

*birthright israel and the Creation of Ritual**
by Shaul Kelner

Sometimes, young people truly are creative. Rather than replicate what already exists, they innovate. Rather than do politely as they are told, they surprise people with the curious and unexpected. It is a “problem” all identity-building programs should have. Consider *birthright israel*, a ten-day peer educational encounter with the Jewish state. The program does not so much *tap* the creative resources of the young generation as *unleash* them. Between the two is the difference between co-optation and empowerment, between a mechanistic view of identity-development and a humanist one.

This is a story about what some men on *birthright israel* did when the program gave them the resources and freedom to create for themselves. It does not follow the standard paradigm of Jewish identity stories that tries to fit things into established categories of “Jewishness.” Instead, it demonstrates just how creative creativity can be.

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It took me several days to realize that the *shofar* belonged to Evan**. I rarely saw him with it. It was always being used by other men in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type who would shell out cash for religious artifact. Too quick to judge by appearances – I should have known that his street tough look was just a look. But, then again, the Judaica souvenir he decided to purchase was no do-gooder’s *tzedakah* box. It was a two-and-a-half-foot horn hewn from the head of a ram. Streaked charcoal gray and curved in a single-helix like a strand of DNA that had been ripped apart, it exuded something raw and animalesque, especially if you nosed around inside.

The *shofar* often came down from its storage space in the overhead rack when people were waiting outside the tour bus. On the curb beside the rear door a group of men would gather, usually about a half-dozen at least, each taking turns trying to coax a sound out of the horn. A man’s status in the group was reflected in control of the *shofar*, and skill with the *shofar* was reflected in status in the group, though the two were not identical. The more one could elicit a resonant blast, the less hands grabbed for the next try. Likewise, some who could

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** Confidentiality was promised to all participants in the *birthright israel* evaluation research. In this article, all names have been changed and no photos depict members of the group being described.

hardly eke out a squeak might claim extended time on the *shofar* if they were seen as leaders in the group.

Most men at one point stood in that circle, and each who asked had the opportunity to demonstrate his prowess with the *shofar*. In fact, the demonstration was the point. The call of this *shofar* was no penitent cry to the Merciful Judge. It was a primal yell by which men asserted their masculinity to one another in an act of competition and camaraderie.

A woman's place in this fellowship was about the same as a man's in a *Rosh Hodesh* group. There would be other opportunities for men and women to come together as one and for women's voices to take center stage. Caryn's performance of her original songs on the hotel piano was one. The horn-blowing contest over who was the "alpha male" was not. Once the *shofar* became a tool for boys to be boys with, it left women with little stake in it. The *shofar* was eventually redefined as a communal possession of men and women alike, but this happened in a way that ironically reinforced rather than subverted the dynamics that had earlier emerged.

Evan, may have owned the *shofar*, but Sam was its master. As the only person able to sound strong blasts with any consistency, he took control of Evan's horn. It was his decision to carry it up the Roman ramp to Masada, where we had gone to watch the sunrise. When the mountaintops of Moab to the East had become a black pencil line against a radiant band of gold, and the sun finally burst out of its hiding place, a piercing *tekiah* shattered the silence. Heads snapped left to see Sam standing on a stone wall with the two-and-a-half-foot ram's horn to his lips. He struck another single note, then a string of medium-length *shevarim* blasts. When the sun had risen fully, Sam let out one final *tekiah g'dolah*.

Isabelle, one of my key informants, pulled me aside and said, "That was definitely a *moment!*" Days later, she confessed over a plate of humous, "When I heard the *shofar*, I cried." Josh made a similar comment in a group discussion, echoing Lauren, who described it as one of the most spiritual moments of their *birthright israel* trip.

If the act of blowing the *shofar* had brought the men together, the act of listening helped unify the entire group. But Sam's ability to decide that the group would experience sunrise on Masada by hearing his *tekiah g'dolah* was a result, not a rejection, of the gender dynamics surrounding the horn. Even as he shared the *shofar's* sound, he tightened his claim to be its master and a leader in the group. He led well, sensing people's desire for a meaningful experience and expressing it with the call of the *shofar*. No longer a primal yell from man to man, it became the call of tradition informing experience and experience refiguring tradition. The blasts were not only moving, they seemed 'appropriate,' as if all sunrises in biblical days had been so marked. By wrenching the *shofar* out of the synagogue ritual to which it had been narrowly confined for centuries, the men of *birthright israel* had restored the *shofar* to functional use. Unconventional uses,

to be sure, but, at first to the men and then also to the women, ultimately meaningful ones.

When *birthright israel* was conceived few imagined that one of the ways it would influence identity would be by enabling men to express masculinity through Jewish artifacts, or that the gender dynamics that would emerge around a *shofar* would heighten the spiritual experience on Masada. But the creative resources the program unleashed led to precisely this. The implications are profound. It encourages us not to treat Jewish identity as a separate box in a person's head, but to explore the ways that an integrated holistic identity might be informed and infused Jewishly. It reminds that, in spite of the pressures to plan, plan, plan, the success of programs to empower people depends as much on a willingness to relinquish control. And finally, the creativity of the program participants breaks down any hard and fast distinction between the programmers and the subjects. People shape their own experiences. The best identity-building programs help them to do so.