

MAKOM's 'Beyond Current Events Day Seminar

No black and white answers, only multi-colored conversations

Rationale

A significant component of the beauty of Israel is its complexity. Like a great painting, Israel is comprised of a broad palette of hues and textures. The diversity of Israel can offer a richness of life that is highly attractive because it has potential to be highly meaningful. At the same time, the diversity and complexity of Israel – particularly surrounding Israeli current affairs - can be perplexing for students as well as for educators. Tough questions that stand at the center of Israeli current events and our Israel engagement demand thoughtful examination.



- How do I make sense of the paradigm of Israel as a Jewish-democratic state?
- How do I articulate the Jewish people's right to a state of their own?
- How do the ways that I contend with these questions translate themselves in the way that I work and the way that I aspire to impact on my own Jewish communal circles?

Faced with tough questions, one common response is to look for the easy answer, the response that quiets, the reply that pacifies. In the discourse of 'public diplomacy' ('hasbara' in the Israeli-Jewish context), answering tough questions relies on the following assumptions:

'Public Diplomacy' ('Hasbara')

- Tough questions are best contended with through simple, concise, sound bites.
- The audience in general does not have the time, the interest, nor the ability to deal with more than the easy answer.
- The main goal is to change public perception of the image of Israel. The main concern is 'how do we look?'
- The strategy is aimed at shifting perceptions and acquiring audience **'buy-in'**

Public diplomacy can be defined as:

... the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals... Such activities usually focused on improving the “sending” country’s image or reputation as a way to shape the wider policy environment in the “receiving” country. (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/about/what_is_pd)

Based on the definition above, the work of public diplomacy is aimed at an external audience, not at citizens or members of the 'family'. Hence, Israel's public diplomacy or 'hasbara' seeks to impact non-Israelis. If we take seriously the notion of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people wherever they reside – as the ethnic-symbolic homeland of world Jewry – then public diplomacy becomes a problematic means towards bolstering Jewish engagement with Israel.

As compared to public diplomacy, Israel engagement has a different set of assumptions.

'Education' – ('Israel Engagement')

- Tough questions are best contended with through a process of deliberation and consideration based on the presentation of a variety of sources and voices.
- The learner is capable of dealing with complexity, and needs to be encouraged to do so in order to be better equipped to live in a dynamic, multi-colored reality. Becoming an adult is about learning to choose commitments facing complexities.
- The main goal is to encourage the learner to bolster their own identifications with the community. The main concern is 'how do I see myself as a contributing member of this community?'



'Must the Jewish People Act This Way?' – Graffiti in Tel Aviv (May 2010)

It could be said that education is about encouraging **'be-in'**, while public diplomacy is about encouraging **'buy-in'**.

Although public diplomacy may be useful when Israel addresses non-Jewish audiences, it is insufficient with regards to Jews. Because of Israel's fundamental role in the Jewish experience, Jews around the world cannot be seen as just another overseas foreign audience. If Israel is to fulfill its claim to be a state not only of its citizens, but also of Jews around the globe, a richer educationally based conversation needs to be cultivated about the tough questions and tough answers regarding Israel and its place in the hearts and minds of individual Jews and in the Jewish world.

The Zionist revolution and the State of Israel provide the Jews as a collective with the power of sovereignty. Part of the responsibility of holding power is a willingness to engage with the oft-times difficult questions about how the Jews ought to live in the world, and what kind of Israel is worth celebrating.

Jewish educators and students need to be provided with options for engaging with Israel that allow them to explore questions of meaning and to receive answers that reflect both a basic commitment to Israel's ongoing existence as a Jewish-democratic state and an honest approach to the inherent, ongoing challenges of Israeli life and the diversity of the Israeli public discourse.

MAKOM's 'Beyond Current Affairs' Seminar embodies a new paradigm for grappling with Israel's current events as central to promoting an Israel engagement that is committed, complex, and compelling.

The proposed workshops will mainly focus on the educator/activist's work in:

1. Bolstering the fundamental legitimacy of the State of Israel's existence as the political expression of the Jewish people's right to self determination.
2. Providing educational opportunities for Jewish students to explore the inspirational potentials of Israel with all of its nuances and complexities.

A central part of the proposed seminar is the work with the educator/activist to help him/her better understand their own positions and commitments vis-à-vis issues growing out of the advocacy discourse. As Plato suggests in his Gorgias, it is not enough to know how to answer. The educator's/activist's ability to present well is best grounded in developing a deeper self understanding of his/her own world view. Through the educator/activist contending with some of the key issues that underpin the debate on the campuses, they will be better equipped to formulate answers that honor their own commitments and express respect for the intelligence and sophistication of the audiences with whom they are working.

Berl Katznelson – one of the central public intellectuals and activists of the 'state on the way' that laid the foundations for the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 discussed his sense of the importance of contending with tough questions and of not being deterred by tough answers. Speaking about the role of educators – 'madrichim' – he wrote:



Everyone seeks to escape from ambivalence. Everyone wants solutions, and if there are not solutions – at least explanations. All the more so when it comes to the madrich. By virtue of the madrich's situation and role, it is 'forbidden' that he will be ambivalent. He must explain and therefore he must 'know.' He must be able 'to prove' that current affairs do not contradict the outlook that he holds and that his educational work aspires to promote. However, precisely because of the above, a warning need be issued against the tendency to cling to solutions that solve nothing, and explanations that fail to explain. The madrich who is expected to explain to others must first and foremost be able to explain to himself without falsifications in – deed or in thought. ('On the Value of Ambivalence and Against Whitewashing.' 1940)

If we want educators and community leaders, and ultimately young people as well to be able to defend Israel; they need much more than talking points and sound bites. **Defending Israel that is developed out from a rich educational experience and cultivated commitment will be more compelling, more convincing because it is more authentic, part and parcel of who we are and not only how we want to be perceived.**