



How to Plan and Execute the Most Effective Mifgash

PRINCIPLES & BEST PRACTICES

Again, we focus mainly on the design of **shared intentional Mifgash experiences**, as opposed to naturally occurring contact situations (even though naturally occurring contacts are no less important for Peoplehood education than intentional programs). The Mifgash is therefore an intentional event with clear boundaries of time and space.

When we set ourselves to plan a Mifgash, we typically ask several basic questions:

1. Who will participate in the Mifgash?
2. Where will the Mifgash take place?
3. When does the Mifgash program begin and when does it end?

However, these questions **should not** be the first ones asked, but rather, they should come only after answers are given to a set of preliminary questions, including:

1. Who are the stakeholders of the Mifgash?
What are their goals and expectations?
2. What are the long range outcomes expected of the Mifgash?

3. Who are the players of the Mifgash? Who is around the table?
4. Who is in charge? Who will facilitate the Mifgash?
5. How do we assess the outcomes and impact of the Mifgash?

A Mifgash is a complex educational and human event. It requires rigorous planning, a well thought out setup, professional guidance and an evaluation design. The Mifgash begins from the moment the stakeholders engage in planning the event (even if years before the actual Mifgash takes place) and it ends after the event is over, when the stakeholders assess outcomes and impact, and plan additional Mifgash experiences.

The Mifgash is a continuum and the same questions or issues can appear in all stages of the process.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- No Mifgash is like any other. There is no standard activity known as a Mifgash. In this tool-

kit we aspire to provide guidelines that fit all sizes and shapes of Mifgash programs.

- Internal and external variables make each Mifgash experience unique.
- Mifgashim may vary in location, duration, scope, number of participants and stated goals. Mifgashim may take place on Israeli soil, in a Diaspora community, or even in a third location that none of the participants call home (e.g. a service learning project in a third world country). Mifgashim may be based on two groups representing two cultures (e.g. Russian speaking Israeli soldiers on a Taglit bus and the Russian Taglit participants), or they may be based on multi-country / multi-cultural events (e.g., ROI community or regional Maccabiah games in South America). Still, there are recurring issues that should be considered by all players in the Mifgash continuum. These issues appear as early as the preliminary stage of planning and endure well into the actual Mifgash event and what follows from it.

Note: While we advocate for Mifashim that are well planned and implemented in the most professional way, we do not want to discourage educators from implementing one. We realize that not every Mifgash can follow all the prerequisites we describe, but we urge practitioners to handle this matter with extra care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are our recommendations for serious consideration:

Matching Populations

While the Mifgash is, by definition, a meeting of people of diverse backgrounds, planners should do their utmost to design the Mifgash whereby the participants display potential capacities for positive outcomes. Matching populations involves areas such as appropriate numerical balance, ensuring adequate language skills, compatible status, and potentially bridgeable ideological, cultural and social gaps. The matching process does not follow a standard formula; common sense and agreement among the partners should be employed at all times.

The Setting

The Mifgash is defined by time and space, It is therefore important to create a setting that is conducive for an effective Mifgash. The setting should be friendly, comfortable, intimate and free of institutional pressure. Participants should be given ample opportunities for personal contact with other participants in a supportive and effective environment. The Mifgash should provide the conditions for reducing stereotypical attitudes by way of de-categorization of the “other” group and high focus on individual expression.

Diversity of Narratives

Even though meeting fellow Jews is not highly charged with ideological tensions, it is important to account for the diversity of narratives present in the Mifgash. Participants represent a variety of world views concerning Judaism, Jewish identity, religious practice, ethnic background, the role of Israel and the future of the Jewish People. These

diversities revolve around historical, cultural and political dimensions. Diverse narratives can potentially evolve into conflict, particularly when the gaps are charged with emotion and possibly with anger. The Mifgash has the potential of accentuating difference, resulting in raised tension or rivalry, rather than bringing about a sense of solidarity.

Predispositions and History

Participants do not come to the Mifgash with a clean slate. They carry with them memories, personal life experiences, expectations and emotions. We should assume that our students have some preconceived notions about the “others” who they will meet, possibly even negative stereotypes. Moreover, participants may have preconceived notions about the Mifgash itself, based on reports from prior Mifgash experiences (e.g., from friends who participated in a previous encounter). The Mifgash is not an island surrounded by neutral water. It has a context that needs to be discovered and accounted for at all times.

Language and Communication

Unfortunately, there is no common language in a Mifgash in which all participants are fully fluent. In most cases the Mifgash will take place in English. This means that at least one group represented in the Mifgash will be in a state of linguistic disadvantage and will be required to speak in a language that is not their mother tongue. Planners need to factor the linguistic gap into the programmatic methods. They should consider various methods to bridge the gap, such a simultaneous translation, or use of non-verbal techniques. Language barriers

can be a source of real stress and tension to both organizers and participants, far beyond the mere difficulties of understanding and communication.

Undercurrents and Hidden Agendas

Every educational activity has undercurrents and implicit messages. In intercultural situations, the hidden areas are loaded with additional complexities that can lead to stress and even conflict. While the formal explicit program may be carefully planned and professionally facilitated, the area under the water is loaded with cultural misunderstandings, perception gaps, different communication styles, subtle gestures, unexplained expressions of aggression and ambiguous social codes. Facilitators and organizers need to identify these undercurrents and use the right methods to minimize their effect.

Facilitation

It has been stated time and again that the Mifgash should be in hands of professionals. More specifically, the Mifgash event needs to be facilitated by a trained Mifgash professional.¹ The facilitator needs to come across as an honest broker (not representing a specific side), with a strong background in intercultural works and the ability to exercise effective dialogue facilitation skills.

THE MIFGASH AND THE BIGGER PICTURE OF JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

The Mifgash is not an end in itself. It is a means toward the advancement of the awareness and commitment to the idea of Jewish Peoplehood. Partici-

pants in the Mifgash may express deep satisfaction and pleasure as a result of their experience. They may leave the Mifgash with new friends and positive memories.

They will most likely recommend this activity to friends and use great superlatives to describe the experience. **All this is good, but insufficient!**

The Mifgash, in the full and broad sense, should be an opportunity to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the idea of Jewish Peoplehood. Sometimes this broader goal is an easy logical connection that can be achieved programmatically, while at other times it is not obvious and can be lost in the social construct of the Mifgash.

Planners and facilitators need to work hard on instilling an understanding among participants that the Mifgash is a **Peoplehood event**, drawing from the Peoplehood discourse and contributing to it.

The ultimate goal of the Mifgash is that people recognize the richness and significance of the Peoplehood idea, and view the Mifgash as the doorway into the exploration of and commitment to the Jewish People.

TYPES OF MIFGASHIM

There is no standard activity called Mifgash/im. Through tracking the field for more than 20 years, here are the most common forms of Mifgash/im that we encountered:

- Diaspora groups visiting Israel and meeting Israel peers while on their program (teen trip/ Taglit)
- Israelis travelling abroad in the form of delega-

tions to visit Jewish communities in the Diaspora (Partnership Together)

- Joint groups of Israelis and Diaspora Jews travelling to a third location (March of the Living)
- International events: conventions, culture and art festival, sports games
- Collaboration of mixed Jewish groups on behalf of a Tikum Olam project (JAFI Ten Program)
- School and JCC twinning projects
- Professional exchanges
- Leadership programs (Bronfman and Diller Fellows, Young adult programs)
- Israelis travelling abroad, post military service

MIFGASHIM DO'S AND DON'TS

Do's

- Plan ahead, start planning from the earliest possible point
- Be flexible at all stages
- Keep in mind the other side's needs and aspirations
- Discuss goals and expectations with your planning partners and ensure that they are aligned
- Select and train your staff carefully; look for professionals with intercultural skills
- Recruit your participants to fit the mifgash profile
- Communicate openly and regularly with your planning partners
- Clearly define roles, responsibilities and authority among all players
- Ensure optimal conducive conditions for the program

- Make sure that participants go through an effective orientation

Don'ts

Factors that might lead to a Mifgash failure

- Leaving goals, objectives and expectations undefined and unexpressed
- Allowing for unbalanced (unequal) control among the planners and organizers
- Planning the program as if only one side has something to gain
- Poor and imbalanced matching of populations in the Mifgash
- Not telling participants what to expect
- Leaving the staff to run the Mifgash without being fully prepared

[1] We are fully aware that in many cases, the Mifgash facilitation is done “in-house.” Still, we believe that the facilitators should do try their best to lead the event with the highest level of professionalism that is within their reach.