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[Birthright Day 11](#)

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Ten days changed their lives. Now what?

One year ago this month, at the age of 26, I visited Israel for the first time. I did not go with my family, as I had long imagined, but in the company of 34 complete strangers.

We arrived at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport a motley crew of Americans: Uri was a ba'al teshuva from California who liked to pontificate on the subtleties of Jewish observance, while Jaime was a sun-kissed sorority girl who knew no other Jews on her University of New Hampshire campus. Aaron, a bespectacled Los Angeles hipster, never had a bar mitzvah, while Russia-born Mike was once shomer negiah. As for me, I grew up in an observant Conservative home, which meant we celebrated two days of Rosh Hashanah, fasted on Yom Kippur and, more often than not, made a Passover pilgrimage to Ohio for lengthy Seders with relatives. But by my college years, I was more interested in socializing, and my Jewish identity was not something I actively cultivated.

Indeed, had any of us met at a party or on a college campus, we likely would not have had much to say to each other. But over the next 10 days, we discovered that what united us was far more powerful than what divided us. After all, we had come to Israel on a free Taglit-Birthright Israel trip and, from the moment we landed, the legacy that had pulled us there was palpable: we were all Jews returning home.

And so, with Judaism as our bond and Israel a rich place to explore it, we traveled the length of the country, from Jerusalem down to the Negev and back up to the Golan Heights. We sat on the 2,000-year-old stones of the Old City and stood at the very spot in the Judean Hills where the Bible says David slew Goliath. We celebrated Shabbat at the kotel, singing and dancing our way through endless rounds of Am Yisrael Chai. We climbed Masada, rode camels in the Negev, slept in Bedouin tents and floated in the Dead Sea. We mourned our murdered brethren at Yad Vashem and fallen Israeli soldiers at Mount Herzl. Indeed, the excitement of being in Israel, of being connected to the Jewish people and belonging to a community much larger than each of us was tangible, the energy contagious. The result? Dancing. A lot of dancing. In the aisles of the bus, at a bar in Tel Aviv, on a sunset cruise on the Galilee - wherever we could find a beat.

But on day 11, the music stopped. Just like that, the trip was over and it was time to go home. And the energy that was left - the momentum we had built - well, what would become of it? After all, we no longer had our group, our tight-knit community, to help us keep the beat alive.

Some of us tried anyway. Upon my return to Chicago, I decided that even though I had been working at a Jewish newspaper for more than a year, I wanted more than just a professional relationship with my Judaism. And so I took to lighting Shabbat candles. On the first Friday night I was home, I dug out the green tin containing six tea candles that had been given as a gift to our Birthright group. As soon as 4:30 p.m. rolled around, I lit the candles, circled my hands inward and repeated the blessings my mom had taught me as a child. Afterwards, I felt proud. This, I thought ambitiously, I will do forever.

But by week two, some of the magic was gone. And when week three came, well, I think it was three hours past sundown when I finally remembered to light. Needless to say, I fell off the bandwagon the following week and I haven't seen that green tin since.

As it turns out, I wasn't the only Birthright alumna to have that experience.



*Birthright participants enjoy a light moment in Caesarea, Summer 2007.
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“I loved the feeling when we were there, the sense of community,” said Jaime Pruzansky, 23, the co-ed from the University of New Hampshire, who also lit candles for a few weeks after the trip and now lives just outside of Boston. “And then it just ended. It’s like quitting smoking cold turkey. You had all that excitement and you felt so comfortable and you [felt] like you belonged, and then...it was like, ‘O.K., thanks for coming to Israel, hope you had fun, hope to see you back soon, bye.’ ”

And so, like many other participants before us, Jaime and I had come to the same sad realization: that ultimately, energy fades, momentum wanes and, if you let it, so will Birthright. In fact, according to Rabbi Daniel Brenner, vice-president of education for the Birthright Israel Foundation, of the 100,000-plus Birthright alumni living in North America, an estimated 60 percent are not involved with Jewish life in any significant way upon their return.

“Nearly every alum I have spoken to,” says Brenner, who estimates that number to be around 600 in the last six months, “tells me that after Birthright, they did not know where to turn. Some of them got lucky and found a rabbi or a Jewish organization to connect with. But many are searching for the same type of non-judgmental, informal community experience that they experienced on Birthright Israel.”

Recognizing this missed opportunity, Brenner is leading Birthright into the next frontier of Jewish engagement: effective follow-through. After all, as anyone familiar with the program will tell you, if the Jewish community can learn to engage alumni upon their return, if it can figure out a way to channel the energy of young people into involvement, it’s possible we may discover that this so-called “lost generation” of Jews is not really so lost after all.

Birthright 101

When Richard Joel, the president of Yeshiva University, told the 2006 General Assembly of Jewish Federations that Taglit Birthright Israel was the best invention in the Jewish world since the bar and bat mitzvah, Len Cole, the former national chairman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, was among those in the crowd who gave him a rousing ovation. And yet, when Cole thought about it a day or so later, he realized that Joel was only half right.

“For many Jews, the bar and bat mitzvah is their rite of passage out of their activity with Jewish life,” explains Cole, who also sits on the United Jewish Communities’ four-member Birthright steering committee. “Birthright, for many, is a way back in.”

Indeed, since the Taglit-Birthright Israel program launched in 1999, it has provided that opportunity to 150,000 Jews from 52 countries, all between the ages of 18 and 26, none of whom had been on an organized trip to Israel before. With an annual budget of \$80 million, Birthright has the capacity to send between 30,000 and 40,000 participants each year, and while it’s too early to know what its long-term impact will be on Jewish life in America, many experts believe it will be enormous.

Dr. Leonard Saxe, a professor of Jewish community research and social policy at Brandeis University, is one of those experts. He has been studying Birthright alumni since the program’s inception and publishing his findings every two years. He says that the words most frequently used by alumni to describe Birthright trips are “amazing” and “life-changing.”

What’s more, Saxe says, participants - who are generally not the most engaged Jews nor those on the absolute periphery of Jewish life - are not simply describing an experience they thought was “fun.” His most recent study, released in 2006, showed that even three years after the trip, 61 percent of alumni said they felt very connected to Israel and 71 percent felt a strong connection to the Jewish people. These alumni are also more likely than their non-alumni counterparts to participate in Jewish events on their college campuses and to say they want to marry other Jews.

“It affirms their sense of being part of the Jewish people,” says Saxe, who is also the director of the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute, which

work together to study American Jewry and Jewish organizations. “They feel connected in ways that they didn’t before they went. They’re interested in Israel, they’re interested in their Jewish identity.”

The idea for giving young Diaspora Jews a free trip to Israel to strengthen their Jewish identities was first floated by Knesset member Yossi Beilin around 1994. Many thought the plan far-fetched, and it languished until about three years later, when mega-philanthropists Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman set an evolved version of it in motion. To fund it, they concocted a tripartite arrangement among fellow philanthropists (there are now about 14 in total), the state of Israel, and Jewish communities and Federations worldwide. They also approached educators and scholars like Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Barry Chazan, a professor of Jewish Education at Spertus College and the founding educational director of Taglit-Birthright Israel, to put together a rigorous but informal educational model.

“The program is built...in a way to introduce people to a diversity of links or connections,” explains Chazan, who is coauthoring a book called “Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity” with Saxe, which will be released this spring. “For some people, it’s going to be cultural, and for some people, it’s going to be political. For some people, it’s been very much related to spiritual meaning. For others, it’s been social action, social justice... We say that it is a potpourri or a diverse laboratory of different Jewish paths. Come, look, visit, experience and then choose.”

To that end, Taglit-Birthright Israel authorizes various providers - currently there are around 25 - to recruit for winter and summer trips that cater to different tastes.

This is important because, as sociologist Steven M. Cohen notes, this is a generation accustomed to choices and choosing. Indeed, studies suggest that it is no longer enough for parents to force-feed their kids a one-size-fits-all Judaism - one that hearkens back to times of persecution or outsider status and centers only around rituals and worship - and expect that this will keep them in the fold. Thus, Birthright is cultivating a new model of Jewish identity and education, one aimed at helping the unaffiliated find a reason to be Jewish, instead of trying to dictate a Jewish identity to them. And it is doing so by shifting the foundational structure of young Jews’ connection to Judaism: from one of obligation, guilt or memory, to one rooted in pride in Israel and the Jewish people.

Birthright offers a wide range of activities, from camel-riding in the Negev to rafting on the Jordan River.

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Even so, there is not universal support for the program within the Jewish community. Critics suggest that 10 days is far too short a time to have a penetrating impact and that the connection Birthright cultivates is more cultural than religious. Still others feel it diverts funding from Jewish education and day schools, which they believe play a far greater role in ensuring Jewish continuity.



Indeed, Isi Leibler, a Jerusalem Post columnist and an expert on Diaspora affairs, used to be one of those critics. But, he says, after witnessing the impact the trip has had on Birthright participants and reading reports of alumni feedback, he now admits that the encounter of Israel for the first time for many apathetic American Jews, even if it is just for 10 days, may make all the difference in sparking an interest in Jewish life.

“It’s the people who are not religious that need to be brought close,” he says. “You can’t do that by pumping religion into them. You get that by giving them some enthusiasm toward Israel and at least making them feel proud and some sort of dignity in the Jewish existence so he knows how important it is.”

And yet, both Leibler and Saxe add that in order for this spark not to lose its robustness when participants are once again immersed in the frenetic pace of their daily lives, effective post-trip programming that builds on the experience is essential. “Without the post-programming, I’d say that even then there’s a value in people coming to Israel,” Leibler explains. “But the cost [of the program] is such that it would not be justified in relation to Jewish education and other areas where some of this money may find its way. But I do justify it if there is a proper follow-up. It’s terribly important to get them involved with some form of Jewish life and activity.”

Day 11 and Beyond

But whose responsibility is it to provide the post-programming that will get at least a small majority of the alumni involved? Birthright’s? The American Jewish community’s? If the ultimate goal of engagement interventions is, as Cohen puts it, “generations of Jewish life, from now until the eye can see,” then it would seem the answer is both.

After all, when Birthright first launched, it had hoped that it would send a critical mass of newly energized Jews back to an American Jewish community waiting with outstretched arms and a bevy of ways to engage them. That didn't happen, and so around 2002, Birthright asked Barry Chazan to develop a post-programming strategy, and from there, post-trip professionals and alumni associations began popping up in various cities. These associations - many of which were Federation-based - provided participants with social, cultural and educational programs like book clubs, movie nights and guest speakers, as well as an e-newsletter every other week.

But now Birthright is determined to take this initial post-programming effort to the next level. In July, Michael Steinhardt pledged to fund post-programming for Birthright alumni so that these young 20-somethings will have a place to continue their Jewish journeys when they return home. Indeed, he says, the challenge is a big one: to create from the Birthright alumni a vigorous and exciting Diaspora community.

"I hope we can build a new Jewish community, on the rocks, on the ashes of the present non-Orthodox Jewish community in America, which I think is crummy," Steinhardt says. "It's not literate, it's not vigorous, it's not philanthropic particularly in a Jewish sense. But the spark that's created in these relatively uneducated Jews, which represents the majority of the kids that go on Birthright, that spark is a pure spark, it's a powerful spark. If we can start to fan that spark and create some fires, I think we can create a community that's far stronger, that's far more resonant and far more spiritual, and one that will have a much stronger Jewish future than the one that presently exists."

The 'Next' Step

And so, in the last year, Steinhardt has poured about \$2 million into an initiative called Birthright Israel Next, which is headed by Rabbi Daniel Brenner and will focus primarily on the post-college cohort of Birthright alumni. Though much of it is still in the planning and fundraising stages - this year's budget stands at \$6.5 million, though they hope to increase that in coming years - the unofficial launch of Birthright Israel Next was last month's Chanukah party, held simultaneously on December 8 in eight cities nationwide and was attended by 3,200 people.

"The way I look at this," Brenner says, "is that we are a bridge between people who are often, I would say, disenfranchised from the Jewish community, to help people find places eventually that are in the Jewish community. If step number one is Birthright, step number two is not going to be getting involved in the Jewish Federation. Step number five may be, but what we have to do with a lot of our participants, we have to create the educational opportunities for them to learn what is out there and for them to choose what works with them and what doesn't work with them."

To that end, Birthright Israel Next consists of both a national and a local component that uses the same multi-entry-point model that has served the trip so well. Among other social and educational initiatives, the national plan is to host a series of immersion retreats, each targeting a different interest group within the Birthright alumni population. There will be retreats that center around the arts, Hebrew, spirituality, Israel advocacy, volunteerism, environmentalism and so forth. The first one, set for February in Niagara Falls, will center on Jewish identity in Israel.

"My dream," Brenner says, "is that everybody that goes on Birthright Israel comes back and has a three-day experience where they are part of a Jewish community that fits who they are."

At the local level, Birthright Israel Next is building a peer-leadership network for alumni in 17 cities. The goal is to get each network to grant 12 Birthright Israel alumni a fellowship to develop programming that will further both their own Jewish education as well as that of their peers. The existing alumni associations will also remain in place, though they are all being folded under the Birthright Israel Next umbrella, and within this framework, there are several cities with models that seem promising.

In New York, the alumni office focuses on attaching a human face, and not just an email, to its post-programming efforts. To that end, Rebecca Sugar, the alumni association director, has her staff conducting exit interviews, which means that participants all get a phone call upon their return and an invitation to meet for coffee. The alumni office generally conducts about 800 each year, and the purpose is to discuss the trip with alumni - what excited them and where their interests lie. In addition, the alumni association has partnered with the Jewish Enrichment Center, and together they host three to five events a week, including a Jewish book club; a bar and bat mitzvah program; a home-based Torah study group; a challah-baking class; a young philanthropists committee that teaches the participants how to make a charitable donation; and a Wall Street group that hosts business lectures.

"There's tons of surveys that tell you that young people in their 20's want arts and culture, they want social," says Sugar, who estimates that in the last year, her mostly education-based programming reached

about a third, or 3,800, of the alumni in her area. “I’m going to say not really. The vast majority, they don’t even have the vocabulary of Jewish life to even know what they want. They’re going to revert back to those things in their everyday lives, but it’s not necessarily reflective of what they might be interested in Jewishly.”

In Toronto, whose Federation-based alumni association is headed by Shauna Waltman, herself a Birthright alumna, the goal is to get a majority of the city’s estimated 12,000 alumni to connect with the local community. Waltman says they are currently reaching about 35 percent, and to facilitate getting them involved in at least one activity per month, the association provides niche programming in a series-style format. So, Waltman explains, the alumni interested in sports might join the JSport co-ed recreational league, while the young professionals may gravitate toward Bay Street Breakfast, a monthly speaker series that brings in Jewish professionals from different industries.

In the northwest, there is Jconnect Seattle, a program targeting Jewish young adults 21-32 in the Seattle area. Run by Daniel Linver through the University of Washington Hillel, it offers programming for 1,200 participants, many of whom are Birthright alumni. Linver, who went on the very first Birthright Israel trip, credits Jconnect’s success to participant ownership over the programming. Every three months, Jconnect holds a leadership meeting with about 35 people, and together they schedule activities for the upcoming quarter. Events run the gamut from hikes to group outings to Shabbat programs to community service and identity discussions. In February, Jconnect will host its second Jewish Arts Month, which is an opportunity for artists in the group to display their work.

“That’s a really key part,” Linver says. “People are very invested in what we’re doing here because...they are very involved in shaping what we do almost on a daily basis.”



*After they return home, some Toronto Birthright alumni attend the Bay Street Breakfast, a monthly speaking series for young professionals.
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Back on Campus

Despite Birthright Israel Next’s focus on the post-college cohort, an estimated 70 percent of Birthright participants will return to a college campus. Since most go on the trip through their campus - typically a Hillel or Chabad house - the opportunities for post-programming and community-building are somewhat inherent. Hillel, for example, which is the largest Birthright provider in the U.S., sending about 5,000- plus college students each year, helps alumni organize bus reunions and get involved in other Jewish organizations on campus, like AIPAC. It is also starting a program called TalkSpace, which will provide alumni with a safe place to continue the deep conversations they started on the trip.

“The goal,” says Andrea Hoffman, Hillel’s Taglit-Birthright Israel director, “is to connect the participant with opportunities and resources that will help them...move along their [Jewish] journey. Nearly every campus will have some sort of reunion, but after that, we are really trying to focus on relationships and not programs. Students can expect opportunities to plan their own programs if they want, with support from Hillel staff.”

Along those lines, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Jewish Federation of Greater Boston, has sunk more than \$1 million into an initiative that launched within the last two years at Hillels on five campuses in its area. Called IACT (Inspiration, Activate, Commitment, Transform), the program provides each campus Hillel with a full-time Birthright professional whose job is to take participants from pre-trip planning through post-trip engagement. The latter includes offering grants to participants who are encouraged to initiate Jewish programs back on campus. On the Brandeis University campus, for example, Birthright alumni have created a film series, while at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, many are signing up for one-credit Hebrew and Israel advocacy courses through their Hillel.

Finally, Mayanot, which is a Chabad-affiliated Birthright provider, started a pilot program at the University of Colorado- Boulder this past fall. It offered an eight-week class on Israel that featured a different speaker each week discussing a facet of Israeli society - from the cultural and political to the religious and historical. About 15 alumni took the course, and Mayanot hopes to tweak its curriculum and expand it to more campuses in the fall.

A Window of Opportunity

If Birthright can continue to expand and become a normative experience for young Jews - along the lines of the bar or bat mitzvah - it will accomplish a goal that has never been achieved: 10 to 15 years down the

road, more than 50 percent of North American Jews will have visited Israel. That, both Saxe and Chazan agree, could create a seismic change in the nature of American Jewish life and identity. After all, research shows that Jews who have been to Israel have an ongoing and lasting connection with Israel and high levels of commitment to Jewish peoplehood.

“It’ll be more engaged, closer to Israel,” Saxe says. “Birthright has made it clear to those who participate that being Jewish is a contact sport, and it’s about being part of the people and about being part of a family, of a community, of a klal.”

And yet, within this collective, there will still be room for the individual to cultivate a personally meaningful connection to his or her Judaism. For some, the connection may be through the arts; for others, through social justice opportunities; for still more, it may be through AIPAC, the Hebrew language or religious practice. What’s important, most experts agree, is that they create some identity - any identity at all - where once there was none. And further, that this identity becomes as integral to their larger selves as, say, their passion for music or cars or sports. In other words, the goal is to help participants realize that their secular and Jewish identities do not have to be mutually exclusive. Of course, this will not happen for every single alumna, and so the challenge for Birthright is to further deepen the program so that more and more participants return home even hungrier to shape their Jewish identity and community.

But the problem on the ground here in America remains very real: there is a huge disconnect between the institutionalized Jewish community, like the Federations and synagogues, and the individuals who will comprise it in the future, including Birthright alumni. This generation - my generation - is largely illiterate in the language of Jewish life, not because we choose to be but because we were never educated in it. And so, 10 years down the road, when we are asked to be on the boards of Jewish organizations or Federations, we will feel much like most of us do today when we step inside a synagogue: ignorant, like outsiders, like we don’t belong and that we would rather be somewhere we do.

The challenge, then, for synagogues and Federations is to develop a multitude of ways to engage this population, and Birthright has at least provided a model, a common language and a starting point.

But these organizations should remember that, as Shauna Waltman of the Toronto alumni association points out, “[Birthright is] this wild, radical, totally out-of-the-box idea. You almost need to counter that out-of-the-box experience with a more out-of-the-box experience...to get people to start wanting to connect to Judaism and to the community.”

And so, the \$64 million question remains: can the institutionalized American Jewish community step up to the plate? If not, it may just be that Birthright alumni and their peers go out and create their own institutions, as some already are, along the lines of the independent minyanim that are spreading like wildfire across the country. If that happens, the future may be bleak for our synagogues and Federations. But if they can make themselves relevant to this generation, they will find, much as Birthright has, that many of us will respond, that the potential is limitless and that it is possible to have a Diaspora community that truly understands klal Yisrael.

As for me, though I haven’t started lighting candles again, I’m slowly building a Jewish identity for myself on this side of the Atlantic. In recent months, my best friend - a fellow Birthright alumna - and I have started attending meetings at the Chicago Federation’s Young Leadership Division (YLD), as well as Shabbat synagogue-hopping in the hopes of finding a place that fits with us.

Indeed, at a recent dinner, a Shared Shabbat hosted by YLD and Chicago’s Temple Shalom, the executive director of YLD asked the 125 people in the room whether they had ever traveled to Israel. Nearly 75 percent raised their hands. As I reflected on the evening later, I realized that a few years ago, this wouldn’t have been the case and that perhaps they had been drawn to the dinner on that wintry November Friday for the same reason I had: Israel.

After all, it’s just like I wrote in my journal on the first day of my Birthright trip, after we had walked through the tunnels of the Old City and placed our notes in the crevices of the Western Wall: “We are but continuing a 2,000-year-old tradition.”

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