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Extending the Birthright privilege

Organizers chart a new course to keep alumni connected beyond 10 days

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Sophie Ambrose grew up without religion on a hippie commune near Jerusalem, Ark. Her mother had rejected Judaism, her father had rejected his Christian background. Ambrose explored churches on her own as a teenager, took a world religions class in college, and as a graduate student in Kansas, began to seek out Hillel and the sparse local Jewish life. Then one day, looking for classes, she Googled "Judaism + college + students" and came upon the Taglit-Birthright Web site.

The offer of a free, 10-day trip to Israel, which the Jewish community has been gifting to 18- to 26-year-old Jews since 2000, changed the trajectory of Ambrose's life.

The first stop on the Birthright trip Ambrose took during the winter of 2003-04 -- straight from the airport -- was Masada, the first-century mountaintop site high above the Judean Desert that serves as a symbol of Jewish heroism.

"Everyone was really cranky and tired, and they made us hike Masada, and I remember this moment I had, this moment of standing there and hearing this story of our ancestors being there before us," said Ambrose, a doctoral student in speech pathology for deaf children, during a recent phone interview from her apartment in the Pico-Robertson area. "And I was looking out at this land, that in some way I was beginning to picture belonged to me, and there was this moment where I went from being not connected, to being connected."

Birthright's success in awakening a connection to Jewish heritage and Israel is unprecedented in American Jewish life. As the number of alumni continues to multiply, they are infusing new energy into American Jewry.

Ambrose is one of approximately 10,000 Birthright alumni living in Los Angeles. By the end of this summer, North America will be home to 191,000 Jewishly pumped Birthright alumni. Around 24,000 North Americans and another 4,000 Jews from around the world will have made the pilgrimage this summer alone, and 16,000 were placed on waiting lists and didn't get to go this round. In addition, more than 13,000 North Americans went last winter.

If those numbers persist, within the next decade about half of all Jewish young adults will have been on a Birthright Israel trip, turning it into a rite of passage almost as common as a bar or bat mitzvah.

The question now facing the organizers of Birthright -- and the rest of the Jewish community -- is what to do with all those alumni.

Ambrose has become a veritable Birthright poster child -- she has both taken and taught several classes in Judaism,

returned to Israel twice, become involved in The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and other organizations, currently serves on the United Jewish Communities speakers bureau and now observes Shabbat and kosher laws and has even gotten her mother to go to High Holy Days services. But most Birthright alumni, though their attitudes change, need more of a push to make behavioral changes.

"The idea of Birthright was to create a spark in people who really needed a spark if they were to remain in some meaningful sense Jewish, and it has done that," philanthropist Michael Steinhardt said in a phone interview. "But it's just 10 days."

Steinhardt, along with Charles and Andrea Bronfman, envisioned and began funding Birthright in 1999.

"I feel extraordinarily gratified that those 10 days have worked as well as they have for as many people as they have, and that Birthright has grown to the point where, frankly, it is the only new entity in the Jewish world that is really something that catches the imagination of anybody," he said. "But again, 10 days is 10 days. The real challenge is taking that spark and igniting it."

In the past year, Steinhardt has fueled the next chapter of Birthright with cash and an organizational structure in the form of a new program, Birthright NEXT, founded with a budget of about \$8 million and aimed at keeping alumni connected and focused on creating a vibrant Jewish life.

But harnessing alumni energy for long-term behavioral changes -- for their own benefit and for the Jewish community's invigoration -- is proving to be a more difficult goal than the formidable but circumscribed goal of changing lives in just 10 days.

Plugging Into the iPod Generation

"The core mission of everyone connected with Birthright is to get people on trips, to make sure we have tens of thousands of people going on Taglit-Birthright, opening the door to Jewish identity, because we see that the impact of the program is remarkable," said Jay Golan, president of the Birthright Israel Foundation, which is the umbrella organization for both Taglit-Birthright and Birthright NEXT.

"That said, people were coming back very energized and not finding an infrastructure or relationship that they could link into comfortably," he said. "That has to do with the fact that close to 60 percent of Birthright participants are unaffiliated or marginally affiliated, and 10 days gave them a spark, but it didn't give them substantial exposure to the established Jewish world. The integration process is more difficult than anyone had anticipated."

On one side, the Jewish establishment, which for years has hoped for greater involvement from young people, has been somewhat stymied in figuring out how to make itself appealing to the iPod generation. On the other side, the established organizations might not be where this generation wants to end up at all. Gen-Yers -- those born from the early '80s to late '90s -- are looking for social networking and creative empowerment, and they often prefer to build their own Jewish milieu rather than step into one already established.

While many alumni have taken the initiative and set up their own Jewish social networks -- face-to-face ones in addition to the 600 or so Birthright-related Facebook pages -- others seem to be at a loss as to how to actualize the commitment they made to themselves at the end of Birthright to be more involved Jewishly.

"There is no question that participants in Taglit-Birthright have been impacted significantly in their attitudes about Jewish identity, about Israel and about being part of the Jewish people," said Leonard Saxe, a social psychologist at Brandeis University who has been evaluating Birthright participants since the program began.

Saxe recently coauthored with Hebrew University's Barry Chazan "Ten Days of Birthright Israel" (Brandeis University Press, 2008), a book that documents the strong and lasting impact Birthright has on participants. But Saxe is just now embarking on a long-term study of early alumni to find out just how deep the imprint went.

"Whether they now lead lives where the Jewish community and Jewish identity is central to them -- that's the long-term outcome question," he said.

Birthright isn't willing to leave that question either to chance or to a Jewish community that doesn't seem to be stepping up with the right answer.

"In many ways, the focus was on funding the trips in the belief, albeit wrong, that communities would develop exciting post-trip programming for young adults," said Jeff Solomon, president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. "That has not been forthcoming from other organizations."

Over the last few years, Birthright board members and professionals realized that they, more than other Jewish organizations, were in the best position to work with alumni: they had the credibility of the Birthright brand, and they had proven they know how to engage this generation.

Funding Trips vs. Alumni

Diverting funding from the trips wasn't an option: In the first seven hours of registration for the summer 2008 trips, 12,000 people applied, and the number reached 40,000 in 72 hours, by which time registration was closed. Because those who don't make the list might not reapply, a new program gives reapplicants priority.

Still, growing waiting lists persist even after a two-year, \$60 million matching grant from the Adelson Family Charitable Foundation in 2006 nearly doubled the number of available slots. Sheldon and Miriam Adelson supplemented that amount with another \$6.8 million challenge grant when they realized how many people were still on the waiting list.

While pressure to get more participants on the planes stays strong, support continues to grow: Dozens of major foundations and federations stand behind Birthright. This year, Taglit-Birthright's annual budget is about \$90 million, funded by philanthropists, Jewish federations and the Israeli government.

A year and half ago Bronfman and Steinhardt agreed that Bronfman would continue to fund trips, while Steinhardt would continue funding trips but would also launch Birthright NEXT, an entity separate from Taglit-Birthright. Other philanthropists have since joined him.

Participant follow-up was built into Birthright from its inception, and more formal alumni programming had been in place since 2004, but the budget for those components of the program was less than \$1 million until 2006. With the establishment of Birthright NEXT, the number rose to \$8 million.

Even so, that boils down to only about \$60 per alumni -- a number that will shrink further as the alumni pool grows and pales in comparison to the \$2,700 allocated per participant for a trip.

Birthright NEXT is designed to approach each participant while they're in Israel, attaching the NEXT name and Web site on all the literature and gifts, as well as explicitly discussing how participants will integrate their experience into life back home.

There are follow-up e-mails, and many groups set up their own Facebook pages. But Birthright struggles to keep track of alumni, since this highly mobile age group might have five different addresses in as many years.

Last year Birthright NEXT hosted two multicity events: Five thousand alumni attended The Eight -- Chanukah concerts co-sponsored by JDub Records -- and another 3,000 saw the Israelity concert tour, according to Rabbi Daniel Brenner, Birthright NEXT director.

Birthright NEXT offers grants of up to \$5,000 for alumni to host their own Israel or Jewish programs.

There is also a push to get alumni back to Israel for long-term programs, allowing them to study, work or volunteer there for three months to a year. The Israeli government, with support from the American Jewish community, established MASA three years ago to offer grants for 18- to 30-year-olds -- whether they are Birthright alumni or not -- to go to Israel for longer programs.

Come for Dinner ... It's on Birthright

NEXT Shabbat, the organization's latest initiative, which is being piloted this summer, asks alumni to host a Shabbat meal, with Birthright NEXT footing the bill -- \$25 per guest, up to 16 guests per meal. Playing into the Gen-Yers' do-it-yourself Judaism, the menu, guest list, location, context and conversation are all up to the host.

"What we intend to do is to create for these kids a social environment that will bring them together in places where there aren't many Jews," said Steinhardt, who helped conceive the idea in keeping with his push for establishing Jewish life outside of institutional venues.

"They will develop a Jewish world around them, and in doing so develop a Jewish community, and that is the most important thing," he said. "What they actually do at the Shabbat dinner -- whether they sing 'Hinei Mah Tov,' light candles, do wine, or bread -- all those things are relatively incidental to having a Jewish communal event they feel good about."

About 900 people signed up to host this summer before registration maxed out, reaching an estimated 10,000 guests who will attend yoga dinners, Mexican fiestas, picnics on the beach, medical school study breaks, Moroccan feasts, knitting circle Shabbat -- whatever hosts could think of.

"When you look at all the incredible diversity, you're seeing that people feel like this is an opportunity for them to express themselves creatively," Brenner said. He has been heartened to see the feedback in the follow-up reports hosts are required to file.

One host wrote asking for help with the prayers she'd forgotten since Hebrew school, another said it was the first time he ever took off work to cook for friends and one alum sent in a picture of the candleholders he fashioned out of paper clips.

While some dinners have substantial Jewish content, organizers realize the Jewish substance can be a wild card in this

laissez-faire programming, where the targets of the programming are empowered to create it. Some also worry that the follow-up with guests needs to be more rigorous.

Steinhardt has turned to another program he funds to experiment with adding more structure to NEXT Shabbat. The Los Angeles-based Professional Leadership Project (PLP) trains young adults to be leaders in the Jewish community. Starting July 18, 100 PLP participants across the country will host NEXT Shabbat dinners for Birthright alumni. PLP is providing hosts with resource information both for how to do a Shabbat dinner and topics of conversation. While Birthright NEXT has those things available on its website, PLP will be more hands-on in coaching the hosts.

Hosts will also collect information about their guests' interests, which PLP will pass on to Birthright NEXT, so they can follow up with specific ways the guests can stay involved, according to Rhoda Weisman, PLP founder and director. Weisman helped establish International Hillel's Birthright program in 1999 and 2000 for college campuses, and worked on Birthright follow-up until 2003.

"My hope for the Shabbat initiative is that they will develop a clear strategy about who they are reaching and how they are following up, and how alumni are moving forward in their Jewish journeys," Weisman said. "All of that takes a lot of thinking and planning, and a lot of time and a lot of piloting. I'm hoping that is the next step for Birthright NEXT."

Getting Communities Involved

PLP is also working with Birthright to place well-trained volunteers in lay leadership positions and to staff a new position: Birthright fellows.

Fifteen communities in North America, including Los Angeles, recently hired or are looking to hire fellows, Birthright alumni who will offer one-on-one Jewish journey coaching, informal education and programming resources. A \$12.5 million matching grant in April from the Jim Joseph Foundation provides half the budget for hiring fellows.

Some large communities, including Los Angeles, have had alumni coordinators for a few years, usually hired through Federations. That position is currently open in Los Angeles, but The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles hopes to fill it soon, which would bring Birthright staffing in Los Angeles to four -- a coordinator, two fellows and a development director.

"We're hoping we can strategize in a serious way about how people can get involved in L.A.," Brenner said. "L.A. has well over 10,000 alumni, and so far there has not been enough engagement of those alumni."

Jami Bachrad, who oversees Birthright support, marketing and fundraising at The Federation, agrees that more resources are needed, but she says programming has been strong, with an average of two events per month.

Birthright in Los Angeles has hosted an environmental retreat at the Brandeis-Bardin campus of the American Jewish University, a Friday night program with IKAR and numerous social events and cocktail hours, in addition to The Eight concert at the Echoplex in Echo Park last Chanukah.

Bachrad was hired through a B3 (Building Birthright Israel Brand) grant from the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, which placed Birthright advocates in ten communities.

Bachrad raises funds for The Federation's Birthright allocation and helps the community understand how important Birthright is on a broader scale. This year, she helped raise \$300,000 on top of the \$600,000 Federation already allocates to Birthright to sponsor two to three community Birthright trips a year. The B3 advocates in North America raised a total of almost \$3 million in their first year, which will be distributed to underserved Jewish areas as well.

It's part of a broader picture of how funders are trying to get local communities, who reap the benefits of the Birthright infusion, to take on more of the Birthright burden.

Steinhardt thinks the community should be jumping at the investment.

"Our hope is that in the not too distant future, at least half of the next generation will have been to Israel with Birthright, and ideally a meaningful portion of those will participate in Birthright NEXT activities. And that generation, hopefully, will be better and stronger than the one that exists today," Steinhardt said. "I think it will be more spiritual, it will look to the ennobled aspects of Judaism. You can make your own judgment, but I think it will be a much better community."

Registration for Birthright Israel Winter 2008-2009 opens Sept. 10.

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