

Bringing Birthright Back: Using the Keys to Jewish Young Adult Identity Formation
By Ari Margolis

In our global society, improvements in travel and communication have made parts of the world that once seemed remote much more accessible to us. And while we as individuals or as organizations can use travel as a means to perform acts of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world – to address issues of poverty, hunger, or human rights in areas that need help – travel also provides an opportunity to repair us, as individuals. An individual can use travel as a means to further oneself by experiencing new cultures, new opportunities and situations that one would never encounter by staying put in one's home environment. The Birthright Israel experience has been using travel to generate a process of change that, if cultivated upon return, can repair parts of an individual's life that would otherwise have been left less than whole - it generates an opportunity for *tikkun ha-adam*, repair of the person.

The Problem of Jewish Young Adults – JYAs

One need not travel far to find many issues that need *tikkun*, repair. Within the Jewish community in America one of these perceived broken parts of the Jewish world has been the rate of interfaith marriage. In the face of statistical publications on interfaith marriage rates and the diminishing effects they have on Jewish identity amongst the next generation, many organizations across the spectrum of Jewish ideology and belief have asked themselves, “How do we ensure Judaism's survival?”

Much of this survivalist thinking has focused on Jewish young adults, JYAs – those Jews in their late teens to early 30s. Organizations have attempted to help JYAs to develop stronger identities so that they will marry within the faith, or from a place of wanting to transmit Judaism to their children. Such institutions have found themselves stymied by how to engage this age group in substantial Jewish life. For years, they have failed to see how many JYAs might resonate with different expressions of Judaism than

their parents' generations have established, thereby causing a real and perceived dearth of Jewish opportunities for JYAs.

From a developmental perspective, the lack of participation in formal organizational structure should not be surprising. JYAs are in the midst of a transition between dependency on parents and the independence of adulthood. There is little room left for worrying about being a part of a larger Jewish community. JYAs tend to be extremely individually focused – the focus is on myself, a small group of friends, and “where I am going”.¹ Yet these developmental issues also reveal why this truly is a critical age group to support. This is the time in which individuals formulate how they want to live their lives as adults. And if Judaism is not in that process at all, it becomes increasingly unlikely that Judaism will be part of who they become.

What is Working?

Luckily, Judaism is ‘sneaking’ its way into many JYAs’ processes of self-establishment. Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman’s recent work, “Cultural Events & Jewish Identities: Young Adults in New York” (2005) shows how this is happening. JYAs are indeed building Jewish identity – only they are doing so in ways that most congregations, federations, and JCCs do not have the current infrastructure nor programming ideology to address. JYAs are seeking a Judaism that is accessible and usable and developing such a Judaism organically.² They get excited about cultural experiences that offer hybridization between Jewish and non-Jewish atmospheres and which integrate different

¹ Chazan, Barry, and Cohen, Stephen M. “What We Know about Jewish American Youth and Young Adults: Some Implications for Birthright Israel.” Journal of Jewish Communal Service 77.2 (2000): p. 79

² Cohen, Stephen M, and Kelman, Ari Y. “Cultural Events & Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York.” 2005 p. 11

expressions of Judaism.³ Such happenings take place in venues that are different from typical Jewish events, often involve music and generally go beyond the institutional events that are typically seen as “bland, conformist, conservative, and alien.”⁴ They are transforming the ways in which they find and express their Judaism, which is a far cry from the stereotypes that are often assigned to this age group as being apathetic and self-involved.

According to Cohen and Kelman, successful cultural programming for JYAs does exist. It is rarely institutionalized, and hardly conventional, serving as an alternative to the synagogue and organized Jewish community that does not speak to the needs of most JYAs. Jewish hip-hop bands, creative arts events, theater, and Jewishly themed bar nights and club outings are drawing great numbers of JYAs who are positively and strongly identifying as Jews. But, after looking deeper at those JYAs who are attending such events, Cohen and Kelman found that these programs are working for those who are already engaged in Jewish life and Jewish activity to some extent and are rejecting the entrenched communal structures.⁵ Such JYAs have already found some individual importance in being Jewish and have made personal commitments at some point in their lives to live Jewishly in some manner. In short, they are already including Judaism as a part of their identity searches.

Looking at this has to make one wonder – what about those who have ceased doing anything Jewish in their lives, or those who had a minimalist Jewish upbringing in the first place? And what about those who do not live in densely populated Jewish areas

³ *ibid* p. 13-14

⁴ *ibid* p. 6

⁵ *ibid* p. 15

and are not exposed to such opportunities? How is Judaism reaching these JYAs? Are they lost causes who are beyond hope?

Birthright Israel

There is an initiative that is reaching JYAs who are outside the Jewish community and have not yet made Jewish identity a priority – those who are currently unengaged in Jewish life. Birthright Israel is applying the restorative powers of travel in an attempt to “fix” Jewish identity amongst those who are most at risk of leaving the Jewish community. It is one of the few initiatives designed for JYAs that is truly reaching Jews regardless of their geographical location, who have not stepped into a synagogue, JCC, or Hillel in years. True, it is also reaching just as many, if not more, JYAs who are already engaged, such as those described in the Cohen and Kelman article. However, reaching these unengaged JYAs is more critical to the aims of the organizations concerned with Jewish survival that have invested in this endeavor. Birthright uses the prospect of travel – an activity that is almost universally appealing to individuals of the target age – to bring Judaism into the process of their identity formations.

Throughout the trip, JYAs are confronted with the contradictions that Cohen and Kelman identified as the types of Jewish experiences that this age group seeks. The society of Israel offers Birthright participants a paradigm of a “Jewish non-Jewish environment.” Participants navigate the setting in which the majority of people are indeed Jews who are doing the ordinary daily tasks that one does not usually think of as that which would happen in a synagogue. To some participants, all of a sudden, benign daily activities become Jewish activities that hybridize the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. They also witness orthodox Jews who are clearly applying and using Judaism to inform their daily lives. Furthermore, by grouping Jews together from all over the United States,

the nature of individuals on the buses automatically constitutes a Jewish peer group that is much more diverse than a typical congregational setting.

But travel is not the only reason that Birthright is critically reaching JYAs of this demographic. In addition to the exploration and openness inherent in traveling, Birthright's programming and structure is providing Jewish cultural expressions in the exact ways that this age group responds to. One of the most successful elements of any Birthright experience is the "Mega-event." This is a grandiose concert/culture extravaganza that gathers a few thousand-Birthright participants from all over the world, either in a convention center in Jerusalem or at the amphitheater at Latrun. Participants mingle with Jews from all corners of the world, hear contemporary Israeli artists who appeal to this age group, and are inundated with hip, upbeat Israeli culture packaged as Jewish culture.

Between 2002 and 2006, I have had the opportunity to staff four different Birthright trips. In the weeks following one of these trips, I was able to poll every participant who had traveled with me on the bus, asking them about the most memorable or impactful part of their trip. Just about half of those asked mentioned the mega-event as a pinnacle moment, many describing that it was the first time they had ever been surrounded by so many Jewish people their age from so many different places. Some also reported feeling a sense of pride of being a part of such a group who was both diverse but connected to them at the same time. And it was primarily the previously unengaged JYAs who pinpointed this experience. In reflecting upon this trend, it is conceivable that the Birthright environment succeeds in engaging these Jews in the quest for Jewish identity to the extent that they could respond to the same types of cultural experiences as the JYAs of New York in Cohen and Kelman's study. The Birthright

Israel experience is indeed reaching Jews who have been previously unreachable by most institutional attempts. However, the experience also raises the question of whether or not ten days is enough in and of itself to affect Jewish identity to the extent that its investors, who are hoping to ensure Jewish survival, have banked upon.

Bringing Birthright Back – Recommendations for Alumni Programming

The question for Birthright is the same question that any travel experience must ask in order to actualize change in an individual: How can I bring this home? Travel can inspire a process of change, but it does not necessarily change an individual by itself. For some, travel may cause one to feel different, but recognizing exactly how this difference has manifested itself and finding ways to cultivate the new feelings and ideas instilled by the experience proves challenging. As a result, it is possible, even for those who had an enlightening experience, to return from an incredible trip and never change an iota of one's daily life. But if one can capture the essence of the experience from the trip back at home – if one reflects on the experience, creates meaning from it, and can find venues to continue exploring the sparks that the trip created – it is much more likely that the trip will indeed actualize the change that can lead to a revamped search for Jewish identity – the type of identity seeking that Cohen and Kelman described as being central those JYAs who are participating in and creating Jewish life.

For JYAs in New York, many opportunities exist that can appeal to Birthright returnees who are now engaged in the process of Jewish identity formation.

Unfortunately, though, as strategic as the Birthright trip is, there has been far less coordination invested in how to capitalize on the inspiration of the trip. Trying to manufacture elements of the Israel experience here in America are very difficult, especially when one of the most powerful elements of the trip is the peer group itself.

Short of funding reunions that reunite buses from across the country, how can Birthright actualize the potential identity formation that it created?

I suggest a two-prong approach. First of all, Birthright serves as an umbrella organization for many different providers who lead trips. In choosing which groups will run trips, it should consider which organizations can follow-up with participants and help provide them with resources and networks similar to what they discovered on the trip. Some of the travel providers are based in Israel. The geographical divide makes it nearly impossible to inform participants who return to the states of cultural Jewish events or networks that they need to continue their journeys. Meanwhile trips run by organizations such as Hillel have professional staffs at the places where students live, who usually are accessible to students and can avail alumni of the resources they need, locally. The organizers of Birthright should ensure that the organizations running the trips also have the infrastructure and training to follow-up with the JYAs they take to Israel – that the individuals leading the trip can relate to this age group and can devote time to following-up with their participants. Ideally, these leaders and organizations would even be based in the communities where the majority of the participants originated, should the group have a local origin.

The second prong involves partnering with some of these JYA initiatives that are working. Get the names of Birthright alumni to the promoters of these successful events who can then grant these newly engaged JYAs access to the types of programs that would appeal to them. This is starting to happen – recently a giant initiative called the “eight” in which 8 cities on December 8th will throw huge parties that will speak to all the needs mentioned in the Cohen and Kelman article. This initiative is being co-sponsored by

Birthright, and much advertising has gone out to Birthright alumni in the respective cities.

In researching for this paper, there was as much of a dearth of information about successful follow-up to Birthright as there is successful community-based programming for JYAs. That makes it difficult to figure out exactly how the Birthright travel experience is serving to repair the identity crisis in JYAs. But in combining the research that is out there with a fresh look at the Birthright experience, it is possible to come up with new approaches for maximizing the impact of Birthright Israel. By providing JYAs with opportunities to experience the culturally Jewish events to which the process of Birthright opens them up, it just may be the case that travel can help *tikkun ha-yehudim* – to repair the Jews. The question that this generation of JYAs will answer is whether the *tikkun* that occurs will merely facilitate Jewish survival as previous generations have defined it, or if it is going to transform what it means to be Jewish.