

# Mifgashm

## An Encounter Between Peers in Israel and the Diaspora

BY ADAM STEWART

*Because teens are particularly attracted to the mystique of the “other,” mifgashim deepen immersive experiences of Israel. Shlichim, visitors, teachers, and technology can create and provide a means to authentic relationships when travel isn’t possible.*

**THE PROJECT INCITE** (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>) *mifgash* cluster group consisted of five Fellows for whom *mifgash* was a key component of their project or as a field area to which their project, or their experience building their project, could contribute. The Fellows were from a variety of professional settings. The format of the cluster centered on several conference phone conversations and an online dialogue (facilitated partly by Google Docs and mostly by e-mail exchange). At several points the notion of a cluster “group project”—either a survey of the field or a group document on key contributions—was discussed as a possible next step. After the first discussion, the cluster was encouraged to read Minna Wolf’s dissertation on the *mifgash* in Israel Experience.<sup>1</sup>

The cluster agreed that there were certain *prima facie* arguments for *mifgash* that are well accepted among Israel educators, but we attempted to establish a set of core values as a means to explore the current implementation and possible future manifestation of *mifgashim*.

We determined these core values or, perhaps more accurately, strategies of the programmatic element:

- There is a perceived value in diversity, and the competing narratives of difference and commonality are powerful educational tools.
- *Mifgash* is a way to provide deeper context to an already immersive experience.
- The mystique of the “other” is attractive, particularly among teens, adolescents, and/or young adults.

In practice, *mifgash* is well established in the context of the Israel experience. Most high school, and many eighth-grade and younger trips, have *mifgash* as a program element and understand—or have been convinced to understand—the programmatic value in the interaction between Jews from around the world and their Israeli peers. The cluster discussed the Taglit-Birthright Israel project (<http://www.birthrightisrael.com>) at some length, which is now the largest and most comprehensive experiment with *mifgashim*, where hundreds of thousands of students and young adults have seen Israel—at least in part—alongside Israeli participants their age. Additionally, the BRI (Birthright Israel) program has stimulated creative approaches to *mifgash*—mostly around subject-interest areas—by offering grants for implementation. Studies conducted by the IDF (<http://idfspokesperson.com>) and the Cohen Center at Brandeis University (<http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs>) found Israeli soldiers returning from *mifgash* were “more committed to military service, more committed to their future in Israel, and more committed to learning about their role in maintaining Jewish survival than they had been prior to their *mifgash*.” In the same study, ninety-six percent of participants said the *mifgash* made them proud to be Israelis and to serve in the Israeli army, and a similarly high percentage felt the experience deepened their personal Jewish identity.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion around this research pushed the cluster to consider the reciprocal nature of *mifgash* and ways in which it brought Israel education to an Israeli audience. The cluster—particularly the participating member who was Israeli—seemed to think that this was a powerful consideration. Indeed, it seems according to the Taglit-Birthright Israel study that successful *mifgashim* move beyond the binary relationship—and as a result, seek less to highlight competing narratives, and more to authenticate things or ideas. Instead of using the other to explore something about the self, we use the other to represent something authentic. In this relationship, each presents the other rather than compare and contrasts the other.

The cluster was resistant to thinking about ways in which *mifgash* could be furthered or re-conceptualized in the case of the Israel experience, perhaps assuming that the pioneering work had been done or simply a reflection of their chosen

projects. Interestingly, only one of the Fellows was engaged in a project that could be defined as a traditional *mifgash* program, i.e., teens from outside of Israel encountering Israeli peers in the context of an Israel experience program. Even this program was as much focused on the pre-trip interaction as it was on the program in Israel. Instead, the cluster focused on other areas of Jewish and Israel education—outside of the Israel experience—where *mifgashim* could play a significant role. The cluster fixed on two main areas:

- “Twinning projects,” which created real and virtual connections between classrooms, mostly using different forms of technology to achieve results

- Israelis (as *shlichim*, teachers, and visitors), who helped to create and authenticate relationships with ideas about Israel

Since two of the projects were directly related to “twinning” (and at least two others tangentially used the concept), we set an agenda to explore and inventory different technologies that were currently available to facilitate twinning.

The results of the inventory were sparse and consisted of several companies that implemented telecommunication solutions to create ways in which classrooms could communicate in planned teleconference sessions. Melitz (<http://www.melitz.org.il>), has developed “Israel Connect,” a more comprehensively conceived program, which seeks to carefully fit schools to promote long-term success, has a curricular component, and attempts to integrate with existing Israel experience programs. One of the Fellows, whose project

however, is the suggestion that there is significant potential to apply technology in facilitating a meaningful and authentic relationship between peers in Israel and in the Diaspora. ■

<sup>1</sup> Minna Wolf, “Adjusting the Boundary: Exploring Identities During Israel Experience *Mifgashim*” (PhD diss., Melton Centre for Jewish Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Sasson, David Mittelberg, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, “Encountering the Other, Finding One-self: The Taglit-Birthright Israel *Mifgash*” (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2008).

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was at an advanced stage, shared her use of a social-media platform that put aside the logistical difficulties of telecommunication and focused on a medium where students on both sides were already familiar.

The initial work of the cluster suggests that there is a great deal more exploratory work to be done in the area. The field of Jewish education has not normalized *mifgash* as an integrative part of Israel education, and the cluster Fellows and their participation reflect a more narrow conception of *mifgash* as an Israel experience component. The contribution of this cluster,

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