In 1747, James Lind, a Scottish physician, conducted an experiment with a dozen sailors afflicted with scurvy, the disease that felled more sailors than wars, storms and all other diseases combined. Divided into six pairs, the ill sailors were given the same diet, save different supplements. After a week, the pairs who had received orange and lemon supplements dramatically improved. By way of a simple study, Lind had found a means to prevent and cure scurvy and, in the process, transformed medicine and science.

Experimentation has matured considerably since Lind’s early study, yet the basic idea remains of comparing groups that are treated the same except for the intervention one wants to study. Today, experiments are routinely conducted not only in medicine, but in virtually every area of health, education and social welfare. For many scientists, experiments are considered the “gold standard” of research.

Despite their central role in other areas, true experiments are rare in Jewish education. Much research on Jewish education is conducted without systematic assessment. Typically, investigations examine changes solely in the treatment group — examining only those exposed to the intervention. Such study designs, however, make it difficult to separate the effects of the intervention from maturation and other natural changes.

The evaluation of Taglit-Birthright Israel is an exception to the typical studies of Jewish education. Since the program’s inception in early 2000, more than 100,000 participants aged 18-26 have taken part in its ten-day educational experiences in Israel. The evaluation of program impact, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, examines changes in the attitudes and

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behaviors of participants regarding their Jewish identity, sense of peoplehood and relationship to Israel. Key to the evaluation is that participants are compared to non-participants.

The non-participants — our comparison group — are individuals who applied to Birthright Israel but did not participate. Although it is not a pure experiment in which participants are assigned to the program or to the waiting list randomly, for the most part random factors determine whether someone participates or not. For most of the history of the program, there have been many more applicants than slots; random factors like logistics tend to determine who actually goes on a trip. In the most recent round of the program (Summer 2006), only 10,000 places were available for North American participants, while more than 25,000 applied.

Analyses comparing participants and non-participants prior to each program round indicate that there are few systematic differences between the groups. We are fairly confident that the post-trip differences observed between the “treatment” (i.e., Birthright Israel participant) group and the comparison group indicate the actual impact of the program. In fact, if anything, the comparison is conservative. Early in the program, the most committed Jews were given lower priority (it was assumed they would find another way to go to Israel). Those early applicants who did not go on a subsequent Birthright trip might, in fact, be even more committed to their Jewish identities and to Israel than are the participants. In addition, those who continue to respond to our surveys over time are likely more engaged, particularly among nonparticipants who do not owe anything to Birthright.

The key advantage of having a comparison group of equivalent participants is that it allows one to obtain a relatively unbiased estimate of the impact of the program. If one only measured changes in participant attitudes before and after the program, it would be impossible to know if any obtained changes were due to the intervention or not. Attitudes toward Jewish identity are in flux for young adults and some change is to be expected.

Application of “gold standard” experimental designs gives us the confidence to attribute impact to the program. In the case of Birthright Israel, the program appears to produce substantial changes in attitudes and behaviors. The ways in which participants view their identities and connections to Israel differ sharply from those of non-participants. These differences are striking and there are no plausible alternatives other than the effect of the program itself.

Change comes in many forms, so it was vital to include multiple measures (both quantitative and qualitative) of many different kinds of outcomes. Change can also be short-lived or late-blooming, so it was important that the design be longitudinal, including measurements three months, nine months and several years after participation.

Can the design used to test the impact of Birthright Israel be applicable to other Jewish education programs? Although comparing random samples of those who do or don’t participate in a program may be untenable in some cases, there are many situations in which the design is appropriate and able to be implemented. Birthright Israel represents a classic situation in which randomization is feasible: the “treatment” is in short supply. Such is often the case when educational programs are in a developmental or expansion phase.

Even if the experiment itself is not feasible, the logic of the experiment is still important. If we are to develop excellent practices in Jewish education, we need to continually ask outcome questions. The experimental twist involves asking if there are alternative explanations for the results.

We can learn much through our use of experiments. Perhaps most important is that this model of research encourages us to try new approaches and, inherently, reminds us to be skeptical about our efforts. The challenge for Jewish education of Diaspora youth — to engage heart, mind and body and, by doing so, to ensure Jewish continuity — requires that we apply ancient as well as modern wisdom. To do otherwise is to ignore our tradition and place our future in peril.

In this regard, the wisdom of our sages seems ever-more relevant. The Ramabm, Moses Maimonides, was a physician as well as a Torah scholar. As he explains in Shemonah Perakim (2:3), “Science … is the knowledge of proximate and ultimate causes, which one must investigate if one is to know anything …” Understanding “causes” is at the heart of experimentation and is essential for the development of a modern and effective system of Jewish education.