

Yehuda Amichai, the late poet laureate of Israel...wrote this well known poem...I quote its ending because the first part is too sarcastic and biting:

Its called Tourists:

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I place my 2 heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker." You see that man with the baskets?" Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head" But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them," "you see that arch from the Roman period ? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit there sits a man who has brought fruit and vegetables for his family."

Yes, how stingingly right he is, for what is Israel for so many Diaspora Jews but a series of great and wonderful MYTHS.... And no one fuels these myths more than we Israelis do!

We have made the desert bloom (now read we have made the economic desert bloom). We have proven ourselves as soldiers, we have revived Hebrew and reclaimed our ancient culture for contemporary use. The underdogs have become top dogs...and most important we are the only REAL democracy in the Middle East. There is truth in much of this and indeed there are days that these miracles overwhelm me with gratitude...and yet reality clouds the truth, and our truth is messy, nuanced, COMPLICATED... Indeed, full of

paradoxes....(Hey is the plural of paradox, pARADIZE) So I love in the Promised Land and PARADIZE!

For many tourists this reality is just too difficult, and they prefer as Amichai writes: "To have their pictures taken together with our famous dead. At Rachel's tomb and Herzl's tomb." But our global village no longer allows their detachment or ours. What we do in Israel impacts on Jews elsewhere. And I would hope that what Jews do elsewhere impacts on Israel.

So let's de-mystify/ tackle these myths....

How do we manage our military might and prowess when it can be unbearable at times or controversial at others? Are we really the democracy we claim to be when our Arab minority suffers discrimination, when liberal denominations of Judaism have no legal status here nor enjoy any government support as a viable religious alternative Has our economic miracle turned its back on the great socialist values that built this country, as the economic gaps grow between rich and poor here? Have we forgotten so quickly what it means to be vulnerable? And to which of these questions do Jews worldwide have a say?

We in Israel are both intoxicated by our success and startled by it? CNN and the world sees Israeli Commandos, Delta and SWAT teams...we know these Israeli soldiers as our sons, who come home every other Shabbat, who cannot wait to get out of uniform. WE love singing our socialist folksongs while sipping one the latest boutique Israeli wine at a upscale cultural festival. Our school system is rapidly deteriorating but who sent the most nimble and advanced medical team to Haiti. (On a personal note, I was volcano-ashed in London, watching the British government botch this...I was "air lifted" by El Al with courtesy and efficiency, shortly after the skies reopened. Israelis have become what we are under extraordinary circumstances; with determination and tenacity we have built this young country. YET< we are often in post-trauma or pre-trauma. We are so driven, so focused on survival, so sure that the world I hates us (which some of the world does) that we assume our Jewish brothers and sisters are with us totally, forgive us generously. We can no longer assume this, certainly not unconditionally. Israelis care about saving the Jewish people in our march of history, but this leaves us at odds with those not needing to be saved? Here too, we assume that between anti-Semitism and assimilation, there is no

future to life outside of Israel. Maybe there is another Jewish world out there, with a mind and culture of its own. Maybe we in Israel are actually struggling with assimilation, certainly globalization and rampant westernization. The collective bounds are fraying....

Even though I had 2 recent trips to England and France and have spent time in many places in the Jewish world outside of Israel, I know North America the best, so I apologize to our international group. There are huge differences between Diaspora communities. But I place myself in the school that, for the most part, all over the Jewish world today, Jews live in relative prosperity and safety; and in so many places they are flourishing. **And Israelis do not know this nor do not care to know this...**it is counter to the Zionist myths. And its time for a change. (As one of the most respected journalists in Israel told me over Shabbat ea...98% of Israelis know only 2 types of Judaism: Orthodox and secular)..OUCH!!! Even if this is TRUE We can no longer dismiss or negate Jewish life outside of Israel. Not only because it is a fact to tolerate, BUT we in Israel need a vibrant Diaspora. And Diaspora Jews need to know the real Israel, not the myths and not the headlines. But people like me and you. Back to Amichai.....

Redemption will only come when the guide points tourists to the day to day life of Israelis, AND REDEMPTION WILL TRULY COME when Israeli tourists, who travel on the US and other destinations, not only visit the Tower of London, EuroDisney , Niagara Falls, and the Empire State building, but are guided to a local vibrant Synagogue, a JCC, or creative Jewish Cultural event. During my recent trips to England and France (Paris and Montpellier) I had the moving and powerful experience of being at services at Liberal synagogue. We are literally Apples and Oranges...the Big Apple (sorry I am a New Yorker by nature and nurture) and the famous Israeli Oranges! We are now very much being shaped by different contexts and narratives.

Perhaps one telling example...our different relationships to Jerusalem. Throughout my various trips this past years, Diaspora Jews expressed deep concern about Jerusalem and not the future status, rather they were deeply disturbed by the ongoing attacks at Women of the Wall. While secular Israelis increasingly distance themselves from Jerusalem in general and the Wall in particular. Diaspora Jews love Jerusalem for deeply religious and Jewish peoplehood reasons while Israeli secular Jews are distancing

themselves from Jerusalem because of the opposite religious and national reasons.

Our Israeli youth, for instance, trek through the world, but mostly to countries with small Jewish communities or they avoid them completely. We need to connect their journeys with discovering the Jewish world. Maybe if they are lucky they might bump into a group of young Jewish Americans traveling to small South American villages to study Jewish texts and help lay pipes for new plumbing (with AJWS programs) Our Israeli kids are “decompressing” after their years in the Army. Who can blame them for wanting time off? On the other hand aren't they and these Jewish counterparts going to build our future Jewish world.., and hopefully together.

As the Israeli respondent to our crucial question....Is what's good for Israel good for the Jews? IN true Jewish form, we need to answer immediately with another question: Is what is good for Jews (In the Diaspora) good for Israelis? And the answer, of course...ye and no!

This will never be a symmetrical question.

There will be actions we must take here in Israel that cannot consider fully, the interests and full range of needs of the Diaspora. Likewise, Diaspora communities take decisions that do not necessarily consider

the impact of their relationship to Israel. Perhaps the most “famous” was the Reform Movement’s decision to recognize Patrilineal descent to determine Jewish status as inclusion in the Reform Jewish community. This had made my life here as a Reform rabbi more complicated as I fight to keep our Law of Return....a Jew is someone born to a Jewish mother or who has converted..... **inclusive of Reform conversions.**

Sadly, too often, the dismissal of the liberal denominations by Israelis is based on that assumption. Israelis do not NEED liberal Judaism like Diaspora Jews, indeed it’s a Diaspora invention, as if Zionism wasn’t? I believe that this quote has been attributed for decades to Prof Avineri, “the synagogue that I do not pray at is Orthodox.”

Meaning, we seculars remain secular and the only authentic form of Judaism is Orthodox. While I do not accuse Prof Avineri of prejudice..... this wide spread sentiment / attitude is a hindrance to development of a viable non Orthodox Judaism within Israel, let alone a blanket disregard for the majority of affiliated Jews in the Diaspora.

We have competing Narratives,,,Israel is the center, Diaspora is the periphery, Israel is B’way, Diaspora is off-Bway. It is time to throw out

these definitions....especially since off Bway is so much more interesting these days that trashy flashy B'way.

We need each other, but not for the 19th and 20th century reasons anymore of security and survival. I am not in the business of politics nor geopolitics, nor Hasbara. So I cannot stand here and offer an agenda for your consideration regarding how to “sell” “market” or “brand” Israel better. I am in the Jewish people business and there is plenty to do to improve relations, mindful that we will always remain a family in the deepest sense (a family of apples and oranges. We love each other but infuriate each other too. Israel’s current low standing in the world is tough on our fellow Jews and certainly in certain places in Europe, it makes life difficult for Jews fighting dis-investment, de-legitimization. My focus is building a healthier, braver relationship... We need each other more than ever for Jewish Renewal and Renaissance. Our Diaspora communities can offer models of pluralism, tolerance, and acculturation. Diaspora offers a model for negotiating the different worlds. The long history of democratic systems, dialogue can help shape our local governments. Help make us better citizens...The ongoing innovations in Jewish communal life should inspire us too. Diaspora Jewry has spearheaded the revival of

Tefillah and worship, reshaped Jewish ritual particularly for women, but not only. This has influenced Israel...make no mistake about it...make it official!!!

Israel must offer the power and dynamism of a revived Hebrew Jewish culture, a tradition now re-affirmed in its Biblical roots. The revival of Jewish holidays, the explosion of music and poetry embedded in our classical texts. Radical re-readings of our ancient texts in networks of Batai Midrash where adults of all ages are taking back the text . This is what Israelis are doing without denominational affiliation.

Jewish sovereignty is a huge enterprise, we run our own hospitals, army police, educational systems. Remind us to operate them with Jewish sensibilities. And let us teach you the task this is!!!

Let us restore Hebrew as a living bridge between us. And let us spend time in each others HOMES. In each others institutions, through shared professional and human interests lets create genuine "mifgashim."

So the Israeli guide and the Diaspora guides can say...

There sit men and women who brought fruit: apples and oranges for their BIG complicated, divergent, and deeply interconnected Jewish Family!!!