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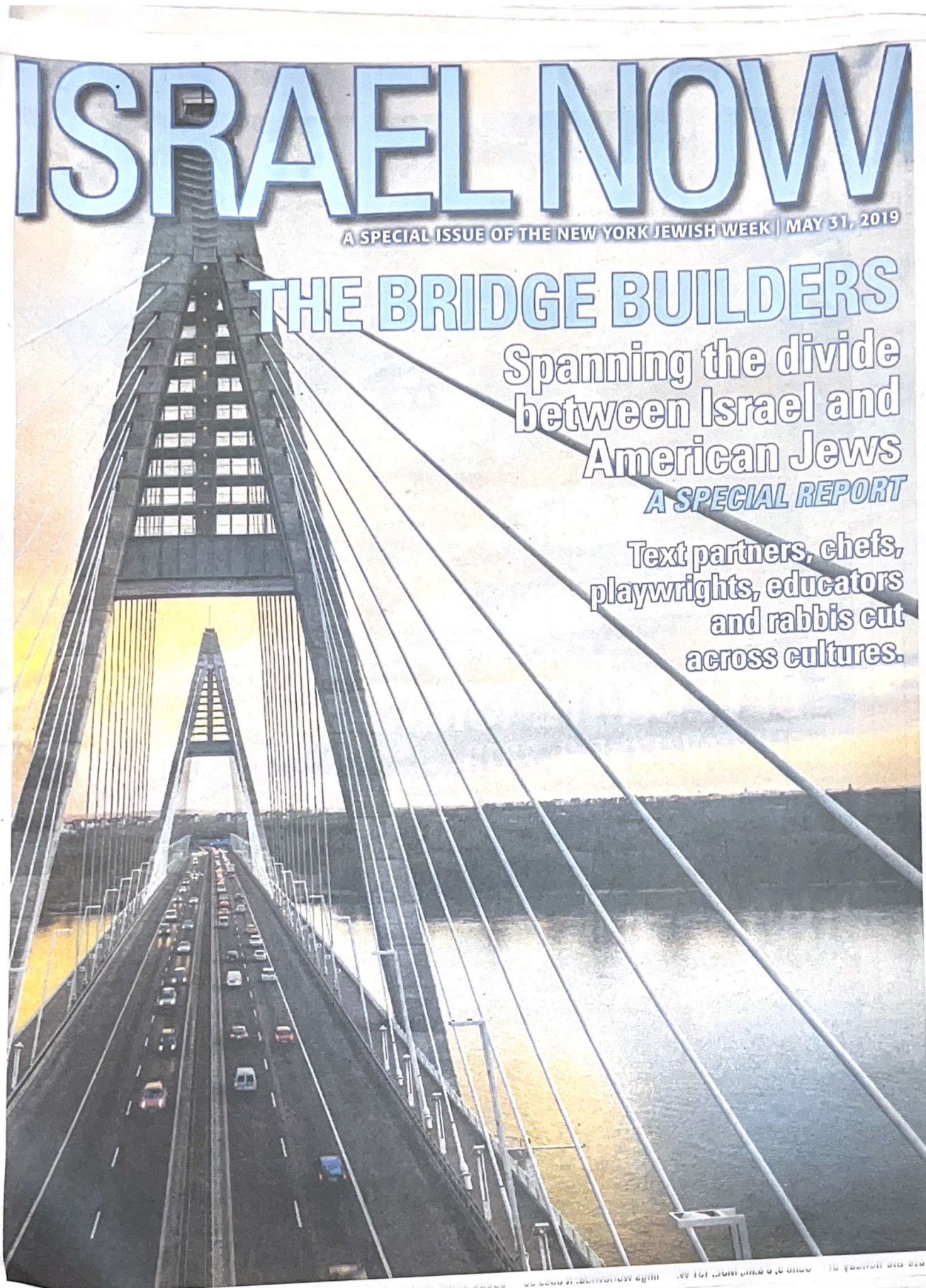
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THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

Spanning the divide
between Israel and
American Jews

A SPECIAL REPORT

Text partners, chefs,
playwrights, educators
and rabbis cut
across cultures.



Forging A Dialogue The Old-Fashioned Way

Communal Jewish text study as a balm in Gilead.

Rebecca Raphael
Special To The Jewish Week

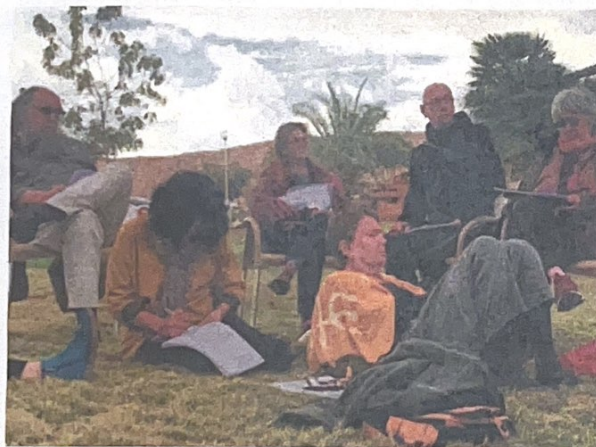
For nearly two decades, Nancy Kahn and her New York City-based study group have met in each other's homes to learn Torah together, while an Israeli cluster has wrestled with the same texts in Israel. Both contingents — together called Bavli Yerushalmi, after the Babylonian (Bavli) and Jerusalem (Yerushalmi) Talmuds — come together annually for five days in Israel or the United States on an alternating basis. A few months ago, Bavli Yerushalmi, which consists of approximately 20 New Yorkers and 35 Israelis, culminated a year of learn-

from the inside out. We've all become close friends; they're like family."

At a time when many are concerned that there is a deepening divide between American and Israeli Jews, interviews with more than a dozen people in the world's two largest Jewish communities reveal one framework that is helping to heal that rift. It is a practice dating back thousands of years: communal Jewish text study.

Programs based in the United States, Israel or online have increasingly been offering opportunities to establish meaningful discourse about text study as a basis for connection with people on the other side of the Atlantic. The results have been multi-layered, as participants report that in addition to learning from various texts, they have gained a deeper understanding of each other's backgrounds, developed new perspectives about the other's societal and political issues,

The Bridge Builders: Text Partners



New Yorkers and Israelis, part of the Bavli Yerushalmi study group, pore over texts at Kibbutz Yahel in the Negev. COURTESY OF BAVLI YERUSHALMI

ing about Moses and the Israelites in the desert by having its retreat in an ideal location: the Negev desert.

"We have forged dialogue, intimacy and a community through the study of text," said Kahn, a psychotherapist on the Upper West Side. "It's so easy to say, 'Israel should do this' or 'Look what they're doing there' ... but when you're in a relationship with these people you get a feel for what's going on in a much more organic, empathic and informed way. You learn about Israel

created strong bonds of friendship and discovered what they have in common instead of that which creates headline-worthy friction.

"If you put a text between two people, it's the fastest way to get them to a deeper, more meaningful conversation. When you ask the other person 'What does this text mean to you?' you begin to understand their values and what's going on in their life," said Rabbi Avi Killip, director of the Hadar Institute's Project Zug, which pairs students from



Paired through the study group Project Zug, Francine Licata and Judy Spigel studied the Book of Psalms and produced artwork for a recent exhibition.

across the globe, primarily Israelis and Americans, for text study. "Chavruta (study partnership) is the secret sauce that allows people to facilitate meaningful conversation and connect in deep ways," she explained. In the last year, more than 1,000 people enrolled in Project Zug's nearly 30 online offerings, including courses about what it means to be a Jewish parent, the Jewish approach to charity and Bob Dylan's Jewish journey, as well as an introduction to Jewish social justice and overviews on Jewish life cycles, the prayer book, Torah and Talmud.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker, president and rosh yeshiva of Hadar, noted that while there are many programs aimed at having American Jews visit Israel to make a connection across the divide, as well as a long tradition of shlichut (emissary missions) that sends Israelis to the diaspora, it's a very different — and impactful — story when Americans and Israelis study Jewish texts together. "When you're studying text," he said, "you're fundamentally studying Jewish values, and Jewish values by definition transcend any manifestation that they take on in [one particular] time, place or history. Those values have relevance, power and allow you to actually talk about the root commitment you share in common even though your political and social

reality may be increasingly divergent from one another."

Pointing out that a growing number of Israelis and Americans are learning together at Hadar in New York, Jerusalem and online, Rabbi Tucker added, "It's a high order for American and Israeli Jews to have a baseline fluency with one another's cultures."

Suggesting that the gap between American and Israeli Jews is, in part, a result of the fact that they lack an intertwined narrative of experience, the rabbi offered an illustration of how text study can be unifying. He posited what might happen when an American, who has ideas about Gaza based only on U.S. headlines, studies with an Israeli whose family was evacuated and displaced. "Suddenly you have a person in front of you showing that it's not just about politics and ideology, but about people," said Rabbi Tucker, who lives in Riverdale. "You encounter in a person's narrative something you might have only known of as a caricature. The transformation of stereotypes to person is incredibly powerful in a way that you only get when you spend time with someone."

That was the case for Tal Hoffman, who was raised and still lives in Jerusalem. Though she had worked as a counselor at an American summer camp and served as an emissary for Camp Judea in North Carolina, it was not until she

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The Old-Fashioned Way

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studied alongside Americans, first at Migdal Oz in Israel and then at Hadar in New York City, that she engaged with them intellectually and developed a respect for them. "I grew up walking around Jerusalem, where Americans on their gap year would be on Ben Yehuda [street] screaming at the top of their lungs and getting ice cream with 16 of their friends," said the 28-year-old who is now earning a bachelor's degree at Hebrew University. "I made fun of Americans and looked down on them a little my whole life."

Text study exposed her to a completely different side of them. Not only was she impressed with how knowledgeable the Americans were despite the language barrier, but she also began to appreciate some of the intricacies of being an American Jew. "Studying together was a way to understand their society in a way I never had before," she said, explaining that the challenges of intermarriage within one's own family, observing kashrut in primarily non-kosher restaurants, or not having an eruv were unfamiliar to her. "It felt like it was an 'in' into a different Jewish culture. I don't think that would have happened over a kiddush in shul or in an encounter where I was the Israeli and they were the Americans and we each had to play our part. Instead, we came together to study Torah. Through that, we had meaningful conversations and became friends." Hoffman added, "I would never be so condescending about Americans anymore."

Frannie Licata from Stockbridge, Mass., and Judy Spigiel from Kibbutz Megiddo in northern Israel were paired through Project Zug. They connected over Skype every week for six months to study a curriculum covering the

Book of Psalms that culminated in a recent art exhibition in Israel; the show was born from the discussions between them and other Israeli and American study partners enrolled in the course. Licata and Spigiel, who had strikingly different interpretations of the texts, uncovered that this disparity may have stemmed from their diverse cultures.

Spigiel, an art teacher and painter, approached the Psalms with cynicism. "My daughter, who's religious, always told me to read Tehillim [Psalms]. Somebody has a cold? Read Tehillim. Somebody's car is broken? Read Tehillim," she laughed. Once she read them, she was mostly unmoved and even annoyed. "They seemed like a little boy with a lot of whining. It was like, 'God, what did you do?' and 'God, why didn't you tell me?'"

Licata, a social worker, delved deeper to better understand her study partner, and perhaps Israeli culture at large. "Judy's mindset was 'Enough with the Psalms. Get up off your butt, stop kvetching, and do something!'" I was profoundly aware of her tenacity and was blown away by her focus on self-agency. I think it could have been her Israeli mindset that led her to think that way," said Licata, a convert who describes her Judaism as an "all-encompassing" aspect of her identity. "We were at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of religion, but I saw that even though Judy is kind of removed from it, in Israel she still deeply lives her life as a Jewish woman. It's very different."

Some Americans found it thought-provoking to discover how serving in the IDF and living in a conflict-torn region colors every aspect of the Israelis' lives, including Jewish observance.

"While most American Jews go to shul and fast on Yom Kippur, in Israel many people are solemn because they're thinking about their loved ones who died in the Yom Kippur War," said Talya Gorsetman, an American who ran

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a program that connected students in Atlanta with Israelis who live in Yokneam and Megiddo, small cities southeast of Haifa. The groups both studied a Melton School curriculum over the course of a year; their assignments included several joint video conference classes, followed by reciprocal visits to Atlanta and the Yokneam-Megiddo region. Gorsetman, 44, reflected: "I will never have a Yom Kippur again without thinking about Israelis who lost their lives."

For Dina Fuchs Beresin, who was in the same cohort as Gorsetman, the most impactful aspect of their week-long visit with their study partners in Israel was the chance to witness the challenges that non-Orthodox Jews encounter there. Many in the Yokneam-Megiddo group were working to open a Conservative synagogue, and the Americans, who had joined them to scout out possible locations, felt invested in the process and the outcome. "It was incredible to see the obstacles they had to go through for people to see them as legitimate, because in Israel you're either secular or Orthodox. It's all or nothing, and there's very little in the middle," said Fuchs Beresin. "It was a rude awakening for us that here were people who wanted to express their Judaism, and it was such an uphill battle for them."

Tamar Kolberg, the former rabbi of Kehilat Ra'anana, a Reform synagogue in Ra'anana, knows quite well how difficult it can be to practice non-Orthodox Judaism in her country; her community endured death threats, walls smeared with messages of hate, and rocks thrown through windows by Jewish extremists. What she didn't know was how Americans perceived Israel's challenges around issues of pluralism. The 67-year-old, who was paired with an

American study partner through Project Zug for three years, realized how important it is for diaspora Jews to be exposed to more than what they learn about Israel from the media.

"I wanted my partner to see that even though the [Orthodox] rabbinate is in official control, egalitarian communities are still making our mark," said Kolberg, who was ordained at the Israeli branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary. "There are so many misconceptions from both sides. A personal connection and a rich dialogue show what's really happening on the ground and that it's not all black and white."

Kolberg's efforts have resonated with her American chavruta, Susan Weiss Firestone. Last month, Weiss Firestone was feeling disappointed about Benjamin Netanyahu's re-election for his fifth term when her conversation with Kolberg via Skype, before digging into text, comforted and inspired her — without any discussion of politics at all. Kolberg mentioned that she would soon be heading to her parents' house for Passover, and the typically 20-minute drive would take about two hours because nearly every Jew in Israel goes to a seder. "A visual like that put everything into perspective for me," said Weiss Firestone, who lives in Long Meadow, Mass. "Of course there are a million things we could complain about — the election, issues at the Kotel, the nation-state law or anything else. Just like America, it's not a perfect country. We can't over-connect the elected officials with the whole society. Tamar reminded me that Israel is a miracle. There we are a free people in our land."

Jonah Burian, who is spending the year at Yeshivat Ma'ale Gilboa in northern Israel, studying pri-

marily with Israelis, attested to how eye-opening the experience can be. "We are united under the study of text, but our different backgrounds force us to think outside of our comfort zone. We all have to recognize where we are coming from culturally, what our privileges, norms and biases are, and then step outside of ourselves," said the 18-year-old from New Rochelle. "We are constantly forced to think about both ourselves and the other."

Though Burian and his chavruta, an Israeli a few years older who has completed his IDF service, have not discussed the details of the latter's experiences in combat, Burian has intuited how it shaped him. "One time he came two or three minutes late, and I casually asked, 'Where were you?' He responded in Hebrew, 'I already finished the army. I don't need a commander,'" recalled Burian. "He wasn't trying to be snarky or mean. It's just a different mindset and disposition. He's more hardened and practical. It can be elusive how it manifests but it's there. I had known intellectually that Israelis constantly feel like their lives are at stake, so they're more guarded and realistic, but had never interacted with this many Israelis so close to my age on this level."

Burian, who will attend the University of Pennsylvania in the fall, had been to Israel with his family or on educational programs more than 10 times prior. But studying text with Israelis has been his most profound experience yet. "It's not just that the text acts as a bridge and facilitates interesting conversations between the Israelis and me. By virtue of studying together, I feel a part of a rich community of Israelis. I understand them better," he said, "and feel closer than ever." ☆



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