

Op-Ed: Step up commitment to birthright

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Birthright Israel is one of the most effective programs at building Jewish identity among the young, yet there's so much more it can and should do. All it takes is a Jewish community determined to make the necessary investment, Jeffrey Solomon writes.

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NEW YORK, Feb. 6 (JTA) -- When young American Jews prefer Cinco de Mayo parties to Purim celebrations, Israel is in trouble. When they'd rather pay for a trip to Cancun than take a free one to Israel, not just the Jewish state is in trouble -- so is the future of American Jewry. Unfortunately, we see more and more young Jews making such choices. Roughly one-third of young American Jews say their Jewish identity means little to them, recent surveys show.

If the trend continues, American Jewry's historic role as a key strategic asset to Israel will be severely undermined. Could the timing be any worse, given the threats Israel faces today from Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, growing anti-Semitism in the Muslim world, and the indifference to Israel's security in Europe and elsewhere?

Let's not forget that as Israel goes, so goes the spiritual well-being, and perhaps even the physical safety, of American Jews -- not to mention the remainder of the Jewish Diaspora.

How has this happened? As the comic-strip character Pogo famously said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." American Jews have been enormously successful in myriad ways, but not in passing on a love of Israel to today's younger Jews. Arguably, until recently we didn't even try very hard.

Taglit-birthright Israel -- the most desired Israel educational experience for American Jews aged 18 to 26 who haven't yet visited Israel on a peer-group trip -- tries harder. There are now more applicants for birthright than there are bar and bat mitzvahs in the United States. The program's market penetration is higher than Jewish schools, camps and other institutions.

To date, some 130,000 young Jews from 51 countries have visited Israel on one of the program's free 10-day trips, and the program is even more popular in some countries abroad than it is among American Jews.

The positive impact of the visits is stunning. During last summer's conflict with Hezbollah, some 54 percent of birthright Israel alumni backed Israel's military response fully,

compared to just 37 percent of young Jews in the United States who had not gone on the program.

One year after their trip, more than 80 percent of birthright alumni say they feel more connected to Israel than they did before they went. Three years later the figure still stands at more than 70 percent.

Intermarriage has had a tremendous impact on American Jewry, and it's no secret that those raised in homes with just one Jewish parent are generally less connected to the Jewish community and Israel than those raised by two Jewish parents.

In this light, it's significant that three-fifths of birthright israel participants say one year after their trip that they want to marry another Jew. Even more exciting is that after three years, 62 percent still prefer to find a Jewish spouse.

Additionally, 78 percent of these alumni say they will raise their children as Jews. Three years later the picture is even brighter, with 83 percent saying they'll do so.

These are clear signs of how the Taglit-birthright israel experience grows in importance as participants mature into the values they've been exposed to during their formative years -- the very age group the program serves.

Still, there's so much more that birthright israel can and should do. All it takes is a Jewish community determined to make the necessary investment of just \$2,400 per participant.

Today more than half of all birthright israel applicants in the United States are put on a waiting list because of funding shortfalls. Four-fifths of those on the waiting list never get the chance to take the trip, either because they fail to reapply or because the timing no longer works for them.

We must strike while their enthusiasm is at its height -- when they first apply. We also know that if there were an option to take a second trip as a young adult, it would do a lot more to cement a lifelong bond with Israel.

And imagine what an effort modeled after the Peace Corps, in which Diaspora and Israeli youth work together in Israel and elsewhere, could do for the Jewish state and Jewish spirit.

There's no doubt that Taglit-birthright israel is a great success, but it must try harder. And it is.

If this is truly to be a young Jew's birthright, then waiting lists are unacceptable. Planning for the program's expansion is under way, but it awaits resource development.

Recently I participated in the annual Herzliya conference in Israel, at which a bevy of political, military, academic and philanthropic leaders put forth a host of suggestions for securing the Jewish state's future. Many of the suggestions were on target.

But what future can there be if young Jews are not invested in Israel and in their Jewish selves?

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