The 2017 Fellows have been together for four weeks now -- time flies when you're having fun! They recently completed their week-long mifgash, or "encounter," with the Israeli Amitim. In this email, Neta Politzer (Amitei Bronfman '05 and Educator, Facilitator & Manager of Amitim Fellowship Year Experience) describes the goals and challenges of the mifgash, methodologies and strategies, and why this year's mifgash is different from previous years.

The mifgash seminar is a cornerstone of The Bronfman Fellowship programs in both North America and in Israel. And yet, over the years, it remained a challenge for our team and raised difficult questions:
How can two groups of strangers form meaningful, intimate connections based on trust during an immersive experience lasting only a few days, while each group is simultaneously going through its own formative process?

How can we get to the tachless (the "essence") and talk about essential issues in the relationships between the two communities and their approach to Jewish identity, while connecting this discussion to a specific time and place?

Our goal was to build a holistic model that would allow us to engage the challenges and conflicts that come with this kind of mifgash, without turning it into a superficial, purposeless experience. **In the model we developed, the summer and winter mifgashim are viewed as two parts of one long process.** This way, it was unnecessary to approach all the issues and levels of the mifgash right away; rather, it allowed us to gradually build trust-based relationships between individuals and to articulate complexities and tensions. When disagreements arise, the trust and openness that we worked hard to create will help us avoid generalizations and overcome stereotypes.

On the first day of orientation for the mifgash, we focused on language and communication -- in particular, language barriers, translation, and misunderstandings. We started with the assumption that, for many of us, **language is home.** Fellows could use whatever language they felt most comfortable with, Hebrew or English. We also experienced different forms of communication: through art, music, body, hobbies, tendencies, and so on. This established a safe space in which the Fellows and Amitim could more easily confront challenges and questions.

After the day of orientation, the Fellows dispersed for weekend homestays in the homes of the Amitim. Having these homestays after only one day of introduction worked out very well. On the one hand, the orientation was long enough to dissolve their anxiety. On the other hand, it didn’t give the Israelis and North Americans time to form too many opinions about their peers. They went into their homestays very much as "blank slates." Most of the Fellows and Amitim returned from the weekend happy and energized.

For the main part of the mifgash, North Americans and Israelis were split into small, mixed "home groups" that became the basis for their conversations and activities. **It was much easier for everyone to express their thoughts and feelings in these small, intimate groups,** and for us as staff to facilitate
complicated conversations without losing anyone along the way. As part of our process for creating trust and common ground, we focused on self-exploration as well as the sharing of family narratives and immigration stories, learning that each story is multi-layered and that all of us, Israelis and North Americans, have shared elements in our identities that are still meaningful to us and our families. This understanding helped us define Israeli and American Jewish identities, and to better understand each other.

For this seminar, we used a variety of methodologies and touched on multiple intelligences. While most Fellowship seminars focus on text study, this one used people as texts. The Fellows and Amitim studied each other in a variety of ways, such as through movement, outdoor activities, etc. One of the highlights was a drama workshop in which the Fellows were blindfolded and had to practice trust, leading, following, and letting go.

On the third day, we transitioned into a more intellectual and textual atmosphere. We touched on some of the fundamental conflicts relevant to the Israeli and American Jewish communities, focusing on exploring and learning about internal conflicts without necessarily trying to come to a conclusion. We met members of the Israeli and North American faculty, who taught Shiurim on the individual and the community. It was the first time that both faculties co-taught the mifgash, and we celebrated the closer collaboration between the American and the Israeli staff.
The mifgash was an opportunity to deepen relationships and to learn how to see the "other" as a whole. An experience of such complexity will always have its obstacles and challenges. But looking back on the past week, I believe that we achieved our main goal of building interpersonal relationships based on trust and honesty.

- Neta Polizer

*Amitei Bronfman ’05 and Educator, Facilitator & Manager of Amitim Fellowship Year Experience*

P.S. To get a sense of what sources the Fellows and Amitim read and the kind of questions they discussed, [see the piece](#) written by Hannah Kapnik Ashar ('04), Faculty Member and Manager of Fellowship Year Experience.