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# Ten Years Later, Birthright Still Reaching Young Jews

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Imagine yourself in February at the first hour of Birthright Israel registration, joining with 10,000 other North Americans. That number swells to 20,00 within 24 hours and 40,000 when registration closes just a week later. Will you be selected for that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Or will you be placed on the waiting list? Again!

A pervasive narrative of contemporary Jewry in America is that Jewish young adults are “distancing” themselves from Israel. Although pessimism is widespread, it is difficult to reconcile with the facts on the ground — in particular, the stunning success of Birthright Israel. Only one out of three young Jews who registered for the free, 10-day visit to Israel was accommodated for the summer trips. Evidence suggests that Jewish young adults are not only interested in Israel, but that they are more emotionally connected than any previous generation of young Jews.

As long-time observers and analysts of Birthright Israel, we are convinced that a new generation of Jewish young adults is emerging. Fear of assimilation and policy disputes over Israel notwithstanding, these young adults are proud of their Jewish identity and eager to see themselves as part of a worldwide Jewish community. For their parents and grandparents, Jewishness was indelibly linked to religion and framed by ethnic and cultural “otherness.” Contemporary Jewish young adults, in contrast, mostly know Jewishness as an admired identity and are increasingly attracted by the positive meaning-making elements of Jewish tradition.

For those of us who grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust and witnessed the rise of the State of Israel, it may be difficult to appreciate the change, but understanding the response of Jewish young adults to Birthright Israel is instructive. Since its launch in late 1999, nearly 400,000 applicants from North America have sought to go on trips, and more than 200,000 have participated. Most have been college students, but increasingly, post-graduate young adults also participate. The power of this gift is changing the landscape. We are past the tipping point as some 25 percent of all 22-year-olds have been on a Birthright trip. There is, perhaps, as much myth about Birthright Israel as there are participants. But there is much that we can glean from the program about the state of contemporary Jewish life.

The idea for Birthright Israel came, initially, from Israeli political figure Yossi Beilin. Interested in a new relationship between the diaspora and Israel founded on education, he called for 17-year-olds throughout the diaspora to be engaged with their heritage and Israeli counterparts. His dream was a reaction not to anti-Semitism, but to Jewish apathy and lack of knowledge. It was a call to arms evocative of Herzl's early call for a Zionist movement. Not surprisingly, it was seen by many in the diaspora and Israel as unrealistic and unsustainable. Two passionate visionary American philanthropists, Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, believed otherwise and took to heart Herzl's adage that "if you will it, it is no dream."

The Birthright Israel organization that was built by Bronfman and Steinhardt was lean, participant-learner focused, and committed to adapting the best of contemporary educational approaches. The founders were driven by Beilin's powerful idea: that a trip to Israel was the "birthright" of every Jewish millennial. Although they garnered support from a few fellow philanthropists and Jewish communities, and Israeli leaders, providing an Israel experience was, at the time, a radical idea.

With only limited support, and with naysayers attacking the idea that an Israel educational trip should be a "gift," the first Birthright Israel flights arrived in Israel in December 1999. Today, more than a decade since the inaugural flights, Birthright Israel — also known by its Hebrew name, Taglit — has engaged participants from 55 countries, and continues to have lengthy waiting lists for every trip.

The founding principles of Birthright Israel were as simple as they were clear — the goal of the program is to provide an educational experience to:

- \* Strengthen Jewish identity;
- \* Enhance ahavat Yisrael: the love of Israel;
- \* Promote klal Yisrael: the connections among Jews as a people.

The program goals are not propagandistic, political or religious. To the contrary, because it is an educational program targeted at sophisticated young adults, Birthright Israel provides experiences that individual participants are encouraged to "own" for themselves.

Offering the program as a gift, with no "strings" attached, was central. Although the founders hoped that the program would stimulate life-long Jewish engagement, they recognized that this goal could not be imposed on participants. They wanted to create an authentic experience. By making it a gift, the founders allowed young adults to decide for themselves whether to participate, and the playing field of Jewish life was leveled. Everyone, regardless of background and means, was treated equally. Authenticity without gimmicks or guilt trips is consistently cited as among the program's most important characteristics.

Also key was that Birthright Israel was designed to be a collective experience, not simply a journey or an educational tour. Participating with a group of peers — including Israelis — who share common connections of Jewish identity and history was central to how the program was conceptualized. Being in the Land of Israel is no doubt critical, but it is being there with fellow Jews that makes it, in the expression common to thousands of participants, "amazing." The 10 days of Birthright Israel becomes a soul-searing experience.

Everyone involved in Birthright Israel is, after more than a decade, wiser about what it takes to engage young adults in their Jewish identity. What is now clear is that Birthright Israel has caught a generation at a luminal moment in its development, a potential inflection point filled by openness and fueled by exploration

of possibilities. The program fills this moment with meaningful experiences and fosters a sense of community, as well as a connection to the past and the present.

For many of us, the celebration of Yom Ha'Azmaut (Israel Independence Day) and the memory of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) are fresh in our minds. We recall the miracle of Israel's creation, but we acknowledge it in the context of the genocidal murder of our brethren. This narrative is the traditional way in which love of Israel has been passed on, but it is now only a part of the story. A new narrative of Jewish life, one rooted in being connected with others, past and present, is being taught by Birthright Israel. A self-confident generation is being introduced to a self-confident Judaism through powerful experiences. The Jewish story is being rewritten, and it is changing the face of American Jewry.

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