

A Mega-
Experiment
in Jewish
Education

The Impact of *birthright israel*



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birthright israel Summary Report I
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About the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of modern American Jewry. Our mission is to enhance understanding of the Jewish community and the development of religious and cultural identity. The Center's faculty and staff includes psychologists, sociologists, and Jewish studies scholars, whose interests include Jewish identity, Jewish culture, family life, religious expression, and Israel-Diaspora relations. A broad range of research is conducted by Center faculty, spanning studies of individuals and institutions. Our research applies cutting-edge methods and theories to the study of modern Jewry and our work is disseminated to both public and academic groups.

The authors gratefully acknowledge Taglit *birthright israel* and the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies for their support of this research and its publication, and Professor Barry Chazan for his helpful guidance and feedback. We are also grateful to the staff of *birthright israel* in Jerusalem and New York who help to make our work possible, and to the thousands of *birthright israel* applicants and participants who gave generously of their time to complete our surveys and interviews.

For thousands of years, Zion has lived in Jewish hearts and inspired the dreams of Jews in every corner of the Diaspora. The founding of the modern Jewish state, and the ingathering of millions of Jews, have made realization of these dreams possible. Diaspora Jews who are able to visit Israel come away deeply moved by the beauty of the land, by its history and spiritual meaning, and by contemporary Israeli society and culture.

However, a visit to Israel isn't just an emotional experience — it has the potential to create a concrete connection to Jewish history and to affect one's sense of being Jewish. Research suggests that travel to Israel can actually strengthen Jewish identity. Visiting Israel, it has been proposed, can make a Jew more Jewish.

As a bold experiment, *birthright israel* is an ambitious test of this premise. By giving young adult Diaspora Jews the gift of a ten-day educational trip to Israel with their peers, the hope is that as many as 100,000 Jews will become more engaged with their tradition. But can a brief visit to Israel have a lasting effect on Jewish identity?

birthright israel is not only an extraordinary undertaking, it offers an unprecedented opportunity to understand the effects of a trip to Israel on a generation of young Jews. The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies has been studying *birthright israel* participants since the launch of the program two years ago. Nearly 5,000 participants, as well as thousands who applied but did not go on the trips, have been surveyed before and after their trips, and observed while in Israel. What we have found is that going on a *birthright israel* trip makes a difference in participants' Jewish identity, and the effects are sustained over time. Those who go on trips are enthusiastic and inspired when they return and, more than one year after their Israel experience, they look different from those who were not *birthright israel* participants.

The *birthright israel* program was launched in the winter of 1999-2000, when a total of 6,000 young American and Canadian Jews responded to an unprecedented invitation to visit Israel as a gift of the Jewish community. This marked the start of a massive educational experiment, funded by a partnership that included the government of Israel, the Jewish Agency and federations, and a consortium of private philanthropists.

The trip was designed to be an educational experience, not just a tour of Israel. Underlying the itinerary designed for each trip was a carefully planned set of experiences designed to influence participants both intellectually and emotionally. Participants traveled in groups of 30-40 on buses, often with students from their own college campus, but sometimes with young people from all over the country. In most cases, they arrived in Israel on flights shared with hundreds of other participants. Although for all of the groups, the sites were the central focus of the program, participants also benefited from their interpersonal interactions — with everyday Israelis, tour guides, *madrichim* (tour staff), and most importantly, with each other.

Participants

Participants in the launch program ranged in age from 18 to 26, but most were between 18 and 20. The participants looked like the Jewish community in North America, with the largest numbers reporting affiliation with the Reform and Conservative movements. A number, approximately one in every five, described themselves as "just Jewish," and there were a small number of Orthodox Jews. About three out of every four participants had some form of Jewish education and had celebrated a *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremony. Only a small percentage had been to Israel before as tourists or for family visits; none had previously attended an Israel-based educational program with peers. What they all shared was a sense of adventure and a desire to take advantage of an opportunity that they indicated strongly interested them but they had not previously been able to afford.

Research Design

Since *birthright israel* was designed to test the proposition that providing an opportunity for young Jews to "reclaim their birthright" and experience Israel as part of a peer group would alter their Jewish engagement, careful study of the program's impact over time was deemed critical in order to assess the program's effectiveness. The organizers of *birthright israel* recognized that it was important to find out what was most meaningful on the trip for participants and what aspects of their Judaism changed once they returned home. Was the trip just a fun experience that would soon be forgotten, or did it linger in their hearts and minds and in their lives? Would participants see themselves differently — would their Jewish identity be stronger? Would they become more involved in the Jewish community? Would they have a desire to return to Israel? And would they end up doing more that was Jewish, such as keeping kosher, lighting *Chanukah* candles, attending services, or engaging in Jewish study?

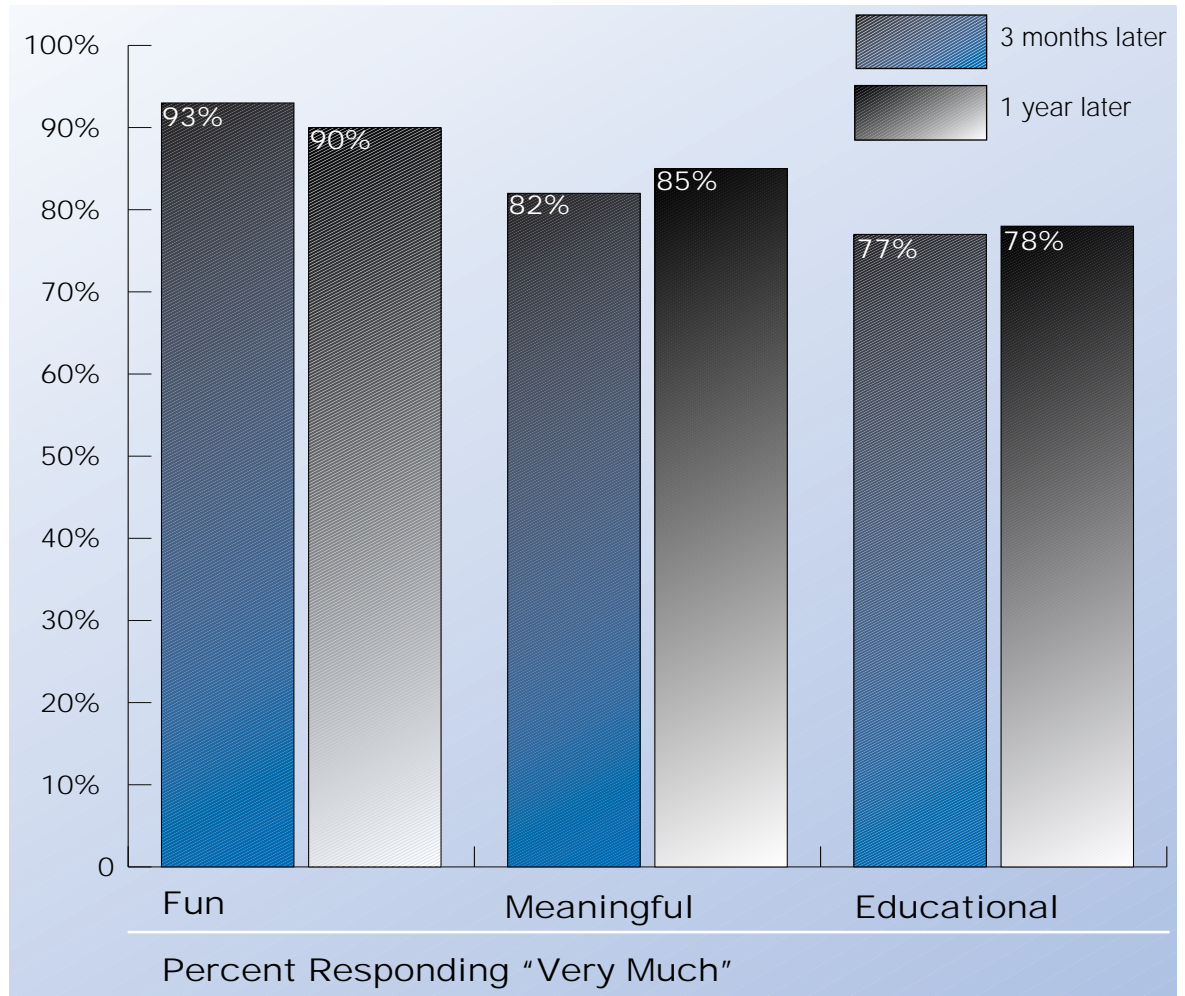
Our program of research was designed to answer these questions. As part of this research, both participants and non-participants (i.e. those who applied but were not selected to go) were surveyed using e-mail and the Internet at three time intervals — one month, three months and twelve to fifteen months after the trip ended. The non-participants served as an effective "control group" since they were not different in their Jewishness from those who went on the trip — participants and non-participants came from the same applicant pool. Participants were, for the most part, chosen by lottery. By comparing those who didn't go with those who did, the actual effects of the trip could be clearly isolated.

Three months after the trip, nearly 2,500 participants and over 500 non-participants completed web surveys after being contacted via e-mail. Twelve to fifteen months after the trip, over 1,600 participants and over 150 non-participants completed similar web surveys with some additional questions added.

The trips were seen as fun, meaningful and educational.

More than a year after the trip, participants continued to describe their experience very positively. The percentages of participants who described it as fun, meaningful and educational were virtually identical to the percentages obtained three months after the trip. Participants' strongest memories were, almost exclusively, of the key historical sites and activities with religious significance: the *Kotel*, *Masada*, Jerusalem, *Shabbat*, the Dead Sea and *Yad Vashem*.

Participant Reactions to the Trip



Participants had a stronger sense of Jewish identity.

Responses to the question: "How important in your life is being Jewish?" indicated a stronger sense of Jewish identity among participants in comparison with non-participants. Before the trip, there were no differences between these two groups. In addition, the percentages twelve to fifteen months after the program were almost the same as those obtained three months after the trip, indicating that the trip's positive impact on Jewish identity remained strong.

Participants were more likely to want to marry a Jew and raise their children as Jews.

Participants were more likely than non-participants to indicate that marrying a Jewish person and raising Jewish children were important. Again the percentages remained consistent over time.

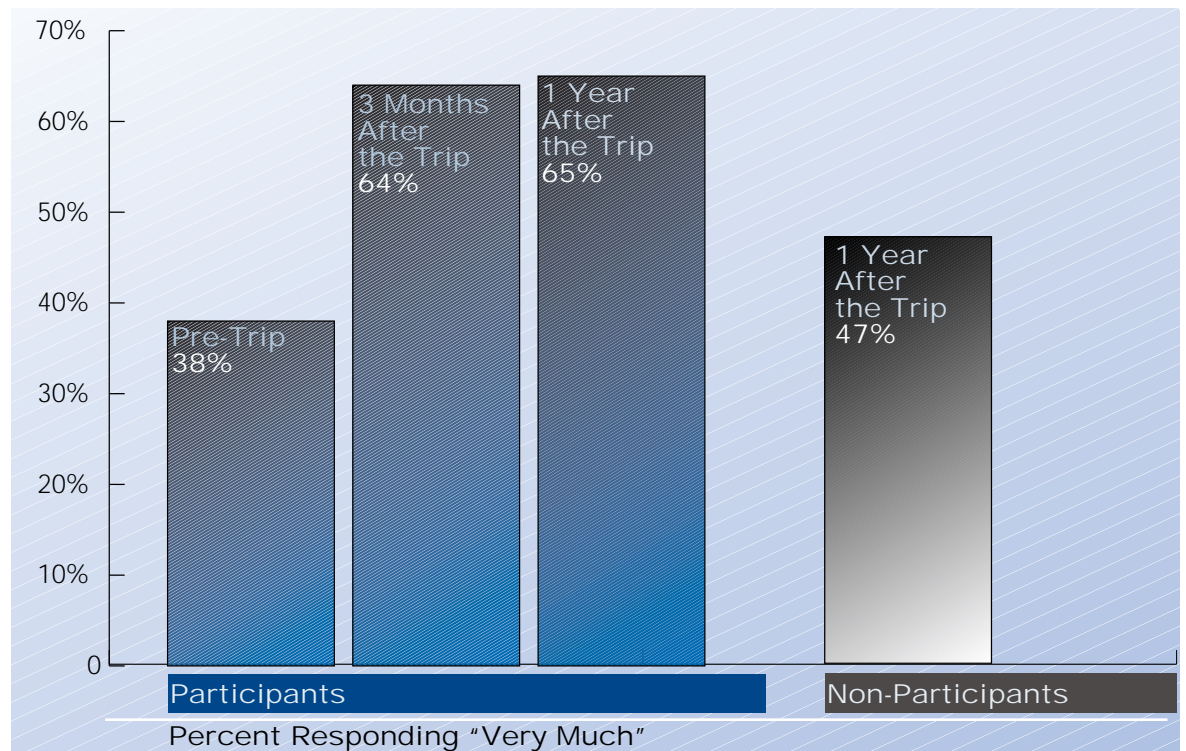
Participants were more likely to feel it was important to remember the Holocaust, to care about Israel, and to support Jewish organizations.

When asked about various "ways of being Jewish," participants were more likely than non-participants to indicate that it was important to remember the Holocaust. Participants were much more likely to care about Israel than non-participants and more likely than non-participants to indicate that supporting Jewish organizations was important. Both participants and non-participants gave low ratings to dimensions relating to Jewish ritual.

Participants had a stronger sense of connection to the Jewish people and were more likely to indicate they were exploring their Jewishness.

In contrast with non-participants, participants developed a stronger connection to the Jewish people as a result of the trip and their sense of connection remained strong more than a year after the trip. They also were more likely to indicate that they were exploring their Jewishness.

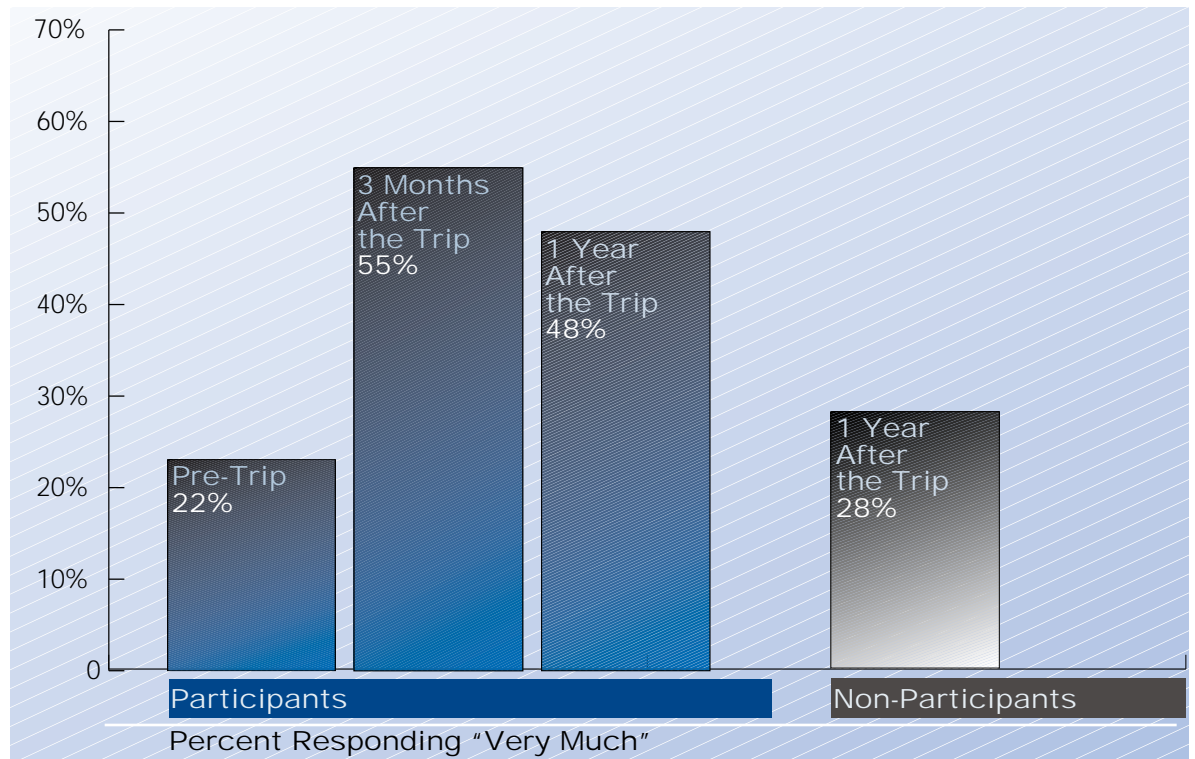
Connection to the Jewish People



Participants felt a stronger sense of connection to Israel.

Participants' sense of connection to Israel, which was not strong prior to the trip, became much stronger after the trip and remained strong a year later. Non-participants were much less likely to indicate a sense of connection. There were no differences between participants and non-participants on attitudes toward Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Connection to Israel



Some participants returned to Israel and many others wanted to return.

Several hundred participants visited Israel again after their *birthright israel* trip. Most returned for educational programs or vacation. When participants were asked whether they intended to return within the next two years, almost half said a return was likely.

Concern about finances was the most significant obstacle to an Israel visit.

The greatest obstacle to traveling to Israel was financial, with almost four out of every five participants and more than two-thirds of non-participants indicating finances made it difficult to plan a visit. About three out of every five participants and two out of every three non-participants said that safety concerns by family and friends affected their intention to go.

Almost everyone who went encouraged others to go.

Almost all of the participants encouraged friends or relatives to apply for a *birthright israel* trip, and over half said that at least one person they talked to ended up going.

Most participants stayed in touch with friends from the trip.

Most participants had some contact with at least one person who had been on their trip after they returned home, with nearly half indicating they had contact once a week or more.

Whether participants were Jewishly engaged after the trip depended upon their student status and the setting to which they returned.

Among students, participants engaged in more Jewish activities on campus than did non-participants. The differences between the two groups were smaller for off-campus activities. Among participants, undergraduate college students were more likely than graduate students or non-students to be aware of and participate in *birthright israel* follow-up activities. Post-trip engagement was greater at some schools, even though the backgrounds of students did not differ. This suggests that something that took place at the schools may have affected their engagement.

Participants showed more interest in Israel and engaged in more Jewish study.

Participants were more likely to show interest in news about Israel after the trip and to engage in higher levels of Jewish study when compared with non-participants.

Participants were most Jewishly engaged after the trip when certain conditions were present.

Post-trip engagement was most likely to occur when participants had positive feelings about the trip, were in regular contact with others from the trip and had Jewish friends.

The Challenge is to Keep *birthright israel* Alumni Engaged

Six thousand young Jews from North America went on the first *birthright israel* trips, and through the summer of 2001, 22,000 have now traveled to Israel from all over the world. On one basic level, the program can be considered a success by a simple criterion — the extraordinarily high level of interest it has generated. More than 50,000 young people applied to participate in the program, most of whom would not otherwise have gone to Israel. Even in the face of continuing violence affecting Israel, interest in the program has continued. As evidenced by the very high percentage of past participants who encouraged their friends to go, it is clear that the "buzz" on the street about *birthright israel* is extremely positive.

birthright israel provided participants with an experience that many continue to describe as "amazing." What now seems clear is that the experience not only gave participants a sense of connection to the land of Israel, but made them feel part of a Jewish community. Ten days of togetherness with fellow Jews created warm and tight bonds. But our data suggest that they didn't just connect with each other — many realized what it means to them to be Jewish.

From the perspective of more than one year after the trip, participants continue to view the experience as extremely meaningful and it appears to have a very positive impact on their Jewish identity and their attitudes toward Israel, Judaism and the Jewish people. Participants look as if they are now on a different Jewish journey. More than a year after their return home, participants' attitudes and their engagement in the Jewish community are different than that of their non-participant peers.

The attitude change produced by the experience is not, however, yet matched by long-term behavior change in participants. Whether it is an issue of how communities are prepared to deal with *birthright israel* alumni or, more simply, a question of making connections between elements of the program and participants is not clear. It seems unequivocal that *birthright israel* participants are inspired and motivated — a seed has been planted that the Jewish community needs to nurture. Capturing the potential of *birthright israel* is, undoubtedly, a challenge. The participants represent the breadth of religious and cultural diversity among the Jewish community in the Diaspora and programming will have to be similarly diverse.

However, it is critical to keep in mind that the setting to which participants return appears to be an important determinant of how engaged they are with Judaism after the trip. If the setting is a university or community with a strong Jewish presence, if alumni have Jewish friends, and if they stay in contact with other trip participants, they are likely to be more involved in Jewish life. If, on the other hand, they are somewhat older, with few Jewish friends, then Jewish engagement is less likely. An important component of the program appears to be the connections that participants make with other Jews on the trip, so efforts to enhance post-trip engagement must similarly create and work through participants' Jewish networks.

Being in Israel as part of *birthright israel* provided participants with a very positive Jewish educational experience. It gave them a sense of the possibilities of Jewish communal engagement. From campus programs, to synagogues, community centers, and other community-based organizations, the challenge is to develop equally engaging opportunities — ones that capture the spirit of *Clal Yisrael* and the love of Israel. In this troubled time in history when faith is being tested by daily events, the need is unprecedented and the potential is unlimited.

The following research reports about *birthright israel* are available from:

The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies
Brandeis University, Mailstop 014, Waltham, Massachusetts 02454
781/736-2060 www.cmjs.org

Saxe, L., Kadushin, C., Pakes, J., Kelner, S., Sternberg, L., Horowitz, B., Sales, A. & Brodsky, A. (2000). *birthright israel Launch Evaluation: Preliminary Findings*. *birthright israel* Research Report 1. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

Kelner, S., Saxe, L., Kadushin, C., Canar, R., Lindholm, M., Ossman, H., Perloff, J., Phillips, B., Teres, R., Wolf, M. & Woocher, M. (2000). *Making Meaning: Participants' Experience of birthright israel*. *birthright israel* Research Report 2. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

Saxe, L., Kadushin, C., Kelner, S., Rosen, M., & Yereslove, E. (2001). *A Mega-Experiment in Jewish Education: The Impact of birthright israel*. *birthright israel* Research Report 3. (Also available in an abbreviated edition as Summary Report 1). Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

Kelner, S., Saxe, L., Kadushin, C. (Forthcoming, 2002). *birthright israel Evaluation: The Second Cohort*. *birthright israel* Research Report 4. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

The following publications describing program information about *birthright israel* are available from:

birthright israel USA
521 Fifth Avenue, 27th Floor, New York, NY 10175

Taglit **תגלית**
birthright israel International
Beit Hashenhav, 12 Beit Hadfus Street, Jerusalem 95483 Israel

Expanding the Vision: A Pre-Post Educational Program

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