

# AUTHENTIC SIGHTS AND AUTHENTIC NARRATIVES ON TAGLIT

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**Abstract:** Tourism is commonly dismissed as shallow, frivolous and inauthentic. When an Israel experience program known as *Taglit* sought to use tourism for the purposes of Jewish education, the standard criticisms made of tourism were also applied to it. In spite of this, participants on *Taglit* generally felt they had an authentic and profound Jewish experience on the program. To explore how this could have happened in the face of expert predictions to the contrary, a constructivist notion of authenticity is adopted. Analysis of ethnographic data from the evaluation of *Taglit* reveals that tourists' perceptions of an authentic Jewish experience were rooted in perceptions of Jewish authenticity in both Israel and themselves. In both cases, these perceptions emerged through a process of a selective integration of disparate elements into coherent but simplified narratives.

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## Introduction

Dismissing tourism comes almost as second nature. We speak of “the ugly American,” “tourist traps,” and in the Israeli context, “a Jewish Disneyland.” People also generally know what is ‘wrong’ with tourists. It goes beyond the superficial criticisms of their trappings and tour buses to their existential state of outsidership. Tourists will never belong, and more importantly, will never *understand*. Life in Paris is not found at the Eiffel Tower or in the Louvre. It is not even in that little café that no foreigner has ever discovered but that everyone wants to. Instead, the real Paris, the Paris of the Parisian is found in the workday routine, the chores and squabbles and comforts of home, the outings with friends, etc. It is in the stuff that is eminently unsuited to what Urry (1990) called, “the tourist gaze.”

Boorstin had already published *the* anti-tourism manifesto four decades ago, in 1961. Tourism, he said, was a “pseudo-event,” an “elaborately contrived,” “artificial,” “assembly-line, store-boughten [sic] commodity.” Don’t have any illusions that you’ll see the authentic Israel or England or Tuvalu if you travel there as a tourist, because the whole nature of modern tourism keeps “the natives in quarantine while the tourist in air-conditioned comfort views them through a picture window” (79,90,99). There is real life and authentic culture out there, but you will never see it as a tourist.

“Formerly, when the old-time traveler visited a country whatever he saw was apt to be what really went on there.... Today what [the tourist] sees is seldom the living culture, but usually specimens collected and embalmed especially for him, or attractions specifically staged for him” (1961:102).

Boorstin attributed this to the commodification of tourism as well as to the preferences of tourists themselves, “willing gulls” complicit in their insulation (1961:107):

“The tourist seldom likes the authentic (to him often unintelligible) product of the foreign culture; he prefers his own provincial expectations. The French chanteuse singing English with a French accent seems more charmingly French than one who simply sings in French. The American tourist in Japan who looks less for what is Japanese than what is Japenesey” (1961:106).

Boorstin may have overstated the case, and certainly he has been criticized for elitism (MacCannell 1973, 1989). But one wonders if his approach doesn’t remain faithful to the tourist experience as it is actually understood by tourists themselves. It is not that it is “intellectually chic,” as MacCannell writes, to deride tourists (1989:9). Neither intellectualism nor chicness have much to do with it. We are speaking of a widely shared sentiment among tourists, who consider the presence of large numbers of others like them to be barriers to authentic encounters with foreign cultures (for empirical confirmation, see Waller and Lea 1998; applications of this notion also appear in Cohen 1972). Even MacCannell himself admits, “Tourists dislike tourists. God is dead, but man’s need to appear holier than his fellows lives” (1989:10). It just so happens that the sentiment has also found expression among academics, who themselves play the role of tourist in their off-hours as much as any other moderns.

There is then, a widespread sentiment that tourism is shallow, frivolous and inauthentic. This general perception of tourism could not but influence the reaction to an initiative that proposed to utilize tourism to Israel as a means of Jewish education. The program, called *birthright israel* [sic] in English and *Taglit* (“discovery”) in Hebrew (Kelner et al. 2000; Saxe et al. 2000), emerged against the backdrop of growing concerns among Jewish-Americans over the survival of their ethnic community. Although hand-wringing over the decline of Jewish distinctiveness is nothing new (Rawidowicz 1987), over the past decade, Jewish organizations have responded to the perceived threat by directing resources toward social interventions designed to foster Jewish commitment. Unquestionably, the most ambitious of these interventions has been *Taglit*.

Initiated by private philanthropists, and supported by North American Jewry’s communal institutions and the Israeli government, the \$210 million intervention, slated to run semi-annually for five years, was conceived as “an outreach effort to young [Jewish] people who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks” (Post 1999).<sup>1</sup> The program provides a ten-day tour of Israel cost-free to North American Jewish college-age youth. Itineraries, which tend to be standardized due both to logistics and curricular guidelines (*Taglit* 2001; Chazan 1999), include visits to Jewish holy sites, nature hikes, social events, tours of ancient and modern historical areas, lectures and discussions on a variety of topics regarding Israel and Judaism, and meetings with Israeli youth. To date, it has enrolled approximately 20,000 participants who traveled in four waves during the Winters and Springs of 2000 and 2001. Most participants in *Taglit* are college students traveling in groups organized by campus. Each group of approximately forty people has its own itinerary, tour bus, driver, and Israeli and American staff.

Although *Taglit* was designed with a clear educational rationale (Chazan 1999, 2001) the fact that its subject material was something as weighty as the venerable heritage of the People of the Book made some people uncomfortable with the notion that it could be conveyed through tourism. Aside from political issues regarding the way the program was placed on the agenda of Jewish communal organizations and questioning the wisdom of providing the trips for free, the basic charge leveled against the program was pure Boorstin: There was no way that a ten-day tour could give any true knowledge of what Israel and Judaism were really about, and that no authentic change in identity could come out of sightseeing, which was by definition superficial. Many of the concerns were voiced in the corridors of Jewish organizations being asked to involve themselves in the program. Isi Liebler, a leading Australian Jewish philanthropist, was one of the few people to commit the criticisms to print. Referring to the program by its English name, he asked,

What is Birthright Israel? A campaign to promote Jewish religious and cultural studies? An expansion of Jewish day schools? A

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<sup>1</sup> The specific nature of these “frameworks” was left unclear – although they presumably referred more to organizations such as synagogues than to institutions such as the family. Planners apparently conceptualized the Jewish population in dichotomous terms, positing a clear demarcation between a group that had “been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks” and a group that had not. Subsequent research with program alumni suggests that this conception was overly simplistic (Saxe et al. 2000).

program to create a new generation of well-educated and motivated Jewish teachers? Not really. Birthright Israel is basically a 10-day “freebie” package to Israel. It will be offered to any young person displaying sufficient Jewish commitment by being willing to “sacrifice” his or her self-funded vacation elsewhere for a free trip to Israel....

A brief visit, with lectures and tours, is not likely to have sufficient impact to influence a young person’s Jewish identity. Unlike the longer duration educational programs to Israel, Birthright Israel in all probability will simply provide American youngsters with a good time and, at best, a memory of a pleasant Israel encounter. So while hoping to be proven wrong, I think it is inconceivable that a 10-day trip can become an entry point toward creating newly committed Jews (1999).

In spite of sentiments like these, participants on *Taglit* by and large left the program feeling that they had acquired significant and valid knowledge about Israel and Judaism, and that they had an authentic Jewish identity-building experience. It is therefore appropriate to ask how this occurred, when a good number of intelligent people were saying that it was impossible.

### **What Do We Mean by Authenticity**

In answering this question, we cannot evade the notion of “authenticity,” a concept that, as Lionel Trilling once noted, “comes so readily to the tongue these days, and in so many connections, that it may very well resist... efforts at definition ...” (1972:12).

Sociologists of tourism have distinguished between objectivist and constructivist conceptions of authenticity (Wang 1999). Objectivist conceptions treat authenticity as a property of toured objects that can be definitively measured against a gold standard. Boorstin (1961) is the principal exponent of this idea. People who have criticized *Taglit* for being unable to show the real Israel or offer a real Jewish experience in the brief week-and-a-half tour also adopt the position that there are clear standards for what is and is not authentic. Moreover, they implicitly or explicitly assert the authority to pronounce what those standards should be.

That the debate over *Taglit*’s authenticity has been framed in objectivist terms demonstrates how great is the divide between popular and academic discourse. In the field of tourism studies, constructivist positions, a label proffered by Bruner (1994) and adopted by Wang (1999), emerged by the late 1970’s to take issue with objectivism’s “essentialist vocabulary” (Bruner 1994:409) and implicit privileging of the judgments of “experts, intellectuals or elite” (Wang 1999:353) over the emic perspective of tourists themselves. Wang identified five features common to constructivist conceptions of authenticity: First, “there is no absolute and static original or origin on which the authenticity of originals relies.” Second, our notions of origins are constructed to serve present needs and are contested. Third, “the experience of authenticity is pluralistic.” Fourth, things are often labeled authentic when they conform to stereotyped images. Authenticity is, in this regard, a projection of tourists own

expectations. Finally, things once defined as inauthentic can be redefined over time through a process of “emergent authenticity.” (Wang 1999:355). Taken as a whole, the constructivist position transforms authenticity from a property inherent in toured objects to a set of socially-constructed symbolic meanings communicated by the objects.

It is tempting to see the different perceptions of *Taglit*'s success in rendering an authentic Jewish and Israeli experience as merely a debate over the standards by which authenticity is judged. In this view, critics measured the program against an ‘authoritative’ or ‘authority-claiming’ standard (depending on whether one subscribes to objectivism or constructivism), whereas participants judged for themselves what ‘felt’ authentic without sufficient regard for these standards. But in practice it was more complicated.

In the first place, notions of what is Jewishly authentic, while certainly contested, still enjoy a wide degree of consensus. As Heilman noted, tongue in cheek, the ancient rabbis of the Mishnah, Hillel and Shammai, are known for arguing whether one should light an increasing or decreasing number of Chanukah candles each night, but they both agreed the candles should be lit (2001). Moreover, the *Taglit* program itself was planned and implemented by establishment Jewish institutions working in the same organizational sphere as many of the critics. In other words, debates over authenticity took place largely ‘within the family,’ which thereby ensured considerable consensus in spite of the disagreements.

Criticisms of the authenticity of the experience can be divided into two basic types. One group of charges referred to things whose Jewish authenticity was affirmed by general consensus. Concerns were raised that a ten-day tour would provide insufficient depth of coverage. The Israel Experience committee of one local Jewish federation, for example, had a standing policy that it would only fund programs of two weeks in length or greater. It’s deliberations on funding *Taglit* dwelt on the concern that a ten-day program was too short to provide a substantive education. Here the notion that tourism was too simplistic was operative.

Other criticisms of the authenticity of the experience had to do with concerns that the program would misrepresent the things it sought to teach. For decades, Israel travel has been used for fundraising (Woocher 1986) and for diaspora Jewish youth education (Chazan 1994). Israelis have long had qualms over the presentation of their country to diaspora Jewish tour groups (Beilin 2000; Goldberg 1995), which they regarded as emphasizing Israel’s symbolism over the life experiences of its citizens. One response to this concern was the development of peer encounter sessions (*mifgashim*) between tourists and Israeli citizens. In the 1990’s, these were institutionalized through the Bronfman Mifgashim Center, funded by the same Bronfman who was one of the initiators of *Taglit*. A sign that the program’s critics and organizers held a set of shared assumptions and values, and that the organizers themselves shared concerns that tourism might present a narrow or skewed representation of Israel, *Taglit* from the outset mandated *mifgashim* as an “educational theme” that had to be included in every group’s itinerary (Chazan 1999).

Not only was the representation of Israel subject to the charge of inauthenticity, so too was the representation of Judaism. And yet, given the diversity of trip-sponsoring organizations, most forms of contemporary Jewish religious expression were promoted in some form or other by their adherents. Denominational groups sponsored by the Conservative and Reform

movements, as well as a host of groups sponsored by Orthodox or Orthodox-affiliated organizations such as Habad Lubavitch, NCSY, Neve Yerushalayim, and Aish Hatorah emphasized their particular notions of Jewish religion. Non-denominational, secular and Zionist organizations also organized programs of their own. All groups were subject to *Taglit*'s educational standards, but within these, there was considerable flexibility.

How, then, could *Taglit* be subject to the charge that it would not accurately represent Judaism? I would speculate that it was perhaps the structure of the experience rather than its content that led people to perceive the program as somehow unrepresentative of 'real' Judaism. It's brevity, dissociation from Jewish institutional settings, and liminality sharply contrast with Diaspora Jewish norms that portray Judaism as a something that should be an abiding commitment; rooted in synagogues, schools, federations, JCC's and households; and experienced intermittently in times defined by the Jewish calendar (for the more observant, at intervals during the day like *shacharit*, *mincha*, and *maariv* prayers or at mealtimes; for others, weekly, on the Sabbath, or even less frequently, in annual holidays or sporadic life-cycle events). Moreover, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett wrote, "The Israel Experience is defined not only by the emotional highs associated with theatricalized situations, but also the adrenaline highs associated with physical challenge" (2000). The hedonism inherent in this might be difficult for some to reconcile with the notion that Judaism, while certainly to be enjoyed, is a serious matter that entails an abiding obligation to God and community.

But if the program were guilty of inauthenticity by either of these standards – oversimplification or as misrepresentation – one would expect that the participants would have raised their voices in protest as well. As mentioned above, the participants, program organizers and critics are all products of the same Diaspora Jewish cultures. Their assessments of what is normatively Jewish are not so radically different that participants would not notice if the program was selling snake oil. As Lincoln said, "You can not fool all of the people all of the time." The notion that 22,000 college-educated men and women could all be so readily duped suggests either a lack of faith in their judgment, or an exaggerated assessment of *Taglit*'s power of persuasion, or both.

If we accept the notion that the participants could legitimately judge the conformity of the program's representation of Israel and Judaism to some broadly accepted standards, then we must ask, how did they conclude that what they saw was authentically Jewish or Israeli?

### **Authenticity and the Tourist Gaze**

This question might be answered in two ways. One approach would look at the specific meanings participants attributed to what they saw, and would evaluate them in terms defined by ideologically-sanctioned meanings. This would produce a long list of meanings, perhaps a typology or categorization, but would contribute little to our understanding of the processes by which the program succeeded or failed in generating these perceptions of authenticity. At most, it would posit a correspondence (dubious in its own right) between curriculum and learning: 'The tour guide said.... the participants repeated....' This is not the approach I will take here.

Rather, because the charges of inauthenticity rest in large measure on a broader critique of tourism as a mode of knowledge, I will address the issue on these terms. Structural characteristics inherent to tourism, I will argue, contributed to the participant's generally positive evaluation of the Jewish and Israeli authenticity of what they saw.

Tourism is a specific mode of experience. Urry (1990), taking a page from Foucault (1976), taught that the basic tourist act is to gaze on things as signifiers. A sightseer is always looking one level beyond: Not just at the thing, but to what it represents. This is not the way people normally go through their routines. I do not walk into my Manhattan apartment at the end of the work day and think, "Hmmm. So this is a *New York apartment*." But because the tourist gaze is so different from regular experience, it leads to a sense that one does not see 'real life' as a tourist. Different, however, does not mean unreal. It does not mean worse. It means different.

Israel was the setting to gaze on signifiers of Jewishness. But consider the process of signification: What makes something a symbol? It is that when you see X, you think Y. The symbols evoke cognitive and affective meanings that exist only in the human mind. Accordingly, even if one is physically in Israel, much of what one tours are notions and conceptions and feeling that already reside within the traveler him/herself.<sup>2</sup>

The referent – 'Jewishness' or 'the real Israel' – was never encountered directly. It was a mental construct evoked only by seeing things that symbolized it. This occurred piecemeal. For example, people who danced with Orthodox Jews at the Kotel on Shabbat, saw them as symbols of Jewish piety. One man said,

"[It] was the most interesting Shabbat experience I've had, because I've been to Shabbat where people just light some candles, go to temple, come back. The one at the Wall was so much festivities, so much energy. So many people there really, really were deep into the whole meaning of Shabbat, taking the commandment of honoring Shabbat.... I just never had an experience where so many people were just so energized to be doing something on a Friday night that wasn't going out. Where I'm from in America, people go out, most of them don't go to Shabbat."

The quotation shows a number of things. First, Jewish religious commitment was not itself experienced. It was a concept that was perceived only through the encounter with a signifier, in the case, the energetic Orthodox worshippers. Second, the ability to perceive this devotion as an expression of authentic Judaism rested on the simultaneous conception of the alternative, inauthentic state. In other cases, this occurred implicitly. Here, the speaker made it explicit. The energy and commitment were perceived in stark contrast to memories or imaginings from home of people who "just light some candles, go to temple, come back.... Where I'm from in America, people go out, most of them don't go to Shabbat." Third, by locating the signifiers of the authentic in Israel and the imagined signifiers of the inauthentic in North America, the cross country comparison leads to the logically fallacious but nevertheless operative perception that the authenticity perceived in Israel is a *result* of being in Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, the act of touring can also end up having an effect on how one thinks about oneself.

Of course, there are Orthodox Jews in America; and, of course, there was nothing inherently Israeli about the Orthodox that *Taglit* participants encountered in Israel, at least in terms of what was on display to the tourists; and, of course, they also met secular Jews who couldn't care less about religion. How, then, could they generalize from the few Orthodox people they danced with to say anything about the country as a whole?

The answer is, partly, that this is essence of the tourist gaze—generalizing from what one sees to where one sees it. But there is more. It also results in part from the fact that people tend to oversimplify. The fragmented nature of tourism – “If this is Tuesday, it must be Belgium” – is a contributing factor. Selective perception is made easier when a person cannot remember where s/he was the day before.

A good example of how people were simultaneously aware of and oblivious to the complexities of real life is found in the fact that only selective aspects of Western culture were taken as signifiers of Israel's Jewish authenticity. A rock concert where the singer played a shofar, and a beer named after the Maccabees were perceived in this manner. But the McDonald's signs written in Hebrew were taken as clear indicators that any Israeli claims to the authenticity that derives from cultural autonomy were ludicrous. One participant, for example lamented, “When I see Burger King and McDonald's here it really ticks me off that my country is going and polluting other cultures.”

In and of itself, tooting a ram's horn as part of a rock song is meaningless. But set it in the context of a narrative that celebrates the merging of tradition and modernity, and it becomes a symbol of Israeli Jewish authenticity. The overarching storyline gives meaning to the fragments of Israeli life that the tourists gather.

Urry wrote, that sightseeing is

“the collection of signs. When tourists see two people kissing in Paris what they capture in the gaze is ‘timeless romantic Paris.’ When a small village in England is seen what they gaze upon is the ‘real olde England.’ (1990:3)

When people saw the joyful and passionate Orthodox, the “chosen beer for the chosen people” and the actual place where David fought Goliath, I would argue that they were gazing upon ‘the authentic Jewish society.’

In sum, one reason that program confounded the critics was because of the way the participants encountered Israel – they wanted to see things as meaningful, they wanted to put things into context. So they fit them into the stories that were most meaningful to themselves. Their sense of Israel's authenticity came from in them. True, the participants were shaped by the same Diaspora Jewish culture out of which *Taglit*'s critics and organizers emerged, which is why their perceptions of Jewish authenticity would not be unrecognizable to others. But they relied on their own experience to determine what was authentic, not the expert judgment of outsiders who claimed to possess the gold standard for measuring such things.



## Authenticity and Personal Experience

There is a newer conception of authenticity in tourism, different from the objectivist and constructivist approaches mentioned above. This treats authenticity as a property not of the things a tourist sees, but of the tourist's existential state of being.

Hughes (1995) is characteristic of the shift from an 'other-directed' concept to an 'inner-directed' one. He analyzed attempts to invent notions of authentic Scottishness and commodify them as objects of tourism and export. Concluding that even constructive authenticity is chimerical, he attempted to save the term through redefinition, arguing that "Authenticity continues to reside in the resistances, choices, and commitments that individuals express within the opportunities and constraints provided by globalized markets and global imagery to which international tourism is an increasingly major contributor" (1995:800).

Wang (1999) has emerged as the most self-conscious voice calling for a "rethink[ing]" of the concept. Using the term "activity-related" or "existential" authenticity, he defined the concept as follows:

"[E]xistential authenticity, unlike object-related version [sic], can often have nothing to do with the issue of whether toured objects are real. In search of tourist experience which is existentially authentic, tourists are preoccupied with an *existential state of Being* activated by certain tourist activities.... [T]hey do not literally concern themselves about the *authenticity* of toured objects.... They are rather in search of their authentic selves with the aid of activities or toured objects" (1999:359-60, emphasis in original).

Others have also invoked this existentialist usage. Crang's (1996) study in living history spoke of authenticity in terms of "the *communitas* felt" with fellow reenactors (1996:428). In a study of dance performances for tourists, Daniel argued that the perception of authenticity was determined not only by faithful adherence to "style, type and context" (object-related authenticity) but also by "the performer's commitment to the dance" (existential authenticity) (1996:785). Handler and Saxton (1988), in their important work on living history, noted the "crucial ambiguity" in the ways authenticity is conceived: "[O]ne speaks of replicating the experiences of others in order to understand those others, while the other focuses on the authentic experiences that one achieves or 'has' for oneself" (1988:247). The attempt to understand the Other is the crux of objective authenticity.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the concern for one's own authentic experience is the essence of existential authenticity.

Handler and Saxton's conception draws upon Heidegger (1926) to argue that narrativity is the lynchpin to feelings of existential authenticity. "Heideggerian authenticity, writ large, is

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<sup>3</sup> Constructive authenticity presents an ambiguous case, because it implies that any efforts to genuinely appreciate and comprehend the Other are undermined by the way the Other is imagined. Although the intention remains to understand the other, the project often fails in the implementation.

life as a readable first person narrative, operationally read in the process of its composition, a life individuated in its authorship, integrated through its emplotment, and creative by dint of its invention” (1988:250). Such a life is “autobiography” rather than “obituary.” (1988:250) The appeal of living history, they find, is that it is felt by its proponents to give “*access to lives and experiences characterized by the wholeness that historical narratives can provide*” (1988:251, emphasis in original).

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This element of narrativity links the object-related and existential forms of authenticity. As highlighted above, participants in *Taglit* were engaged in a process whereby the selectively pieced together fragments of Israel into a narrative about an authentic Jewish society. An analogous process also took place when the tourists turned their gaze inward to reflect on their own lives. By piecing together selected elements of their own life histories, *Taglit* participants constructed personal narratives about their own Jewishness.

Although this process occurred spontaneously, it was fostered, made explicit, and institutionalized by *Taglit*. Groups held discussion sessions with titles like “My Connection to Jewish Memory” and “How I Relate to Israel – How Israel Relates to Me,” in which staff asked the participants to tell about their Jewish lives. Isolated fragments from life were retrieved, like a bag of mosaic tiles. Sometimes these memories were arranged to give them some sense of coherence. For example, one rabbi asked the group she was meeting with to introduce themselves and tell where they and their families were from. Some responses, paraphrased by the field worker, were as follows<sup>4</sup>:

Harold says his father’s side of the family is from Hungary and his mother’s side is probably from eastern Poland. His mother’s side is from Lodz. His grandfather was in Siberia, and then came to Vancouver. Each generation in his family is less religious. His father went to temple and his mother to Hadassah and is also on the temple board. Dave played in Maccabee. He’s not sure where life will take him.

Half of Jill’s family came from Russia several generations ago, and half are German immigrants of the pre-war period. On her father’s side her great grandfather was Orthodox while her grandparents were more Conservative. Her mother’s parents were assimilated German Jews and Reform. Her parents are Reform and grew up strongly Jewish and very active in Jewish youth groups and summer camps.

One side of Andy’s family came from Dublin, and one from Russia. He had a Conservative education. His parents decided to leave for Reform a year ago. He like it a lot better – he can understand what goes on. His mother is very religious. Even if he doesn’t go to temple, Jewish identity is very important to him. He hopes to pass this on and be involved in the community.

Lewis’s great grandparents were all Eastern European and Orthodox. His mother was in one of the first Reconstructionist synagogues. He grew up not very religious. Going to temple dropped off post-Bar Mitzvah. He was in a youth group. Three years ago he became religious.

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<sup>4</sup> Identifying details have been masked.

In other cases, fragments of memory were retrieved and related in snippets, as in one group's discussion of "Jewish memory:"

*Staff: What are your Jewish memories?*

Josh: Masada. Climbing it for the first time.

*Staff: It could also be something like seeing Coca-Cola written in Hebrew.*

Isabel: After my brother was born, watching him grow up and be all into Hebrew and Judaism.

Isocoles (a nickname): Well, I didn't feel spiritual at the Wall. I stood in front, able to touch it. I thought every time we pray, we faced east. This is what we turn toward.

Max: Family.

Ron: Matzo ball soup. Whenever [my mom] made that, it was for something Jewish.

Mark: My grandparents. They were members of B'nai B'rith, always. I remember when he passed.... That was the most intense. I am eternally grateful to him.

Beth: When I did the semester abroad, and I was abroad for Passover, we prepared a large Seder....

Jamie: I was also abroad, in Spain, and we also got together for Passover.

Jeff: The movie Independence Day. In the end they're praying. And also when Will Smith says, "I'm not Jewish," and Jeff Goldblum says, "Nobody's perfect," and nobody in the theater was laughing except me.

Lindsey: I went to a boarding school that had a very small Jewish population. Every year there was an international fair, but there was never anything Jewish. I thought there should be Jewish food. I got all the recipes and spent all day cooking.

Although the Jewish memories in this instance were not immediately woven into general life stories, they were retrieved deliberately at the request of a staff person who asked participants to think back only to specific aspects of their lives. Participants were not asked to reflect on their histories or memories as Americans, as men or women, as consumers, etc. They were asked only to select those elements of their lives that had something to do with being Jewish. What was not germane to this narrative was filtered out.

Participants' lives were complex. But to understand themselves as Jews, they had to overlook much of this complexity and focus on a simpler notion of who they were. This inevitably ignored or downplayed other possible self-definitions. But at the same time, it let people perceive their lives in terms of a story with, if not a coherent plot, then at least some basic themes. It was this sense of coherence that led people to feel that they were authentically themselves. And it was by only focusing on the Jewish that they achieved this state.

## **Conclusion**

What was evident with regard to the way *Taglit* participants looked at Israel was operative with regard to how they looked at themselves as well: Feelings of authenticity emerged

when there was some degree of over-simplification and selective perception. This is inherent in the nature of authenticity, which is perceived only by reducing the complexity of real life to something more easily grasped. One could argue that critics of *Taglit* who charged that tourism was inherently inauthentic as a mode of Jewish expression were constructing their notions of authenticity in precisely the same way. Such conceptions deliberately neglected widespread Jewish participation in Jewishly motivated travel experiences like UJA missions, Israel experience programs, private Israel tours, visits to Nazi death camps, walking tours of Manhattan's Lower East Side, visits to Jewish museums in cities worldwide, and genealogical heritage tours to Eastern Europe.

If we set aside the problematic notion of a gold standard for authenticity, and focus instead on the social processes by which perceptions of authenticity are constructed, we will find that these processes were present on *Taglit* in both the touring and in the participants' self-reflection. The critical processual element was the selective integration of fragments into coherent, but simplified narratives. Accordingly, in a great irony, *Taglit* was perceived as authentic by its participants for the very reasons it was perceived as inauthentic by its critics.

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