



Jewish World / We should stop hugging Israel and start wrestling

The recent row over a U.S. art installation illustrates that our blanket embrace of Israel is outdated.

By Robbie Gringras

An exhibition in Chicago's Spertus Museum features Israeli and Palestinian artists engaging with the subjectivity of maps, and all falls apart. After a short struggle, the [exhibition is closed down](#). The curation is described by the Jewish Federation as "anti-Israel," and one commentator goes so far as to describe the closed exhibition as "a cultural crime scene," no less. Articles are written about "freedom from censorship" on the one hand, and "Jewish communal commitments" on the other.

But the huge elephant in the room has once again been stepped around.

The truth is that we don't fundamentally disagree about freedom of expression, or about the need for Jewish cultural institutions to relate to their audiences. We just haven't fully worked out how American Jewry can relate to Israel.

We have become used to only one way of relating to Israel:

"hugging." We give Israel warmth, love, and support - with our eyes closed. This

hugging was once entirely appropriate. The fledgling state was in need of support - immediate, instinctive, even blind support. But can hugging alone be a sufficient response to all of Israel's current complexity? Will a hug help us past Israel's attitudes to progressive Judaism? How much can a warm embrace move us beyond the nature of the Iranian threat?

Hugging is not enough: We must also learn how to "wrestle" with Israel. Just as its biblical echoes suggest, wrestling with Israel requires an effort, a fight, a struggle. But it also demands an intimacy and a commitment. If I don't care about Israel, I will never be upset about the way it operates.

As leading Israeli funk-rap band HaDag Nachash sang: Only Here I feel like I belong, Although I'm angry about the corruption... We might go further, and suggest that the proposition ought to be "Only Here I feel like I belong, and therefore I am angry..."

Anger, grappling, wrestling with Israel, is often an indication of commitment. Indeed when our institutions honestly and publicly engage with the complexities of Israel, they can inspire commitment where once was detachment. Critique is not necessarily treachery. We must start looking to engage with Israel through "wrestling and hugging." Though a smooth slogan, opening ourselves up to acknowledging that not all is as we dreamed it might be, is a painful, delicate shift.

Aviv Geffen once wrote:
There's been a collision between
Imagination and reality
There are casualties.

The early idea of Israel, the Zionist dream of the mid-to-late 20th century, lit up our imagination. Through Israel we would save our souls, we would save the Jews, we would save the world. But then our collective imagination collided with a hard, complex, Middle Eastern reality. Not at all surprisingly (what did we expect?) the

imagined Israel has been limited, if not battered beyond recognition, by the reality of life in a young, endangered, and confused new State. There are casualties.

Moving forward into this somewhat challenging new paradigm of hugging and wrestling, we would do well to be sensitive to new complexities. There is still a time for hugging ? at times of existential threat; at times of deep sorrow and distress; and at times of

achievement and on the marking of significant milestones. On a day when Israel releases terrorists in order to receive the bodies of two of its soldiers, only hugging is appropriate. The following day, when the corruption trial of the Prime Minister continues, hugging may be less suitable. The arts are wonderful tools for celebration and unity, as well as critique. The key is to differentiate clearly between the responsibilities of the artist, and the responsibilities of the artistic programmer. The artist should be left free to flame along the lines of inspiration with little regard for taste or taboo. But the programmer will always maintain one eye on the choice of art, and one eye on the community served by the art. How much wrestling can this community take right now? If the current show is heavy on the critique, how then can I ensure my institution provides room for the community to process its response rather than reject outright? Is the hugging embodied in this presentation a little too much, or is it appropriate given the event?

The truth is, that the arts emerging from Israel these days are perhaps our most inspiring example of both wrestling and hugging. From world musicians and Hebrew rappers to internationally acclaimed films and visual arts and novels, the Israeli arts are self-advocating.

We do not need to argue for the value of Israel-wrestling. We can simply show it. Israeli artists are engaging with their country, sometimes criticizing, sometimes raging, often celebrating, and they

do so in such a talented and courageous way that we cannot but be inspired.

When imagination and reality collide there are often casualties, but there is also a huge amount of creativity and vitality. Israeli arts bring us inside the loving dance, inside the passionate wrestling over the soul of the country,

in such a way as to touch us deeply and infuse us with energy and excitement. It would be a tragedy for the Spertus controversy to blind us to this new awakening.

Robbie Gringras is a British-born Israeli playwright, director, and performer working as artist-in-residence for [MAKOM](#) Israel Engagement Network.

Hugging and Wrestling with Israel

Israel of the 21st Century is dynamic, complex, and constantly evolving, just as Jewish identity is dynamic, complex, and constantly evolving. In these fluid times, MAKOM's mission is to empower Jewish educators, rabbis, arts and community leaders to develop deep, sophisticated, and honest Israel programming through both hugging and wrestling.

At [MAKOM](#) we strive for disciplined imagination as we nurture people and develop content to face the multi-dimensional challenge of Israel engagement for our times.

Reimagining the why, the what, and the way of Israel in Jewish life.

www.makomisrael.net