Judaism, beyond ideology

Interview with Dani Danieli, Director of Beit Avi Chai

Range of Perspectives

In our preparatory conversation, you claimed that over the past years, discourse on issues of Jewish identity has unfortunately become less significant in the State of Israel. It seems to me that if there is any topic that comes up all of the time, it's the issue of Jewish identity. I may be mistaken, considering that I am more involved within certain circles, but your impression of the insignificance of this issue surprises me. It seems that many institutions deal with it - specifically Reform and Conservative groups. Has this topic really become insignificant and what is your unique contribution in this area?

You may be correct in saying that there are other institutions active in this area, but much less than we are. In any case, if you take a closer look at the audiences that other organizations address, ask questions such as who expresses interest in these topics, if they reach younger audiences, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and so on, you will see how different we are. For instance, if you're talking about the Reform and Conservative movements or Orthodox institutions, these groups are not necessarily interested in the broader aspect of Israeli discourse. They present a sectorial perspective which is unique to them. We, on the other hand, claim that Beit Avi Chai has broadened the spectrum and expanded the boundaries. The voices and opinions expressed here are

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not sectorial by any means. We allow presentation of a wide range of perspectives and voices and this is a part of our message and the essence of our activity. Another thing that makes us unique is that we deal only with this topic. I think that you'll have a hard time finding institutes that deal only with Judaism and Israeli culture, without any bias and with complete dedication to these issues.

_So in your opinion, you don't represent any ideological direction... so what do you have to offer the Israeli public other than a warm embrace?_

We're not here to embrace or caress – we don't try to "embrace" anyone. We state that we do not represent any ideology, and we certainly don't recommend any lifestyle over another. All that we are saying is that all Israeli Jews living in our times have the responsibility to find their own personal ways, based on each person's personality and beliefs, of their commitment and connection to the entirety of Jewish-Israeli culture. We even offer this as a gift to the Jewish people, without making a profit and without receiving significant public funding.

_Can you define your ideology in any way?_

We have no sectorial ideology. We just feel that any Jew living in Israel must confront issues of Jewish-Israeli identity. Anyone who avoids serious deliberations on these topics is lacking. Secular people living deep within their secular world miss out on the wealth of Jewish heritage and history. Religious people who avoid music, theater and modern Israeli literature etc. – miss out as well. A personal fundamental statement of mine is that we live in a time where people tend to seek beyond the borders of rigid definitions. The spectrum of identities which have formed in Israel is much more varied and colorful than it was in the past. People are more open to exploration, more willing to accept behavior and opinions foreign to what they grew up with, and we find that enthralling.
We do not hesitate to confront difficult matters that concern Israeli society. We deal, for example, with the question of Shabbat in Israeli society, along with the Eretz Acheret magazine. We deal with topics relating to law and education. In the past, we ran ten series of lectures on fundamental Israeli issues, including fashion, sports, education, law, theater and the Hebrew language. These lectures lead to instances of severe struggle and controversy between the speakers and the audience. We do not avoid conflict. Our goal is to encourage people to listen to other opinions, other ideas. Two year ago, for instance, we dealt with approaches to memory and commemoration, which lead of a very difficult, very painful debate.

Why?

Our guest speaker, Merav Michaeli, triggered the debate. She provoked the audience, even if that was not her intention, by saying that we are more comfortable discussing the dead than confronting those injured both physically and emotionally during the wars, and asked what this says about us, as a society. The debate struck the most sensitive chords of our society, making it very difficult. Many events held here bring up topics and issues that may make many people uncomfortable.

Fostering creativity in music and theater

Let's take a look at the types of activities that you run. What types of events are included? Plays, musical performances, lectures?

Unfortunately, plays presented here are limited to only one or two actors (such as the monodrama "I am not Dreyfus" by Alex Ansky) due to space limitations. Regarding music, our program includes performances of all types imaginable: classical, folk, liturgy, cantorial and rock. In these events we put an emphasis on uniqueness. I'll give you a detailed example of a concert that we initiated ourselves, entitled "Voices of the
Levites", because it can give you a better understanding of our approach. It was developed by a man named Ilan Green, former member of a leading Israeli rock band. In a conversation with him, we discussed the idea of him teaching the subject of musical instruments used in the Holy Temple. Of course we don’t know exactly what kind of instruments were used and how the instruments mentioned in the Bible and in other sources correspond with those that we are familiar with today. Indeed, some even claim that the instruments mentioned in ancient sources are only metaphors. In any case, in an attempt to comprehend the music of the past and the melodies sounded in the Temple, Green built unique instruments inspired by the texts that he studied, composed original music for them and used these to create a concert. In this case, this was not actually our own production.

Another example is a performance called "Dikla meets Marina". This is another unique event that we requested, starring two singers – Marina Maximilian Blumin and Dikla Dori. Dori is a hard-core oriental singer and therefore may not be as popular as other singers like Eyal Golan. At the performance, Marina Maximilian sang oriental music, Dikla sang Russian songs and they sang together. This is a good example of how we think – we bring different elements of Israeli culture together. Other examples are the sessions that we hold with Nurit Hirsh. During these events, Hirsh discusses works other than her own, meets new people and performs with them. In one of her events she hosted Leah Shabbat, for example. During these evenings, the artists discuss the sources and inspiration for their work and compare them to each other. We challenge jazz singers, both those living in Israel and those living abroad, to create jazz adaptations for Jewish and Israeli music. For many of them, this is a fresh type of art and creativity. Other types of encounters include bringing together intellectuals and artists – such as Yochi Brandes, the writer and Alma Zohar, the singer. In their performance they discuss Biblical sources and sing lyrics from them.
We teach music from an intellectual standpoint as well, combing music, poetry, literature and history.

Another aspect of our activities – alongside the well-known artists who perform at Beit Avi Chai, we gave lesser known artists the stage as well. We had a program for these types of artists called "Music on Mondays". We invested much effort in these performances and invite bands that meet certain quality standards to perform.

If you flip through our programs, you will find a theme of encounters – cantors with eastern liturgy, Ladino with "Israeliness". There are other types of connections made as well: for example, an evening with Yaakov Orland, composer and presenter of true stories of family and friends. That is the tip of the iceberg in the music area. Academically, as an expression of our wide-spread approach, our program includes encounters between completely different angles and backgrounds. We discuss the Bible, Rambam and Levinas. Sometimes lectures are given and sometime we hold more complex series to which we invite lecturers and artists or people of different disciples. One example is a series which explored the lives of the few women mentioned in the Talmud. The series was given by Dr. Ruchama Weiss, who addressed these women as if they were receiving psychological therapy. She worked alongside psychologist Avner Cohen and together they attempted to delve into the Talmudic story and not only understand the text, but also discover its relevance to modern issues that we deal with today. Another complex series held at Beit Avi Chai dealt with secularism and spirituality. Different lecturers from different backgrounds and affiliations participated in this program. It involved observing "new-age" and "spirituality" from different perspectives. The intention was to present the challenge of openly exploring topics that we think are important to anyone confronting questions of Jewish-Israeli identity. I think that very few others deal with these issues.
Other major areas that we cover are the Hebrew language and the Jewish calendar. I don't think that you will find any cultural center in Israel that uses the Hebrew months such as "Adar" and "Nissan". Our rhythms and our programs are designed to suit the Jewish calendar. Outside of religious institutions, we are the only ones who attribute significance to the new Jewish month by combining appropriate study with music.

An Uncommonly Young and Diverse Audience

Who is your audience? Can it be characterized?

We address a wide range of people, but most of our efforts are invested in attracting young adults and students. I think that this is an area in which we are more successful than other institutes. There are, of course, evenings that attract an older crowd but most of our series have a very diverse audience. Music events, other than cantorial events, are attended by people of very different age groups and backgrounds. We advertise mainly to college students and up.

But what about young adults who are not college students?

Some participants are not college students, but most of our formal efforts are invested in college campuses and movements that work within the city (such as the "Wakeup Movement", working to guarantee Jerusalem's future). We contribute to the community by running activities for the youth doing a year of volunteer work before they begin their army service. We are also active within Jerusalem neighborhoods. We offer a weekly full-day study program on culture, Zionism and leadership from September till June. This is a community project that is constantly growing. Due to the program's success, it expands each year.

Are all of your programs free of charge?

We charge no more than 60 shekels per event, which is a very low
price for such high-quality performances. Most events cost 30-40 shekels and college students never pay more than 20. 15% of our events are completely free of charge.

**Changing and reviving tradition**

*Is your Shabbat-eve audience religious or not?*

Until mid-2011, we had a program that is kind of a play on the typical Shabbat-eve traditions. It forms a connection between studying the portion of the weekly Torah reading, and music, skits and guest lecturers or artists whose style or area of involvement fit the topic within the weekly Torah portion. This "cracks" the traditional niche, meaning that we make small modifications to traditional discourse in order prepare for Shabbat with an experience that is partially serious and partially humorous. The audience is more diverse than you can imagine. This is Beit Avi Chai's main attraction.

*What other unique events do you hold?*

There are larger events, such as the learning program Shavout night. The event that we hold is the largest of all, other than programs in synagogues. 3500 people attended this year's event. Our entire building was devoted to it – the halls, the outdoor area, etc. We also have a program on the Fast of the Ninth of Av. We combine content appropriate to that day of mourning (such as civil hatred) with film studies.

*Do issues of Jewish law, such as desecration of Shabbat, concern you at all?*

Jewish law is generally irrelevant here, but on the Shavout holiday we followed Jewish law in order to attract different sectors.

As an institution interested in attracting everyone, we must form a setting that anyone can participate in. We don't use the terms
"religious" or "secular" either. The Avi Chai foundation does deal more
with religious-secular relationships (such as the Tzav Pius program for
conciliating sectors within Israeli society). We simply open our doors
to everyone to make anyone feel comfortable here and give everyone a
sense of belonging.

What about different ethnic groups? You celebrate the Ethiopian
Sigd holiday. Why that holiday and not Seharane, the Kurdish Jews' spring festival? Is it random or intentional?

We celebrate the Sigd holiday because the Israeli public knows
nothing about it, unlike Mimouna and Seharane. We didn't hold the event
for Ethiopians. Ethiopians were welcome, of course, but our intention
was to include the Israeli public in the traditions, music and difficulties
that characterize this holiday. The Ethiopians obviously have a harder
time than others linking their tradition to the modern Israeli world.

I noticed that your web site is very active

We consider our website a virtual Beit Avi Chai. It advertises events
but is also loaded with content of its own, under a section entitled "Added
Benefits". Some of the articles in that section "got us into trouble",
because their abrasiveness makes people uncomfortable. We believe
that active, living culture is not nostalgic and not necessarily warm and
embracing. If we feel that it is important to focus on a profound, debatable
issue, we are the first to do so. We are even proud to do so. I avoid, of
course, provocation for the sake of provocation. That is not our job. We
believe in maintaining respectability and high quality, but when there
are subjects that need to be addressed, we don't hesitate to address them.