Taglit-Birthright Israel: Universalizing the Israel Experience

By Zoe Chazen ‘14
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Autobiographical Statement

Growing up as an American Jew in New York City, I never realized that Jews were a minority and I never pondered the meaning of my Jewish identity. Most of my friends were Jewish, and those of other faiths were well versed in Jewish traditions due to the preponderance of Jews in my school. Although I did not attend Hebrew school (my mother had always been ambivalent about the existence of god and organized religion), I went to fifty-six Bat and Bar Mitzvahs in 7th grade. I was not very religious, but I was Jewish, which until my trip to Israel had very little meaning to me, besides of course matzoh ball soup on Passover and kugel at many family gatherings.

The summer before 9th grade, however, my family and our close family friends embarked on a trip to Israel, an experience that reshaped my perception of myself in the greater context of the world. For some inexplicable reason, as we drove towards Jerusalem from the airport, I felt as if I were returning home. During our visit to the Western Wall, I felt an unprecedented sense of interconnectedness as I inserted my prayer (written on a piece of paper according to tradition) into a crevice of the wall and followed in the footsteps of my Jewish predecessors. In addition to moving me on a spiritual level, my trip to Israel caused me to feel proud of being Jewish, of being part of the people that had built that wonderful country. Israel, as a secular state, allowed me to connect with Judaism on a cultural and national level rather than (as had hitherto been the case) on a primarily religious basis.

Impacted by my childhood in New York City and my vacation to the Jewish State, I was struck by my first encounters with peers at Andover regarding Israel
and Judaism. I was surprised by the visceral feelings that negative comments about Israel and Judaism ignited within me. Ever since freshman year, during which I engaged in multiple intense debates over Israel’s right to exist and overheard anti-Semitic jokes, I have contemplated the role that my Israel experience has played in the development of my Jewish identity. Subsequent conversations with Jewish friends made me realize that many Jews return from trips to Israel with new perspectives on their Jewishness and a newfound love for Israel (I was not unique).

I applied to be a CAMD Scholar because I hoped to explore more intensely the correlation between “experiencing” Israel and feeling an affinity towards the Jewish people and the Jewish State.

Project Introduction

In an effort to answer what seemed like a broad question, I decided to study the history of Taglit-Birthright Israel, which has become the most prominent “Israel experience” for young Jews in America, as a lens through which to examine Israel’s effect on modern American Jewry.

Sponsored by Jewish philanthropists, Jewish organizations, and the Israeli government, Taglit-Birthright Israel (“Birthright”) has been the “largest educational experiment ever attempted” by the contemporary Jewish community.¹ Since its inception in 1999, Birthright has sent more than 330,000 young-adult Jews from 62 countries (with most travelling from the United States and Canada) on free trips to Israel in attempts to strengthen their attachment to the Jewish people and the State of Israel.² Birthright founders developed their curriculum as an alternative to
religious Jewish education and in response to fears that assimilation was distancing North American Jews from engaging with the Jewish community and Israel. Post-trip studies suggest that Birthright has the ability to reintegrate non-observant or unaffiliated Jews into the folds of Jewish life while enhancing observant Jews’ connection to their faith and peoplehood.

Part I: The Beginnings of Taglit-Birthright Israel

*Jews who are not familiar with their roots, will not stay Jewish*

-Yossi Beilin

In a 1994 speech, Yossi Beilin, an Israeli statesman and scholar, argued that the then current relationship between North American Jewry and Israel—one of a “capable brother” helping an “incapable brother” with philanthropy—benefitted neither North American nor Israeli Jews. Instead, Beilin argued that the American and Israeli Jewish communities should collaborate as coequals and redirect funds towards Jewish education in the Diaspora. Beilin believed that to ensure the future of world Jewry, Jewish leadership should expose all Diaspora Jews to their heritage by granting them a free ten-day trip to Israel. Although Beilin “planted the seed” for Taglit-Birthright Israel, Michael Steinhardt, an American Wall Street legend, and Charles Bronfman, the Canadian scion of the Seagram’s liquor family, brought the idea to fruition.

Within two years of Steinhardt and Bronfman’s informal dinner at Jerusalem’s Israel Museum in 1997, the two philanthropists had established an official organization called Birthright Israel to design a curriculum for the trips, set
standards, and oversee logistics. They had also secured funding from twelve other philanthropists, the Israeli government, and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Steinhardt and Bronfman developed a strong partnership between the financiers and the educators and enlisted the help of Richard Joel, the former President of Hillel, to organize the initial trips and recruit trip attendants on college campuses.

Both committed yet non-religious Jews, Steinhardt and Bronfman founded Birthright on the basis that in America’s open society, one in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions instead of imposed identities, Judaism competes with secularism, universalism, ideologically rigid anti-colonialism, and other worldviews and cultures. In order to preserve young Diaspora Jews’ connection to their heritage and peoplehood, Steinhardt and Bronfman hoped to offer them a positive, empowering Jewish-Israel experience, which would render Judaism meaningful, fun, and appealing. During his encounters with Birthright participants, Bronfman famously affirms, “It’s your choice [to be Jewish or not]. We wanted to give you a chance to experience one of the great moments in Jewish life as you face your choices.”

Steinhardt and Bronfman launched Birthright because for the latter half of the 20th century, an increasing number of Jews were choosing not to be Jewish. Look magazine’s May 5, 1964 article, “The Vanishing American Jew,” prophesied that American Jews would soon cease to exist as a result of low birth rates, high intermarriage rates, and assimilation into all sectors of American society. Six years later, results from the Council of Jewish Federations’ 1970 National Jewish Population Survey alarmed leaders of American Jewry. The 1970 survey presented
a rapidly accelerating intermarriage rate and suggested that many American Jews were abandoning their faith and culture: intermarriage increased from less than 2% for individuals married before 1925, to 6% for marriages between 1940 and 1960, to 12% from 1960 to 1964, to 29% from 1970 to 1975. Many Jewish leaders view intermarriage as a threat to Jewish continuity because intermarriage generally leads to a breakdown of the traditional Jewish family structure, and children of intermarried couples are far less likely to be raised Jewish or to feel connected to Israel.

Barry Chazan, a leading scholar of Jewish education, argues that the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which subsequently reported that 52% (later corrected to 43%) of all Jews who married during the five years from 1985 to 1990 had married non-Jews, sparked a Jewish Renaissance in America. Evidence that the majority of American Jews were intermarrying inspired Jewish leadership to reconsider the external and internal causes of assimilation. Were American Jews simply fulfilling the centuries-old Jewish dream to lead “normal lives,” supposedly better lives free of persecution or alienation? Or had the American Jewish community failed to engage and educate American Jewish youth in any meaningful way?

The Ironies of Assimilation

There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants and the other is getting it.

-Oscar Wilde

The roots of these questions date back to the Jewish Emancipation in
Western Europe, which began in France in 1791 as the logical outcome of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. The Emancipation theoretically allowed Western European Jews to incorporate themselves into the economic, social, and political realms of their respective host countries—a privilege hitherto denied to them. Over a span of more than one hundred years (France, 1791; Belgium, 1831; Great Britain, 1858; Italy, 1861; Austria-Hungary, 1867; Germany, 1871; Switzerland, 1874; Serbia and Bulgaria, 1878 etc.), Western European governments granted Jews citizenship and civic and economic rights in exchange for Jewish oaths of loyalty and duty to the state and affirmations that Jews would place civil law and national military needs above Jewish law. 15

Prior to Emancipation, Jews had been forced to live in cramped quarters and ghettos and to abide by a dress code that highlighted their Jewish identity and status.16 Seeking to address the brutal marginalization of European Jews in the 1770s, some Jews founded the Haskalah movement (the Jewish Enlightenment), which strove for Emancipation and advocated renouncing traditional Jewish education and rituals in favor of a more secular lifestyle.17 Although certain rabbinical leaders resisted and rejected Haskalah initiatives, many Jews willingly sacrificed elements of their Jewish identity in order to escape persecution.

Regardless of earnest attempts by European Jews to productively contribute to their civic societies and to assimilate according to Emancipation demands, European societies never accepted that the Jews could be as German as the Germans or as French as the French—the Emancipation never came to fruition in Europe. Perhaps it was bound to fail when in the 1789 French National Assembly, the Abbé
Maury proclaimed, "To call the Jews citizens would be as if one would say that, without letters of naturalization and without ceasing to be English and Danish, the English and Danes could become French"\(^{18}\) (Note that the Zionist Movement arose in the 1880s when many Jews eventually concluded that without national sovereignty, they would never overcome anti-Semitism or their “otherness,” a topic that will be discussed later in this paper).

Furthermore, Eastern European Jews from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries that did not “emancipate” their Jews continued to endure confinement in Jewish villages and pogroms (institutional and popular anti-Semitic violence that proved much harsher than that of Western Europe). Eastern European Jews also remained scapegoats for poor conditions in the economy and government. Given that the Jews never assimilated in Europe, European Jewish leadership never had to consider the consequences of such a reality.

The fate of Jews in America, however, has been seemingly different. In his introduction to *The Zionist Idea*, Arthur Hertzberg notes that America has presented the most favorable conditions in history for the assimilation of the Jews and that “The Emancipation, which was never achieved in Europe, has come closest to realization in the New World.”\(^{19}\) The last line of Irving Howe’s 1976 book, *World of Our Fathers*, illustrates Jews’ all-pervasive dream to be accepted, secure, and integrated into a nation—as one of its own and no longer as a stigmatized Jew—and the apparent success with which Jews in America have achieved their goal: “Here in these pages is the story of the Jews, bedraggled and inspired, who came [to America] from Eastern Europe. Let us now praise obscure men.”\(^{20}\) In celebrating the
successful assimilation of now “obscure men,” Howe embraces the cultural sacrifice required for assimilation but never addresses the dire consequences of erasing any distinction between Jew and Gentile—the end of the Jewish people.

In his 1991 book *Fiedler on the Roof*, Leslie Fiedler, an acclaimed Jewish American literary critic, articulated the irony of Jews’ assimilation into America when he defined the “silent Holocaust.” Fiedler deemed himself not only a “minimal,” non-practicing Jew but also a “terminal” Jew because not a single one of his eight children had a Jewish mate. Still, he concluded, “Yet, whatever regrets I may feel, I cannot deny that I have wanted this, worked for it.”21 As members of the collective history—the hardships and struggles—of the Jewish people, Howe and Fiedler seem to suggest that the ends (a supposedly better life) justify the means (the abandonment of one’s Jewish identity).

In 1989, Chaim Potok, an American rabbi and author, affirmed that the fate of American Jewry was at a crossroads. In his paper, “Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey,” Sidney Goldstein echoes Potok and argues that the absorption of the Jews into the “very fabric of American life” poses both “enormous opportunities and significant risks, including the disintegration of core Jewish values and the splintering of the Jewish community into a multiplicity of factions.”22 Goldstein references Potok and continues,

> The issue that remains open...is whether Jews in the United States will succeed in fashioning an authentic American-Jewish civilization, one rich in new forms of individual and communal expression, or [ ] they will become fully absorbed into the larger culture and disappear as a distinct group.23

In response to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Jewish Federations across North America rapidly established Jewish continuity
commissions, which sought to cultivate positive Jewish identities by strengthening the profession of Jewish education, expanding informal educational opportunities, such as retreats and Israel trips, and widening the scope of Jewish education from the individual student to the whole family. Many synagogues and philanthropists, including Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman, also supported the movement for enhanced and expanded Jewish day school education by creating the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE), the first national Jewish organization to promote and improve Jewish day schools across America.

The Changing Role of Israel in Diaspora Jewish Life

_If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!_

-Psalm 137

Regardless of these efforts to alter the trajectory of Jewish life in America, Steinhardt and Bronfman remained convinced that a trip to Israel would offer a more authentic and meaningful educational opportunity for young unaffiliated or marginally affiliated Jews. Both Steinhardt and Bronfman were enamored of Israel. Bronfman had been a major proponent of Israeli educational travel for young people since the 1980s, during which he founded the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies in part to support research, pilot programs, and coalitions of national organizations to increase the role of Israel travel in Jewish life. His philanthropic work and his public conviction that every young person had a right to visit Israel later influenced the creation of Israel Experience Inc, an organization that proved invaluable in the early stages of Birthright’s development by becoming a prototype
for cooperation between Jewish philanthropists, organizations, and Israeli partners.\textsuperscript{27}

Steinhardt, disillusioned by ritualistic Reform and Conservative movements, described Israel as “his substitution for religion” and as his “Jewish miracle.”\textsuperscript{28} He viewed Judaism as a civilization of values and disapproved of traditional Jewish education, which prioritized religious observance and other activities over trips to Israel. He lamented,

I think that many of the trends that we have seen – such as the fact that 55-60\% of non-Orthodox Jews are marrying ‘out,’ such as the fact that only 15\% of total philanthropy of Jews goes to Jewish causes – are reflective of that fact that non-Orthodox Jewish education in America has been, and continues to be, a shandah [a disgrace] – an abysmal failure.\textsuperscript{29}

Perhaps his comment and his nationalistic conception of Judaism explain his motivation for undertaking an educational project that had the potential to transform and augment Israel’s role in the lives of all Diaspora Jewry.

Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews in the Diaspora defined themselves as a dislocated people, aware of their “unnatural” lives in exile. Diaspora Jews compared their realities to a longed-for messianic existence in the Jewish homeland. Every year, observant Jews recited Psalm 137, whose verses read, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand whither!” and concluded Passover Seders and Yom Kippur services with the hopeful words, “Next year in Jerusalem,” which embodied the Jewish longing for restoration to an imagined place and messianic redemption. In \textit{Tours That Bind}, Shaul Kelner opines, “Modern Zionism [has] shifted the practice of Jewish Diaspora from the rabbis’ symbolically centered model to one that has been materially state centered and symbolically state informed.”\textsuperscript{30}
Howe argues that the reality of a Jewish State further complicated Diaspora Jews’ struggle for self-definition and a connection to the Jewish homeland. With the granting of Israel’s independence in 1948, Diaspora Jewish communities, specifically the affluent and well-integrated North American community, faced criticism from Israeli Zionists such as David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, who argued that one could not live a fully Jewish existence outside the State of Israel. Many Jews now viewed the once tragically imposed *galut* (exile) as a matter of conscious choice, and *aliyah* (permanent immigration to Israel) became the “chief alternative to assimilation” for non-religious Jews.

Regardless of this new tension, most American Jews initially showed their solidarity with Israel “less as a fulfillment of the Zionist...idea than as a vibrant historical reality... where survivors of the Holocaust and other Jews in flight could make a life for themselves.” Although expressions of support remained personal, members of the American Jewish mainstream agreed that Israel “had to be helped, nurtured, and kept alive.” Furthermore, the increase in financial donations and advocacy for Israel during times of crisis suggest that many American Jews viewed the State of Israel as an extremely necessary Jewish refuge that must be protected.

Despite material exchange between American Jewry and the Jewish homeland, Israel remained an imagined place for the majority of American Jews at the end of the 20th century: the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey found that only 35% of American Jews had visited Israel. Birthright, however, has already brought at least one third of Jews born after 1985 to Israel and has transformed the hope of granting the majority of young Jews an Israel experience into a realistic
Part II: Building Connections: The Birthright Journey

In converting Birthright from an idea into a reality, Steinhardt and Bronfman appointed Shimshon Shoshani, Israel’s senior educational professional, to lead and build the new Birthright organization. Shoshani relied on a compact staff with specific skills (finance, education, marketing/public relations, and administration), so Birthright would function like a nimble and efficient commercial entity. He avoided high overhead costs and bureaucracy by outsourcing educational and logistic services to trip providers, who would be expected to meet detailed standards and undergo periodic evaluations. Shoshani’s strategy also increased competition between non-profit and for-profit providers, thus incentivizing organizers to develop the best “product.” Although providers might tailor trips to attract participants with varied interests, all Birthright programs would share a long-term vision and common curricular elements relating to core themes.

**Long-Term Vision:**

1. Connect with “unaffiliated” Jews by providing them with an Israel Experience
2. Launch young Jews on a “Jewish journey” that will lead to lifelong engagement with Jewish life
3. Form lasting bonds between young Jews, the State of Israel, and the Jewish community

**Operational Goals and Corresponding Attractions:**

1. Present a concise overview of the “narrative of Jewish history” by introducing key landmarks of historical, national, archeological, or natural significance that have and continue to shape Jewish life
   a. A Jewish Heritage Site (antiquity to 1900)
b. Zionist Heritage Site (1900-1948)
c. A National Heritage Site (1948-present)
d. A 'Natural' Heritage Site (a preserved outdoors landscape significant to Israel and unique to the region)
e. A Shoah (Holocaust) Heritage Site

2. Portray Israel as a modern contemporary society
   a. Arts & Culture
   b. Environmentalism & Ecology
   c. Science & Technology
   d. Politics, Society & Statehood

3. Demonstrate the connection of Judaism to Jewish values by encountering specific examples of these values
   a. Shabbat
   b. Hebrew as a Living Language

4. Convey Israel as a country of diverse views and as an example of pluralism in Jewish life
   a. Diversity in Israel
   b. Israeli and Palestinian perspectives and the shades of gray in between

Designed primarily by Barry Chazan, the Taglit-Birthright Israel curriculum invokes John Dewey's experiential educational model, which centers on the essential link between feeling and knowing. Chazan and other Birthright educators reject the separation of emotion and cognition characteristic of the Western rationalist tradition and instead seek to render the objects of study emotionally resonant and thus more meaningful to participants. Tour organizers strive to create a “total experience” by engaging all of the participants’ senses and incorporating sites, informal activities and discussions, social dynamics between American Jewish peers and Israelis, and self-reflection into the curriculum.

Chazan maintains that this approach seeks to correct for the lack of holistic, organic experiences in modern Jewish life due to the disintegration of traditional Jewish communities. Nevertheless, one must note that the Birthright trip is an entirely constructed experience, and the core themes chosen by philanthropists and educators (and the way they shape the curriculum) reflect the donors’ and
educators’ perceptions of what constitutes Jews’ collective identity and a modern Israel.46 Birthright educators utilize tiyul (hiking), group dynamics, the mifgash (encounters with Israeli peers), meetings with Israeli leaders, and tie-in conversations to cultivate participants’ sense of belonging, pride, and love for the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Participants and the Land of Israel: Tiyulim (Hikes)

The tiyul’s purposes are to mold the character of our youth and to make it an organic, inseparable part of the landscape of the homeland; to plant in its heart and soul, and to inscribe in its flesh and sinews the healthy feeling of deep-rooted, unseverable, valiant communion with the land...and with its entire history.

—Zev Vilnay, 194847

Perhaps unwittingly, participants of Taglit-Birthright Israel trace the steps of their Zionist forbearers when they come to “know” Israel through immersive experiences such as tiyul (strenuous hikes).48 Beginning in the early 1900s, leaders of the Zionist movement studied the topography, geology, and botany of Palestine and guided Jewish immigrants on tiyul in order to inculcate a deep connection between recently arrived Jews and the physical homeland.49 Zionists cited the bible, not their contemporary John Dewey, when they affirmed that “to know” the land of Israel was to commune with it.50 They believed “knowing the land of Israel” would breed love for the land of Israel and viewed ritual hikes as a way of sacralizing the land and asserting control over it.51 Crafters of the Birthright curriculum employ early Zionists’ methods to realize similar goals when they organize hikes up Mount Masada and Mount Meron.
Recalling one Birthright group’s journey on Mount Meron, Kelner posits that the physical challenge, when framed correctly, imbues the Israeli landscape with emotional and spiritual significance. At the Mount Meron vista, Sam, a Birthright participant, leaned on a tree and expressed his new attachment to Israel: “In America, you have beautiful things and places and you appreciate it, but I don’t feel like its mine. Here, this [tree] is mine. This is my tree.”52 As Sam’s comment illustrates, many participants begin to feel ownership over both the Land of Israel and the Jewish experience through tiyulim. Even if participants do not make aliyah, their newfound connection to the Land of Israel often inspires participants to act as ambassadors of Israeli goodwill in their respective countries. 53

Participants and Their Relationship with Each Other: The Group as a Total Institution

In addition to emphasizing the “individual-homeland” encounter, Birthright educators render the shared group experience a central component of Taglit-Birthright tours. Although multiple Birthright busses, which each carry approximately forty people, travel along the same route at the same time, Birthright educators intentionally assign participants to one bus for the entire ten-day period in order to stimulate participants’ feelings of closeness to and fondness for their fellow Jewish travelers. The bus group remains the one constant throughout Birthright tours’ rapidly changing scenery and is the primary grounding for individuals’ experience of “self-in-the-homeland.”54 By fulfilling Erving Goffman’s four-point definition, the bus groups becomes a “total institution:”
1) All aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same authority
2) Each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried out in the immediate company of a large batch of others
3) The day’s activities are tightly scheduled
4) The enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan to purportedly fulfill the official goals of the institution

Although the financial and logistical limitations of mass tourism generate these conditions, Birthright organizers capitalize on participants’ constant companionship in order to cultivate a group mentality and to thus fulfill North American philanthropists’ Diaspora-building mission—attempts to sustain and strengthen the Diaspora Jewish community. Gidi, an Israeli Birthright tour guide, regrettably recognizes that the bus group becomes a type of “bubble” or “a kind of mini-US.” Quite often, however, guides intentionally create this “bubble” during bus rides by sacrificing opportunities to elaborate on the Israeli sights outside in favor of nurturing a tight group dynamic through activities on the bus.

Many Birthright tours include Jews from the same campus or region in order to increase the likelihood that participants will remain in contact after the trip. For participants from sparsely Jewish-populated areas, the Jews in the Birthright bus group powerfully influence their subsequent identification with and attachment to the Jewish people at large. Regardless of participants’ previous interactions with other Jews, Birthright educators hope that participants will remain in touch with friends made on Taglit-Birthright and will feel positively connected to the global Jewish population long after the ten-day trip.

Participants and Israelis: Mifgashim (Encounters)
**Encounters with Israeli Peers**

Birthright not only connects participants to fellow Diaspora Jews but also facilitates a *mifgash* (encounter) between Diaspora Jews and Israelis of the same age. On every Taglit-Birthright trip, six to eight Israelis (87% of whom are Israeli Defense Force soldiers) travel and engage with their peers from the Diaspora for five to ten days. In the mid-1980s, Anne Lanski, a young Chicago-based educator, pioneered the concept of the *mifgash* in hopes of bridging the distance between young North American Jews and Israelis. Now, 80% of Birthright participants cite the *mifgash* as “the most important part of their journey,” and Steven Bayme, a renowned Jewish sociologist, affirms that the *mifgash* is the most essential component of the Birthright curriculum. In attempting to convince Diaspora Jewry that they should feel a deep attachment to Israel, the *mifgash* transforms Diaspora-Israel encounters into person-to-person relationships.

In some cases, the *mifgash* results in marriages or close, lasting friendships, and in most, the *mifgash* adds depth to participants’ understandings of life in Israel and the broad range of Israeli perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The *mifgash* also enhances participants’ compassion for Israelis by portraying oft-demonized Israeli soldiers as human beings and friends. Lital, an Israeli soldier and *mifgash* participant, mentions that dressing in normal clothing (instead of in uniform) allowed her to more easily connect to her Diaspora Jewish peers. In an interview for the *Yale Daily News*, Courtney Sender discussed her 2009 Birthright experience, in which *mifgash* soldiers returned to their bases for emergency military duties, and stated, “That was really scary to know that someone we knew and formed a
relationship with was involved in [the violence].”\textsuperscript{64} Sender also said that getting to know Israelis gave her a greater stake in the country’s affairs.

Accounts from Birthright alumni indicate that the \textit{mifgash} not only engenders participants’ platonic love for Israelis but also sometimes leads to romantic interactions between male IDF soldiers and North American females and less frequent relationships between female Israeli soldiers and North American males.\textsuperscript{65} Half-joking and half-serious, Steinhardt has offered to pay for the honeymoons of couples that meet on Birthright.

Critics of the \textit{mifgash} either express disgust at the eroticism in the bus turned “love incubator” or express skepticism at the highly praised \textit{mifgash} paradigm. Professor Jon A. Levison of Brandeis University, concedes that the \textit{mifgash} successfully “foster[s] interpersonal bonds,” “broaden[s] horizons,” and “stimulate[s] self-reflection” by Birthright participants yet maintains that it does not necessarily establish a connection between individuals and “the larger (and more abstract) collectivity that we call ‘the Jewish people.’”\textsuperscript{66} He argues that a sense of peoplehood would better be pursued through story, language, and love; however, he fails to recognize that the \textit{mifgash}, which does indeed intertwine these three listed components, does not act alone but operates within a structured regime aimed at building peoplehood.\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, researchers as the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University (CMJS) have concluded, “Repeated interactions with Israelis significantly increase students’ attachment to Israel and to the global Jewish community.”\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Encounters with Israeli Leaders}
Although not formally a part of the *mifgash*, the encounters between Birthright participants and Israeli leaders serve an essential role in making Diaspora Jewry feel valued by and welcomed into the Israeli community. Most Birthright participants do not have direct access to leaders of national importance in their host countries, but in Israel, these young adults attend lectures and question-and-answer sessions with famous Israeli politicians, editors, authors, activists, rabbis. Past speakers include Benjamin Netanyahu (the current Prime Minister of Israel), David Landau (the former editor-in-chief of *Haaretz*), and Natan Sharansky (a prominent Israeli politician, human rights activist, and best-selling author). The speakers generally conduct informal sessions, in which they dress casually and engage with participants on a first name basis. They present different perspectives on being Jewish and tend to urge participants to remain educated on Israeli issues, which are deemed pertinent to all Jews. Although participants do not rank these sessions as highly as other components of the program in post-trip surveys, Israeli leaders’ solicitousness and accessibility seem to increase the likelihood that Birthright participants will speak with authority on the situation in Israel and will choose to remain involved in Israel-related activities.

**Participants and Their Jewishness: Tie-Ins and New Perspectives**

*We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.*

- John Dewey

The Birthright guidelines require every trip provider to implement at least three “Tie-In sessions” (formal group conversations) throughout the trip in order to
ensure that Birthright participants reflect on their experiences with their peers.\textsuperscript{71} If conducted successfully, “Tie-In sessions” will enable participants to

1) follow the journey’s thematic structure and better integrate their insights within Birthright’s broader educational narrative and framework

2) process and reflect upon their experiences as individuals and as group members\textsuperscript{72}

In each session, tour guides hope travelers will internalize Birthright’s message through active dialogue, but the formality of these discussions varies depending on the trip provider. Some providers simply ask participants to share personal responses while Hillel and others follow a structured curriculum for each tie-in session.\textsuperscript{73}

Hillel has developed questions and readings on topics such as “How I Relate to Israel-How Israel Relates to Me,” “My Relationship with Jewish Memory,” and “Special and Normal.” The latter topic relates to Jewish “otherness” in the Diaspora and poses questions such as, “What about being Jewish makes you feel special or unique and what about your Jewish identity makes you feel normal…in relation to other people?” Some participants recall hearing anti-Jewish jokes or feeling hyperconscious of looking Jewish in their host countries; others mention the pride they feel when everything in Israel, even the decorations on buildings in Tel Aviv, are Jewish.

Tie-In sessions also allow participants to discuss controversial issues and Middle Eastern politics within limited discursive boundaries. For example, participants can criticize Israel and Israeli-Palestinian relations, but underlying all discussions is unanimous acceptance of Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist.
Moreover, despite presenting an array of political viewpoints on Israeli-Palestinian relations at sites and in “Tie-Ins,” Birthright cultivates support for Israel and for many of its policies because participants *discuss* Palestinian perspectives but *experience* those of Israelis.  

**Part III: Reactions to Taglit-Birthright Israel**

**Addressing the “Brainwashing” Criticism**

In their respective articles, Kiera Feldman, Sandra Korn, and Belen Fernandez implicitly and explicitly argue that Birthright brainwashes participants with “racist,” “dangerous,” and unethical dogma. They assert that Birthright’s promotion of Israel is illegitimate because it fails to extensively voice Palestinians’ viewpoints and to reveal “the truth;” in doing so, however, they reject Birthright’s explicit mission. Jennifer Zimmerman, Global Chief Strategic Officer at McGarryBowen Advertising Agency declares, “The difference between brainwashing and legitimate emotional marketing is full disclosure,” and thus completely refutes accusations that the “Birthright agenda” is dishonest. Taglit-Birthright Israel repeatedly and publicly announces its objectives, and participants are aware of these intentions before they participate on the trip.

Furthermore, the Taglit-Birthright Educational Platform professes Birthright’s commitment to developing a “culture of ideas” on each trip: “[Taglit] aims to enable participants to deliberate on ideas and beliefs in a safe and non-judgmental context that fosters open-ended discussion and critical examination of concepts and viewpoints.” In fact, Birthright educators sometimes attempt to
remain apolitical at the expense of failing to address political issues. When participants responded to questions about their “Israel education” on Birthright, only 59% said they had learned about the Arab-Israeli conflict “to a great extent” while 82% and 79% felt they had respectively learned about the Israeli natural environment and Israeli culture and lifestyle “to a great extent.” These responses suggest that Birthright educators tend to steer clear of political issues in order to avoid accusations of indoctrination.

Alan Dershowitz, a fervent supporter of Israel, posits that the “brainwashing criticism” is proof of Birthright’s effectiveness; he states that “enemies of Israel” would not try to “sabotage [Birthright]” if they did not believe it achieved its goals. In addition to referring to negative articles, Dershowitz highlights multiple cases in which Jews who are “virulently anti-Israel” travel on Birthright trips in attempts to undermine the entire Birthright tour and curriculum.

Evaluating Taglit-Birthright Israel

As investors in the Jewish future, Birthright founders have delegated the task of evaluating Birthright’s “effectiveness” and impact to Jewish sociologists and scholars at Brandeis University. Several researchers at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) specialize in Birthright and have conducted numerous studies including “The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices,” “Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: the Taglit-Birthright Mifgash,” and “Connecting Diaspora Young Adults to Israel: Lessons from Taglit-Birthright Israel.” The CMJS team has become an authority on Birthright statistics and has consistently concluded that Birthright prompts significant long-term
changes in participants’ emotional attachments to Israel and the Jewish people and counteracts the likelihood of intermarriage for participants from all religious upbringings.\textsuperscript{81}

**Impacts on Participants’ Attitudes and Emotions**

In the CMJS 2012 update, researchers compared the responses of Birthright participants six to eleven years after their trip with those who applied for Birthright during the same time period but could not attend because demand outweighed Birthright’s maximum capacity.\textsuperscript{82} Main findings included:

1) Taglit participants are 42 percent more likely to feel “very much” connected to Israel compared to individuals who did not go on the program.

2) Participants are 22 percent more likely to indicate that they are at least “somewhat confident” in explaining the current situation in Israel as compared to those who did not go on Taglit.

3) Taglit participants are 45 percent more likely than nonparticipants to be married to someone Jewish: 71 percent of participants marry other Jews compared to only 49 percent of non-participants.

4) Taglit participants are 23 percent more likely than nonparticipants to view raising their children Jewish as “very important”

5) By the time of the survey, 29% of Taglit participants had returned to Israel, either for vacation or for longer-term organized programs\textsuperscript{83}

CMJS researchers affirm that the people-to-people connections fostered on Birthright are the root cause of such drastic attitudinal changes.\textsuperscript{84} Kelner, who studies homeland tourism across a range of nationalities, suggests that these new person-to-person relationships (whether they be between Diaspora Jews and Israelis or two Diaspora Jews) begin to substitute for many participants’ lack of
familial connection to the Jewish State (most Diaspora Jews do not have relatives in Israel). By forging unprecedented personal bonds between Diaspora Jews and Israelis, Birthright renders Israel a place whose destiny and current situation directly affect participants’ dear friends and thus participants themselves. When two Diaspora participants develop long-term friendships, they remember Israel as the place where they met and shared a common experience.

Although many scholars concentrate on the source of participants’ attitudinal transformations, Steven Bayme hopes to measure the substance and strength of participants’ self-declared attachments to Israel and the Jewish people. Bayme considers the CMJS’s fifth finding (that nearly 30% of participants return to Israel) a good indicator of participants’ true connections to Israel because he believes participants’ decisions to embark on additional Israel trips, which they pay at their own expense, illustrates their willingness to invest their own resources into a Jewish experience.

Impacts on Participants’ Behavior

Scholars note a disjuncture between the impacts of Birthright on participants’ attitudes versus their daily behavior. The CMJS concluded that Birthright participants’ engagement in traditional Jewish life did not change across a spectrum of Diasporic Jewish practices:

1) Taglit participants are no more likely than non-participants to volunteer for Jewish causes, and participants are only slightly more likely to donate to Jewish causes than non-participants

2) Although participants are more likely to know about the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), participants are no more likely than non-participants to engage in Israel-related political activities or to express views on the future of the West Bank and East Jerusalem
3) Taglit-participants are only slightly more likely than non-participants to celebrate Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath)

4) 22 percent of Taglit participants (without children and not raised Orthodox) belong to a synagogue compared to 16 percent of non-participants, but this impact is far less pronounced than those relating to participants’ emotional connections and their marriage choices.

5) Participants are no more likely than non-participants to send their children to Jewish day care, nursery school, or pre-school.\(^8\)

Kelner attributes Birthright’s ability to alter mindsets yet not actions to the fact that the Birthright model for “being Jewish” does not match the Diaspora Jewish model.\(^8\) Birthright guides Jews to appreciate their Jewishness through immersion in Israeli daily life, which differs from isolated forms of Diasporic Jewish practice in synagogues, Jewish classrooms, or Jewish Federation meetings.\(^9\) Although they utilize different language, both Kelner and David L. Graizbord, an associate professor at the Arizona Center for Judaic studies, allude to perceptions of “the relative thickness and naturalness of Israeli Jewishness, as compared to the relative cultural thinness of Jewish life in North America.”\(^9\) Israeli Jews do not need to allocate extra time or energy to “being Jewish” because the Israeli calendar aligns with that of the bible, the Israeli weekend centers on Shabbat, Israelis speak Hebrew, and as mentioned earlier, Israeli-Tel Aviv architecture employs Jewish symbols (such as the Star of David) for decoration. In the Diaspora, however, Jews face competing demands on their self-definition and their time, and as a result, Birthright alumni do not always prioritize their newfound or newly revived Jewish identities.\(^9\)

Bayme, however, espouses the viewpoint that Birthright has indeed changed
participants’ behavior by altering the language of Judaism from “it’s hard to be a
Jew” to “it’s great to be a Jew” and by rendering Judaism a resource rather than a
burden.92 By granting young Jews a free trip to Israel, the Jewish community says,
“we care about you, don’t you care about us?” and offers Diaspora Jewry a Jewish
celebration, which provides Jews with new opportunities rather than new
obligations.93 Given that Birthright departs from synagogues’ and pro-Israel
organizations’ models of Jewish identity, Bayme affirms that scholars should not
expect Birthright alumni to increase their involvement in religious or political
Jewish life.94 Rather, Birthright concentrates on immersing Jews in Jewish
experiences and thus inspires Birthright alumni to socialize with other Jews in a
Jewish atmosphere tinged with common Jewish memories yet different from
synagogue or political advocacy settings.95

**Birthright NEXT**

In response to the CMJS’s findings on participants’ lack of involvement in
traditional Jewish life, the leadership of Taglit-Birthright Israel formed Birthright
NEXT in 2007 to increase Birthright alumni’s access and attraction to Diaspora
Jewish communities. Birthright NEXT incentivizes young Jewish adults to engage in
Jewish life after their Birthright tours by subsidizing programs such as NEXT
Shabbat, NEXT High Holidays, NEXT Book Clubs, and NEXT Grants for Social
Entrepreneurs.96 NEXT Shabbat pays for every Birthright participant to host six
Shabbat dinners at a cost of fourteen dollars per person for at most sixteen guests
and provides each host with a “Shabbox,” which contains candles, a challah cover, a
Kiddush cup, music, blessings, and information on specific Jewish communities around the world. In addition to enabling Jews to host their own Jewish gatherings or book clubs, Birthright NEXT organizes free events in major cities across the United States to strengthen the Birthright alumni network.

Who Should Foot the Bill for Jewish Experiences?

The inauguration of Birthright NEXT in 2007 led Jewish leaders to revisit the controversial issue of “paying” Jews to be Jewish, i.e. subsidizing their Birthright and post-Birthright experiences. Steven Bayme and Steve Cohen have long expressed skepticism at Birthright’s completely free model and have urged Birthright to require a minimal monetary fee from Birthright applicants. They believe that a personal investment would enhance participants’ stake in the success of each tour and would indicate that Birthright applicants value their Jewishness.

Birthright’s value, however, lies in its ability to recruit unaffiliated Jews and to render Judaism meaningful to them. Although many unaffiliated Jews generally view Birthright as an intriguing free trip, post-trip surveys indicate that less than twenty percent of participants remember their trips solely as a “fun vacation.” The vast majority of participants deem their Birthright tours a “group Jewish experience” or “journey to Jewish roots,” and seventy-three percent of participants agree that Birthright was a “life-changing experience.” Dershowitz celebrates the generosity of Jewish philanthropists, Jewish organizations, and the Israeli government and their willingness to invest in young Jews who they do not know.

Kelner also believes that older generations should fund the Jewish
experiences of young adult Jews until they possess a steady income and can start giving back. Unlike Bayme and Cohen, Kelner believes Birthright renders the Israel experience much more meaningful by eliminating money and fundraising from the equation. He notes that many Jews become skeptical and disinterested when they associate certain benefits and free experiences with fundraising schemes.

Given that the Birthright organization is less than fifteen years old, scholars must patiently study participants as they transition from young adulthood to parenthood and (hopefully) begin to engage in Jewish tzedakah (charity and social justice).

Conclusion

Taglit-Birthright—as an Israel experience—profoundly impacts young Jewish participants’ sense of belonging to Israel, the Jewish people, and the Jewish collective memory and future. Although most Israeli educational tourism yields similar attitudinal impact, Birthright has altered Diaspora Jewry’s connection to Israel by exponentially increasing the number and types of Jews visiting Israel. Birthright has extended the Israel experience to thousands of young Jews who might otherwise not visit Israel due to a lack of funds or interest and has consequently altered the process by which they relate to their Jewish identities. Reflecting on the tragic yet hopeful narrative of Jewish history while simultaneously experiencing a thriving, vibrant, democratic Israel inspires feelings of pride within many Diaspora Jews.
The attitudinal shifts sparked by Birthright do not always provoke behavioral changes, but Kelner argues that once participants return to their Diaspora communities, participants’ lack of involvement depends not on Birthright’s shortcomings but on the communities’ failure to meaningfully engage Jewish young adults. Birthright ignites a passion within most participants, but their permanent communities determine whether or not they will act on those passions. Birthright NEXT has attempted to integrate alumni into their local Jewish communities and to stimulate new Jewish niches, but other organizations need to more proactively and creatively design programming for younger generations of Jews.

As Jews increasingly seek to celebrate Jewish life through communal activities, questions remain regarding the point at which they should begin to pay for their own Jewishness. Initial results substantiate claims of Birthright’s overwhelming impact, but conclusions relating to long-term Jewish continuity require data spanning several generations. Steve Cohen still remains skeptical of Birthright’s ability to completely reverse intermarriage trends because currently, only ten percent of the grandchildren of intermarried couples will lead Jewish lives. If Birthright can continue to universalize the Israel experience, which has proven to be an effective means of Jewish education and socialization, it might succeed in altering the pessimistic trajectory of Jewish life in America.
Glossary of Terms

Aliyah- Hebrew for “going up;” refers to Jewish immigration to Israel

Diaspora- “dispersion;” refers to all Jewish settlements outside the Land of Israel

Galut- Hebrew for “exile”

Haskalah- Hebrew for “enlightenment” and “intellect;” refers to the Jewish Enlightenment, a movement among European Jews in the 18th–19th centuries that advocated adopting enlightenment values, pressing for better integration into European society, and increasing education in secular studies, Hebrew language, and Jewish history

Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Life- an international organization that provides resources and programming for Jewish students on college campuses.

Mifgash- Hebrew for “encounter;” refers to the component of the Birthright tour that introduces Diaspora Jews to Israeli peers and fosters friendships and romantic relationships between both groups

Pogrom- Yiddish for “thunder;” refers to the violent massacres and persecution of Jews in the Russian empire and other countries in Eastern Europe

Shabbat- Jewish Sabbath lasting from Friday night at sundown until Saturday night at sun down

Shandah- Yiddish for “disgrace”

Tiyul- Hebrew for “trip;” refers to the strenuous hiking on Birthright tours
Remarks on Being a CAMD Scholar

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