
Making Meaning: Participants' Experience of Birthright Israel

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PREFACE

The present report is the second in a series of documents that describes a systematic evaluation of Birthright Israel. A previously published report focused on two surveys conducted with alumni of the launch programs. The results of these surveys indicated that Birthright Israel, at least in the near-term, had considerable impact on participants. At the outset, there was substantial concern whether young Diaspora Jews would be interested and whether it was a worthwhile investment. The program sponsors acknowledged these concerns and were willing to subject the program to external scrutiny. The present report delves in-depth into the dynamics and processes by which the trip produced the outcomes observed in the survey data. It is hoped that these findings will provide useful feedback to the program sponsors and will be of value to scholars interested in how the program achieved its impact.

Additional studies and reports are underway. Most importantly, a third follow-up will be conducted with Winter 1999-2000 participants. A new round of evaluation of the Spring 2000 and Winter 2000-2001 trips is also in process. In addition, research is focusing on the experience of the organizations charged with implementing Birthright Israel and further analyses of the survey data are being conducted. The present report should be seen within the context of this on-going program of research.

As with most contemporary social science, the present project was a team effort. Although, as principal co-investigators and as the coordinator of the field work, we take responsibility for the overall conduct of the Birthright Israel ethnography 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. In addition to each of the field workers, whose names appear as the co-authors of this report, we also want to acknowledge the contributions of our other team members. Naomi Bar-Yam skillfully managed the logistics that enabled the nine researchers to enter the field. Heather Shapiro spent much of her internship with us reflecting on her own participation in Birthright Israel, and providing a crucial “reality-test” for our ideas. Archie Brodsky’s keen eye and sharp pen helped us express our thoughts as clearly as possible.

Our work also benefited from the assistance of colleagues. Professor Harvey Goldberg shared with us advice based on his own experience as a participant observer on an Israel trip for teenagers. Dr. Elan Ezrachi provided insight into the structured encounters with Israeli peers. Howard Charish and Professor Samuel Heilman offered helpful suggestions for the report. We are also very grateful to Keith Krivitzky, Yuval Koren, Paul Reichenbach and the numerous other professionals working for Birthright Israel, the trip sponsors and the land service providers, whose assistance was crucial to the success of this field work; in particular, our primary liaison, Professor Barry Chazan, who made our work possible. His consistently insightful feedback has added immensely to the current report.

One theme that emerged in our study of Birthright Israel was the importance of family. With that in mind, we offer heartfelt thanks to Pamela Kelner, Jared Kelner, and Rhoda and Morton Schulman, whose readings of multiple drafts helped us craft a report we hope is accessible to diverse audiences.

Most of all, we would like to extend our gratitude to the participants and bus staff of the Birthright Israel trips we observed. They received our team of researchers warmly, and made the research experience for us both interesting and fun. Throughout the research process, we have attempted to treat the subjects of our study with respect. We hope this respect is reflected in these pages. After all, this story of Birthright Israel is the story of their thoughts and lives.

We hope that the present report, like the others in this series, will be useful to both scholars and practitioners. We welcome your feedback.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Birthright Israel's short-term goal was to provide participants with "a stimulating encounter with Israel —and by extension with their own identity" (Post, 1999). Three months after participants returned home, survey data (see Saxe et al., 2000) make clear that the goal was met. Alumni evaluated almost every dimension of the trip highly and there was evidence of enhanced feelings of Jewish connection and increased levels of participation in the North American Jewish community. Although the program's long-range impact cannot yet be assessed, the preliminary success of the program raises the question: "What is there about a ten-day Jewish experience in Israel that has such powerful impact?"

To understand what participants experienced, and how it was affected by the way in which trips were organized, a team of ethnographers from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies conducted detailed participant observation of over a dozen diverse Birthright Israel groups. The findings reinforce the results of the surveys and help to explain why the trip seemed to have such great impact.

The principal findings can be summarized as follows:

- Being in Israel contributed directly to the program's Jewish identity-building goals. Suffused with Jewish symbols, Israel forced Jewishness onto the consciousness. Trip itineraries capitalized on this by explicitly linking educational themes with physical settings. This capacity to tap the reservoir of core elements of American Jewish folk religion (a sense of history, tradition, peoplehood, family, heroism, insecurity and power) was experienced most vividly at evocative settings like the Western Wall, the Golan Heights, and the JNF forests. By the end of the trip, Israel became the encapsulating symbol of an intense, positive Jewish experience. The personal experience of Birthright Israel was thus tied to a collective Jewish symbol possessing great tangibility, durability, and authority.
- Post-trip survey data found that Birthright Israel participants exhibited greater diversity in their Jewish backgrounds than is typical for Israel experience programs. Both the survey and the ethnography found that this diverse group was self-selected for interest in Israel. Participants understood the goals of the program and were open to a Jewish identity-building experience, even if this was not an explicit desire. Both because of their own interests, and the guidance of Birthright Israel staff (before and during their experience in Israel), participants anticipated a meaningful experience and interpreted the things they did and saw in light of these expectations. In other words, participants saw what they expected to see and felt what they expected to feel. Having willing participants was crucial to the success of Birthright Israel.
- A consequential result of the strong group cohesion was peer pressure to respond to Israel and to feel transformed. Through group interactions, individual expectations of a personally meaningful experience became collective expectations. Staff encouraged

this by instituting formal group discussions that made the consensus explicit. When participants communicated the party line directly to their fellow travelers, including the most important message—that the trip was personally meaningful—each person could hear his/her own sentiments echoed by others, and feel comfortable that such feelings were legitimate. For the participants, a collective belief that the encounter with Israel bore existential significance became inescapable. One could deny it, but not ignore it.

- Unique, personalized encounters with Israel were a crucial supplement to planned group activities. When happening upon learning experiences that were not pre-planned, people felt that they were encountering “the real Israel.” The spontaneity and personalization gave the experiences a perceived authenticity that caught people’s attention and focused it on Israel. Individual encounters with Israel had important group consequences. As individuals brought their personal stories back to the group, it strengthened the perception that everyone was interested in Israel. Although many of these encounters happened during free time, the limited repertoire of free-time activities (mostly shopping, eating and clubbing in business districts) limited the variety of encounters available to people.
- The perception of a personalized donor-recipient relationship was crucial in making the free trip feel like a “gift.” Participants’ willingness to cooperate and be open to the program’s identity-building goals reflected the gratitude they felt toward specific donors.

Among the groups, there was a striking similarity of outcome: Consensus that the trip was an extremely positive experience, intense feelings of group cohesion, development of close friendships, an emotionally resonant personal encounter with core American Jewish symbols, and a projection of all this onto Israel—the encapsulating symbol of the experience. Participants’ understandings of what it meant to be Jewish were enriched with new cognitive and affective dimensions, rooted in both concrete personal experience and collective symbols of Jewish meaning. The consistency of result across the dozen groups reflects the relative uniformity of the itineraries and the care that went into curriculum planning.

Birthright Israel seemed to “work” because it resonated with deep-seated American Jewish conceptions about what being Jewish means and Israel’s place in this constellation of values. This encounter with the mythic Israel of American Jewish dreams was essential to the ultimate power of the Birthright Israel experience. The other, non-mythic Israel was of little more than passing interest to participants, in spite of the efforts of program providers. The trips that included both Israelis and North Americans as participants were the notable exception, offering one model of how a grassroots connection between Israel and the Diaspora—a goal of the program whose realization remains unclear—might be brought about.

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INTRODUCTION: OBSERVING BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL

The Millennium was supposed to bring a flood of pilgrims to Israel. Some, like Pope John Paul II, would be welcomed. Others, allegedly plotting violence to hasten the Second Coming of Christ, would be deported. Still others, ushering in the dawn of the new millennium in Jerusalem, would be disappointed: Religious authorities forbade hotels from organizing New Year's Eve parties, to avoid desecrating the Jewish Sabbath that began at sundown on December 31, 1999. In the words of one Romanian tourist, "In Transylvania we have a great New Year tradition —music, dancing, lots of food and wine. Here I don't think they will have anything special" (Katzenell, 1999).

Deep in the Judean desert in the pre-dawn darkness of January 1, 2000, a different group of pilgrims climbed a winding path to the top of the ancient mountain fortress Masada, where they would witness the first sunrise of the new year. These were American Jewish college students who had come not because of the millennium, but in spite of it. "I was invited to... two or three parties [in the United States]," one man said. "I was really disappointed that I couldn't go." The irony is, that while Israel's millennial expectations of a tourism boom never fully materialized (Copans, 1999), a marked success of Israel's tourism industry was a mass pilgrimage of young Jews that had nothing to do with the year 2000.

Conceived as "an outreach effort to young people who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks and may therefore soon be lost to the Jewish people" (Post, 1999), Birthright Israel sent nearly four thousand Jewish college-age youth on a free, ten-day educational touring program in Israel during the winter of 1999-2000. When registration had closed several months earlier, over twice that number had applied. The program was initiated by philanthropists Charles R. Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt. It was supported by North American Jewry's communal institutions, the Israeli government, and the Jewish Agency for Israel, and Keren Hayesod, as well as a group of private philanthropists. The \$210 million, multi-year program entailed what is so far the largest single mobilization of resources to address "the challenge of adult Jewish identity and involvement" (Chazan, 1997).

In retrospect, surveys of program alumni show positive reviews of the trip, enhanced feelings of Jewish connection, and increased levels of participation in the North American Jewish community¹ (Saxe et al., 2000). Although its long-range impact remains an open question that will be answered only over time, Birthright Israel appears to have met a short-

¹ One month and three months following the program, surveys were administered to all Birthright Israel alumni and a control group of applicants not selected to participate in the program. For details, see *Birthright Israel Launch Evaluation: Preliminary Findings* (Saxe et al., 2000).

term goal of providing participants “a stimulating encounter with Israel —and by extension with their own identity” (Post, 1999).

What actually happened in these ten days that made a difference? To answer this question, over a dozen groups were systematically observed in a comparative ethnographic study. Seven full-time participant observers each lived with a different Birthright Israel group, doing what the travelers did, sleeping where they slept, eating where they ate, for the entire length of the program. In addition, several senior investigators ‘floated’ among groups. This report is the outcome of their detailed observations of the program’s dynamics. The focus is on the elements of the program that had clear impact, as well as some elements whose impact was mixed.²

The present narrative begins by comparing two vastly different experiences —the visits to the Western Wall and Eilat. Through these emblematic cases, the crucial role played by the participants’ own expectations and desires, as well as Birthright Israel’s ability to influence these expectations, is explored. The focus then shifts from descriptions of specific places to a conceptual journey. The relevance of the group dynamics is considered, along with the effects of receiving the trip as a free gift, and the importance of Israel as the program’s setting. As evidence for our analysis of the program, quotations and vignettes recorded in a multitude of sites are used.³ The report is intended to convey a sense of the richness of the ethnographic data that underlie our conclusions.

ENCOUNTERING THE WESTERN WALL⁴

It is late morning as a group of forty American Jewish college students enter the walled Old City of Jerusalem through the archway of Zion Gate. Walking along the limestone-paved streets that lead to the Jewish Quarter, the tour guide’s voice is barely audible, drowned out by the shouts of young boys wearing skullcaps and sidelocks playing in a synagogue courtyard.

The group winds its way through stone alleyways. These open onto a large square, revealing the excavated remains of an ancient Roman colonnade and a destroyed synagogue under a reconstructed stone arch. Outside the synagogue, the group stops and

² This report necessarily highlights some aspects of the program at the expense of others. For present purposes, the focus is on the experience of participants. We discuss only in passing, for example, the nature of staff interaction with participants, and the structured encounters with Israeli peers (*‘mifgashim’*). We also attempt not to retread ground well covered by our predecessors in the ethnographic study of Israel experience programs (cf. Cohen & Wall, 1994; Goldberg, 1995; Heilman, 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2000).

³ A stylistic note: Direct quotations interspersed throughout the text are indicated by double quotation marks. Words and phrases inside single quotation marks reflect the authors’ usage, but are not necessarily quotations of participants.

⁴ The following composite is drawn from the field notes of several participant observers. All the events described actually occurred.

people find places to sit. Yaniv,⁵ the Israeli tour guide, stands in the middle of the circle of students and provides an eloquent description of the site's history and significance. But the group's attention appears to wander, and when Yaniv asks if there are questions or comments, the real object of their interest becomes clear. For many, the Jewish Quarter is merely the passage to the real destination, the Western (or "Wailing") Wall —the remains of the ancient Jewish Temple built by King Herod and destroyed by the Romans. Judaism's holiest site, it is one of the most anticipated highlights of the Birthright Israel tour.

Students pepper Yaniv and each other with questions and comments about the Western Wall, or *Kotel*, as it is known in Hebrew. Many express a special interest in the written prayers ("notes," "letters") that are traditionally placed in the cracks of the massive stones. "Do I have to put my name on it?" "Can I write more than one?" "How long does it have to be?" "I have to write for so many people!" "Will we be back at the Wall, because I forgot my letters at the hotel?" (Several people have brought prayers written by family and friends.) Paper and pens change hands as people write their thoughts.

Twenty minutes pass before the group rises to leave the area and approach the Western Wall. Individual conversations continue during the walk through the stone corridors of the Jewish Quarter. "Are we near the Wall?" "Stand over there for a picture." "I never straighten my hair." Bells ring out. People admire the Jerusalem limestone. Some of the women swoon over the guide. Some are still writing notes to place in the Wall. A group of children runs by, eliciting a chorus of *oohhs* and *ahhhs*. A conversation shifts to community service and working with youth, while others discuss their favorite type of pen.

Then, for the first time, the alleyway opens onto a vista of the Dome of the Rock and below it, at the far end of a large plaza, the Western Wall —an 18-meter high limestone façade with shrubbery growing out its cracks. The Wall is set off behind a low fence, with a large divider separating crowds of female worshippers and tourists on the right from the many men on the left. Standing at the top of a staircase leading down to the Wall, one woman exclaims, "That's what I flew 8000 miles to see!" The Mount of Olives is visible in the background, as the Muslim call to prayer echoes through the air.

Having passed through a security checkpoint on the staircase, the group stands at the rear of the plaza while Yaniv explains about the Western Wall, the Temple and the significance of the location. Anyone having side conversations is whispering now. Yaniv says that the Temple was built on Mount Moriah, the place where the patriarch Abraham came to sacrifice his son Isaac. He also discussed King David's selection of Jerusalem as the capital of the Israelite kingdom. At the end of his talk, Yaniv stresses that the visit to the Wall will bring up different emotions for different people —some will cry, some will think it is just another wall —but that whatever feelings people have are 'okay.' A few people have started

⁵ Throughout the report, all names of participants and staff have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain privacy.

to cry and appear deep in their own thoughts, writing petitionary notes and staring at the Wall.

The students are given thirty minutes on their own at the *Kotel*. Walking quietly toward the Wall alone or in pairs, people find it difficult to navigate the crowd. All the people observed from above praying in front of the Wall present themselves at eye level as more of a mob. One person exclaims, “Wow! There is no way we are getting near that wall...unless we push through.”

Most people who try do eventually manage to claim a space next to the Wall. A few of the students with prayer books recite prayers, but most simply put their note in-between the large stones and then touch the Wall for seconds or minutes. One woman is in tears. Another, standing near the back, is visibly shaken. At the same time, a young man is spending considerable effort to get a well-composed photograph of wall, shrub and sky. Many students are approached by beggars holding red string bracelets. Some students give them a wide berth, but others give money and receive red strings (which they wear for the rest of the trip).

A commotion erupts as a rat scampers across the plaza. People try to run out of the rodent’s path, shrieking and laughing. A security guard chases it, as do some children. The shrieking increases as the rat runs up the leg of an old woman who had failed to step out of its way. The woman shakes her leg, the rat runs down and the guard kicks it forcefully. A passerby yells at him for kicking an animal at such a holy place.

When the group reassembles at the rear of the plaza and files back to their bus, most are quiet and contemplative. Within minutes, the scene shifts and people find themselves downtown at the Ben Yehudah Street pedestrian mall. Only minutes ago they were crying and worshipping at a site that has been the focus of Jewish yearnings for millennia. Now, suddenly, they are in the center of a 21st Century city, being handed *shekels* and instructed to buy a falafel or other lunch, and then to enjoy the shopping.

EXPECTATIONS SHAPE AN EXPERIENCE

Participants’ responses to the Western Wall speak volumes about the ways they approached and interpreted their encounter with Israel in general. When the Western Wall came into view for the first time, Julie, a 23-year-old participant traveling with her sister, exclaimed, “That’s what I flew 8,000 miles to see!” Her sentiment was shared by many others in her group. The arrival at “the Wall” was supposed to be a highlight of the trip, and both participants and trip organizers knew it. Describing the program strategy to his staff of *madrichim*,⁶ one rabbi explained that somewhere inside each participant were “prepacked experiences” that had to be “let out.” He singled out for special mention “the *Kotel*.”

⁶ Group leaders. Sing. *madrich* (m.), *madrichah* (f.).

Participants, from those with years of Jewish day school to those with no formal Jewish education, were laden—in some cases, burdened—with expectations. No other site visited on Birthright Israel trips had so many preconceptions attached to it. Known as “a holy place,” a place of “hopes” and “prayers and dreams,” “the basis of our civilization,” the *Kotel* loomed large in the minds of participants, and would later be described by many as “magnificent,” “amazing,” “impressive,” and “humbling.” “A highlight” of the trip, if not “the highlight.” Undoubtedly, some came with long-established preconceptions shaped by years of Jewish socialization through schools and synagogues, family, friends and the media. But others had their preconceptions shaped by Birthright Israel itself, through the *madrachim*, fellow participants, and the orientation sessions most attended before coming to Israel.

Sam, an English major at a state college who attended his first *Shabbat* service while on Birthright Israel, described his experience at the Western Wall as “the most religious experience I have ever had.” His group had been given thirty minutes at the *Kotel*, which he spent sitting, looking deep in thought, in the corner of the enclosed area at the left of the men’s section. Later, he would tell a researcher that he was much more overwhelmed by the experience than he had ever expected to be. “It was true. I felt like I was talking to God, and that something there was speaking to everyone.”

Another student, David, had studied “Torah, the Talmud, and Midrash” in Jewish day school and then attended a “secular” high school where he says he “strayed.” His expectation that he should experience a profound religious moment made him acutely self-conscious. “I wasn’t sure what to feel once I saw the Wall,” he later commented. It was as if his emotional response was something he could and should control, and as if there were ‘correct’ emotions he should be feeling there. “I thought it would be nothing but God,” he continued. “I touched the Wall and felt nothing—cold rock. I was upset because the Wall meant so much.” Had he failed? Had the *Kotel*?

With his attention focused on monitoring his own emotional response, David found it hard simply to experience the moment. Self-consciousness, essentially the process of treating oneself as the object of examination (Mead, 1967 [1934]), may prevent complete immersion in an experience, and may make the heightened spiritual state difficult if not impossible to achieve.⁷ Such difficulties at the *Kotel* were not uncommon, but neither were they insurmountable.

In some cases, participants were able to achieve the desired emotional response through a great deal of effort. One student, Miriam, approached the Wall knowing she was supposed to write her prayers on a small piece of paper that would be placed between the stones, but, she later said, “I had no idea what I wanted to put in the Wall, like what the hell?” So she deliberately separated herself from her group and took time to absorb the scene. “I had to do it by myself. I walked down, noticed faces: Old people, young people, all into their

⁷ Meditation, for example, allows practitioners to achieve an altered state through a series of behaviors and mental exercises designed to suppress self-consciousness.

praying.... I sat in a chair away from the Wall and watched people come.... I cried. There were prayers and dreams in the air and then I realized I knew what to say.” Other people found their attention drawn elsewhere: shrugging off or giving money to beggars, watching a rat cause a commotion in the plaza, composing the perfect photograph. The “prayers and dreams” that inspired Miriam were competing with a thousand other goings-on, and noticing them required either a sustained focus or a pre-existing belief that one would find them there.

Such expectations and preconceptions were common, and were expressed in a variety of ways. This included ‘foreknowledge’ of how one would feel once at the *Kotel*. Winding her way through the streets of Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, one woman confided that visiting the Western Wall “is going to be really, really, really emotional for me because my dad has cancer and it’s incurable.”

The culturally prescribed notion that a visit to the *Kotel* could, should or would engender strong emotion was affirmed repeatedly when students discussed whether or not it had the anticipated effect on them personally. Many students framed their discussions of the Western Wall on an axis of emotional or spiritual meaning. They may have placed themselves at the low end of this axis, but the presence or absence of personal meaning was still the salient point of reference⁸:

“I just sort of felt I was going through the motions. There wasn’t anything really too meaningful to it. It just kind of seemed like we were doing this, doing that and I don’t know, I can barely even remember it.”

“I didn’t feel a really big connection with the Wall. I didn’t feel anything at the Wall.”

“Basically, I wrote a little something on a piece of paper and I went over to the Wall and placed it over there and that’s about it. Didn’t really do any praying or anything. Just placed it in the Wall. There was no real significant feeling while I was there. It was just ‘doing something else.’”

Visitors’ expectations that the site would be a place of religious meaning were also revealed by their reaction to perceived desecrations. Many expressed “shock” at the presence of beggars and their aggressiveness. One new American from Uzbekistan told her group that she gave money to a woman who then asked her for more, as if what she had given was not enough. Many kept their distance, and some said it hurt or even ruined the experience for them. Birthright Israel participants were also somewhat dismayed at how “touristy” the *Kotel* seemed. One was disturbed by all the “gawking and picture taking,” which he thought violated the holiness of the site. Another student echoed this sentiment, saying he “had problems with kids posing for pictures with it.” One religiously observant woman,

⁸ Other sites, such as the *Knesset* (Parliament) and Dizengoff Center in Tel Aviv, were rarely if ever framed in such a manner.

who visited the Western Wall with her group on Monday after first going to see it alone during her free time on the Sabbath, said she preferred the *Shabbat* atmosphere with “no cameras and everyone in long skirts, really praying.”

Sensitivity to the sanctity of the site was evident not only among the tradition-minded. Anne, a lesbian with a non-Jewish partner, was dismayed by what she observed at the *Kotel*. “For me it was a sickening experience. I walked up and, there, three girls with cameras were putting their head on the Wall in dramatic ways. They were taking pictures of each other and then striking even more dramatic poses. It made me sick.”

By no means were the three mocking the holy site. Theirs was an earnest attempt to portray themselves engaged in religious contemplation. To do so, they drew upon a familiar cultural script that ordained the quintessential physical expression of the experience one was supposed to have at the *Kotel*: In physical contact with the Wall, leaning in to create a private space to have a conversation with God. The pose had been immortalized in paintings and needlepoints (often of Hassidim) that adorned the walls of Jewish homes. It had been captured in photographs of soldiers and others standing before the Herodian stone in worshipful contemplation. And it was evident in life, as people observed each other, in the words of one field researcher, “touch the Wall with their heads and hands.” In striking the pose for a photograph, the three “girls” transformed the act from a spiritual aid into a hollow representation of itself. The intent was not actually to commune with the Divine, but to pretend to do so by striking a symbolic pose for the sake of a souvenir. It was this display of sham spirituality that so offended Anne.

Regardless of the offense she took, the act of posing demonstrated cultural awareness.⁹ The women knew the meaning and behavior associated with the Western Wall, and sought to reproduce it faithfully in a photograph. In this, and in the similar behavior by others who were trying to achieve the religious experience they associated with the location, the expectations of what one would find and how one should act at the *Kotel* shaped the way people experienced the place.

As the three women indicated through the pose they struck, people behaved at the *Kotel* as if the stones possessed an otherworldly force that could be accessed most directly through touch. Many visitors, like one student from a large Southern university, commented on “the experience of touching the Wall.” He described it as “one of the most intense experiences I have ever had. I felt like I was having a conversation with God.” Another, Michael, who became progressively more isolated as the trip went on, put it this way:

“When I went up to the Wall, I did not know what to write. I am not a religious person. My grandfather just died. He always talked about it but never went. I touched the Wall and a funny feeling went through my hands. I heard my

⁹ Had they not had this cultural knowledge, they could as easily have posed the picture by bending over backward and kissing the Western Wall as one would the Blarney Stone.

grandfather saying a poem to me in my head. I felt like all of the meaningful people in my life were in my head.”

That the Wall touched Michael even as he touched it is part of a culturally prescribed script. This script essentially externalizes the spiritual experience. It removes the locus of religious power from the individual and projects it, fetish-like, onto a physical object. Recall David’s disappointment that in feeling the ancient stones, there was no “funny feeling” such as Michael experienced, but only “cold rock.” The Western Wall is invested with the power to create a profound emotional response and potentially religious experience.¹⁰ Believing this leads people to open themselves to such experiences, to seek them out actively, to interpret their thoughts and feelings there in emotional terms, and to pay close attention to whether they are experiencing the anticipated effects of the site.

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS, REAL AND IMAGINED

It is not enough to claim that the expectation of an emotion-generating experience became a self-fulfilling prophecy. For participants, the thoughts and feelings evoked by the visit were grounded in the specific meanings they attached to the Western Wall. Were the *Kotel* not a “condensational symbol” serving to “summarize and condense experiences, feelings, and beliefs” (Elder & Cobb, 1983), the anticipation of a moving experience would likely have proven irrelevant.

The present view concurs with that of Goldberg (1995), who suggested that “one aspect of the heightened emotions connected with the *Kotel* is that *whole worlds of abstract associations and meanings* are suddenly conjured up and concentrated in a single concrete time and place” (p. 47, emphasis added). In other words, no single understanding of the *Kotel* accounts for its emotional impact on visitors to the site. But neither are the associated meanings purely idiosyncratic.¹¹ By way of example, consider one of the more commonly voiced themes —the Western Wall as the focal point of Jewish yearning.

¹⁰ This power is largely symbolic, and was generally understood as such by participants who saw the *Kotel* as an encapsulating representation of Jewish religion, peoplehood and perseverance. Its physicality was critical. One student remarked, “I did not realize how hard it is to be a Jew. Lots of people were excited by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There were things to touch. The Wall is a factual wall that people can touch.”

¹¹ This assumes that *post facto* discussions of the experience reflect what participants actually felt, rather than a process of group coalescence around a consensual narrative. This assumption is debatable, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000) makes a strong argument that “language will finally be inadequate to the task of communicating the youngsters’ experience” (pp. 39-40). Several field workers noted discrepancies between their contemporaneous observations of the scene and subsequent self-reports. In discussion groups after the visit to the *Kotel*, participants indicated more of an emotional impact than the researchers surmised. Whether the source of discrepancies can be traced to the time of observation or to the subsequent time of self-report remains an open question. Clearly, field work has inherent limitations with respect to ‘observing’ internal states. But reliance on self-reports assumes that the subject possesses complete self-awareness at the time under consideration, that he or she is able to reconstruct accurately a complete account of what occurred, and that no external influences have intervened to shape the report (cf. Danzger, 1989). While neither method is perfect, when used in tandem, each can serve as a check on the other.

Whether through prior Jewish socialization, the introductions given by the *madrichim*, or the observable reactions of their peers, many participants approached the Western Wall acutely conscious of its profound meaning to other Jews with whom they identified —be they specific individuals (such as family members like Michael’s grandfather), strangers worshipping there at the time, or abstract notions of ‘the Jewish people over the centuries.’ For example, Alan, a philosophy major, who continued his Jewish education past Bar Mitzvah, fought back tears when saying he was amazed to be “standing in a place where millions of Jews have prayed and found hope.” Another student, who was more often observed smoking and talking than listening, and who did not know what the Hebrew word “*Kotel*” was before asking the *madrich* to explain, later commented: “It has withstood the test of time, war, and weather, but the coolest part is that the cement that holds the Wall together is people’s hopes and dreams.”

Indeed, the knowledge of what the *Kotel* meant to others made some people feel uncomfortable. One Birthright Israel participant who visited the Wall but “did not feel God” and “did not feel spiritual” admitted afterward feeling like an outsider. “I was not sure it was a place we belonged. I was not sure I should go. So much history, so many people’s notes. I felt guilty asking for anything.”

For many people, sights and sounds at the *Kotel* reinforced the sense that others considered it sacred. Groups visiting on the Sabbath were struck by the sheer press of the masses praying, singing and dancing.¹² Even in groups that did not visit on the Sabbath, many commented on being moved at the number of written prayers stuffed between the cracks of the stones. Others were conscious of the “wailing” (Would they have used that word if the place were not called the ‘Wailing’ Wall?), “emotion,” and “strength” of worshippers around them. One student described the experience:

“At the Western Wall, first just touching it and realizing that I was actually here, touching the Wall, then hearing the singing of the bar mitzvahs that were going on behind me, mixed with the sounds of someone really praying seriously to the right of me, and someone crying, really sobbing, to the left of me—all those sounds kind of mixed together and gave me the sense that there was really something profound happening there.”

Although this student recognized the importance of the place to others, like many of his fellow participants, he placed himself squarely at the center of the narrative. The goings-on around him were not of mere anthropological interest. Rather, they were part of something larger in which he too shared. Hence the marvel expressed at the “realiz[ation] that *I* was actually here.” To the cognitive and affective dimensions of symbolic attachment (Elder & Cobb, 1983) to the Western Wall, an *identificational dimension* needs to be added. Whereas the former refer to the substantive meanings and to the positive or negative

¹² In terms of its ability to create a transcendent experience, the Sabbath eve visit had several advantages. It was a mass event, with all the excitement that can be generated by crowds. It also was tied to an organized religious observance as part of the regular Jewish calendar familiar to many participants.

feelings attached to the symbol, the identificational dimension refers to the relationship posited between the symbol's referents and the self. For Jewish visitors to the *Kotel*, a sense of identification, belonging and possession helped differentiate the experience from visits to the holy sites of other faiths.¹³

In subsequent visits to the *Kotel*, the emotional power of the encounter was often dulled, a testimony to the power of the participants to create their own sacred moments.¹⁴ Confronted for the first time with a deeply resonant symbol, people were acutely conscious of symbolic meanings associated with the place, and interpreted experiences there in terms of a larger narrative. Returning days later, they still experienced the *Kotel* as a real place, but were less likely to imbue the encounter with transcendent meaning. Three days after one Hillel¹⁵ group's first visit, students coming back to the site displayed a lighter mood. Rather than approaching it alone, as many had done before, people walked to the Wall in small groups, while others remained in the plaza, chatting. As they climbed the stairs leading away from the *Kotel* toward the center of the Jewish Quarter, one student described this trip to the Wall as a lot less emotional for people because "everyone has been here now two or three times." Another echoed this sentiment, saying he felt he was "taking it more for granted."

Whether through prior Jewish socialization, effective education by Birthright Israel, or the influence of peers, people first approached the Western Wall with an understanding that this was supposed to be a profound encounter. They were *supposed* to feel a certain way. This turned some people off. For others, it set expectations so high that they were bound to be disappointed. It encouraged some people to work hard to try to feel what they were supposed to feel. And it enabled others to open themselves to the experience. But the diversity of behaviors occurring at the *Kotel*—taking photographs, shrugging off beggars, chatting with friends—and even more so, the fact that the same people could have very different experiences in repeated visits to the site, demonstrate that the power to create the transcendent moment does not reside in Herod's stones, but in the hearts and minds of those who approach it. The students traveling on Birthright Israel were clearly ready for the experience.

¹³ It also helps explain why a number of participant observers expected that female visitors would feel less of a connection to the Western Wall than males, and also why these expectations were generally not borne out. The researchers' knowledge of internecine conflict surrounding the status of women at the *Kotel* led them to expect a weak identificational attachment to the *Kotel* among women, especially feminists. Participants, however, were generally unencumbered with a knowledge of the issues and few voiced feelings of exclusion.

¹⁴ These later visits usually occurred when groups were touring archaeological sites nearby. One exception occurred when a group returned to the Western Wall immediately prior to departure to Canada. Associated with the end of the ten-day trip, and with bidding farewell to Israel and the group, the *Kotel* was framed in highly symbolic terms and helped focus the emotions of an already emotional bunch. As we will discuss at length later in the report, the *Kotel* in this instance took on totemic qualities, serving as a physical representation of the group experience.

¹⁵ Hillel is an international organization serving Jews at colleges and universities. The majority of American groups on Birthright Israel during Winter 1999-2000 were campus-based groups organized by Hillel.

AN “OFF DAY”

If the Western Wall was the most anticipated attraction of the trip, Eilat was a counterpoint—an out-of-the-way rest stop with little symbolic value attached to it either before or after the visit.

Only a minority of buses made the half-day trek through the desert to the Red Sea resort town at Israel’s southern tip. The long ride, described as a “drag” made “easier” only by “everybody’s expectation of going down to the Dead Sea—not the Dead Sea—the Red Sea,” was used by some to catch up on much-needed sleep. Subtly reinforcing the common view among participants that travel time was mere passage to the ‘real’ destinations, organizers of the Canadian tours decided to forego the bus trip altogether and chartered airplanes.

Eilat was largely an unknown. Few expectations (other than a vague awareness of the Red Sea with “all the fish”) and even less excitement were in evidence. The Western Wall visit was prefaced by a barrage of questions from eager students. Eilat was approached with minds elsewhere and little student-initiated discussion about the destination. As one bus rumbled along to the sandy Southern outpost, a Hebrew-speaking American student commandeered the microphone to teach a Hebrew counting song, then encouraged a lewd discussion based on a play of words about group “bonding and bondage experiences.” Twice, Israeli staff broke in to explain about the region’s geography and Eilat’s economy, but participants immediately slipped back to singing rap songs and telling off-color jokes over the microphone.

For travelers from the United States (as opposed to Canada), most information about the city and its environs was provided outside Eilat proper, often in the crimson mountains overlooking the city. There, guides capitalized on the proximity of the Egyptian border to expound upon the history of Israel’s relations with its neighbor to the South. The view of the Gulf of Eilat afforded by the mountain hike presented an opportunity to discuss the “orgy of corals” that was “dying from pollution” and the relative merits of diving the Red Sea and Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Describing Eilat itself, as one bus made its way along the Arava Highway towards the city, staff mentioned the importance of “oil and exports” and Subaru imports to the local economy. Little was said of the burgeoning tourist industry that would dominate the students’ own encounter with the port city.

In fact, the pervasiveness of this tourist industry locked most groups into a limited repertoire of activities. In varying order, most groups partied and swam on a “disco boat” cruise; hiked up the same trails in the ruddy hills outside the city to survey the Egyptian border, Red Sea and areas of human settlement; relaxed in the hotel; and shopped, drank and got tattooed (Hebrew names were a popular choice) during extended free time in the tourist district. In fact, so similar was the experience of different groups that students arriving on different dates under different sponsorship ended up spending free time at the same Three Monkeys bar—presumably not the only bar in Eilat, but the one that

repeatedly became Birthright Israel turf during the winter of 1999-2000. “That was awesome. They had a great band there.... Everyone was socializing. You know, people from all different buses everywhere, you know. Not just, like, our trip or anything. That was the hangout, I guess.”

Due to a sister-city relationship between Toronto’s Jewish federation and Eilat, the Canadian trips were in some regards exceptional. In addition to the *de rigueur* hike, boat cruise, Three Monkeys and tattooing, participants engaged in structured conversations (*mifgashim*) with Israeli high school and culinary students, visited a battered children’s center, and attended a banquet hosted by dignitaries from the sister cities. The institutional relationship broke the tourist-industry monopoly that otherwise dominated the framing of Eilat, and gave the tour guides options to offer alternative interpretations of what the city was ‘about.’ For the most part, the message treated Eilat and Toronto as exemplars of Israel-Diaspora partnership. But the discussions with Israelis and treatment of social problems in Israel potentially allowed other messages to be received as well.

Knowing what was taught is not the same as knowing what was learned. The lack of comment that greeted Eilat characterized the departure as well, making it difficult to know what participants thought of it. In one group in which in-depth interviews were conducted daily, the three students asked about Eilat framed their responses in similar terms, even though they disagreed about the value of the experience:

“At that place I really didn’t feel anything religious or anything. It was a great experience. The boat ride on the Red Sea was really cool, I thought. The best part about that was how you could see three countries all at once... It was an off day. I mean, like, it wasn’t very upbeat, the city itself... I took a walk around the strip of hotels with someone who actually knows Israel, who’s been to Israel. He’s on this trip... But he speaks fluent Hebrew and his grandmother lives here and his father’s from here. So he knows the area much better than I do. I was glad to meet someone like that because they can tell me a little more in depth about this place... But as I said for the religious aspect there is no —the religious aspect, the spiritual and religious... I really didn’t feel it that day. Not that day. But, I mean, the trip as a whole. Yes I have. I think this trip has done a really good job of integrating everything.” – Female

“[We] went to Eilat. It was like, ‘Whoah! This city looks incredible. I wish we could stay here longer.’ And then we went to the Red Sea and jumped in. I don’t know, it was one of the most peaceful days. I was very sleep-deprived... It wasn’t the day that I contemplated Judaism the most but it was the day I enjoyed myself the most... We went looking at tattoos with some people and then I actually started to fall asleep in the tattoo place and so I went back [to the hotel]... I fell asleep for four and a half hours and then I was wide awake. So what I did was I walked around the city finding food. And it was great because it was like four in the morning and there were still places open. I was eating. I was talking to people. And I finished a

book in a café eating some really good blintzes... I've been thinking a lot about what it would be like to live in Israel and I was thinking if it wasn't, like, impossibly expensive, which I don't know, it would be cool to live at least on the outskirts of Eilat or something. I mean, maybe in retrospect maybe it would be kind of a touristy place to live. I'm not sure." – Male

"For an experience for me, [the Red Sea] was absolutely nothing. There was really nothing good, nothing experiential. I thought it was kind of ridiculous to drive all the way down there to jump in a boat, jump off a boat, ten to fifteen minutes and drive back up. There could have been more time spent in Tel Aviv or even here in Safed. Too much running around and that was way out of the way... I went out in Eilat [during free time], but I'm not a big city-goer so it was kind of interesting. I definitely did dig the scene, and it was definitely fun and everything, but I still didn't think it was worth going all the way down there for that unless we would have spent one more night down there or one more day. Not waking up so damn early. I'm sorry, so early." – Male

If Eilat was seen as anything, it was as a city of leisure. Not because they saw an affluent local population at rest, but because Eilat's working class was busy cleaning their hotel rooms, serving their drinks, and piloting their disco boats, so that the tourists themselves might remain blissfully unaware of the work that everywhere surrounded them. For participants, their feelings about Eilat became inseparable from the personal experiences they had there.

The experience at the Western Wall suggests that participants were not blank slates upon which Birthright Israel could inscribe whatever messages it wished. But to the extent that program organizers had some ability to shape participants' views about specific sites and their associated 'meanings,' Eilat, unburdened by widespread expectations and symbolic attachments, provided greater opportunity. Utilizing Eilat's extensive tourist facilities, Birthright Israel's American trips planned a series of activities that encouraged participants to think of Eilat as a leisure capital with little relation to things religious or meaningful. They apparently met with great success. Participants internalized this message and, at least when put in the position of being formally interviewed, expressed an awareness that Eilat was somehow separate from the broader context of the program. Some appreciated this, whereas others felt that the ends (leisure) did not justify the means (a day-long bus ride). Whereas the *Kotel* emerged as a highlight of the trip, Eilat quickly faded from consciousness. Leisure, simply put, has little symbolic resonance on its own and does not tap the reservoir of core American Jewish values that were evoked to great effect at the Western Wall, the Golan Heights and the JNF forests.

Still, this was by no means a missed opportunity. The visits to the Egyptian border were seized by educators as a teaching moment, and by participants (in one group) as a chance to shake hands and exchange souvenirs with an Egyptian guard or (in another group) express satisfaction at the "reversal of fortunes" when throwing rocks over the fence into Egypt.

The Canadian trips maximized their connections with diverse sectors of the local population to present a broader understanding of the city. Even the focus on leisure had important consequences when judged in the broader context of the program —providing opportunities for group bonding and for needed rest and relaxation (although the long bus ride was tiring in and of itself). It encouraged American Jewish youth to see Israel not simply in terms of religious and political symbolism. And it even gave college students an opportunity to integrate something ‘Jewish’ —like Hebrew tattoos¹⁶ and blintzes —into a party atmosphere few associate with the Judaism of family and synagogue.

THE READINESS IS ALL

Having been part of the American Jewish cultural landscape for three generations, the “Israel Experience” (at least its general parameters) is by now familiar to many American Jews, even those who have never traveled on one. Whether through stories told by friends or family, or information disseminated by Birthright Israel itself, participants did not arrive at Ben Gurion Airport culturally illiterate, with no idea what to expect. Of course, they had heard more about some things, like the Western Wall, than others, like Eilat. But the other activities eagerly anticipated by many participants will come as no surprise to those knowledgeable about Israel Experience programs.

The story of the mountaintop fortress Masada was already known by some, including one enthusiastic Texan who ran up the ancient Roman ramp at the desert peak and shouted “the Jewish Alamo!” Some had an image of it as the place for beautiful sunrise hikes and bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. In fact, one such ceremony was privately arranged by participants without the involvement of staff. A participant who had taken to wearing a *yarmulke* in Israel (although it was not his practice to don the skullcap in the United States) surprised people in the group by pulling out from his backpack a *tallit*. He donned the fringed prayer shawl and proceeded to remove a set of leather phylacteries (*tefillin*) from the bag. These he presented to another young man who began wrapping them around his arm with the first young man’s help. Most of the group had by now gathered to watch. When the *tefillin* were finally in place on the head and arm, the young man, who had never had a *bar mitzvah* ceremony, beamed at the group. “*Mazel tov!*” they congratulated him. Later, the *bar mitzvah* boy would single out this moment as the high point of his trip, when his Jewish community welcomed him into Jewish adulthood.

¹⁶ Jewish law prohibits tattooing, and for many Jews, the tattoo as a mark of Jewish identification evokes images of the numbers etched into the arms of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Rejecting deeply-rooted Jewish attitudes in favor of pop-cultural norms, Birthright Israel participants transformed the tattoo into a positive assertion of Jewish identity.

Likewise, the mineral-rich Dead Sea was “one of those things you have to do”¹⁷ and “something you’ve always heard about... Everyone says you float, and you go in and [lo and behold] you float.” And even if some participants had not heard about the Dead Sea from “everyone,” many had obviously seen the stock publicity photo of a bather floating in a seated position while reading a newspaper, because they faithfully reproduced the pose for the cameras themselves.

Many students, feeling that their trip would not be complete without the requisite “tree planting ceremony,” insisted that this be included in the itinerary. When weather threatened to cancel the activity for one group, there was general disappointment as students almost begged, “Can we plant trees, please!” An Israeli guide on another bus informed her group that they would add tree planting to the following day’s schedule in response to student requests. She was greeted with shouts of approval. The planting was apparently important to the students on two, probably related, levels. For some, it symbolized “a connection to the physical land of Israel.” In the words of one business student who had been expelled from Hebrew school when she was eleven, “We are planting our roots here in Israel by planting a tree. It symbolizes to me that this is our land and we will never be kicked out again.”

More commonly, the act was seen as a way to honor or memorialize loved ones. A shortage of dedication certificates in one group led students to have “a fit” (in the words of the researcher present at the time) and the bus was forced to turn back to retrieve more from the Jewish National Fund field office. Sometimes, the decision to dedicate a tree was spontaneous, as in the case of one man who asked a researcher nearby if he should dedicate his tree, which he then did in honor of his grandfather. In other cases, staff suggested the idea, at which point participants began calling out the names of family members, and several mentioned friends struggling with cancer.

Complaints in general were muted on Birthright Israel, and participants generally were enthusiastic and flexible. But there were isolated cases when participants greeted with skepticism activities that did not conform to their preconceptions of an Israel experience program. At a visit to Kfar Kedem (a simulated Biblical-era community), wary eyebrows were raised when participants were given Biblical-style clothing to don. “Is this really going to help me connect with my Jewish identity?” one person complained, while others questioned the purpose of listening to a lecture on ancient farming techniques and a demonstration on wheat-grinding. Once in costume, however, the mood lightened considerably, especially when the group began baking its own bread and riding donkeys.

The modern, as well as the ostensibly ancient, raised hackles. Walking with their group toward Dizengoff Center on a rainy day in Tel Aviv, four men joked sarcastically, “Hey, what did you do in Israel? We went to the mall!” A woman on another group approached the researcher to report a “sociological comment:” She didn’t find hanging out in the mall

¹⁷ But only once. *Madrichim*, Israeli group members in those groups comprised of both Israelis and North Americans, and people who had previously been to Israel generally remained on the shore.

for an hour to be “very enlightening.” “How can you process a day at the mall?” another sneered, during one of the six Hillel “conversations.”¹⁸

Such complaints revealed that people had expectations not only regarding specific sites, but also surrounding the purpose of the trip. Participants expected that the trip would deliver the meaningful Jewish experience it promised, and they were quick to voice dissatisfaction when it did not. Complaints about the food, the pace, the weather, the accommodations and the head-cold epidemic were ever-present but minimized even by the complainants themselves. “Whenever I start bitching about something here, I just remind myself that it’s all for free,” said one man who had established himself as something of the bus nuisance. Even a sick woman apologized to those around her for complaining that she was feeling under the weather. “Why should I complain when I have this awesome free trip?”

But complaints that elements of the trip were not furthering the lofty program goals were of a different order. Although only a small number of researchers accompanied the groups, Birthright Israel was under the microscope of thousands of observers. As they went through each item on their itinerary, the participants were constantly evaluating their experience, judging whether a mall visit provided the “enlightening” experience a person was hoping for, or whether a Biblical reenactment was “really going to help me connect with my Jewish identity.”

All this occurred in spite of the oft-repeated claim, “I had no idea what to expect” about the trip. The professed lack of expectation is surprising, coming from students who are both worldly and sophisticated. But something was different about Birthright Israel – something that made past travel experiences seem somehow inappropriate points of comparison. What they described as coming with “no expectations” was in reality an openness to a different type of travel experience. In spite of their protestations to the contrary, there is evidence that people did indeed understand what an Israel experience program was supposed to be about.

Expectations that Birthright Israel could provide a personally meaningful Jewish experience were established for many long before the program began and from sources well beyond the BRINA/*Taglit* network.¹⁹ “I’ve always heard that going to Israel is an experience that’s life-changing,” one woman explained to her group during the closing discussion. Sitting in discussion circles in hotel rooms across Israel, students from all over North America echoed the sentiment: “I had so many high expectations, and everyone at home always told me about how amazing and incredible Israel was, and before coming here I was like ‘I hope I have that kind of an experience.’”

¹⁸ In spite of the claimed interest in spending more time with Israelis and seeing other parts of Israel, visits to malls truncated *mifgashim*, and even the time spent in Tel Aviv generally failed to ignite an enthusiasm comparable to that surrounding the encounter with the Israel of ancient history, natural beauty, God’s presence, and Jewish survival.

¹⁹ The *israelexperience.org* website and the pre-trip orientation also communicated this message to participants. But the point is that regardless of specific messages coming from BRINA and its Israeli counterpart organization, *Taglit*, many participants had a general sense of what the experience would entail.

For many, tales of transformation had come first-hand from friends or family who had been on Israel experience teen tours, university study-abroad programs, or UJA missions. “A friend of mine who had spent the entire summer here told me... how jealous she was, and how I’d come back, like, a totally different person.” Some people, via mail, received articles parents had clipped from local newspapers about Birthright Israel, its mission and the controversies surrounding it. One was even called to the Torah at his parents’ synagogue on the *Shabbat* prior to his departure, where the rabbi recited the “pilgrim’s prayer” for him. Although they may have been fuzzy on the details, most signed on to Birthright Israel fully cognizant that the program was intended to be a journey of personal discovery and Jewish growth—not just another trip to a foreign country.

In fact, when Birthright Israel was portrayed by outsiders as just a free trip, it stirred up resentment. In a small bar at the Newark Airport departure lounge, a group of about ten students was talking over drinks while a television flashed images above them. Suddenly, they let out a shout, “We’re on the news!” People rushed over to see their pictures on TV and to hear what the reporters had to say about them. Walking away disappointed, one young man complained, “It was basically about how we’re going for free. Nothing more thought-provoking than that... But what can you expect. The media sucks. You can’t expect anything more thoughtful from them.” They had missed the point. “I would have talked about what it meant, why we were going,” he said.²⁰

What *did* it mean? Why *were* they going? Some people had for years hoped to visit Israel. Others had never considered it until this program came along. But once the decision to join Birthright Israel was made, most participants shared either a desire to have a personally enriching experience, or an expectation that such an experience could easily occur whether they wanted it to or not. Either way, they boarded the El Al jetliner prepared to interpret their experiences in light of these expectations.

IT’S ABOUT PEOPLE

As a typical Israeli hotel, the Ariel in Jerusalem offered a buffet breakfast that included cheeses and yogurts, vegetables and fruit, rolls, cereal, eggs, fish, and juice. The food was good, but not great, and coming down to the dining room four mornings in a row to find the same Israeli buffet began to elicit grumbling from students in one group. Memories of the Ariel buffet were called to mind three days later in Tel Aviv when the group awoke in the Carlton Hotel to a breakfast so good it became the main topic of conversation during the meal. “You can really experience Israel at the Carlton, first-class!” “I’m missing the Ariel already,” someone else joked. Smiling at their good fortune, another person chimed in, “We really owe Michael Steinhardt a thank-you for this one.”

²⁰ To be sure, the fact that the trip was cost-free to participants was a major incentive for people to sign on. In one woman’s words, “Oh, I have to apply for this because it’s free!” Another said she would not have gone on such a trip under ordinary circumstances, but “when this one came up, there was no excuse since it was free.”

It was no coincidence that the thank-you went to Michael Steinhardt personally, rather than Hillel or BRINA. Although critics of Birthright Israel expressed doubts that college students would value something provided to them for free (Liebler, 1999), participants confounded these expectations, in large measure because they saw the program as a ‘gift’ and felt both gratitude and obligation toward those they considered to be the gift-givers. This was not the complex web of federations and organizations that insiders think of when they speak of ‘the Jewish community.’ It is, perhaps, hard to be grateful to a system. Human beings relate best to human beings, and participants on Birthright Israel were no exception. Their gratitude was directed specifically toward Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt.

The two men achieved something akin to celebrity status among the thousands of young people on Birthright Israel. Students asked if they could get the chance to meet Charles Bronfman. Those who heard him deliver a speech on the Israeli economy flashed their cameras like paparazzi. In the departure lounge at Newark Airport, a seemingly endless stream of students approached Michael Steinhardt and thanked him for sending them to Israel, a scene that would be repeated throughout the program. Clad only in bathing suits under a bright desert sun, people shouted, “We’re Jewish, we’re floating in the Dead Sea, and we love it!” echoing the chant Charles Bronfman led days before at a Saturday night gala event that brought together 3,000 Birthright Israel participants.

That night, both men had been greeted by deafening applause as they entered the student-packed auditorium of the Binyanei Ha’uma Convention Center in Jerusalem. People jumped out of their seats and rushed to shake Charles Bronfman’s hand as he walked toward his seat in the area cordoned off for VIPs. As one field worker noted shortly after the program, “Students could not clap enough for Bronfman and Steinhardt.” Having identifiable faces to associate with the gift was as important to participants as having an opportunity to say thank you. “It was really great to honor the people who made [Birthright Israel] happen,” one woman said.

In a phenomenon that has both advantages and disadvantages as well as an intuitive logic, participants were encouraged in the perception that Birthright Israel was a gift from two identifiable individuals rather than multiple organizational partners.²¹ The personalization of the donor-recipient relationship made the crucial difference between seeing the program as a ‘gift’ rather than as a ‘freebie’ or a ‘hand-out.’ Gifts have givers—individuals who can be thanked and to whom a sense of obligation is incurred. The reciprocal obligation

²¹ Although participants were grateful for the work of their bus staff, they generally failed to recognize the amount of labor that went into organizing and planning the program over the preceding months. In many cases, the Birthright Israel portfolio was added to the workload of local Hillel staff without a concomitant reduction in their existing responsibilities, increase in salary, or expansion of staff. In part, the reluctance of Hillel professionals to abandon people served by other programs accounted for their decision to take on Birthright Israel in addition to, rather than instead of, other programs. In a sense, the ‘gift’ of Birthright Israel included not only the money donated, but also the labor ‘volunteered’ by the staff of Jewish organizations. Whether this model will remain tenable over the long term is an issue that participating organizations will need to address.

students felt the gift imposed upon them (even if it went unstated) was to make the most of the opportunity, to be good sports about things they might otherwise complain about, and to be open to the values that the two philanthropists apparently communicated through the act of paying for complete strangers to see Israel. As one woman put it, addressing her group at the end of the ten days, “When we were in the memorial room at Yad Vashem and sang ‘*Eli, Eli*’ together—which has always been one of my favorite songs and prayers—everything just came together for me. I felt like it was so amazing that someone cares enough about our faith and our past to send us on this trip.”

Prior to Birthright Israel, few of the participants had heard of the two philanthropists who initiated the program. Their emergence as the face of Birthright Israel was the result of a series of messages communicated repeatedly to participants. Staff encouraged people to see the gift-givers as people, rather than institutions or abstractions like ‘the Jewish community.’ A guitar-playing rabbi led a group in a *niggun* (a Hasidic wordless melody) in honor of Michael Steinhardt. The gala placed the two philanthropists on center stage, along with dignitaries such as the Prime Minister of Israel (who appeared by satellite TV, from peace negotiations in West Virginia with President Clinton and Syrian representatives) and the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament. A *madrich* repeatedly referenced them during his lectures: “One of the reasons Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt paid for Birthright is that Jewish identity is disappearing.” “Israel... is your homeland. There should be some connection between you and any Jew in the world. Bronfman and Steinhardt had a very good idea.”

When groups sat together for their wrap-up discussions at the end of the program, people thanked their guides and each other for the experience. The only names mentioned from outside the group were “Chuck and Mike,” as one student affectionately called them. “I’ve had a *mifgash* [encounter] with everyone in this room,” one man began, “I really feel that we are all one people. I have to thank Steinhardt and Bronfman for this. It was their dream, but we’re the ones who accomplished the dream.”

THROUGH THE EYES OF A GROUP

Although dependent on the complicity of individual participants, the creation of a meaningful experience on Birthright Israel was more than an individualistic phenomenon. The group context was vital for effecting personal transformation.

Researchers of teen trips to Israel (cf. Chazan, 1997; Cohen & Wall, 1994; Goldberg, 1995; Heilman, 1995) have written at length on the importance of the group in defining the essential character of the experience. In Heilman’s words, “[W]hat had been created above all else was not a set of connections to Israel but to one another” (p. 50).²² Even after only a ten-day experience, Birthright Israel participants recognized the group’s importance in language laden with emotion:

²² The present view is consistent with Heilman’s conclusions regarding the centrality of the group, but sees the issue of a connection to Israel somewhat differently, as discussed below.

“It is amazing the way the entire group has jelled. That’s what has made the trip for me.”

“This trip meant so much to me. The best part was being with the group and not necessarily any of the experiences.”

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

“I don’t want to go home at all, but if I stayed none of you would be here with me.”

Whatever participants thought about Israel before they arrived, by the end of their trip they would associate it with the faces and stories of their Birthright Israel group. Writing eighty-five years ago, the sociologist Emile Durkheim traced the origins of religion to the sense of “exaltation” that emerges in powerful group experiences. Being part of a close-knit group that exists only for a brief moment in time often leads people to “feel themselves transformed” and “transported into a special world, entirely different from the one where [they] ordinarily live.” Mementos of the experience—in this case, the artifacts of Israeli and Jewish culture—become “totems” that symbolize the emotions felt there. Encountering any one of them “continues to bring [the emotions] to mind and evoke them even after the assembly has dissolved, for it survives the assembly... By it, the emotions experienced are sustained and revived” (1965 [1915], p. 249-252).²³

Participants left the program feeling an authentic connection to ‘Israel’ and ‘Jewishness.’²⁴ The layered meanings they attached to these concepts encompassed not only higher-order abstractions like ‘peoplehood’ and ‘Zionism,’ but the concrete realities of their group experience. If the totemic character of Israel is sustained, then whenever participants watch a CNN report on the Middle East peace process, hear Hebrew spoken on the street, attend a *Shabbat* service at Hillel, eat falafel or shawarma, or explain to friends the Hebrew name tattooed on their ankle, they will feel some echo of the emotions that were so palpable on Birthright Israel.

²³ Drawing his examples from anthropological studies of aboriginal tribes in Australia, Durkheim made reference to the “totem”—a physical representation of an animal that symbolized the tribe. We have translated this notion more broadly to refer to both physical and non-physical characteristics of the setting for the collective experience.

²⁴ Such a connection to Israel is different from that of Israelis, but no less real. So too, the connection to ‘Jewishness’ cannot be considered inauthentic. When discussing identity, concepts such as ‘Israel’ and ‘Jewishness’ inevitably take on the character of symbols, the content of which is defined for all individuals by idiosyncratic meanings as well as shared understandings. And even supposedly shared understandings can vary widely by subgroups within populations. The idiosyncratic component of Birthright Israel participants’ understandings of Israel and Jewishness relates to an immediately perceived Jewish community to which they belong. Similarly, the ‘Israel’ that Israelis perceive is rooted in their interpersonal relationships, just as the ‘Jewishness’ of many American Jews is grounded in their personal experience of synagogue communities. But as we emphasize throughout this paper, Birthright Israel succeeded in touching the hearts and minds of its participants precisely because their understandings of Israel and Jewishness were grounded in the meanings collectively attributed to these symbols by the Jewish people.

A variety of factors combined to forge cohesive groups. Staff consciously played an active role, among other things mixing up room assignments to ensure that participants met each other and to prevent cliquishness, and initiating ice-breaker games that lasted throughout the trip.²⁵ They also tried to involve participants in management of the group—each day, for example, assigning a different member the responsibility to ensure that all were on the bus. One North American staff person often used music to create a common focus for the group’s attention. As his bus pulled out of the Jerusalem hotel early one morning, he took the microphone and announced that they would listen to “inspirational music” for their trip to Masada. Michael Jackson’s 1979 disco classic “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough” blasted out of the bus speakers. Up and down the aisle he danced with students, while others throughout the bus bounced to the beat in their seats.

Naturally emerging dynamics also fostered group solidarity. In the name of running things smoothly and fairly, participants were expected to accept the limited authority of the group and suppress individuality and autonomy to a certain degree.²⁶ Those who did not were met with anger and derision from their peers. As reported by one of the participant observers:

At one point during the trip, our morning process breaks down a bit for the first time: No-one gets a “wake-up knock,” and there is confusion over what time we are actually leaving. As a result, the students pile onto the bus at 7:30 A.M., grumpy, sleepy, and unshowered (which particularly upsets some of the women in the group). Then, we are held up by the absence of Todd, who, we are told by his roommate, went back to the room to “take a shower and dry his hair.” (Todd is rather obsessed with his hair and its good days and bad days, despite the fact that to the untrained eye it always looks exactly the same.) Near mutiny on the bus—growling, grumbling, veiled and not-so-veiled threats against Todd’s health and well-being. Finally, he boards the bus to a chorus of boos, which he takes in stride. Although many in the group find Todd, with his loud voice and outspokenness, quite annoying, Todd is either impervious or oblivious to their frustration with him.

The subordination of the individual to the group was also legitimized by a norm of ‘good sportsmanship’ that was operative though rarely voiced. Bus staff made no secret of the

²⁵ In one such game, “*Anak and Gamad*” (Giant and Dwarf), each person (a *gamad*) was assigned another group member whom they secretly had to research (the *anak*). The *gamad* would then describe his/her *anak* to the assembled group (usually over the bus microphone), and people would try to guess the *anak*’s identity. Another bus instituted a game in which people would secretly plant a decorated clothespin (the “tick”) on someone else. When the bus leader said “tick call” the person with the tick would have to entertain the group.

²⁶ In joint North American-Israeli groups, Israeli participants generally felt less constrained than North Americans. During one group’s visit to the Old City of Jerusalem, the Israelis kept to themselves, looking bored and basically not with the program, both in the colloquial and literal meaning, until they were given a ‘pep talk’ by one of the *madrichim*. In another group, it was common for Israelis to opt out of specific programs, and even to leave the trip (for reasons apparently acceptable to the staff) and return later.

fact that a primary goal of the trip was personal transformation, and the people who signed up for the program were willing participants. (“I’m having a personal renaissance!” students, prompted by staff, joked with one researcher). People played along, taking part in the activities in good faith, and generally cooperating with the staff. Outright rebellion was rare.²⁷ Participants were probably even more likely to be good sports and follow the program because they were reluctant to look a gift horse in the mouth.

A major element in the emergence of cohesive groups was the near-total lack of privacy or personal space on Birthright Israel. As sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) has suggested, group consciousness can readily emerge in institutional settings where “each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together” (p. 6).²⁸ How much more so on a program that uprooted participants from their familiar environments and placed them as a group in a strange, new setting. As they struggled together to make sense of their situation, old identities became less relevant and therefore less rigid. At the same time, the influence of the group, and of the staff upon whom they were dependent, became pronounced. Personal change became a possibility, at least temporarily.

One way staff mobilized the dynamics of cohesive groups to further the program’s goals was through the forced revelation of personal information, something that distinguished Birthright Israel from standard tour packages. Discussion circles were common features on most buses, though their frequency and level of formality varied. Once every few days, a certain group held a “*ma’amad*,” or ‘stop action,’ in which all participants would gather for a staff-facilitated discussion of personal reactions to recent experiences. During one such *ma’amad*, participants publicly aired their feelings about a visit to the site of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination. One woman said she “found the experience more emotional than being at the *Kotel*.” Another echoed the sentiment, saying he was “more moved than he expected to be.” Others demurred. “I didn’t feel much,” one man said, while another admitted he “didn’t feel a connection at all [and] for the first time... felt like a tourist.” Others posed questions the visit had raised for them. One expressed bewilderment that “Likud could be elected after the assassination,” while another asked why there was “a religious assassin when the religious population of Israel does not fight [in the army]?”²⁹

²⁷ Critics who charged that students were interested only in a free party would be hard pressed to explain why alcohol consumption was almost exclusively a free-time activity that did not intrude on the formal program. One exception —when students hiking Masada allegedly filled their canteens with alcohol —is notable precisely because it was such a clear departure from the norm.

²⁸ We are indebted to Goffman’s work on total institutions (1961) for shedding light on organizational factors that helped create cohesive groups and make possible personal change on Birthright Israel. Goffman examined the extreme limiting cases of such institutions because they placed in stark relief the social processes that commonly remain masked in a variety of settings. Although Birthright Israel is not one of these extreme cases, Goffman’s broadly applicable insights are useful for this case as well as others.

²⁹ At the time of Rabin’s assassination by an opponent of the 1993 Oslo Accords that Rabin’s government had signed with the PLO, the Likud was the main opposition party. The second question exhibited a confusion between the religious Zionist orientation of the assassin and the non-Zionist orientation of ultra-

Rather than leave the individual to interpret the experience for him/herself, staff instituted a process that made each participant privy to the thoughts of everyone else. Each person could hear his/her own sentiments echoed by others, and feel comfortable that such feelings were legitimate. Moreover, a dynamic was created in which participants communicated the party line directly to their fellow travelers, including the most important message – that the trip was personally meaningful. Regular features of group discussions included comments such as these:

“I found the Kabbalat Shabbat³⁰ service amazing. Singing songs made me feel connected to Jews all over the world.”

“Recognizing that I had Israel made me a Jew. I realized I have a large Jewish family, and where I belong by being here.”

“I feel I have to ensure that the next generation has the opportunity to be around other Jews.”

Dissonant voices were present, too. But the overall tenor of discussions echoed the messages trip sponsors hoped to convey. Coming, as they did, directly from the participants themselves, these messages were backed by the full force of peer pressure. In such a manner, individual expectations of a personally meaningful experience became normative for the group. For the participants in Birthright Israel, a collective belief that the encounter with Israel bore existential significance became an inescapable fact. One could deny it, but not ignore it. Even though they had been together for only a short time, they were acting as a family—they had intimate knowledge of one another’s lives and the trip became an on-going conversation.

The discussions also placed a premium on personal meaning by forcing participants to reflect on their experience.³¹ Although a state of heightened self-awareness was an essential component of the encounter with the Western Wall, at other points in the trip the rush of events made many of the actual experiences a blur. In addition to providing the opportunity to pause and reflect, the “Six Conversations” curriculum designed by Hillel raised issues of personal meaning and values that were only tangentially related to the itinerary. During a Conversation about “spirituality,” one group of students lay down on the floor in a small room. With the lights dimmed and their eyes shut, they were guided through a meditation by the Israeli staff person. She then instructed each person to think of a spiritual moment in his/her life and to remember what made it special. After several

orthodox communities that are legally exempt from military service. Staff clarified this misunderstanding for the group.

³⁰ The Sabbath eve worship service.

³¹ The presence of researchers served a similar function. One field worker wrote that a student “thanked me for always asking him what he was thinking about because he realized that sometimes he was not thinking about what he was experiencing, and just experiencing it. [He] continued by saying that when a person thinks about what is going on around him, he appreciates it all the more.”

minutes, the lights were turned on, and the guide instructed the students to pair off and discuss the spiritual moment they thought of.

No option was given to keep one's thoughts private. Throughout the trip, the expectation that emotions be exposed to examination by the entire group, rather than remain the private domain of the individual, was never questioned. Although this might have made some people uncomfortable, there appeared to be a genuine desire among many to share with their friends intimate details of their lives, often having little to do with Israel or Judaism. For example, a surprising number of these young people revealed that they were struggling with emotions raised by the loss or illness of friends and family. While never explicitly framed as such, tree-planting ceremonies, worship at the *Kotel* and group discussions at places like Yad Vashem functioned in some cases as 'healing services' that provided a cathartic release in a supportive environment.

Baring one's innermost feelings to a group of forty others makes one vulnerable. Trust in the group develops as people come to realize that others will not take advantage of this vulnerability. Standing in a discussion circle at Yad Vashem, one woman revealed that she underwent life-saving heart surgery as an infant and might need to undergo the operation again. She was crying, as were many people in the circle. Later, she told the staff that it was the first time she had ever spoken of her medical condition in a group. Several days later, she thanked the other students as they sat in their last discussion circle of the trip:

"I kinda wanted to thank the whole group because, um, the other day at Yad Vashem —I've never felt like I've been supported by people, and so I just wanted to thank you guys because I felt like I could say that to you. Like, I wasn't going to, but I did."

There were exceptions to the feelings of trust among group members. One facilitated conversation raised the issue of interfaith marriage. The woman who felt so comfortable sharing her medical condition reported to the researcher that another woman, the product of an interfaith marriage, felt "attacked" and unable to enter the conversation. In other groups, gays and lesbians who were 'out' in their home communities closeted themselves during the trip. One finally outed herself when she felt that the staff had allowed a joke about homosexuals to become a running bit of bus humor.

The discussion circles also gave formal structure and sanction to a phenomenon that was occurring naturally in any case: the continual telling and retelling of stories about unique personal experiences on the trip.³²

Stories that generated the most excitement often revolved around discovery of something unexpected: The chance invitation at the *Kotel* to a *Shabbat* lunch; the unexpected opportunity to give charity to a "real Israeli;" the great deal on an ornate water pipe purchased in Jerusalem's Arab market; the sudden glimpse of a shooting star in the desert;

³² We are indebted to Rachel Canar, who first identified the phenomenon and its significance.

the discovery of an ancient pot at an archaeological dig. Each of these situations created a uniquely personal encounter with some aspect of Israel, be it the religion, people, culture, nature or history.

As the Sunday morning traffic dissipated, an Egged Tours bus cruised westward along the highway linking Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, only about one third of its 42 seats occupied. One of several groups that included both North Americans and Israelis, the participants had dispersed for *Shabbat* home hospitality with families of the Israeli group members.³³ Only those who had gathered at the pick-up point in Jerusalem were present. There would be three more stops *en route* to Haifa to collect the remaining people. With an open bus, people moved through the aisle trading stories about their individual *Shabbat* experiences. The enthusiasm with which one story-teller, Evan, related his midnight taxi adventure drew a small crowd to the seats by the rear door. Now the center of attention, Evan described standing alone by the roadside in the “middle of nowhere” at “four in the morning” on *Shabbat*, watching the passing cars in vain as he looked for a taxi. Somehow, fortune smiled on him and he managed to hail a cab, which ended one problem but brought others. First was the language barrier. The driver spoke little English, and Evan spoke no Hebrew, other than the name of his destination. To the delight of his listeners, Evan described with great flourish how he and the cabby negotiated a price by scribbling numbers on scrap paper. Although he felt he was getting “ripped off,” what choice did he have, he thought, alone at 4:00A.M in an unfamiliar, isolated place, and on the Sabbath, no less? A price settled on, they began driving, but it was not long before a loud “Pop!” startled both passenger and driver. The driver pulled the cab over to the shoulder and exited to examine the blown tire. Somehow, overcoming the language barrier, the cabby asked for help. Seizing the opportunity to get a fair deal, Evan held out his hand and told the cab driver to give him back ten *shekels*. The offended driver refused and ordered Evan out of his cab. Evan blinked first; he helped change the tire. But working together to solve their joint problem forged a bond between the two men that overcame Evan’s previous animosity. He moved up to the front passenger seat, and struck up a rudimentary conversation in improvised sign language. “My wife,” the driver said in English, and then held his hand out around his belly to signify pregnancy. Evan offered his congratulations.

Such experiences customized an otherwise mass program. This was valuable on many levels. On the one hand, they let each person feel special. In a group where everyone was going through the same planned activities, the uniquely personal encounters became all the more important. They took on an ‘authentic’ character that stood in stark contrast to pre-packaged experiences set out on the itinerary (cf. MacCannell, 1973).³⁴ On the other

³³ Two organizations, Shorashim and the Bronfman Mifgashim Centre, coordinated groups that included about ten Israeli peers as participants in the program.

³⁴ This customization operated at the group level as well, and reinforced solidarity. Rami, an Israeli tour guide, decided that rather than eat at a ranch with other Birthright Israel groups, his students would eat with a family that, for a fee, hosts small groups in their home for gourmet dinners. The experience was enhanced for the participants because they saw Rami as having bent the rules for them. The unplanned and seemingly unsanctioned character of the activity increased its salience for the group.

hand, but just as important, they allowed people to gain status, attention and approval in the group, as each related his/her personal tale to the assembled others.

Even the unique individual experiences, then, gained much of their power from their relationship to the group context. People shared their stories, which resulted in a ‘feedback effect’ that amplified individual experiences into the collective property of the group. Only Evan was in the taxicab, but others in his group experienced the nighttime adventure vicariously through his retelling. As participants encountered Israel through the eyes of their peers, a collective consciousness emerged, orienting people’s interpretations of their experience toward a common understanding (cf. Durkheim, 1965 [1915]). Those listening to Evan’s tale were hearing a peer excited about a cross-cultural encounter. Their enthusiastic response validated Evan’s implicit assertion that the ability to function alone in Israel was important, as was the opportunity to interact personally with Israelis. Israel was worth paying attention to.

THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE

The experiences described above suggest how the expectations brought by individuals and the norms emerging in cohesive groups shaped the Birthright Israel experience. To this mix, a third element needs to be added —the significance of place.

For all Birthright Israel’s success in touching the Jewish lives of thousands of participants, one might wonder if all this could not have been achieved with a ten-day retreat in the Canadian Rockies, properly facilitated with a well-planned educational program and appropriate Jewish content. For many participants, the Saturday-night gala was inspiring simply because of “how amazing it was to be in a room with 3,000 other Jews.” But few Israelis were present and the MC —a professional comedian —was an American Jew whose humor was distinctly North American. Could not such an experience have been created on this side of the Atlantic? Jewish camps and domestic teen travel programs like ‘USY on Wheels’ are premised on the assumption that Jewish “cultural islands,” to use a Lewinian term, can be temporarily carved out in the Diaspora to great effect. In spite of this, evidence from Birthright Israel suggests that the Israeli setting was vital and could not be replicated elsewhere.

First, as noted above, by the time participants completed the program, Israel had come to symbolize the feeling of being part of something larger than themselves. Just as they ascribed to the stones of the *Kotel* rather than to themselves the power to create a religious epiphany, so they attributed to the country Israel the power to create the intense feelings of belonging and excitement they felt during their ten-day visit. Israel concretized the feelings of Jewish connection. Thus, even as Israelis debate post-Zionism, students such as one self-proclaimed “pacifist” had no qualms announcing to his assembled peers that after seeing Israel he “knows” that he would enlist in its army “in a second” if Israel ever “needed” him. By taking place in Israel, the program anchored participants’ feelings of belonging and exaltation in a physical location that bears concrete personal significance as well as

collective meaning to the Jewish people. Israel's physical existence will serve as a constant reminder to them that they are Jews, and subsequent encounters with its culture, even the snippet of Hebrew conversation overheard on a Chicago street, may evoke the feeling created by Birthright Israel. Equally important, it is a place to which they can return to explore and develop further as Jews. As the encapsulating symbol of an intense, positive Jewish experience, Israel has a tangibility, durability, authority and collective meaning unlike anything that could be created in North America.

Second, in the secular and non-voluntaristic aspects of Israeli Jewishness, participants saw a contrast to the style of Jewish life familiar from home. After returning from *Shabbat* home hospitality, two North American women in group that also included ten Israelis explained to a field researcher the difference between being Jewish in Israel and in America:

Carrie: "In America you have to do Jewish things to be Jewish. In Israel you can just be Jewish because there are so many Jews around."

Brenda: "[In the U.S.] if you were to tell me you didn't go to temple, have a bat mitzvah, go to [Jewish] camp, et cetera, I would say 'Oh, you're not very Jewish.'"

Carrie: "Yeah. But here, in Israel you don't have to do any of that and you're still Jewish."

The Israeli alternative resonated strongly with people who chose Birthright Israel, many of whom considered themselves secular Jews with an ambivalent relationship to the Jewish institutions of North America. "I'm secular and agnostic, but I still go to services all the time," one woman said. "It's always been a conflict for me. Here I could live a secular, connected Jewish life and maybe not feel as much of that conflict." For another woman, the mere existence of a legitimate secular alternative was a revelation. "I related mostly to the cultural identity I saw here, and it was nice to see a way of being Jewish that wasn't about religion." After visiting a non-religious *moshav*³⁵ settled by American immigrants, one man said, "I could see myself doing that. I'm not very Jewish, but I feel Jewish here. I could relate to them."

The dichotomy between religion and secularism came to be identified with the contrast between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. "I wish we had an extra day in Tel Aviv," one participant said. "We have four days in Jerusalem, which is the religious part, but most kids on this trip aren't so religious, and we relate to Tel Aviv." Did Tel Aviv stand as a positive symbol of secularism in its own right, or was it notable primarily for its *lack* of notability, especially when contrasted with Jerusalem? Certainly, a secularist framing of Tel Aviv was not foreordained, as evidenced by a group that gathered on the Tel Aviv coast to welcome the Sabbath as the sun set into the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps the presumed secularity of Tel Aviv reflected an inability to construct a coherent storyline around the city using its most common tourist sites—the Dizengoff Center retail district, the site of the Rabin

³⁵ A collective settlement with a greater degree of private ownership than a *kibbutz*.

assassination, and Israel's Independence Hall.³⁶ In the words of one staff person, it was hard to "show" Tel Aviv. To participants looking to make sense of their trip in terms of broader meanings, this demoted the city's position in the relative ranking of their experiences. Tel Aviv was rarely mentioned as memorable, and it paled in comparison to Jerusalem, Masada, the Negev and the Golan Heights, which received overwhelmingly positive reviews.³⁷

Finally, program outcomes were inextricably linked to the Israeli setting by the fact that Israel is suffused with Jewish symbols. Like the neon signs in Times Square, Jewishness in Israel is inescapable.³⁸ Birthright Israel's guidelines capitalized on this by explicitly linking educational themes with physical settings. Its sample itinerary (which more or less reflected what actually occurred on the trips) suggested, for example, that the theme "From Holocaust to Redemption" be taught through visits to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and the Mount Herzl military cemetery (Chazan, 1999).

But even seemingly random occurrences which developed at every turn triggered Jewish thoughts and associations in the minds of participants. While waiting to board the bus at a *kibbutz*, two people practiced their Hebrew skills by using the pictures and the sound of the Hebrew words to translate advertisements for upcoming plays. Spending *Shabbat* with Israeli host families prompted comparisons with *Shabbat* dinners at home. In Safed, people walked from store to store buying ritual items such as *mezuzot* and *havdalah* candles, or micrographic artwork depicting Biblical scenes.

Even things that need not be framed in Jewish terms often were. A camel ride led to speculation about whether camels were kosher. An explosion in Lebanon, heard from a *kibbutz* on the northern border, led one person to express a sense of common fate with other Jews. "When I heard the bomb go off I was in disbelief. I thought to myself that someone probably just died and that they would have wanted me to die if they had a chance."

³⁶ On the pedagogy of tourism, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000).

³⁷ As noted earlier, participants on Birthright Israel generally expected to have a meaningful experience. For all their professed secularism, most did not hold this as a rigid ideological position. They were, for the most part, open to the possibility of having religious experiences and arriving at new understandings of religion during the trip.

³⁸ One-fifth of Israel's population is not Jewish, but this fact was largely irrelevant to the participants on Birthright Israel, whose main interest in the country stemmed from its Jewish associations. Educational sessions on the Arab-Israeli conflict tended to take place in the Golan Heights, where the focus was on Syria and Lebanon. In most groups, Palestinians and the issues surrounding negotiations with them were largely neglected or treated only tangentially. Encounters with Israeli Arabs usually displayed the 'model minority' Druze and/or Bedouin, but even in the latter case, the 'encounter' for at least one group did not include meetings with actual Bedouin, but rather with Israeli Jews in Bedouin costume. They evidently made their living by teaching tour groups about Bedouin culture. Many buses traveled the West Bank road that paralleled the Jordan River. The fact that the Palestinian Authority controlled much of the adjacent areas was ignored on the buses we observed, as was the fact that the people seen along the road were mostly Arab. The Arabs were in effect invisible.

Israel was laden with ‘symbolic triggers’ that tapped the array of sentiments associated with American Jewish folk religion—a sense of history, tradition, peoplehood, heroism, (in)security and family. The last of these merits further comment. Even in a program that was deliberately peer-focused, family was not far from mind. While all the other symbols were explicitly incorporated into the educational program, the strong familial sentiment appears not to have been anticipated by planners. At both the Western Wall and the tree plantings, participants commonly mentioned thinking of family, especially grandparents, the ill and the deceased. These people were often portrayed as “beacons” of Jewish authenticity (Horowitz, 2000), whose dreams the participants were fulfilling by coming to Israel. Recall Michael’s words at the *Kotel*:

“When I went up to the Wall, I did not know what to write. I am not a religious person. My grandfather just died. He always talked about it but never went. I touched the Wall and a funny feeling went through my hands. I heard my grandfather saying a poem to me in my head. I felt like all of the meaningful people in my life were in my head.”

Jared also thought of his grandfather:

“Being at the Western Wall just blew me away. This is it! This is it! In Jerusalem at the wall of the holy Temple. My grandfather was a kohen³⁹ and this is where my ancestors prayed. It was breathtaking, so much so that I was left at a loss for words. Jewish history came alive here. Wow! I will never ever forget it.”

Participants also recalled grandparents in discussions surrounding the visit to Yad Vashem—who had escaped the Holocaust, who had survived, who spoke of it and who did not. The family connection was not only intergenerational, but extended to brothers and sisters as well. One group included three sets of siblings, all of whom said the opportunity to travel together was a deciding factor in their enrollment. Waiting at the top of Masada for the sun to rise, one young man broke off a conversation in mid-sentence when the sun suddenly peeked above the low-lying cloud bank. “Wait, I want to find my sister,” he said. The desire to share the special moment with family was mutual; she appeared at precisely that instant.

Israel’s ability to evoke thoughts of home bespeaks the nature of the encounter. Birthright Israel succeeded in touching the hearts and souls of participants when it tapped core American Jewish symbols by showing them the heavenly Israel of their dreams—an ancient, beautiful land rich with religious meaning and the history of the triumphs and travails of the Jewish people; the land their parents lobbied for and gave money to; the land their grandparents dreamed of and great-grandparents prayed for. The other, earthly Israel—the Israel of Bauhaus architecture in Tel Aviv, malls and McDonald’s, and in the poet Amichai’s words, “a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family”—was of passing interest but largely irrelevant, in spite of the best efforts of the trip organizers.

³⁹ The priestly caste in Judaism.

The main attempt to foster a connection with the Israeli reality as Israelis themselves experience it consisted of organized encounters (*mifgashim*) with Israeli peers.⁴⁰ These were coordinated by the Bronfman Mifgashim Centre, which offered options ranging from one-and-a-half days to the duration of the trip. A one-day option was later added to accommodate tour providers who had set their itineraries prior to entering discussions with the Mifgashim Centre. In the end, even the notion of spending one day in *mifgash* proved optimistic. Most facilitated discussions lasted one or two hours, and were either preceded or followed by a joint activity (such as a meal, mall visit, or party). Although some *mifgashim* fostered greater dialogue and relationships than others, in most cases there simply was not enough time to meet the curricular goals that motivated the inclusion of the *mifgash*.

The trips organized by Shorashim, and the Canadian groups who opted for the Mifgash Centre's "Mifgash in Motion" were notable exceptions. These groups consisted of approximately thirty North Americans and ten Israelis of similar age traveling together for the entire ten days of the program. The North Americans often looked to their Israeli peers as additional sources of information about Israel, often engaging them in conversations about their lives, the army and school. But even here, where the North Americans evinced a greater sensitivity to Israel as Israelis experienced it, the connection with the mythic Israel of American Jewish dreams was essential to the ultimate power of the Birthright Israel experience.

Birthright Israel resonated with deep-seated American Jewish conceptions about what being Jewish means and Israel's place in this constellation of values. Those seeking a deeper Israel-Diaspora partnership based on mutual understanding even at the grassroots will have to reassess the ability of a ten-day program actually to foster this. Still, the persistence of such religious and ethnic feeling among the current generation of Jewish college students should give pause both to the Jeremiahs of North American Jewry and to those who fear that Jewish identity is becoming idiosyncratic in the extreme.

A "TEACHER-PROOF" PROGRAM?

Analysis of the curriculum across seven groups revealed much uniformity in design and clear variations in delivery. On some buses, staff exhibited less sensitivity to the needs of participants than on others. For instance, touring in and around Jerusalem's Old City, one Israeli *madrich's* retelling of Second Temple period history began to wear people's nerves. "Let's get to the final chapter," Tzachi, the Israeli guide said, as they entered the archaeological excavations near the southern end of the Temple Mount. One student told a friend quite seriously, "I doubt it is the final chapter," while another commented to no one in particular, "This story is getting boring." After concluding his presentation on

⁴⁰ The Bronfman Mifgashim Centre has prepared its own evaluation of Birthright Israel's *mifgashim* component (Avivi, 2000).

priestly corruption and factional conflict (moral of the story: Jewish infighting, not the Romans, destroyed the Temple), he turned the students loose on the site. While they posed for pictures on the ruins, Tzachi asked the two American staff, “Was my tone too dramatic?” to which one replied, “Keep sticking it to them until they get it.” And “stick it to them” he did. The group moved next to a rooftop overlook of Jerusalem and the Judean desert, where a biting wind chilled the already tired students. Tzachi droned on, oblivious to the shivering students, many of whom were making faces and jumping in place to warm up and keep their full bladders from getting the better of them. Although the researcher confessed personally, “In my eyes, [Tzachi] was redeemed by the amazing overlook of the city against the backdrop of a setting sun,” he also noted that for most of the assembled complaining outweighed the “moment.” One student repeated to the researcher a comment he had made several times before: “[I am] not into the stories.”

Confronted with similar situations, staff from other buses seemed more willing to adapt. Yaniv, a *madrich* much admired by his group, once cut short his presentation to give his restless students free time. This was exceptional behavior even for Yaniv, who generally maintained the group’s interest in a number of ways. He left significant breaks between explanations, which kept students hanging on, wondering how the story would end. Rather than overloading students with information, he would often allude to things he could tell them but would not. They could ask him later. He also allowed people to move at their own pace through sites, only periodically gathering the entire group together to refocus their attention.

Tzachi, who loved to talk about local history, took a different approach, even though his students much preferred active, informal learning to formal presentations. But in spite of their impatience with his pedagogical style, the group liked Tzachi. He, like others, was the subject of friendly teasing. People felt comfortable opening up to him, including the fun-loving Marissa (“When I drink too much, I do anything”), who recounted to him her midnight tour of Jerusalem personally guided by two soldiers she met at a dance club. Somehow they ended up at “inspiration point.” “Nothing happened,” she insisted. “Really!”

But relations with Tzachi never reached the level of outright adoration that was expressed on other buses. Two groups in particular adulated their Israeli *madrichim*, referring to them as “awesome,” taking up a group collection to purchase them gifts, and even swooning over them. Throughout the trip, one researcher overheard numerous female participants say that they were “in love” with their male guide; eventually, the men began talking openly about having “non-physical crushes” on the *madrich*. This adoration in part resulted from and in part contributed to the Israeli guides’ ability to engage students in the curriculum.

Most people would infer, quite logically, that the educators most attuned to the needs of their students were most likely to achieve the program’s Jewish identity-building goals. And yet, we could find no evidence to support this claim, which, in principle, seems so self-evident. Various curricula may have made some issues more salient than others;

differences in the quality of instruction may have influenced the amount of cognitive knowledge gained. But if the criterion for ‘success’ is fostering positive feelings about Israel and Jewish heritage, and making people conscious of Birthright Israel’s role in generating these feelings, then the short-term success of the program was consistent across groups.

The consistency of results raises the critical question of whether Birthright Israel was “teacher-proof.” Probably not. More likely, the lack of variance reflects the relative uniformity of the itineraries and the care that went into curriculum planning long before the first plane touched down. The staff were only one component of an educational system that approached its work with seriousness and skill, and while they were an important part in the delivery of the educational program, the effort did not stand or fall on the staff’s performance alone.

CONCLUSION

Conceived as “an outreach effort to young people who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks” (Post, 1999), Birthright Israel attracted participants who wanted to go to Israel. Those who preferred to spend winter break in Cancun likely did not board the El Al flight to Tel Aviv. Although participants came from more diverse Jewish backgrounds than typical young visitors to Israel, they were a self-selected group. There was considerable evidence that they had some awareness of the program’s goals and were open to what Birthright Israel had to offer. Many shared the desire to have a meaningful Jewish experience; many knew that such programs were reported to be “amazing” experiences of personal discovery and lifelong friendships. Their Jewish backgrounds were diverse, but even those with little Jewish knowledge had been socialized enough into North American Jewish life to respond when buttons were pushed.⁴¹ The few with almost no Jewish background, like one woman who did not know of her Jewish ancestry until entering college, came with especially high motivation to explore their Jewish heritage.

With such participants, unless Birthright Israel failed miserably, success on a certain level was almost foreordained. Across the observed groups, we found a striking similarity of outcome: Consensus that the trip was an extremely positive experience, intense feelings of group cohesion, development of close friendships, an emotionally resonant encounter with core American Jewish symbols, and a projection of all this onto Israel—the encapsulating symbol of the experience. Participants’ understandings of what it meant to be Jewish were enriched with new cognitive and affective dimensions, rooted in both concrete personal experience and collective symbols of Jewish meaning. These enriched understandings were

⁴¹ To what do we attribute this socialization? Is a pre-trip orientation session all that is needed to instill symbolic attachments, or does success require a critical mass of individuals whose basic Jewish knowledge and affect have had years to ripen? Ethnography can pose the question but not answer it. If the latter is true, then we might be able to add a good word on behalf of the Hebrew schools many participants said they hated. For all their shortcomings, the schools may have succeeded in helping to plant the seeds of basic affective orientations to Jewish symbols – symbols that were evoked to great effect later in life.

complemented by an awakened commitment to Jewish community and identity, and feelings of attachment to Israel.

In large measure, Birthright Israel's successes in the short term have been aided by the continuing emergence of Israel Experience programs as a normative feature of American Judaism. Calling such programs "*agents of re-ethnification*," Israeli sociologist David Mittelberg (1999) argues that they are providing North American Jews a new set of shared experiences that foster group cohesion. As more people partake of the Israel Experience, the process of re-ethnification gathers steam and increases the incentive for others to join in. By seeking to engage so large a number of individuals simultaneously, Birthright Israel reinforces the expectation that every Jewish young adult should participate in an Israel Experience. Its alumni will likely function as ambassadors for the Israel Experience among both their peers and slightly younger cohorts who look to them as role models. They may even have an influence upon their parents. Conceived as a program to influence Jewish youth, Birthright Israel may have much more far-reaching effects, potentially reshaping the North American Jewish community as a whole by enshrining a pilgrimage to Israel as a prevailing rite of American Jewish passage.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Birthright Israel was envisaged as a multi-year program that would engage tens of thousands of Diaspora youth in Israel and Jewish heritage (Post, 1999). The first groups traveled to Israel from December 1999 through February 2000. To be eligible for the free trip, participants had to be between the ages of 18-26, identify as members of the Jewish people and never have been to Israel before on an organized peer program. Approximately four thousand North Americans and 1,000 from other countries of the Jewish Diaspora were selected for the program from among over 10,000 who applied.⁴² In North America, most participants were college students, and the majority were recruited by campus Hillel organizations. Coordinated by Hillel's International Center, nearly 100 campuses organized groups of 20-80 students each. In addition to Hillel, a variety of religious and secular Jewish organizations, including the Reform movement's college-age program and the Jewish Community Center Association of North America, also served as trip sponsors. In Israel, participants traveled in groups of approximately forty, mostly intact campus or organizational groups. Each group had its own itinerary, tour bus, driver, and staff. With few exceptions, staff included an Israeli guide and at least two North American representatives of the sponsoring organization. Itineraries tended to be standardized due to logistics and the curricular guidelines of the Birthright Israel organizers (Chazan, 1999).

Within these constraints, trip sponsors maintained flexibility to tailor the programs in accordance with their own educational goals. For example, one sponsor, Shorashim, emphasized a direct encounter with Israeli society and composed its groups of thirty American participants and ten Israeli peers. Others, such as Livnot U'Lehibanot, combined travel, education, communal living and volunteer work in a religious setting.

In an effort to understand the Birthright Israel experience, and to supplement post-trip surveys of participants and elite interviews with trip sponsors and operators, a comparative ethnography was conducted of selected groups. Our stance toward data collection was much like Heilman's (1995) and Goldberg's (1995), although the dynamics were quite different given the short duration of the Birthright Israel trips (ten days), the age of the participants (and observers), and the comparative study of seven tour groups. Ten researchers from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies joined the Winter 1999-2000 launch of Birthright Israel as participant observers, while one advisor who helped train the team remained in the United States. The observers included two senior faculty, one junior faculty (who served as coordinator of the field work team), and seven graduate students close in age to the participants.

In December and January, seven researchers each joined a Birthright Israel group with whom they remained throughout the duration of the program. We selected groups to observe a variety of program sponsors (Hillels, religious movements, and communal

⁴² After ineligible applicants (e.g., those who had been to Israel on a prior educational trip) were excluded, participants were typically selected by lottery. Each program provider, however, retained flexibility to set criteria for choosing among eligible applicants.

organizations) and Israel-based tour operators (Da'at-Momentum, IEL-Gil, Shorashim and Young Judea). Campus groups were chosen with diversity in mind. We observed groups from private and public universities, large and small; from all regions of the continental United States; and from campuses that traveled alone, with one other campus or as part of large multi-campus delegations. The field work coordinator spent at least one day visiting group to which a participant observer had been assigned. The principal investigator spent half a day or more with each group and, as well, served as liaison with Birthright Israel and the sponsoring organizations. Contact among researchers was maintained through daily cell-phone communication, through a team meeting in Jerusalem, and through encounters as buses crossed paths throughout Israel. In February, a senior researcher visited six Canadian groups that utilized staff from the Israel-based Archeological Seminars. Some of these groups were comprised solely of North American participants; others, coordinated by the Bronfman Mifgashim Centre, included Israelis as well.

Because the goal was to understand the Birthright Israel experience from the perspective of the participants, graduate students close in age to the Birthright Israel participants were used as field workers.⁴³ All were trained in participant observation prior to embarking on the research. Intentionally, observers were selected for their different levels of familiarity with Israel. For one observer, this was her first trip to Israel. Others had spent varying amounts of time there, working, studying or participating in short- and/or long-term Israel experience programs. All but one grew up in North America.

Observers were full participants in the activities of their groups. They were instructed to avoid taking on the role of staff (e.g., providing interpretations, handling logistics, enforcing rules) and generally succeeded in doing so. Their presence as researchers was known to participants and staff, who quickly came to see them and their notepads and tape recorders as normal fixtures of the setting. In the course of their work, participant observers recorded observations, interviewed participants and staff, and wrote extensive field notes at night on laptop computers brought for that purpose.

Each researcher observed his/her group through a unique set of lenses —the result of personal experiences and values, as well as varying academic orientations.⁴⁴ The value of comparative ethnography with multiple observers is not that individual biases are washed away when the findings are aggregated, but that dialogue among the researchers expands the vision of each, allowing for a richer perception of experience. Through conversations before, during and after the field work, researchers exchanged ideas and perspectives, and attempted in their own contexts to confirm or refute ideas formed in observations of other groups. Following the trips, the team's field notes were collected and analyzed as a whole by the coordinator of the field work team, with the cooperation and input of the other researchers.

⁴³ The observer of the Canadian trips was a Hebrew-fluent professor of sociology with over 40 years of research experience.

⁴⁴ The graduate-student researchers were earning masters degrees or doctorates in sociology, Jewish studies, Jewish communal service, Jewish education, and social welfare.

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