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## The Case Against Israel Advocacy: Calling for Less Pro-Israel Activism

By Benjamin Greene

At a recent major student conference on Israel, a placard detailing the conference's aims included two bullet points: "Focus on quick facts and points/counterpoints about current issues in the Middle East," followed by, "Focus on improving your debate skills."

When it comes to Israel in America, this emphasis on advocacy is common. The established post-Second Intifada mentality, particularly on college campuses, has generally been that Israel is "under attack" by an ever-growing coalition of deceptive, anti-Semitic organizations. This assessment has led to the prevailing belief that we must train our youth to battle against these organizations so that those on the sidelines will realize that the accusations against Israel are baseless and that the Jewish State is truly in the right. Unfortunately, among the flaws of this approach is that it presupposes an established love and passion toward Israel, which for many students has never developed.

One study conducted by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman found that only 48% of American Jews under age 35 believe that "Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy," and the general community is searching to understand what went wrong. As communal officials debate whether the blame for this attitude can be pinned on everything from intermarriage to media bias to simply an apathetic and self-centered generation, what is truly needed is for the American Jewish community to critically evaluate its current strategies of Israel programming, which have come to exhibit a clear imbalance between pro-Israel advocacy and direct engagement with Israeli society.

All too often, today's youth are beckoned to speak on behalf of and in defense of Israel without first being given the chance to speak with actual Israelis. As the birthright Israel experience has shown, direct contact and shared experiences (*mifgashim*) with Israelis is consistently reported to be one of the most meaningful and influential aspects of the trip. When American youth have the opportunity to hike in the Negev and explore the Tel Aviv nightlife with their Israeli peers, relationships and understandings are formed that transcend those which can be created in advocacy-centered programs.

As such, personal experiences with Israelis are of paramount importance for forming and reinforcing connections to Israel. Regrettably, the American Jewish community has misallocated its resources through its determined focus on teaching young people how to advocate for Israel, instead of providing

them with gateways to build positive, complex, and sustainable relationships with the Jewish State and its people. Emotional connections are not made with complicated maps, nuanced UN resolutions, and meta-arguments about territorial rights. Rather, these connections are established with people, music, art, literature, and other windows of cultural and social engagement. Young Jews will never develop deep and lasting relationships with Israel if these relationships are predicated on entering a type of public debate.

In our zeal to craft sound bite arguments, we have created situations where many are now better suited to have conversations about Israeli policies with protesters than they are with Israelis. Student trained in advocacy programs often believe they are representing the Israeli view of the situation, as though all Israelis have a monolithic view of State decisions past, present, and future. Which, of course, they do not: for the majority of Israelis, the debates over such matters as settlements, borders, and targeted assassinations are far from resolved. Issues at the heart of everyday life, such as religion and state, environmental protection, economic expansion, and 21st-century Zionism, are unfortunately absent from most Israel programming.

Instead of featuring “Israel updates” that are synonymous with an update of the peace process and Israeli politics, “Israel updates” should be about emerging popular artists, social trends, and technological innovation. Instead of preparing youth to counter what Americans are talking about on television, we should help American Jews to find out what Israelis are talking about in coffee shops.

Combating anti-Israel propaganda on college campuses is a legitimate concern, but we cannot allow it to drive all of our Israel programming and initiatives. It is distressing when the primary or only opportunities and resources a student may have to develop a relationship with Israel are focused solely on forms of advocacy or counter-protest. Instead, we should develop programs and initiatives that are centered on aspects of Israeli life and culture, providing students and young adults with access to direct engagement with Israelis and Israeli society. If we really hope to promote and build meaningful and enduring connections, tomorrow’s strategy must focus on the voices within Israel, not the voices shouting against her.

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