

# When Progressives Meet Israel



IT WAS A SIMPLE GESTURE: a colleague calming a crying infant so the baby's mother, a co-worker, could speak to a group. Five years later, everyone who was in the room remembers that moment like it was yesterday. Why? Because the four-month-old baby was the child of Meredith, who was an Orthodox Jew, and her colleague was Muhammad, a Palestinian Muslim. The two were leaders of a people-to-people program, speaking in a church in East Jerusalem to a group of liberal Christian and Jewish clergy from across America. The visitors immediately grasped—personally, concretely—that trust is possible, even in the center of one of the world's most famous and confounding conflicts.

Another moment: a reception for LGBTQ leaders from across North America with members of the Israeli LGBTQ community. No panel discussion, no history lesson, not even an archaeological site. Just a group of diverse leaders, Israeli Jews and Arabs, American Jews, Christians, and Muslims, hanging out on a Tel Aviv rooftop bar, getting to know one another. Sharing difficult stories from their lives as activists, but also eating, drinking, laughing, connecting.

Why have Jewish communal organizations been so focused on travel to Israel over the past 60-plus years? Because beautiful human moments like these can flip a switch in people's heads that will forever change how they relate to this complicated place a world away from their daily lives. These "aha" moments illuminate the reality of Israel and the essential humanity of those who make the country so special.

Most people have been introduced to Israel through a two-dimensional lens—newspapers, television screens, or their computer monitors. As a result, the people of the land are too often reduced to characters in a biblical drama or a wargame, caricatures of good and evil. It is precisely this unidimensional formulation that compels people to find "solutions" for the conflict that involve punishing the side they view as evil and that close off the imagination to the humanity of people trapped on *both* sides, who deserve peace-building rather than condemnation.

Quite often, perceptions are most challenged in the unscripted moments of a tour. Stories like these are the ones shared in reflection sessions on trips and in the immediate post-trip evaluations. Their true impact, however, is best demonstrated in follow-up interviews several years later. Participants may not recall the brilliant points shared in academic presentations, but they can often paint scenes like Muhammad calming Meredith's little boy.

Showing the human face of Israelis is essential, and putting real people and their experiences at the center of our programs allows visitors to care about Israel, its future, and the people who live there.

Support from Israel on the American left has declined by double digits over the past 20 years, leading to considerable and understandable consternation. This unhealthy trajectory bodes poorly for the success of Israel and the security of the American Jewish community. As unquestioningly opposing Zionism and boycotting Israel become increasingly de rigueur in social justice circles, more efforts have emerged to bring progressive leaders to Israel. Rather than simply rebut anti-Israel claims, host pro-Israel speakers, or create sexy marketing campaigns, we need to bring

progressive leaders—especially skeptical or hostile ones—to the country itself. While we may not be able to convince the committed anti-Israel ideologues to see Israel for themselves, we have a lot of opportunity with the so-called fence-sitters, those for whom seeing the situation in real life and connecting honestly with Israelis and Palestinians help in forming educated opinions.

Just as we customize travel to Israel for any group, connecting them to people and experiences that will appeal to their interests, trips for progressive leaders showcase the dimensions of Israel that resonate with audiences for whom social justice is a core imperative. Unlike those who are already strong supporters of Israel, progressive fence-sitters are, not surprisingly, less religious and more distrustful of the use of force to resolve conflict. They value human rights, diversity, inclusion, and acceptance of difference. They may believe that Israel falls short in all of these areas. In order to form a closer attachment to Israel, they must connect to Israelis through a recognition of shared values.

Far beyond the slivers of reality that American media and political debates provide—an Israel dominated by religious, political, and military conflict—introducing American progressive leaders to social justice activists in Israel enables them to connect to three-dimensional, relatable Israelis who share their values: peacemaking, advancing full LGBTQ inclusion, helping underserved communities, building a more equitable future, and overcoming past inequality. Trips enable progressive audiences to appreciate that, like America, Israel is a work in progress, far from perfect, but grounded in a commitment to fairness, compassion, and decency.

What doesn't work is just giving people more information. A common trap in Israel engagement efforts is to assume that those who criticize Israel lack sufficient information—and that by laying on facts, they will join the “converted.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

Research has also shown that the shopworn messaging common to most Israel engagement work, including detailed history lessons

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and double-standard arguments, are little more than self-reinforcing rhetoric. They don't shift opinions. As atrocious as the actions of the mufti of Jerusalem might have been during the Second World War, knowledge about his anti-Jewish animus and relationship with Nazi German leaders does little to change perceptions about the imperatives of Israelis today—especially when contrasted with a conversation that is grounded in the present tense.

Another ineffective strategy with progressive audiences is attempting to define the “other side.” Pro-Israel Jews can never be the authorities on the prerogatives of Palestinians. And one of the least helpful pro-Israel messages is to frame Palestinians as barbarous or uncompromising antisemites. Such approaches lack empathy on their face. At best, they resonate with those who are already allies, but they badly alienate the very audiences that most need to be reached. “Vilifying the opposition doesn't work anymore,” a prominent conservative pollster has said. “It makes you look close-minded and overly aggressive.” (And the converse is true—arguments that frame Israel in brutal terms fail to persuade progressive fence-sitters to become more pro-Palestinian.) For this and many other reasons, such approaches belong in the dustbin.

If we respect our audiences, we must let them draw conclusions from what they observe. “Show them. Don't tell them.” There is

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tremendous power in mingling and breaking bread with activists who are working on environmental problems that transcend borders, fighting for trans inclusion, bringing disparate communities together, connecting West Bank Palestinians and their Israeli settler neighbors, demanding justice in the Knesset—and the courts—while leading everyday lives. Such interactions offer much more than any set of talking points ever could.

And we must not shy away from bringing our audiences to hear from and meet with Palestinians where they live, in all their diversity. The Palestinian condition is undeniably a core social justice concern for progressive audiences. When we trust our trip participants to reconcile what they hear from Palestinians with what they hear from Israelis, without contextualizing it for them, their respect for the complexity of the conflict expands, including questioning simplistic solutions and zero-sum formulas, such as BDS.

Demonstrating genuine empathy for Palestinians may be challenging for those wishing to make the case for Israel. And for many it may feel counterintuitive. It is, nonetheless, wise. While the 2014 Gaza war was raging, pollsters on both the left and right searched for what people were thinking about the war and what we should say. They discovered the same thing: The most important points

to make were grounded in empathy for both sides. Bringing Americans to meet with people like Meredith and Muhammad, whose lives are caught up in a conflict that they work every day to mitigate and humanize, is powerful.

A perennial critique of those who show a softer side of Israelis is that we are “\_\_\_\_\_—washing.” The trend started with the infamous lie about “pinkwashing”: the myth that friends of Israel promote its inclusive policies for LGBTQ people only to distract people from their oppression of the Palestinians. In a similar vein, discussion about Israelis who work on protecting the environment is ridiculed as “greenwashing.” The list goes on. Those who celebrate Israeli cuisine are accused of “dishwashing.” (Really.) Of course, none of this is true. We can walk and chew gum at the same time—introducing people to Israelis and Palestinians, learning about the complexities of the region, and eating delicious food, home-cooked if possible.

Those who advance these sorts of accusations are again reducing Israelis to caricatures; they deny reality in order to conform to a preordained narrative. These are fundamentally illiberal distortions that endeavor to silence a set of progressive voices—ironically, the very people who tend to articulate the keenest sensitivity to the Palestinian cause. Israeli LGBTQ protections are the result of hard-fought battles, not a propagandistic governmental plot. It is possible to celebrate some parts of a society and continue to work for further progress in others.

One key takeaway from this past year, while travel has been suspended because of the pandemic, is that much of the necessary educational work that we do on our trips, bringing participants up to speed on Israeli history and politics, can happen virtually in advance of a trip. When travel resumes, it will enable us to do much of this “information” work virtually, freeing up our time in Israel for even more opportunities to meet in personal ways with Israelis and Palestinians.

And along the way, we will no doubt have the kinds of unscripted, authentic moments that will stay with us for a lifetime, building badly needed common ground. \*