



HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF
CENTER FOR JEWISH LEARNING

**Programming *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land*
by Donna Rosenthal**

Introduction

Israel is an interesting place for more than just the reasons we see on the news. It offers much to students as either a means to a stronger Jewish identity or an end of being strongly connected to Israel. When we engage with our people in Israel we gain a deeper understanding of our history and our selves. We long for that deeper sense of connection.

The Israelis looks at the stories of those who live in Israel, rather than focusing on politics. It shows us Israel as more than just a conflict and Israelis as more than just victims of terrorism. It allows us to relate to Israelis as individuals and to see them as “like us.”

Because the book describes many different people, there are various opportunities for students to identify with the different aspects of these people’s lives and with our commonalities. We should encourage students to ask how they relate to the stories of those profiled in the book and why it is important to them to connect to Israel.

There are many entry points in this book which may be used for various target populations. Keep in mind your own target populations as you read through this guide and through the book. If your campus has received or purchased copies to give away to students, you could ask them to read the whole book to discuss or you could ask them to focus on particular selections as highlighted throughout the guide.

The book can be divided into three themes: General Interest, Jewish-Jewish Dialogue and Minority vs. Majority. In the General Interest sections the author touches on issues such as dating, marriage and divorce; life in the army; business and technology; and gay/straight issues. In the Jewish-Jewish Dialogue sections the author touches on different Jewish groups within Israel such as Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Russians, Ethiopians, Haredim, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox. In the Minority vs. Majority sections the author touches on issues of living in Israel as a minority.

Method

We have provided ideas for target populations that might be engaged by the book, followed by ideas to spark programs for those target populations. We have more deeply developed one program idea for each section that can be adapted for your campus. Take some time to skim through the sections associated with each topic to see which you feel most comfortable with. Encourage student leaders to do the same. Then take a look at the ideas listed to see if you are interested in developing any further. For a quick program use the program idea already developed at the end of each section. Be sure to utilize any Israeli staff or students that would add value to the discussions and activities.

Sections in The Israelis related to General Interest

Introduction:	Colliding Worlds
Chapter 1	One of the World's Most Volatile Neighborhoods
Chapter 2	Dating and Mating Israeli-style
Chapter 3	A People's Army
Chapter 4	Swords into Stock Shares
Chapter 16	Marriage, Polygamy, Adultery, and Divorce Israeli-style
Chapter 17	Oy! Gay?
Chapter 18	Hookers and Hash in the Holy Land

Target Populations

- a. Israel engagement students
- b. birthright israel/Mission alumni
- c. Israel study abroad returnees
- d. Students interested in business or technology
- e. LGBT students
- f. Tzedek students
- g. Feminist students
- h. Students from inter-faith families

Goals

- To engage students in topics related to Israel beyond the conflict
- To connect new target audiences with issues in Israel they also are dealing with in the U.S.
- To also highlight some of the differences between young Americans and young Israelis so as to discuss questions of peoplehood.

Ideas

1. **Basic Book Discussion Group.** This group could meet once a month to discuss different sections of the book, or could meet at the end of the semester to discuss the book as a whole. Discussion questions may be found throughout this program guide.
2. **Discussion/Program that speaks to the issue of inter-faith relationships.** This uses material from Chapter 2 and could draw students from inter-faith families or in inter-faith relationships. It draws on the humorous side of what the author calls a "mixed" marriage, i.e. one partner is Ashkenazi and one is Mizrahi; but also gets at the heart of a serious issue facing students.
3. **A discussion about life in the Israeli army.** Enlist birthright israel returnees to talk about their mifgash experience and what they learned from their Israeli counterparts during their trip. Chapter 3 talks about young people in the Israeli army and the challenges they face. In high school in Israel, most teens discuss which division they will enter in the army, not where they want to go to

college. Discuss the differences between the situation of young Americans and young Israelis, the sacrifices, the reality. Israel has the only army that drafts women. Soldiers in Israel are sworn in on their choice of four different books: the Hebrew Bible, the Koran (mostly Bedouin volunteers), and the secret book of the Druze or the Christian Bible. How is that different from the U.S.? Bedouins are known as some of the bravest soldiers. Arab Christians have volunteered more than ever during the current intifada.

4. **Engage your business majors.** In Chapter 4 the author discusses the technology and medical advances that have emerged from Israeli research. Israelis invented the Pentium and Centrino chips, the major components of the cell phone, the technology behind AOL Instant Messenger, the heart stent, the M2A camera that travels through a person's digestive tract for medical exploration and much more. Lead a campaign where students don't use technology invented by Israel for a day. See how much awareness that raises!
5. **Get your feminists excited.** Have a discussion about the content in Chapter 16. Talk about the laws surrounding marriage and divorce, and the cultural norms around polygamy and adultery. How do the laws and norms differ in American society? Does it differ within ethnic enclaves in the U.S.?
6. **Talk about being gay and Jewish.** What's it like to be gay and Jewish in Israel? How is that different from America? Chapter 17 explores these issues and tells the stories of people struggle with them each day.

Expanded Program Idea: "All in the Family" (45 minutes)

The book is populated with many different kinds of people. Do students feel connected to them? Why or why not? Some argue that the great thing about family is that even when you don't all agree, you still love each other. Our Jewish family is the same way. We may not always agree with politics or social movements in Israel, but we enjoy engaging in discourse around these issues. We may not all agree on how the state of Israel should look, but we feel connected to the history of our people in Israel. When we read the stories of the people in this book we see the different members of the family. We see the colorful, lively and bustling side of Israel. We see the side that we are proud of and connect to as people and as Jews.

We want to encourage students to consider what it means to feel like part of this Jewish family, connected to Israel.

Assign roles to students or staff, or have one staff person or student play various roles from the book. Give students excerpts from the book that describe individuals and have them present that person in a dramatic way. Bring costumes and maps to emphasize the drama and encourage the students improvise. Introduce the activity by selecting pieces from the discussion above and relating it to the group you have before you. (5 minutes)

Role Play (each participant should present for 5 minutes):

One way to start is to use the characters on the cover of the book. Who are the people on the book cover?

- On the left we see an Ethiopian girl. What is her life like in Israel? What is her family's story? What challenges does she face as a modern woman? Or is she more bound by tradition? (pp159-164)
- Next to her we see a woman at the disco. Is she Muslim, Jewish, Christian? Her dress tells us that she would not be accepted in Druze or Bedouin society. What else can we tell about her?(pp11-14; 23-24)
- Who is the surfer? Is he hanging out on the beaches of Tel Aviv? Who are his ancestors? What is his tradition?(pp. 27-30; 39-40; 261-265)
- Who is the man with the yarmulke and the bubble gum? Where does he live? What does he believe? What does the color of his yarmulke tell us about him? (pp218-220; 231-236)
- What is the story of the woman in the army? How old is she? What are her plans after the army? What unit is she in? What kinds of experiences has she had in the army? Note that Israel is the only army that drafts women. (pp. 49-55; 65-68)

Concluding Discussion (15 minutes):

How would other students have emphasized different aspects of that character? Who do students most identify with, feel most close to? What experiences have they had that made them feel like more a part of the family? What about ones that have made them feel like less of a part of the family?

Sections in The Israelis related to Intra-Jewish dialogue

Chapter 5	The Ashkenazim: Israel's "WASPS"
Chapter 6	The Mizrahim: The Other Israelis
Chapter 7	The Russians: The New Exodus
Chapter 8	Out of Africa: Ethiopian Israelis in the Promised Land
Chapter 9	The Haredim: Jewish-Jewish-Jewish
Chapter 10	The Orthodox: This Land is Your Land? This Land is My Land!
Chapter 11	The Non-Orthodox: War of the Cheeseburgers

Target Populations

- a. Students from different ethnic Jewish backgrounds such as Russian, Bukharian, Ethiopian, Mizrahi, Sephardi
- b. Students from across the observance and religious spectrum such as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, post-denominational, secular

Goals

- To create a positive dialogue among groups that have traditionally not had common ground
- To learn about differences between different ethnic and religious groups within Judaism in a positive way; cultural sensitivity
- To understand the similarities that bring us together as well

Ideas

1. **Foster understanding between Jewish ethnic groups.** Does your campus have a large population of Bukharan or Russian Jews? What have you learned about these cultures as compared to the culture of Ashkenazi (western European descent) or Sephardic (Spanish or Portuguese descent) Judaism? Has there been cultural misunderstanding on your campus? Lead a discussion about growing up Jewish in different environments. Be sure to gather a diverse cross-section of the students on your campus. Use sensory perception: what smells do you remember from childhood; what sounds do you remember from childhood; what is your first Jewish memory? According to the author, in the U.S. 98% of Jews are Ashkenazi, while in Israel half of the Jews are Mizrahi (Indigenous to the Middle East). How do the Jewish faces of the U.S. differ from the Jewish faces of Israel? Use the stories from chapters 5-8 to discuss the different ethnic groups that make up our rich culture. How does what we've grown up with relate to what we know about each other? How does our common ground bring us together as Jews? What have you learned about another group that surprised you or helped change your mind about something you thought you understood?
2. **Foster understanding between different religious groups.** Does your campus have various movements organized on campus? Or, is there little discussion about different religious and observance levels? Either way, Chapters 9-11 can invoke a

thoughtful discussion about Jewish identity, Jewish observance and creating a pluralistic Jewish community. The exercise above about growing up Jewish using sensory perception also could work here.

Expanded Program Idea: Jewish-Jewish Dialogue

We often talk about inter-group dialogue to create community on campus. It is just as important, if not more so, to strengthen our own Jewish community on campus by creating dialogue that helps us understand the differences among us. The Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC) brings together pro-Israel organizations from a wide spectrum of political beliefs. It is a living example of inter-Jewish cooperation and understanding. The ICC guide to intra-Jewish dialogue offer two exercises for creating a framework for dialogue. Both are useful exercises, but exercise 2 in particular hits on many points from The Israelis. The following is exercise 2, an excerpt from the Intra-Jewish Dialogue Guide. It includes sources other than The Israelis to build the discussion.

Israel's Democracy Wrestles with Pluralism and Criticism

Introduction to The Israelis¹

An international news producer friend at CNN told me: “Our viewers are confused. We have footage of Jews who look like Arabs, Arabs who look like Jews. We have black Jews. Bearded sixteenth century Jews and sexy girls in tight jeans. Who are these people anyway?”

Part of the answer, I hope, is in *The Israelis*. Who are these Israelis who order big Macs in the language of the Ten Commandments, believe that waiting in line is for sissies and light up under no Smoking Signs? Their children, the world's biggest MTV fans, go to malls to get the latest Jennifer Lopez CDs ... and gas masks...

They picnic at the Sea of Galilee and have all-night rave parties on the Red Sea. As a post-Army rite, planeloads of Israelis celebrate a kosher Passover in Katmandu. After their travels, tens of thousands reunite near the ruins of Megiddo (the Armageddon of the Book of Revelations) to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Woodstock-style. Although the vast majority of Israeli Jews are secular, more than 98 percent of the country's synagogues are either Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox.

Cross-cultural adventures between Jews and Jews abound. There's nothing like a “mixed marriage” where couscous meets gefilte fish. Ashkenazi Jews with origins in Europe and Mizrahi Jews whose families fled Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa struggle to bridge their differences. Tradition-bound Ethiopian Jewish mothers are shocked to see strange, nearly naked white Jews tanning in “dental floss” bikinis. It's not easy for the teen wearing a knit *kippa* over his dreadlocks to tell his parents in broken Amharic he's in love with a non-religious white girl. Some highly observant Israelis design the world's most famous computer chips at Intel, where bomb shelters are frequently used – either as synagogues, mosques or meeting rooms.

...Black-hatted politicians once had the clout to close down non-kosher eateries or malls on the Sabbath, but not since the 2003 elections brought about a backlash against

¹Rosenthal, Donna. The Israelis. New York, Simon & Schuster/Free Press 2003.

the ultra-Orthodox. Men on “modesty patrols,” however, still check that ultra-Orthodox women bus passengers are “properly” dressed and sitting apart from males.

The “modest patrols” can do nothing about the female soldiers. Israel is the only country that drafts (non-Orthodox Jewish) women. Fervently religious families face a new problem: teens who take off their black clothes and run away to join the army...

Israeli men spend more time in uniform than any other men, but their life expectancy is the third highest in the world. These men come in all sizes, shapes...and sexual orientations. From army officers to El Al stewards, Israelis are flinging open the closets... So many thousands turn out for the annual gay pride parade in Tel Aviv, it's hard to hear rabbis and imams screaming “blasphemy.” Israel's singing sensation is a gorgeous brunette. She was a “he” in the army. Other Israelis live in secret worlds – like a lesbian whose parents on an Orthodox West Bank settlement have no idea she has a girlfriend...

Discussion Questions:

- *While Israel's cultural and political diversity create tensions, it also generates positive values from the collision.*
- *What aspects of Israeli Society/Values are known discussed in popular discussion on campus?*

‘The Only Country’²

...It's the only country where the expression "I didn't bother you" means that I want to bother you.

It's the only country where Muslims sell holy souvenirs to Christians, in return for notes bearing the features of Maimonides.

It's the only country where you leave home at 18, and at 24 you're still living there.

It's the only country where it's easy to find software for launching satellites, but you have to wait a week until someone repairs your washing-machine. And while on this subject, it's only here that a unit of time exists known as "I'll get to you between eleven and six".

It's the only country where, on a first date, the guy asks the woman where she did her army service. It's also the only country where it transpires that she was more of a combat soldier than you were...

It's the only country where just 60 seconds separates the saddest day from the happiest.

It's the only country where most people can't explain why they live where they do, but have masses of reasons why it's the best place to live.

It's the only country where, if you despise politicians, abhor clerks, hate the situation, are disgusted with the taxes, loathe the standard of service, and detest the weather, it's a sign that you love it.

And it's the only country I could ever live in.

² Minister Tommy Lapid Excerpt from “The Only Country.”

'I Don't Want to Kill Anymore.'³

Years later, Fox coupled those memories with a story he heard, a true one, about a Shin Bet agent whose wife had killed herself leaving the husband a note explaining that life had become unbearable with him, cold and remote as he was. After an initial period, in which the husband returned to work as if nothing had happened, "he began to have panic attacks," says Fox. He went into psychotherapy, enrolled in university, and fell in love with another man, a fellow student, with whom he started to do "all kinds of crazy things — like, they would be running around at night, and they'd come to the sea, and all of a sudden, he take off all his clothes and run into the water, not caring what anybody thought." Eventually the man reached an emotional equilibrium and he settled down to a more conventional life with a woman. Fox believes, though, that he needed the period of wildness "in order to get connected to the world of his emotions, and it had to be with a man, not a woman, so that he could learn something about himself as a man."

Fox says that during his recent visits to Germany, "people would ask me, do you really believe there's a chance of these Israeli men changing Barak and Netanyahu and Sharon? And I say, look at Rabin, he changed. He's the guy who [as defense minister] told me, in the first intifada, 'Break their bones.'"

Is he suggesting that it's only Israelis who have to change, that all the responsibility for today's violence lies with them?

"The responsibility is more ours, because we are stronger and bigger. It's like a family, and we're like the parents or the older brother. And they are like the children, or the weak, young, crippled brother, whom we have to take care of. Plus, I really believe that if you look at history, that we are very much to blame for what happened. We didn't realize what was happening [after 1967], how things were slipping out of our control, out of our hands."

NEAR THE BEGINNING OF "Walk on Water," Eyal and Axel are sightseeing when they learn that a suicide bomb has gone off in Haifa. The German asks the Mossad agent if "you ever think why they are doing this?" Eyal responds: "There's nothing to think about." By the end, his heart has softened, and we have reason to believe that Eyal would be capable of understanding the Palestinian point of view.

Eytan Fox thinks that such a change of mentality is necessary if Israel is to save itself, and he believes that it's possible too. He says he's been attacked by critics for being "too mainstream, too slick, too Americanized. And that may be the case. But I want to tell you and this is why it doesn't bother me so much it's not from a manipulative place. That's who I am. I am in many ways an American at heart.... We want a happy ending because we believe in happy endings: in our lives and in our movies."

Discussion Questions:

- *Is it healthy to have internal dissent in a democracy? (what about when it is used out of context or by detractors)*
- *Who should care? If someone utilizes internal dissent to undermine the existence of Israel and not merely a policy, who should point that out?*

³ The Jerusalem Report, David B. Green's review of Eytan Fox's movie 'I Don't Want to Kill Anymore.'

- *How is the Israeli army discussed and within Israeli society that is hard to translate or understand outside of Israel?*

Sections in The Israelis related to Minority vs. Majority

Chapter 12	The Muslims: Abraham’s Other Children
Chapter 13	The Bedouin: Tribes, Tents, and Satellite Dishes
Chapter 14	The Druze: Between Modernity and Tradition
Chapter 15	The Christians: Uneasy in the land of Jesus
Epilogue	Shalom/Salam

Target populations

- Political Science student
- Interfaith groups
- University Chaplaincy

Goals

- To address the idea that there are minority groups living within the majority Jewish population in Israel
- To discuss the issues that arise in this situation
- To understand more about the minority populations in Israel

Ideas

- 1. Discuss Christians as a population in Israel.** Christians and Jews share a biblical heritage that takes place in the land of Israel. (pp. 305-307) Therefore we may expect that some Christians will also be drawn to the state of Israel. According to the author, Israel is the only country in the Middle East with a growing Christian population. Why do you think that is? What does the book tell us about what life is like for Christians in Israel? (pp. 308-312) Christians serve in the army, with the Christian bible being the fastest growing book in the army. Since the current intifada began, more Christians than ever before have joined the army. “I’ve been living here, a minority all my life, an Anglican among Orthodox Christians, a Christian among Muslims, a Palestinian among Jews, a left-winger in a right-wing town.” (p. 319) What kind of image does this quote conjure? What does it mean to be a Palestinian Christian—a minority among minorities? Use pages 319-323 for reference.
- 2. Learn about the Druze.** Who are the Druze? How does their culture and history contribute to the richness of Israeli society? “Druze are famous for their fearlessness in the face of death. They believe in the immortality of every Druze soul, that they are brief sojourners in this world.” (p. 292) How does this belief make them such a dedicated part of the Israeli army? The religion of the Druze teaches that they must be loyal to the country in which they live. (pp. 302-304) In addition to their deep loyalty to the state of Israel, however, the Druze community remains very insular. The Israeli government designates the Druze as a separate religious community, so they have their own religious courts. One must be born into the Druze community, there is no way to marry in, or convert to being Druze. Marriages may be only among other Druze. How does this way of life fit into the

large community of Israel? (pp. 296-299) How do young Druze feel about this way of life? (pp. 299-302) In reading chapter 14, what most resonated with the group?

Expanded Program Idea: Bedouins Beyond birthright israel

We think of Israel as a Jewish state, but as we see in chapters 12-15, there are many other ethnic and religious groups that exist within the state. What does that mean for our image of Israel as a Jewish state? Does that change our connection to Israel as Jews? How is Israel different than other “melting pot” states like the United States? Are we proud that Israel has different ethnic groups that fit within the state makeup? Does it worry us that other groups are fighting in the Israeli army and defending the state? What are the tensions of having a multi-ethnic state?

Bedouins are Muslim, but most consider their culture distinct. Has anyone in the group spent time in a Bedouin encampment? What does the group know about the Bedouin way of life? Bedouin communities face many hardships but according to the author roughly half of them refused to leave their tent and shack encampments. Why do people in the group think some Bedouins choose to remain in their makeshift homes when the Israeli government has offered them homes in places like Rahat? Use Chapter 13 as a reference.

On a first trip to Israel, students might visit a Bedouin community to savor the rich coffee and tasty food. They may even stay overnight, as the Bedouin are known for their hospitality. However, we do not learn much about the reality of Bedouin life from these brief, made for tourist encounters. There is much more to the Bedouin story than what we experience on birthright israel trips. (pp. 278-291) Bedouins are Muslim Arabs, but do we think of them differently than we think of other Arabs? Why? They are a minority within a minority. How are they treated in Israel as a minority? How are they treated in the Arab community? How do they co-exist in Israeli society?

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/Bedouin.html

Learn more about the Bedouin culture and what life is like in Bedouin communities:

<http://w3.bgu.ac.il/bedouin/information.htm>

<http://i-cias.com/e.o/bedouins.htm>

The Israeli Bedouin community may be found living in the Negev. As Israel has technologically advanced over the past few decades, the Bedouin community has been encouraged to move into towns provided by the government to take advantage of proximity to modern resources. (pp. 286-290) This emerges as a controversy with some arguing that the tradition of the Bedouin is being destroyed by the state. Others argue that the state is offering the Bedouin a wonderful opportunity, as citizens of the State, to be lifted out of poverty. What responsibility does the state of Israel have to its people to provide affordable, modern housing? What about to develop regions of the state that may become good agricultural land or business developments? Does the government of israel “owe” the Bedouin community the right to remain in the land? Why do some of the Bedouin choose to move into the modern settlements while others choose to remain in the

nomadic communities?

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=22&ItemID=5939>

How does the issue of majority vs. minority arise here? Is the minority being pushed out or lifted up by the majority? What do you think? Would you want to take advantage of the opportunity to move into a new community, or would you rather live in the community in which you've always lived?

Break the group into smaller discussion groups to answer the questions in this exercise for 15 minutes. Have a large group discussion based on the smaller groups' conclusions for 15 minutes.

More Topics

Other ways to use The Israelis

- Work with your Israeli professionals, such as Israeli fellows, on campus or community to create a dialogue with students about how the Israeli professionals felt reading the book and how the students felt about the Israeli professionals after reading the book.
- Consider bringing Israel at Heart, a group of young, post-army Israelis to campus. They are engaging and relate well to students. Being the same age, they are able to talk about life in Israel in a way that college students can relate. Use The Israelis to begin the discussion about life in the army, and use Israel at Heart as a resource to personalize the discussion. They can also talk about all facets of Israeli life, from a young person's perspective. <http://www.israelatheart.com/>
- This year, the ZOA is bringing Ali, a gay Palestinian, to campuses across the country. Campuses have engaged the LGBT communities in joint programs. Consider bringing Ali in conjunction with LGBT groups on campus, and use The Israelis as a pro-Israel advocacy piece during the program. LGBT students will learn about gay rights in Israel and Jewish students will hear a personal testimonial about a gay Palestinian who sought refuge in Israel. Contact: Julie Sager- jsager@zoa.org
- "Seeds of Peace" is a camp in Maine that brings young Palestinians, Arabs, and Israelis together for a summer where they learn about co-existence and communication. Young adults who attended "Seeds of Peace" when they were young, often speak on campus and give accounts about the skills and hope they take away. The presentation can be very hopeful and optimistic, and may be a good companion to those who choose to pick up on the co-existence elements of the book. Contact: info@seedsofpeace.org
- Use parts of the book in your Israel trip orientations.
- Encourage birthright israel alumni to order it from the AVI CHAI bookshelf so they can join in the discussion and reconnect with Israel.
- Bring the author Donna Rosenthal to campus by contacting her speaking agent at info@theisraelis.net. Her basic rate can be reduced if she is already in the area. She can speak on any of the various topics in the book and gear her discussion towards one or more of your target groups.
- The author has offered to do a "press conference" with our Hillel professionals to discuss different aspects of the book. If you would be interested in this please contact Brianne Nadeau at bnadeau@hillel.org.

The Israelis by Donna Rosenthal was first published by Simon and Schuster, Inc. in 2003. For information about special discounts or bulk purchases, please contact the publisher at 1-800-456-6798 or business@simonandschuster.com

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