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# Birthright Israel Launch Evaluation: Preliminary Findings

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In January 2000, nearly 5000 college students and young adults from Diaspora Jewish communities participated in the launch of Birthright Israel, a ten-day educational tour provided as a cost-free “gift.” Its purpose was to connect young Jews (ages 18-26) to their heritage and to strengthen their Jewish identity. Initiated by philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, the program was also supported by other philanthropists, the State of Israel, and Jewish federations across the United States, with the involvement of United Jewish Communities (UJC). It was a response to concerns about Jewish continuity.

This report summarizes the findings of a preliminary evaluation of Birthright Israel conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. The evaluation was designed to find out what participants learned, cognitively and affectively, about Israel and how the experience affected their Jewish identification and their relationship to Israel and the Jewish community. Along with the results of a preliminary survey of participants conducted one month post-trip, the present report describes the results of a detailed survey of participants and non-participants conducted three months post-trip. Qualitative data obtained from ethnographic field observation, interviews, focus groups, and workshops are described in a separate report, but have informed some of the conclusions presented here.

## **Backgrounds and Expectations of Participants**

The survey findings make clear that Birthright Israel brought together a remarkably diverse group of young people. In terms of denomination, Jewish education, and their own and their families' Jewish practices, they look as different as those who are interviewed in population studies. The program did not exclusively engage either the already committed or those at risk of being “lost to the Jewish people” (Post, 1999), but a mixture of the two—and everything in between.

Two generalizations can, however, be made about the participants. To be eligible to participate in Birthright Israel, one had to identify as a Jew and not have traveled on a peer-group educational trip to Israel. Indeed, most participants (86%) had never been to Israel prior to receiving the gift. Those who applied to the program were, however, a self-selected group, not by prior Jewish engagement, but by some prior exposure and interest. Whether in childhood Seders, stories of relatives who did or did not survive the Holocaust, personal friendships, Judaic studies courses, or socializing at Hillel, these young people wanted to know more about what it meant to be a Jew. There was within them a readiness to respond to the symbolism and the reality of Israel.

That readiness was both mobilized and amplified by the gift of an expenses-paid trip. A large majority of participants said that cost was a major reason why they had not visited Israel before and that the offer of a free trip was a major consideration in their decision to apply. Beyond the practical value of the gift, participants expressed overwhelming feelings of approval and gratitude for it. By conveying the message that the community was giving them something precious, the gift created a compelling reason to become more closely attached to the community. Thus, before the trip even began, its sponsors had prepared receptive emotional ground for the experience to take hold.

## **Reactions to the Experience**

In the three-month follow-up survey, participants were asked about various aspects of their Birthright Israel experience. The vast majority found the trip fun (93%), personally meaningful (82%), and educational (77%). [Some also found it “exhausting.” These quantitative data parallel responses to the open-ended survey conducted one month after the trip. Participants were asked what part of the trip had been most positive for them. The largest set of responses had to do with a sense of being part of a community and interacting and bonding with people (Americans and Israelis). Among the sites visited, those with the greatest reported impact were the Old City of Jerusalem, the Kotel, Yad Vashem, Masada, and the Golan Heights. These were all sites of deep symbolic significance. Asked whether they would participate in Birthright Israel if they had it to do over again, 93% said they definitely would, and another 5% said they probably would. That is an extraordinary endorsement.

## **Impact on the Trajectory of Participants' Lives**

Birthright Israel was designed “to spark interest, involvement and a thirst for enrichment,” so that participants would “appreciate and remain in the Jewish fold” (Post, 1999). The long-term impact of the program cannot, of course, be measured for years to come. Its immediate impact, on the other hand, could be measured both by retrospective “before and after” questions and by

comparisons between participants and non-participants (those who applied but were not chosen to go). At this three-month measuring point, all indications are that the experience significantly altered the trajectory of the participants' lives.

Participants reported that they felt more connected to Israel, explored their Jewishness more, and felt a greater connection to the Jewish people after the trip than before. Three months after the trip, participants were significantly more likely than non-participants to feel strongly that being Jewish involves caring about Israel (62% versus 46%) and feeling a connection to other Jews (63% versus 48%). The percentage of participants expressing strong disagreement with the statement, "The fact that I am a Jew has little to do with how I see myself" increased from 38% before the trip to 51% after the trip.

These changes in attitude were reflected in changed associations and behavior. Participants regularly thought about the Birthright Israel experience, kept in touch with others in their tour group, and felt closer to those companions than they had before the trip. Three months after the trip, many participants were spending more time learning about Israel and participating in Jewish campus and off-campus activities than before. Thirty percent reported that they were extremely likely to return to Israel within two years, while a slightly larger number indicated that they were somewhat likely to do so. Showing the variety of ways in which participants saw Israel as relevant to their lives, many wanted to return to Israel, nearly a third to study or work.

As one participant put it, "...religiously, Judaism has not been a huge part of my life. So just the fact that I started going to Shabbat services... I changed ... and was able to feel more comfortable." Changes like that are highly significant. They also raise the question of how and why such changes came about. Why did the program work? What elements of the experience were responsible for its impact?

## **Community**

As noted above, when asked what they found most positive about the trip, participants most often mentioned a sense of community and feelings of closeness with others. The bonds that united participants came, in part, because they traveled together in large and small groups, but also because many toured with students they already knew, and would continue to know, through their campus Hillel organizations and JCCs. All were accompanied by a team of guides and educators, many of whom were from their campus or their community. These arrangements, although dictated by logistical necessity, created ready-made communities that helped shape participants' impressions of what they witnessed. Procedures worked out by staff and group norms favoring open sharing of feelings and opinions contributed to forging cohesive groups.

Participants liked the people they traveled with and recognized in them a sameness as well as diversity (a microcosm of Jewish community). The extent to which they have kept in contact with their traveling companions is one measure of the success of this communal bonding. On a larger scale, 77% of participants reported that being part of a program with thousands of Jews had a strong emotional impact on them. The impact of numbers, proximity, and the sharing of intense experiences is reflected in numerous testimonials:

"What hit me first was how I felt like I belonged there... I really belonged with the group, and in the country. I didn't feel like I was a tourist."

“...it was a combination of feeling that I belonged and being with a group of people experiencing the same thing. [It] provided an outlet intellectually and emotionally that felt safe and comfortable.”

“I have the group to thank for making this experience special.”

The formation of community in the group context was both a means and an end. It was a means to the creation of significant personal experience—rising to the level of personal transformation—insofar as an individual’s feelings and reactions were confirmed and amplified by others. Emotionally laden confrontations with the sites and symbols of Israel’s history gained much of their power from the group context as individual reactions became group norms. Community was also an end in that the core purpose of Birthright Israel was to bring participants into a closer relationship with the Jewish community. Its success is summed up by the sentiment, expressed by various participants in their own words, that the trip “made me feel that I am part of something bigger than just myself.”

### **The Significance of Place**

The intense group experiences that came to characterize Birthright Israel probably could not have happened anywhere but in Israel. Nowhere else could participants have been made to feel so

good about themselves as Jews; nowhere else would they so readily feel part of something bigger than themselves. The people, places, and events they encountered—from the respected tour guides to the many “symbolic triggers” of familial, ethnic, and historical associations—were continual reminders of their communal mission. In particular, 81% said that being in a majority Jewish state had a strong emotional impact on them. For some, being “Jewish” in America seemed to mean being set apart by religious practices or a chosen way of life. In a country where “everyone” was Jewish, however, there were Jews of every stripe, secular as well as religious. Here one could be comfortable with one’s Jewishness, whatever that might be.

## **Conclusion**

The Birthright Israel participants were a diverse group, but our preliminary data indicate that their response to the program was highly uniform. What is clear even now is that, starting with a highly motivated and receptive population possessing varying levels of information and experience, this experiment in nurturing individual and collective Jewish identity has had very positive effects, at least in the short run. Birthright Israel has sent several thousand young people back to their campuses and communities with a greater identification with the Jewish people and an interest in things Jewish. Whether the experience has long-term impact in shaping the Jewish engagement of young people is a question for future research. But, together with other Israel experience programs, it may make a pilgrimage to Israel an expected rite of passage for American Jews. Finally, beyond the specifically Jewish context, it points a way to fulfilling a universal social need by creating meaningful community.



# Birthright Israel Launch Evaluation: Preliminary Findings

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly 5000 college students and young adults from Diaspora Jewish communities came to Israel in early 2000, as participants in the launch of Birthright Israel.<sup>1</sup> Unlike earlier generations of Jews, they came to Israel not to escape persecution and tyranny, but in an experience designed to allow them to encounter their heritage. Young Diaspora Jews in North America live in an era of unprecedented material wealth and in societies where overt anti-Semitism has all but disappeared from consciousness (Saxe et al., 2000). Yet, material success has had a price and there is substantial evidence of diminished involvement by many Jews in spiritual and communal life. Birthright Israel's ambitious goal was to connect young Jews to their history and to their land and, in so doing, reconnect Jews to one another.

Birthright Israel was initiated by philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt. Their goal was to provide a "gift" of a ten-day educational experience in Israel for Diaspora Jews ages 15 to 26. Eventually, they hope that tens of thousands of young people will participate in this educational program and be transformed as a result. Already, the initial support for the program has been extended by substantial additional funding from other key philanthropists, the State of Israel, and Jewish federations across the United States, with the involvement of United Jewish Communities (UJC). As part of this effort, a systematic evaluation of the project's impact was undertaken. The present report describes preliminary findings from this research. Our goal is to provide initial answers to some of the fundamental questions about the program.

This report focuses on the first wave of participants, a group of nearly 4,000 young Jews (ages 18 to 26), primarily college students from the United States. They spent 10 days in Israel during late December 1999 and early January 2000. Nearly 75% of the participants were recruited and brought on trips sponsored by Hillel (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life); the remainder of the participants were recruited and traveled through a range of trip organizers, including the youth organizations for the major denominations (UAHC and the USY). Other youth-serving organizations, such as the JCC Association of North America (JCCA), also sponsored trips. The eligibility criteria for individual participants were simple: one had to consider him/herself Jewish and not have visited Israel previously as part of a peer educational program.

The ten-day trip taken by the first group of participants, referred to as the Launch Program, was organized according to a set of educational criteria designed to insure that participants learn about Israel both cognitively and affectively. Participants traveled in groups of 30-40 ("bus groups"), typically with students from a single university campus, but in many cases (the non-Hillel trips) with students from multiple sites. Together, they followed itineraries that provided an introduction to the narrative of the Jewish people, Jewish values and ideas, and the present realities of Israel: the Kotel, Massada, Safed, Yad Vashem, the Golan Heights, the Ein Gedi nature

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<sup>1</sup> Birthright Israel is the English name for the program which is known in Hebrew as *Taglit*.

preserve, Tel Aviv, and numerous other sites. All participants spent at least one *Shabbat* in Jerusalem. Throughout the trip, participants engaged in formal and informal conversations with one another, with their tour guides, and with other Israelis.

According to Marlene Post (1999), chairperson of Birthright Israel North America, the program “was conceived chiefly as an outreach to young people who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks and may therefore soon be lost to the Jewish people.” It was not expected that a single educational experience in Israel would be an end in itself; rather, the hope was that an intense experience of Jewish community would lead participants to change their feelings about being Jewish. Indeed, it was hoped that they would change their way of being Jewish sufficiently such that they would seek out reinforcing experiences (reading, study, social and spiritual pursuits, volunteer activities) on their return home. These experiences, in turn, were expected to strengthen participants’ commitment to living Jewishly and bring them firmly into the orbit of both the local and worldwide Jewish community. Although Israel is believed to be an important element of Jewish identity, it seems to be less prominent among contemporary Jews who live outside of Israel (cf. Cohen & Eisen, 1998). The present study attempts to measure whether, at this early stage, these desired effects have begun to occur for the first group of participants.

## **BACKGROUND**

Although the shared commitment to Birthright Israel on the part of Israeli and Diaspora sponsors and the extent of financial support for the program are unprecedented, the idea behind Birthright Israel is by no means new or untested. Birthright Israel developed out of a growing recognition of the need to strengthen Jewish identity in the Diaspora and Jewish communities worldwide. The program seeks to provide young Diaspora Jews an experiential connection with Israel as they enter into adulthood. In recent years, the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora has become a prime concern of those involved in promoting Jewish identity. For example, Yossi Beilin, a prominent Israeli politician, in his book *The Death of the American Uncle: Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, has advocated using educational visits to Israel as the basis for developing a new relationship with Diaspora youth. Others, such as Goldstein and Goldstein (1996), note that Israel plays a central role in Jewish identity development and visits may help those who have moved from heavily populated Jewish areas to maintain a connection.

David Mittelberg (1999), an Israeli sociologist, has described some of the theoretical reasons why a program such as Birthright Israel is important. Drawing on anthropological theories of community (cf. Eriksen, 1993; Featherstone, 1995) to understand processes of self- and mutual identification, he suggests that the globalization of culture presents an opportunity to reestablish Jewish ethnic identity. The ease of communication and travel makes possible what had previously not been feasible. As a primary focus of the re-ethnification of American Jews, he proposes that Israel be transformed from “an ‘overseas’ philanthropic allocation” to “a truly integral part of their lives” (p. 123). Analyzing the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and longitudinal data from Project Otzma, Mittelberg finds a positive association between a visit to Israel and measures of Jewish identification, community affiliation, and religious practice — irrespective of denomination, Jewish education, age, gender, and region. These findings suggest

that the identity-enhancing effect of a visit to Israel for North American Jews may be independent of prior socialization.

Other research suggests the importance of post-adolescence for identity development. Horowitz (1993), for example, analyzing data from the New York Jewish Population Survey, found that “voluntary” Jewish experiences in the teenage and young-adult years more strongly predict higher rates of affiliation and practice later in life than do “involuntary” Jewish experiences earlier in childhood. Israel and Mittelberg (1998), drawing on the 1995 Boston community demographic study, specifically studied the effect of the age at which a person first visits Israel. They found that those who have taken their first trip to Israel during college are more highly engaged in Jewish life than those who have made a first trip at a younger age. Similarly, in focus groups organized by the American Jewish Committee, college-age visits to Israel were found to have a more lasting impact on students than B’nai Mitzvah-age family visits or high-school programs (Ukeles, 1994).

Using the 1990 NJPS and related data, Mittelberg (1999, p. xiv) concludes that the Israel trip “is a unique experience that connects American Jews to their past, to Israel’s present, and by virtue of its Jewish contribution to Israeli society and culture, to the future well-being of the Jewish people.” Chazan (1997) has proposed three causal models to explain the process by which Israel experiences affect young people. One, a *domino* model, suggests that an Israel visit is a critical step in a series of educational experiences. The second, a *cluster* model, asserts that the Israel experience gains impact in conjunction with parallel educational experiences. Finally, according to Chazan, an Israel trip may operate through *independent* impact with its own causal influence on Jewish identity.

Although the prior research seems persuasive, as Mittelberg (1999) notes, much of this research only establishes an *association* between trips to Israel and an interest in Israel and the Jewish people. It should not be surprising that young people interested in Judaism, regardless of their background, are more likely to take the trip. Hence, the causal relationship between the trip and positive outcomes is potentially spurious. The present research was carefully designed so as to make imputations of a cause-and-effect relationship between taking the trip and subsequent changes in participants’ views of Israel and the Jewish people more plausible.

Although evaluation has been a component of prior Israel trips (see e.g., Cohen, 1994; 1995; Sales, 1998, 1999), much of the previous work has focused on assessing the experience itself. That is, the evaluations have been conducted in the field and the long-term impact of the trip has been difficult to gauge. In other cases, where follow-up was conducted (e.g., Cohen, 1994), it is difficult to separate the impact of selection (i.e., who chooses to go on the trip) from the effect of being in Israel (Chazan, 1997). Two of the most important studies of Israel programs are ethnographies of high school trips sponsored by UAHC and Young Judea (see Goldberg, 1995; Heilman, 1995). Both Goldberg’s and Heilman’s studies suggest the complex dynamics underlying successful experiences. Israel is the setting for the trips, but participants form their own culture and their experience of Israel is colored by the group dynamics. Along with an Israel experience’s causal role in shaping identities, the ethnographies suggest that it is essential to understand the impact of being together with other young Jews and *madrichim* (American and Israeli staff).

## LAUNCH EVALUATION

The evaluation built into Birthright Israel has been developed to assess whether the program has the desired impact of bringing Diaspora youth closer to Judaism and the Jewish community. The evaluation design includes collection of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as comparisons of participants with non-participants:

- Ethnographic field observation by participant-observers, *madrichim*, and students;
- Initial survey of participants (one month post-trip);
- Semi-structured interviews with providers;
- Focus groups and workshops;
- Survey of participants and a comparison group of non-participants (three months post-trip).

The present report is based primarily on initial analyses of the quantitative data from the three-month survey (of nearly 2000 participants and 800 wait-listed non-participants), informed by our interviews of participants and providers. Additional details about the evaluation design, the questions asked in both surveys, sample selection, survey administration, and data analysis are described in the Methodological Appendix. The Appendix also documents the high response rate and efforts to insure that the data are representative of those who participated in the program. The present report is the first in what is expected to be a series of reports based on data from the Birthright Israel programs.

The Birthright Israel evaluation was designed to answer the following questions:

- *Who are the participants?* What cross-section of North American Jewish youth do they represent?
- *Socioeconomic profile:* Can students or their families afford to pay for the trip to Israel and what other financial burdens do they face?
- *Jewish engagement:* How strong is the participants' prior affiliation and involvement with Jewish life? Has Birthright Israel succeeded in bringing in those with minimal connection to the Jewish community, or has it mainly attracted those whose lives already have a solid Jewish foundation?
- *What kinds of experiences did the participants have in Israel?*
- *Emotional experience:* What aspects of the trip meant the most to participants? What aspects were most bothersome or problematic? Did participants come to feel differently about themselves as Jews? Did they develop greater feelings of identification with the Jewish people throughout history, the State of Israel, and the Jewish community worldwide? Did they come to feel part of something larger than themselves? Which sites or events most strongly elicited these reactions?

- *Cognitive learning:* What did participants learn about historical events, about Israel today, and about Jewish beliefs and practices? What did they learn specifically from their visits to museums and other historical sites? What did they learn from and about the Israelis with whom they interacted? What did they learn from and about one another?
- *Collective experiences:* What kinds of bonding experiences did participants report? Were these experiences different for those who traveled in cohesive units (i.e., those recruited from a single campus) as opposed to those who were brought together in heterogeneous groups? Did the groups that experienced Israel together have the potential to stay together as a community after their return home?
- *What impact did the trip have on participants' lives?* How did they make sense of the experience? What meanings did it take on for them? How (at least in the near term) has it affected the extent of their Jewish practices, their participation in Jewish communal life, their ongoing involvement in Jewish educational experiences, and their intention to visit Israel in the future? Are they likely to recommend the Birthright Israel trip to friends and classmates, and (in this and other ways) to attract others to the Jewish community?

Ultimately, our goal is to understand whether and how participants change: their feelings about being Jewish, awareness of Jewish traditions and issues, identification with the Jewish people (past, present, and future), sense of being part of an ongoing community, and commitment to being involved in the life of the Jewish community. More broadly, we want to understand how individual change impacts college communities and the larger Jewish communities—local, national, and worldwide.

## FINDINGS

The data from the one-month and three-month post-trip evaluation surveys<sup>2</sup> were designed to provide an indication of the potential impact of the project. If there was little or no impact early on, then it is unlikely that there will be a large effect later on. If, however, participants appear to be on a trajectory of increased involvement after one to three months—particularly when compared to non-participants—then there may be positive long-term impact. Our goal, at present, is primarily descriptive; that is, to give voice to a representative sample of participants and non-participants. Although our focus is on the degree to which participation in Birthright Israel is transformative, it is also important to understand how the program functioned and what is responsible for its impact. To answer these questions, the discussion below summarizes findings on the characteristics of participants, which elements of the program were most effective, and what sorts of impact has it had to date.

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<sup>2</sup> Except where otherwise stated, all findings reported come from the three-month post-trip survey. All comparisons exhibited in Figures are statistically significant, with *p* values ranging from < .05 to < .001, unless otherwise noted. See Methodological Appendix for further details about the design, instruments, and sample.

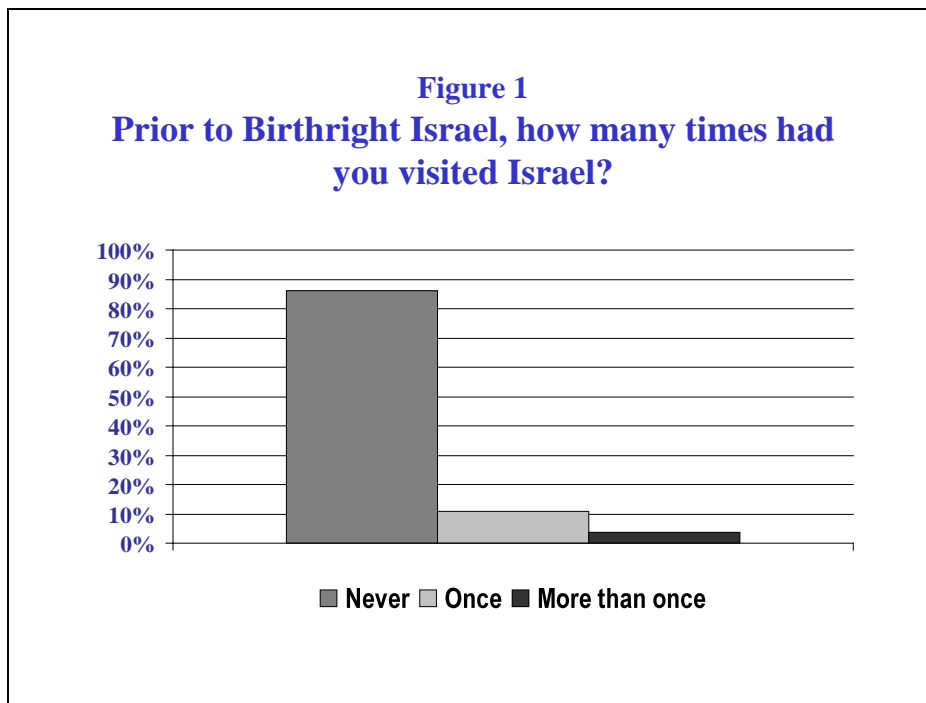
## WHO WERE THE PARTICIPANTS?

It is critical to know who came on the Birthright Israel Launch: Were they students with experience in Israel who simply had not been on an educational trip, were they individuals with considerable Jewish background, were they active Jewishly on their campuses, or were they young people with few connections to the Jewish community? If the trip had drawn mainly committed Jews who already had had experience with Israel, then it clearly would not have served its purpose.

The following quotes from responses to our initial survey (one-month post-Israel) suggest that the participants were diverse: they included previously uninvolved individuals on a search as well as those who were already committed.

*“I was having issues with being Jewish...I just didn’t know how it fit into my life and what I thought about [it].”*

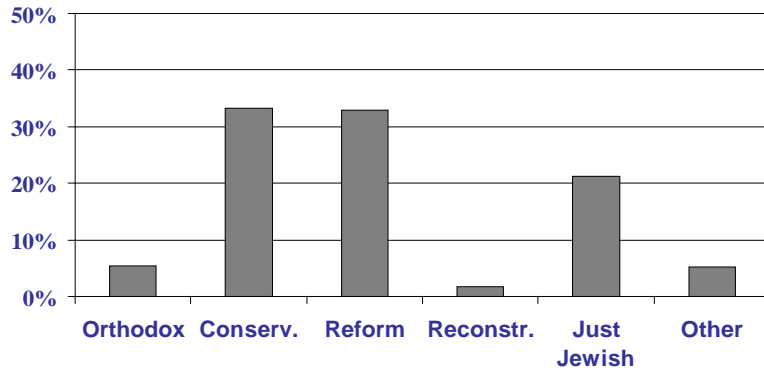
*“People told me...this trip was specifically designed for people...that hadn’t been involved in Jewish community at all. I really wanted to go to Israel, but I certainly didn’t fall into that category. I’ve been involved with Hillel since I got here [the university].”*



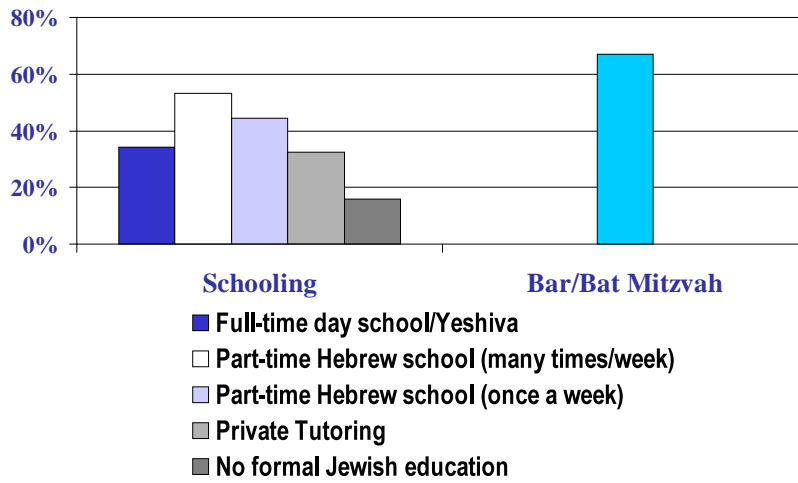
The data reveal that the overwhelming majority (86%) had not been to Israel before (see Figure 1). Birthright Israel, thus, not only gave participants their first educationally-oriented trip to Israel, but gave the vast majority their first exposure to the Holy

Land. Perhaps more importantly, there is no indication that the trip drew primarily from the highly committed. Indeed, in terms of prior Jewish engagement, the population of Birthright Israel participants closely mirrors that represented in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (cf. Fishman, 2000; Goldstein & Goldstein, 1996). In terms of denominational affiliation, for example, about one-third reported that they were Conservative, one-third Reform, and one-fifth “just Jewish,” with scattered representation of Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and other identifications (see Figure 2). Figure 3 shows that about half (53%) had gone to part-time Hebrew school, while one-third had (at some point) gone to Jewish day school or Yeshiva, and another third had been privately tutored. (Twenty-nine percent of participants had more than one type of formal Jewish education, while 16% had none.) As for Jewish practices (Figure 4), more than half did not keep Kosher, while only 10% always did so. Nevertheless, nearly two-thirds fasted on Yom Kippur, and nearly three-quarters lit candles last Hanukkah. Two-thirds had been celebrated their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. These data give a picture of diversity; they show that the Birthright Israel Launch drew participants from every corner of the Jewish community.

**Figure 2**  
**Do you consider yourself...?**

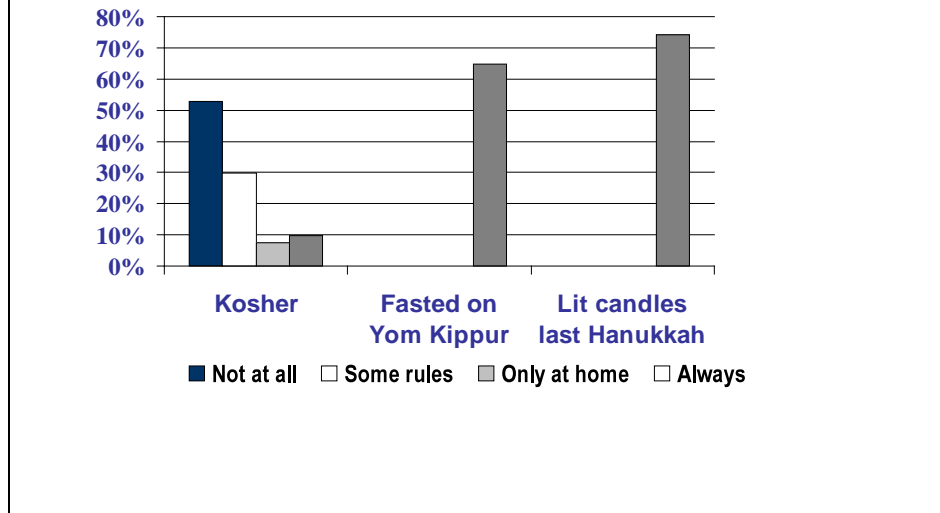


**Figure 3**  
**Jewish Education**



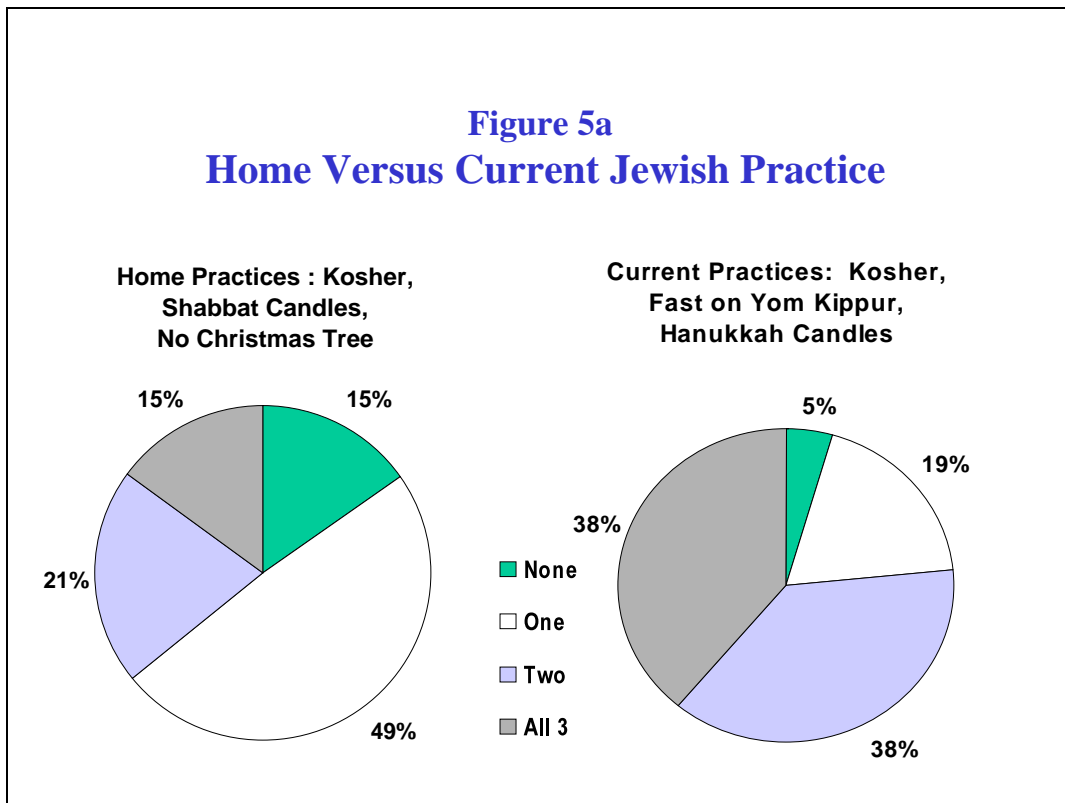


**Figure 4**  
**Jewish Practices**



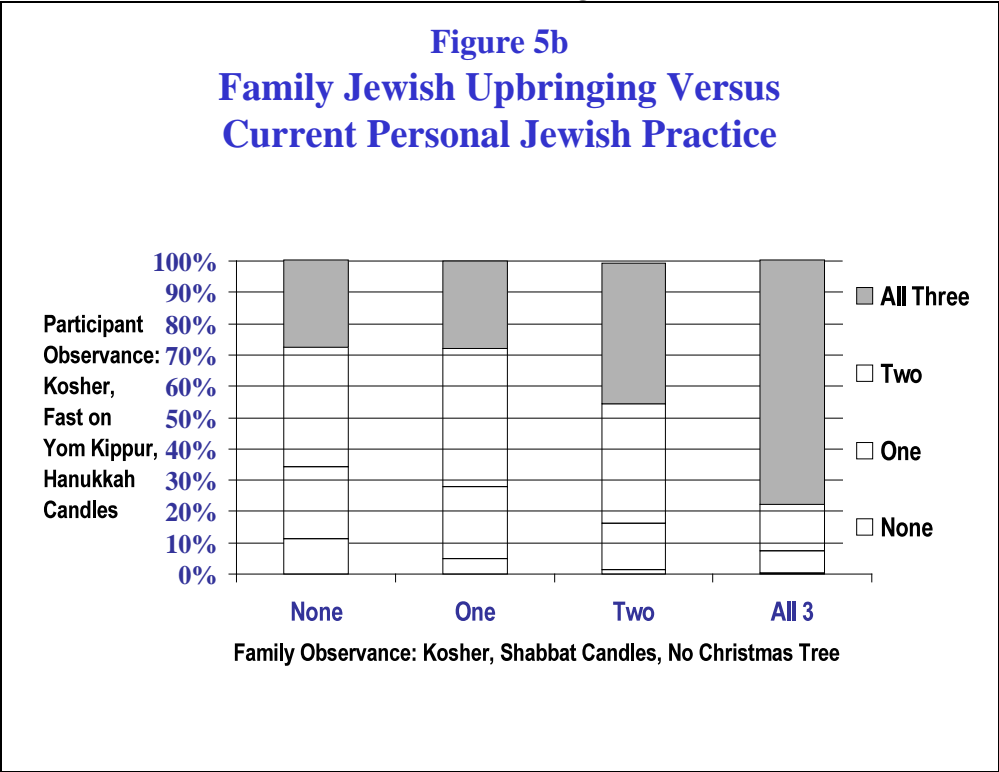
One of the challenges to understanding the Jewish engagement of college students is that they are in a time of transition (cf. Horowitz, 2000). Their Jewishness is a “work in progress” and they may be experimenting with various ways to be part of the community. Thus, we asked participants about their household practices during high school (keeping Kosher, regularly lighting *Shabbat* candles, and never having a Christmas tree), as well as about three of their own current practices (keeping Kosher, fasting on the previous Yom Kippur, and lighting candles the previous Hanukkah). Note that, except for *kashrut*, the observances listed are different in the two cases, reflecting the differences between young people’s lives at home and away from home. Thus, there is no direct comparison – only a suggestive one – between family and personal observance. Figures 5a and 5b depict the complex relationship between participants’ own Jewish practices at the time of their Birthright Israel trip and those of their parents’ households.

**Figure 5a**  
**Home Versus Current Jewish Practice**



Overall, 76% of the participants engaged in two or more of the three Jewish practices they were asked about, with 38% observing all three (see Figure 5a). Among the observant 76% were 93% of those whose families had kept all three of the observances about which respondents were asked (not shown in Figure). Thus, nearly all students who came from religiously observant households retained a high level of observance. Yet, only 15% of all participants came from these most observant households. Indeed, nearly half of the participants' households (49%) maintained only one of the three practices, and 15% maintained none at all (see Figure 5a). Given minimal exposure to Jewish life at home for a majority of participants, their own level of practice is surprising. As Figure 5b illustrates, among participants whose families had kept only 1 of 3 observances, 72% kept at least two

of the three they were asked about. Among those whose families had kept none at all, 66% kept at least two. Although our data do not permit a precise comparison, a significant proportion of participants show signs of developing a greater commitment to Jewish life than that of their parents. Many may have discovered Judaism through Judaic studies courses, socializing at Hillel, or personal friendships. For these young people, already primed and receptive, Birthright Israel provided a breakthrough opportunity to immerse themselves in their heritage.



**WHY THEY CAME ON THE TRIP**

If many of these young people were already involved in the Jewish community, why had they not been to Israel before? There are a wide variety of high school trips and experiences, many of them subsidized by local Jewish communities. Were they simply taking advantage of the offer of a free vacation activity, or had they really been interested in Israel but

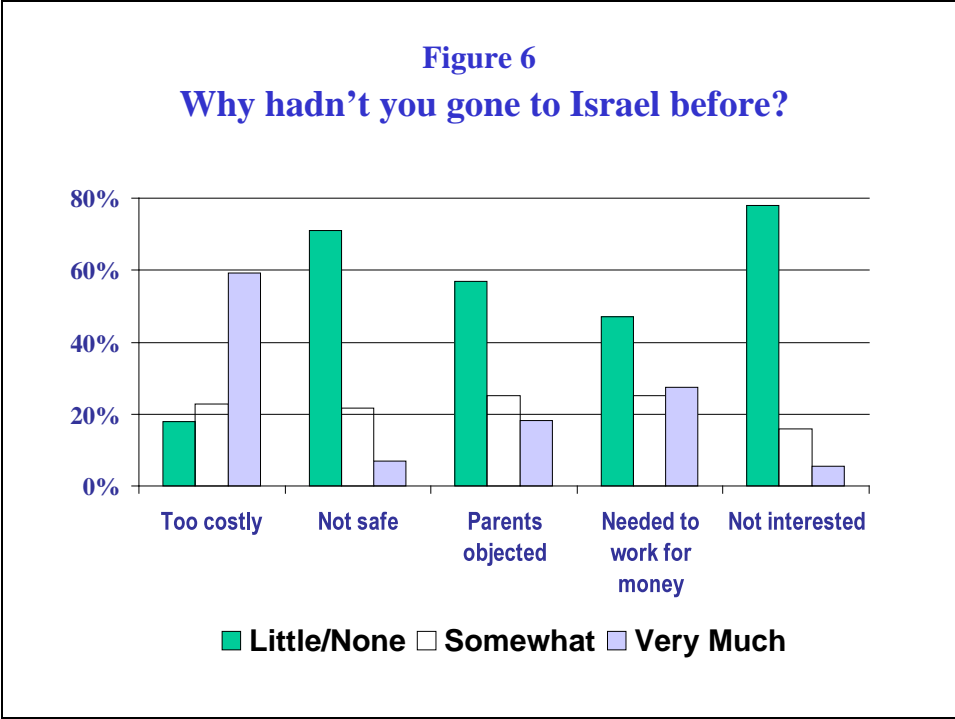
could not afford to go? The data above on their Jewish practices suggest that many would have been interested.

In terms of our direct data, very few said they were not interested in visiting Israel (see Figure 6). By far, the most common reason —cited as a major consideration by 59% of the participants and as a consideration by 23% more —was that a trip was too costly. Similarly, when participants were asked to rate the importance of various considerations in their decision to apply for the Birthright trip (Figure 7), 76% said it was extremely important that “the trip was free.” Nearly as many (71%) gave equivalent importance to “always wanted to see Israel.” Again we see the same combination of underlying interest and financial constraint.

Participants’ reasons for applying for the trip are summarized by the comments of two respondents:

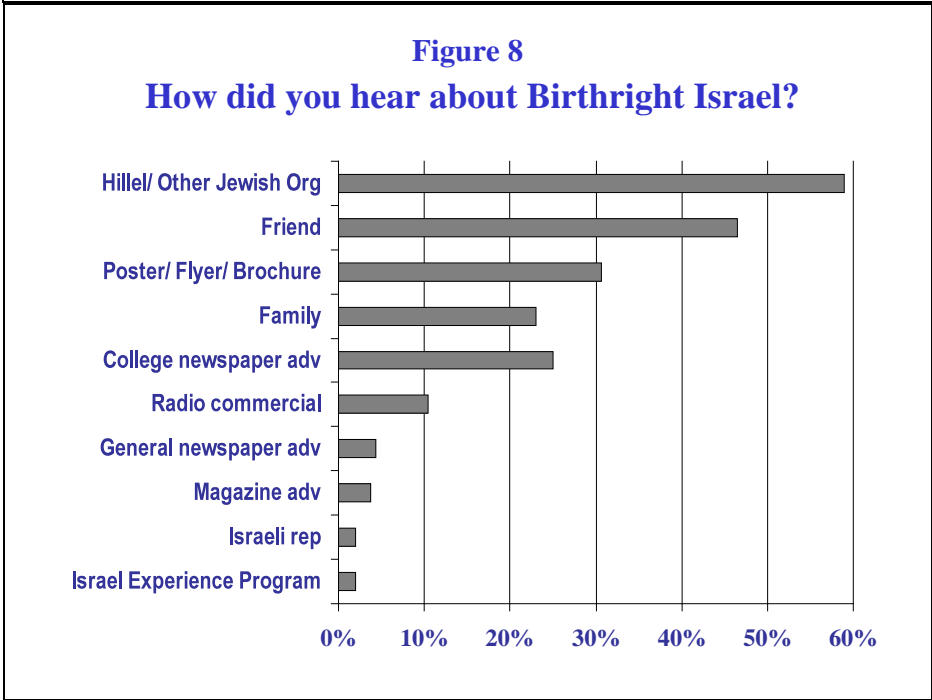
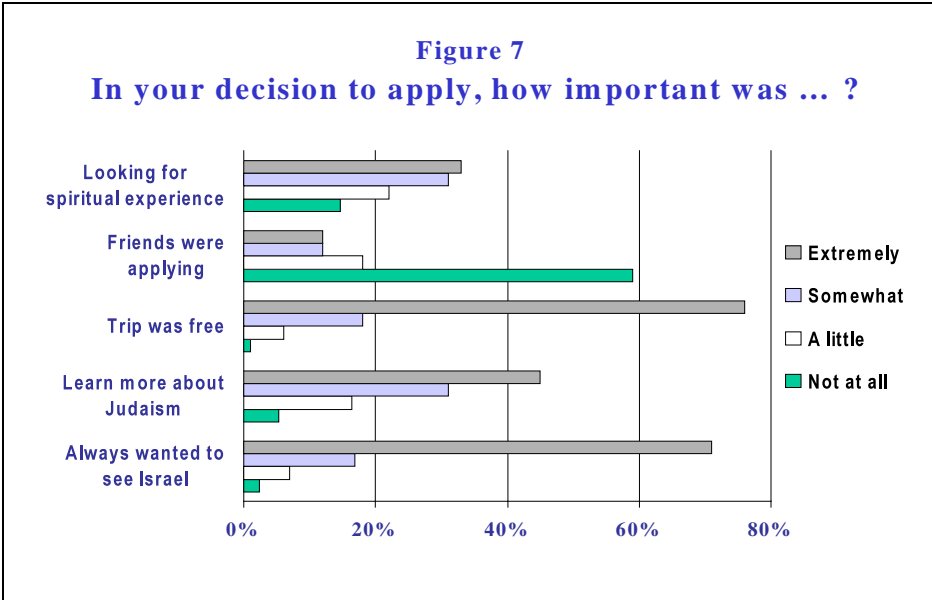
*“It was too good to pass up...”*

*“...it was a free trip to somewhere I’ve never been before, and that sounded like an amazing opportunity.”*



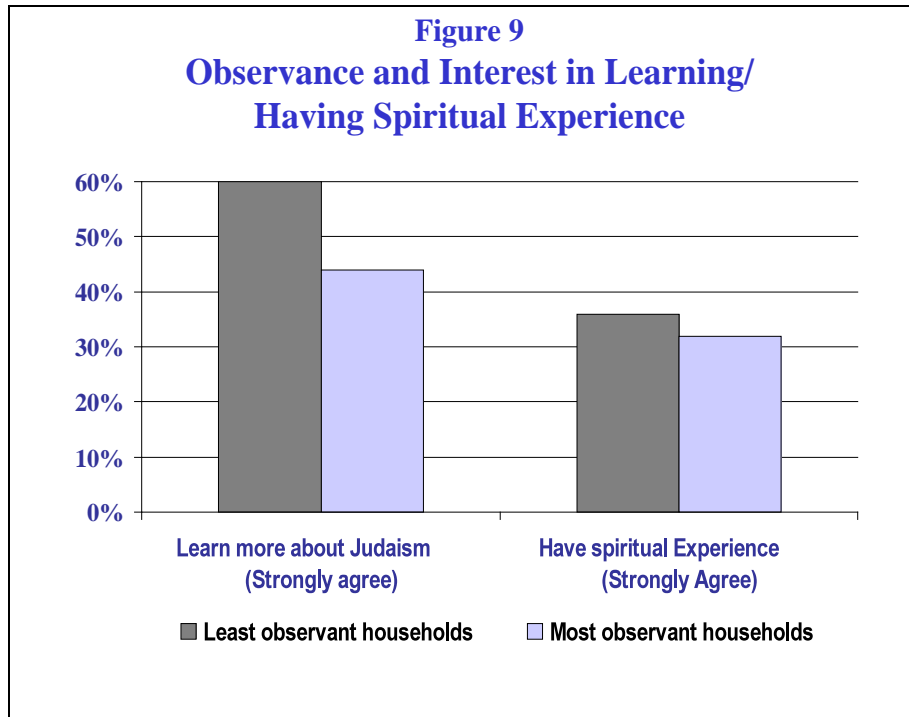
If, indeed, there was a large pool of young Jews who wanted to go to Israel but finances had prevented them from going before, perhaps all that was needed was a catalyst, an opportunity. How did they learn about this opportunity? Typically, students heard directly from Hillel or another Jewish organization. Some of our interviews suggest that there was substantial pent-up demand among college students to visit Israel, but they perceived that it required a large time and money commitment. Birthright Israel addressed both these issues and thus, it appears that not much needed to be done to “sell” the program, other than making prospective participants aware of the opportunity. Figure 8 shows that 59% of the participants heard about Birthright Israel from Hillel or another Jewish organization; 47% heard about it from a friend; and 31% learned about it from a flyer, poster, or brochure. (Some participants were informed about the program

in more than one way.) Advertising did not seem to play a significant role in spreading the word.



Once they learned of the opportunity, what were the decisive factors that motivated so many young people to apply? Overall, it turned out not to matter a great deal whether participants came

from a stronger or weaker Jewish background. Those *currently* more highly engaged in Jewish life were somewhat more likely than those less engaged to cite “meet Jewish students,” “learn more about Judaism,” and “looking for spiritual experience” as important considerations. Yet, as shown in Figure 9, those (about one in seven participants) who came from the least observant households cited learning about Judaism more frequently than those from the most observant households. With respect to interest in having a spiritual experience, a similar trend (not statistically significant) in the same direction was found. It may be inferred that the self-selection process of applying to Birthright Israel has unearthed a segment of the young Jewish population that has not had intensive prior Jewish involvement, but may be interested in developing a connection with the Jewish community. Birthright Israel, thus, drew in young people who were both exposed to and interested in the program on their campus environments.



In sum, the Birthright program drew in not only “young people who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks” (Post, 1999), but also many who were already highly engaged or were starting to become engaged in Jewish life. They appear to have availed themselves of the community’s “gift” because they appreciated the spirit of it and/or because their own and their families’ resources were largely consumed by college expenses. Although a focus of further analysis will be to understand better the makeup of the Launch participants, they clearly were a diverse group, particularly in terms of their religious background and involvement.

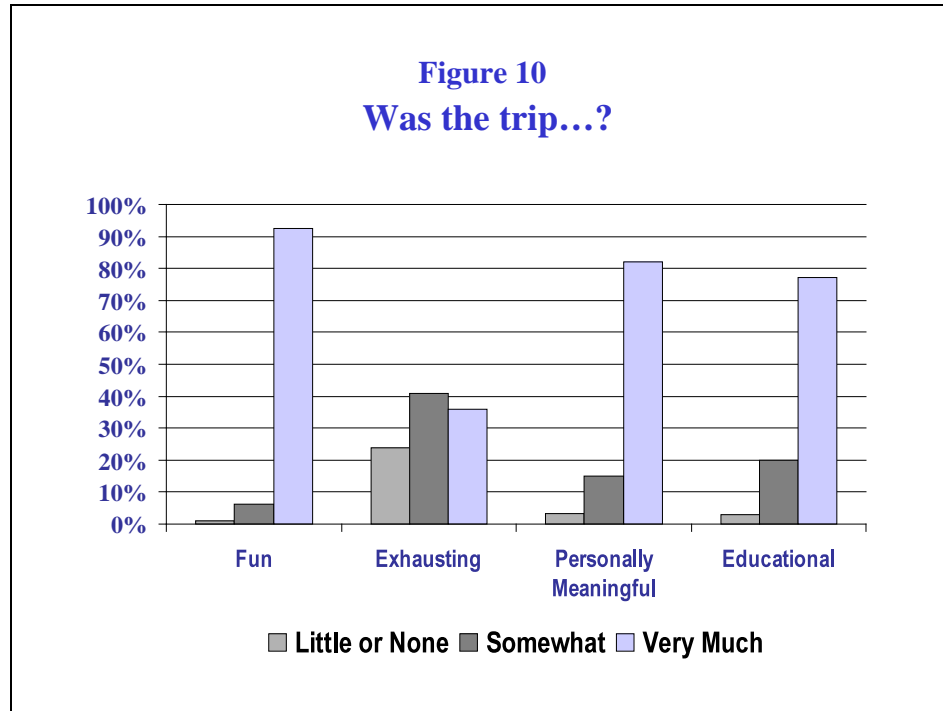
**WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE?**

Birthright Israel unquestionably succeeded in attracting many interested participants, but did it succeed in involving them fully in the purposes of the trip? There was trepidation on the part of some trip organizers and some Jewish organizations that people who were offered the “gift” of a free trip would not take it seriously. Below, we examine first whether participants enjoyed the trip—a requisite to the trip’s having a positive impact—and then various aspects of the experience.



*“What hit me first was how I felt like I belonged there... I really belonged with the group, and in the country. I didn’t feel like I was a tourist.”*

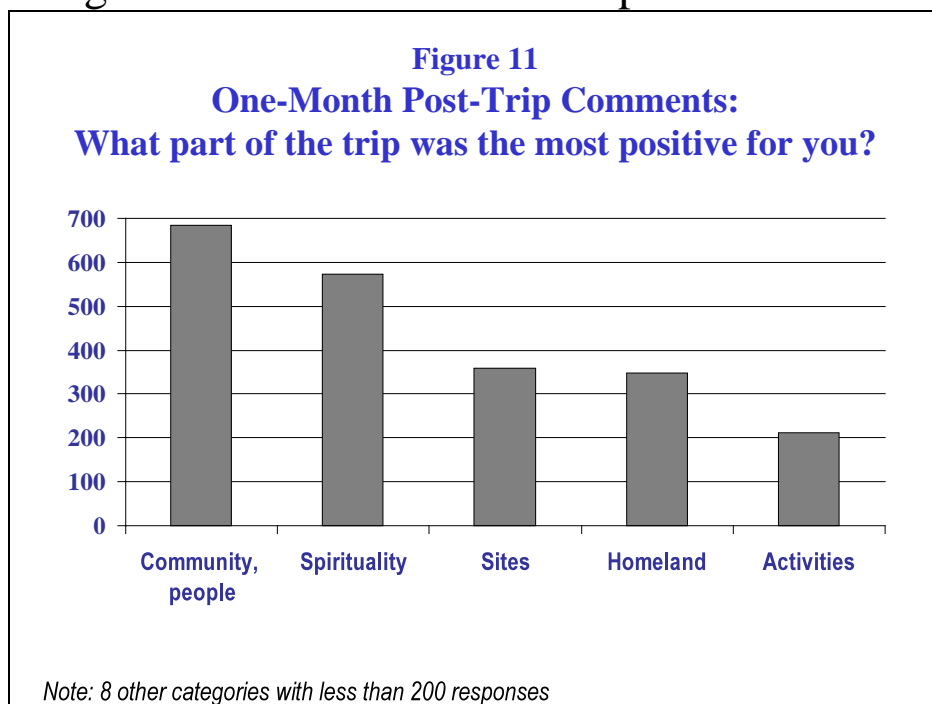
*“The moment with my most religious impact was my first trip to the Kotel.”*



As Figure 10 shows (based on data from the three-month follow-up survey), a vast majority of participants found the trip fun (93%), personally meaningful (82%), and educational (77%). The only “negative” outcome was that many of the participants found the trip “exhausting.” These quantitative data parallel responses to an open-ended survey conducted one-month post-trip. Shortly after they returned, participants were asked what part of the trip had been most positive for them and what part had been most negative or problematic. The most common responses to the “positive” open-ended question are shown in

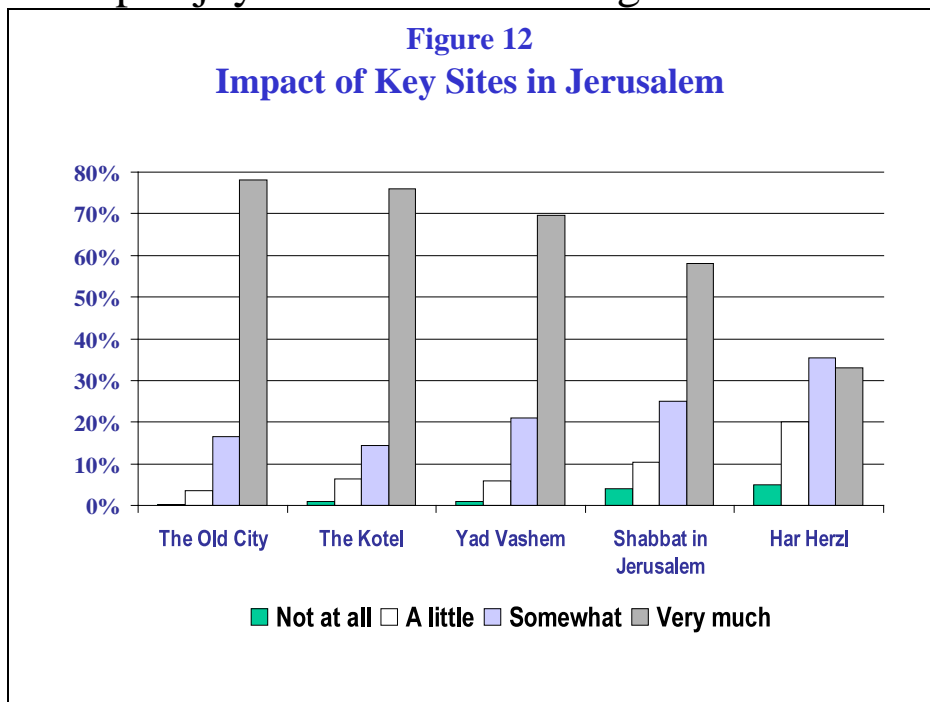
Figure 11. The largest set of responses had to do with a sense of being part of a community and interacting and bonding with people (Americans and Israelis).

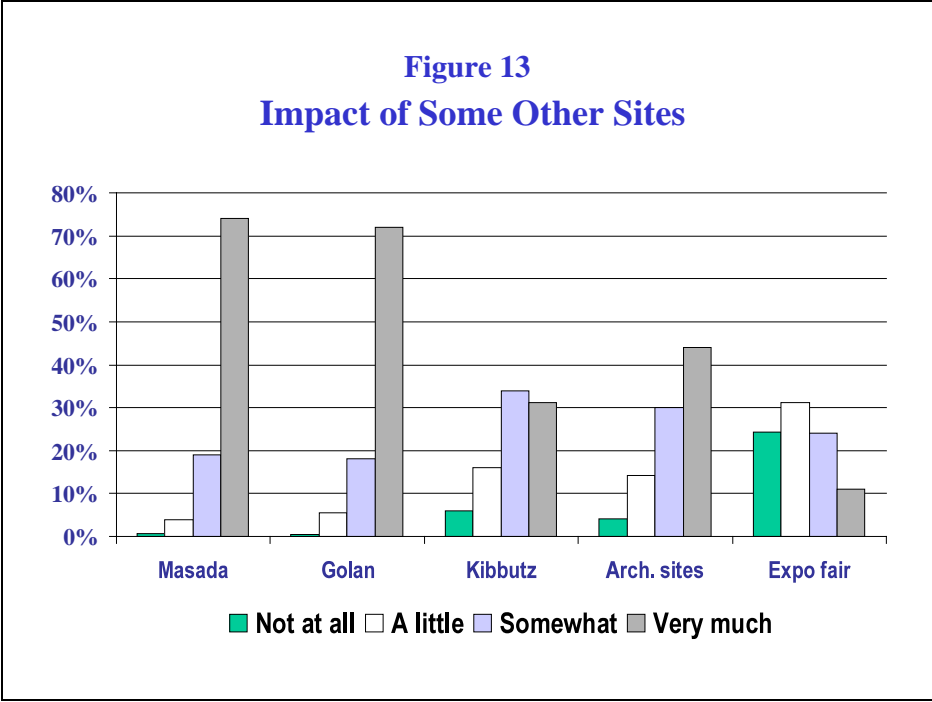
In response to the negative open-ended question, 28% reported that there was *nothing* problematic about the trip. Most of the complaints concerned organization and planning, reflecting the intensity of the trip and the numbers of activities that were planned. Not surprisingly, participants reported logistical problems and would have preferred less structured activity and more free time, having had the feeling of being rushed or not having enough time for all the activities packed into the trip.



What was it about Israel that produced overwhelmingly positive reactions? Among the sites visited, those with the greatest reported impact were the Old City of Jerusalem, the Kotel, Yad Vashem, Masada, and the Golan (see Figures 12 and 13). These were all sites of deep symbolic significance (N.B. at the time of

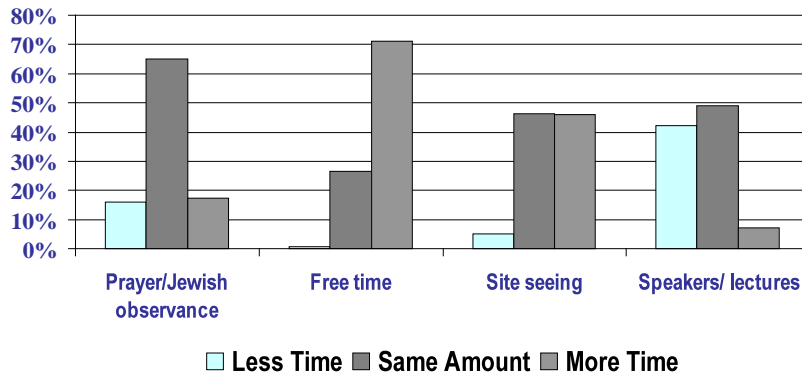
the Launch visits, peace discussions with Syria about the Golan Heights were being held in the United States). Despite the importance of particular sites, it should be remembered that the participants traveled in a “cocoon” formed by the 40 persons on their bus. This, too, proved a successful intervention, even if it was dictated by logistical necessity. Nearly 70% of participants found the people on their bus very friendly, yet most (53%) tended to characterize those companions as “somewhat similar” to themselves rather than “very similar” (17%) —an indication that participants experienced community along with a recognition of diversity. Further analysis of the focus-group data will explore the extent to which this heterogeneity contributed to making the trip enjoyable and stimulating.





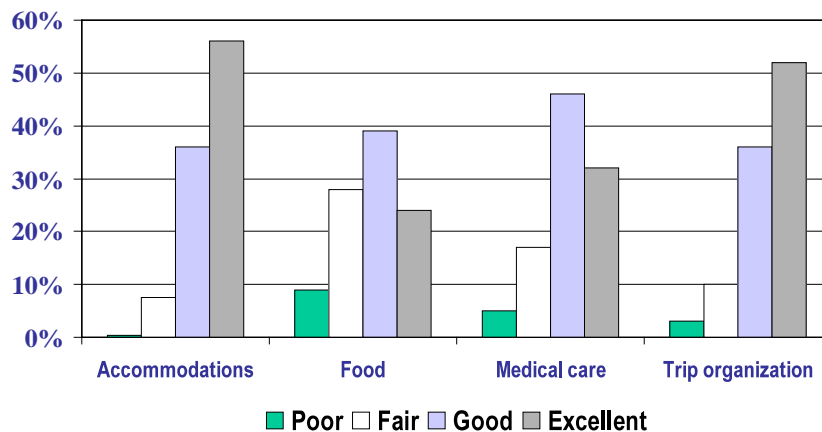
The trip was more than traveling to one site after another on a bus. There were diverse activities and, of course, many logistic considerations that could undermine the goals of the program if they were not handled competently and sensitively. As shown in Figure 14, participants were highly satisfied with the structured activities, thought that no more time should be spent on speakers and lectures, and would have preferred more unstructured time. Evaluations of the trip planning were positively skewed (Figure 15), with accommodations (92% good or excellent) and trip organization (88% good or excellent) rated higher, on average, than food and medical care. North American college students are not always keen on Israeli institutional cooking, and in the bad weather that characterized the winter trip, over 40% reported having had some health problems.

**Figure 14**  
**What amount of time would you have wanted for... ?**

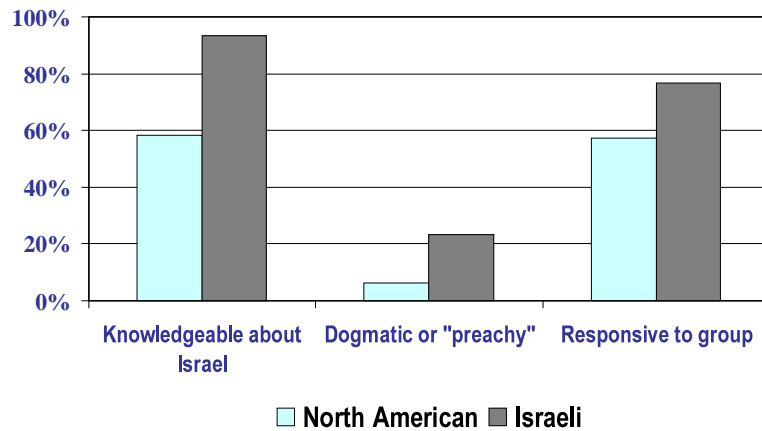


Finally, people and the way they interact make a big difference. Each bus had two North American leaders and one Israeli guide. Both were rated very positively. They were seen as very knowledgeable, but not preachy or dogmatic. At the same time, they were seen as responsive to the group. Figure 16 shows the percentages of students who responded “very much” to each of these characterizations. These high ratings appear to reflect a predominant perception among participants that the Birthright staff accepted them unconditionally and refrained from imposing *a priori* demands on them.

**Figure 15**  
**Satisfaction with Trip Planning**



**Figure 16**  
**Guides and Educators (on the bus)**

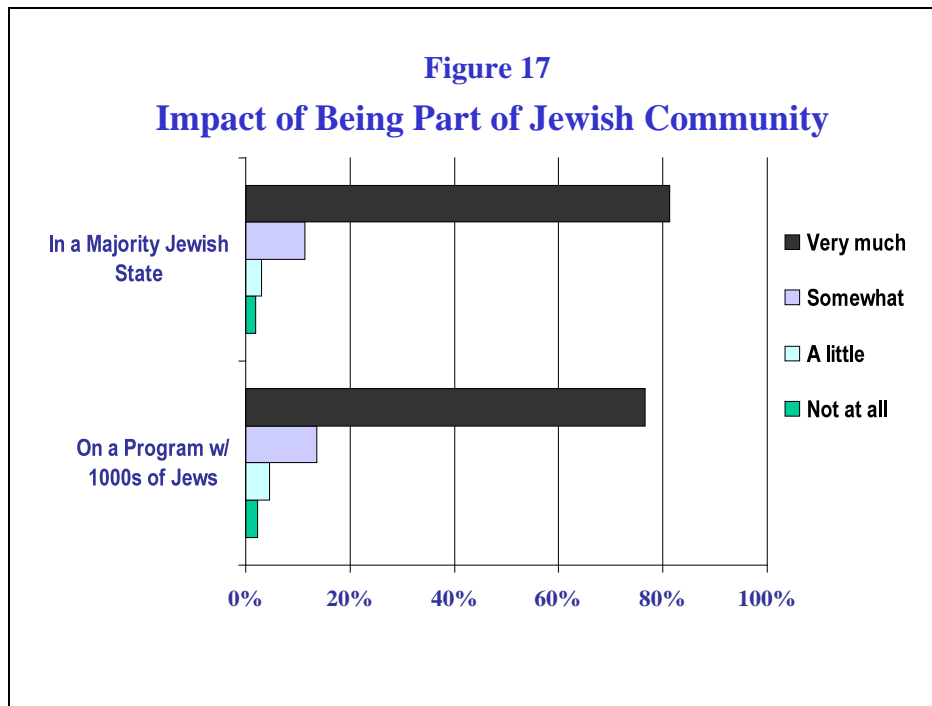


**WHY DID THE EXPERIENCE “WORK”?**

The sites, the logistics, and the bus all had an important impact, but the participants’ reports suggest that the trip was much more than that. The true test of the effectiveness of Birthright Israel lies in the *gestalt* of what participants experienced—a larger, deeper experience than any one locale or event. Consider the comments of two of our respondents (who participated in focus groups):

*“... it was really important that the Rabbi went. It showed that he was a person ... because rabbis are holy. I can never just talk to them, hang out....”*

*“...it was a combination of feeling that I belonged and being with a group of people experiencing the same thing. [It] provided an outlet intellectually and emotionally that felt safe and comfortable.”*



The transforming impact of the Birthright Israel experience is captured by the responses summarized in Figure 17. Being in a majority Jewish state had a strong emotional impact on 81% of the participants; 77% were similarly affected by being part of a program with thousands of Jews. These findings show the force of the communal bonding that occurred, both with Israel and among peers. Birthright Israel sought to create an experience of community at both of these levels, and it succeeded perhaps beyond expectations, as the power of numbers, proximity, and the sharing of intense experiences took hold. This reaction was especially strong for Hillel-sponsored participants, 80% of whom (as compared to 73% of those with other sponsors) said that being part of a program with thousands of other Jews had a large positive impact on their Israel experience. Perhaps not surprisingly the campus groups had more contacts with other participants and trip leaders and spent more time on Jewish activities after the trip than did other participants. These findings suggest that the experience of community was heightened for Hillel-sponsored participants, who (in varying degrees) had the benefit of a community within a community.

## HOW WERE PARTICIPANTS AFFECTED BY THE EXPERIENCE?

*“...a lot of the trip was about spirituality. Not necessarily about Judaism, but just personal spirituality. The trip was at a time in my life where I needed to find something good to focus on.”*

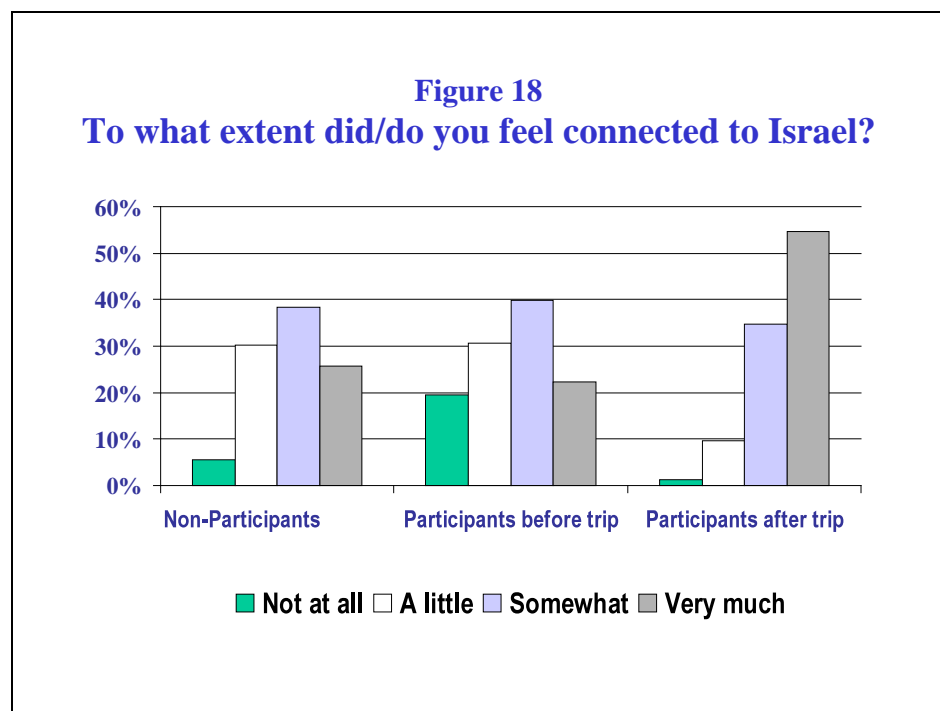
*“...religiously, Judaism has not been a huge part of my life. So just the fact that I started going to Shabbat services ... I changed ... and was able to feel more comfortable.”*

However intense the Birthright Israel experience, it would not have served the intended purpose had the participants not come home significantly altered from what they had been. Birthright Israel was designed to be “...an all-out effort to engage...young people in a stimulating encounter with Israel—and, by extension, with their own identity ... and to spark interest, involvement and a thirst for enrichment,” so that participants would “appreciate and remain in the Jewish fold” (Post, 1999). How well has this goal been achieved, at least in the first several months after the trip?

The impact of the Birthright trip on participants’ lives was measured both by retrospective “before and after” questions and by comparisons between participants and non-participants. For example, before any question on the trip or its experiences was presented, respondents were asked, “Last year, before you heard about the Birthright Israel program, to what extent did you feel connected to Israel?” Then, after questions about the trip were answered, respondents were asked, “To what extent do you feel connected to Israel?” This was done in an attempt to extend

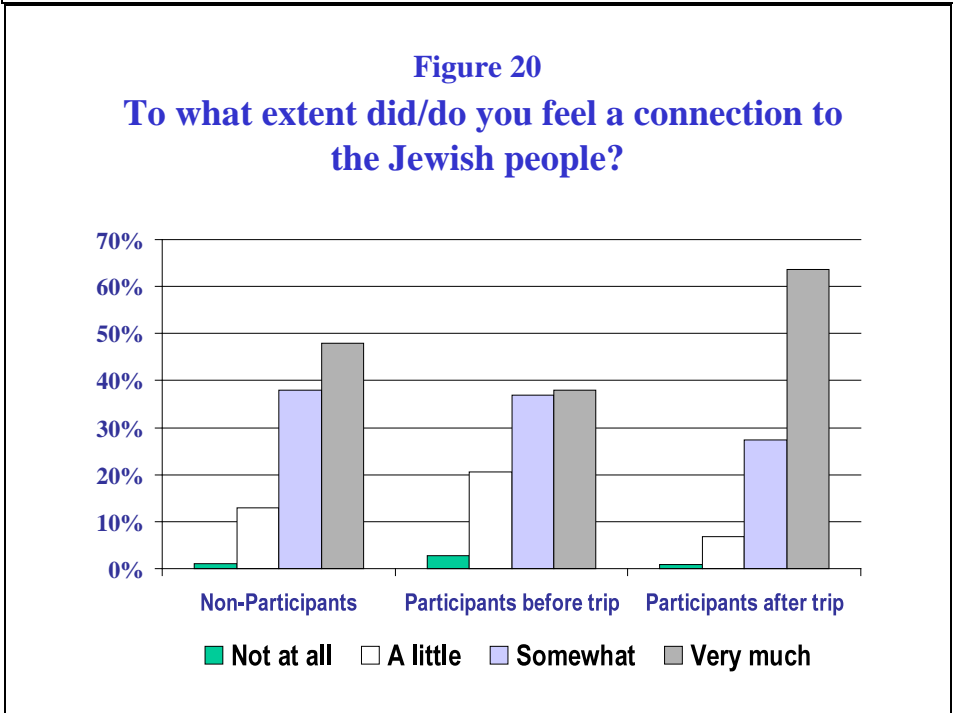
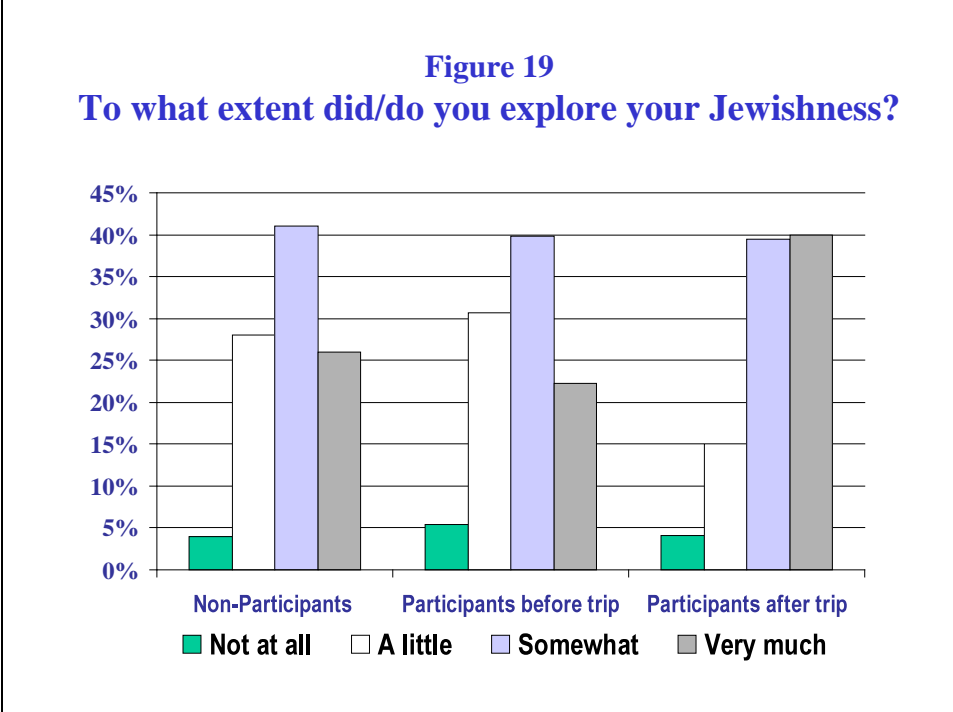


previous research by examining the possibility that the association between having been to Israel and feeling connected to Israel results simply from the fact that persons who feel connected to Israel in the first place are more likely to go there. “Before” and “after” questions administered at approximately the same time are still suspect as measures of change. Therefore, the same questions were asked of a sample of those who were just like those who went on the trip, but who had been placed on the waiting list. Because more applied than could be accommodated in the first round of trips, participants were selected (in most cases) at random from among applicants (see Methodological Appendix). The discussion below compares the two groups on several outcome measures.



In Figure 18, responses by participants and non-participants to questions about their connection to Israel are shown. Twenty-five percent of the non-participants (i.e., those on the waiting list) reported feeling very much connected with Israel as compared to 22% of the participants who

reported they had felt very much connected with Israel before their trip. The similarity between the non-participants and the participants in this respect gives us confidence that the participants were correctly reporting on their feelings before their trip to Israel. Upon their return, however, 55% percent of participants reported feeling “very much” connected with Israel. Figures 19 and 20 show comparable data for exploring one’s Jewishness and feeling a connection to the Jewish people.

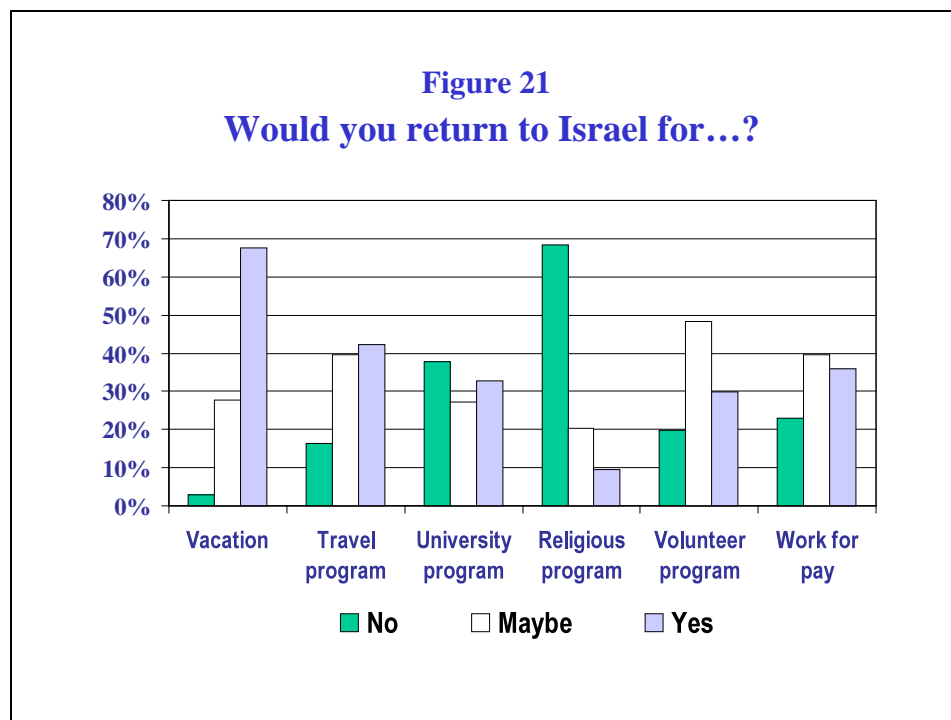


Twenty-six percent of non-participants said they explored their Jewishness “very much.” So did 22% of the participants, referring to their feelings before they went on the Birthright trip, whereas 40% of participants felt they explored their Jewishness “very much” after returning from the Birthright Israel trip (see Figure 19). The outcomes for “...feeling connected to the Jewish people” are not quite as strong, but still there is a substantial and significant change from pre-trip to post-trip (see Figure 20). Forty-eight percent of the non-participants report feeling very much connected to the Jewish people and 38% of the participants report similar feelings before their trip, increasing to 64% percent reporting feeling very much connected to the Jewish people after their trip.

Identity and community were both components of the change. The percentage of participants expressing strong disagreement with the statement, “The fact that I am a Jew has little to do with how I see myself” increased from 38% before the trip to 51% after the trip. Before the trip, 39% did not feel close to anyone in their tour group. After the trip, 71% felt close to four or more of their companions. One month after the trip, 92% of participants thought about the experience at least several times a week; nearly two-thirds thought about it at least once a day. For Birthright Israel participants, changed attitudes and changed associations went together and may well have been mutually reinforcing.

The bottom line in terms of the impact of the trip is summed up in the following: Asked whether they would participate in Birthright Israel if they had it to do all over again, 93% of the participants said they definitely would, and nearly all the rest said

they probably would. Thirty percent reported that they were “extremely likely” to return to Israel within two years, while a slightly larger number indicated that they were “somewhat likely” to do so. As shown in Figure 21, two-thirds said they would return to Israel for a vacation, 42 percent showed interest in a travel program, one-third in a university program, 30 percent in a volunteer program, and 36% in a paying job. The variety of ways in which participants would like to return to Israel reflects both the interests of participants and the fact that the group included college students from freshmen to seniors, as well as some who were already graduates. Not surprisingly, the largest disparity by years of education occurred in the case of university study-abroad programs, chosen by 41% of those in their first or second year of college but only by 29% of those in their third year or beyond.



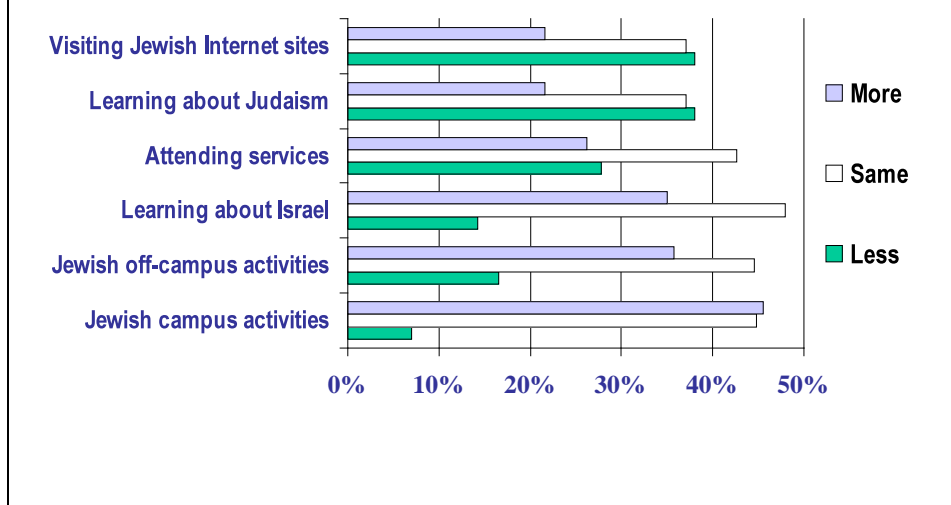
**AFTER THE TRIP**

*“I’m really interested in learning more about Judaism.”*

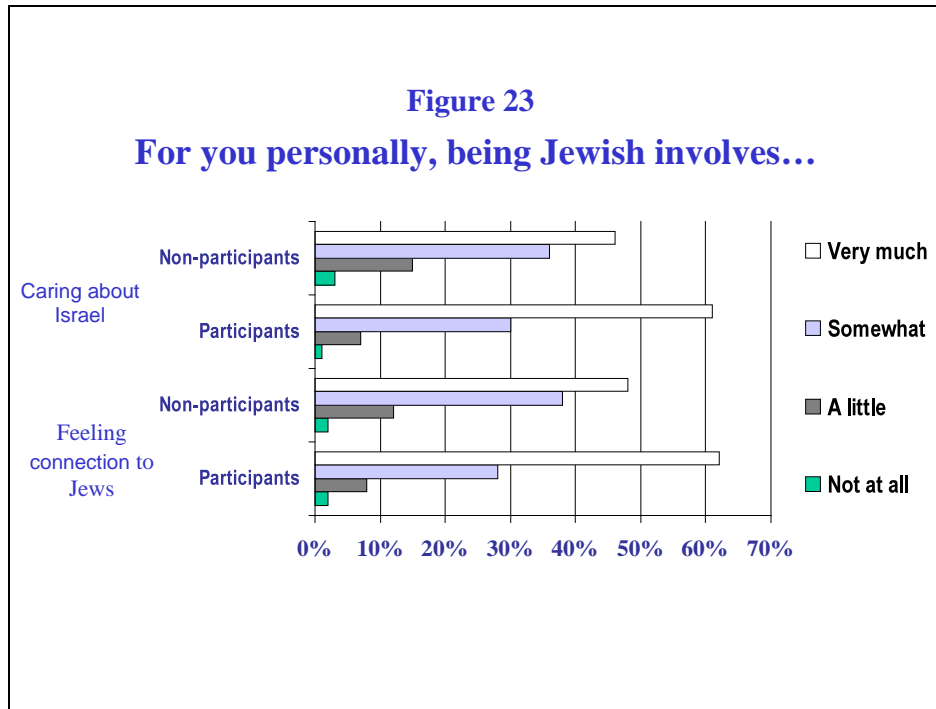
*“I feel comfortable with being with people who are like me, who view Judaism as a culture, and enjoy the holidays we celebrate.”*

The enthusiasm of the moment would matter little if it dissipated after the participants returned home and had little observable impact on how they lived their lives. How well was this initial enthusiasm (one month post-trip) sustained in terms of actual activities in the North American environment? Data from both the one- and three-month post-trip follow-ups yield several answers. One month post-trip, 74% of Hillel-sponsored participants and 65% of other participants maintained at least weekly contact with others who made the trip. This discovery of community generalized beyond the Birthright Israel group to the participants’ home environments. Three months after the trip, participants were far more likely to increase than to decrease the time they spent on Jewish campus and off-campus activities (see Figure 22). At its broadest reach, the sense of community extended to embrace Israel, and even three months post-trip, participants reported spending more time learning about Israel.

**Figure 22**  
**After your trip do you spend less or more time on...?**



These behavioral changes take on greater significance insofar as they are reflected in attitude change. As shown in Figure 23, participants were significantly more likely than non-participants to feel strongly that being Jewish involves caring about Israel and feeling a connection to other Jews. The impact of Birthright Israel was felt at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. Moreover, the robustness of these findings three months after the trip allows for greater confidence that the trajectory of the participants' lives has been altered.



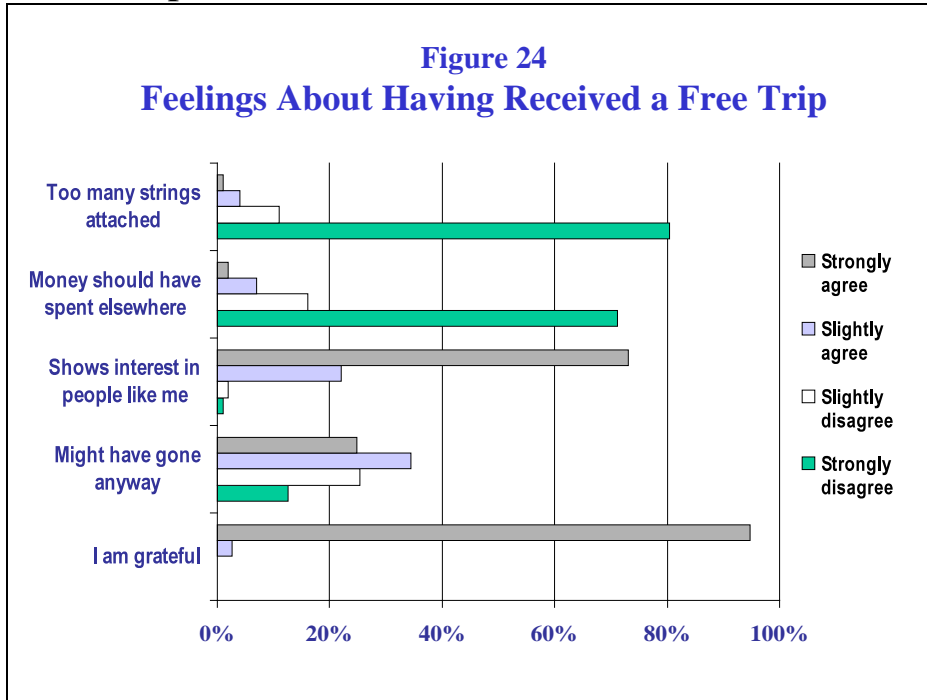
**THE GIFT**

*“I wished that I could have stayed in Israel longer ... But for a free trip, 12 days was plenty of time! Thank you for the great experience.”*

*“The fact that it was free was really important, because I would never have been able to go otherwise!”*

Would these kind expressions of thanks and approval have occurred if participants had paid all or part of their expenses? The experience of the gift of a trip seemed to be very important in the overall reactions of participants. Although some were concerned that the trip would be taken *less* seriously because it was cost-free, the cynical view is not supported by the data. As shown in Figure 24, participants expressed overwhelming feelings of approval and gratitude. Participants did not regard the gift as frivolous or wasteful. On the contrary, 73% strongly agreed that it “shows interest in people like me.” This sense of being valued may have been heightened by the unconditional nature of the gift. Aside from the gift’s practical value, it seems to have had personal significance for many

participants. By conveying the message that the community was giving them something precious, it gave participants a compelling reason to become more closely attached to the community. In this way, the terms of the Birthright Israel experience created a receptive emotional ground for the experience to take hold.



**BEING PART OF SOMETHING “BIGGER”**

*“Before the trip I didn’t know much about the history of Jews or Israel, nor did I really consider myself Jewish.... Now after the trip I feel a lot more educated and am very proud of my people and their accomplishments.”*

*“[The trip made me] ... feel like I am a part of something bigger than just myself.”*

For the first group of participants, the Birthright Israel experience clearly was more than the sum of its parts. What seems extraordinary is that an otherwise diverse group of young people bonded together. To be sure, many came in campus groups that had opportunities to meet and get to know one another beforehand and could expect future interaction. Nevertheless,



across different types of groups, with individuals from all sectors of the Jewish community, they made a connection with one another that transcended the starting point. Undoubtedly, that they traveled together in close quarters (by airplanes and bus, and in hotels and hostels) was important in creating community. It was also clear, however, that the experience was unique because they were in Israel, surrounded by other Jews and Jewish culture. These factors, along with the educational components of the experience and the impact of receiving the trip as a gift, all contributed to a transformative experience with effects that have lasted beyond the moment of the experience.

## DISCUSSION

Our preliminary analysis of systematic evaluation data from the Birthright Israel Launch indicates that the program had very positive immediate and, as of three months, ongoing impact on participants. The participants were a diverse group, reflecting the contours of the broader U.S. Jewish community. Many had long been interested in visiting Israel, but some had only peripheral connections to Judaism and to Israel. It is clear, however, that regardless of participants' initial level of engagement, the experience served to enhance their connection to fellow Jews and to Israel. Birthright Israel provided intense exposure to being part of a Jewish community and it appears to have had a profound impact. The extent to which the Birthright Israel experience alters the long-term Jewish involvement of participants cannot yet be determined. But the present findings suggest that those who participated in the program Launch have been placed on a different Jewish trajectory from their peers.

Unlike much previous research (see Mittelberg, 1999), our findings allow us to address the direction of causality in the association between visiting Israel and being engaged with Judaism and the Jewish people. Thus, our findings about differences in impact between those who actually took the trip and those who applied, but were wait-listed for the program, suggest that carefully structured Israel experiences can have a direct effect on Jewish identity. But we need to understand better what is responsible for such impact. Fortunately, we have a rich set of ethnographic data about the Launch trips. Ongoing analysis of these data, as well as additional analyses of the

quantitative data, will help shed light on how the trips nurtured Jewish identity. Birthright Israel appears to have succeeded in creating a transformative experience in which participants were “met on their own terms” and came to feel part of something larger than themselves.

The research challenge is now to “unpack” the elements of the program responsible for the program’s impact. Thus, we need to conduct additional data analyses to help us understand how participants’ particular experiences and reactions on the trip predict outcomes (e.g., desire to return to Israel, involvement in Jewish activities at home). In particular, the significance of the participants’ immediate environments —the cocoon-like groups in which they traveled together on buses —is a focus of these analyses. Given the time participants spent together and the intense experiences they shared at close quarters, groups with different sponsorship, different leadership, and different degrees of heterogeneity may have had markedly different reactions and outcomes. Assessment of these differences should aid efforts to insure the impact of future trips. As further analyses are conducted to understand the dynamics of how the program created change, several issues will be primary foci:

## **COMMUNITY**

Creating community was both deliberate and serendipitous in the design of Birthright Israel. Thus, for example, putting 400 people on a plane together was necessary logistically, but it also resulted in reinforcing community. In addition, the majority of participants were recruited by campus Hillel organizations, thereby forming a mini-community that had potential life both before and after the program. Our data are clear that participants traveled in bus groups that included those who they felt were “like them” as well as those who were different. A key focus of the next stage of our analyses will be to understand how diverse communities of young Jews form and how that process affects their feelings of belonging to the Jewish people.

## **ISRAEL**

Our data suggest that, while merely putting young Jews together in an intense experience was important, being in Israel was essential. But we need to understand in what ways Israel played a critical role. Some of our qualitative data, for example, suggest that meeting both secular and religious Israelis helped to validate Jewish identity for participants. Participant reactions to tour leaders, the Israelis with whom they had the greatest contact and upon whom they relied as *morai derech* (literally “teachers of the way”), may also have had an important influence. We need to understand how these factors functioned and to assess, more specifically, experiences such as the various *mifgashim* that were conducted with participants.

## **TRAJECTORY**

In some respects, the impact of Birthright Israel will not be known until the current generation of students matures into adulthood and they become parents of the next generation. Nevertheless, decisions about how to educate youth will need to be made long before the “true” impact of the experience is knowable. It is thus critical to understand the trajectory of present participants. Although, as Horowitz (2000) has found, the paths taken by Jews are non-linear, it is clear that the direction taken early is important. Those who enter and leave college with little Jewish education and little sense of connection to the Jewish people seem unlikely to return to the community at a later stage. A primary focus of our analysis, and of subsequent follow-up research, will be to identify predictors of future behavior.

Birthright Israel is a bold experiment that attempts to nurture Jewish identity on a scale heretofore not attempted. The present data suggest that the experience has substantial potential to shape the religious and ethnic identity of young Jews. Equally important, it also seems to provide young adults with an experience that reinforces their sense of belonging to a community and a larger human enterprise. The participants in the present study live in a society that emphasizes individualism and are surrounded by technologies that isolate them from genuine interaction. Despite social isolation (cf. Putnam, 2000), other social forces are pressing young people into greater interdependence. Our positive preliminary findings about the impact of Birthright Israel suggest that the program has both particularistic and universal significance. Along with strengthening ethnic and religious identification, the program promises to fulfill an important social need by creating meaningful community. Demonstrating the extent to which it does so is a major challenge for future research.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

### EVALUATION DESIGN

The Birthright Launch Evaluation is part of a larger, ongoing evaluation of the Birthright Israel program. It draws selectively on the components of the overall evaluation to allow for the timely presentation of data that reveal key findings about the impact of the program on participants and on the various affected communities.

The present report is based primarily on quantitative data collected as part of the three-month post-trip survey. Additional qualitative data were collected before, during, and after the Launch from observations of fieldworkers, semi-structured interviews with participants and suppliers, participants' diaries, focus groups, and workshops. The observational and other qualitative data stand as critical background to this report. The fieldworkers' reports, focus groups, and comments made by participants help us understand the experience from the participants' perspectives and aid in the interpretation of responses to scales on various surveys. The multiple sources of data help to capture the multiplicity of participants' experiences and to understand what aspects of the Launch were successful and what aspects were unsuccessful. This understanding, in turn, can point to modifications of the program for subsequent trips (e.g., to make the trips either more structured or less structured). Although the preliminary report focuses on quantitative indicators, their interpretation has been informed by other data sources. Below, the various indicators used in the study are described.

## **ONE-MONTH SURVEY**

The survey conducted one month after the trip was undertaken for two purposes: to collect up-to-date contact information for participants and to obtain preliminary indications of the nature and impact of the Birthright Israel experience. In addition to questions about their mailing address, e-mail address, and Internet access, participants were asked (in multiple-choice questions) how often they thought about their experience in Israel, whether they would make the trip if they had it to do over again, and how likely they were to return to Israel in the next two years. They were then asked open-ended questions about what parts of the trip they had found most positive and what parts they had found most negative or problematic. Information was collected from 1849 participants. Responses to the open-ended questions were grouped to determine the frequency with which certain underlying themes were mentioned.

## **THREE-MONTH SURVEY**

A survey instrument with approximately 100 questions was developed as the primary tool for soliciting information from participants about themselves and their experience. Items were drawn from widely-used and standardized surveys of adolescents and college students, as well as from surveys designed to measure Jewish attitudes and behavior, including evaluation studies of Israel experience programs. Many of the items had been developed and pilot-tested in our study of Jewish adolescents (Saxe et al., 2000). All items were pre-tested with small samples

and cognitive testing was done to refine questions. As described below, several versions of the instrument were developed for use via the Internet, by mail, and by telephone.

## QUESTIONS

The survey questions (all closed-ended except for the last section) were grouped into the following sections:

### Part 1. Your Trip to Israel

General reactions to trip, likelihood of return to Israel

### Part 2. Before Birthright Israel

Respondent's prior relationship to Jewishness and to Israel, prior travel to Israel and elsewhere, exposure to Holocaust memorial museums

### Part 3. Planning for Your Birthright Israel Trip

How respondent heard about and decided to go on the trip, the selection and orientation processes

### Part 4. The Birthright Israel Trip

Reactions to others on the bus, guides and educators, organization and pace of the trip, various sites and experiences on the trip

### Part 5. Since Your Return From Israel

Post-trip contacts with participants and others met on the trip, comparison of Jewish activities before and after the trip.

### Part 6. Values and Views

Connectedness to Israel and the Jewish people, feelings about being Jewish, what being Jewish involves.

### Part 7. Your Everyday Life

Place of residence, how respondent spends time, proportion of close friends who are Jewish, exposure to college courses on Jewish subjects.

### Part 8. Future

Contemplated return to Israel, educational plans, relative importance of various life goals.

### Part 9. More About You

Jewish practices, denominational identification, date and place of birth, student and employment status, how tuition is paid, secondary school attended

### Part 10. Your Family and Upbringing

Hebrew school, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, Jewish youth activities, denomination and Jewish practices of family, parents' background (national, educational, Jewish), parents' and siblings' travel to Israel

### Optional

Open-ended questions eliciting personal reactions to the trip (positive and negative), strongest memory of the trip, and advice to a friend going on the trip





## SAMPLE SELECTION AND SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The three-month survey was administered to all participants in the Launch Program for whom usable contact information was available. To ensure a representative sample of participants, a stratified random sub-sample of 1200 participants was selected for intensive follow-up, with the aim of achieving at least an 80% response rate within this sub-sample. Relevant sections of the survey were also administered to a comparison group of students who applied but did not participate in the trip; typically, participants were selected by lottery and those who did not go had “lost” in the random-selection procedure. It was not a pure lottery, however, because many of the trip sponsors applied additional criteria. Applicants were interviewed and sponsors often tried to achieve gender balance and to exclude activists (who were assumed to have other options for visiting Israel). As a result, the comparison group is not a purely randomly selected group and is slightly biased toward greater prior Jewish engagement than the participants.

Most Birthright Israel participants registered for the program using the Internet. The survey, as well, was administered primarily on the Internet through an on-line questionnaire. All participants (n=3401) with an e-mail address were first sent a message informing them of the upcoming survey and its purpose and assuring them of confidentiality. Of these participants, 3079 had a valid e-mail address. They then received another e-mail asking them to complete the questionnaire by visiting a web site (“clicking” on a URL) created for that purpose. Each respondent was admitted to the web site by using an individual identifier that

allowed only eligible participants to complete the survey; it also provided a record of who did and did not complete the questionnaire. A paper-and-pencil version of the survey was sent to 161 participants who did not have an e-mail address. Of these 81 were undeliverable. Forty-five additional participants (who had been originally contacted by e-mail) completed the survey by mail.

These communications were followed, as needed, by e-mail reminder notices, telephone reminder calls, and postcards urging participation. Full telephone interviews were conducted with the remaining non-responders from among the 1200 individuals in the sub-sample who could be reached. Those without Internet access were surveyed by mail or, if necessary, by telephone. Given these numerous opportunities to be surveyed, few refused altogether, although some were lost to follow-up. Of necessity, the telephone survey was streamlined, with fewer questions and fewer response codes than the written (Internet and mailed) questionnaire.

The 2000 (approximately) contactable participants who not part of the sub-sample received all of the follow-up, except the final telephone call. Participants who were not part of the selected sub-sample were also asked to complete an Internet survey, but without the intensive follow-up given the sub-sample. Non-participants were surveyed in the same manner as participants, although they received a modified survey instrument that asked only about their background and Jewish involvements. To insure an adequate response rate for this group, each person was

offered an incentive of \$10 (a gift certificate to an on-line book and record store).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Information was collected from 1999 participants: 77% through the Internet, 6% through a mailed paper-and-pencil questionnaire, and 17% through intense follow-up by telephone. The datasets from the Internet, mail, and telephone surveys were concatenated and response rates determined for each of the groups surveyed. The characteristics of respondents and non-respondents were compared to test the reliability of the final sample. Data from the 2000 non-randomly selected participants were then compared with those from the selected sub-sample of 1200 to determine the extent to which they could be used to enrich the analysis. There were few differences (fewer than would be expected by chance) and, for the purposes of the present report, the datasets have been integrated.

Indices were then created, the most important of these being for Jewish engagement, both in the participant's high-school-age environment and in terms of current practice. These measures made it possible to measure the extent to which the program brought in, as intended, youths on the periphery of the Jewish community.

### **SAMPLE AND RESPONSE RATE**

The table below shows the high response rate that was obtained for the three-month post-trip survey, especially in the selected sub-sample given intensive follow-up.

# Sample

	Participants: Selected Sample	Participants: Non-Selected	Non-Participants (Wait List)
<b>Respondents</b>	1002/ 84.5%	997/ 51.6%	805/ 67.5%
<b>Total Eligible*</b>	1186	1931	1192

\*The number of eligibles in each category is those for whom we had valid contact information.

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## Preface

Birthright Israel was a bold experiment, although at the outset, there was substantial concern as to whether young Diaspora Jews would be interested and whether it was a worthwhile investment. To the credit of the program sponsors, they were eager to get systematic feedback about the program and were willing to subject the program to external scrutiny. The present report is the first in a series of documents that describes a systematic evaluation of Birthright Israel. This report focuses on two surveys conducted with participants in the launch programs and summarizes their reactions one and three months after the experience.

Additional studies and reports are underway. A subsequent report will document the experience from the perspective of participant observers who joined the initial trips. Further analyses of the survey data are also being conducted and will be integrated with additional follow-up surveys of participants. With such a dynamic program it seems important to release information as promptly as possible. This report is, as the title indicates, preliminary and we will no doubt refine our view of the program as we collect and analyze further data. That said, we feel confident that the present report accurately summarizes near-term reactions to the program.

As with most contemporary social science, the present project was a team effort. Although, as principal co-investigators, we take responsibility for the overall conduct of the effort and its conclusions, this report could not have taken shape without the incredible work of our colleagues and students. We feel privileged to work with each member of the team. We are also very grateful to those involved in the Birthright Israel program; in particular, our primary liaison, Professor Barry Chazan. One of the leading scholars of Jewish Education, Professor Chazan made our work possible.

We hope that the present report, as well as our subsequent documents, will be useful to both scholars and practitioners. We welcome your feedback.

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