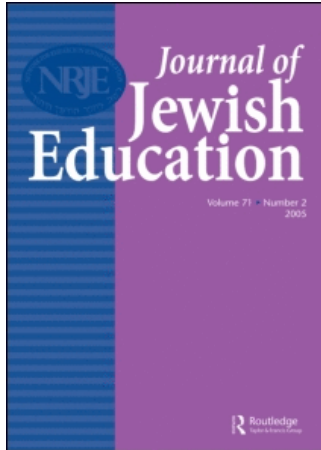


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MIFGASHIM: A Meeting of Minds and Hearts

A Comparison of Cognitive and Affective Models in Structured Educational Encounters between Israeli and Jewish-American Adolescents

ERIK H. COHEN

ABSTRACT

“Mifgashim” — structured meetings between Diaspora participants of Israel Experience Programs and Israeli youth — are organized to strengthen ties between the two populations. Two basic models of Mifgashim are offered, one emphasizing cognitive and the other affective means of achieving the same goal. The cognitive-based model had a slightly stronger impact, especially on the Israeli participants. Nonetheless, both fall somewhat short of their potential in impact and satisfaction. We believe that the types of activities within the Mifgashim programs are not the source of the encounter’s shortfalls. Rather, the difficulties include the brief time allotted, language barriers, and group functioning, in particular adolescent group dynamics. Perhaps the most fundamental problem is a widespread perception that the Mifgashim are conducted primarily for the benefit of the Diaspora youth. The objectification of the Israeli participants by program planners can be seen as reflecting attitudes in the larger field of Israel-American relations.

INTRODUCTION

The Israel Experience

Every year, thousands of young Jewish

visitors come to Israel. A large percentage of them come on Israel Experience programs, under the auspices of the Jewish Agency’s Department for Jewish Zionist Education. The programs’ basic goal is to expose Diaspora youth to Israel and Israeli society, thereby strengthening the bond between the communities (Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Wall, 1993; Cohen, 1994; Mittelberg, 1994). The Israel Experience programs seek to reach both the hearts and minds of participants: to give them both an understanding of and a feeling for Israel (Rovner, 1976). For Diaspora youngsters, interacting with young Israelis works towards both of these goals. One of the activities included in a growing number of the short-term summer programs is known as “Mifgashim” — literally, meetings — or planned encounters with Israeli youth.

The Israelis participating in the Mifgashim are not part of a corresponding local program, but are recruited individually. There is no well-developed or articulated educational rationale for Israeli youth interacting with their Diaspora peers.

The Mifgashim

The Mifgashim are structured meetings between Jewish youth from the Diaspora and from Israel, with English as the common language. They are as short as two days or as long as twelve, averaging between four and five days. The Mifgashim take place at various times during the tour program, some of

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them soon after the youngsters arrive in Israel, some shortly before they leave.

The organizers and designers of the Israel Experience programs attribute a great deal of importance to the Mifgashim. The encounters are allotted a relatively long amount of time within the tour programs, which last only three to six weeks. In comparison, many other components are given only several hours. In November 1994, an entire institute was founded dedicated to improving and promoting the Mifgashim, under the aegis of Charles R. Bronfman and the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education. And the recently created Birthright Foundation which will promote the Israel Experience by giving each young Diaspora Jew the real possibility of coming to Israel in the framework of educational groups, is considering making Mifgashim a mandatory element in the program curriculum.

Jewish Agency organizers and professionals are aware of a paradox within the Mifgashim program: Despite the fact that Israel Experience participants have repeatedly and emphatically requested more opportunities to interact with Israeli teens, the Mifgashim program consistently receives only modest evaluations. The present study was conducted, in part, to try to unravel this paradox.

Because not all Mifgashim follow the same format, we began by looking at the different types of encounters, which reflect two different and distinct philosophical lines. One emphasizes an intellectual approach through discussion groups and seminars; the other takes place on the seashore and centers around fun and leisure activities.

The Cognitive Model

The cognitive model represents a more structured and intellectual approach. The designers of these workshops and discussion

groups believe that the young people, coming from very different worlds, need a conceptual framework in which the encounters can take place and be meaningful. Nothing is "natural" or "given" in this model; everything is constructed. The counselors take an active role in guiding the discussions or activities that focus on issues specific to Israel and Judaism. Here the common references are religion, culture and nationhood, and they are explicitly articulated and their meaning explored through the discussion groups.

The Affective Model

The principles guiding the affective model assert that people create authentic relationships through non-mediated encounters. The counselors are instructed to take a minimal, almost *laissez-faire* approach. They allow the participants to take the initiative in making contacts. Because overt intervention makes "noise" in the encounters, participants are expected to find natural channels of communication. These are to be based on universal references, such as male/female relations, common hobbies, and sports. Issues of Judaism, Israel and Zionism are not addressed directly, on the assumption that the simple fact of forging friendships with Israelis will bring the Diaspora youngsters emotionally closer to the country (Daily Forward, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we used two major sources of information: anthropological observations carried out at different times and in different sites; and evaluation questionnaires distributed to almost all encounter participants. This survey of the Mifgashim is part of a comprehensive research of the Israel Experience which I have been conducting for the past 10 years. Thus the findings of this specific study could be evaluated within the larger framework of

what we have learned about the program overall.

The field research for this study was conducted during the summer of 1994 (Cohen, 1995a, 1996a). Of the various Mifgashim models offered, we looked in-depth at the Recreational Activities and the Creativity Workshops. These were selected as representative of the two basic approaches to the Mifgashim, the first one an affective model and the second, a cognitive one. Four hundred fifty-seven American participants and 312 Israelis completed questionnaires, in English and Hebrew, respectively. This number represents 86 percent of the participants of the selected groups. Two full five-day encounters were observed from early morning until "lights out," as were several single-day units within multi-day encounters.

We considered only the data from American-Israeli encounters in this analysis, as the samples from Mifgashim in programs originating elsewhere in the world were small.

RESULTS

Satisfaction with the Mifgashim

Both the Americans and the Israelis strongly believe that the encounters are vital in bringing Diaspora youth closer to Israel. Eighty-four percent of the Americans and 97 percent of the Israelis state that it is important or very important for American youth to spend a week with Israeli youth in order to understand Israel. In a follow-up survey conducted one year after they returned home, 73 percent of the North American alumni of the summer 1993 Israel Experience recommended more encounters with their Israeli peers in order to improve the quality and impact of their tour (Cohen, 1995b).

At the same time, we also found that the Diaspora participants with the Mifgashim component was significantly lower than their

satisfaction with other components, such as the Exodus program,¹ and with the Israel Experience overall (Table 1). Similarly, the percentage of Israel participants who feel the program is "very important" (59%) far outstrips the percentage of those who were "very satisfied" with it (26%). Although a very low percentage of Mifgashim participants said that they were actually dissatisfied with the program, the encounters program has not reached the high standard of the overall Israel Experience tour.

Impact of the Mifgashim

This is not to say that the Mifgashim are failing to achieve their goal. As seen in Table 2, the majority of both the Americans and the Israelis report that the program had a positive impact. However, there is room for improvement. For example, a quarter of the participants answered in the negative when asked whether their opinion of their peers from the counterpart group had improved at the end of the program. This was also reflected in the observers' reports, which were peppered with accounts of communication problems between the two nationalities. The anthropological teams noticed a lack of interaction between the two groups outside the formal activities.

We wanted to learn what differences, if any, exist between the two models, as well as between the two nationalities. Within this list of evaluative questions, some measure more cognitive types of impacts, others more affective. For example, a better understanding of peers indicates a cognitive change, while the intention to maintain contact with those peers represents an affective one. Satisfaction with the encounter includes both the emotional and the intellectual. Thus responses to this question can show us whether one of the approaches was more effective in general, or for the visiting youth or their Israeli hosts in particular.

Table 1. Satisfaction with Mifgashim program as compared to the Exodus program and to the overall Israel Experience (Americans only): Percentage of respondents answering "Definitely Yes."

	<u>Mifgashim Program</u>	<u>Exodus Program</u>	<u>Israel Experience</u>
Would you say that you are satisfied with your program?	18	45	55
Would you recommend this program to your friends?	20	N/A	65

Impact of Mifgashim on Israelis and Americans

We can see that the encounters did not affect the two nationalities in the same way. Overall, the Israelis responded more favorably to the encounters and were slightly more satisfied with the program. More Israelis said they felt they were able to get to know their peers through the Mifgashim, and that they planned to stay in touch with their new friends. They were much more likely to recommend the program to others. Most surprisingly, a slightly higher percentage of the Israelis said the experience changed the way they see their own home country!

The most dramatic difference was in the recommendation to include Mifgashim in all Israel Experience programs. A far greater percentage of the Israelis felt strongly that meetings with local youth should be a required part of all the Jewish Agency's tours. The only question on which the Americans as a whole gave more positive answers was whether they made personal contacts with the other young people. This apparent contradiction may simply indicate that the Americans have a more lenient idea of what it means to make personal contact with someone. A discussion of how each group perceives concepts such as understanding, getting to know and making contact with others is beyond the scope of this article, but further research in this area could be helpful to those studying interaction between the two cultures.

Impact of Cognitive and Affective Programs

In general, the differences between the evaluations of the Creativity Workshops and the Recreational Activities are slight. The Americans are more satisfied with the affective program, the Israelis, to a lesser extent, with the cognitive one. As a whole, the cognitive approach received a better evaluation from both nationalities, although not dramatically so. The greatest difference, again, is found in the recommendation to include Mifgashim in all Israel Experience tours. As opposed to the youngsters participating in the leisure activities, 20 percent more of the Israelis and 10 percent more of the Americans enrolled in the discussion group format recommended expanding the program. The stronger impact of the intellectual approach is seen even on the items referring to emotional issues, such as a desire to maintain relations.

DISCUSSION

In an attempt to answer our first question — why the Mifgashim are less successful than the Israel Experience as a whole — we looked at two program models. The results have raised two additional questions: Why is there so little difference between the evaluations of the Creativity Workshops and the Recreational Activities? And why was the cognitive approach more effective, however slightly?

Why the Cognitive Approach?

It is commonly believed (and claimed by Recreational Activity designers) that the affective, fun-centered approach is better adapted to groups of adolescents. This would seem to be largely supported by the opinions of the teens themselves. Ninety-five percent of all participants said that having fun in Israel is an important factor in fostering a positive connection with the country. The Recreational Activity model is predicated on fulfilling this desire for an enjoyable visit; so why did the Creativity Workshops get a more favorable evaluation?

Clearly, despite their desire to have fun on their trip, the American participants join these tours for more than just a beach holiday. They want and expect to have a specifically Jewish experience, a sort of modern pilgrimage (Cohen, E. H., 1986; Cohen, S., 1986; Goldfarb, 1991). They are seeking an authentic, holistic experience, which will give them a sense of community, spirituality and tradition (Abrams et al., 1996), not a superficial "pseudo-event" (Boorstin, 1964). In Cohen's (1979) typology, tourists are ranged in a continuum from the recreationally to the existentially motivated. The Israel Experience participants are undoubtedly interested in the

Table 2. Impact of Mifgashim (Percentage of Respondents Answering Definitely Yes.

	Creativity Workshops (Cognitive)		Recreational Activities (Affective)	
	<u>Americans</u>	<u>Israelis</u>	<u>Americans</u>	<u>Israelis</u>
When you take into consideration all the different components of your encounter program, would you say that you are satisfied?	17	28	23	26
Would you recommend expanding the encounter program for every Israel Experience program?	25	86	16	68
Would you recommend to your friends to participate in such an encounter?	26	46	21	44
Do you intend to maintain relationships with young people of the other country?	17	32	14	21
Did the encounter change the way you see Israel?	15	16	5	7
Do you think that your opinion regarding young people of the other country changed for the better following the encounter?	17	17	9	11
Would you say that the program gave you a real opportunity to get to know young people of the other country?	31	42	26	40
Do you now feel that you better understand young people of the other country?	25	26	18	21
Did you make personal contacts with Israelis/Americans your age? (% answering "Yes, many")	41	34	43	23

recreational aspects of the trip, but the fact that they chose such a program, as opposed to simply touring with friends, indicates an interest in the more cerebral and spiritual elements as well.

A recent study of youth travel discusses the phenomenon of "collecting" exotic places and experiences (Desforges, 1998). The American Jewish teens who come to Israel do not seem to be part of this phenomenon. They are looking not for an "other," but for themselves and their extended "family." The Creativity Workshops explore issues pertinent to this relationship in an explicit way not found in the Recreational Activities. Similarly, although the Israelis who sign up for Mifgashim certainly expect to have a good time, they decided to meet young Americans through a structured program, not at a disco or on the beach.

Neither population was specifically recruited as "intellectuals." Nevertheless, we know from previous research that the American participants in Israel Experience programs are intensively involved in Jewish youth organizations (Cohen, 1999a, 1999b). They are the core of the Jewish community, many going on to become leaders or professionals in their communities. Half a year before their trip, we asked youngsters from Detroit what motivated them to sign up for an Israel Experience tour. Overwhelmingly, they responded that, in addition to having fun, they expected to learn, to increase their knowledge, to better understand — all cognitive goals (Cohen, 1996b). Thus the participants in Israel Experience programs may be somewhat more oriented to an intellectual approach than the "average teen." There has been a drive in recent years to bring unaffiliated American Jews on Israel Experience programs. It will be interesting to verify or refute this assumption if and when the programs expand to include this new population in the next few years. We expect to see a move towards the affective.

The Israeli participants are specifically recruited for the Mifgashim. First of all, they must be conversant in English. Beyond that, particularly "motivated" teenagers are chosen to take part. These two criteria seem to be selecting for youngsters who are more interested in and moved by the discussion-group format.

The essence of the cognitive approach is mediation. Communication between the two populations is channeled, directed. In every planned discussion and activity — in fact, throughout the entire encounters — a referent, an invisible "third" (in psychoanalytical terminology) is present. This "third" — for example Judaism or Zionism — can make encounters less threatening and confrontational, because they are less immediate and personal. Though a referent also often exists in affective activities (such as agreed-upon rules in a volleyball), it is often not verbally or consciously expressed.

It has been suggested that the slightly lower rating of the Recreational Activities can perhaps be attributed to the counselors (Henri Cohen-Solal, personal communication, 1999). Organizing and overseeing a smoothly running and thematically clear activity, while maintaining a "hands-off" approach, requires a good deal of sophistication, which may be beyond the skills or training level of many counselors.

A QUESTION OF CONTENT?

The Mifgashim consist of what has been termed "quasi-primary groups" — organized face-to-face encounters with a specific purpose. In this kind of encounter, environment is a crucial factor, influencing the nature of a group's interactions, dynamics, opportunities for participation, and the relationships formed. It is expected that groups of equivalent populations which conduct their activities in different settings will have markedly different

experiences. "Two given quasi-primary groups may be entirely different due to the opportunities the milieu offers or withholds for group participation [and] activity facilitation" (Horrocks, 1962: 226). As seen through the evaluations, the Creativity Workshops and the Recreational Activities are not "entirely different"; in terms of impact, in fact, they are not very different at all.

We cannot ignore the possibility that no significant difference was found between the two because, despite designs and guiding philosophies, no real differences existed in the programs in terms of emphasis on cognitive or affective methods. However, while it is true that the Recreational Activities included some discussion groups and the Creativity Workshops included some games and tours, the observations of the anthropological teams support the claim that the two represent distinct approaches to the encounters.

It seems, then, that the evaluations of the two are so similar because the most crucial issues lay outside the realm of the daily activities. We now return to our original question. What is preventing the Mifgashim from reaching their full potential?

On a superficial level, the failure of the Mifgashim to achieve the acclaim accorded the Israel Experience tour overall might be explained with a simple maxim: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The entire tour, with all its new sights, sounds, interactions and experiences, comprises much more than a compilation of its planned activities. Participants frequently call it "the best experience of their lives," or say that it changed their lives (Cohen, 1994a, 1994b). No single lesson or hike is responsible for such an impact, nor can the Mifgashim be expected to be. However, after studying and observing the encounters in depth, it is apparent that the shortcomings cannot be explained away so easily. There are some fundamental challenges which must be dealt with to make the

reality of the program approach the expectations and desires of the participants.

Expectations and Realities

A closer look at the expectations the two groups brought to the meetings helps in understanding the dynamics and subsequent difficulties within the program.

A larger percentage of the Israelis think that it is essential for visiting Jews to meet Israelis in order to have a true understanding of their country. Three-quarters of the Israeli participants feel that it is very important for visiting Jews to make friends among the local population; only half the Americans feel this way. Similarly, 59 percent of the Israelis responded that it is very important for the visitors to spend a week with Israeli teenagers, as opposed to only 31 percent of the Americans. The Israelis also had higher hopes for the encounter: only 3 percent anticipated that the encounter would be a negative experience, compared to 20 percent of the Americans (Table 3).

Observations carried out in the course of the program found the Israeli participants more eager to make contact with their American peers. These observations were borne out by the results of the questionnaires. Roughly a third of both groups perceived the Israelis as being more interested in the encounter, compared to less than 10 percent who felt the Americans were more enthusiastic.

This result runs counter to the conventional wisdom that visitors are more interested in getting to know their hosts than vice versa (Herman, 1977: 208). In part, the Israelis' greater enthusiasm can be explained by the fact that they were more specifically interested in the Mifgashim than their American counterparts. The Diaspora youth signed up for a trip to Israel, while the Israelis specifically volunteered to be part of a cultural interchange program. Furthermore, the Is-

Table 3. When you began the encounter program, did you feel it would be a positive experience?

	Creativity Workshops		Recreational Activities	
	Americans	Israelis	Americans	Israelis
Definitely not	1	1	2	0
No	13	3	23	2
Yes	68	41	56	55
Definitely yes	17	56	19	43
Total	100	100	100	100

raeli youngsters were chosen after a stringent selection process and were specially prepared for the meetings, while the overseas participants were not always made aware of the problematic aspects of these encounters and did not undergo any kind of selection process.

Communication Barriers

Development of meaningful relationships may simply require more time than is allotted. This is especially true of the organic encounters anticipated in the affective models. The observers noted that, by the end of the program, the Recreational Activities counselors were forced to intervene and catalyze communication between the Israelis and the Americans who were not interacting on their own. Arguments occasionally broke out during meetings.

Group development has been described as occurring in four stages: role establishment, conflict, overcoming conflict, and performance (Horrocks, 1962). The time required for each of these phases varies, depending on the participants and circumstances. But even the longest of the Israel Experience Mifgashim — 12 days — barely gives the group the opportunity to reach the stage at which interpersonal conflicts begin to surface. In this light, the fact that conflicts occur should not be viewed as a failure in the program, but rather as a natural stage in the group development.

Unfortunately, the short-term nature of the program does not allow progress beyond this stage.

This view of group formation may explain the success of several independent, long-term encounter programs in establishing meaningful and lasting relationships. One such program is *Shorashim*, a camp in Israel modeled after American-style summer camps. The Israeli participants join their American peers for the entire duration of the program, with a lengthy home hospitality at the end. Both groups return to the camp in Israel year after year, and some of the Israelis in turn visit the United States, allowing individuals to form significant friendships and enabling the groups to move beyond the preliminary phases of development. No Jewish Agency-sponsored Israel Experience programs have tried Mifgashim which last the length of the program.

Another recurring problem is language, particularly in the cognitive models. While the selected Israelis participants are conversant in English, intellectual discussions or debates require more advanced language skills than many of them possess. The very fact that the discussions are conducted in English can be barrier, because for many Israelis the Hebrew language itself is a significant element in their identity. Israelis sometimes view Americans' inability to speak or understand the national language as an indicator of the cultural

rift (Bayme, 1994). In the record kept of a discussion at the end of one Mifgashim program, an Israeli participant repeatedly objected to the use of English, although he was able to understand and speak it.

The communication barriers are not simply a matter of vocabulary. Serious discussions about complex issues such as Jewish identity, the roles of Israel and the Diaspora, intermarriage, etc., require an understanding of each other's beliefs and experiences. Again, the short period of time allotted is barely long enough for the participants to begin exploring each other's — and their own — opinions on these subjects. Many of them have probably never given serious thought to these types of issues and need time to sort out their own feelings.

Encounters for Adolescents

Thus far, we have analyzed the Mifgashim as an inter-cultural encounter. It can also be seen as intra-cultural in two respects: first, because all the youngsters are Jewish, although their perceptions of what that means may be vastly different; and second, because they are all part of a global "youth culture" (Horenczyk & Bekerman, 1997). The anthropological observers noted that, though the Israelis and Americans had distinctive body language, their clothing — an integral part of this global youth culture — made them virtually indistinguishable from each other at a distance.

We would now like to briefly examine the Mifgashim as a meeting between groups of adolescents, in which their age plays a more dominant role than their respective cultural and national backgrounds. Camps for Israeli and American children or meetings between Israeli and American academics, even if arranged for the same purpose of creating a connection between the two populations, would obviously have entirely different dynamics. If

we are to understand the Mifgashim, we must consider the particulars of this age group, in addition to those of the cultures and nationalities involved.

It is widely understood that adolescence is a time of major transition in one's self-image and in social relationships. There are two major conflicts associated with this age — the conflict of finding one's personal identity, and the conflict of finding how that identity fits in with one's peer group or society at large (Erikson, 1963). The social and cognitive elements of cross-cultural education can be particularly important during this period of identity formation (Nitzan, 1992).

The adolescent's concern with his or her image in the eyes of the group is one factor which can make the encounters difficult. It is important to remember that when the overseas participants begin their Mifgashim program, they are generally already formed as a group. After weeks of getting to know one another, finding their respective places within the group, and working out conflicts, the Americans are reluctant to let new members into their clique and to begin this (sometimes) painful process anew. This group structure among the Diaspora youth makes it difficult for the Israelis, who come as individuals, to initiate conversations or meetings with them. Similarly, long-term studies of American visiting students have found that they came to Israel with high expectations of making friends, and found it difficult to break into previously formed cliques of Israeli-born students (Herman, 1962; Herman, 1977; Friedlander et al., 1991; Cohen & Ifergan, 1997). The essential factors seem to be not the nationality of the individuals, but pre-existing social structures and expectations.

It is well known that, at this stage of physiological and psychological development, young people "are primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others" (Erikson, 1963: 228). One of the reactions to

situations in which young people find their identities threatened is over-sensitivity to differences between the familiar and the foreign and clinging to the security of their cliques (Erikson, 1968). Young people seek interactions which will reaffirm, not call into question, the identities they are struggling to solidify. Thus, although the participants believe in the importance of the program and join it willingly, the opportunities presented through the Mifgashim to reexamine one's identity can be not only exciting but also frightening to adolescents. Another study of Mifgashim found that the American participants began the program with a negative "reflected image," that is, a negative perception of how the Israelis saw them. By the end of the program this had improved, as the teenagers began to realize that the differences between them were not as great as they had imagined (Horenczyk & Bekerman, 1997).

The late teenage years in Israel carry an extra set of worries beyond the typical ones centered around peer groups, dating and career choice. All Israelis, both male and female, must serve in the army when they reach the age of 18. In general, women serve two years and men serve three, plus years of reserve duty. According to the anthropological teams, the Israeli youngsters are more mature than the Americans, most likely as a result of the looming fact of their army service. This difference in concerns and opportunities for the immediate future can be as much of a barrier to communication as language. Young Israelis sometimes express resentment about the easier lot of American Jews and question their commitment to the country (Kafka et al., 1990; Bar Shalom, 1998).

The Counselors

It has been observed that the counselors themselves, perhaps to an even greater extent than the participants, are resistant to the dras-

tic changes in the group dynamics engendered by the inclusion of Israeli youngsters for the days of the Mifgashim. The counselors have a strong personal and professional investment in the smooth functioning of the group. They are reluctant to see the cohesive unit, which they have worked for weeks to help form, disrupted (Bar Shalom, 1998). Sometimes other goals and themes of the Israel Experience tour "need to be put on the back burner" during the Mifgashim, which again can be difficult for the educators to accept (Sutnick, 1998).

A Meeting of Equals?

The finding that the Israelis come to the Mifgashim with higher expectations and more enthusiasm is somewhat ironic. In the course of this study, we were faced with a widespread belief that the encounters are organized primarily for the benefit of the Americans. This assumption was held, for differing reasons, by organizers and staff people at all levels and on both sides of the ocean. In fact, the stated goal of the Israel Experience is to bring Diaspora youth closer to Israel. The meetings with Israeli teenagers are seen as a means of achieving this goal, just like visiting the Western Wall or hiking Masada. This is, perhaps, the most pervasive problem damaging the encounters.

The bias that Mifgashim program is for the Americans was manifest in several ways during the course of this field research. Initially there was resistance to the very idea of distributing questionnaires to the Israeli participants. The Americans were viewed as the sole subject of the study. Although Hebrew questionnaires were prepared, the Israelis often did not receive them, unless the process was strictly supervised by the team research.

In addition, at the time of this study only the Israelis went through a selection process and were prepared before the encounter. The

fact that the most "motivated" applicants were chosen shows they were expected to act as pseudo-counselors rather than equal participants. All Israeli participants attended a week-end-long course on possible cultural problems which could arise, how to address them, etc. The Americans, who apparently were expected to learn but not to teach, to receive but not to give, were not similarly prepared.² The preparatory course may have contributed to the Israelis' initial optimism and enthusiasm about the encounter. The fact that the Americans were not given any (or only very little) information which would help them better understand the Israelis almost certainly led to some of the difficulties in communication (Rohrlich, 1993).

The American organizers tend to view the Israeli participants as a tool or catalyst for the "authentic experience" they want to provide for their clients. Some counselors seemed to impart to the American participants the attitude that the Israelis were there to provide them with a service (Bar Shalom, 1998). In this way, visiting Israel can be said to resemble the consumptive type of youth travel seen around the world, in which contacts with locals are equivalent to the purchase of souvenirs: the visitor takes but doesn't give (Desforges, 1998). Israel and Israelis become products which, as I have heard in the course of my research, are now "unfashionable." This attitude exemplifies the objectification of the Israelis; equals can be disagreed and argued with, but not dismissed as unfashionable.

The Israeli organizers, on the other hand, seem to think the purpose of the encounters is for Israelis to teach the Americans, but not vice versa. Their goal is to bring Americans closer to Israel, not to forge a connection between Israelis and the United States. The very idea that the Diaspora is a community, which will continue to exist, runs contrary to traditional Zionist thought (Bayme, 1994;

Bick, 1985; Sternberg, 1990).

In both these views, the Americans are the active receivers in a one-way cultural transmission. The Israelis are alternatively passive instruments or teachers. In neither view are they equal partners in a meeting which can benefit both.

There is general agreement that Israel and Israelis play a crucial role in the Jewish identity of Diaspora Jews, and a wealth of research exists on the subject (Gannes, 1984; Eisen et al., 1992; Elad, 1997; Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997; among many others). The much more limited literature exploring the other side of the Israel-Diaspora equation indicates a bias that the experiences and beliefs of the Diaspora Jews are, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, dangerous to the identity of the Israelis. The issue of American-Israeli relations certainly has received a lot of attention in recent decades (American Jewish Committee, 1978; Cohen, S., 1989; Bick, 1983, 1985). However, here too we find that the relationship is not perceived as an equitable give and take. Israel provides a spiritual center, a sense of identity and connection with history, for which the American Jewish population pays with financial and political support (Kronish, 1983). This attitude is reflected in the Mifgashim, in which American teens pay for a spiritual and cultural experience that the Israeli teens are meant to provide.

The communication problems of the Mifgashim can be seen as an analogy of American-Israeli relations. On the one hand, Israelis are viewed as staff in a spiritual retreat for Americans. On the other, Americans are seen as lesser Jews who can benefit from but not contribute to the interaction. However, the significance of the Mifgashim program goes beyond that of analogy. We have seen from other studies that the participants in Israel Experience programs tend to come from the most involved elements of the Diaspora communities (Cohen, 1999a, 1999b). A signifi-

cant number of counselors, educators and leaders in American Jewish communities began their careers as participants in such informal Jewish education programs (Cohen, 1992). Their early perceptions of and contacts with Israel and Israelis can have a real impact on the future of the relationship between the two largest populations of Jews in the world.

A small but growing number of researchers and organizers in the world of informal Jewish education are becoming interested in pursuing the idea that the Jewish identity of Israelis can be enhanced through encounters with their brethren in the Diaspora (Cohen, G., 1998; Cohen, E. H., 1998; Elazar, 1977; Ezrachi, 1994; Sternberg, 1990; Zemach, 1987). This would represent a fundamental shift in the philosophical focus of the Israel Experience, or at least in the Mifgashim. Rather than conducting the programs to bring Diaspora youth closer to Israel and Israelis, they would be carried out with the goal of bringing the two populations closer to each other.

CONCLUSIONS

While the Mifgashim program is succeeding in its basic goal of exposing American Jews to Israeli youth, it falls somewhat short of its potential. Despite their enthusiasm for the program, a significant percentage of the participants are disappointed at the level of authentic interactions that take place. As we found only slight differences between the evaluations of the two models of encounters, we concluded that the problem lay not with the nature of the activities, but with the underlying attitudes guiding the program. The Israelis, who are primed before the program, come with higher expectations for forming significant and lasting friendships. The Americans, who have already formed a social unit within their traveling group and who view the Mifgashim as only one small element in a

longer series of experiences, do not meet these expectations.

The Mifgashim are simultaneously an inter-cultural and an intra-cultural encounter. The group dynamics, especially because the participants are adolescents, are quite complex but are critical in creating a positive and meaningful experience.

A fundamental problem with the program is the belief that the meetings are arranged for the benefit of the guests but not the hosts. Israel-Diaspora relations are one of the most widely discussed problems in the Jewish world today. Mifgashim provides a potentially very effective step towards increasing communication between young Jews growing up inside and outside Israel. For this to be realized, however, the participants must meet as equals, ready both to teach and to learn. The educational rationale for the Mifgashim will need to be expanded to include what the Israelis can be expected to receive, not only to give, in these encounters.

The Mifgashim can be seen as a microcosm of American-Israeli relations. The challenges faced by these teens in establishing communication and the issues they are addressing reflect those of the larger international Jewish community. These youngsters have expressed an interest in forging a relationship with each other by the very fact of their participation in such program, and some of them are likely to continue to take an active role in their communities and in cross-cultural Jewish relations. Positive early encounters which appeal both to the intellect and the emotions of the participants, can set the tone for future interactions.

ENDNOTES

¹The Exodus is a component of some Israel Experience programs, focusing on Holocaust education and the early days of the State of Israel. Participants take a boat from Rome to Haifa, "reenacting" a pre-State aliyah.

²Since the time of this field research and the submission of the subsequent report to the relevant agencies, some changes have been made in the Mifgashim program. Just this past year, booklets and a film aimed at preparing the American participants for the encounter have been issued. These orientation guides stressed that the Mifgashim must involve give and take, benefitting both groups. It will be interesting to verify and update the ideas presented here as the levels of preparation between the two groups are equalized.

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