Gvanim – Fostering Jewish Pluralism in Israel

_Tamar Alperovitch and Shraga Bar-On_

**What is Gvanim?**

This may sound like the beginning of a joke: an ultra-orthodox man, secular woman, Reform Jew and modern orthodox woman get on an airplane – but this is just an example of actual Israeli reality. It is an optimistic Israeli reality rooted in pain – the pain of sectorial differences, narrow mindedness and the shallowness of Jewish life in Israel. Gvanim aims to deal with exactly this – to expand the pluralistic boundaries of Jewish life in Israel.

Gvanim was established in 2000 by the Israel department of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco. The initiative was the result of an understanding that the especially difficult challenges that Israel faces are not limited to security issues or foreign relations. The torn Israeli society is faced with Jewish identity challenges which are no less important. Gvanim strives to strengthen feelings of Jewish identity within different communities living in the state of Israel, while emphasizing the relevance of Jewish texts, culture and tradition to many aspects of life. Gvanim works to promote pluralistic, open and accepting approaches to a variety of styles and encourage development of new ways of defining Jewish identity and its manifestations.

Participants in our program are senior public managers, educators, media figures, business people, artists and community leaders. They are meticulously selected and represent a variety of religious, political and social identities and perspectives. They are all people of action,
with a record of significant contribution to Israeli society, interested in promoting Jewish pluralism. The program invites these people to partake in a journey in search of their individual and group identities centered on the state of Israel's Jewish characteristics. At the end of this year-long journey, participants are expected to initiate their own plans to promote pluralism in Israel's Jewish society.

**Gvanim's journey towards Jewish identity**

"As an Orthodox Jew, I think that orthodoxy's greatest tragedy would be maintaining control over Judaism. This monopoly, in my opinion, paves the road towards separation from the rest of the nation, and no less severe – detaching part of our nation from its rich, ancient sources and culture. I joined Gvanim in order to tear down another brick in the wall that divides us, erected at the heart of Israeli society. Through the sessions throughout the year, I discovered that not only are there other wonderful partners with similar goals, but that there are still walls within myself that must be torn down – walls that I prefer to pretend don't exist". (Yoav Friedman, editor of the Judaism section of the Ynet news website and Gvanim graduate)

Gvanim is based on study, inspiration and experience. The program includes one session daily for three weeks, a two-day tour to the northern part of Israel and a two-day tour to the south, a group weekend and a joint journey to the Jewish communities in San Francisco and New York. During these sessions, participants study together; attend lectures given by intellectuals and socially active figures; hold debates, present their own personal philosophy of life and are introduced to significant Judaism-renewal projects going on in Israel. Tamar Ish-Shalom, news anchor and correspondent for Israel's channel 2 news station and graduate of Gvanim described what brought her to the program and her impressions of it:
It was my interest in Judaism as a culture and the Jewish sources that brought me to Gvanim, but only once I was there did I realize the immense importance and potential of Jewish pluralism and the contribution of open dialogue between different and opposing movements in Israel's Jewish society. At Gvanim, I took part in deep debates on the most complex issues of state and religion, all devoid of populism or criticism. This type of dialogue is rare in Israel and I am thankful to Gvanim for allowing me to be a part of it.

Rani Yeger, the program's first director and group mediator during the first four years of the program says that the program's original purpose was to bridge the gap between Judaism in the United States with Judaism in Israel, especially in light of the "Who is a Jew" crisis that make headlines from time to time. But as it evolved, the federation was open-minded and honest enough to understand that the program must be designed to suit Israeli society. Today, the program's content addresses Israel's Jewish-cultural-social challenges such as socio-economic inequality, education, conversion, tendencies towards religious stringency, city-periphery relations and others. We examine these issues through the many different eyes and perspectives of Israeli society. We try to be as connected to reality as possible, to see and experience Israeli society first-handed and thus establish an educated stance based on through understanding of the variety of perspectives and opinions. We hold sessions in different places – at the JDC, the Hartman Institute, Memizrach Shemesh – Jerusalem Center for Jewish Social Activism and Leadership in Israel and the Yachad Modiin school for religious and secular students. We can be found in Jewish renewal centers in Tel Aviv such as the secular Yeshiva in BINA or at Beit Daniel. We also head south to the Yaacov Herzog Center in Ein Tzurim and the Atid Bamidbar program in Yeruham, and north to Nahalal in the Jezreel Valley, to the Ma'ase Center and Oranim College in the Galilee, as well as to emerging
communities in the Golan Heights. Even the trip to the US is part of our attempt to inspire Jewish pluralism within the program's participants.

**Becoming a Nation and Working Together - Our Trip to the US**

Liat Josefsberg Ben Yehoshua, scientist specializing in cancer research and one of the leaders of the Gesher community of Mazkeret Batya which brings secular and religious people together, describes the significance of the trip to the US:

"Jewish nationality is the feeling of a connection to a nation, a combination of culture, religion, values and a common past, present and future. Before the trip, we were told to be prepared for an exciting experience that would change our Jewish perspective, and so it was. The trip began in San Francisco, the city in which my American grandfather was born; the Golden Bridge city; a city that's very existence is an example of pluralism on a giant scale. The city is known for its tolerance towards its homosexual community, but it is also a city of immigrants descended from countless gold diggers from all over the continent and the world. It is a scientific capital, home to over 40 Nobel Prize winners and a drawing point for hi-tech experts flocking to Silicon Valley. We focused on Jewish aspects of the city, visiting one of the Reform movement's first synagogues. It is a beautiful building, surrounded by stained glass windows portraying stories from the bible from an extremely pluralistic perspective. Miriam and Moses are displayed in a manner that brings a different "Miriam" from a different religion to mind. Moses is shown carrying the two stone tablets as he descends from a large, threatening mountain; not from Mount Sinai, but rather from California's Yosemite Mountains. This artwork gives a completely different meaning to classic Jewish tradition."
During the trip, we visited the homes of people who warmed our hearts with their warm connection and feelings towards Israel, such as members of the San Francisco Women’s Federation who work hard throughout the year to contribute and fund-raise for local Jewish activity and for Israel. We visited the Shaar Zahav congregation for people of all sexual identities. The encounter was expected, but surprising. We learned there that feelings of connection to Judaism are not restricted by gender definitions. The community was established by people who felt longing and love for Judaism, who one day decided to take on the challenge and establish a synagogue for their community. Today, the congregation boasts many members, singles, couples and even children, including traditional families who find the prayer there more genuine than in other places.

The tour then continued to Manhattan in NY where we spent Shabbat, avoiding puddles and getting drenched (observant Jews do not carry umbrellas on Shabbat for religious reasons and the rest had the wind carry their umbrellas away). Our visit to the Bnei Yeshurun synagogue was heart-warming, thanks to both the beautiful Shabbat prayers and the warm welcome that we received from Rabbi Matalon and his congregation. In the bustling Manhattan, we met ultra-orthodox people who work for a living at the B&H photography equipment store which is closed on Shabbat and Jewish holidays (and yes, it is the world’s biggest online store – someone should tell the Bilu shopping center in Israel that businesses can be profitable without working on Shabbat and holidays). What I found that all of the places that we visited had in common was the feeling of a joint, national cause worth working to promote. We met young people such as Sara Lefton who creates humorous animated films about the weekly torah portion, and adults like Gesher Kalmenson who established a Bar/Bat Mitzvah project to commemorate children murdered in
the Holocaust. These are people who woke up one morning and decided to do something important to influence as many people as possible to connect their fate with that of the Jewish people. We learned a lesson on community values and acts of kindness from several inspiring initiatives, such as a group of parents from the Brandeis Hillel day school who discovered their Judaism within the walls of their children’s school and joined together to pray and support each other during both sad and joyful times. We met the faces behind the words - Ruth from California, a non-Jewish mother who sends her children to a Jewish day school to allow them to develop a meaningful Jewish identity, like their father’s. We met Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service who fights battles against hunger, poverty and disease in third-world countries. We connected with entrepreneurs whose activities link Judaism and environmentalism.

The most significant experience of all was the visit to the Delancy Street Foundation – a rehabilitation project for ex-convicts and prostitutes, which gave new meaning to the phrase "tikun olam" (bettering the world), that American Jewry is so fond of. Mimi Silbert, an inspiring Jewish woman, devised a rehabilitation program based on the model of the Jewish family in which each member must take on responsibility and everyone is involved in everyone else’s business. The high level of involvement encourages deep feelings of belonging and commitment. When a new resident joins Delancy, he or she joins a small group of mentors. Several of these groups form a "tribe" and thus responsibility is given out and all are involved. Anyone is welcome to join this project, regardless of religion, race or gender and all members celebrate Passover together. One of the most moving speeches that I have ever heard was the redemption speech given by Avriya last Passover. Through tears and laughter, she expressed her gratitude to the project and to her mentor. She then led us through the
incredible neighborhood that the residents built themselves, stone by stone, in a real demonstration of transition from slavery to redemption. The vast majority of the program's graduates do not return to drugs or to the street.

Statistics of American Jewry are discouraging. Only about 20% of those who consider themselves Jewish are involved in any type of Jewish activity. The assimilation rate is staggering and the connection with Israel is diminishing and is no longer taken for granted. But on the other hand, we in Israel have a lot to learn from a Jewish community fighting for its existence, a community that wakes up each morning knowing that if it doesn't do something, it might not be here the next day. In our small country, where we fight to build Jewish identity and national unity, we can be comforted by understanding that the negative side of pluralism is when sectors create their own secluded environment, avoiding contact with other sectors. In Israel, as long as we live together and despite the intense arguments over army service, parking spaces and emergency rooms, we have not given up and still care for each other.

There is no doubt that the visit to San Francisco and New York was an excellent lesson in pluralism, lessons that obviously have to be adapted and suited to Israeli reality. The idea is certainly not to copy models from abroad and implement them in Israel, but simply to open our minds to a different style of thought by observing a different, though relevant reality, while focusing on cooperation between different expressions of Jewish identity". 
"If You Will It, It is No Dream" – The Program's Achievements and Influence

"I didn’t need the program to ask what pluralism is and understand its importance", said Dr. Gili Zivan, member of the Sa'ad Kibbutz, executive director in the Herzog Center, faculty member of the Hartman Institute and one of the first Gvanim graduates, "but experiencing the complexity of creating a common Jewish identity that leaves room for each group and individual is a completely different story. I felt the enormous challenge of Jewish pluralism at Gvanim, both within our group of thirteen men and women, in the places that we visited and during our group debates. It made the issue of varied, diverse Jewish life throughout the world an existential challenge for me. The questions of Jewish identity and co-existence are not theoretical questions. They are painful and concerning for our brethren in the flourishing American diaspora but they are much more acute here in Israel, in the intenseness of Israeli society, where the state determines the individual's religious life style and every move made by any ideological group insults, angers and outrages other groups in the fragile and explosive society that we live in".

As part of the process of deepening and expanding the participants' personal Jewish identity, the group initiates meaningful debates about community renewal in Israel and how to handle critical issues concerning Israeli society such as social justice, conversion, state-religion relations and others. Through in-depth study and open, serious and meaningful dialogue which leaves room for controversy and encourages a multitude of opinions, a renewed approach to the relationship between the Jewish nation, the Torah and the State are developed. This process inspires the personal and joint projects that the program's participants are expected to develop.
"When I told Jewish Federation activists in San Francisco that they taught me a lesson in humility, many eyebrows were raised" said Rani Yager. "You are part of a community that loves Israel and its Jews, but Zionism is not the center of your world. Nevertheless, you give us an excellent example of Herzl's vision of Jewish renewal based on Jewish initiative and responsibility. Instead of complaining, instead of pointing fingers, we in Israel have to start taking active responsibility".

There is no doubt that the last decades have brought on amazing expressions of Jewish renewal. The changes that Israeli society is undergoing towards Jewish pluralism must not only be maintained but also enhanced. There is still much to do in this area and Gvanim humbly attempts to act and influence in this manner. Graduates who have experienced this personal growth leave the program feeling committed to Jewish pluralism in Israel. The commitment is expressed differently by each graduate. Program mediators direct them to utilize their own abilities and professional skills to contribute to Jewish pluralism.

Each graduate is required to present a project at the end of the year. In order to help the graduates convert their personal experiences into an initiative that will serve Israeli society, the Federation provides initial financial funding for the projects. So far, two major types of projects have been established – one type is comprised of subsidiary projects of Gvanim, based on our philosophy but reaching out to new and different audiences. The second includes innovative projects established by program graduates in areas such as education, community, media, arts and more.

Since its establishment in 2000, 120 men and women have participated in Gvanim's programs. An additional 250 people have participated in Gvanim's subsidiary programs. Thousands of youth and adults from all over the Israeli socio-religious-political spectrum participate in the different projects and programs created by Gvanim graduates each year. "If you will it, it is no dream"