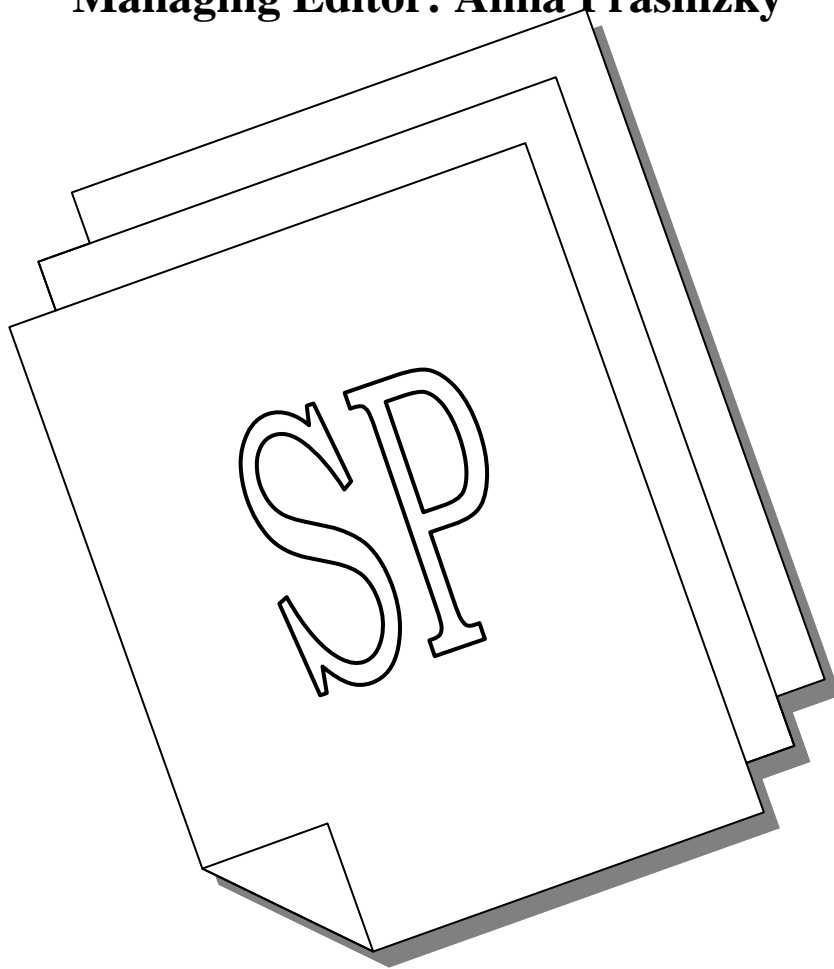


# *Sociological Papers*

## **Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Lessons and Challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora**

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# **What Happens on the Bus? How Community Impacts Jewish Engagement on *Taglit-Birthright* Israel**

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## **Abstract**

Taglit-Birthright Israel motivates participants “to explore their Jewish identity through a peer educational experience of historic and contemporary Israel” and attempts to strengthen relationships among young Jews in the Diaspora and Israel (Taglit-Birthright Israel, 2012). Substantial research has shown the positive impact of Taglit, but there are still multiple questions about the mechanism through which Taglit impacts the participants. The current research explores the role of creating community on the Taglit bus. Using data from pre and post-trip surveys, the impact of community on participants’ connections to Judaism and Israel are explored. In sociological terms, bringing individuals together to create community increases bonding social capital. Data show that an atmosphere of community and friendship on the bus is a strong predictor of trip outcomes. Implications for participants’ connections with the Jewish community are considered.

## **Introduction**

Taglit-Birthright Israel, launched in late 1999, was designed to enhance Jewish identity, love of Israel, and *klal Yisrael* – a sense of Jewish community – among Diaspora young adults (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). The program goals were ambitious, and initially, there was considerable skepticism about whether they could be achieved simply by bringing young adults to Israel for a ten day educational tour. More than a decade of research assessing the impact of the program, however, documents its effects – on increased feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people, as well as increased Jewish engagement amongst participants (Saxe et al., 2008; Saxe et al., 2011; Saxe et al., 2012). Despite strong evidence of its impact both in the short and long-term, the mechanisms underlying Taglit’s impact are not fully understood. The current paper explores some of what happens during a Taglit trip and how it leads to changes in Jewish identity and involvement in the Jewish community. In particular, the present research explores the way in which a sense of community on the bus helps participants feel a deeper connection to their Jewish identity, Israel, and the Jewish people, *klal Yisrael*.

## **Community on Taglit-Birthright Israel**

Taglit has brought over 350,000 young adults to Israel from around the world. Participants spend 10 days touring Israel on a bus with 40 peers from their home country. For at least half of the trip, they are joined by 6-8 Israeli peers who become fellow participants as the group visits historical and modern landmarks and

experiences contemporary Israel. This aspect of the Taglit experience is called the *mifgash* (encounter) (Sasson, Mittelberg, Hecht, & Saxe, 2008).

Taglit is open to young Jews (even those with one Jewish parent) who are between the ages of 18 and 26 and have not been on a peer trip to Israel.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Taglit attracts a wide spectrum of Jewish young adults. Participants have varied levels of Jewish education and practice, as well as knowledge about Israel. The majority of Taglit participants are from the United States and Canada, with a significant contingency coming from across the world. Israeli *mifgash* participants also represent a broad spectrum of Israeli young adults. Most consider themselves secular, although the majority follow Jewish traditions and many identify as traditional (Masorti) or religious (Sasson et al., 2008).

Bringing seemingly diverse Jewish young adults together to learn about their shared culture is central to the mission of Taglit. As described by Taglit's educational platform, "the Taglit-Birthright Israel educational journey is committed to a culture of open discussion and dialogue about diverse visions and versions of Jewish identity, discourse, and living" (Taglit-Birthright Israel, 2012). Participants on Taglit are encouraged to explore new ways of Jewish engagement in an open, non-judgmental setting (Kelner, 2010). A temporary Jewish community is established, modeling Jewish solidarity and group life on a small scale (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002).

It is through this temporary Jewish community that many of the trip participants are able to experience Jewish life in a meaningful way, some for the first time. In an analysis of a different Israel experience program, Heilman uses the term "*gibush*" to describe the friendship, bonding, and group solidarity experienced on an educational tour in Israel (Heilman, 2002). Heilman argues that group solidarity helps create meaningful and impactful experiences for the participants. Creating a sense of community on a Taglit bus may explain how the Taglit trip increases feelings of *klal Yisrael* that may lead to greater Jewish engagement.

## **Social Capital**

In sociological terms, bringing Jewish young adults together builds social capital, specifically bonding social capital – a sense of connection to others of a similar ethnicity (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital provides a feeling of belonging, similarity to others, and acknowledged interdependence; a feeling that one is a part of a system that is larger than oneself (Sarason, 1974). In turn, feeling a sense of community is associated with participation in community activities (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Four elements underlie a sense of community: (a) membership – feelings of belonging, (b) influence – feeling that one can make a difference, (c) integration – believing that one's needs can be met by the resources available in the community, and (d) emotional connection – sharing of memories and experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

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<sup>1</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel gift is open to all Jewish young adults, ages 18 to 26, post high-school, who have neither traveled to Israel before on a peer educational trip or study program nor have lived in Israel past the age of 12. Eligible individuals are those recognized as Jewish by the Jewish community or by one of the recognized denominations of Judaism. Applicants must also have at least one Jewish birth parent, or have completed Jewish conversion through a recognized Jewish denomination, and identify as Jewish while not actively practicing another religion. For more details, see [www.birthrightisrael.com](http://www.birthrightisrael.com).

Social capital, in particular bonding social capital, provides social support necessary for creating a sense of community. For some, such as Putnam (2000), enhancing connections among individuals is increasingly important in a highly individualized society. Dissimilarity or social distance between people is common for those of different backgrounds, even if such background differences are only perceived, rather than manifest. Interacting with diverse others and strengthening ties with similar others are not mutually exclusive, in fact, these are often mutually reinforcing such that those who maintain strong ties to family and friends are also those who are most active in the community. This is especially important to Taglit, as it is the hope that participants will return committed to the Jewish community but also to the larger community around them (Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

Although young adult Jews are by many measures relatively homogenous, there are also important differences, specifically, a gap in knowledge and perspective between religiously observant and nonobservant Jews (Freedman, 2000). Indeed, throughout the 1990s many scholars of the Jewish religion argued that schisms between Jewish movements represented the biggest threat to the continuation of the Jewish people (Freedman, 2000; Greenberg, 1987; Wertheimer, 1997). More recently, scholars have argued for increased efforts aimed at Jewish peoplehood, overcoming barriers that divide, isolate, and separate Jews (Mittelberg, 2008). The need to create innovative and dynamic programming to encourage *klal Yisrael*, bonding within the Jewish community, is imperative (Ravid, 2012).

Jewish young adults are not immune to divisions within the Jewish community (Chertok, Sasson, & Saxe, 2009; Sales & Saxe, 2006). In their daily lives, observant and nonobservant Jews may not interact on a regular basis and thus, may have preconceived notions of the other group, which may or may not be accurate. Part of Taglit's mission is to bring young adults together to bridge this gap and understand how all Jews are interconnected as part of a larger Jewish community. In addition, it is the hope that increasing bonding social capital, connections within the Jewish community, will translate into greater bridging social capital, connections to the larger community (Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

Young adulthood is the ideal time to explore issues of Jewish identity and practice. During this period of "emerging adulthood," young adults develop their own perspective on the world and move away from simply accepting the worldview of their parents (Arnett, 2002, 2004). Young adults possess the emotional maturity to grapple with complex issues and begin to question their place in the world around them (Jayakumar, 2008). Taglit trips target 18- to 26-year-old young adults in the midst of this time of questioning and understanding on their path to adulthood.

The current study explores the sense of community that emerges after a Taglit experience. At the outset, participants may feel socially distant from others on their bus with different backgrounds. Participants vary by religious upbringing, denominational affiliation, Jewish educational experience, and feelings of Jewish identity. Even such factors as the type of college may increase perceived dissimilarity between young adults (Chertok, Sales, Klein, & Saxe, 2006). The ostensible divide between the lives and experiences of the Israelis and the Diaspora participants on the bus may also create distance (Liebman & Cohen, 1990; Sasson et al., 2008). The intimate experience of touring on a bus together and interacting as peers creates a unique context in which to bridge these social divides. By creating opportunities for contact, Taglit has the potential to dissolve preconceived notions about other

participants. Building community among members of the bus may then translate into strengthened Jewish identity, along with the cornerstones of the Taglit experience – connection to Israel and *klal Yisrael*.

## Method

In spring 2008, all eligible applicants to the summer 2008 Taglit trips (N=37,983) were contacted via email and asked to respond to a Web-based pre-trip survey.<sup>2</sup> The pre-trip survey asked questions about respondents' Jewish backgrounds and religious practices growing up, as well as current Jewish identity and engagement. The pre-trip survey achieved responses rates of 67 percent for Taglit participants and 41 percent for eligible nonparticipants (AAPOR RR2). Post-stratification weights were calculated in order to account for response bias.

Several months after the trip all eligible applicants (N=37,168) were contacted via email again and asked to respond to a Web-based post-trip survey.<sup>3</sup> The post-trip survey repeated many of the questions from the pre-trip survey about Jewish identity and engagement. Participants were also asked about their experiences on the trip. The post-trip survey achieved responses rates of 37 percent for participants and 20 percent for eligible nonparticipants (AAPOR RR2). Post-stratification weights were calculated in order to account for response bias.

Although data was collected for all eligible applicants, including those who did not go on a trip, only data from participants were used in the current study. In addition, the current study was limited to respondents who answered all relevant questions in both the pre-trip and the post-trip surveys (N=5,749). Post-stratification weights appropriate to analysis using both pre- and post-trip survey data were used in all analyses.

Ideally, the study's hypotheses would be explored using multilevel models, but insufficient numbers of survey participants per bus preclude that approach. Instead, a set of measures relating to bus characteristics — such as the mean rating of bus community — were calculated for all participants from a given bus and included in individual-level analysis. A series of ordered logistic regression models examines the relationship between bus characteristics and various post-trip measures of Jewish identity. In all regression models, an individual's pre-trip response is included as a control in order to isolate the impact of the Taglit experience.

## Measures

### Participant and Bus Characteristics

The summer 2008 Taglit trips included more than 20,000 U.S. participants on 515 buses operated by 24 distinct tour operators.<sup>4</sup> Typical buses had around 40 participants ( $M = 39.22$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 27 ( $M =$

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<sup>2</sup> The summer 2008 cohort was used in the current analysis because the most extensive pre and post trip data exist for this cohort. Data from subsequent cohorts is focused primarily on post-trip evaluations.

<sup>3</sup> Post-trip survey invitations were not sent to those who (1) refused to participate in the pre-trip survey, (2) were subsequently deemed ineligible to participate in Taglit, or (3) became eligible applicants to the winter 2008-09 Taglit trips.

<sup>4</sup> Taglit tour operators are independent organizations that are contracted with Taglit to run tours. Analyzing the differences between the tour operators is beyond the scope of the current paper, but we used the tour operators as a control in the analysis as they may contribute to differences in the experiences of participants.

21.65,  $SD = 2.52$ ).<sup>5</sup> The mean age of participants on each bus ranged widely, from 18 to 25.55 years ( $M = 21.66$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). In addition to the U.S. participants, each bus had 6-8 Israeli participants. In a recent survey of Israeli participants, most Israeli participants were between the ages of 20-21, about 70 percent were currently serving in the Israeli army, and the rest were students (Sasson et al., 2008).

### Jewish Education

As part of Taglit registration, participants indicated their Jewish denomination (Table 1). A plurality of participants (44 percent) identified as Reform, with substantial numbers identifying as Conservative (24 percent) and “just Jewish” (23 percent). Based on participants’ denomination affiliations, a value for their hours of formal Jewish education in grades 1 through 12 was imputed. Values were taken from the pre- and post-trip surveys in which participants of each denomination provided details about the type and duration of their formal Jewish education (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> “Just Jewish” participants had just over 500 hours of Jewish education, equivalent to about four years of supplementary school. On the other end of the spectrum, Orthodox participants had almost 6,000 hours of Jewish education, equivalent to about nine years of day school ( $M = 1,085$ ,  $SD = 887$ ).

**Table 1. Participant Denomination and Imputed Hours of Formal Jewish Education, Grades 1-12**

	Proportion of Total Participants	N	Imputed Hours Jewish Ed. (in 1000s)
Reform	44%	2,513	0.796
Conservative	24%	1,375	1.504
Just Jewish	23%	1,374	0.531
Orthodox	3%	117	5.843
Sephardic	2%	80	2.664
Reconstructionist	2%	110	1.029
Other	3%	172	1.127
	100%	5,741	

The mean hours of Jewish education for participants on each bus ranged from 585 to 5,592 hours ( $M = 1,083$ ,  $SD = 565$ ). The standard deviation of hours of Jewish education on each bus was calculated in order to capture the diversity of Jewish educational backgrounds. Standard deviation ranged from 130 to 2,430 hours ( $M = 585$ ,  $SD = 392$ ). In other words, some buses were relatively homogeneous with regards to Jewish education, while others included participants with very different

<sup>5</sup> Age as of May 1, 2008. All participants were 18 years or older during their Taglit trip.

<sup>6</sup> Based on research conducted using JData.com, an online database that collects and provides census-like information about Jewish educational programs in North America, one year of one-day-a-week supplementary school was considered equivalent to 65 hours, one year of multiple-days-a-week supplementary school was considered equivalent to 130 hours, and 1 year of day school was considered equivalent to 650 hours (Boxer, 2012).

levels of Jewish education. The research explored whether buses with a wider spread of Jewish educational backgrounds impacted the outcome measures.

### Quality of Bus Community

In the post-trip survey, participants were presented with a series of statements about the atmosphere on their bus and the quality of their Israeli tour guide and asked to what extent they agreed with each statement, with response options ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (4). Parallel analysis was conducted with the 95th percentile criterion (Hayton, Allen, & Scarpello, 2004), and an index was created from eight of the items ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).<sup>7</sup> Index scores ranged from 0 to 3, but most were very high ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ).

In order to capture the overall quality of the bus community, the mean index score for all post-trip survey respondents on a given bus was calculated. For the 515 buses, mean scores ranged from 1.46 to 2.96 on the scale of 0 to 3, with most scores clustering around the top of the spectrum ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ).

### Outcomes

Analysis focuses on two sets of outcome measures. The first set of outcome measures relates to feelings of connection to Judaism and the Jewish community (Table 2). Identical questions were asked in the pre-trip and post-trip surveys in order to isolate the impact of the Taglit trip on respondents. The second set of outcome measures relates to the salience of Jewishness in participants’ lives, specifically, the importance of being Jewish and having Jewish intimates (Table 3). Again, identical questions were asked in the pre-trip and post-trip surveys. In all cases, except feeling a connection to the Jewish community where you live, post-trip responses are significantly higher than pre-trip responses. Taglit has a positive impact on each of these measures of Jewish identity.

**Table 2. Feelings of connection to Judaism and the Jewish Community, pre- and post-trip (N=5,749), on the scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much)**

		Mean	Std. Dev.
A connection to Jewish history	Pre-trip	3.20	0.76
	Post-trip	3.29	0.74
A connection to Israel	Pre-trip	2.72	0.90
	Post-trip	3.36	0.77
Part of a worldwide Jewish community	Pre-trip	3.03	0.85
	Post-trip	3.37	0.78
A connection to the Jewish community where you live	Pre-trip	2.84	0.99
	Post-trip	2.83	1.05
A connection to Jewish traditions and customs	Pre-trip	3.17	0.80
	Post-trip	3.21	0.82

<sup>7</sup> To what extent... (1) did your bus feel like a group of friends? (2) did your bus feel like a community? (3) did the group atmosphere enhance your experience? Your Israeli tour guide(s)... (4) was friendly? (5) was knowledgeable? (6) created a feeling of community on the bus? (7) was open to concerns and questions? (8) was boring [reversed]?

A connection to your Jewish peers	Pre-trip	3.16	0.83
	Post-trip	3.29	0.80

**Table 3. Importance of being Jewish and having Jewish intimates, pre- and post-trip (N=5,749), on the scale from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important)**

		Mean	Std. Dev.
Being Jewish	Pre-trip	3.46	0.74
	Post-trip	3.49	0.75
Dating someone Jewish	Pre-trip	2.41	1.12
	Post-trip	2.49	1.12
Marrying someone Jewish	Pre-trip	2.72	1.17
	Post-trip	2.78	1.17
Raising your children Jewish	Pre-trip	3.33	0.95
	Post-trip	3.39	0.93

### Impact of Community

A series of ordered logistic regressions assessed outcomes including feelings of connection to Judaism and the Jewish community and perceived importance of being Jewish and having Jewish intimates. In each case, regressions controlled for participants' pre-trip survey responses and tour operators, allowing for an examination of the impact of bus community on outcome measures.

Table 4 presents the results of the regressions of feelings of connection to Judaism and the Jewish community. The bus's mean bus community index score was a significant positive predictor of all outcomes. Community and friendship on the bus appear to be a key part of the mechanism by which Taglit impacts participants' feelings of Jewish connection. Mean hours of Jewish education on the bus was also a significant positive predictor of all outcomes. The standard deviation of hours of Jewish education had no impact on any outcome.

**Table 4. Ordered logistic regressions of feelings of connection to Judaism and the Jewish community on bus measures: odds ratios (N=5,749)<sup>1</sup>**

	A connection to Jewish history	A connection to Israel	Part of a worldwide Jewish community	A connection to the Jewish community where you live	A connection to Jewish traditions and customs	A connection to your Jewish peers
Mean hours of Jewish education on bus	1.65** *	1.19*	1.31**	1.54***	1.84***	1.72***
Std. dev. of hours of Jewish education on bus	0.88	1.21	1.01	0.95	0.84	0.94
Mean bus community index	1.54**	2.30**	1.90**	1.45**	1.67***	1.63***



score on bus	*	*	*			
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\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

<sup>1</sup> Models also control for pre-trip response and tour operator.

Table 5 presents the results of the regressions of the salience of being Jewish and having Jewish intimates. The bus's mean bus community index score was a significant positive predictor of three of the four outcomes, again indicating the importance of community and friendship on the bus to trip outcomes. Mean hours of Jewish education on the bus was a significant positive predictor of all four outcomes. As with the first set of outcomes, the standard deviation of hours of Jewish education had no impact.

**Table 5. Ordered logistic regressions of importance of being Jewish and having Jewish intimates on bus measures: odds ratios (N=5,749)<sup>1</sup>**

	Being Jewish	Dating someone Jewish	Marrying someone Jewish	Raising your children Jewish
Mean hours of Jewish education on bus	2.20* **	1.88** *	2.04***	2.03**
Std. dev. of hours of Jewish education on bus	0.82	1.00	0.87	0.81
Mean bus community index score on bus	1.52* *	1.39**	1.22	1.39*

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

<sup>1</sup> Models also control for pre-trip response and tour operators.

## Discussion

The current study attempts to understand how a Taglit experience in Israel affects Jewish identity, love of Israel, and *klal Yisrael*, as mediated by the feelings of community created on the bus group. The bus groups that demonstrated stronger feelings of community produced greater connections to Jewish identity, Jewish community, and Israel, regardless of the varied Jewish backgrounds of the participants. In addition, individuals on buses with stronger feelings of community also expressed greater desire to date someone Jewish and raise Jewish children.

Thus, the question of whether *gibush*, group solidarity, can impact outcome measures is answered by the current study. *Gibush* is a strong predictor of positive trip impact. From a psychological perspective, when people have a superordinate goal, a goal that they must accomplish together, there is an increased sense of community (Sherif, 1958). Taglit itself may serve as a superordinate goal, but opportunities for group bonding through hikes or other challenges may also enhance the feeling of community.

Building community with young adults from different backgrounds is one of the hallmarks of the Taglit experience. By creating a “culture of openness and respect for divergent viewpoints” (Taglit-Birthright Israel, 2012), Taglit hopes to enhance the feeling of connection among participants. Although it was predicted that looking at the spread of hours of Jewish education on the bus (a potential measure of diversity on the bus) would affect the trip outcomes, no independent effect was detected. Diversity, however, is a difficult concept to operationalize, and perhaps our measure was not able to capture the diversity on each bus. From an educational perspective, having a range of Jewish educational backgrounds on a bus represents a unique learning tool. Nevertheless, it seems that the sense of community on the bus is a stronger predictor of post-trip feelings of connection to the Jewish community and Israel. It is clear that the group cohesiveness and bonding that occurs on the trip creates connections between individuals that extend beyond the trip to the whole Jewish community.

The analyses presented here do not completely rule out the possibility that the strong feeling of community on some bus groups existed prior to the trip. If Taglit participants sign up for the trip with a group of friends, a sense of community may have been present already. However, these effects are likely to be small and would not account for the power of the *mifgash*. Many of the participants (31 percent) did not have a single friend on their bus prior to the start of the trip and the majority of participants (49 percent) had just one or two friends on their bus. In addition, there are a host of differences among the participants’ Jewish backgrounds on the buses. Previous research has shown that young adults from different religious upbringings perceive dissimilarities between themselves and others (Chertok et al., 2006). In addition, Israeli and American participants feel quite distant from each other before extended interaction (Sasson et al., 2008). These differences should generate perceived social distance before the trip.

Future research is necessary in order to understand how close bus communities are formed. Ideally, a measure of how connected or close the participants feel toward the others on the bus would be collected before the start of the trip. Future research may also consider the impact of bringing participants from the same college or local community and whether the outcome measures on those trips are different from other trips.

The present analyses were developed to aid our understanding of the mechanism through which Taglit works. The current research is an attempt to unpack the multiple ways in which Taglit affects participants. The data show strong support for the idea that building a community on the bus, bonding social capital, is part of the effectiveness of Taglit. Building a *klal Yisrael*, a sense of shared community amongst Jewish young adults, extends beyond the bus to the larger Jewish community and the world as a whole.

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