelis are taking on communal leadership roles. We need to work to make this the standard and not the exception.

**Encouraging the second generation to assume key communal positions** – As stated, first generation Israelis often find themselves struggling to balance their complex identities. Second generation Israelis, however, are more-free to embrace their hybrid identities as an asset rather than a liability. This holds tremendous potential for leadership. For this reason, we need to encourage second generation Israelis to be more active in communal and organizational positions such as Jewish summer camp counselors, Taglit guides, local volunteer programs, and such.

“This is the time; This is the day: This is the moment,” as Yehuda Poliker sings, for the Israeli community living outside of Israel to step up and assume their leadership role as frontier guides in service of our collective Jewish People.

**Netaly Ophir Flint is a Partner at KONU: Growing and Provoking Leadership. She is the former CEO of the Reut Group**



## Achdut V'lo Achidut– Unity Without Uniformity

**Lori Palatnik**

The Jewish people are an anomaly. Are we a religion? No, you can be a Jew without ever entering a synagogue. Are we a race? No, Jews come in so many shades and colors. Are we a nation? For 2,000 years we had no common country. A people? Yes, but I propose our identity is even deeper and more profound.

We are a family — a highly dysfunctional family — but a family nonetheless.

And just like any family, we sometimes fight amongst ourselves. But if attacked from the outside, we band together as one. Is that the only way to create unity, when there's a shooting in a synagogue or when three boys are kidnapped or when bombs are falling?

Although the joke is that there are two Jews and three opinions, today Jewish organizations and Israeli leaders will agree on one thing—that division amongst Jews not only makes for inner strife, but also can make us vulnerable to our enemies. Division creates weakness. Our enemies know that and take advantage of it, pitting Jew against Jew.

It used to be that at least we could agree on one thing—Israel. That was the one thing that brought us together. But unfortunately, I have sat in too many talks listening to Jewish thought leaders say that we will speak about many things today, but not Israel, as Israel is now a “controversial” and “divisive” subject.

How do we stop the madness and bring the family of the Jewish people together?

Perhaps Israelis who live in the US are the answer. **Poised geographically to play a key role in healing the divide, American Israelis can be that bridge.** But they must look out for the cultural quicksand that could cause the bridge to stand on a shaky foundation.

When I meet Jews at functions and they find out my husband is a rabbi, they often tell me, “I am not religious. I am culturally Jewish.”

What does it mean to be a “cultural Jew”? Culture includes music, art, language, dress... Jewish culture varies widely – depending on where we’re from and where we live.

While we may not share a culture, we do share values – values that have been handed down for 3,500 years, values that have civilized nations and changed the world for all time. We are referred to as “the people of the book,” and I think it’s worth revisiting that book. Cecil B. Demille’s movie, *The Ten Commandments*, was good, but everyone knows the book is always better than the movie.

The book links the Jewish people and Israel in the deepest way. When David Ben Gurion presented our claim to Israel to the United Nations, he opened up a *Tanach* and read that God gave the land to the Jewish people.

While we may choose a label for ourselves as Reform, Conservative or Orthodox, remember there is one book, one Torah, and it contains all the values that unite us, including Israel. And in it we are charged with a mission: to be an *Ohr L’Goyim*, a “Light Unto the Nations.”

Unfortunately, American Jewry is now a very dim light, as Harvey Weinstein and Bernie Madoff have become the examples to the world of what a Jew has become.

You, as American Israelis, can teach all of us a lot. You were born in Israel, worked it, lived it, and put your lives and the lives of those you love, on the line for it. Your soul is strong and you have so much to share with the Diaspora Jewish community.

Remind your fellow Jews why Israel is special and why we must continue to fight for it. Be the strong bridge between Israel and the Diaspora. But remember that it is a chain-linked bridge – and that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Be a proud, educated and empowered Jew, part of a family where we may be very different in many ways—religiously, politically.... but where we come together by focusing on what unites us and not what divides us. Then we’ll be able to dial down our inner strife, become a shining strong light to other nations, and protect ourselves from those who wish us harm.

Yes, two Jews, three opinions – but one heart.

**Lori Palatnik is the Founding Director of The Jewish Women’s Renaissance Project. In partnership with Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, the JWRP has created Momentum, a one-year program of empowerment for over 15,000 Jewish mothers from 26 countries that includes an eight-day transformational experience in Israel.**



## A Brain Drain? The Potential for Gain\*

**Shira Ruderman**

Israel's officials recently named Professor Amir Yaron as the next Governor of the Bank of Israel. Without doubt, this is a challenging and complex position, and whoever holds it finds him/herself at one of the most crucial decision-making junctions in the State of Israel. His success is our success, and we should wish him luck on this journey.

However, the pending appointment of Prof. Yaron is also an opportunity to reassess how we view Israelis, especially businesspersons and academics, living and working overseas. For years, the discourse emphasized the 'brain drain' and Israel's loss of a pool of potential professionals and achievers. We said it was a loss for the country and society, and that the phenomena should be curbed. This appointment shows there is another option: to view the move of Israeli to abroad as an opportunity to gain, not drain.

Prof. Yaron is one of the hundreds of thousands of Israelis currently living in the United States. He was born in Israel, served in the Israeli defense force and completed his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Israeli institutions – a similar track to that of many Israelis. Then came the turning point as he decided to pursue his Doctoral studies in the US. Many people would see this decision as an example of a problem characterizing the Israeli academia – a lack of appealing programs or career opportunities that could have swayed this young and promising researcher into staying in Israel. Today we can clearly argue that Yaron's decision to continue his advanced studies abroad led him to an remarkable academic career, mostly in the US but also in other countries (including Israel), and without a doubt played a significant role in the development of his knowledge and expertise, as well as his professional circle and friends. The same knowledge and relationships he will now use as Governor of the Bank of Israel.

This story of Prof. Yaron is not unique. There are thousands of Israelis currently in other countries working to enhance their education and progress in their professional path in their respective fields – medicine, law, economics, IT, physics, engineering and many other fields of sciences and social studies. Prof. Yaron's appointment demonstrates this, as did the appointment of Judge Alex Stein to Israel's Supreme Court in early 2018.



The Israeli government should internalize that Israelis living outside the country have immense potential to help the State.

Israel has many good things, even though there are always things that can be improved. Israel has advanced industry and high-tech, leading research universities and opportunities for business and professional growth. The truth needs to be spoken: Israel is a small country, with a limited financial market and a limited marketplace for ideas. This size has ramifications for the state, and bears implications for individuals aspiring to be the best in their field. In other words, in order to develop one must also grow outside of Israel, if only for a limited period.

In order to be a meaningful player, Israel needs international ties. Israelis living in the US are the natural choice to build and foster relationships between the two countries. For Israelis like Yaron, Stein and others to help Israel, the state needs to acknowledge that also those who choose to live overseas still feel connected to Israel. I argue this based on my personal experience: I married an America-Jew, and this led me to move to Boston and raise my four children here. Had someone asked me in high school or during my army service if I'd live in the US I would have laughed; today it is reality. And, in this day to day reality, I still feel Israeli, not only when visiting family and friends.

In 1976 the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin called the Israelis living around the world "a downfall of cowards." We no longer live in the 1970s, and there is room to reexamine Israel's relationship with Israelis in abroad. Every few years someone asks whether Israelis should be allowed to vote for the Knesset – but the issue is much broader. Does the State of Israel see Israelis as a liability or a strategic asset? Does it view the likes of Haim Saban and Dr. Miriam Adelson as friends who can help build relationships with politicians and key institutions? Does it know how to support Israeli scholars currently working in non-Israeli universities, in order to strengthen academic cooperation between institutions and countries? Can it support groups like the "Tzabar Tzofim", tying the next generation of Israeli overseas to Israel – because it understands the children of Israelis in Miami or Los Angeles have the potential to be pro-Israel voices on campus and in their workplace?

The appointments of Prof. Yaron and Justice Stein testify that the work, research and efforts by Israelis overseas does not mark the end of their connection with our homeland. It is time the Israel invested more in its relationship with them. The more the government views Israeli living abroad as a strategic asset, the more beneficial it will be to the future of Israel.

**Shira Ruderman is a professional philanthropist and social activist. She serves as the Executive Director of the Ruderman Family Foundation, a private family foundation that invests in three primary areas of focus: advocating for and advancing the inclusion of people with disabilities throughout our society, strengthening the relationship between Israel and the American Jewish community, and modeling the practice of strategic philanthropy worldwide.**

*\* The following is an adapted English version of an op-ed published in Hebrew by TheMarker on October 22, 2018*



## A New Paradigm

**Nachman Shai**

We must not allow the anti-Semitic murder in Pittsburgh to cast a dark shadow over the relations between Israel and the Jewish community in the United States, including the hundreds of thousands of Israelis living in America. Jews in the U.S. do not face life-threatening danger. The calls in Israel following this act of terror – for U.S. Jewry to find a safe haven in Israel – were unwarranted and reflect a basic misunderstanding of the situation. Jews living in the U.S. are not planning to emigrate. And if they do, the motivation is certainly not a fear for their lives and the lives of their families.

This is only an example of the fundamental misconception prevalent in Israel vis-à-vis U.S. Jewry, including its Israeli component.

The Israeli community in the U.S. has a special status. It is situated between the large community of American Jews whose families came to the U.S. generations ago, and the relatively young State of Israel. The Israeli community in the U.S. includes mostly young immigrants whose ties to the State of Israel are significantly different from those of Jews who were born in America. For the Israeli-American, Israel is first of all a place of birth and, of course, a place of family ties and deep emotional connections. This adds another dimension to the already complicated relationship between the Jewish communities in the U.S. and Israel.

This reality is dynamic, changing constantly. The historical, one-dimensional attitude toward Israelis who chose to leave the country and settle in America has become complex and varied. The former attitude, which we all remember well, is no longer relevant. The world has changed, primarily due to the impact of technology, and the circumstances have changed, engendering a change in attitudes too.

I see the Israeli community in the U.S. as an integral part of the Jewish world and expect to develop a reciprocal relationship with it, just like any other Jewish community in the Diaspora. Any other policy – of turning a blind eye or holding a grudge – is inappropriate and will lead us nowhere. Of course, I would be happy to see many Israel émigrés returning and resettling in Israel. However, in our open and mobile world, this expectation is not realistic.

So, how do we maintain our relationship with this large group? (I don't know its exact number, but cautiously say it is growing.) The key, of course, is to recognize the presence

of Israelis in America and to respect their decision to live there for however long they choose. This is already happening.

The next question is how to avoid losing them as Israelis and as Jews. The third question is how to forge relations of mutual assistance with them. Today, the greatest danger facing the Jewish people is not anti-Semitism or despicable murderers like Robert Bowers. The real danger is the loss of substantial parts of the Jewish people due to the ongoing erosion of Jewish identity and assimilation into the general society. The U.S., like other liberal democracies, offers Jews (including Israelis living in America) a life of equality and security. This means that the Jewish community is no longer self-enclosed and limited; it enjoys the unrestricted freedom that democratic life offers. The dilemma is how to enjoy the countless possibilities in such societies while remaining Jewish and maintaining a connection to the State of Israel.

There is no greater challenge to the Jewish people in our generation. A great change is occurring in the relations between the Jewish Diaspora and Israel. The fact is that the largest Jewish community in the world resides in Israel. It is a Jewish state, the state of the Jewish people and home to about 6.5 million Jews. Throughout the world, including the U.S., the Jewish people is shrinking. Inter-marriage is gradually reducing the number of Jews. This can already be seen today and will certainly have an impact on the next generation. Therefore, the responsibility for the future of the Jewish people falls upon the State of Israel.

Most Israelis, including my colleagues in the political arena, do not sense or understand this. We are now addressing a different problem – of how Israel has failed to instill a sense of connection with the Diaspora in the young generation. We've been so concerned about nurturing the Diaspora's connection toward us that we've forgotten the reciprocal part of the relationship – that is, we've failed to nurture our connection toward them.

The time has come for a new paradigm of relations in which Israel takes the leading role. Yes, Israelis will continue to fundraise and solicit political support in America and in other parts of the world, and to disseminate Israeli culture. That's fine, but it's not enough. I also envision a formal and informal array of efforts in the State of Israel dedicated to fostering Israel's responsibility toward its "brothers and sisters" overseas. This should include programs of study in the schools, and organizations that focus on the connections between Israel and Jewish communities in the Diaspora. What seemed superfluous in the past has become a core issue of supreme importance, in my view.

Israel is burdened with many problems – or "challenges" in American parlance. You know them well. I would like to add the Israeli community in the U.S. to this long list and assign high priority to it. This challenge lies before us, and we must pick up the gauntlet.

**Dr. Nachman Shai is a Knesset member of the Zionist Union and chairs the Lobby for strengthening the Jewish World**



## What's in a Name?

**Aya I. Shechter**

When our children were born in the US we looked for a name. We rejected all names that will be understood well in Hebrew but will have a weird meaning in English (like Dror, which is too similar to Drawer), all names with the letter R that sounds very different when pronounced with a Hebrew vs. English accent (like Rachel) and all names that just sound completely different (Jonathan vs. Yonatan). In short, names that are easy to pronounce, that are young, that are cool, that has no baggage and blend in perfectly with the society and culture in which we live.

Years later I'm thinking that knowing what I know now I would have chosen differently, or at least ask myself a different question- what's in a name?

On Friday evenings Jewish families gather around the Shabat table. Some parents bless their sons "May you be like Ephraim and Menashe". From all the males, the boys, the leaders in our bible why them? What's in their names?

Ephraim and Mensahe are the only two grandchildren of Jacob who were born in the diaspora.

Their parents could have chosen other names for them. Names that would help them fit in.

I want to believe that the sons of Yosef would have grown up to be good Jewish boys no matter what their names were, but can it be that the name helps you preserve your identity? That it signals who you are from a distance? That it summons different interactions in life?

Raising a Jewish child in the diaspora comes with a set of challenges if identity is of concern to the parents. The chosen name of the child is no magic bullet to solve these challenges but here are my thoughts on how it can be a factor.

Israeli-Americans, as oppose to some other immigrant communities, have no identifiable external characteristics. Remove an identifiable Jewish name or an Israeli name that may lead to questions like "what does your name mean", remove identifiable accent

that Israeli-American children do not have, and you have the perfect recipe to blend in, or using harsher words, to assimilate. When you need to explain your name, it creates opportunities to tell your story: "It's a Jewish name that means...", "my parents are from Israel and in Hebrew this name means...".

At the Israeli American Council, the names of our programs tell a story. They encompass our educational vision, the long-term goal and the communal vision. They represent where the program comes from, where it is going and what we want to achieve. They do not necessarily roll easily on the tongue. It may take more than one attempt to pronounce them well. They may sound a little foreign to the non-Israeli ear but they invite exploration, and they help us preserve identity and cater to the specific needs of the changing Jewish American community that we, as Israeli-Americans, are a part of and becoming an increasingly significant part of.

**Aya Shechter is the National Regional offices operations director of IAC. She spent the last 10 years in executive and leadership positions in the Jewish-American non-profit world and specifically the Israeli-American community.**



# The Israeli Diaspora

**Jordan Shenker**

As Israelis disperse throughout the Jewish world, they are experiencing the challenges of immigrant populations while at the same time having the opportunity for connections to Jewish life if they choose to accept it. Israelis in the diaspora can successfully transition into their new communities with meaning and purpose while also adding value to their community. The central question is: how do they become part of the culture, fabric and community of where they live while maintaining deep connection to the culture and history of where they have been?

Living in Israel, being Jewish is woven into the fabric of everyday life. In the diaspora being Jewish is a choice that requires action to connect. In making this choice, there is a balancing of competing needs that Israelis in the diaspora wrestle with; the degree to which they remain an isolated population in the greater Jewish community addressing the unique needs of connection to Israeli culture in Hebrew and from the perspective of an Israeli vs. seamlessly integrating into existing programs and experiences within the community. Similarly, Jewish communities are wrestling with understanding that both of these needs are relevant and to learn to respond and welcome both rather than prescribe one over the other.

Choosing to be Jewish and choosing to connect to Jewish life are new ideas to most Israelis as they settle outside of Israel. Being connected to the Jewish people outside of Israel requires this choice and proactive action to achieve this goal. This reality is not unique to Israelis. Jews in the diaspora are all faced with this question, but those who have not lived in Israel, have grown up with the understanding that being Jewish and being connected to Jewish life was a choice, for Israelis this idea is new.

The organized Jewish community has a responsibility to reach out and connect with Israelis and Jews of all backgrounds wherever they are both geographically, philosophically and spiritually and provide opportunities to engage that are meaningful for them. Organizations and communities cannot mandate what is meaningful for anyone. Each individual must choose what is meaningful to them.

Being Jewish is a choice for us all. The beauty, wonder and fulfillment of this choice begin with first an acceptance of the awareness and sense of belonging to the Jewish people. But awareness and a sense of belonging are only first steps. Showing up matters! Being an active part of your own Jewish journey is critical to meaningful engagement and when we all accept the joint responsibility for developing our Jewish journeys together, our Jewish communities will all be stronger.

The strength of the Jewish diaspora is tied symbiotically to both the diversity of people, beliefs and perspectives along with the shared connection to being part of a people. Israelis add a depth of meaning and value to and receive value from the diversity of the Jewish communities in which they live. Jewish communities around the world would do well to find ways to embrace Israelis living in their communities to add to the rich fabric of Jewish life for us all.

**Jordan Shenker is the CEO for the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, one of the largest JCCs in the country**





# A Strengthened Israeli–American Jewish Partnership to Oppose the Delegitimization of Israel and Jewish Identity

**Barry Shrage**

*“Sociological descriptions are helpful in expanding awareness of the facts. They should not be expected to unlock resources of creative imagination by which to modify the facts.*

*In contrast to those who call for amor fati (acceptance of fate) we call for ahavath Israel, for joy in being what we are, love for those who share our commitments.”*

*Abraham Joshua Heschel*

The emerging American Israeli diaspora is in the process of defining itself, its ethos and vision and its role in relation to the American Jewish community, Israel, and the future of its own children.

Up until a few years ago these issues confronted an Israeli community without any venue to “talk among themselves” ....to understand their own diversity and their place in the American Jewish community. There was a barely articulated concern that raising Jewish families faced special challenges in America but no place to formulate a better understanding of the challenge, to develop new strategies, or to talk to the organized Jewish community about mutual needs and approaches to the challenge of Jewish identity in the 21st century, a challenge common to Israelis, American Jews and Israeli Americans.

And yet, Israelis and American Jews need each other, perhaps more than ever before to face the future with confidence. There is no one who can tell Israel’s story in America better than Israeli-Americans. Yet, for decades, most Israeli-Americans existed on the periphery of Jewish life in the U.S. Federations, JCC’s, and synagogues that had little

success attracting them to programming or engaging them as supporters. The important question is not about the nature of the American Israeli community as it currently exists, but rather our vision and our dreams of the critical role it might play in shaping the Jewish future at the leading edge of Jewish history.

In the past ten years, this paradigm has shifted in large part because of the work of the Israeli-American Council, which has unified a national Israeli-American community through its own programming and joint efforts with partners in American Jewish institutions, including our own Federation here in Boston.

Many in the American Jewish community have long assumed that education is the key to ensuring Jewish identity. While critically important, Jewish education without a strong connection to Jewish peoplehood lacks purpose and stickiness. If you don't understand how you fit into the Jewish story and how you are connected to the Jewish people, why bother to study Judaism at all? Why not choose to engage with one of the thousands of other dynamic cultures that exist in American society? This question is particularly salient today and complicated by the attack on Jewish identity linked to the delegitimization of Israel under the banner of the most extreme forms of intersectionality.

Israeli-Americans can help confront these challenges. They are uniquely familiar with the value of Jewish peoplehood and having served in the IDF, capable of offering personal witness to the challenges Israel faces and their pride in its incredible successes. In my new role as director of the Initiative on Jewish Identity at Brandeis University I'm acutely aware of the role that peoplehood, love of the Jewish people, plays at the heart of Jewish identity and the importance of the paradigm shift that the IAC spearheaded and the critical role that it can play in the lives of our children and theirs.

**Barry Shrage is a Professor at Brandeis University and former President of Boston's Jewish Federation for the last 31 Years**



**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org).

Past issues can be accessed at [www.jpeoplehood.org/library](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/library)

**The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE)** is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting. [www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)

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