

## **Realizing a dream: hopes and challenges**

Lesson plan for adults

*This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “A Young American Jew in Israel, 1947-1948,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/apr08/>. Visit this website to download the main featured documents, Zipporah Porath’s letters from November 30, 1947 and November 29, 1948, and to learn more about Zippy Porath.*

1. Begin by asking participants what they know about the creation of the State of Israel. Depending on the age of the participants, they may have some first hand memories of Israel’s founding. Ask them to share what they remember, or, if their parents or relatives have memories that they have shared with them, what do they recall from those stories?
2. Give participants a basic timeline of the history of the founding of the state, touching on questions such as: who populated the land of Israel at the time and what was the demographic distribution of population? What role did the Holocaust play in the establishment of the State of Israel? What was the role of the British Mandate, the Balfour Declaration, and lastly, the U.N. Partition vote on November 29, 1947 in the founding of the State? What was the result of the Partition Plan (e.g. war, Arab refugees, British pull-out, declaration of State with different borders than those proposed by the Partition Plan)? You may want to consider the politics surrounding the displacement of Arab refugees (estimated by Israeli historian Benny Morris to be between 600,000-760,000). You may want to consult the following websites for more information:

For information about the British Mandate:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Mandate\\_of\\_Palestine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Mandate_of_Palestine)

For information about the Balfour Declaration of 1917:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour\\_Declaration\\_of\\_1917](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour_Declaration_of_1917)

For information about the U.N. Partition Plan:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947\\_UN\\_Partition\\_Plan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947_UN_Partition_Plan)

For the complete text of the U.N resolution approving partition:

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/res181.htm>

[http://www.knesset.gov.il/holidays/eng/29nov\\_e.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/holidays/eng/29nov_e.htm)

To listen to a radio broadcast of the U.N. vote and celebration in Tel Aviv (note that Porath was in Jerusalem), you can connect a speaker to a laptop and use the following web site:

<http://www.isracast.com/article.aspx?ID=266>

3. Share with the participants Zipporah Porath's biographical information and her two letters. You can have them read these, or for a more dramatic effect, tape someone in advance (preferably a young person, 18-22 years old) reading them with emotion – an aspiring actor, perhaps. Play these aloud, interrupting only to explain that the second letter is written one year later.

***The following sections provide two program options. Use one or both as you see fit.***

- a) Battles of gender in the midst of a greater battle

Zippy's experiences capture the paradox of gender in Israel. Zionist ideology claimed gender equality, and indeed some women found themselves working in non-traditional roles. However, despite the fact that some women were fighting in combat, taking leadership roles, and working in the fields, true equality of the sexes was – and remains – elusive. Today, for example, women remain underrepresented in the leadership of both the army and the government. (See the following article for more information:

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history\\_community/Israel/Israeli\\_Politics/WomenIsraeliPolitics.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/Israel/Israeli_Politics/WomenIsraeliPolitics.htm))

Zippy's letters suggest some of the issues regarding the treatment and place of women in Israel at this time.

Read the letter dated Jan. 8 1948 (included at end of this lesson plan). Have participants read and analyze this letter for some of the issues Zippy herself was sensitive to. (For example: "As far as I can tell, women have an equal status with men in the Haganah – but they are still given low-level duties....")

- Do you also believe that if the war were only against the British, the women would have had different duties assigned to them?
- What justification is used here for keeping the women behind the scenes, and what do you think of these justifications?
- What do you think of Zippy's "romance" with Yehudah – and about the nickname for his gun?
- Are there comments in the other two letters that also make you wonder about how it would have felt to be a woman at this time?
- Do you see parallels to the U.S. today?

b) Idealizing the struggle for a dream

Many of your participants may have experienced a struggle for the attainment of a dream or against something they thought was wrong. People who came of age in the 1960s and 70s may have personal recollections of the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the women's movement, among others, while 1980s and 90s activists may recall protests in support of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry. All may have personal stories of efforts to get a school, organization, or cause off the ground.

One of the things we see in Zippy Porath's letters is a person entangled in the realization of a communal dream. While the dream may come true, the daily struggles, anxieties, and conflicts along the way may be

forgotten. Porath's letters serve as a timely reminder of the difficulties inherent in building a new country.

Guide the participants through a close reading of the two featured letters (Nov. 30, 1947 and Nov. 29, 1948), which were introduced earlier in the lesson. What do you see that is evidence of not just the enthusiasm and spirit of the day but some of the difficulties that have already or will soon be facing Zippy and others? How does our contemporary perspective inform our reading of her letters? Is there anything not included in the letters that you would have expected to see?

Introduce the letter dated December 7, 1947 (included at end of this lesson plan). Only a week after the celebrations over the U.N. vote, Zippy's writing already conveys a very different feeling. If your group is large, feel free to break into smaller groups to promote conversation.

- What can we read between the lines of this letter? How is it different from the letter that was written one year later?
- How would you characterize Zippy's mood in this letter? What are her concerns? How does she characterize their morale?
- What are the challenges Zippy faces as a woman, as an American, as a Jew?
- Allow participants to share some of the challenges they've faced in the struggles they have been a part of. Were these issues that they had not thought about in a while? If so, why?
- How do we balance the romanticizing of a struggle for ideals with the realities of that struggle? You can bring in modern day struggles as examples – fighting against the war in Iraq, or for rights of Palestinians, working for a particular candidate in a political campaign, or anything you think is relevant to your population.

4. Conclude with a conversation about the meaning of the Zionist dream today.

- We've discussed how the struggles to idealize a dream can be romanticized. How do we "unromanticize" and grapple with the ongoing process of trying to realize a dream? Today, 60 years after Zippy wrote her letters, in what ways do you think Israel has realized the Zionist dream and in what ways has it fallen short?
- What are we celebrating when we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut? How do we celebrate and also address the unfinished aspects of Zionism?
- In commemorating Israel's Independence Day, what is our responsibility to consider other perspectives on the events of 1948? (You may want to bring for discussion the following article from *Ha'aretz* about the recent decision of the Jewish National Fund to add to the signs in its parks information about the Palestinian villages that were once located there: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/950689.html>)
- What do you think the relationship of American Jews to Israel should be today?
- What do you think are the biggest issues in Israeli society today? (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the religious-secular divide, ethnic discrimination and racism, what it means for a Jewish state to be a democracy, etc.)
- What are your hopes for Israel in the next 60 years?

**Activity idea:** Have participants write letters describing their hopes and dreams for Israel and what they perceive as the challenges to be faced in realizing them.

Jerusalem

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January 8, 1948

Dearest Mother, Dad and Naomi,

This is one letter I am sure will reach you because it is going via Boston with one of the American students who is leaving. I am told that a million eyes read our mail before it gets to you, part of the reason for the delays. Finally, I get an opportunity to write an *uncensored* letter and I can't think of a damn thing to say that will make any sense to you . . . aside from the fact that I am being rushed to finish this even before I've started.

I don't know how to tell you not to worry about me. I imagine that if our roles were reversed I'd be sick with worry. There's no sense telling you that American students are sitting on the sidelines and watching the procession of events without participating. The truth is that most of us are involved in some *tafkid* (assignment) or other, with lesser or greater degrees of danger. As far as I can tell, women have an equal status with men in the Haganah —

but they are still given low-level duties. I suspect that if the battle were only against the British, we would be more involved. The British have a reputation for being a little more gentlemanly than the Arabs when confronted with women.

The only studying I'm doing at the moment is a first aid course which meets three times a week. Trying to talk in Anatomy is a semantic torture. I know where the extremities are and am learning how to treat them in case of emergency, but oh, to spell them in Hebrew!

The other volunteer activity that keeps us all busy is *shmirah* (guard duty). My neighbor Ami, it can now be told, was our local Haganah commander and it was he who gave me firsthand instruction on the arms we would be using. How to aim, fire and clean them — blindfolded. It seems I have a special knack with His Majesty's hardware. Now I'm passing on what I learned to the others. After a while, Ami was taken for more important things and replaced by Yehudah. So when I mention their names you will know who is who. With all this personal tutelage on the fine art of defending myself, I'd like to see a Manhattan masher start up with me now.

I was just interrupted by Yehudah, who popped in to invite me to a movie — as soon as he gets a night off, that is, which can be anywhere from tomorrow to a month. It's called planning ahead. This guy is something. He leaves me notes with sweet little nothings written on them in the most ungrammatical English, learned in His Majesty's Service, and expects me to correct them. On duty, he pops out from behind dark trees to test my quick reaction. Somehow, Naomi, he reminds me, of your *shaliach* friend D., a kind of "he-man"—little boy combination, only Y. is more polished and has the credentials of a third-generation Sabra.

Nary a night goes by when he doesn't pop in a dimpled face to coo good night at me and see if I'm all right. Once the head is past the partly open door and has been smilingly received, the rest of him wiggles in and sits itself down at the table. He reaches for the Bible — he is trying to improve my Hebrew — and opens to the chapter following the one we read the previous night. He reads, then explains. I ask questions, he answers. He finishes reading. Then I read from an old *New Yorker* magazine or an anthology of modern American poetry in an effort to improve his English. He listens, asks questions, I explain. I finish reading. He says good night. That, in short, is our romance — plus an occasional movie or a walk through the hills when we are on duty together.

He has nicknamed his tommy gun after me and loads it "with little twinklings from the laughter in my eyes." Get that, willya? I am now near famous in the neighborhood in a very unflattering way because of him. Word is passed around that Zippy (or "Tzipke," as the gun is called), will be getting a workout at such and such a time and place. Actually, it is an official code message for a clandestine Haganah action. The next day, I am asked in fun: "How was it?" All I can do is blush demurely because I participated in the activity in name only, though I'm told my namesake wasn't found wanting.

I guess all this sounds very ominous, but it is part of life here and a fascinating experience. Carmi and I were just commenting the other day on the fact that it's a helluva way to spend a year of study and certainly not what the ZOA had in mind when they granted us the scholarships. We decided, laughingly, that if we ever get back to studying they'll have to increase the tuition allowance. We won't settle for anything less than \$1,500 because the cost of living — not to speak of staying alive — has increased considerably.

Like most of my letters, this is being written to the accompaniment of an unrelenting background of gunpowder explosion, like a sound track to a film. I am intently banging away at the typewriter, dunking cookies in tea and mashing out cigarettes, and every so often I stop short, wondering why it is suddenly quiet, why the shooting has stopped. What has happened? Mostly you don't bat an eyelash while the volley is going on, your ear muscles condition themselves to pick up the refrain and measure the distance. It's when it stops suddenly that you get concerned.

Have to finish. The courier is leaving. I almost wish I were going with this letter, but I'd hate to miss what's happening here.

Love,  
*Zippy*

*December 7, 1947*

Dearest Folks,

From your end of the ocean or ours, it is still a holiday of sorts. The date rings a bell . . . Pearl Harbor, the trigger for American entry into World War II. I try not to think about that — about anything that has to do with war.

I am sitting in my room looking mournfully at a lovely ceramic menorah and watching two little candles dwindle into their sockets. It is the second day of Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights, but you wouldn't know it because the streets are dark, all public ceremonies have been cancelled and all the local students have been mobilized.

It's vacation time at the University and, though I would love to see more of the country, it isn't wise to travel around right now, so I am staying put. I'm also unable to pick up mail for a week or so. The trip to Mount Scopus is not the safest in the world and there are days one cannot go up for lack of a convoy. I suggest you start addressing my mail c/o Pension Pax, New Montefiore, Jerusalem.

I have no idea what the American papers are feeding you about the situation here. Arab attacks are gathering momentum and forcing the Jewish community to organize resistance to protect itself. Censorship prevents me from going into details.

Things seem to be surprisingly well under control, the only time they get out of hand is when the Goddamn British stick their noses in. Everybody here thinks we could handle the situation effectively if only the British would stay out of it or stay neutral.

The morale of the Jewish community in Palestine is fantastic. Unity and purposefulness pervade everything —

every single person is caught up in the needs of the hour. I can tell you I wouldn't have missed this experience for a lifetime of illusions about Zionism and Palestine lived in the "quiet" of New York. You are part of a struggle that is bigger than your own individual striving for self-attainment and self-preservation. There is an overpowering sense of belonging, of being needed and of being wanted. A commitment you cannot reject.

Living here at this time you learn the art of taking care of yourself, of being cautious where caution can be a matter of life and death, of being constantly alert. Thank goodness, I have grasped the essentials quickly. There are times when it pays to be an apt pupil in other than academic matters.

Can you imagine this: the door just opened and a shy sweet neighbor stuck in his hand, not his head, clutching two little posies of wild flowers that he had collected on the way home from work to cheer up us "foreigners" far away from home at holiday time. These guys are really taking good care of us.

I'll try hard not to neglect you but make allowances because I am getting very busy.

Love,  
Zippy

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— NOTE —

*What I was "getting very busy" with — it can now be told — was joining the Haganah, the underground Jewish defense organization. The next letter, describing the induction ceremony, was written much later and, to evade the censor, taken to the States by one of the returning students.*