

Laura Siegel
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Contributing to the Field

Is Just Visiting Israel Enough?

When teaching a four year old about Hanukkah what story do you teach them? Do you teach them about the rebellion and battles? Or do you focus on the miracle of lights? Do you teach the same story to a 15 year old or to an adult? How do you balance engaging students in the Jewish tradition with teaching them about the more controversial aspects of the tradition? For instance, it might be easier for students, young students especially, to relate to the miracle of oil lasting eight days when there was only enough for one day, rather than the raging underground battle for monotheism and Temple worship. Maybe even more importantly, teachers also need to teach students to grapple with their *own* opinions of the tradition.

The same questions apply to teaching about Israel. How do students relate to a country and people so far away, especially when this generation hears so much about Israel in the news, rather than in a cultural or traditional context? Research by Steven M. Cohen and Laurence Kotler- Berkowitz has shown that one of the most influential Jewish experiences a student can have is traveling to Israel¹. These Israel experiences are meaningful regardless of whether participants go when they 13 or when they are 26. When students visit Israel they gain a greater sense of Jewish people hood, a greater connection to Israel and begin to explore their own Jewish identity in real and mature ways. According to the research of the report by Cohen and Berkowitz, “The Impact of Childhood Jewish Education on Adults’ Jewish Identity: Schooling, Israel Travel,

¹ Cohen, Steven M., and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz. The Impact of Childhood Jewish Education on Adults’ Jewish Identity: Schooling, Israel Travel, Camping and Youth Groups. Travel, Camping and Youth Groups. United Jewish Communities: Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01. 2004. 1-19. < <http://www.peje.org/docs/ImpactofJewishEducation.pdf>>.

Camping and Youth Groups”, travel to Israel also increases participants’ likelihood for the following behaviors; marrying a Jew, having close friends that are Jewish, becoming a synagogue member, believing that being Jewish is very important and feeling attached to Israel.²

How important is it that participants examine the political tensions over land and Palestinian rights, the complications of religious hegemony, or even the conflicts that arise from the vast cultural diversity of Israel? Is it enough to just get a taste of Israel? Is it enough to only establish a surface love of Israel? Or do we need to engage students in Israel and its complexities, furthering their own Jewish exploration at the same time? In the same way that it is important to have a thorough understanding of the story of Hanukkah, as Jewish educators we need to encourage comprehensive introspection, and grappling with the deeper emotional issues when it comes to learning and experiencing Israel as well. Just as we encourage exploration of our American identity, we need to help young Jews to explore, challenge and wrestle with their Jewish identity.

During September 2005 through June 2006 I had the privilege of working as the Midwest Regional Director of the University Student Division of the World Zionist Organization (USD Hagshama), and had the experience of planning and leading two birthright Israel trips. Birthright Israel trips are sponsored by over twenty different organizations³ most of which offer specialized theme trips, (for example, Israel through nature, Israel with the Reform movement, etc.). The focus of the majority of these trips is

² Cohen, Steven M., and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz. The Impact of Childhood Jewish Education on Adults’ Jewish Identity: Schooling, Israel Travel, Camping and Youth Groups. Travel, Camping and Youth Groups. United Jewish Communities: Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01. 2004. 1-19. <<http://www.peje.org/docs/ImpactofJewishEducation.pdf>>.

³<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Features%5E12731&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Features&&channel=TheTrip>

for participants to have a fast, fun, community building experience with other young Jews in Israel. While there is a tour guide, there is usually little emphasis placed on Jewish or Israel education; rather the goal is for participants to have a positive experience in Israel. Most trips do not focus on learning Israeli history, discuss the modern politics or some of the modern challenges Israelis encounter.

The two trips I led through the World Zionist Organization were titled: “Peace, Pluralism, and Social Justice”. We believed that our participants chose our trip to learn about aspects of Israel that most birthright trips ignore. We felt it was our responsibility to create an environment of learning, critical self- exploration and grappling with Jewish identity and exploring Israel. We tried to convey some of the social, political, and cultural complexities of life in Israel. In addition to the traditional birthright tours of Masada, the Old City of Jerusalem and Yad Vashem, we also met with members of both the religious settler movement and Palestinian activists, we met with the director of the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) to explore some of the religious tensions in the State, we also volunteered with the organization “Table to Table” that picks excess food from farms to be donated to food distribution sites all over the county. It was important for us to participate in hands- on social justice activities in Israel. We wanted our participants to wrestle with some of the mounting problems in Israel just as they wrestle with problems in America and around the world.

We thought very carefully about what knowledge we wanted our participants to gain from this experience, and how we presented the material to them. We created an informational packet to help ensure a common and balanced knowledge base for our participants. The packet included: a historical timeline, maps that outlined the changing

boarders of Israel, articles about some of the political issues and the challenges of religious diversity, and information about each of the people and groups we met with and sites we visited. There was also a page of resources with books and websites for participants to further their knowledge after the trip. We also felt it was important to include blank pages for notes, journaling, and reflections and we encouraged participants to write and reflect throughout the trip. They received this packet at the beginning of the trip and it was a resource they could refer to throughout the experience and after they returned home.

During this planning process and creation of the informational packet, it became extremely clear that we had a lot of power over the tone of the trip and the learning experience our participants could have. Without some kind of knowledge base it would be hard to gain as much from our specialized trip. At the same time though, our participants' encounter could be greatly influenced and we even ran the risk of "brainwashing", rather than teaching our participants. Hence, it was crucial that we treated these travel experiences as we would *any* form of Jewish education. We needed to adapt to multiple learning styles, create time for reflection and questions, and treat the trip as an open classroom experience.

There is a definite value in teaching young children the "miracle of lights" version of Hanukkah. This story relates directly to the ritual of lighting candles and instills a sense of pride in the rededication of the Temple and the restoration of Jewish life in Israel. At the same time it is just as important that students progress in their education and also learn the historical accounts of the battle related to the holiday as well. If we only teach the "miracle of lights" or fun, party, tour-based version of Israel on Israel experience

trips, we are doing a disservice to ourselves, our students and to Israel. We run the risk of our participants missing a valuable opportunity to explore their feelings and opinions about Israel in a Jewish context. The experience of exploration, grappling, and reflection is where learning takes place, and where Jewish identity is explored and developed in unique ways that can not take place at home. By participants exploring some of the more complex issues in Israel first hand they are more aware of their feelings and better prepared to discuss them with others, relate to news articles about Israel, and confront critiques of Israel when they return home.

I whole-heartedly believe in the power and passionate quality of Israel trips. But I also believe in teaching participants to challenge themselves and their beliefs, and not “party” their way through the experience. Therefore, I was prepared to engage our participants in conversations about being open-minded and looking beyond just the social aspects of our trip. Inherently, though, our trip title attracted a particular audience; a self selecting group of participants that wanted to engage in some of the present civil rights and social justice issues in Israel. We advertised the kinds of programs and activities we knew our participants would value, and the vast majority chose our trip because it highlighted issues they were concerned with. However, I was not expecting our birthright participants to have some uneasy and at times even negative feelings about Israel.

Alvin Rosenfeld, professor at Indiana University, wrote a paper on the controversial nature of growing anti-Zionism among liberal or progressive Jews, titled “‘Progressive’ Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism.” In this paper he outlined

some of the emerging issues of anti-Zionist rhetoric that he has observed among liberal Jews in America, Israel and around the world.

...Jews who mouth the standard clichés about Zionism and Israel to establish their leftist credentials. Because the ideological package that informs progressive politics today links anti-Zionism to anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-globalization, anti-racism, etc. Zionism and the supposedly “racist”, “colonial” and “oppressive” state it has created.⁴

This observation is interesting to examine because the majority of the participants on my birthright trips were self described liberals, and voiced that they were often conflicted about supporting Israel.

By creating an open environment to learn about some of the reservations our participant’s experience with Israel helped them to form educated opinions and to bring this experience back to their communities. So many of our participants articulated that they do not feel they have a place within the Jewish community. This is a struggle for them outside of their feelings about Israel, but is representative of the American Jewish community more generally. As Professor Alvin Rosenfeld suggested, there is often little room for a pro-Israel voice on the left American political spectrum⁵. Hence, it is fundamental that we teach an engagement with Israel in an environment where participants have an opportunity to grapple with some of the more complicated issues. I believe that it was our commitment to teaching an engagement and wrestling with all aspects, even difficult ones, of the Israel story that we were able to reach our participants in a meaningful and effective way. For example, we met with an organization called

⁴ Rosenfeld, Alvin H. “Progressive” Jewish Thought, and the New Anti-Semitism. American Jewish Committee, 2006.

⁵ Rosenfeld, Alvin H. “Progressive” Jewish Thought, and the New Anti-Semitism. American Jewish Committee, 2006.

the Parent's Circle,⁶ an organization comprised of surviving members of Israeli and Palestinians families that have lost family members to terror. We discussed the issues of terror through the lens of the survivors and their drive to build bridges and build community as a way to grieve and combat terror together. This open dialogue and first hand encounters helped participants frame the issue of terror faced by all peoples in Israel in a new and very effective way. It helped contextualize some the facts of terror in Israel and also helped our participants engage in discussion about the efforts on the ground to rise above the political conflicts.

Ideally, everyone who goes to Israel will establish a loving connection to the land, people, and culture. However, I believe that we need to go further than that, and challenge students to form opinions and truly wrestle with issues they might have, thus deepening their connection to Israel. In the same way we teach young children to be engaged American citizens, we need to teach young Jews to be engaged Jews, and sometimes that means wrestling, and having an environment to wrestle in!

From my personal experience participating in and also leading Israel trips, in addition to the research done by Cohen and Berkowitz, it is clear that Israel experiences have an incredible opportunity to help shape participants' Jewish identity development. Therefore we need to take Israel experience trips more seriously. Israel experiences should not be treated as a vaccine! It is a disservice to send our participants to Israel on programs that lack serious content when we have such a valuable opportunity to inspire critical engagement. Providing participants with the forum to visit and experience Israel first hand is vital. However, I believe that a level of knowledge, study, and reflection are

⁶ www.theparentscircle.com

imperative to the personal experiences that they will have on their trip: and for that matter what experiences with which they will return to our communities.

From the contacts I have kept from each of our birthright trips, and evaluations from the end of the experience, I feel proud to say that I believe we achieved our goals. We created an environment where it was acceptable to ask questions and explore some of the deeper parts of Israel, and at the same time, have a lot of fun. So much of Israel trips are social, cultural, community building and these relationships do help to influence participants' Jewish identity development in real and tangible ways. The same priority placed on enabling students to go to Israel must be placed on *engaging* students with the issues while they are there. It is our responsibility to our students, to Israel, and to future generations to teach participants to *reflect* upon Israel, and for them to integrate their experiences into their Jewish identity. For it is in this process of reflecting that learning takes place from experience. Birthright and other short term Israel experience trips are an incredible *first* step, but we must take it upon ourselves to go to Israel and then also study, connect and reflect.