

Leonard Saxe & Theodore Sasson

'Generation Birthright Israel' Chooses Engagement

A DEEPLY PESSIMISTIC NARRATIVE about the future of non-Orthodox American Jewry permeates contemporary discourse. Pundits believe that high rates of intermarriage among young adult Jews, uninspiring Jewish education and looser ties to traditional Jewish values have led to alienation from Jewish life and distancing from Israel. But recent data from a study we conducted of applicants to Taglit-Birthright Israel in 2001-2004 suggest grounds for a more positive outlook.

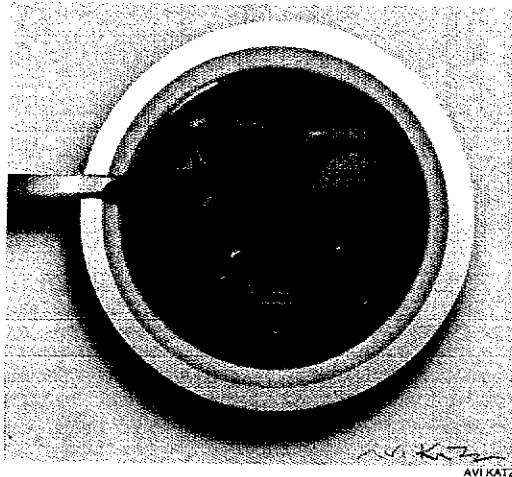
Our latest research compared participants from five to eight years ago who experienced a Taglit trip to Israel with similar individuals who applied but did not have the opportunity to participate. We found that participation in Taglit is associated with increased attachment to Israel, a stronger sense of Jewish peoplehood, and a greater likelihood of marriage to another Jew.

Overall, the study indicated that non-Orthodox participants were nearly 60 percent more likely to be married to someone currently Jewish. Nearly three-quarters of married participants had a Jewish spouse, compared to less than half of similar non-participants. Indeed, in interviews, alumni often cited Taglit as a key factor in their decisions about marriage and how they expected to raise children.

Birthright Israel also influenced the Jewish commitment of participants who were coupled with a non-Jewish partner. Thus, for example, Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni, who were intermarried, were much more likely to say that they wanted to raise Jewish children.

Taglit participants overwhelmingly described their brief stay in Israel as a life-changing experience, and while we do not know exactly why it makes such a remarkable difference in just ten days, the key seems to be that it gives participants a chance to be part of a close-knit Jewish community and to develop a connection with their Israeli peers. For many alumni this was a mind-opening experience, raising questions and providing insights about what it means to be Jewish and part of the Jewish people.

Since Taglit-Birthright Israel initiated its educational trips nearly ten years ago, nearly 200,000 North American Jewish young adults have participated and an additional 100,000 have applied for trips, but not gone. These Taglit alumni and applicants provide a window into the lives of the millennial generation in the United States and Canada. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the iPod-text messaging



generation is not shying away from binding connections and, in particular, from association with other Jews and engagement with Jewish life.

The members of "Generation Birthright Israel" are, in fact, seeking ways to connect to others and find meaning in their lives. Their decisions about marriage and how to raise children are one way in which they "vote" to be part of the Jewish people. They appear to do so not because it is the proper or expected thing to do. Rather, they marry Jewishly because Taglit-Birthright Israel provides them with a deeper understanding of why identifying as a Jew and being part of the Jewish community makes sense.

Perhaps the most important lesson from our study of Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni is that Jewish educational experiences, if suffused with cognitive and emotional content, can actually make a difference. Although some commentators proclaim that a diminishing demography is our destiny, it turns out that it is possible to alter trajectories of Jewish engagement – whatever the starting demographic facts.

There is also an important lesson about Israel's role. In an era in which Israel often appears to be on the defensive, the study highlights its deep significance to diverse sets of young adult Jews. Participants may differ in background, political outlook and knowledge about Jewish life, but the experience of being in Israel and encountering Israelis allows them to create a positive narrative, framed in the richness of Jewish-Israeli culture. Israel is central to the program's impact and provides the context for participants to discover their heritage.

Taglit-Birthright Israel is not a panacea for all that ails Diaspora Jewry. But strong evidence suggests that it can alter the degree of engagement with Israel and Jewish life. And, most importantly, it holds out the promise that we can promote Jewish peoplehood to ensure the strength of Israel and of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In an age of cynicism, that's a reassuring message.

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