



## RELATING AND RELATIONSHIPS

by Anne Lanski, Adam Stewart, and Yehudit Werchow

*“When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, G-d is the electricity that surges between them.”  
—Martin Buber*

The Israel of Anne, Adam, and Yehudit includes places, experiences, and memories; but most of all—relationships. These personal connections shape our lives. Our Israel is very much related to the people we care about who often live 6,000 miles away.

## A Conversation with Friends

### Anne Lanski

I loved our shlichim. They came to summer camp and to our community. Hearing Hebrew spoken (including to me), tasting Israeli salad and schnitzel, learning about Israeli current and historical events, hearing all kinds of Israeli music—all comprised my first “Israeli” immersion experience. These relationships transcend time and distance. Decades later, we remain like family.

### Yehudit Werchow

As an Israeli, one of the most exciting experiences of traveling outside of Israel is being welcomed and hosted by friends and family, or, by people who at the moment we met were complete strangers and by the end of our time together become part of my life and family and vice versa. I am always deeply moved by the generosity of people; their willingness to open their homes and hearts, immediately expands my heart and helps me become more present and more curious about them and about myself. הנחיל means “letting in”—and it’s unsurprisingly the most appropriate way of describing the reciprocal impact of such unique encounters. In order to let someone in, the host needs to create space; this action reshapes the “traditional” roles between the host and the guest so that now, both get to enrich the space with their presence and their inner worlds, creating together a shared “home.” This kind of hospitality is essential for creating meaningful and lasting relationships between us, and ultimately strengthens our shared home and our people.

### Adam Stewart

When I was sixteen years old, I traveled around Israel for six weeks with Israeli peers. My experience in Israel—the things I saw, the places I visited, and the ideas that I encountered—are forever shaped by these people and they continue to impact the way in which I experience Israel.

My friends from high school, from college, and from my professional life all form a real and authentic collective of my past and inform how I digest the news of the day. When something happens in Israel—good, bad, ugly, or beautiful—I always contextualize it against the feelings and experience of the Israelis I know. A phone call, an email, or even an imagined conversation form the authentic foundation of my relationship with Israel.

## From Mifgash to Relationship-Building

The term “*mifgash*” (encounter) initially referred to a program component of an Israel trip, whereby overseas participants met Israeli peers. This concept has emerged from a program element to a foundational requirement for a “good” Israel experience and serves as a guiding principle in Israel education, wherever it occurs. Israel education is about building meaningful and lasting relationships, which become the connections that sustain, nurture, and enrich us. *Mifgash* as a tool is timebound, a framework that is mostly artificial and perhaps best viewed as a trigger for a longer meaningful relationship. Relating to each other, North Americans and Israelis, educators, and students, in Israel and abroad, is a key goal of Israel education. Relationship-building processes begin and end with the participants and their inner world, and then move towards the collective.

## Components of Relationship-Building

How can we enable meaningful relationship-building as part of our educational work?

- 1. Hospitality** is an essential starting point for encounters between people.
- 2. Mutuality** of experience is assumed as each participant has something to gain and to learn from the partnership.
- 3. Responsibility** for something larger than the encounter—that the sum of these meetings is greater than its parts. The net result of the project strengthens the vibrancy and sustenance of the Jewish people.
- 4. Relatability** through an inclusive language and dialogue that makes relationships the subject of the project rather than the tool by which it is achieved.

## Hospitality

### Anne Lanski

I always remember the amazing welcome our American participants received upon arrival in Israel. They exited the terminal, suitcases in hand—nervous, exhausted, and excited all at the same time. The sliding doors opened and suddenly dozens of Israeli participants holding “*b’ruchim ha’baim*” signs and balloons, and singing Hebrew songs excitedly rushed into the group of “their” Americans with welcoming handshakes, smiles, and hugs. Giant circles were created and together they sang songs, linked arms, and jumped to the left shouting “*achim, achim, simcha, simcha!*” The energy and spirit permeated the arrival terminal and everyone in it. Spectators smiled and stared in amazement. Within minutes, they loaded the bus together and I could not tell for sure who was Israeli and who was American.

This group would spend every minute together until that moment at the end of the trip in the departure terminal where the hugs were strong and tears were flowing. As a result of their shared adventure, there was much discovery. Separating, they realized they felt more whole for having been together and at the same time, less complete for having to separate.

And in contrast, I looked over at the other American groups in the arrival terminal. Suitcases in hand, they were solely greeted by their Israeli tour guide and simply followed a sign with their group number held high in the air.

When we prioritize “relationship” over “encounter,” we are able to invite each other—learners, participants and educators—into a shared space in which that relationship can develop.

Our posture then is not one of examination (i.e. how does one learn from the other), but rather one of mutuality (i.e. how do we experience together and learn from each other).

## Mutuality

### Adam Stewart

As an educator, I found my own authentic voice through *mifgash*. In my early years as a *madrich*, I scrambled to accumulate as much information as I could about Israel, Israelis, sites, history, and politics. That collection of information and the passion to learn serves me still to this day, but what defined me as an educator was the realization of the limitation of my own voice. It struck me one day in the Old City of Jerusalem, as I listened to one of my co-staff. He told

the story of growing up in the Old City as a secular Jew, at a time when many secular and religious Jews lived side-by-side in the Jewish Quarter. He talked about playing hide and seek in the alleys, and the time that *Kippi Ben Kippod*, the giant porcupine character from the children's show *Shalom Sesame*, came for a visit to film an episode. I realized that I could never tell this story.

It was not a disappointing discovery; rather, it relieved a burden. It wasn't important how much he (or I) knew about this place, but instead how we knew it. How we related this information to our participants became more of a function of how we related to the places and to the participants themselves rather than the primary knowledge presented. Moreover, the complement of both of our voices—American and Israeli—created a far better Israel experience than either of our voices could have alone.

We no longer assume that bicultural interaction is only a way in which we can learn more about a culture. It is also a way in which a new dimension of our selves can be explored. In this case, the

sum of the parts is truly greater than the whole. What emerges is not simply greater cultural awareness on both sides, but something new: a relationship that has a life and strength of its own.

## Responsibility

### Yehudit Werchow

At a peoplehood learning-workshop at *Beit Ha'tfusot* (The Museum of the Jewish People), participants were invited to select and articulate components of their identities. Once each of us selected our components, we were invited to identify pieces similar to our own by exploring those introduced by others. The beauty and power (עוצמה) of the experience emerged when I discovered the sameness and otherness amongst the components of the diverse identities present in the room.

While many of us wrote Israel as one of the core elements of our identities, there were so many Israels and so many roles and adjectives related to it. It was home, comforting, confusing, complex, simple, and more. Through personal and sincere conversations with other participants, some of the components I defined so carefully gained new dimensions and my experience of Israel was enriched and transformed. Engaging in reciprocal, authentic, and thoughtful relationships with each other expanded our personal and shared ideas and understandings of ourselves and of the world.

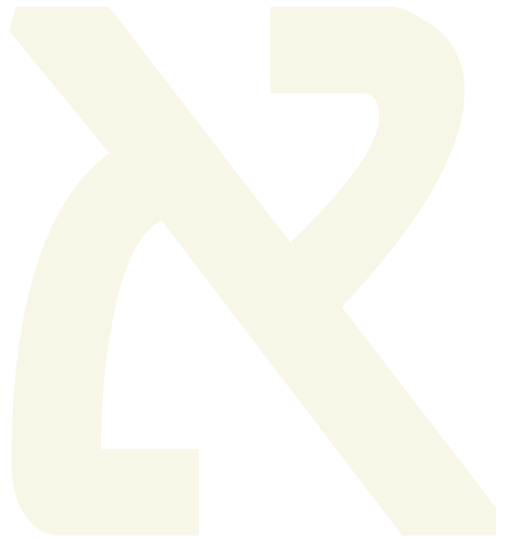
We understand that the project of building relationships is not simply about the individual exploration that it involves,

but rather the sense of responsibility that it inspires—a responsibility to Jewish peoplehood.

## Relatability and The Role of Language

The language that we use to describe this work shapes our consciousness about how we understand it.

Through emphasizing “relating” over “encounter with the other,” we emphasize our goal of making the relationship foundational.



Examples of a shift in language:

	<i>Mifgash</i>	Relationship Building
<b>Summer Camp</b> <i>(Shlichim)</i>	<p>» Refer to Israeli staff throughout the summer as the “<i>Mishlachat</i>.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Defined by role, rather than by mutual responsibility and the richness of our personalities.</i></li> </ul>	<p>» Yossi, Gali, and Noa are joining our camp family as partners in education.</p>
<b>Israel Experience</b> <i>(Mifgash)</i>	<p>» Prepare for “the encounter” by understanding differences to avoid cultural misunderstanding.</p> <p>» Israelis understand their role is to explain and teach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emphasizing what separates us and the differences between us (mainly using stereotypes).</i></li> </ul>	<p>» Emphasize commonality to enable an organic relationship of which differences are a part.</p> <p>» Understand Israelis as group participants, not guests.</p>
<b>In Communities</b> <i>(Twinning)</i>	<p>» Israeli guests (peers and educators) bring Israel to our community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emphasizing their role as transmitters of culture rather than relationship builders.</i></li> </ul>	<p>» Israeli friends and colleagues enable authentic and meaningful experiences in our community.</p>

Relationship building with Israeli peers and colleagues can happen virtually or in-person, in Israel or abroad, at home or at summer camp, in school or anywhere where people communicate, learn, and experience together. In an age of interconnectedness, relationship provides a way for people to explore and connect to Israel in a way that is authentic to them.

together, transforming them into the shared experience of “us” rather than “me” and “you.” Zelda’s poem is about relating and relationships.

Relating is the process of establishing sympathetic connections between people and people, and people and things. It is the feeling of being linked to, and connected with, another. David Brooks describes this as transcendence.<sup>1</sup>

These are moments we all know and feel. The moments when we truly connect with a friend, a colleague, a prayer, a place, or a spouse, and we feel complete being in sync with someone else and with our self. Relating is that process, and relationship is the sustained experience of being tied to another.

What exactly is an authentic relationship? How we move forward is as varied and diverse as the people who are coming together to form the field of Israel education.

As Zelda’s poem suggests, the process begins with the words “my” and “your” and quickly proceeds to shared moments; holidays that we both love, to changing seasons, changing weather, and seasonal fruit which become the common thread that turns “my” into “ours.”

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### “My Peace” by Zelda

My peace is tied with thread  
to yours.

And the holidays we love,  
the wondrous seasons of the year  
with their treasure of fragrance, the flowers  
the fruit, the leaves and the winds,  
with the mists and the rains,  
the unforeseen snows,  
and the dew,  
hung on the thread of yearning.

### Taking a Look Again: Redefining Mifgash

The first line of the poem by Zelda (pen name of Zelda Schneersohn Mishkovsky) suggests an exciting dynamic of initiating, expanding, and significantly deepening the nature of the meeting between people. The poem introduces the idea of “threads” that tie experiences

## Endnote

1. Brooks, David. *The Social Animal*. New York: Random House, 2012. Print.



Anne Lanski currently serves as the Executive Director of the iCenter. Israel education has been her personal and professional passion for three decades. As a pioneer in cross-

cultural education and teen travel to Eastern Europe and Israel, Anne is the Founder and former Executive Director of Shorashim, a nationally-recognized Israel education organization. She is regarded as the seminal figure in making the *mifgash* a central component of Israel educational programs, and is the recipient of numerous grants and awards for her pioneering work in this field. Anne received her M.A. from the Steinhardt School of Education at NYU, and is a graduate of the Senior Educator Program at the Melton Centre of Hebrew University. She served as Director of Education at Congregation Hakafa in Glencoe, Illinois and taught Hebrew at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois, where she developed new methodologies of Hebrew language and culture instruction. Anne also has experience in the world of Jewish youth group and camp settings.



Adam Stewart has been involved with Israel education and teen travel experiences for fifteen years and is the Director of Education at the iCenter. Previously, he was the Director

of Shorashim, an Israel experience organization that has laid the foundation for the concept of *mifgashim* in Israel education. Adam has taught at the Newberry Library Center for Public Programs and Loyola University Chicago. He has also lectured on topics in Jewish history and culture, and has served as an educational consultant to a variety of Jewish organizations.



Rabbi Yehudit Werchow was born in Argentina and made *aliyah* with her family as a child. She graduated from The Hebrew University with a B.A. in Political Science and Literature

and a M.A.R.E. in Jewish Education from HUC-JIR NY. She was ordained by the Israeli Rabbinic Program at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem. Yehudit is the Director of Education for Masa Israel Journey. Formerly, she served as the Director of Israel Engagement for the Union for Reform Judaism. Yehudit served as the Jewish Agency's Senior Shlichah for the Reform Movement in North America and as a *shlichah* for the Movement for Reform Judaism in the UK. Prior to her *shlichut* to the URJ Yehudit worked in Merkaz Maase, a leading Israeli social organization.