

Birthright Israel: Expanding our Engagement  
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December 9, 2007

Of the many reasons why teaching Israel to Reform Jewish students is a challenge, finding a relevant way to relate students to Israel is arguably number one. Israel's complicated history is often hard to present in a meaningful way to students who are intelligent and critical. On top of that, Israel's current events are abundant, hard to keep track of, and hard to understand through various media representations. It is difficult for students to identify a culture as their own when they do not understand the people, their language, and sometimes even their customs. It is hard to get students to know the geography of Israel by only looking at maps and pictures. And, it is especially difficult to find an emotional connection to the land under these circumstances. Finally, even if these methods of presenting Israel worked to some extent in relating students to Israel, are they at all promoting any kind of Zionist sentiment- a love of Israel and self-identification with the state, people, and land?

This is where Taglit Birthright Israel comes in. It is sensible that if the barriers of distance in religious school classrooms make it an unsuitable place to teach Israel, than actually visiting Israel is a viable solution. Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin, Shaul Kelner, Mark I. Rosen, and Erez Yereslove agree. In their research for The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University titled "The Impact of Birthright Israel," it states, "A visit to Israel isn't just an emotional experience-it has the potential to create a concrete connection to Jewish History and to affect one's sense of being Jewish. Research suggests that travel to Israel can actually strengthen Jewish Identity. Visiting Israel, it has been proposed, can make a Jew more Jewish." The hope of Birthright is that by sending young adults to Israel, the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world will diminish, solidarity among world Jewry will be strengthened, and participants' personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people will increase. But the question, as stated in the Cohen Center publication, is "Can a brief

visit to Israel have a lasting effect on Jewish identity?” Furthermore, I will question whether the increase in Jewish identity that the Birthright trip seems to promise, has any relationship with a person’s connection, understanding, and ongoing relationship with Israel.

Many are doubtful. Samuel Freedman, a Columbia University journalism professor and author says, “There is little chance that a long-term relationship will develop and be sustained between the program’s alumni, Israel, and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora” (Freedman 1998). He cites American society’s acceptance and tolerance of American Jews as a challenge to American Zionism, what I believe to be the unwavering and outspoken support of Israel from America-political, social, emotional, educational, and financial. Even if American Jews take the opportunity to visit Israel, he argues that the opportunities to express a sincere American Zionist ideal in the States are limited in choice beyond *aliyah*. The Brandeis study somewhat supported this statement. When Birthright participants were asked about their connection to Israel before their trip, only 22% of participants indicated this connection was strong. Three months after the trip, 55% of participants answered that their connection was strong, and one year later, only 48% of participants felt a strong connection to Israel. Although the study shows a major increase in participant’s connection to Israel after the trip, and the retention rate remains high an entire year later, in my opinion, the fact that only half of Birthright participants gain a connection to Israel, still seems fairly low and unimpressive. If this is the case, it does not seem like the lasting effects of Birthright are promising for a connection to Israel. Furthermore, no where in the study is it described what that connection to Israel is. Are students promoting Israel on their college campuses? Are they keeping up with Israeli current events on a daily basis? Are they advocating for human rights and social justice on a societal level? These questions are left unanswered in this particular study. However, when participants were interviewed about other areas of Jewish involvement such as marrying Jewish, or feeling a

connection to the Jewish people, the percentage of participants who answered positively was high, and remained consistent over one year's time. Although it may not be the traditional understanding of "Zionist Ideal," Birthright seems to be able to help many Jews strengthen their Jewish ties and practices within the United States by taking Jewish studies courses in college, becoming active in Hillel, or returning to Israel at later times.

I am confused as to the expectations that are held for Birthright alumni. Is the goal a personal Jewish connection or a connection to Israel? Although the program's goals as described earlier as taken from the mission statement implies both, it seems as if the program cannot achieve both successfully. In a personal interview with a senior at SUNY Albany who attended a Birthright trip with her college Hillel, I asked what she remembers most from her Israel experience. Her answers included sleeping in a Bedouin tent, praying silently in the desert at night, and "partying." When asked how her relationship with Israel has changed since her trip one year ago, she said that she doesn't think it has changed all that much, however it was great to finally see Israel and experience its culture firsthand. In terms of her Jewish identity, she does not participate any more or less in Hillel activities on campus, she does not read about Israel more in the news. She has enrolled in a Jewish Studies class, however, titled, "Jews in Film." Finally, when I asked her to sum up her experience, she proudly declared, "Israel is *Sababa!*" Unfortunately, she is retaining no more connection to Israel, than pop culture slang. An apt comparison could be if an Israeli teenager's relationship to America is "Freakin' Awesome!" While Birthright participants may indeed be fascinated with the Israeli culture they briefly interact with, it does not necessarily lead to a deeper, more invested, layered relationship with Israel, the state, people, and culture.

Keeping in mind that this opinion is based on only one girl's experience on Birthright, we must remember that for some alumni, Birthright is what got them to

be engaged with Israel, and it is the organization that continues to keep them engaged with Israel. The Birthright website is the home of a message board which holds the dialogues and debates of alumni's feelings towards current events in Israel, their trips, and any other interesting thoughts. The website also offers invitation to Jewish events throughout the year, and has interactive tools to even learn some Hebrew online. If trip alumni want to make the effort to stay connected with Israel, the opportunities are indeed offered through Birthright. But is this enough?

As the Cohen Center study points out, the new challenge of Birthright is not how to get young Jews to Israel, but rather how to keep alumni engaged. The article praises Birthright simply for the amount of interest it has generated in Israel overall. It is important to consider that the largest target audience for a Birthright trip is an unaffiliated college student who has completed their formal religious education, usually up to B'nei Mitzvah. The ability to re-engage these people at all, matched with an overall positive Jewish experience for all participants makes the program a great success. However, let us not forget that that the Birthright experience does not occur in a vacuum. The publication reads, "Whether it is an issue of how communities are prepared to deal with Birthright Israel alumni, or more simply, a question of making connections between elements of the program and participants is not clear...a seed has been planted that the Jewish community needs to nurture."

Perhaps this is where our model for engaging with Israel from the Diaspora can change. Birthright has already made Israel relevant, relatable, and available to so many of our young Jewish community members. But should we expand the model on which Israel education is based beyond the trip? Recently, Charles Bronfman called out to the Jewish community for help in funding the successful trip, asking that the trips should not run on philanthropy alone but rather from a communal funding effort. The Adelson family answered his call, estimated by the Forbes Magazine to be worth over USD 16 billion, by donating a 25,000 million dollar gift to Birthright.

Adelson said, “The Birthright Israel program is one of the best ideas our time has seen because it has the greatest potential to maintain Jewish continuity in the face of growing assimilation” (JewishJournal.com 8 December 2007). But perhaps our money can be spent not by sending more people to Israel on Birthright, but in strengthening the stateside experience of solidifying and translating positive trip experiences into a sustainable form of American Zionism. This would include not only personal engagement with Judaism on more levels, but trip alumni becoming Israel delegates, teachers, and spokespeople in their communities countrywide through outlets that the community provides. Programs can be set up that help college students represent Israel fairly on college campuses, invite political discussions to schools, and help an overall negative political tone turn positive in campus life. Jewish Community Centers could sponsor Israeli art and music exposes in which the cultural activities are chosen by Birthright alumni based on their Israel exposure. Synagogues can help organize social action programs that allow trip participants to dive into some of the deeper social and human rights issues related to Israel, and work to bring about positive change in Israel. Of course, these are only some basic suggestions of ways the Birthright alumni and Jewish community can come together to support Israel. Offering more money to Birthright trips may help more young Jews believe that Israel is “*Sababa*” but it won’t truly create a sustained and lasting relationship with Israel. Only true educational efforts from a communal initiative can begin part two of Birthright- fostering Zionism in the Diaspora.

Bronfman, Charles. 2007. “Birthright Israel Needs Wider Support.” [www.JewishJournal.com](http://www.JewishJournal.com) (accessed on December 8, 2007).

Freedman, Samuel. 1998. “Why Birthright Israel Can’t Work” [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com) (Accessed on December 8, 2007).

Saxe, Leonard, et al. 2001. “The Impact of Birthright Israel.” A Publication of the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University.

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