

Navigating American Culture

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הסוכנות היהודית
לארץ ישראל
THE JEWISH AGENCY
FOR ISRAEL

מקום
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Goals

1

Understanding key cultural differences between American and Israeli cultures

2

Awareness of when and where differences are likely to arise

3

Gaining practical tools for predicting and navigating these differences

– Virtues מידות

Every society admires certain behaviors or qualities of character.

We call these “virtues” – מידות

Some are fairly universal – courage, humility; some are distinct to particular societies.



Statues of Aristotle's Four Virtues

The Israeli Virtues

What are some distinctly *Israeli* virtues?

- Directness – ישירות
- Resourcefulness – תושיה
- Assertiveness – אַסֶּרְטִיבִיּוּת
- Resilience – חוסן / עמידות
- Mutual Responsibility – ערבות הדדית
- Family-ness – משפחתיות



Some American Virtues

Here's my list of *American* virtues:

- Niceness
- Fairness
- Industriousness (Hard-working)
- Professionalism
- Privacy / Personal Boundaries
- Choice / Independence / Freedom



Niceness

Being nice is *not the same* as being kind

Niceness is about not being disagreeable

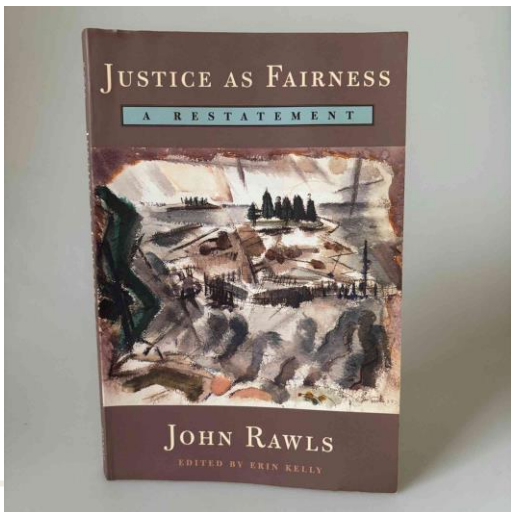
- **Not offending or hurting someone's feelings**, even if it means saying something untrue
 - Runs into conflict with Israeli **directness** all the time
- **Smiling, being pleasant**: “How *are* you??” “We should have coffee some time!”
- **Conflict-avoidance**: Can lead to passive-aggressive behavior. Can also be hard to figure out what others, including bosses, think of you or your work





Fairness

- Strong sense that similarly-situated people should get the same
- Leads to a culture of **rule-following**, as rules apply to all
- Also admiration for those who work hard and succeed, and contempt for those who succeed without hard work
- Relates to **professionalism**: doing things the right way
- Conflicts with Israeli virtue of **assertiveness** (“the rude Israeli”)

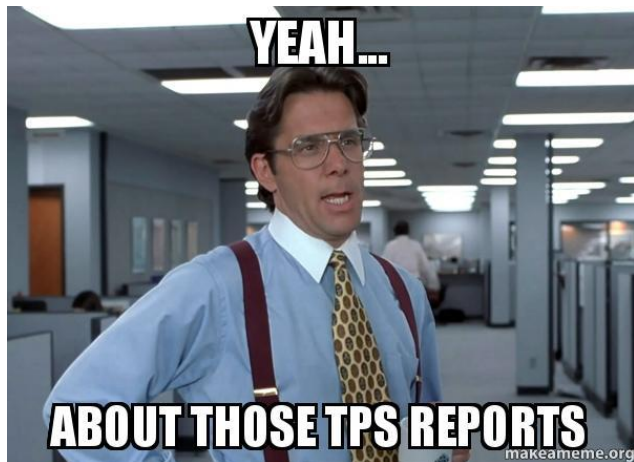


Industriousness (Hard-working)

- Deep admiration for those who work hard
- Work is, for many Americans, the most important part of life and should take priority over all else
- Even if you aren't working hard, you have to be *seen* to work hard – long hours, appearing “busy”



Professionalism



- Related to the values of **fairness** and **industriousness**
- Following procedures very important
- Dressing appropriately for work, formal functions, is expected. Even “business casual” is *business* attire
- Practice formal communication style
- Timeliness is very important
- “The customer is always right”
- Maintaining boundaries between work and private life (see **Privacy**)
- Can conflict with **משפחתיות** and Israeli informality

Privacy / Personal Boundaries



- Americans maintain a **boundary** between the public and the private
- It may take a long time until someone really **opens up** to you about their life
- **Respect boundaries:** intimate subjects (money, politics, religion, beliefs, sex, appearance) are generally out of bounds until close friends
- Also relates to **tolerance** – what people believe politically or religiously, their sexuality, personal choices, are **their business**
- Private matters (incl. **family**) don't belong at work
- In general, this is all very hard for Israelis

<i>When an American says....</i>	<i>The American may mean...</i>	<i>An Israeli might hear / think...</i>
We may have some challenges here.	There are problems here that must be solved.	Great -- finally things are getting interesting, challenge is good.
I might do this differently	The way it is getting done now is wrong and needs to be changed.	How you would do it isn't relevant, since there doesn't sound like there's any problem with the way we're doing it already.
Did I understand you correctly when you said Y?	I am amazed that you said something so wrong or stupid.	Looks like I need to explain again because they didn't understand the first time.
I would appreciate if you could get this to me by Thursday.	The drop dead deadline for this is Thursday.	It would be nice to get it done by Thursday, but not essential. Later than Thursday will also be OK.

<i>When an Israeli says...</i>	<i>The Israeli may mean...</i>	<i>An American might hear / think...</i>
You have to listen to me	I want to get your attention	You're ordering me around, how insulting!
You are wrong	I disagree with your point of view and want to discuss it some more so that we can reach agreement on the correct view	There's no room for discussion. Better back off.
Your presentation was OK	Your presentation was really good	You didn't like my presentation.
Why don't you do it another way?	I'm giving you a helpful suggestion.	You are really insulting my work.

Adapted (in part) with permission of Lucy Shahar

Remember: You're a Guest

Americans and Israelis are really, really different
– and that's OK

No one expects you to be American – it's OK to
make mistakes

- You are there as a *דוגמא אישית* – a model of
Israeliness, curiosity, sincerity, authenticity,
humanity

Most problems will arise from
misunderstandings / misaligned expectations

- When conflicts arise, try to explore them in a
spirit of openness



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