The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high-quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.
We gratefully acknowledge Maccabi USA for initiating this study and for providing material support to make it possible. We are especially appreciative of Dan Kurtz, Shane Carr, Jed Margolis, and David Snyder for their feedback and dedication to the project.

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Deborah Grant edited and laid out the report. Max Stern designed our cover. Masha Lokshin and Ilana Friedman expertly manage the center’s day-to-day operations and provide critical support.

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Our gratitude notwithstanding, the authors take full responsibility for the design, conduct, analysis, and interpretation of the study.
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“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Executive Summary

Often referred to as the “Jewish Olympics,” the World Maccabiah Games attract thousands of Jewish athletes from around the world to Israel every four years, to compete in a high-level athletic competition. The US delegation to the Maccabiah is sponsored by Maccabi USA, whose mission is to use sports as a vehicle to strengthen Jewish identity and connections. As part of the Maccabiah experience, Maccabi USA organizes a seven-day educational-cultural travel program in Israel for US athletes prior to the athletic competition. Called “Israel Connect,” this program is designed to strengthen athletes’ Jewish identities and instill in them the passion and knowledge necessary to advocate for Israel. Focusing on applicants to team USA in the 2013 and 2017 Maccabiah, this study examines the extent to which the Maccabiah experience altered the Jewish trajectories of the US Jewish athletes who participated.

Method

This study draws on interviews, observations, and survey data collected from athletes who applied to compete in the 2017 and 2013 Maccabiah Games. It employs a strong quasi-experimental design, whereby the athletes who applied but did not compete—either because they were not appointed to the team, or because of a scheduling conflict, sports injury, etc.—serve as a the comparison group against which to measure the impact of the Maccabiah.

Maccabiah Athletes

Most of the 2017 and 2013 Maccabiah athletes were young adults between the ages of 18 and 32, from fairly high-income geographic areas. Although Maccabiah athletes had a wide range of Jewish backgrounds, they came disproportionately from the “middle” of the spectrum of US Jewish engagement—e.g., those with only one Jewish parent and those raised Orthodox were somewhat underrepresented. The majority of 2017 Maccabiah athletes had traveled to Israel before the 2017 Maccabiah, including 18% who had competed in a previous Maccabiah Games.
Most Maccabiah athletes first heard about the Maccabiah Games from friends or family, or through their sport. Having fun and being part of an international athletic competition were the most important motivating factors in applying to compete.

Athletes’ Impressions of the Maccabiah Experience

Most 2017 Maccabiah athletes had very positive feelings about their Maccabiah experience. The majority felt that their overall Maccabiah experience was a life-changing encounter with Israel and their Jewish heritage. They described the sporting competitions, the opening ceremonies, and the relationships they forged with other athletes in very positive terms. The vast majority of the 2017 athletes said that they would encourage other US Jewish athletes to compete in future Maccabiah Games.

The Israel Connect program engendered some very positive feelings and some criticism. Interactions between athletes, coaches, and others were extremely positive. The discussions and activities during Israel Connect were generally viewed favorably but were more appealing to those in Israel for the first time. However, many athletes found that they did not receive adequate sleep, food, or practice time during Israel Connect. Finally, more than two thirds of athletes thought that Israel Connect felt like “pro-Israel propaganda.”

Impact of the Maccabiah

The evidence clearly demonstrates that the Maccabiah experience engenders lasting, positive feelings toward Israel. Before the Maccabiah, 24% of the athletes felt “very connected” to Israel; after the Maccabiah, 32% felt “very connected.” Similarly, even four years after the experience, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were more likely to feel connected to Israel than the comparison group.

At the same time, the Maccabiah experience had little to no impact on knowledge about Israel, willingness to express opinions about Israel, or return trips to Israel. Furthermore, the Maccabiah experience did not appear to impact feelings or beliefs about Jewish peoplehood, likelihood of having Jewish friends, involvement with Jewish organizations, marrying Jews, raising Jewish children, or any one of a number of Jewish ritual practices.

The impact of the Maccabiah experience may only become evident as more of the athletes marry and have children. A “ceiling effect” may also be preventing the Maccabiah experience from having its intended impact on the athletes. In other words, because the majority of the athletes came from relatively strong Jewish backgrounds and had already been to Israel when they applied to compete in the Maccabiah, their Jewish attitudes and behaviors were stronger than average even before their Maccabiah experience, leaving minimal room for growth.
Lessons Learned

Another possibility is that elements of the Maccabiah experience need to be adjusted in order to produce the desired impact on Jewish identity. This study suggests three potential strategies:

**Address the athletes’ physical needs during Israel Connect.** As Maslow (1943) famously observed, people cannot focus on social, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual growth if their basic physiological needs have not been satisfied.

**Help the athletes articulate the link between their experiences during the Maccabiah and their own Jewish identities.** To accomplish its goals, Israel Connect may need more than tour guides who can provide facts and experiences; it may need educators who are equipped with “pedagogical content knowledge,” strategies to help participants grapple directly with more abstract questions of Jewish identity (Shulman, 1986, 1987).

**Adjust the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is addressed during Israel Connect.** Especially given that the majority of the young adults who compete in the Maccabiah (1) have been to Israel before and (2) identify as liberals, they would likely benefit from a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of the conflict, including input from more left-of-center organizations and speakers.

Moving forward, experimenting with ways to adjust programming in order to foster lasting change, particularly for the relatively highly engaged cohort of Jewish young adults who compete in the Maccabiah, will be Maccabi USA’s primary challenge.
“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Introduction

Often referred to as the “Jewish Olympics,” the World Maccabiah Games were founded in 1932 in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine. The inspiration for the Maccabiah grew out of the early Zionist movement and its interest in cultivating a “muscular Judaism” as a response to centuries of perceived Jewish weakness in the Diaspora (Kaplan, 2015). Since the 1950s, the Maccabiah has taken place in Israel every four years, most recently in summer 2017. The 2017 Maccabiah Games attracted 10,000 Jewish athletes from 80 countries around the world, competing in 45 different sports. Today, the Maccabiah is the third-largest sporting competition in the world, after the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup.

Maccabi USA and the Israel Connect Program

The US delegation to the Maccabiah is sponsored by Maccabi USA. Founded in 1948, Maccabi USA is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization whose motto is “Building Jewish Pride Through Sports.” Maccabi USA views sports as a vehicle to provide Jewish experiences that strengthen Jewish identity and relationships, including connections to Israel. The 2017 Maccabiah Games included a US delegation of approximately 1,200 athletes and staff. More than 300 athletes competed in the most prestigious and competitive division, called the “Open” division, which is the focus of the present evaluation. The Maccabiah Games also include less competitive “Junior” and “Youth” divisions for high school athletes and a “Masters” division for athletes ages 35 and older.

As part of the Maccabiah experience, Maccabi USA also organizes a seven-day educational-cultural travel program in Israel for US athletes prior to the athletic competition. Called “Israel Connect,” the program is required for all US athletes competing in the Open, Junior, and Youth divisions. Athletes train with their teammates in the morning and then visit sites in the afternoon and evening, including Jerusalem’s Old City, Yad Vashem, Har Herzl, Masada, the Dead Sea, Tel-Aviv’s Independence Hall, Shuk HaCarmel and the beach. There is also a b’nai mitzvah ceremony for athletes who have not celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah before or
who want to celebrate again in Israel. The staff and lay leaders of Maccabi USA describe Israel Connect as critical to achieving their overarching goals of strengthening athletes’ Jewish identities and instilling in them the passion and knowledge necessary to advocate for Israel.

Maccabi USA’s mission to strengthen Jewish identity and connections reflects the ongoing concern of Jewish communal leaders for the survival and vitality of the US Jewish community (Sarna, 2004). Secularization, changing family formation patterns, and the increasing incidence of marriages between Jews and non-Jews all present strong challenges to US Jewish continuity (Dashefsky & Sheskin, 2015). In response, Jewish educators have embraced peer trips to Israel as a means to provide effective, experiential Jewish education to young American Jews (Chazan, 2002). These interventions are not unique to the Jewish community; other minority ethnic and religious groups have embraced heritage tourism as a way to bolster group identity (Timothy, 2011; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). In the Jewish world, the most far-reaching example of such programs is Birthright Israel, a free, 10-day trip to Israel for Jewish young adults that has reached more than 600,000 participants worldwide since it began in 1999 (Kelner, 2010; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). A program of academic research has demonstrated Birthright Israel’s lasting impact on participants’ connection to Israel, Jewish communal participation, and likelihood of forming Jewish families (Sasson et al., 2015; Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe et al., 2010; Saxe, Shain, Wright, Hecht, & Sasson, 2017).

Study and Research Questions

Like the research on Birthright Israel, this study follows in the tradition of modern social program evaluation (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Using a strong quasi-experimental design, the study assesses the extent to which this programmatic intervention—experiencing the Israel Connect program and then competing in the Maccabiah Games—altered the Jewish trajectories of the young US Jewish athletes who participated. The findings draw on interviews, observations, and survey data collected from athletes who applied to compete in the 2017 and 2013 Maccabiah Games. Because the Israel Connect program was somewhat different in character before the 2013 Maccabiah, earlier cohorts of athletes were not included in the study.

The study addresses a number of specific questions. What were these athletes’ perceptions of the Maccabiah experience in general, and of Israel Connect in particular? More critically, did the Maccabiah experience inspire feelings of Jewish pride, connection to Israel, connection to Jewish peers, and connection to the Jewish people? Did it strengthen involvement with Israel and the Jewish community? How does the impact of Maccabiah participation compare to the impact of Birthright Israel, particularly as a first-time Israel experience? Finally, what can the Maccabiah experience teach us about heritage tourism, identity formation, and the future of the Jewish community?
An Evaluation of the Impact of Competing in the World Maccabiah Games

Report Outline

This report begins with a detailed explanation of the study’s methodology and continues with a description of the characteristics of the athletes who competed in the Maccabiah in 2017 and 2013. The study then examines how these athletes describe the Maccabiah experience, including its impact on their lives. At the heart of the report are three sections assessing the short- and long-term impact of Maccabiah participation across three domains: Israel, Jewish peoplehood, and Judaism. The Maccabiah experience is then compared to that of Birthright Israel. The report concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.
“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Method

Section Summary

The core of the evaluation consisted of three surveys: a pre-trip survey of Maccabiah 2017 applicants, whether appointed to the team or not; a post-trip survey of Maccabiah 2017 applicants, whether appointed to the team or not; and a long-term follow-up survey of Maccabiah 2013 applicants, whether appointed to the team or not. Survey design and analysis were informed by a supplemental qualitative investigation. The impact of the Maccabiah was assessed using quasi-experimental methods. Short-term impact was analyzed using a “difference in differences” technique, and long-term impact was analyzed using statistical models that examine the relationship between having the Maccabiah experience and various outcomes, while holding fixed other differences between the treatment and comparison groups.

Qualitative Investigation

The study used qualitative research methods to inform survey design and interpretation of survey results. The qualitative investigation included:

1. **Interviews with 2013 Maccabiah athletes (N=8).** Athletes were selected to represent a range of ages, sports, and Jewish backgrounds. The goal of these interviews was to understand the trip experience from the perspective of the athletes. Questions covered athletes’ reasons for participating, their satisfaction with the program, and their sense of how the program affected them. Interviews were conducted in January and February 2017.

2. **Interviews with Maccabi USA staff and lay leaders (N=7).** These interviews were designed to elucidate program goals, structure, and operations. Interviews were conducted in January 2017.

3. **Observation of 2017 Israel Connect program.** In order to observe the experience and to gain an understanding of its components, a researcher joined the 2017 Maccabiah athletes for the Israel Connect program.
Surveys

The core of the evaluation consisted of three surveys:

1. A **pre-trip survey** of Maccabiah 2017 applicants to the Open team, whether appointed to the team or not;
2. A **post-trip survey** of Maccabiah 2017 applicants to the Open team, whether appointed to the team or not; and
3. A **long-term follow-up survey** of Maccabiah 2013 applicants to the Open team, whether appointed to the team or not.

Once they apply to compete in the Maccabiah, athletes are appointed to Team USA based on athletic ability alone. The athletes who applied but did not compete are the comparison group against which this study measures the impact of the Maccabiah. Of the athletes who did not end up competing in 2017, about two thirds were not appointed to the team, and about one third (N=197) were appointed to the team but had another reason for not competing. Members of the comparison group who responded to the post-trip survey cited a number of reasons for not competing, including personal, academic, professional, and sports conflicts (Table 1).

Using Maccabi USA’s records, we attempted to include those who competed in both 2017 and 2013 in the long-term follow-up survey, rather than the pre- and post-trip surveys of Maccabiah 2017 applicants. These efforts were successful in some cases (N=33), but in other cases 2013 Maccabiah athletes who applied to the 2017 Maccabiah were surveyed with the 2017 athletes (N=46). Their data was incorporated into the analysis to the extent possible.

The survey instruments for all three surveys are available in Technical Appendix B.

### Table 1: Main reason for not competing: 2017 Maccabiah comparison group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not appointed to team</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, academic, professional, or sports conflict</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not raise the monetary commitment</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports injury</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reason</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Pre- and Post-Trip Surveys of Maccabiah 2017 Applicants. Email invitations containing individual links to the pre-trip survey were sent to athletes on April 24, 2017. A $15 Amazon.com gift card was offered as an incentive to complete the survey. Email reminders were sent to all nonrespondents on May 2 and May 10. Nonrespondents who had been appointed to the team also received phone calls encouraging them to complete the survey on May 15-16, and Maccabi USA emailed all appointed athletes on May 22, encouraging them to complete the pre-trip survey if they had not already done so. A final email reminder was sent to all nonrespondents on May 23, and the survey was closed on June 5.

Email invitations containing individual links to the post-trip survey were sent to athletes on November 1, 2017. A $15 Amazon.com gift card was offered as an incentive to complete the survey. Email reminders were sent to all nonrespondents on November 8, November 15, and November 29. Nonrespondents received phone calls encouraging them to complete the survey between November 20 and December 15 (appointed athletes were called twice). Maccabi USA emailed all appointed athletes on November 28, encouraging them to complete the post-trip survey if they had not already done so. A final email reminder was sent to all nonrespondents on December 21, and the survey was closed on January 2, 2018.

Response rates for the pre- and post-trip surveys are presented in Table 2. Athletes who competed in the Maccabiah responded at a higher rate than those who did not. Women were significantly more likely than men to respond to the post-trip survey (49% versus 42%). There was no significant response bias with respect to age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>Pre-trip survey respondents</th>
<th>Post-trip survey respondents</th>
<th>Pre- and post-trip survey respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never competed</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(comparison group)</td>
<td></td>
<td>238</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st time competing</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(treatment group)</td>
<td></td>
<td>225</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 2017</td>
<td>937</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>463</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Athletes who were under age 18 at the time of the surveys were invited to complete the surveys only if their parents gave consent. Consent was obtained for 59 of 81 minors. The 22 minors whose parents did not give consent are considered nonrespondents. Table excludes individuals who competed in Maccabiah Games before 2013 (N=97).
**Long-Term Follow-Up Survey of Maccabiah 2013 Applicants.** Email invitations containing individual links to the long-term follow-up survey were sent to athletes on November 6, 2017. A $15 Amazon.com gift card was offered as an incentive to complete the survey. Email reminders were sent to all nonrespondents on November 13 and November 20, 2017 and on January 4, 2018. Nonrespondents received phone calls encouraging them to complete the survey between November 30, 2017 and January 14, 2018 (appointed athletes were called twice). A final email reminder was sent to all nonrespondents on January 17, 2018, and the survey was closed on January 22, 2018.

Response rates for the long-term follow-up survey are presented in Table 3. Athletes who competed responded at a higher rate than those who did not. Women were significantly more likely than men to respond to the long-term follow-up survey (32% versus 26%). There was no significant response bias with respect to age.

**Assessing Short-Term Impact**

In order to analyze the short-term impact of the Maccabiah experience, we used a technique called “difference in differences” that mimics an experimental research design. The first step in the difference in differences analysis was to compare the survey responses of the “treatment” group (2017 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2017) before and after the 2017 Maccabiah Games. The second step was to compare the survey responses of the comparison group (athletes who applied but were not appointed to a team) before and after the 2017 Maccabiah Games. The final step was to compare change between the two time points among the treatment group to change between the two time points among the comparison group. Any change that was evident among both the 2017 Maccabiah athletes and the comparison group was attributed to exogenous factors, such as the news cycle. Any change among the 2017 Maccabiah athletes that was different from change among the comparison group was attributed to the Maccabiah experience.

**Table 3: Long-term follow-up survey response rates by treatment versus comparison group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013</th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>% responding</th>
<th>N responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never competed</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(comparison group)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st time competing</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(treatment group)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 2013</td>
<td>1,151</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table excludes individuals who competed in Maccabiah Games before 2013 (N=97). Forty-six of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes who applied to the 2017 Maccabiah were also surveyed with the 2017 athletes. All of these individuals completed either the pre- or post-trip surveys, bringing the overall study response rate to 50% for this group.
There were two systematic, pre-existing differences between the Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2017 and the comparison group:

- 44% of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2017 were women, compared to 31% of the 2017 comparison group; and
- 49% of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2017 had been to Israel before, compared to 61% of the 2017 comparison group.

The gender difference suggests that more men than women applied to compete. The difference in prior Israel experience may suggest that athletes who were more interested in Israel travel were more likely to apply, even as a “long shot,” and thus were more likely to be Jewishly engaged than the treatment group regardless of the Maccabiah experience. This result may also suggest that those who had been to Israel before were less motivated to go if appointed. Regardless, the “difference in differences” analytic technique used here mitigates any selection bias—that is, any pre-existing differences between the Maccabiah athletes and the comparison group—because we are only comparing change within the 2017 Maccabiah athlete group to change within the comparison group.

Assessing Long-Term Impact

Because surveys were not conducted before the 2013 Maccabiah Games, the difference in differences technique was not appropriate for analyzing the long-term impact of the Maccabiah experience. For this analysis, we compared the treatment group (2013 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2013) to the comparison group (athletes who applied but were not appointed to a team). There were several systematic, pre-existing differences between the treatment and comparison groups that complicated this method:

- The 2013 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2013 were an average of nine months younger than the 2013 comparison group;
- 65% of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2013 had two Jewish parents, compared to 80% of the 2013 comparison group; and
- 3% of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2013 were raised Orthodox, compared to 12% of the 2013 comparison group.

Whether the 2013 comparison group was also more likely than the 2013 Maccabiah athletes who competed for the first time in 2013 to have been to Israel before the 2013 Games is unknown. The survey did not collect sufficient information about past
Israel travel to be able to determine definitively whether such travel occurred before or after the 2013 Maccabiah. Whatever the differences in prior Israel travel, the comparison group was more likely to be Jewishly engaged than the treatment group.

To mitigate this selection bias, we used a statistical process called regression analysis. Using data from the treatment group and the comparison group, we modelled the relationship between having the Maccabiah experience and various outcomes, while holding fixed other differences between the treatment and comparison groups: age, number of Jewish parents, and childhood Orthodoxy. For reporting purposes, we present predictive margins estimated at the means of these three variables for the 2013 Maccabiah athletes.

**Description versus Impact Analysis**

In the descriptive sections of the report (“Who Competes in the Maccabiah?,” “Applying to the Maccabiah,” “2017 Maccabiah Athletes Describe Their Experience,” and “2013 Maccabiah Athletes Describe Their Experience”), we used all available data from the pre-trip, post-trip, and long-term follow-up surveys to paint a portrait of the athletes who competed in each Maccabiah, regardless of whether the athletes also competed in another Maccabiah. However, in the sections on the impact of the Maccabiah, we compared only those who competed in the Maccabiah for the first time to those who had never competed in the Maccabiah before. Thus, the 97 survey respondents who competed in the Maccabiah Games before 2013 are excluded from the impact analysis.
Who Competes in the Maccabiah?

Section Summary

Most of the 2017 and 2013 Maccabiah athletes were young adults between the ages of 18 and 32, from fairly high-income geographic areas. Although Maccabiah athletes had a wide range of Jewish backgrounds, they came disproportionately from the “middle” of the spectrum of US Jewish engagement—e.g., those with only one Jewish parent and those raised Orthodox were somewhat underrepresented. Furthermore, the majority of 2017 Maccabiah athletes had traveled to Israel before the 2017 Maccabiah, including 18% who had competed in previous Maccabiah Games.

Gender

The majority of Maccabiah athletes were men: 57% in 2017 and 58% in 2013. This gender imbalance is unusual for an Israel travel program serving US Jewish young adults. In most such programs, the majority of participants are women. US Jewish women exhibit stronger Jewish attitudes and behaviors than US Jewish men across most measures, such as strength of Jewish religious beliefs, membership in Jewish organizations, and having Jewish friends (Fishman, 2009, 2015; Fishman & Parmer, 2008; Hartman & Hartman, 2009). The overrepresentation of men in the Maccabiah suggests that sports may be a vehicle for successfully engaging men in Jewish life.

Age

Most Maccabiah athletes were young adults ages 18 to 32. The average age of the 2017 athletes at the time of the 2017 Games was 22.6 years, nearly identical to the average age of the 2013 athletes at the time of the 2013 Games (22.5 years). A small proportion of athletes were minors, and a small proportion were over the age of 32 (Table 4).
Socioeconomic Status

Because Maccabiah athletes were young, many had not completed their education or settled into careers. Measures of their educational attainment or household income may understate their true socioeconomic status. However, upwards of 70% lived in ZIP codes where the median household income is in the fourth or highest quintile of the US income distribution (Table 5). This concentration in high-income areas suggests that the monetary commitment required of Open team members, $8,000 in 2017, may prevent those from lower income areas from applying. Although only 12% (N=25) of the 2017 comparison group said that the monetary commitment was the main reason they did not compete (see Table 1 on page 10), there may be other athletes who simply did not apply because of the cost.

Table 4: Age during the Games: 2017 Maccabiah versus 2013 Maccabiah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah athletes</th>
<th>2013 Maccabiah athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18 years</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-32 years</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 32 years</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from Maccabi USA registration system.

Table 5: Median household income of ZIP code: 2017 Maccabiah versus 2013 Maccabiah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah athletes</th>
<th>2013 Maccabiah athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest quintile</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd quintile</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd quintile</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th quintile</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest quintile</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.
**Jewish Background**

Maccabiah athletes had a wide range of Jewish backgrounds: Some had no Jewish education and did not celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah, while others were raised Orthodox and attended Jewish day school (Figure 1). Compared to the broader Jewish population in their age group, Maccabiah athletes came disproportionately from the “middle” of the spectrum of American Jewish engagement—e.g., those with only one Jewish parent and those raised Orthodox were somewhat underrepresented.

![Figure 1: Jewish background: 2017 Maccabiah versus 2013 Maccabiah versus all US Jews (ages 18-32 only)](image)

Prior Israel Experience

The majority of 2017 Maccabiah athletes had already been to Israel before the 2017 Maccabiah. They were more likely to have been to Israel than all US Jews in their age group (Table 6). Almost one quarter (23%) had participated in a Birthright Israel trip, and 18% had competed in previous Maccabiah Games.

Pre-Trip Political Views

The 2017 Maccabiah athletes came to the Games with a variety of political views and opinions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. About half (52%) of the athletes described their general political views as liberal versus 21% who identified as conservative (Table 7). This breakdown is typical of US Jews in general: 49% of all US Jews describe themselves as liberal while 19% of US Jews identify as conservative (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Table 6: Prior Israel experience: 2017 Maccabiah versus all US Jews (ages 18-32 only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Been to Israel (before the 2017 Maccabiah Games)</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been on Birthright Israel trip</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competed in previous Maccabiah Games</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>[no data]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 7: Pre-trip political views: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely liberal</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly liberal</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly conservative</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely conservative</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question text: “In general, would you describe your political views as...?”
Applying to the Maccabiah

Section Summary

Most Maccabiah athletes first heard about the Maccabiah Games from friends or family, or through their sport. Having fun and being part of an international athletic competition were the most important motivating factors in applying to compete. The Jewish community played a relatively small role in making the athletes aware of the Maccabiah, and the Jewish aspects of the Maccabiah experience were less important motivating factors in applying to compete.

Hearing about the Maccabiah

Just over half of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes first heard about the Maccabiah Games from family or friends, and another quarter first heard about the Games through their sport (Table 8). However, among the roughly 13% who had competed in the Olympics or another elite international competition, or who had played professional sports, the majority (55%) first heard about the Maccabiah Games through their sport (not shown).

Table 8: How athletes first heard about the Maccabiah Games: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From family or friends</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through my sport</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through my Jewish community</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruited by Maccabi USA</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 225

Note: Excludes 2017 Maccabiah athletes who competed in a previous Maccabiah Games (N=54). Total may not add to 100% due to rounding. Question text: “How did you first hear about the Maccabiah Games?”
Motivations to Apply

The biggest factors that motivated athletes to apply for the 2017 Maccabiah Games were having fun, being part of an international athletic competition and representing America (Figure 2). Meeting other Jewish athletes and learning more about Jewish history, culture, or religion were less important motivating factors.

Figure 2: Factors in the decision to apply: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I thought it would be fun</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to be part of an international athletic competition</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to represent America</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to visit Israel</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to achieve a certain level of athletic performance</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to meet Jewish athletes from other countries</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to meet other American Jewish athletes</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to learn more about Jewish history, culture, or religion</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parent(s) wanted me to apply</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=225. Excludes 2017 Maccabiah athletes who competed in a previous Maccabiah Games (N=54). Question text: “How important was each of the following in your decision to apply to compete in the 2017 (20th) Maccabiah Games?”
2017 Maccabiah Athletes Describe Their Experience

Section Summary

Most 2017 Maccabiah athletes had very positive feelings about their Maccabiah experience. The majority felt that their overall Maccabiah experience was a life-changing encounter with Israel and their Jewish heritage. They described the sporting competitions, the opening ceremonies, and the relationships they forged with other athletes in very positive terms. The vast majority of the 2017 athletes said that they would encourage other US Jewish athletes to compete in future Maccabiah Games.

The Israel Connect program engendered some very positive feelings and some criticism. Interactions between athletes, coaches, and others were extremely positive. The discussions and activities during Israel Connect were generally reviewed favorably but were more appealing to those in Israel for the first time. However, many athletes found that they did not receive adequate sleep, food, or practice time during Israel Connect. Finally, more than two thirds of athletes thought that Israel Connect felt like “pro-Israel propaganda.”

**Overall Impressions: 2017 Maccabiah Athletes**

The 2017 Maccabiah athletes were very positive about their Maccabiah experience. The majority described it as “life changing,” as well as “an encounter with the real Israel,” “a journey to your Jewish roots,” and “a learning experience.” The 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were in Israel for the first time were more likely to describe the Maccabiah experience in these terms compared to the athletes who had been to Israel before (Figure 3).
Figure 3: What the Maccabiah experience felt like, by prior Israel experience: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior Israel experience (N=112)</th>
<th>A life-changing experience</th>
<th>An encounter with the real Israel</th>
<th>A journey to your Jewish roots</th>
<th>A learning experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Very much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First time in Israel (N=99)</th>
<th>A life-changing experience</th>
<th>An encounter with the real Israel</th>
<th>A journey to your Jewish roots</th>
<th>A learning experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Very much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33). Question text: “Athletes have described the Maccabiah experience in many ways. Overall, for you, did the experience feel like...?”
The vast majority (88%) of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were unequivocal in saying that they would encourage other US Jewish athletes to compete in the Maccabiah (Table 9). Only 2% would not encourage others to compete under any circumstances, and the rest were equivocal.

The 2017 Maccabiah athletes detailed some of the reasons they would encourage others to participate:

“I would encourage other Jewish athletes to compete. I not only made friends from different countries, I made friends for a lifetime on the USA team. I am extremely happy I decided to participate in the Maccabiah Games.

“Based on my experience, I would 100% encourage other American Jewish athletes to compete in the next Maccabiah Games because it was such a unique and amazing experience that generates a sense of belonging through sports and commonalities. Furthermore, you get to meet some amazing people from all over the world that you would have never met otherwise.

When asked about the highlight of their Maccabiah experience, about half of the athletes said it was the people they met and the relationships they formed, and about one quarter said it was the athletic competition (Figure 4). Those who were in Israel for the first time were substantially more likely to cite Israel Connect and sightseeing as a highlight of the experience than those who had been to Israel before.

Table 9: Whether 2017 Maccabiah athletes would encourage others to compete in the next Maccabiah Games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, wholly positive</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional, mixed</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, wholly negative</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Question not asked of some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33). Of those who were asked, 85% provided an answer.

Question text: “Based on your experience, would you encourage other American Jewish athletes to compete in the next Maccabiah Games? Why or why not?”
Figure 4: Highlight of the Maccabiah experience, by prior Israel experience: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Question not asked of some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33). Of those who were asked, 83% provided an answer. Response categories not mutually exclusive.

Question text: “For you, what was the highlight of your Maccabiah experience?”
2017 Maccabiah athletes described some of the highlights of the trip:

“The highlight of my Maccabiah experience was singing in Hebrew at the opening ceremonies with a boy from Germany and a boy from South Africa. Such an incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience of unity and Jewish pride in our homeland.

While the opening ceremonies were an incredible experience and something I will never forget, the most fulfilling thing I took away from the whole thing was the relationships I made with my teammates. We grew extremely close over the three weeks, and I have no doubt we will continue to be friends for many years to come.

“The highlight was the moment we won the gold medal—I have never experienced a moment like that before—pure joy!”

“The highlight was the people. My teammates became brothers that I am still close with today. The US delegation was like one big family, even if you had never seen or spoken to someone before. Meeting the local Israelis and Jews from all over the world was special. Seeing your culture and talking to people who have similar family traditions as you from countries like Chile, South Africa, Kazakhstan, and all over was special. It was a place where everyone was friendly and wanted to be friends and a nice change from the ‘real world.’
Israel Connect: 2017 Maccabiah Athletes

Israel Connect engendered some very positive reactions, as well as some criticism among the 2017 Maccabiah athletes. First and foremost, Israel Connect provided the athletes with an opportunity to get to know their teammates, their coaches, and Israelis. Interactions between people during Israel Connect were extremely positive (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Interactions with others during Israel Connect: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=201. Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33). Proportion having no interaction not shown. Labels <1% omitted.

Question text: “Overall, how would you describe your interactions with…”

- Athletes on your team
  - Extremely negative: 1%
  - Negative: 3%
  - Somewhat negative: 20%
  - Somewhat positive: 74%

- Israelis who joined the buses
  - Extremely negative: 5%
  - Negative: 29%
  - Somewhat negative: 60%

- Your coach
  - Extremely negative: 8%
  - Negative: 4%
  - Somewhat negative: 16%
  - Somewhat positive: 56%

- Athletes from other open teams
  - Extremely negative: 9%
  - Negative: 42%
  - Somewhat negative: 47%

- Your Israeli tour guide
  - Extremely negative: 3%
  - Negative: 12%
  - Somewhat negative: 33%
  - Somewhat positive: 42%

- Your bus captain/manager
  - Extremely negative: 2%
  - Negative: 2%
  - Somewhat negative: 41%
  - Somewhat positive: 34%

- Junior/Youth athletes
  - Extremely negative: 1%
  - Negative: 6%
  - Somewhat negative: 21%
  - Somewhat positive: 35%
  - Positive: 14%

Legend:
- Extremely negative
- Negative
- Somewhat negative
- Somewhat positive
- Positive
- Extremely positive positive
Touring around Israel was the most highly rated component of Israel Connect, followed by free time, the 4th of July celebration, and the b’nai mitzvah ceremony (Figure 6). Enthusiasm for all the Israel Connect activities, including the touring component, was lower than enthusiasm for the athletic competitions and the opening ceremonies. Athletes who had been to Israel before were also less positive in their assessment of Israel Connect activities than those who were in Israel for the first time.

Figure 6: Rating parts of the Maccabiah, by prior Israel experience: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33).

Question text: “How would you rate your experience in the following parts of Maccabiah 2017?”
There were logistical issues that detracted from the experience of Israel Connect. The majority of athletes did not feel that Maccabi USA was invested in their athletic performance (Figure 7). Half said their physical needs as athletes were not met, and 45% said their team did not have enough practice time. Our observer noted that athletes were not provided with enough water or food while touring, and that the food that was provided was sometimes subpar and not sufficiently nutritious for high-caliber athletes. Our observer also noted that the cancellation of a practice in order to visit Masada frustrated a number of coaches and athletes.

Figure 7: Athletic concerns during Israel Connect: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=209. Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33).

Question text: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? During Israel Connect…?”
In terms of the educational experience, the majority of 2017 athletes thought that Israel Connect at least “somewhat” included thoughtful discussions about a variety of subjects related to Jewishness and Israel (Figure 8). The athletes reported fewer thoughtful discussions about Israel than about Jewish subjects, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict engendering the fewest thoughtful discussions. On all these subjects, athletes who were in Israel for the first time were more positive than those who had been to Israel before.

Figure 8: Thoughtful discussions about Jewish subjects and Israel during Israel Connect, by prior Israel experience: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33).

Question text: “To what extent did Israel Connect include thoughtful discussions about…?”
Nearly two thirds of all 2017 athletes agreed as least somewhat that they heard “authentic” accounts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that Israel Connect allowed for diversity of opinion about the conflict (Figure 9). Those who identified as political liberals or political conservatives before the trip did not differ in their assessments of whether Israel Connect presented authentic accounts of the conflict and allowed for diversity of opinion (not shown).

Figure 9: Discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during Israel Connect: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=209. Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33).

Question text: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Israel Connect?”
The pro-Israel perspective of Israel Connect’s programming was visible to most participants. Half thought that Israel Connect was political, and nearly two thirds saw it as pro-Israel propaganda (Figure 10). It is not completely clear what the athletes meant by “propaganda” or what qualified as “apolitical,” nor is it clear whether these were positive or negative statements, as perceived by the athletes. Athletes who identified as political liberals before the trip were more likely than those who identified as political moderates or conservatives to view Israel Connect as pro-Israel propaganda: Nearly 85% of political liberals at least “somewhat” agreed that Israel Connect was propaganda, compared to 57% of political conservatives (not shown).

Figure 10: Politics during Israel Connect: 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=209. Excludes some 2017 Maccabiah athletes who were known to have competed in 2013 and were surveyed with the 2013 athletes (N=33).

Question text: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Israel Connect?”
In their open-ended responses, the 2017 athletes made clear that their conception of propaganda included discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also the itinerary and statements by representatives of Maccabi USA more broadly:

“The only negative part was the Israel Connect program. I felt that the program was extremely biased and was only used for propaganda. It was so blatant that it backfired with many of the athletes. In fact, at the dinner where we were asked to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, my teammate expressed that the questions provided by [StandWithUs] were extremely biased.

“I would encourage any athlete participating in the games to take any narrative presented by Maccabi USA (or the scripted presenters during opening/closing ceremonies) with a grain of salt.

“I felt forced to visit a tank museum [the Armored Corps Memorial Site and Museum at Latrun] and watch a movie that could literally ONLY be described as propaganda. If I had to summarize the movie, it would be ‘tanks are so cool!’ I do not think tanks are cool, I do not like war, and I do not think we should lionize the military or present one side of an issue without a fair discussion of alternative perspectives.
2013 Maccabiah Athletes Describe Their Experience

Section Summary

Four years after their Maccabiah experience, the majority of 2013 Maccabiah athletes said that it was a life-changing experience that made them feel closer to Israel and their Jewish heritage. The majority of the 2013 athletes also felt that their Maccabiah experience influenced their life decisions in some way, often in terms of their Jewish attitudes and behaviors.

Reflecting back on their experience four years ago, the majority of 2013 Maccabiah athletes said that the Maccabiah experience “very much” made them feel closer to Israel, made them feel closer to their Jewish heritage, and was a life-changing experience (Figure 11). Only 15% thought the experience was even “a little” a disappointment.

Furthermore, of all the athletes who competed in the 2013 Maccabiah, 9% had competed in a previous Maccabiah, and 10% went on to compete in the 2017 Maccabiah. This phenomenon of competing multiple times also speaks to the value the athletes attached to the experience.

The 2013 Maccabiah athletes were asked to reflect on whether their Maccabiah experience had influenced subsequent decisions. Two thirds of 2013 athletes said that the Maccabiah experience had influenced at least some of their life decisions (Figure 12). Some perceived influence on their Jewish attitudes and behaviors, such as “I think Maccabiah made me want to be with a significant other who was Jewish,” and “I was more involved with Jewish life in college as a result of attending the Maccabiah Games.” A smaller number perceived influence on their attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis Israel, such as “the Games were reaffirmation for me of my love for Israel,” and “I now try to convince others to visit Israel.”
Figure 11: Reflections on the Maccabiah experience: 2013 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=218. Excludes some 2013 Maccabiah athletes who applied to the 2017 Maccabiah and were surveyed with the 2017 athletes (N=46).

Question text: “Thinking back on your Maccabiah experience, would you say that it...?”
Figure 12: Decisions influenced by the Maccabiah experience: 2013 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=144. Excludes some 2013 Maccabiah athletes who applied to the 2017 Maccabiah and were surveyed with the 2017 athletes (N=46). Of those who were asked, 65% provided an answer.

Question text: “Can you think of any decisions that you made that were influenced by your Maccabiah experience (for example, decisions about jobs, relationships, religious observance, how you spend your free time, etc.)?”
“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Impact of the Maccabiah: Israel

Section Summary

Competing in the Maccabiah Games resulted in strong, positive change in participants’ emotional attachment to Israel, and this change persisted at least four years after the experience. At the same time, competing had little to no impact on knowledge of Israel, beliefs about Israel, or willingness to express opinions about Israel around unfamiliar people, in either the short or long term. The Maccabiah Games did not appear to increase the athletes’ likelihood of returning to Israel in the four years after the Games.

Emotional Attachment

The Maccabiah experience caused positive change in feelings toward Israel. The 2017 Maccabiah athletes became more emotionally attached to Israel as a result of their Maccabiah experience (Figure 13). Four years after their trip, 2013 Maccabiah athletes were also more likely than the 2013 comparison group to feel attached to Israel. Note that the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were already somewhat more emotionally attached to Israel than their peers in the general US Jewish population before the Games.²

Three months after the Maccabiah experience, 2017 Maccabiah athletes were more likely to say that being Jewish means caring about Israel (Figure 14). However, this effect did not persist over time. Four years after the 2013 Games, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes looked much like the 2017 Maccabiah athletes in the pre-trip survey, and they were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to say that being Jewish means caring about Israel, controlling for pre-existing differences between the groups.
Figure 13: Emotional attachment to Israel: Impact on Maccabiah athletes

Estimates for all US Jews reflect authors’ analysis of the Pew Research Center’s (2013) Survey of US Jews, using the Steinhardt Social Research Institute’s minor reclassifications of Jewish respondents (Saxe et al., 2014). The short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A3 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “How emotionally attached are you to Israel?”

Figure 14: Extent to which being Jewish a matter of caring about Israel: Impact on 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=164. The effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A3 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “To you personally, to what extent is being Jewish a matter of...caring about Israel?”
Knowledge and Beliefs about Israel

The Maccabiah experience did not result in much change in knowledge of or beliefs about Israel. After the 2017 Maccabiah Games, the athletes were no more or less likely to feel confident that they understood the current situation in Israel—although the comparison group became somewhat less likely to feel confident, perhaps pointing to a modest positive effect of the Maccabiah experience in preserving participating athletes’ sense of confidence in the short term (Figure 15). The 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to feel confident that they understood the current situation in Israel, controlling for pre-existing differences.

Figure 15: Understanding the situation in Israel: Impact on 2017 Maccabiah athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah comparison group</th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pre (N=148)</td>
<td>19% 16% 32% 22% 18%</td>
<td>19% 18% 40% 18% 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post (N=148)</td>
<td>4% 12% 15% 32% 28% 9%</td>
<td>2% 10% 19% 39% 21% 9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A4 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? … I feel confident that I understand the current situation in Israel.”
Competing in the Maccabiah Games had no short- or long-term impact on believing that Israel “has a varied and beautiful natural landscape,” “is a world center of high-tech innovation,” “is part of God’s plan for the Jewish people,” or “is guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people.” The 2013 Maccabiah athletes were more likely than the 2013 comparison group to believe that Israel “has a vibrant cultural scene” and “is under constant threat from hostile neighbors who seek its destruction,” controlling for pre-existing differences (Figure 16). At the same time, no Maccabiah impact was evident among the 2017 Maccabiah athletes on these two measures.

Figure 16: Beliefs about Israel: Impact on 2013 Maccabiah athletes

Note: The long-term independent effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression models; predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes. See Tables A5 and A6 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “Thinking about Israel, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"
After the 2017 Maccabiah, the athletes became less likely to agree that “Israel upholds freedom of religion for all of its citizens,” whereas the 2017 comparison group did not change on this measure (Figure 17). At the same time, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were more likely than the 2013 comparison group to believe that Israel upholds freedom of religion for all of its citizens, controlling for pre-existing differences. The qualitative investigation into the 2017 Maccabiah did not shed light on this finding, and it is possible that it is a statistical type I error—that is, a “false positive.”

Figure 17: Belief that Israel upholds freedom of religion: Impact on Maccabiah athletes

Note: The short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A7 in Technical Appendix A. The long-term independent effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression model; predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes. See Table A8 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “Thinking about Israel, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? … Israel upholds freedom of religion for all of its citizens.”
Behaviors

The Maccabiah experience did not result in much change in behaviors related to Israel. After the Games, the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were slightly more likely to see stories about Israel on their social media feeds (Figure 18). However, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to see stories about Israel on their social media feeds. The athletes did not experience any change in their willingness to express their opinions about Israel around people they do not know, nor were the 2013 Maccabiah athletes any more likely than the 2013 comparison group to be willing to express their opinions about Israel, controlling for pre-existing differences.

Figure 18: Israel’s presence on social media feeds: Impact on 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: N=162. The 4% who don’t use Facebook, Twitter, or other social media not included in figure. The effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A9 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “In the PAST MONTH, how often did your Facebook, Twitter, or other social media feed include stories about Israel?”
In the post-trip survey, 2017 Maccabiah athletes and members of the comparison group who had been to Israel before were asked how likely it was that they would return to Israel in the next five years. About half of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes said it was “very much” likely that they would return, but these responses were not different than the responses of members of the comparison group who had previously been to Israel (Figure 19).

Since summer 2013, more than half (61%) of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes returned to Israel. However, during the same time period, the same proportion of the 2013 comparison group also visited Israel. Thus, it is not clear how much the 2013 Maccabiah athletes’ high rates of return travel to Israel reflect the impact of the Maccabiah, versus their pre-existing interest in Israel travel.

Figure 19: Likelihood of returning to Israel: 2017 Maccabiah (post-trip)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah comparison group Post (N=51)</th>
<th>2017 Maccabiah athletes Post (N=187)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Limited to members of 2017 comparison group who had been to Israel before. The lack of short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression model. See Table A10 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “How likely is it that you will return to Israel in the next five years?”
“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Feelings and Beliefs about Jewish Peoplehood

The Maccabiah experience did not affect the athletes’ feelings or beliefs about Jewish peoplehood. In the short term, competing in the 2017 Maccabiah had no impact on the athletes’ likelihood of agreeing that they “have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people” or of saying that being Jewish is a matter of “belonging to a people.” Similarly, controlling for pre-existing differences, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to agree that they “have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people” or to say that being Jewish is a matter of “belonging to a people.” Note that 86% of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes agreed that they have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people before the trip, compared to only 70% of all US Jews in their age bracket.3

Jewish Friends and Organizations

The Maccabiah experience did not affect the athletes’ likelihood of having Jewish friends or being involved with Jewish organizations. In the short term, there were no changes in the proportion of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes’ close friends who were Jewish or whether the athletes expected to make any charitable donations to Jewish or Israeli organizations or causes in the coming year. For undergraduate students, there...
was no change in the degree of involvement in campus Jewish activities. For those who were not students, there was no change in likelihood of being a member of a Jewish organization, like a synagogue or JCC.

In the long term, controlling for pre-existing differences, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to have close friends who were Jewish or to expect to make any charitable donations to Jewish or Israeli organizations or causes in the coming year. Among those who were not students, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were significantly less likely than the 2013 comparison group to be a member of a Jewish organization: 42% versus 54%. 

**Family Formation**

As is typical of their age cohort, most of the Maccabiah athletes who participated in this study had not married or had children. Virtually all (94%) of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were unmarried and childless. Fewer than one-in-five (17%) of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were married; of those, about half were married to Jews (Table 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10: Marital status of 2013 Maccabiah athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married to a Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married to a non-Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This intermarriage rate is roughly on par with national trends: 58% of Jews who married between 2005 and 2013 married non-Jews (Pew Research Center, 2013).

**Controlling for pre-existing differences,** the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to be married at all or be married to a Jew. Only 4% of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes had children at the time of the survey, precluding an analysis of the Jewish upbringing of children.
The Maccabiah experience had no effect on the athletes’ attitudes toward forming Jewish families. Before the 2017 Maccabiah, the majority of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes said it was either “not important” or only “a little important” to them to marry someone Jewish (Table 11). Neither the 2017 Maccabiah athletes nor the comparison group showed any significant increase on this measure after the 2017 Maccabiah. Levels of importance were very similar among unmarried 2013 Maccabiah athletes, who were no more likely than unmarried members of the 2013 comparison group to say it was important to them to marry someone Jewish, controlling for preexisting differences.\(^5\)

Before the 2017 Maccabiah, most of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes said it was either “very” or “somewhat” important to them to raise their children Jewish (Table 12). Neither the 2017 Maccabiah athletes nor the comparison group showed any significant change on this measure after the 2017 Maccabiah. Levels of importance were very similar among 2013 Maccabiah athletes without children, who were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to say it was important to them to raise their children Jewish, controlling for preexisting differences.\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 11: Importance of marrying someone Jewish: 2017 Maccabiah athletes (pre-trip)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t want to get married</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little important</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question text: “How important is it to you to marry someone Jewish?” Excludes those already married (N=13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12: Importance of raising children Jewish: 2017 Maccabiah athletes (pre-trip)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t want to have children</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little important</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question text: “Thinking about the future, how important is it to you to raise your children Jewish?”
Impact of the Maccabiah: Judaism

Section Summary

Maccabiah athletes placed somewhat higher-than-average importance on being Jewish even before the Games. Competing in the Maccabiah Games had no discernable impact on how important it was to the athletes to be Jewish, in either the short or long term. For the most part, competing also had no discernable impact on the athletes’ likelihood of engaging in Jewish rituals. In the short term, there was a small, positive impact on frequency of attending Jewish religious services, but this impact was not evident in the long term.

Jewish Identity

Competing in the Maccabiah had no impact on the athletes’ likelihood of saying that being Jewish was important in their lives. Before the Games, 2017 Maccabiah athletes were more likely than their peers in the general US Jewish population to say that being Jewish was at least “somewhat” important in their lives (Figure 20). After the Games, the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely to say that being Jewish was important than before. Furthermore, controlling for pre-existing differences, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to say that being Jewish was important in their lives.

Jewish Ritual

For the most part, the Maccabiah experience did not affect Jewish ritual behaviors. Participation in the 2017 Maccabiah Games did not affect whether or how often the athletes:

- Had or attended a special meal on Shabbat,
- Lit or participated in lighting Shabbat candles,
- Did anything to observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or Sukkot, or
- Said it was at all important to them to keep kosher.

Furthermore, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to engage in these rituals, controlling for pre-existing differences.
The 2017 Maccabiah athletes also did not change whether or how often they attended Jewish religious services—however, the comparison group became less likely to attend Jewish religious services (Figure 21). Thus, in the short term, competing in the Maccabiah had a positive impact on maintaining levels of Jewish religious service attendance. However, in the long term, this effect was not evident: Controlling for pre-existing differences, the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were no more likely than the 2013 comparison group to attend Jewish religious services.

Figure 20: Importance of being Jewish: 2017 Maccabiah (pre-trip) versus all US Jews (ages 18-32 only)

Note: The lack of short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A11 in Technical Appendix A. Question text: “How important is being Jewish in your life?”
Figure 21: Frequency of Jewish religious service attendance: Impact on 2017 Maccabiah athletes

Note: The short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A12 in Technical Appendix A.

Question text: “In the past MONTH, how often, if at all, did you attend some type of organized Jewish religious service?”
“Building Jewish Pride Through Sports”
Maccabiah Games versus Birthright Israel

Section Summary

The 2017 Maccabiah athletes were nearly twice as likely as summer 2017 Birthright Israel participants to have been to Israel previously, and Maccabiah athletes already felt more connected to Israel before the Maccabiah than Birthright Israel participants felt before their trips. Among those with no prior Israel experience, Maccabiah athletes and Birthright Israel participants described their respective experiences in much the same way, and the magnitude of the impact of the two experiences on feelings of connection to Israel was similar. At the same time, individuals who had a Maccabiah and a Birthright Israel experience generally felt that the Maccabiah experience was more valuable.

Comparing the impact of participating in Birthright Israel to the impact of competing in the Maccabiah is challenging. First, the reach of the two programs is vastly different: Birthright Israel sent over 20,000 participants from the United States to Israel in summer 2017, compared to a few hundred athletes who competed in the US Open team in the 2017 Maccabiah. Second, Maccabiah athletes are a different population than Birthright Israel participants. Only 31% of the summer 2017 US Birthright Israel participants had been to Israel before, compared to nearly twice that many of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes. As a consequence, Maccabiah athletes felt more connected to Israel than Birthright Israel participants before their respective Israel experiences in summer 2017 (Figure 22).

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some general comparisons between 2017 Maccabiah athletes with no prior Israel experience and summer 2017 Birthright Israel participants with no prior Israel experience. First, among those with no prior Israel experience, 2017 Maccabiah athletes and summer 2017 Birthright Israel participants described their respective experiences in much the same way (Figure 23). Maccabiah athletes who were in Israel for the first time were slightly more likely to describe their experience as “life changing” and “an encounter with the real Israel” compared to Birthright Israel participants who were in Israel for the first time.
Figure 22: Feelings of connection to Israel: 2017 Maccabiah versus summer 2017 Birthright (pre-trip)

Note: Estimates for summer 2017 US Birthright Israel participants from pre-trip survey of summer 2017 Birthright Israel applicants (for methodological details, see Shain, Wright, Hecht, & Saxe, forthcoming).

Question text: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?”

Figure 23: What the experience felt like: 2017 Maccabiah versus summer 2017 Birthright Israel trip (no prior Israel experience only)

Note: Estimates for summer 2017 US Birthright Israel participants from post-trip survey of summer 2017 Birthright Israel applicants (for methodological details, see Shain et al., forthcoming).

Question text: “Athletes have described the Maccabiah experience in many ways. Overall, for you, did the experience feel like...?”
Second, among those with no prior Israel experience, both the Maccabiah experience and the Birthright Israel trip had a positive impact on feelings of connection to Israel, and the magnitude of the impact was similar in both cases (Figure 24).

### Figure 24: Feelings of connection to Israel: Impact on Maccabiah athletes versus Birthright Israel participants (no prior Israel experience only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017 Birthright</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthright</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants</td>
<td>(N=84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maccabiah athletes</td>
<td>Pre (N=84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A13 in Technical Appendix A: Random-effects ordered logistic model of connection to Israel, 2017 Maccabiah. Estimates for Summer 2017 US Birthright Israel participants from pre- and post-trip surveys of Summer 2017 Birthright Israel applicants (for methodological details, see Shain et al., forthcoming). Question text: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?”
In an open-ended question, Maccabiah athletes who had also been on a Birthright Israel trip were asked to describe how they perceived the impact of the Maccabiah experience versus the impact of Birthright Israel. Almost half (46%) said that the Maccabiah experience was more valuable, usually because it was longer, more flexible, focused on sports, and fostered connections with other athletes (Table 13). Others noted that Birthright Israel had a stronger educational component with more and deeper discussions of Israel, Jewish heritage, and Jewish identity.

Maccabiah athletes who reflected on both experiences highlighted the themes of interpersonal connections as they evaluated the Maccabiah. The following are observations by the Maccabiah athletes:

“I enjoyed my Maccabiah experience much more because for me, whenever athletics are involved, the intensity, emotion and enjoyment level always go up—especially when it comes to meeting people and sharing experiences. I enjoyed Birthright, but the relationships in Maccabiah and the focus on sports—makes everything better.

Being with other Jewish athletes gave us an immediate connection because we had something in common right away...I learned so much on both trips, and they were each amazing in their own way, but I had a much more memorable and meaningful experience with Maccabiah. I also developed friendships that have lasted the last eight years, whereas I quickly lost touch with the people I went on Birthright with.

Although Maccabiah was fun to meet other athletes with similar backgrounds, I enjoyed how the Birthright trip, even though it was half as long, covered many more activities and education than the Maccabiah trip.

These questions also provide yet another example of the importance of the connections formed with other athletes during the Maccabiah.

Table 13: Perceived impact of 2017 Maccabiah versus summer 2017 Birthright Israel trip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maccabiah more valuable</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthright Israel more valuable</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both equally valuable</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No value judgement</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question text: “Briefly, how would you describe the impact of your Maccabiah experience versus the impact of your Birthright Israel trip?”
Discussion

The athletes who competed in the Maccabiah described their experience in very positive terms, with more than half calling it “life changing.” Initially, most athletes applied to the Maccabiah for the sports, and after the Games, they spoke enthusiastically about the athletic competitions and the opening ceremonies. At the same time, when asked about the highlight of their Maccabiah experience, about half of the athletes pointed to the people they met and the positive relationships they formed. These relationships may explain why the evidence clearly demonstrates that the Maccabiah experience engenders lasting, positive feelings toward Israel, even four years after the experience.

At the same time, the Maccabiah experience had little to no impact on knowledge about Israel, willingness to express opinions about Israel, or return trips to Israel. Furthermore, the Maccabiah experience does not appear to impact feelings or beliefs about Jewish peoplehood, likelihood of having Jewish friends, involvement with Jewish organizations, marrying Jews, raising Jewish children, or any one of a number of Jewish ritual practices. Why has Maccabi USA accomplished some of its goals, but not others?

One possibility is that the impact of the Maccabiah experience will only become evident as more of the athletes marry and have children. Virtually all of the 2017 Maccabiah athletes were unmarried and childless at the time of the study; fewer than one-in-five of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes were married, and only 4% of the 2013 Maccabiah athletes had children. Unmarried, childless adults are far less likely to be engaged in Jewish life than married adults and those living in households with children (Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Sheskin & Kotler-Berkowitz, 2007; see also Wuthnow, 2010). Research has shown that Birthright Israel’s impact on Jewish engagement manifests primarily among alumni who are married, engaged, or living with a partner.
(Saxe et al., 2017). However, Birthright alumni also exhibit positive changes in their attitudes toward Jewish life in the short term (Saxe, Fishman, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2013; Saxe et al., 2008), and Maccabiah athletes do not exhibit these changes.

A second possibility is that a “ceiling effect” is preventing the Maccabiah experience from having its intended impact on the athletes. A ceiling effect occurs when a high proportion of both the “treatment” and comparison groups in a study achieve the desired outcome, making it impossible to discern any impact of the program under investigation. In this case, although the Maccabiah athletes spanned a range of Jewish backgrounds, those with one Jewish parent, who did not celebrate bar or bat mitzvah, or receive formal Jewish education were significantly underrepresented. The majority of the athletes had also already been to Israel when they applied to compete in the Maccabiah. As a result, their Jewish attitudes and behaviors were stronger than average even before their Maccabiah experience, leaving less room for growth. It is possible that the Maccabiah experience would have a greater impact on the athletes if the athletes were more typical of young adult Jews, without prior Israel experience.

A third possibility is that elements of Maccabiah experience need to be adjusted in order to produce the desired impact on Jewish identity. This study suggests three potential strategies:

**Address the athletes’ physical needs during Israel Connect.** As Maslow (1943) famously observed, people cannot focus on social, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual growth if their basic physiological needs have not been satisfied. High-caliber athletes have nutritional needs that require careful attention. The athletes also need sufficient practice time in order to perform well during the Maccabiah, and to feel reassured that Maccabi USA is invested in their athletic performance. Addressing the athletes’ physical needs was particularly complicated in summer 2017 because of record-setting temperatures, with the most intense heat wave occurring during the first four days of the month, during Israel Connect (Rinat, 2017, August 3).

**Help the athletes articulate the link between their experiences during the Maccabiah and their own Jewish identities.** Classical social psychology teaches that emotional experiences are shaped by cognitive factors—that is, what a person knows determines how that person understands his or her experiences (Schachter & Singer, 1962). To accomplish its goals, Israel Connect may need more than tour guides who can provide facts and experiences; it may need educators who are equipped with “pedagogical content knowledge,” strategies to help participants grapple directly with more abstract questions of Jewish identity (Shulman, 1986, 1987). One possibility is to introduce a structured, reflective process like Birthright Israel’s “tie-in sessions.” There is also untapped potential to explore the
intersection of Jews and sports, perhaps through text study or activities related to the idea of “muscular Judaism” that inspired the first Maccabiah Games in the 1930s (Kaplan, 2015). Given that the majority of Maccabiah athletes are primarily motivated by sports and not by interest in exploring their Jewish identities, these sorts of explicit discussions are especially important.

Adjust the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is addressed during Israel Connect. The 2017 Maccabiah athletes were less likely than summer 2017 Birthright Israel participants to say that they heard authentic accounts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or that the trip allowed for diversity of opinion about the conflict (see Shain et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, athletes who identified as political liberals before the trip were more likely than those who identified as political moderates or conservatives to view Israel Connect as pro-Israel propaganda. This disparity may reflect the fact that discussion groups about the conflict were facilitated by StandWithUs, a pro-Israel education and advocacy organization that portrays itself as politically neutral but is often described as being right-of-center (see, e.g., Guttman, 2011, November 27). Especially given that the majority of the young adults who compete in the Maccabiah (1) have been to Israel before and (2) identify as liberals, they would likely benefit from a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of the conflict, including input from more left-of-center organizations and speakers.

The results of this study underscore the importance of engaging in rigorous evaluation of the programs designed to sustain and strengthen American Jewish life. The athletes who competed in the Maccabiah were highly satisfied with their experience and felt more connected to Israel, even four years after their experience. At the same time, this study has demonstrated that eliciting an emotional response is not the same thing as engendering lasting, measurable change in beliefs or behaviors. Going forward, the challenge is experimenting with ways to adjust programming in order to foster lasting change, particularly for the relatively highly engaged cohort of Jewish young adults who compete in the Maccabiah.
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Notes

1 Data from Maccabi USA registration system.

2 We also examined the question, “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?” and found similar, positive, lasting change as a result of competing in the Maccabiah. The short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A13 in Technical Appendix A. The long-term independent effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression model; predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes. See Table A14 in Technical Appendix A.


4 “Are you or someone in your household currently a member of a...? Synagogue, temple or other Jewish congregation (e.g., minyan, chavurah); Other Jewish organization (e.g., JCC); None of the above.” The independent (negative) effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a logistic regression model; predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes. See Table A15 in Technical Appendix A.

5 The (lack of) net positive change due to competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A16 in Technical Appendix A. The (lack of) long-term independent effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression model. Predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes: 18% very important, 29% somewhat important, 22% a little important, 27% not important, 3% did not want to get married. See Table A17 in Technical Appendix A.

6 The (lack of) short-term effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with a random-effects ordered logistic model. See Table A18 in Technical Appendix A. The (lack of) long-term independent effect of competing in the Maccabiah was confirmed with an ordered logistic regression model. Predictive margins were estimated at the means of the covariates for Maccabiah athletes: 46% very important, 23% somewhat important, 15% a little important, 9% not important, 7% did not want to have children. See Table A19 in Technical Appendix A.
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References


The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI), hosted at CMJS, uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.