

WEEKEND

Adar Cohen

Imagine that on a trip abroad you meet distant relatives with whom you had barely been in touch for decades and who live very differently from you. I suppose that most of us would feel an immediate affinity with them, despite the differences of language and culture. We would be delighted in the renewed meeting with our long-lost relatives, take an interest in and empathize with them, and show solidarity over their situation. We would probably even be willing to make an effort on their behalf, and we would want our children to get to know their children, even if their way of life was different from ours. After all, they're family.

I was captivated by that metaphor, which is taken from a survey that the Pew Research Center conducted among American Jews. I thought about it a great deal during the past year, which I spent with my family as *shlichim* – emissaries – to the Reform Movement in the United States, specifically to Congregation B'nai Israel, in Sacramento, California. Members of the liberal streams of Judaism – Reform, Conservative and others – constitute almost 60 percent of American Jewry (according to the latest survey, from 2020), but their Judaism is different from most of what we in Israel are accustomed to.

Some of us Israelis have relatives in the United States, but for the most part they are former Israelis or Orthodox Jews. So it's not surprising that most of us don't give much thought to the nature of our ties with those 3 million to 4.5 million members of our people – depending on how we count – who belong to the liberal streams and about the common future we share. (According to the same survey, some 30 percent of American Jews either don't identify with any denomination or are not affiliated with a congregation.) During this intense year, in which I met many of them, I gained experiences and insights that surprised me even after years of engaging with this topic.

American Jewry is an important part of the Jewish family tree, whose roots are planted deep in Jewish identity, despite the fact that it split off in different directions from the Israel branch. I want to share some of my experiences, with the hope of making such encounters available to more Israelis.

Same, but different

During the past year, I heard multiple voices that gave expression to a stunning diversity of Jewish identities in America. At times they were confusing, but they always provoked a great deal of thought, and I always felt a sense of identification. Most striking for me, as a native Israeli, is that so many liberal Jews see themselves as religiously observant. However, instead of upholding the laws of kashrut and Shabbat – the chief ritual practices that we associate with Jewish religiosity in Israel – they emphasize the pursuit of social justice and pay heed to the moral voice that emanates from the Torah – what's often referred to as *tikkun olam*.

That can be puzzling for Israelis. On the one hand, these Americans routinely maintain many of the practices of “religious people” (*dati'im* in Hebrew): They pray, they regard their rabbi (male or female) as an important spiritual figure in their lives, they give time and money to the shul, mark Jewish holidays, study the weekly Torah portion and love fulfilling mitzvot. On the other hand, many subscribe to a modern, liberal, pluralistic worldview, work to ensure equality between women and men, respect different sexual identities, and are open and positive toward other religions – in short, everything we in Israel would understand to be “secular” values.

This is an odd combination for Israelis who grew up in a culture that saw a dichotomy between religiosity and liberalism, and which perpetually demands that one choose between them, whereas millions of Jews in America find the combination natural. In some cases I was asked with astonishment – and also disappointment – how it is that in Israel people see a contradiction between a deep commitment to Judaism as a religion and a deep commitment to democracy and humanistic and progressive values, which American Jews consider a self-evident pairing.

For example, our congregation in Sacramento has a committee for racial and social justice, whose members deem it their duty, as Jews who walk in the path of the Torah, to fight for voting rights for Black people, assist refugees from Ukraine or Sudan, and struggle for LGBTQ rights.

These people are not fanatics, nor are they on the fringes of the congregation; rather, they constitute a leading voice within it. My daughter and I joined dozens of other congregants on a tour, organized by B'nai Israel, that took us to Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, in an effort to study and understand the historical legacy of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Some of the participants viewed the trip not as a tourist outing but as a religious journey, almost a pilgrimage. Indeed, the week-long journey included prayers led by the congregation's rabbi, a



Reading from the Torah at Ohev Shalom synagogue in Washington, D.C. Many members of liberal congregations are angry at the lack of respect they feel Israelis have for them.

Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post via Getty Images

Go west, young Israeli

Like Jerusalem and Babylon in ancient times, the Jewish world today exists in two vibrant centers: Israel and North America. And just as Birthright and other programs offer young people from ‘Babylon’ a formative visit to ‘Jerusalem,’ Israel needs to initiate a journey in the opposite direction



Song leaders join campers and counselors around the campfire at URJ Camp Hartlam in Kunkletown, Pennsylvania.

Courtesy of Foundation for Jewish Camp

Instead of upholding the laws of kashrut and Shabbat – the chief ritual practices that we associate with Jewish religiosity in Israel – American Jews emphasize the pursuit of social justice and pay heed to the moral voice that emanates from the Torah.

meeting with an African-American Baptist minister, and a dialogue on the Jews' role in the struggle for civil rights for Black people in the United States. Similar tours, I learned, have become common among other Jewish communities in recent years.

Another interesting term I came to adopt is “Jew by choice” (an expression that doesn't have a translation to Israeli Hebrew). The Reform movement recognizes individuals whose father is Jewish (even if their mother is not) as eligible for synagogue membership and as part of the Jewish people. What's more, the community makes a concerted effort to be as inclusive as possible, even if a member chooses to marry someone who wasn't born or raised as Jewish. The question of one's birth is still important, but from the community's point of view, and contrary to what is self-evident in Israel, it's not the major and exclusive entry ticket to the Jewish collective.

As an Israeli it was surprising for me to realize that, more important

than the question of who one's parents are is what one's family life looks like, and what kind of education a family's children are getting. Accordingly, the decisive criterion is not whether both members of a couple were raised as Jews, but whether the two have made the choice to be members of the Jewish community and raise their children in that framework. In some cases, the “inward embrace” also includes a formal conversion procedure, but at times they make do with what researchers call “sociological conversion,” meaning integration into everyday Jewish life – even if that doesn't include formal conversion. This can be a jolting perspective for us Israelis, who are used to the classic halachic belief that a Jew is only someone born to a Jewish mother.

I spoke with many Jews who are deeply engaged with questions about the continuation and content of Jewish identity. Some of the questions they wrestle with are: What should be the aims of Jewish day schools? What is the best way to approach the congregation's supplementary education for children most of whom attend American public or non-Jewish private schools? What dimensions of innovation and creativity can be introduced into prayers so they will appeal to young people and not just the older generation? What is Israel's place, if any, in contemporary Jewish identity? Should Hebrew be taught mainly to enable people to read the prayer book? (This latter notion reminded me at times of Jews in an 18th-century *heder*.) And constantly hovering above was the question that a congregant raised: How can I make sure that my grandchildren will be Jewish?

I came to understand that the ste-



A look to the West is necessary; the American Jewish communities are astonishing in their ability to display tolerance.

Eliyahu Hershkovitz

reotype of affluent American Jews living in comfort and worry-free is inaccurate. Economic well-being certainly exists, but to be an involved and active Jew in the United States is difficult and requires long-term effort and an investment of energy, time and finances. The reality in which these communities operate is dramatically different from what we in Israel take for granted. The public space around them is not Jewish, Hebrew is not widely known, and the yearly cycle of national holidays and days off does not revolve around the Hebrew calendar. There are no state institutions that offer economic or organizational support to strengthen Jewish identity, so everything in this regard must come organically from the initiative and funding of the community. This is perhaps simpler for Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews, because their commitment to halakha and their relative insularity from the outside world preserves their communal structure. However, liberal Jews require other solutions.

The common Israeli and Zionist instinct will undoubtedly suggest, somewhat tauntingly, “Then why not make aliyah?” However, it's important to understand that most Jews in the United States see that country as their home. The historical memory of Babylon and Eretz Israel, two flourishing Jewish centers that coexisted for hundreds of years, can help us understand the mindset in which they live. For them, it's not life in a doleful and difficult exile from which they can only anxiously anticipate being redeemed. It is in fact a place where they feel at home, want to continue living, maintain a liberal, modern way of life, and also preserve their Jewish identity as a religious minority. This is the challenge they are

copied with, and it's not always easy for us Israelis to grasp its full depth or be properly empathetic. What was fascinating was discovering the solutions that liberal Jewish communities are proposing to this challenge.

Years for coming of age

I discovered that together with the Jewish holidays and family life, there are other key anchors for cultivating Jewish identity among the next generation: coming of age – when the Jewish commandments begin to be observed – summer camps and trips to Israel.

In the liberal synagogues, bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies are celebrated for all children at age 13, enabling them all – boys, girls and non-binary – to study together. As a Sunday-school teacher, I understood that the process of preparation for the bar/bat mitzvah takes at least three years and involves the entire family, and that one of the congregation's roles is to help the family prepare. Learning how to orient oneself in prayer, to read from the Torah, to write a *drash* (a speech) – all the tasks that challenge many secular Israeli children as they approach their bar or

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bat mitzvah – are far more arduous for kids who aren't fluent in Hebrew and whose school friends don't share a similar experience. The preparation leading up to the big day requires serious investment by the parents, for whom it is not only a deeply moving moment but also a key to seeing their children enter a life of Jewish identity.

As opposed to the anxiety they had about reading Torah publicly, the kids I taught were generally enthusiastic about, and looked forward to, Jewish summer camp. Two or even four weeks of camp will combine sports and social activities, prayer, Jewish learning, and most of all, they will have an outlet for the youthful energy and fervor that can lead to the creation of lifelong friendships and Jewish identity. I met many youths who return to camp annually, first as campers and then as counselors, and I came to see that it's not only fun but an essential element in ensuring future community leadership.

Israel trips, whether in high school, gap year or college, play a critical role in bolstering the place of the Jewish state and in forging Jewish identity. The connection with, and commitment to, Israel is not self-evident, as it once was. I was well aware that Israel is a painful subject for many liberal Jews in America, but in the past year I grasped in depth the complexity of the problem. On the one hand, I found a great hunger for ties with us Israelis, and intense curiosity about our culture and politics. Most members of liberal congregations love Israel as a place, but at the same time, many are critical of the Israeli government and its policies, notably on the Palestinian issue, are concerned about the continuation of the occupation and are angry at the lack of respect they feel that Israelis have for them as Reform and progressive Jews.

Like any family in which there's a cousin or a sister-in-law whom we love but whose behavior worries or angers us, so too, with this. They care about Israel and about us, but they are concerned, and in some cases angry, at us. I did not encounter any BDS supporters, but I did find myself speechless in confronting feelings of disappointment and insult from those who see themselves as deeply committed to Israel but lament the lack of recognition for their way of being Jewish – for their rabbis, their right to hold egalitarian prayer services at the Western Wall, and more.

Warm, but unilateral

Encouragement and support for organized visits to Israel comes from Jewish federations and synagogues, Jewish philanthropists, the Israeli government, and the Zionist national institutions (the Jewish Agency for Israel, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish National Fund), as it should be. Programs like Birthright are essential for perpetuating the connection between Israel and the Diaspora and for positioning Israel as an integral component of modern Jewish identity in America. They can even serve as stepping stones toward aliyah.

However, during the past year I began to understand that a warm relationship with our extended family cannot be unidirectional. It's not enough for young American Jews to come to Israel in order to learn about us and from us, when we dispatch profession-

al shlichim with the mission of instilling a sense of connection and affinity for Israel. That could even be seen to some degree as patronizing.

Like Babylon and Jerusalem, there are two vibrant, strong Jewish centers in today's world, which can and should look at each other at eye level and learn from each other's shared experience. The tasks of deepening our mutual understanding – as two equal halves of the Jewish people – should not be only the responsibility of American Jews. The effort should be mutual and equal on both sides.

I discovered that our siblings across the ocean want to learn what life looks like in a public Jewish environment, how Zionist thought developed in the Jewish state, and how to impart to the next generation love of the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language. But we, for our part, have much to learn from them about an indefatigable thrust for social justice that speaks a Jewish language, and about adapting Jewish identity to the modern world and to universal values. The American Jewish communities are astonishing in their ability

The hundreds of schools that offer their students the opportunity to make a journey to Poland can allow some of them the alternative of getting better acquainted with American Jewry.

to display tolerance for diverse ways of life – Jewish and in general. They successfully live Jewish pluralism and don't just talk about it.

One of the tasks of our generation is to connect with our sisters and brothers in the modern "Babylon" – the significant other Jewish center of our times. "Babylon" and "Jerusalem" are here to stay, and the mutual connection between the young generations in both places is critical for the continued existence and resilience of the Jewish people. Like it or not, the American Jewish communities are our strategic partners for Jewish continuity – not the evangelical Christians or America's ultra-Orthodox Jewish minority. Accordingly, this family connection should be nurtured from both sides. It's not enough for them to get to know us. We, and especially our children, need to make an effort to get to know them and engage openly with them about Judaism, Israel, culture and politics.

Many young American Jews who visit Israel through Birthright (whose Hebrew name, "Taglit," means "discovery") or similar programs do in fact discover a new world and undergo a transformative experience as Jews. At the same time, young Israelis who go to North America as shlichim (whether for a short or long period) often undergo a formative, even jarring, transformation in their Jewish identity. We met Israelis just out of the army who arrived to serve as shlichim at summer camps. In my interactions with them, it was strikingly apparent that their experience in encountering the diverse faces of American Jewry was no less meaningful than that of their campers in encountering them.

However, the emissaries sent by the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency to North America make up only a tiny fraction of the next Israeli generation. They can be part of the change in the experience of Jewish youth in America vis-à-vis Israel, but their small numbers are unlikely to lead to a deep transformation of Israeli society's perceptions and knowledge of American Judaism. This is a case where quality is also determined by quantity.

Discovering America

Just as Birthright aims to create an organized journey of experience for masses of young Jews coming

from Babylon to Jerusalem, we must forge a similar journey in reverse, from Jerusalem to Babylon, as a more meaningful and abiding element in the education of young Israelis and the crystallization of their Jewish identity.

Today, a high percentage of Israeli high schools send students to Poland to acquaint them with the Jewish world that was lost and with the place where the Jewish people suffered their greatest catastrophe – the Shoah. However, a mere fraction of Israeli schools organize delegations to North America to encounter the Jewish world of today. The Israeli education system is at a crossroads at which a diplomatic question mark hangs over the future of the organized delegations to Poland – which in any case have come in for criticism, giving rise to the need to reassess their content and character. I believe that it is time to reconsider whether those trips should remain the dominant focal point for the inculcation of Jewish values among our youth.

The journey to Poland is important for learning about our past, but the journey to North America, to expose Israeli youth to American Judaism, is critical for our future as a people. Along with seeing up close and personal the horrors of death and destruction, learning about the heroism and the resolute steadfastness that our people displayed in Europe in the 20th century, it's equally necessary to take note of the resurgence of Jewish creativity in 21st-century America.

I believe that it is essential to re-think how we spend our energy and resources, and to divide them in a more balanced way. The hundreds of schools that offer the opportunity to make the journey to Poland could offer students, as an alternative, the opportunity to familiarize themselves with our family across the ocean. There is no reason why, instead of the two busloads of students that large Israeli high schools dispatch to Poland, there could be two different delegations – one bus in each direction across Jewish time and space. The students should be allowed to go through a judicious process of study before choosing between the two destinations. Upon returning from each journey, the students and teachers will share their experiences with each other, benefiting the entire school community.

The Education Ministry (and in this case with support from the Diaspora Affairs Ministry, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency) should support and subsidize these tours, just as it supports the tours of Poland. However, the ministry must consider more than the funding of such a program. It must also think about supervising the preparations for such a journey, training the group leaders and fostering long-term relationships. A flight to the United States costs more than one to Warsaw, but the possibility of being hosted in the homes of Jewish families could offset the costs while creating a more meaningful experience.

The journeys to Poland are an important and formative experience for many young Israelis in the shaping of their identity, but they tell only part of the modern Jewish story, one that focuses on our arduous past. I am deeply tied to the Holocaust, both personally and as an educator, but my conclusion from the past year is that we must enable our youth to make parallel and formative journeys to living Jewish communities, not only to those that were wiped out. It will tell them a different and critical part of our story as a people, and introduce them to their American counterparts with whom they must face the questions about the future of Jewish life in the 21st century.

The importance of both the Jewish past and the Jewish future need not be in competition; a place for both needs to be found in shaping the next generation of Israelis.

Dr. Adar Cohen is director of the Teachers' Education Department at the Seymour Fox School of Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a former national supervisor of civics studies for Israel's Education Ministry.

A 14-year-old boy, a bullet in the forehead

An Israeli soldier shot Adel Daoud in the head from an ambush as he sat with friends next to the separation barrier in Qalqilyah, killing him. The army says he threw Molotov cocktails at the troops; eyewitnesses and the city's governor say the area was quiet and nothing justified such a lethal act



The separation barrier, close to the spot where Adel Daoud was shot last Friday. He didn't notice the soldiers lying in wait.

The Twilight Zone Gideon Levy and Alex Levac

It's a very dispiriting sight: a tree nursery bisected by a barbed-wire fence, a security road, another fence and concrete cubes.

Next to the verdant nursery with its cultivated trees in neat rows – cypress, olive, palm, guava and citrus – is a veritable dumping ground of construction waste, shreds of a burned tire, two tear-gas-grenade casings and the rotting carcass of a sheep whose stench is pervasive.

This is the boundary of the choked city of Qalqilyah in the central West Bank, which is almost completely encircled by a fence. Boundary? The tree nursery across the fence also belongs to the people of Qalqilyah, but the fence cuts them off from their land.

A blue pipe carries water to the nursery. Last Friday, 14-year-old Adel Daoud was sitting on the pipe with three or four friends his age. Apparently they didn't notice Israeli soldiers who were concealed by the olive trees in the grove next to the tree nursery on the Palestinian side of the fence. Suddenly one of the soldiers fired a round that slammed into Adel's forehead and exited from the back of his neck. A hole in one. The boy toppled onto his side.

Eyewitnesses say the soldiers delayed his evacuation to the hospital for about half an hour as he lay bleeding. A few hours later, Adel Daoud, who had dreamed of becoming a lawyer and liked to swim in the town pool, was killed on the edge of his city.

We stood this week at the spot where he was killed. On the other side of the fences, a few dozen meters from us, we spotted a few soldiers sitting on a green bench, maybe hiding among the trees, maybe not. We heard them chatting; they were that close. It was impossible to escape the thought that they might shoot us, too, as they or their buddies shot Adel that Friday.

A spacious house in southwest Qalqilyah – the Daoud family's home. The four days of mourning hadn't yet ended when we visited on Monday. It was Sukkot and the city was teeming with Israeli Arabs who came to shop on the Jewish holiday that shuts down much of the country. The traffic was bumper to bumper in this green city that has more trees lining its streets than any other Palestinian city except maybe Jericho.

The face of the bereaved father, Ibrahim, is a study in profound anguish and pain. He says little; his older brothers – Waal, 62, and Bassem, 57 – sit on either side of him and occasionally speak for him. The cellphone of one of them holds an image of the four Palestinians who were killed in the West Bank that lethal weekend.



Ibrahim Daoud, the father. He says little, and his face is a study in anguish and pain.

For three days, Adel was the youngest Palestinian to be killed this year, but on Monday, Mahmoud Samoudi, from the village of Al-Yamun near Jenin, died of wounds he sustained when he was shot late last month. He was 12, so now he holds the distinction of being the youngest, at least for now.

Ibrahim is a 50-year-old electrician who worked for years in Israel. He and his wife, Manal, 40, had five children – three sons and a daughter – until Adel was killed. On the living room wall is a photograph of Mohammed Daoud, one of the longest-serving security prisoners in Israel. Daoud was convicted in the wake of a 1987 terrorist attack in which Ofra and Tal Mozes, from the settlement of Alfei Menashe, were killed by a Molotov cocktail thrown at their car, setting it ablaze. The other three members of the Mozes family who were in the car were seriously wounded.

Mohammed is Adel's uncle, his father's older brother. He was taken into custody on December 8, 1987, and would receive two life terms. His sentence hasn't been commuted, even after 35 years; he's now 61 and ill with cancer. Adel never met his uncle – only his photograph gazed at him from the wall. In Qalqilyah, the older man is considered a hero; his image now also appears on the mourning poster for his young nephew.

The Daouds are a large family in the city: 100 dunams (25 acres) of their land were expropriated for Alfei Menashe and for construction of the fence. Qalqilyah also lost 36,000 dunams on the other side of the fence,

which was built on 6,000 dunams of its territory.

Last Friday, Adel, a ninth-grader, got up at around 9 A.M. – there's no school on Friday – ate breakfast and went outside to meet with his friends at about 10. On Fridays, the townspeople usually hold family picnics and barbecues in the last remaining patches of nature around the city, the remnants of their land. Adel and three or four of his friends went to the family's land near the fence, close to the nursery. According to the family, the boys grilled meat over a fire. His father and uncles say that as far as they know, there were no clashes with the army at the site that day.

The governor of Qalqilyah, Rafa Rawajbeh, whom we met in his capacious office with the director of the mobile clinic of Physicians for Human Rights, Salah Haj Yahya, confirmed that there had been no clashes that day. The governor, who previously headed preventive security in Nablus, added that confrontations had taken place in the days before Adel's killing, but not that day. Like everyone else in the city, the governor is convinced that Adel was shot and killed for no reason. "Three or four kids sitting on a pipe and a soldier comes and gives one of them a bullet in the head," he said.

An eyewitness, Mahmoud Nofal, who's in charge of irrigation for the nursery, said on social media that Adel had been sitting with friends on the pipe when suddenly he was seen collapsing to the ground, shot in the head. The other boys ran to get help, but the soldiers shot at anyone who

tried to approach. According to what people in Qalqilyah are saying, the Palestinian ambulance that came to the site was held up for 30 to 40 minutes before the soldiers allowed Adel's evacuation. He was still alive, despite the head wound.

He was taken to Darwish Nazzal Hospital in Qalqilyah, where his parents and other close relatives were also summoned. They were told that his condition was critical. After a short time, he was taken, ventilated, to Rafadiya Hospital in Nablus, where brain surgeons were preparing to operate. They didn't get that chance. Adel Daoud died at 8 P.M. The next day, Saturday, he was buried in the Qalqilyah cemetery.

Why did the soldiers shoot him? Why with live ammunition and in the head? Did the 14-year-old boy pose an immediate danger to any of the troops? Initially, the army said that the boy had thrown an explosive device at the soldiers, but later said it was a Molotov cocktail. The Israel Defense Forces' Spokesperson's Unit issued the following reply to Haaretz's questions: "During routine operational activity last Friday adjacent to the city of Qalqilyah, in the sector of the Ephraim Territorial Brigade, IDF fighters spotted a suspect throwing Molotov cocktails at them. The soldiers responded by firing at the suspect. A hit was identified. The allegation that the forces at the site hindered the evacuation of the wounded individual is incorrect. The circumstances of the incident are being clarified."

At home, the family is certain the soldiers shot him for no reason. "You're an Israeli journalist and you're familiar with the mind of the soldiers," Adel's Uncle Waal says in Hebrew. "You know that they can suddenly open fire. Sometimes there's shooting next to our house and we have no idea why. Can a boy of 14 endanger the soldiers? He actually looks 10. He doesn't understand what a Molotov is or what a 'device' is. It may be a dangerous area there, but not for the soldiers."

Ibrahim, the bereaved father, says in a whisper, "How did he endanger the soldiers?"

Some of the cypress trees in the nursery have withered lately. There's a bit of scorched earth here, but nothing like you see in areas of real clashes in the West Bank. The one burned tire and the two tear-gas-grenade casings we found also don't attest to a war zone. Activity here consists more of growing cypress and palm trees for Israeli villas than throwing stones or incendiary devices at soldiers.

A black-and-white kitten scampers between the cypress saplings. The soldiers are opposite us. Ibrahim, in his first visit here since his son was killed, stares at the ground and is silent; he paces back and forth, distraught. For a moment he gazes at the soldiers who are hiding among the trees across the fence. Maybe one of them killed his son.



Israeli students visiting Auschwitz. A mere fraction of their schools organize delegations to North America. *Alit Keplic/AP*