

ISRAELI STUDENTS LEARN DEBATE DOES NOT REQUIRE SHOUTING

by Larry A. Smith

The *Jerusalem Post International Edition* for the week ending February 7, 1998, devoted a full page to Israeli students learning the process of formal argumentation and debate without the traditional Israeli style of, "He who talks loudest is the one who gets heard."

For the first time "civilized argument will be heard throughout the land" as high school students from 26 countries participate in the World Schools Debating Championship.

Asher Weill, the British-born editor of *Ariel*, a local arts and culture magazine, notes, "We see debating as the key to improving democracy. It's not just shouting at the other guy; it's actually listening to him, relating to his arguments and speaking back in a way that is polite and informed."

Reasoned, quiet, logical discourse is not a tradition in Israel, according to Prof. Shoshana Blum-Kulka, of Hebrew University's Department of Communications. "We have a long tradition of argumentation...where everyone seems to talk at once. There is a tradition which is very Israeli, that of saying exactly what you mean. It all feeds into a highly confrontational style."

Israeli high school students, led by their coach Adam Lifstein, hope to establish a more reasoned tradition of argument in Israel, one based on logical, courteous, and carefully conceived argument. Lifstein comes from a family tradition of debate at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Adam, his father, and his sisters all have participated in debate. Lifstein teaches rhetoric at several Israeli schools. He notes, "Part of the health of a democracy is the quality of its discourse. Debate is one of the best ways to teach children and adults about the discourse that makes up democracy." Some might say he came to the wrong country, given the tradition of debate by shouting. Lifstein disagrees. "Certainly my skills as a debate coach wouldn't be that necessary in England--but here I'm one of the few people who actually has some experience in the issue."

Lifstein is like other debate coaches. He has been teaching his students the fundamentals of rhetorical argument: identifying logical fallacies, ways of analyzing

opponent's arguments and proper methods of structuring and writing speeches. He also is trying to teach them to be effectively "listenable" by adding in a little humor and passion to their speeches.

Yehoshua Gurtler, a 17 year-old at Jerusalem's Hartman High School was "born talking" according to his father. Yehoshua wants to be a lawyer. He is a great fan of LA law. "I'd heard about debating from friends and watching television, so I decided to try it out, and I got hooked. I enjoy the intellectual game, the idea of speaking in public, the techniques. I really like discussing and examining both sides of an issue...but what I enjoy most is going head to head with an opponent."

Yaron Nahari, 16, and a student at Tel Aviv's Tichon Hadas humorously notes he got into debating because he likes to wear suits. He also admits he likes to argue and lives in a home where the family argues about everything. He also admits, with a smile, he still settles arguments with his younger siblings the way he always has..."by beating them up."

Yaron credits his formal training with making him more effective in prevailing in arguments. "I never thought it would happen, but I keep a lower profile when I'm arguing now. My arguments are more analytical and cream less--it's more about getting the point across." His prowess at persuading has convinced his friends at school. They now send Yaron to the principal when the friends want something done.

Sivan Cohan, 15, of Holon's Ephraim Katzir High School, got into debate because her mother couldn't get a refund for the tuition at a debate workshop which Sivan's older sister could not attend. After the workshop she was selected to the national team after advancing through national competitions. Sivan has only one complaint about debate. "I hate wearing skirts." Cohan admits to being nervous in front of an audience, but once the debate begins, she often overcomes her jitters with a little humor. During a debate on technology teammate Nahari described a man's technology gone awry with toast popping out of a toaster uncontrollably and a coffee pot boiling over. Sivan responded, "That man should either have gotten married or taken home econom-

ics instead of woodworking in high school."

Yael Shapira, 16, another team member, thinks learning to maintain eye contact with listeners (and judges) is the key to successful debating. Another key element he says is, "staying focused and thinking about how to stand (on an issue). You have to think about what the opposition is going to say." That is certainly a departure from traditional Israeli discourse where a person only concentrated on what HE was saying and ignored his opponent's thinking.

The World Schools Debating Championship was held in the Knesset, Israeli's parliamentary house. The topic was, "This house would continue to prosecute World War II criminals." Certainly the topic was one that was very relevant to those who live in Israel. The topic would obviously have a highly charged emotional meaning for those who live in the Jewish country. An emotionally charged topic would normally lead to the traditional confrontational shouting match that has been a long tradition in Israel.

Notes Gurtler, "There is a big problem in Israel because a great deal of arguing is about things that are emotionally charged. Sadly, the role model for kids is *Popolitica* (a televised "debate show) and the Knesset." Apparently neither forum is a positive model for reasoned, logical, and courteous argumentation.

Coach Lifstein says, "We can't pretend that if everyone learned to debate, there would be no more raucous performances like *Popolitica*. What I would hope is that if people learn to debate, they'll be able to watch it in a much healthier way, that they won't be swayed by the 'rhetoric of force.'"

Coach Lifstein and his team members are truly a tiny seed for progress in developing democratic, non confrontational debate in Israel. His goal in teaching young people to be future leaders is the same as the goal of the National Forensic League. Perhaps Lifstein and his debaters ought to be accorded honorary membership in the National Forensic League.

(Larry Smith is former district chair of the Sierra (CA) district and a member of the NFL Hall of Fame.)

POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Can an Israeli get his opinion across in an argument without screaming? One quiet new trend is changing the nation's youth. Aryeh Dean Cohen considers the World School Debating Championship.

There's no debating the fact: Israelis have a great deal to learn about how to talk to one another.

Just flick on a Knesset debate and you'll see the Israeli style of discourse in full bloom: He who talks loudest is the one who gets heard.

As of January 31, however, a different voice will be heard throughout the land: the sound of people conducting civilized argument as part of the 10th World Schools Debating Championship. This is the first time the championship is being held in a country where English is not the native language.

Opening in schools throughout Israel, the event will include 200 competitors from 26 countries. The finals, sponsored by Siah VeSig, the Israeli Debating Society, will be held in the Knesset, on a subject certain to attract interest. The title: "This house would continue to prosecute World War II criminals."

While debating has a proud tradition in English-speaking countries, it hasn't quite caught on in Israel yet.

The Israel Debating Society was established 10 years ago by South African immigrant Ann Swersky, who thought the level of discourse in Israel was abysmal. The society set up debating clubs and societies in hundreds of schools, with debates conducted largely in Hebrew.

But, lamented society chairman and competition organizer Asher Weill, when the money for these activities dried up, so did the clubs. He hopes the international competition will change that, and expose Israelis to what they're missing. Perhaps, he muses, even the Education Ministry will get involved.

"We hope to show teachers who teach rhetoric and logic how they can use debating as a tool for democracy," says Weill, the British-born editor of Ariel, a local arts and culture magazine, "We see debating as the key to improving democracy.

"It's not just shouting at the other guy, it's actually listening to him, relating to his arguments and speaking back in a way that's polite and informed.

"There are civilized techniques of debate which are far more effective than screaming at one another," Weill continues. "If you listen to the dialogue of the deaf in

the Knesset, you realize how important it is for people to learn a different way of talking."

JUST HOW did Israelis' level of discourse sink so low?

Prof. Shoshana Blum-Kulka, of the Hebrew University's Department of Communications and Department of Education, says it's in the blood and history.

"There's an old Jewish tradition of saying 'no' even when you mean 'yes,' she explains. "I think it goes back to old yeshiva traditions.

"We have a long tradition of argumentation, and another one of overlap in prayer, as you see in an Ashkenazi synagogue where everyone seems to talk at once. It's an Eastern European tradition.

"There's also a tradition which is very Israeli, that of saying exactly what you mean. It all feeds into a highly confrontational style."

Combine that with what Blum-Kulka says is the Mediterranean predilection for a "high-volume, argumentative" style of conversation, and it begins to sound a lot like the *Popolitica* talk show on a bad night.

But says Blum-Kulka, while it might *sound* highly argumentative and confrontational, it isn't really. It can be sociable, while also highly antagonistic, the way it usually is in political debates."

This style may well be the Israeli tradition, but it's a practice the five members of Israel's debating team and their coach have definitely abandoned. They've spent the past few weeks preparing to present a new tradition: logical, courteous and carefully conceived argument. It's a technique of sharp rebuttals, formulated after listening to one's opponents, then putting together winning conclusions to rack up points with the judges and bring the debating gold to Israel.

Coach Adam Lifstein has his own traditions, connected to debating greatness from his days on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill team.

"I debated, my father debated, my sisters debate," smiles the affable 32-year old. The teacher of rhetoric at several Israeli schools, who also works at the Branco-Weiss Institute, took on the challenge of coaching the Israeli team and pushing debating locally because he felt something ought to be done.

"Part of the health of a democracy is the quality of its discourse. Debate is one of the best ways to teach children and adults about the discourse that makes up democracy."

While some people tell him he's come to the wrong country, Lifstein disagrees in typical debating fashion.

"That's one way of looking at it," he says. "The other is to say that I came to the right country. Certainly, my skills as a debate coach wouldn't be that necessary in England -- but here I'm one of the few people who actually has some experience in the issue."

Lately Lifstein has been drilling his team in "identifying logical fallacies, ways of taking apart opponents' arguments, working with them on structure, building speeches, and adding a little humor and passion."

A PASSION for talking is what got team captain Yehoshua Gurtler, a 17-year-old studying at Jerusalem's Hartman High School, into debating. Gurtler's father David insists that "he was born talking. From the time he was three months old he said he wanted to be a lawyer."

Guilty as charged, confesses Gurtler, who admits to being an LA Law freak. Gurtler got turned on to debating during a summer workshop run by the Israel Debating Society two years ago.

"I'd heard about debating from friends and watching television, so I decided to try it out, and I got hooked. I enjoy the intellectual game, the idea of speaking in public, the techniques."

"I really like discussing and examining both sides of an issue, the mental exercise of persuasion. But the things I enjoy most," says Gurtler, whose family is originally from Queens, New York, "is the clash, going head-to-head with an opponent."

Yaron Nahari, 16, of Tel Aviv's Tichon Hadash, got hooked for another reason: He likes wearing suits. Beyond that, however, and more seriously, he admits that he likes to argue.

"I do it at home all the time. My parents say to me: 'We're not debating,' but I disagree. We argue about anything and everything. Besides that," he adds with a grin, "I like to be the center of attention." Laughingly he admits that he still generally settles arguments with his siblings "the way

I used to -- by beating them up."

"I never thought it would happen," says Nahari, "but I keep a lower profile when I'm arguing now. My arguments are more analytical and screamless -- it's more about getting the point across."

That change hasn't been lost on his friends at school, either. "They have a tendency to send *me* to the principal or the teacher if they want to try to get something done," he says. SIVAN COHEN, 15, of Holon's Ephraim Katzir High School, got started in debating when she discovered that money talks. Her sister had been scheduled to take part in a debating workshop but had to cancel, and since her mother had already paid, Cohen entered, even though officially she was too young.

She along with the rest of the team, was selected after advancing through the ranks in national competitions.

Now she's working on overcoming one of her biggest problems: keeping her skirt down during debates. "I hate wearing skirts," Cohen moaned during a recent practice, where the team had divided up to prepare an impromptu debate on "This house believes that technology is dangerous."

(Preliminary arguments: "We've got to make it a cost-benefit thing; show that our world is what it is because of technology; that in and of itself technology isn't dangerous.")

Ordinarily, Cohen added, "I try not to think about the audience, because when I do I get very tense."

She once took someone's advice to "think of them as all sitting there naked -- but then I started laughing in mid-debate."

Humor is considered an important tool in debating, however, and Cohen was soon demonstrating it.

During the debate on technology, Nahari described a technological man's

morning, with toast popping out of a toaster uncontrollably and a coffeemaker boiling over. Rebutted Cohen: "That man should either have gotten married or taken home economics instead of woodworking in school."

The best practical use she's made of her debating skills? "Convincing my parents to let me go to the Yitzhak Rabin memorial, and to Eilat with my friends."

WHAT ARE some of the tricks of the trade? "There are no secrets, really," says Coach Lifstein. "Open up an introductory textbook on rhetoric and all the secrets are there. Aristotle wrote them down.

"And I don't believe in tips. You need to develop your critical thinking skills by thinking critically. The more you do so, the better your critical thinking becomes."

Nonetheless, Lifsteins' charges were ready to share some pointers.

Eye Contact

"The most important thing is eye contact," says Yael Shapira, 16, "because when you're debating, you're talking to the judges. You're trying to convince them, they're giving the marks."

Stay Focused

Another key element, she says, is "staying focused, and thinking about what the opposition is going to say. There are many things you must do simultaneously; that's the most difficult."

Nahari remembers being asked to debate whether brides should wear black.

"I could think of very few reasons why brides should wear black, and in the end my team came up with the argument that black would show fewer stains," he recalls.

"I generally find my best opening is not necessarily sentences. Once, in a debate on fashion, I took off my jacket and tie and put them on backwards; and in a debate on immortality I took a few bites out of

an apple." Sivan Cohen remembers singing in a debate.

With long hours spent researching for debates in libraries and on the Internet, it's no wonder the team occasionally gets a little punchy. Yehoshua Gurtler admits they've been known to practice by debating such burning issues as whether or not one should walk on the grass.

Debating has had an impact on the team members' families, too. Gurtler's father, David, says he wins arguments at home only "by pulling rank," while Nahari's mother, Karyn, says she "gave up long ago" on getting in the last word.:

"It's a constant battle of wits; I can't fob him off," she says. Both parents are extremely proud of their sons' interest in debating, as well as of the fact that they've learned how to keep an open mind.

While they may specialize in how to conduct a dispute, there's no disagreement between the team members, their coach or their parents over the benefits to be gained by watching a debating match or getting involved themselves.

"There's a big problem in Israel because a great deal of arguing is about things that are emotionally charged," explains team captain Gurtler. "Sadly, the role model for kids is *Popolitica* and the Knesset.

"We're trying to change this. Hopefully as time goes by, the public will learn."

"We can't pretend that if everyone learned to debate, there would be no more [raucous performances like] *Popolitica*," Lifstein says.

"What I would hope is that if people learn to debate, they'll be able to watch it in a much healthier way, that they won't be swayed by the 'rhetoric of force.'"

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