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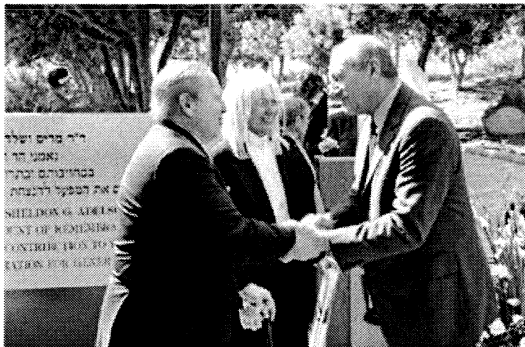


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**AMERICAN JEWRY**



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, right, congratulates Miriam and Sheldon Adelson at a ceremony in October marking the couple's \$25 million donation to Yad Vashem.

**Adelson gift of \$25 million a year provides huge boost to birthright**

By Jacob Berkman  
February 6, 2007



NEW YORK, February 6 (JTA) - The much anticipated Adelson Family Charitable Foundation made its first official gift this week as billionaire Sheldon Adelson and his wife, Dr. Miriam Adelson, pledged \$25 million a year for the foreseeable future to birthright israel.

The gift will allow birthright to send 20,000 Jews between the ages of 18 and 26 on free 10-day trips to Israel this summer, doubling its previous capacity.

According to birthright, the money will continue for several years provided the program's other funders, who contributed \$51 million last year, maintain their levels of giving.

The announcement comes at a time when birthright was turning away young Jews because its funding didn't keep pace with the demand for space on the popular trips.

It also comes as sociologists, Jewish communal professionals and philanthropists have pointed to a greater need to engage Jews in their 20s and 30s in Jewish identity-building programs. They tout birthright as among the most successful programs in that endeavor. "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," Adelson said in a news release announcing the gift Tuesday.

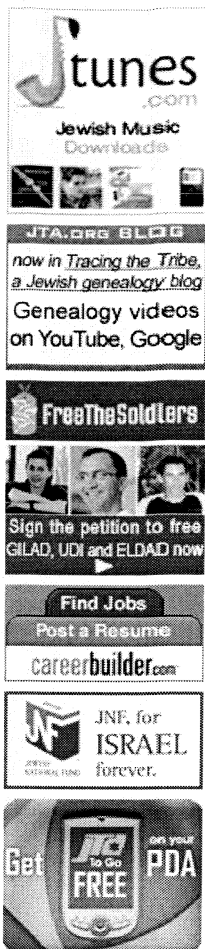
"By founding the birthright program, Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman have given one of the greatest gifts to the Jewish people in our generation. We applaud their creativity and generosity, and we are privileged and honored to provide the resources to enhance the program and solidify its future."

Since 2000, birthright has sent more than 120,000 young Jews from 51 countries to Israel for free. It has become widely accepted as the most successful and formative Jewish experience for young adults.

The program has been jointly funded by private philanthropists, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Israeli government and the North American federation system.

Bringing Adelson into the funding picture could remarkably change the program's reach.

Adelson, CEO of The Las Vegas Sands Corp., which owns the Sands and Venetian casinos in Las Vegas, is building a Las Vegas-like strip in Macao, China. The project, which could cost up to \$11 billion, has caused LVS



stock to skyrocket, along with Adelson's wealth.

In September, Forbes Magazine estimated Adelson's worth at \$20.5 billion, placing him behind only Bill Gates and Warren Buffet on the list of wealthiest Americans. Adelson, who is believed to make about \$1 million per hour, could overtake Buffet as the richest American within the next year.

The Adelsons' Jewish philanthropy also has been growing. In October the couple gave \$25 million to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel. In December they gave \$5 million to Birthright to pay for 2,000 Jews who had been on the waiting list for winter trips.

Days before the December birthright gift was announced, word leaked that the Adelsons would start a foundation that could dwarf anything the Jewish community has seen from an individual philanthropist. In early January, Adelson tapped Boston-based lawyer Michael Bohnen to serve as president of The Adelson Family Charitable Foundation.

Speculation on details of the foundation has been rife for months. Initial reports said it would disperse \$200 million to \$250 million per year to Jewish causes.

But those close to Adelson, including Bohnen, have remained mum about the reports. Sources close to Adelson say the foundation actually could give out more per year than what was reported.

The Yad Vashem contribution and the earlier birthright gift will be funneled through the foundation, Bohnen told JTA, but Tuesday's gift is the first grant made by the foundation since it opened.

Engaging young Jewish adults has become a top priority in the Jewish communal world.

Sociologist Len Saxe has been working on a U.S. population study that estimates up to 1.3 million more U.S. Jews than previously believed and that Jews in their 20s and 30s were especially undercounted by the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey.

This means the Jewish community not only is larger than previously believed but less affiliated, Saxe said. He noted a population bulge among Jews in their 20s and 30s, and a large segment of that group wanting more opportunities for Jewish engagement.

Some birthright officials had seen the record 33,000 North American applicants - more than the number of bar and bat mitzvahs last year - for 2006 trips as a possible peak for the program, according to Jeffrey Solomon, president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

But Saxe's data suggest that the number of applicants will continue to grow.

Now birthright is looking at a different tipping point - where its free trips to Israel become a normative Jewish experience like the bar or bat mitzvah, birthright CEO Shimshon Shoshani said in a telephone interview.

Birthright most likely will extend the time frame for summer trips an extra two months, through August and September, to accommodate the expanded capacity.

But the uniting of need for more funding with a benefactor with seemingly limitless potential has the philanthropy world buzzing.

"This is an exciting time in Jewish life because we have all seen mega gifts in American philanthropy, but we haven't yet seen a gift of this size in Jewish life," Solomon said. "But the generosity of a \$25 million gift to be spent over a three-month period is unprecedented and hopefully a turning point in Jewish philanthropy.

"It shows that if there are exciting options in Jewish life, there will be philanthropists there to support them."