



PEOPLEHOOD IN PRACTICE:

FOSTERING MEANINGFUL JEWISH
CONNECTIONS THROUGH SERVICE



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WHY ENCOUNTERS MATTER

Jewish life has always been shaped by connection across borders. Yet today, Israelis and Diaspora Jews often hold different assumptions about identity, community, Israel, and the role of Judaism in the world. This is true even within the Diaspora, where Jews from different regions and political contexts often live in separate cultural realities. Bringing these groups together through intentional encounters is one of the most powerful tools we have to deepen Jewish connection and nurture a shared sense of responsibility to each other, and to broader humanity.

WHAT IS JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD?

Jewish Peoplehood is a sense of collective belonging and shared identity among Jews worldwide, rooted in history, culture, values, and responsibility for one another. Peoplehood emphasizes the bonds that connect Jews across different countries and contexts, affirming that despite diverse expressions of Jewish life, we are part of an interconnected people with a shared past and future.



"Diaspora Jews naturally center Israel and the idea of Peoplehood in their conversations. But Israelis often haven't even considered their connection to the Diaspora. Acknowledging this gap openly, rather than avoiding it, is crucial for meaningful dialogue."

– BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change

GLOBAL SERVICE PROVIDES A UNIQUE PLATFORM FOR ISRAELI-DIASPORA ENCOUNTERS

When Jews from different geographic locations volunteer side by side, their connection goes beyond dialogue, to shared purpose.

This is especially true when the service experience takes place in a setting that is new for all volunteers, such as a location outside all participants' home communities. These spaces are ideal environments for cross-cultural learning — both between volunteers and the local community, and among the volunteers themselves.

Because the setting is unfamiliar, no volunteer comes to the experience as an expert; instead, all share the vulnerability and curiosity of being learners. Service thus becomes a space not only to engage the local culture and community, but also to encounter one another as Jews with distinct identities and narratives. Rather than erasing differences, it allows them to surface — sometimes in tension, sometimes in harmony — and become part of the conversation and learning. By working together on a shared project, Jewish volunteers from different backgrounds can strengthen their relationships with one another, while making a meaningful contribution to the local community.



WHAT IS MEANINGFUL AND ETHICAL SERVICE?

Meaningful and ethical service is volunteer work that addresses authentic community needs and is designed in partnership with the local community. It is grounded in an educational framework that helps volunteers understand the root causes of issues while providing space for reflection. It avoids harm, prioritizes dignity, and fosters reciprocity to ensure that the experience benefits both participants and the local community.

Achieving this requires clarity about the goals and outcomes for both participants and local community members. For participants, outcomes can include personal growth, skills development, increased empathy, a deeper understanding of global issues, and, in a Jewish context, strengthened Jewish identity. For the local community, outcomes should focus on tangible and sustainable benefits. By explicitly defining these outcomes, programs ensure that service is meaningful and impactful for everyone involved.

This guide focuses specifically on the participant outcome of strengthened Jewish Peoplehood. Like any outcome, it requires intentionality to achieve results.

“We don’t shy away from tough conversations. If cultural or societal tensions come up, we name them and create space for processing.”

— JDC Entwine

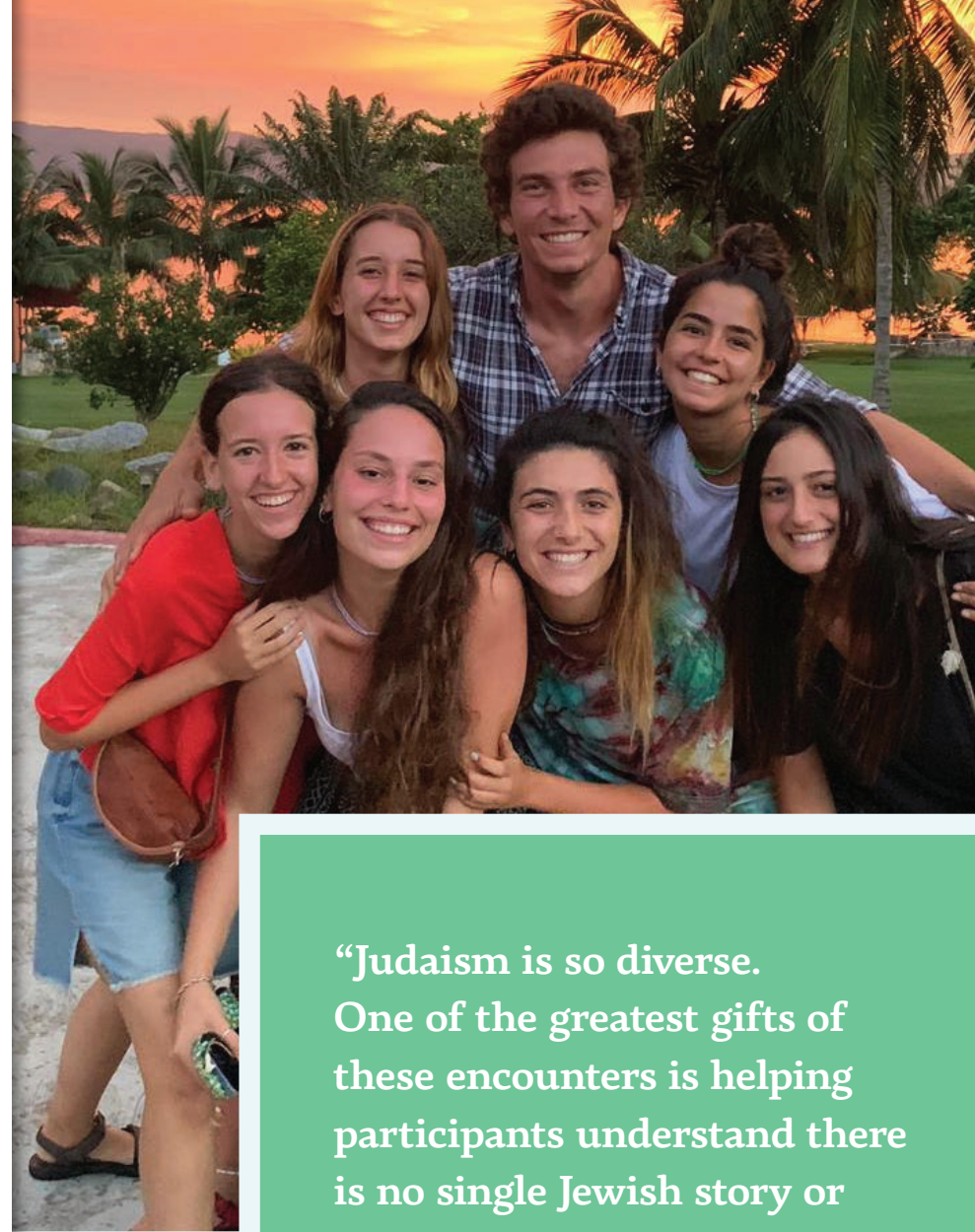


WHY GLOBAL SERVICE MATTERS NOW

Travel to Israel has been constantly disrupted and unpredictable since the outbreak of Covid-19, and further complicated by October 7 and the subsequent war. As a result, many Diaspora Jewish communities are seeking new ways to engage with Israel and Israelis. Joint service opportunities outside Israel offer a meaningful way for Diaspora Jews and Israelis to connect, deepen understanding of each other's lives, and live out the Jewish value of serving vulnerable communities.

In an age of increased polarization within the global Jewish community, service also provides a space for Jews from different Diaspora communities to build bridges and foster connections across the Jewish world.

By working together on shared projects, volunteers not only contribute tangibly to local communities, but also strengthen relationships and understanding among Jews worldwide.



“Judaism is so diverse. One of the greatest gifts of these encounters is helping participants understand there is no single Jewish story or way to be Jewish.”

– JDC Entwine

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource is produced by OLAM, with the support of Shalom Corps. OLAM is a network of Jewish individuals and organizations committed to global service, international development, and humanitarian aid. It is based on interviews with three organizations from OLAM's network that currently run, or have previously run, service programs for Israeli and Diaspora Jews and/or for Jews from different Diaspora Jewish communities: BINA, JDC Entwine, and TEN, which has since ceased operations, though its past programs still provide valuable insights. Staff members from these organizations shared what worked, the challenges they encountered, and what others can learn from their experiences. Their voices and stories are woven throughout these pages.

Although this guide focuses on service, many of the lessons learned can also apply to other immersive travel experiences that, while not service-based, still foster connections between Diaspora Jews, Israeli Jews, and local Jewish communities.

Shalom Corps of Mosaic United is an initiative of the Israel Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.



PURPOSE

This guide is designed for Jewish educators and program planners who want to:

- » **Create authentic, impactful encounters** between Diaspora Jews and Israelis, and/or between different Diaspora Jewish communities.
- » **Harness volunteerism** as a tool for building connection, empathy, and shared responsibility among Jews from different regions and communities.
- » **Navigate** cultural, linguistic, identity, and power differences among volunteers with care and honesty.

CONTENT

- » **Core principles** gathered from the field.
- » **Various program models** for fostering Jewish Peoplehood experiences in a service context.
- » **A practical checklist** to guide your program from pre-trip preparation and on-site engagement to post-program reflection and follow-up.
- » **Voices from practitioners** offering tips and advice.



"The most important thing is to let the chemistry happen. Encourage participants to move from certainty to curiosity by asking thoughtful questions of one another and exploring differences together."

– BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change

CORE PRINCIPLES FOR FOSTERING JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD IN A SERVICE CONTEXT

Intentional Design is Everything	<i>Design experiences with clear Jewish Peoplehood goals in mind, whether fostering shared learning, building relationships, or navigating differences.</i>
Start with Relationships, Not Ideology	<i>Prioritize building trust, empathy, and personal connection among participants. Intellectual learning and discussion often follow naturally once participants feel seen, heard, and understood.</i>
Acknowledge, Seek Understanding, & Celebrate Cultural Differences	<i>Embrace cultural humility by acknowledging differences among volunteers from diverse backgrounds, defining terms that may not be universally understood, and avoiding assumptions about volunteers from different geographic areas. Recognize that participants' perspectives are shaped by their unique contexts, and encourage exploration of those differences with curiosity and respect.</i>
Balance Structured Dialogue & Organic Conversations	<i>Foster environments where participants feel comfortable being authentic, asking questions, and reflecting on their experiences. Provide facilitated sessions, but also create ample free and fun times for organic relationship-building.</i>
Productive Discomfort	<i>Recognize that difference, tension, and uncertainty are natural in cross-cultural encounters. Rather than avoiding discomfort, programs should provide guidance and space for processing it in meaningful ways. Acknowledge the discomfort and help participants use it as a springboard for deeper conversation, greater understanding, and stronger relationships.</i>
Bridge Cultural & Religious Aspects of Judaism	<i>Recognize diverse Jewish practices and beliefs. Enable participants to explore Jewish identity through both cultural and religious lenses, allowing for open discussion and understanding of various practices and connection points.</i>



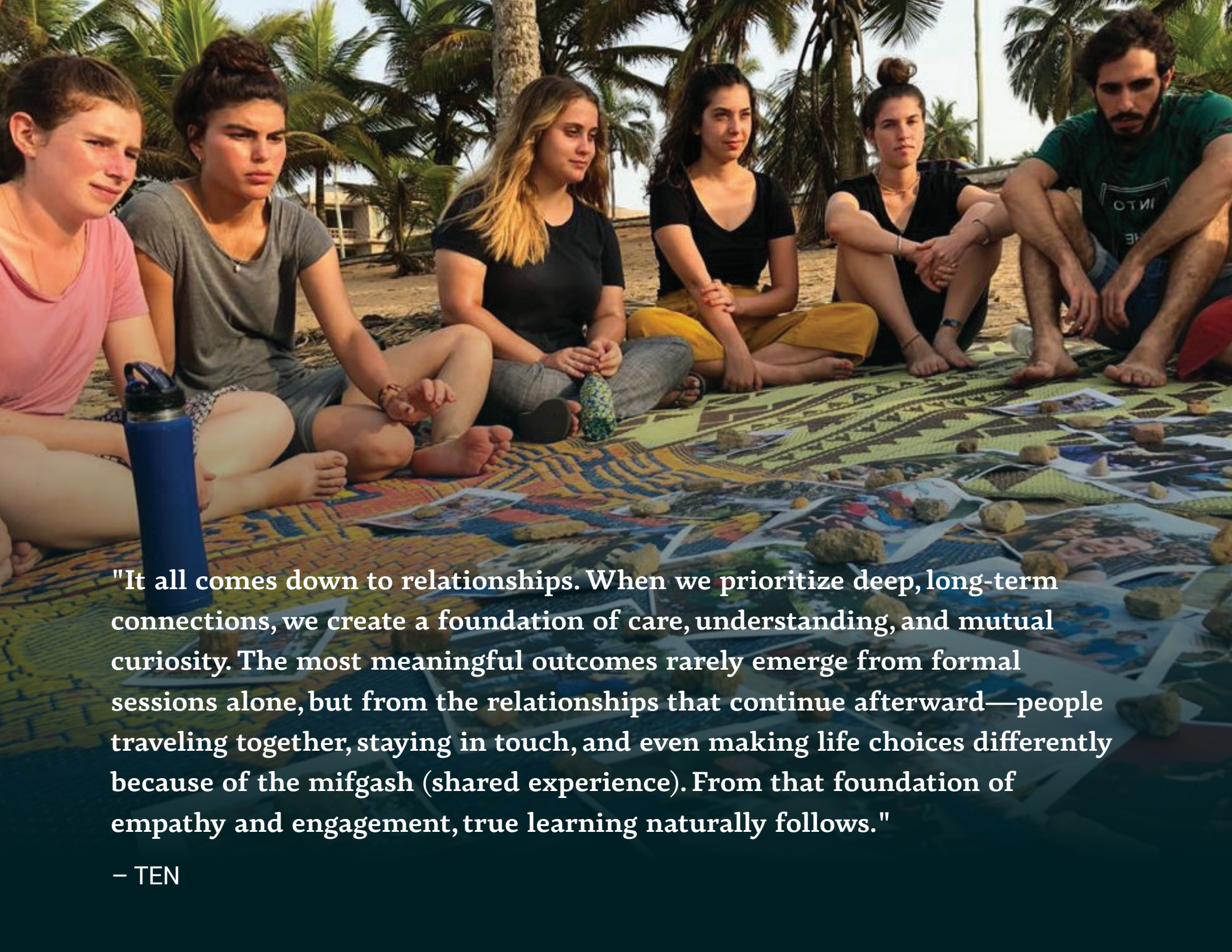
"The facilitator's role is to ask the right questions, surface perspectives not present in the room, and provide context for differences and challenges participants are experiencing. This can include bringing in written sources, texts, videos, or survey data to frame conversations thoughtfully, without assuming to represent everyone."

– BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change

MODELS FOR PEOPLEHOOD EXPERIENCES IN A SERVICE CONTEXT

There is no single model for structuring meaningful encounters between Jews from different geographic areas in a service context. Programs can be adapted based on goals, geography, and participant mix. However, below are some common approaches and tips to consider as you determine your program model.

Full Immersion Model	<i>Participants from multiple geographic communities (e.g., a cohort including Jews from Israel, the U.S., Europe, and Latin America) share the entire service experience together.</i>
Partial Encounter Model	<i>A group from one community (e.g., British Jewish college students) travels to another country (e.g., South Africa) and, as part of a broader service experience, spends several days serving alongside peers from the local Jewish community.</i>
Balanced Ratio Model	<i>Programs are designed with an intentional balance — often 50/50 — between two communities, ensuring equal representation of each (e.g., half the group from North America and half from Israel). The service experience may take place entirely in one community's home country, split between their home countries (e.g., two months in Israel and two months in the U.S.), or in a completely new location (e.g., Rwanda).</i>



"It all comes down to relationships. When we prioritize deep, long-term connections, we create a foundation of care, understanding, and mutual curiosity. The most meaningful outcomes rarely emerge from formal sessions alone, but from the relationships that continue afterward—people traveling together, staying in touch, and even making life choices differently because of the mifgash (shared experience). From that foundation of empathy and engagement, true learning naturally follows."

– TEN

KEY ADVICE

- » Unless it is the “Full Immersion Model,” with a diverse cohort from multiple geographies, no participant should be “the only one” representing their identity or community. Avoid situations where one Israeli or one Jew from a smaller community is placed in a group of 15-20 people from another geography.
- » In the “Partial Encounter Model,” when a group serves alongside local Jewish peers for a limited period, the experience should allow for mutual learning, enabling each group to understand both cultural differences and shared commonalities.

"We ask participants to define what they mean by terms like ‘religious,’ ‘Peoplehood,’ and ‘tikkun olam.’ This helps surface differences in understanding, ensuring that everyone is speaking with clarity and intention."

– BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change



PROGRAM CHECKLIST

BEFORE THE PROGRAM: PROGRAM DESIGN, PARTICIPANT SCREENING, AND DEMOGRAPHICS

- ❑ **Language:** Determine the primary language for the program and plan for any language barriers to ensure full participation. Check language proficiency of non-native speakers to provide appropriate support.
- ❑ **Cost and subsidies:** Promote equitable access by considering differential subsidies based on participants' country of origin or economic need.
- ❑ **Interviews:** Conduct interviews to assess social and emotional intelligence for cross-cultural readiness.
- ❑ **Define clear Peoplehood goals and develop metrics to measure progress towards those goals:** Possible goals include deepening an understanding of Jewish culture and practice across communities, fostering friendships among Jews of diverse geographies, shifting perspectives about other Jewish communities, strengthening a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, etc. Be open with participants about these goals.
- ❑ **Prepare staff:** Choose staff with cross-cultural proficiency and an understanding of different Jewish communities around the world. Train staff in group dynamics, cultural humility, and conflict navigation.

BEFORE THE PROGRAM: PRE-TRIP ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

- ❑ **Orientation:** Provide a pre-trip orientation that sets expectations around cultural humility.
- ❑ **Start building connections:** Organize virtual “meet & greets” (e.g., Zoom or WhatsApp) to build connections and discuss group dynamics.
- ❑ **Contextual learning:** Alongside opportunities for volunteers to begin learning about the local community, offer participants from diverse geographies the opportunity to begin learning about each other. For example:
 - Israelis: Jewish life outside of Israel
 - Diaspora Jews: Israeli society, politics, and cultural diversity

PROGRAM CHECKLIST CONT.

DURING THE PROGRAM: ON-SITE LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

- ❑ **Group agreement:** Create a group agreement. Revisit and reinforce group agreements/intentions regularly.
- ❑ **Vary approaches to discussions:** Use small groups or pairs to build trust and prevent “us-versus-them” mentalities in an all-group setting.
- ❑ **When challenges arise:** Name and process challenges when they arise – don’t ignore tension.
- ❑ **Cultural context:** Highlight how cultural context shapes participants’ understanding of service, justice, social action, Jewish identity, and the world.
- ❑ **Jewish rituals and traditions:** Incorporate shared Jewish rituals (e.g., Kabbalat Shabbat or Havdalah), while allowing varied expressions of practice, and opportunities for participants to share their own customs.
- ❑ **Empower participants:** Empower participants and rotate leadership: Have participants from diverse geographies lead discussions, icebreakers, rituals, and more.
- ❑ **Free time:** Unstructured time is crucial for organic relationship building and trust.
- ❑ **Active listening:** Encourage active listening, curiosity, and constructive communication.

"Peer-led sessions — where people brought their own identities and stories — created the most meaningful encounters. Equally important were the moments of fun and free time, when friendships took root."

– TEN



PROGRAM CHECKLIST CONT.

AFTER THE PROGRAM: SUSTAINING IMPACT AND REFLECTION

- **Create structures for continued connection:** Establish WhatsApp groups, alumni calls, and reunions so that relationships don't end when the program does. These networks nurture Jewish Peoplehood by keeping participants connected across geographies beyond the experience itself.
- **Support participants in sharing insights and actions with their home communities:** Encourage participants to share what they've learned about both their fellow program participants and the local communities they visited. By bringing these lessons home, they extend the impact of the program, while reinforcing that Jewish Peoplehood is experienced both locally and globally.
- **Reflect on the long-term impact of service and relationships:** Link the experience to broader concepts of Jewish identity, Peoplehood, and global responsibility. Encourage participants to reflect on the long-term impact of service and relationships, and connect them to Jewish programs and opportunities so they can continue their Jewish service journey—whether at home or abroad. [TEST](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [OLAM's Global Service Ethical Best Practices Spectrum](#)
- [The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education](#)
- [The Jewish Peoplehood Coalition](#)
- [Israeli Jewish Peoplehood Coalition](#)
- [Guide to Creating Group Agreements](#)
- [How to Have Better Conversations](#)
- [IDI Intercultural Development Continuum](#)



“Discomfort is not failure—
it’s where the deepest
learning lives.”

– JDC Entwine



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