

# S3KReport



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## Bringing Conversations about Israel into the Life of American Congregations

### Engaging Israel Through Conversations

Two hundred members of a not-so-typical synagogue meet in groups of 12 at different congregants' houses one evening. They read a short text or watch a clip from a movie or listen to some music. The next two hours are filled with the sounds of debate, discussion, and conversation. In one house, people debate whether Arab Israelis should serve in the IDF; in another, people discuss whether "land" has any spiritual meaning for them; in a third, people struggle with different religious visions of American and Israeli Judaism. Participants disagree with each other, sometimes heatedly, but they listen to opposing views with respect and integrity, allowing for even the most contentious and alienated of voices. Congregants come to understand that the opposite of "commitment" is not "dislike;" it is "apathy." At the end of the evening, congregants return to their homes, feeling that they were

able to speak and be heard; that they were able to listen and learn; that they were able to understand and engage.

The vignette above took place at a well-known urban synagogue in 2008. Marking a significant benchmark in their congregation's Israel engagement work, it was in large part due to a



year-long deliberation between one of the synagogue's rabbis and one author of this paper. But this kind of activity is all too rare, as Israel has come to occupy a less than central place in American Jews' consciousness and communities owing, in part, to the absence of real discourse about Israel between and among American Jews.

Throughout much of the 20th century, "Israel engagement" meant lending political and philanthropic support to the beleaguered Jewish State. Today it must in addition mean something different, something more personal (Cohen and Liebman 2000). "Israel engagement" in this personal sense includes Jews talking about real issues; their grappling with how Israel speaks to their Jewish identities; and investing quality time in making meaning around Israel.

In this paper, we offer and develop the notion of *conversation* as an educational *means* and an educational *end* in Israel engagement. As an *end*, conversation is in and of itself a form of engagement, a desirable outcome for American Jews. It is also a *means*, as we see in the synagogue vignette above: a mode of doing Israel engagement that may lead to further Israel engagement.

### Israel is a Jewish Text

We begin with an audacious claim: *Israel is a Jewish text like all other Jewish texts*. And we Jews know a thing or two about how to read, discuss, teach, learn and draw meaning from texts. We know how to deal with a text that we don't understand. We know how to grapple with a text we find problematic. We know how to incorporate the ideas

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## About the Paper

**This paper** emerged from qualitative data that included formal interviews with rabbis and congregational lay leaders, as well as many insights from our ongoing work with them. However, it makes no pretensions to be a data-driven research paper. It is a suggestive conceptual brief that offers a new way for thinking about the way we engage with Israel in congregational life.

## About the Authors

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of texts into our own lives. We know how to appropriate texts intellectually, spiritually or emotionally, so that we “speak in their language”. We know how to re-interpret texts that have become antiquated. We know how to juxtapose texts to make them more than the sum of their parts.

One way in which educators make texts meaningful is by highlighting the compelling conversations going on in and between those texts. For example, Israeli Bible scholar Yair Zakovitch sees the Bible as a multivocal cacophony of conversations which the reader is asked to join. Genesis 1 has one conception of God; Genesis 2-3 has a very different one. Deuteronomy has one conception of conversion into the Jewish nation; the Book of Ruth offers an entirely different one. These conflicting and conversing texts were put together in the Bible deliberately, according to Zakovitch (and many other scholars), because the biblical writers and editors believed that really big questions do not afford easy answers. The Bible therefore becomes the record of an ongoing, extended conversation between different Jewish thinkers, about the really big, existential issues that Jews as human beings face. The reader of the Bible is asked to join that conversation. This invitation to join the Biblical conversation is one of the elements that makes the Bible so alluring and timeless (Sinclair 2003).

So too, instead of seeing Israel as a monolith, we can see it as a collection of voices conversing about some of the really big issues of modern Jewish existence. In doing so, we will find ourselves drawn into the issues behind those conversations, and – presumably – increased commitment emerges from the study of Israel-as-text, much as it does with the study of Bible-as-text.

## Distanced American Jews in Intimate Conversations

Contemporary American Jewish society is characterized by the increasing personalization of religious life (Cohen and Eisen 2000), as well as declining levels of support for Israel and a loosening of ethnic ties and feelings of responsibility for Israel and Israelis (Cohen and Kelman 2007). At the MAKOM Knesset Israel seminar in 2008, which was attended by nearly 100 lay and rabbinic leaders from around 30 congregations across North America, many participants expressed these concerns. “What reason do we give the person on the street in our home congregation to engage with Israel?” asked one lay leader. One rabbi sighed in frustration in the middle of a discussion: “I don’t want Israel to be just another sales call.” And in a powerful and moving moment, another rabbi told us:

*A congregant I am working with right now says “I have no interest in going to Israel; there are a thousand other places in the world where I would rather go.” I don’t think we have yet answered these questions for the vast majority of people. I can answer the why for myself, but I can’t... superimpose it on my congregants.*

The “distancing from Israel” hypothesis has been challenged empirically (Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe 2008). Nevertheless, from a value perspective, both schools of thought agree that it is absolutely critical that

Israel engagement become a vehicle for personal meaning-making (see, for example, Cohen and Liebman 2000, p. 20; Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, 2008, p. 27). Without a deep level of personal meaning, the American Jew will not engage with Israel. *Our claim is that conversation is a significant educational means and end to lead to that personal meaning-making, even, and indeed especially, for those Jews who have weak prior commitments to Israel.*

The synagogue in our initial vignette organized this large-scale “Israel conversations” evening only after a series of conversations on a smaller scale that engaged with texts related to Israel and with Israel itself as a text. It was through these smaller-scale conversations that stakeholders began to realize that conversation led them not only to a different kind of engagement with Israel, but also to an understanding that Israel can have a significant role in adding to a deeper sense of personal Jewish meaning.

## The Israel Advocacy Agenda — Friend or Foe?

American Jews have traditionally been offered two primary prisms through which they may engage with Israel: philanthropy and advocacy. In much of the 20th century, these modes undergird the emergence of what

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Cohen and Liebman (2000) have called the “mobilization” model. We are certainly not suggesting that they have no place in the web of Israel engagement today. However, there is increasing evidence that in the 21st century, a focus on philanthropy and advocacy is unlikely to attract young Jews to Israel; indeed, they may even have the opposite result (Luntz 2003). Today, when used as primary gateways to engagement for younger generations, both of these dimensions, while important and worthy acts in their own right, are unhelpful

and, perhaps, even counter-productive in leading to genuinely deep engagement with Israel, primarily in the case of liberal Jews. Israel today must be a source of personal meaning for American Jews, not merely a philanthropic cause or political icon (Chazan 2000).

Certainly many American Jewish organizations, leaders and educators still encourage American Jews to adopt what appears to many as the “support Israel right or wrong” model of interaction. Israel advocates ask Jews to serve as Israel’s informal ambassadors, whose principal job it is to support and defend it against its detractors and adversaries. In many synagogues, those who are most committed to Israel are often those who most adhere to this advocacy-centered message.

However, notwithstanding its value in the political sphere, Israel advocacy can collide with Israel education. The advocacy agenda may alienate

(About the Authors Continued)

**Esti Moskovitz-Kalman** is Deputy Director and Director of Education for MAKOM - Israel Engagement Network. She is a Jewish educator who combines content knowledge with a business consulting perspective, following studies in both fields. She recently graduated from the Mandel Jerusalem Fellows program, where her research articulated a profile of an Israel-engaged leader and an emerging model for preparing leaders to become Israel-engaged. She was associated with Melitz, directing the Jerusalem programs and serving as the Melitz Scholar at the JCC of Greater Baltimore and a Senior Consultant to the BJE in Baltimore. She directed the Jewish Agency-UJC’s Israel Education Month, designed to bring Israel into North American communities during the worst years of terrorism. She then joined the founding team of MAKOM and created and led on-going Israel engagement training for professionals, lay leaders and clergy. In 2008, she was an educational chevruta for a senior rabbi in a major North American synagogue as the leadership was rethinking the place of Israel in their congregation. She lives with her family in Beit Shemesh, Israel.

those who don't like politics in general. It certainly repels congregants who question the very Israeli policies that the advocates espouse. It frustrates those who reject being told that contrary to the ethos of the democracy in which they live, they may not voice their doubts about Israel's policies openly and honestly. The tone of the advocacy approach is "convergent," rather than "divergent": it mutes and shuts down too many potentially stimulating conversations, rather than initiating and opening them.

## Concerns about Conversation

Proponents of Israel advocacy undoubtedly feel that Israel's precarious situation demands a robust advocacy commitment on the part of American Jews. They worry lest free-ranging conversation might damage Israel's standing both among Jews and non-Jews. After all, if Jews criticize Israel in conversation, what's to stop others (Jews, non-Jews, friendly critics and anti-Israel foes) from criticizing Israel without restraint? Israel advocates may well be skeptical of the notion that Israel-oriented conversation does indeed lead to pro-Israel commitment. Rather, they may argue, open Israel-focused conversation should be reserved for the time when genuine and solid pro-Israel commitment has been achieved. In this view, commitment to Israel's image must come *before* conversation about Israel's complexities.

We understand these concerns, but they ignore the commitment-building potential of open and complex conversation, especially among Jews who are alienated from Israel to begin with. People who debate an issue come to feel committed to and invested in it. By debating internal Israeli issues, and by becoming immersed in conversations about them, Jews will become *more* committed to Israel, regardless of the political position they maintain or adopt. Complexity and conversation *lead to* commitment; they need not *wait for* commitment. Commitment to Israel does not mean agreeing with everything that it does.

For some, the conversational approach may lead to alienation and disequilibrium. Nevertheless, these risks are worth taking. In the long run, a conversational mode of engagement will *lead to greater communal capacity for Israel advocacy, not less.*

We cannot prevent Jews from hearing criticism of Israel. That criticism is everywhere: in the press, on the internet, and rampant among friends and colleagues. The advocacy approach often requires Jews to choose between respected, trusted and ubiquitous voices in their lives, and the seemingly un-nuanced and biased voices of the organized Jewish community. Faced with such a stark choice, it is no surprise that many young Jews become skeptical of both the organized Jewish community and Israel engage-

ment. The conversation approach would allow such Jews the safe and open space to explore their questions and qualms about Israel within Jewish environments that are supportive of Israel's right to exist and flourish.

In fact, we need not choose between Israel connection and Israel advocacy or between Israel engagement and Israel philanthropy. Conversation can be integrated with philanthropy and advocacy activities and programs in order to deepen, enrich, and make them more likely to lead to meaning and engagement. Conversation can turn philanthropy from being a somewhat remote mode of caring into being a more in-depth, textured, engagement that shapes identity and creates personal meaning. It can transform advocacy from a stark either-or choice, into a mode of engagement that brings people into public discourse about Israel even when they don't agree with this or that specific policy under discussion. The result is the construction of meaningful Jewish identity despite difficult political questions, and the establishment of a more robust relationship with Israel.

Birthright Israel has understood well the power of these kinds of conversations. Integrating Israelis into large chunks of the Birthright trip leads to powerful and compelling conversations. Both Americans and Israelis freely express their opinions, and American participants report transformed feelings and deeper understandings of Israel (Sasson, Mittelberg, Hecht, and Saxe, 2008). By asking Jews to become involved in conversations about Israel, the richer, thicker, deeper understandings that they will acquire will stand them in much better stead to defend Israel from unfair attacks, even as they simultaneously acknowledge Israel's flaws.

Thus far, we have presented an argument for a new paradigm in Israel engagement and education, with conversation at its heart. As with all philosophical statements about education, though, the real challenge lies in the translation of theory into practice (Fox, Scheffler, and Marom 2003). What, then, are some of the practical challenges involved in the conversational paradigm?

Conversation ... is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought.



## The Rabbi and Senior Leaders

Rabbis and other professional Jewish educational leaders often see their role as one in which they serve as authorities on Jewish ritual, texts and ideas. Within most aspects of Jewish education, this model is understandable. But Israel education and engagement raise many questions about the model. Should a rabbi even claim to be an authority with regards to Israel? Or, is Israel a unique subject of Jewish life for which rabbis can claim no special (that is, “religious”) expertise? We suggest that Israel is indeed such a subject: it “levels the playing field.” Israel engagement “democratizes” educational relationships within the congregation. The rabbi’s opinion on Israeli politics may be personal rather than authoritative. So too with the other senior members of a congregation’s leadership team: the cantor, the education director, the program director, etc.

Related to this point are wider leadership issues rooted in the metaphor of *tzimtzum* (Borowitz 1990, 320-331). *Tzimtzum* (“self-contraction”) is a Jewish theological term that refers to God’s withdrawing from the world in order to allow humans the opportunity to act and create change. Borowitz transfers the metaphor to Jewish leadership, advocating for leadership that is less directive and more facilitative. While *tzimtzum* may be an appropriate leadership stance in all manner of contexts and subjects, in teaching for Israel engagement it is even more important. For example, if we return to the synagogue described in our opening vignette, at a big Saturday night event, the rabbi performed *havdalah*, but then let congregants run the entire conversation and facilitation about Israel. The rabbi’s *tzimtzum* put the conversation about the “text” at the center. Borowitz’s notion of leadership through *tzimtzum* may be an important direction for further exploration in thinking about Israel engagement. As the British thinker and intellectual, Theodore Zeldin (1998), writes:

*Conversation... is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards. That's the part that interests me. That's where I find the excitement. It's like a spark that two minds create. And what I really care about is what new conversational banquets one can create from those sparks.*

Conversational banquets cannot occur unless everyone is able to eat. To allow all to partake of the conversation, rabbis – and other congregational leaders – need to withdraw from their customary positions as authoritative leaders. It’s an adjustment that is both difficult and necessary.

## What Kinds of Conversations?

How does a Jewish capitalist country deal with increasing gaps between rich and poor? How does a Jewish democratic state integrate non-Jews in its midst? How can an Israeli Judaism battered by decades of secular-religious divide recover to become an inclusive and pluralist civil religion? How can Israel, in conjunction with its neighbors, solve the pressing ecological pitfalls faced by this highly-populated, polluted, waterless region? Israel today is a society of stark contrasts, which bounces between elation

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and depression, pride and shame, within the space of hours. It aspires to be worthy of being called a “Jewish state” in the modern world. But it knows that its path towards that vision still needs nurturing by all who care about it, both within and without. The conversations about Israel that we conduct must take all these realities into account (Sinclair 2009).

Important questions about Israel are a) immensely complex, interesting, and generative; b) deeply connected to issues of Jewish spirituality, religious tradition, and meaning-making; c) not often spoken about in the American Jewish community; and d) apt to encourage further steps that lead towards commitment. In Dewey’s (1938) terms, these kinds of conversations are educative in the grand utilitarian sense that they are likely to lead to growth and appreciation of future experiences if they are facilitated in the right manner.

## Conversation in Practice in the American Synagogue

What might these ideas look like in practice? One route in responding to this question is to return to the vignette with which we began. This kind of event, or some version of it, could be replicated in any synagogue, with a minimum of financial and organizational investment. Space and time can be made for literal conversations about Israel in all sorts of contexts: for synagogue-going congregants over *Kiddush* or *oneg shabbat*; for young parents after pre-K drop-off; for teenagers in the evenings; at seniors’ lunches; and so on. Once we start thinking about the notion of conversation in practice, we might imagine all kinds of other activities that have conversation *at their heart in a more metaphorical sense*.

## Israel Conversations in Life-Cycle Events

Jews often find themselves in synagogue for life-cycle events. These events tend to come in spurts at particular times during people’s lives: a *brit* and baby-naming, then, later, a bar or bat mitzvah, then, later on, weddings and funerals. Can the idea of Israel conversation help enrich those experiences? Can Israel be naturally and organically integrated into life-cycle events?

At the end of the wedding ceremony, the breaking of the glass was traditionally introduced with a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and its centrality to Jewish life. In many contemporary weddings, this custom has fallen by the wayside, and the breaking of the glass is typically related to the fragility of life or other themes. What might it mean for this moment to be “reclaimed” as a recollection of Jerusalem’s destruction?

How might the bar/bat mitzvah period of a child’s life be infused with conversational Israel engagement? At the ceremony itself, some synagogues present the young man/woman with a cash gift that is to be invested and then used towards a future Israel trip. What else might the bar or bat mitzvah receive as a gift to bring him or her into a conversation with and about Israel? Perhaps an appropriate gift is a subscription to the *Jerusalem Post*’s teenage edition, or a gift voucher for an Israeli music website, or a small piece of contemporary Israeli art. These ideas are “low-hanging fruit” which may easily be adopted.

The questions about how to integrate Israel into religious rituals are

highly complex, and we continue to invest time and energy into exploring more authentic ways to achieve this integration. At life-cycle events, marked necessarily by heightened existential concern about life, rabbis have the opportunity to help congregants find meaning, possibly by talking about their relationship and responsibility towards Israel. At such moments, the congregants inhabiting the world of *The Jew Within* challenge us as Israel educators to add a layer of personal and intimate engagement with the Jewish people, and with Israel.

## Israel Conversations in the Public Space of the Synagogue

How can the public space of the synagogue, *outside* the sanctuary, reflect the kind of Israel engagement we are talking about? How can physical space encourage conversation? One idea is the installation of a flat screen television in the lobby of the synagogue, playing Israeli TV quietly in the background all day long. The cost is negligible; the “Israeli Channel” is available for \$20 per month from Dish Network. But the results could be amazing. Imagine: every time congregants walk into the synagogue lobby, they see Israeli TV broadcasting news, current affairs, sports, culture and entertainment in real time. Most congregants won’t understand a word, but that’s fine: it is the atmosphere created, the sub-texts, the underlying message that has the impact. They hear Hebrew being used to discuss sports, politics, food, culture. They see the news images that Israelis are seeing and talking about. They see that on most days, there are not bombs going off left right and center. They see kids’ programs with happy, smiling children. They see loud, raucous, vibrant political debate and argument.

It should be clear why Israeli TV is a programmatic idea that is rooted in the conversational mode of Israel engagement. TV by its nature is a medium that (along with its inherent pitfalls, of course) prompts “wrestling and hugging,” as Robbie Gringras (2006) puts it; it is a medium that invites a multi-vocal conversation.

The synagogue’s public space outside of its sanctuary can become a place where Jews are encouraged and nurtured to interact with Israel in a conversational manner. Again, we should stress that even when a conversation is not literally happening, the context, whether physical, ritual, or programmatic, creates the stimulus, space, desire, and permission for a conversation to occur at another time.

## An Invitation

Conversation is a powerful and important educational mode to use in considering how we do Israel engagement. More examples and ideas are needed to flesh out how conversation becomes authentically and organically embodied in practice. A “pedagogy of conversational Israel engagement” needs to be developed (indeed, this is an ongoing project of the authors of this paper, with their colleagues at MAKOM), in order to help practitioners think about the kinds of triggers, resources and activities that will draw people into conversations, how to scaffold conversations for participants with little background knowledge, and what kinds of conversations are most appropriate for different ages and contexts. We invite you to start talking.

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## About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Los Angeles and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

## About MAKOM

MAKOM – the Israel Engagement Network seeks to renew the place of Israel in Jewish life by re-imagining the possibilities for Israel engagement in today’s complex world. Israel excites, alienates, and compels. How are we as Jews implicated in Israel’s achievements, mistakes, and challenges? We at MAKOM don’t pretend to have simple answers, but we do know that without openly engaging with these questions, our Jewish lives are impoverished – so we encourage hugging and wrestling with Israel. Through a network of labs, communal, educational, cultural and spiritual role models are mentored to incubate innovative programs with the support of compelling content and fresh materials. To date, MAKOM has succeeded in laying intellectual groundwork and inspiring new initiatives that are significantly advancing the field of Israel education ([www.makomisrael.net](http://www.makomisrael.net)) and changing the communal conversation about Israel ([www.makom.haaretz.com](http://www.makom.haaretz.com)). MAKOM is a partnership of the Jewish Agency and Jewish communities.

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