BREAKING BARRIERS

A Look at Birthright Israel Specialized Trips for Participants with Disabilities

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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.

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INTRODUCTION

Birthright Israel trips have emerged as the normative “coming-of-age” experience for contemporary Jewish young adults. Since 2000, more than 450,000 young adults from North America have participated in Birthright’s ten-day educational experience in Israel. Almost two decades of quantitative research on Birthright indicates long-lasting and substantial outcomes for participants. These include a greater sense of connection to the people and state of Israel, increased knowledge and understanding of the political situation in Israel, enhanced engagement in Jewish communities and religious practices, and a higher likelihood to in-marry (Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2013).

Jewish communal values and aspirations include affirming the dignity and inherent human worth of individuals with disabilities and encouraging their authentic participation in Jewish life (Belser, 2016). Birthright Israel has made a commitment to making the Birthright experience accessible for participants with a variety of specialized needs stemming from life-threatening or chronic illnesses, physical and sensory disabilities, cognitive and developmental disabilities and addiction recovery. Although systematic information is not available about the number of young adults with disabilities that have participated in non-specialized Birthright trips, each year over the last decade, over one hundred young adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities, including autism-spectrum disorders, have participated in specialized Birthright trips. The goal of the present research is to understand the experiences of young adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities on specialized Birthright trips and to explore potential impacts of a Birthright experience for this population of Jewish young adults.

The experience of traveling to Israel on Birthright with a peer group may be of particular importance for Jewish young adults with disabilities. Unlike their peers, a majority of young adults with disabilities live at home with their parents (Wehman et al., 2014). Although some individuals with disabilities attend post-secondary educational institutions, including transition programs and four-year colleges, they enroll at much lower rates than their peers without disabilities. Young adults with disabilities are also much less likely to be involved in their communities and volunteer activities than are peers without disabilities. A study by Lynn Newman et al. indicated that nearly half of young adults with disabilities reported not participating in any community activity in the previous year (2011).

The social networks of people with disabilities are small and often limited to family members and professionals (Lippold & Burns, 2009). Studies have found that when young adults with disabilities engage in leisure activities, it is
often in isolation (Wagner et al., 2005) or limited to a narrow range of options (Braun et al., 2006). Social inclusion goals for people with disabilities vary and include increased community participation, expansion of social networks, and development of social capital (Simplican et al., 2015). The Birthright peer experience has the potential to move the needle on all these goals and be life changing for Jewish young adults with disabilities.

Educational travel has the potential to contribute to physical, psychological and mental health, enhance quality of life, and expand the social skills repertoire of people with disabilities (Lee et al., 2012). Access to tourism promotes feelings of social inclusion among people with disabilities (Hamed, 2013), allows these individuals to experience social roles other than being the “object of care” (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011), and expands their sense of self-efficacy gained through facing and successfully dealing with challenges (McCabe, 2009; Yau et al., 2004). At the same time, educational travel, such as Birthright, involves encountering new sensory experiences and stimuli, and adapting to changes in routine and activity-filled days may strain the stamina and coping strategies of young adults with disabilities (Hamed, 2013).

Specialized Birthright Israel trips are designed to create itineraries and experiences that take the concerns and needs of participants with disabilities into consideration. These specialized trips have a higher staff-to-participant ratio than typical Birthright trips. The trips also mitigate the disruption to routine posed by travel by limiting the number of hotel changes and by maintaining a consistent daily routine of meals and group activities. Trip organizers also take pacing into account, limiting the number of activities each day so that participants have the energy to engage fully with the experiences. The pedagogical orientation of specialized Birthright programs is also somewhat different from that of non-specialized trips, spending more time in hands-on and multisensory activities.

This report expands on our evaluation studies of Birthright Israel (Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2013) by exploring the experiences of young adults with disabilities on specialized trips. The intent of the research is to build knowledge that will be useful for Birthright Israel as well as other organizations and programs that seek to engage Jewish young adults with disabilities. The study addresses the following questions:

- What motivates young adults with disabilities to register for Birthright Israel’s specialized trips, and what barriers, if any, do they face to their participation?
- What are the Birthright experiences of young adults with disabilities on specialized trips? How are they similar to and different from the experiences of young adults without disabilities?
- What approaches, methods, and frameworks maximize the quality of the Birthright experience for participants on specialized trips?
- What are the potential outcomes of Birthright participation for young adults with disabilities?

The report begins with a brief overview of study methods followed by a discussion of the experiences of participants on the trips studied and the early indicators of lasting impact on their lives. Also explored are the challenges that providers of specialized trips face in creating a meaningful and authentic Birthright experience. The report concludes with discussion of the implications of these findings for the development and expansion of specialized and inclusive trips for young adults with disabilities.
METHODOLOGY

For this study, we explored the Birthright experiences of participants on three specialized trips conducted during winter 2017-18. Table 1 describes the organizers and target populations for the three trips studied.

Previous research with non-specialized trips has focused primarily on quantitative measures of program outcomes. This research has typically utilized online surveys of large numbers of participants and non-participants. The project took an in-depth, qualitative approach to understanding the experiences of and outcomes for participants with disabilities on specialized trips. This method included observations of trips and interviews with key informants, participants, and parents of participants. The qualitative strategy allowed us to gather information from participants with a broad spectrum of cognitive disabilities, many of whom would not have been able to complete a survey instrument. This approach also allowed for the possibility that the experiences and outcomes for participants with disabilities might be different from those of participants without disabilities and are worth exploring as unique and important in their own right. The resulting strategy focused on depth rather than breadth of data collection. Our reporting of the findings emphasizes quotes from the participants, their parents, and the professionals who served as trip leaders, educators, and guides.

Table 1: Trips included in study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trip</th>
<th>Target Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yachad- National Jewish Council on Disabilities + OU: Israel Free Spirit</td>
<td>Young adults with developmental and cognitive disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorashim</td>
<td>Young adults with Asperger’s syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramah Tikvah + Routes-Amazing Israel</td>
<td>Young adults with developmental or cognitive disabilities, including Down syndrome and autism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Data collection occurred December 2017-March 2018. The research included the following components:

**Key Informant Interviews:**
In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges involved in specialized Birthright trips, interviews were conducted with professionals and staff members associated with the three trips. Trip leaders were interviewed before the winter trips took place. These trip leaders and four staff members (one staff member from Ramah Tikvah, one from Shorashim, and two from Yachad) were also interviewed after the trips were completed.

**Trip Observations:**
Two researchers joined the three specialized trips conducted during winter 2017-18. One researcher joined two different groups for almost the entirety of each trip—everything but the airport experience at the end of one trip and the beginning of the next. Another researcher joined the third trip over three days. The researchers observed group activities and conducted informal interviews with trip staff.

**Parent Interviews:**
Parents of 12 participants were interviewed before and after the trips. Parents of eight additional participants were interviewed after the trip, and one parent participated only in the pre-trip interview. These interviews represented each of the three trip providers. The interviews prior to the trips focused on how families found out about the program and what their expectations were for their young adult participant. Interviews after the conclusion of each trip focused on the experiences of their young adult participant and the indicators of potential lasting impact. The post-trip interviews also provided the opportunity for researchers to discuss with parents whether their young adult would be comfortable and able to participate in a telephone interview and to secure permission from parent-guardians to speak with young adults who had a guardian.

**Participant Interviews:**
To better understand the lived experience of young adults with disabilities, the research team conducted interviews with 10 participants. These interviews included participants from each of the three trip providers and were conducted in the month following the conclusion of each trip. Participants were asked about their expectations for and their experiences during the trip, their ongoing connections to Israel and to their peers on the trip, and their hopes for continuing their Jewish journeys after the trip.
FINDINGS: EXPERIENCES AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

THE CHOICE OF A SPECIALIZED TRIP

Although some of the young adults we spoke with might be able to fully engage with and enjoy a non-specialized Birthright trip, most of the participants and parents felt that only a specialized option could meet their particular needs and allay their concerns. Both participants and their parents reported that adaptations to the pace, structure, and activities of the trip were critical in their decision to register. Parents and participants worried that the itinerary and social demands of non-specialized trips would be too taxing and were pleased to learn that these concerns were addressed on specialized trips. For example, one parent knew the trip would be perfect for her young adult because it limited the schedule to “two major things per day.”

The Asperger’s trip seemed promising because it looked like it would be like a more comfortable pace for me to go on, as opposed to other trips that might be more fast paced, which might have been stressful. (Participant)

I had to do a lot of research about it before I went. I was looking for [a Birthright trip] with people [with] disabilities because I have a disability. I have physical disabilities. So I had to find one that was for that. (Participant)

I had a fair bit of concern about sending him on a standard trip or mainstreaming him. What I know from friends that have gone—or their kids that have gone—is that there is a fair bit of partying, and it’s a fairly fast-paced trip. That’s what makes it exciting to other young adults, but that would be really overwhelming for him. (Parent)

As we began to understand how they were organizing this trip for these special needs kids, slowly but surely we began to develop confidence that they know the condition of these kids individually. (Parent)

Actually, the director of the trip offered, and we accepted, that he would call us and talk to us in detail about what our concerns were. That was really helpful in helping us make that decision to let her go. (Parent)

Two of the three trips observed were organized by agencies that provide different types of programming for Jewish young adults with disabilities. Often a participant’s experience with Ramah’s Tikvah camp programs or with Yachad’s programs for young adults with disabilities helped allay concerns regarding how well that young adult would do on the organization’s Birthright trip. Families appreciated knowing the staff and the organization’s approach to working with their young adult’s needs. By traveling with organizations with which they were familiar, some participants were able to experience Israel with staff or friends they already knew. As one parent remarked,
“There’s no way we would have agreed to send [participant] on a 10-day trip to Israel without having had the camp experience.”

[Participant] was very happy to know that some of her camp friends would be on this same trip. While we were skeptical of having her go, I realized this might be really her only chance to go with a group where she might know some of the people that are on the trip. I just really pushed, and we really just talked about it a bit, and we decided that it was worth it to go. (Parent)

Many of the activities experienced during the specialized trips were similar or identical to those included in non-specialized Birthright trips. The difference was that specialized trips emphasized, and spent more time on, multisensory and hands-on approaches to engagement and education. As one trip organizer told us, “It’s a group that’s probably going to do well with really hands-on things…planting trees and walking, and making pottery.” For example, one trip educator had staff and participants enact scenes from the history of the sites they visited. Another educator used a large map of Israel to discuss each site the group was visiting and its proximity to other places the group had visited. Others used hand motions, songs, props, and other means to gather and maintain participant attention and to make the content accessible for multiple ability levels. Hands-on activities were also among the highlights of the trips mentioned by participants. Activities such as tasting and making candy at a chocolate factory, writing notes to place in the Western Wall, interacting with animals at the Biblical Zoo or on camel rides, and exploring the Golan in Jeeps, were frequent favorites.

The camel was really fun. But I kind of like riding the Jeeps, that was kind of fun. I’d never been on a Jeep ride. I went to a chocolate factory, which was fun. (Participant)

The chocolate factory was one of my favorites. That we were able to make our own and like eat it. (Participant)

We got to put the [IDF] Army clothes on. We had a contest of who could put it on the fastest. We had a talent show as well. (Participant)

**IMPORTANCE OF PEER COMMUNITY**

When asked what she was most looking forward to on her upcoming Birthright trip, one participant started off by telling us that she wanted to ride a camel but quickly followed that by saying, “I wanted to make friends.” People with disabilities often experience high rates of social isolation (Bigby, 2008), and up to half of people with disabilities report feelings of loneliness (Stancliffe et al., 2007). A recent white paper from the Ruderman Family Foundation found that among Boston-area high school students, those with disabilities were substantially more likely to experience cyber-bullying as compared with their peers without disabilities (Fuxman et al., 2019).

Parents and participants often recalled supportive and inclusive experiences during supplementary Jewish education, but had more difficulty finding hospitable venues for Jewish peer interaction after bar/bat mitzvah. Young adulthood, unfortunately, is when people with intellectual and developmental
disabilities age out of publicly funded programs and many of the educational and social options offered through the Jewish community. Many parents told us that once their young adults reached age 21, they had limited or no opportunities for social interaction with peers, especially with Jewish peers.

I’ve been outcast a lot. Not just in Hebrew school but just in general, which does not feel very good. (Participant)

[Jewish youth group] didn’t make me feel included completely in the group. I had just come for Havdalah. He [the leader] was really rude. He didn’t want me to come for the dinner or the lunch; just Havdalah and that was it. And I also wasn’t invited to other events. (Participant)

I don’t really have Jewish activities. (Participant)

She did one or two of the NFTY trips when she was younger. We stopped doing them—because it just was a little bit difficult because they aren’t set up for special needs. Those are just set up across the board for all kids. And so there weren’t really accommodations for her. (Parent)

In his [post-high school] program, he is the only student who’s Jewish. And I think at times that’s very lonely for him, it separates him at the holidays. He’s the only one who’s celebrating Hanukkah. (Parent)

It’s actually very hard for her because she identifies very much as being Jewish, and there’s no one here to share it with. When she was younger, she was more part of the Jewish community because she could keep up. Now that she’s 20, finding that kind of involvement in our community is rare, very rare. (Parent)

Social inclusion is defined as having a sense of belonging and a valued social role within a group (Cobigo et al., 2012). Many participants we interviewed experienced just this sense of community and described feeling fully integrated into a group of peers as the most important element of their Birthright trip. Talking about her daughter’s experience, one parent told us, “She felt part of a group, she felt part of a community.”

We started out as strangers at an airport, and we came back, landed in New York City as a whole big new family, so it was really nice, a nice experience. (Participant)

I couldn’t ask for a better group. You guys are my family. You grow this relationship with these people, who again, you only meet for ten days, but you grow this bond that is so hard to explain. (Participant)

My favorite experience was meeting the friends and people, meeting all the new people... They were very nice, and we had a lot of fun talking. (Participant)

Participants particularly appreciated that their peers on the specialized trip were also people with disabilities. Several told us that it was important to have friends with whom they could share the experience of living with disabilities and even more important, to have peers who understood and accepted them without having to explain their situation.

[On Birthright] I got to be with other people with disabilities, so I felt very included. Which was great. (Participant)

We noted some instances in which participants had uncomfortable or negative experiences with individual peers on their trip. For example, several participants experienced unwanted or unrequited romantic attention with other trip participants. While these experiences can occur on non-specialized
Birthright trips, knowing how to respond and manage the situation can be a particular hurdle for young adults with disabilities. The participants interviewed reported that they were able to enlist the assistance of staff to help them navigate age-appropriate but unfamiliar and difficult interpersonal dynamics.

Some boys, I didn’t like because they were trying to hook up with you. That wasn’t my favorite thing of the trip. The first time I gave him like a chance because he doesn’t know me yet. But at the airport he was like looking at me. I said—okay, hi, nice to meet you— like that. Fine. But then he was—hey, kid, what’s your phone number? And I just met you, I don’t know you yet. So why would I give you my number right away? I told him on the bus ride to stop looking at me, in a nice way. And I guess he listened. I just had to tell one of the staff members, the director. And they spoke to him. (Participant)

The girlfriend dumped him. He was okay with that. He doesn’t really know why. He asked her to sit with him on the plane from New York to Israel and maybe she just got bored after a ten-and-a-half-hour plane ride with him, I don’t know. Or maybe he said something that offended her. And maybe she scared her off. But the first three days she didn’t really want much to do with him. Then after that, she did want to sit with him on the bus, not all the time, not exclusively. She wanted to maintain their friendship but nothing more. (Parent)

In follow-up interviews, participants and their parents often told us that one of the most important outcomes of their trip was the development of ongoing social connections. Participants recounted their efforts to keep in touch with new friends. Some told us that they speak on a regular basis, and several have even travelled to meet in person, staying at each other’s homes.

We video chat every day. Yeah, every day, we’re really close. (Participant)

I have at least five new contacts in my phone for friends now, so that’s really nice. (Participant)

I wanted to make friends. That did happen. I mean, I’m seeing one of them this weekend and then I’m seeing another next weekend. (Participant)

She made new friends. She became friends [with a] group of girls that she liked a lot and she’s in touch with. And they have plans already to see these people this weekend and in two weeks. And so that was great. (Parent)

Parents often noted that their participant returned from their trip with increased social comfort, awareness, and skills. Parents were particularly encouraged, and in some cases amazed, by the substantial increase in the social activity of their young adult, many of whom were experiencing an active circle of friends for the first time. Parents also remarked that their participant now had a group of friends with whom to share the experience of being Jewish.

This is what I have been referring to as the first miracle of having this Israel trip was that I was leaving the house, and he was home. His door was shut and that usually means he’s watching a video and does not want to be disturbed. But I yelled through the door like I always do, right, that ‘I’m leaving and I’ll see you later.’ ‘Wait, I have to talk to my mom. Hold on. Mom, you’re interrupting me. I’m talking to my friend.’ He has never in his whole entire life said, ‘Mom, you’re interrupting a call with my friend.’ (Parent)

She became friends with several of them. And now they are all doing these video chats. A couple of them—one is in Georgia, one is in Wisconsin. A couple of them are in Los Angeles area. And they all, somehow or the other, get on their phones and they video chat with each other. For hours. For hours. Which is wonderful, which is absolutely great… It’s a peer group she’s not bad before. (Parent)
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He actually called one of the young men that he connected with, and then the guy called him back. It was nice because that's one thing [Participant] always says, that he calls people and they don't call him back. It was a wonderful experience. (Parent)

He really bonded nicely with the other participants. This environment is particularly exceptional for him because nobody in his on-campus transition program is Jewish. So I think from an identity perspective, it was really nice for him to have that religious aspect in common with all these other participants. It's something that he has looked for in the past, and it's been difficult for him, and this makes this trip very special for him. (Parent)

A “NORMAL” BIRTHRIGHT EXPERIENCE

That's what it means to have a ‘birthright.’ Everybody gets to do this. And if you need some supports, we'll help you with that. But the given is you get to do it. (Trip Professional)

Traveling to Israel on a Birthright trip has become a marker of the entrance into adulthood for a generation of Jewish youth (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). For the participants we interviewed, it was very meaningful that they had a Birthright experience just like their peers, friends, and family without disabilities. Participants told us how proud they were that they went on a Birthright trip.

Everyone in my family had been to Israel except me. A lot of people at my synagogue and the related community have been there. I figure that I might as well take the opportunity to go myself. (Participant)

My sister went on it, and she learned about it in college. And so, she told me all about Birthright, and how she loved it. (Participant)

[Participant] has two older cousins, and they both went and he has a number of friends who have gone on Birthright and so he's like—I'm going on Birthright. (Parent)

Her sister did a trip two years ago, so she came back from that all excited and having a great time. So she got her sister excited. Another friend of hers went last summer and then just got her all excited. Yeah, she knows people that have gone. She's very excited to be doing something that these other people have done too, and it's sort of a normal part of being Jewish. (Parent)

He was really proud that he was going, and when he came back I think he just really loved telling people. He knew it was something very special and that kids without disabilities were able to do. (Parent)

Participants often made a point of telling us that they engaged in the same Birthright activities as young adults without disabilities, including going on a camel or jeep ride, visiting Masada, and being at the Kotel. For participants, these iconic destinations and activities signified that they had an authentic Birthright experience, just like that of their peers without disabilities. Going forward, participants were looking forward to joining in conversations about Israel and to telling their own Birthright stories. For parents, the normative nature of the trip was also important. Some saw this trip as an affirmation that there was a place for their young adult in Israel and the Jewish community. For others it was an occasion to celebrate an age-appropriate accomplishment.

We got to do everything. (Participant)
The fact that my daughter could go and participate in a Birthright experience, and she felt like all her other friends, it was a mitzvah. (Parent)

To be able to say, 'I went on Birthright,' just like his cousins have done and his friends have done. As a parent, as a mom, it was very important. (Parent)

I wanted him to have the opportunity to see and experience what everybody else gets to see and experience. (Parent)

They saw all the same things, but they saw them in a different way. They went to the agricultural place for people with disabilities. They went to a chocolate factory. They did things that were Israeli, but also near to things that she would understand. (Parent)

I just can’t tell you how much I appreciate that he had this opportunity, from a parent’s point of view, you feel like he has missed out on so many things because of autism. At least this one thing he gets to be a part of too. (Parent)

It’s cliché but to see the pictures and the videos, immediately my friends at work, my colleagues, were saying, ‘Oh my God, you’re glowing. You’re so excited. You’re so happy for your daughter.’ (Parent)

Regardless of whether a traveler does or does not have a disability, the experience of a foreign country is a disruption of day-to-day context and encourages a re-examination of assumptions about how they think and act (Szakolczai, 2009; Verplanken et al., 2008). Many participants on the specialized Birthright trips we studied had prior experiences of traveling with their families, and some had taken flights by themselves, but none of these young adults had ever traveled for an extended period of time without family. Both participants and parents told us that their Birthright trip marked a milestone in becoming more independent.

I went by myself halfway across the world. (Participant)

I went by myself without my parents. It was a good experience. (Participant)

She’s been away from home. But this was a major trip. She felt like she was spreading her wings. She was honestly thrilled that we weren’t coming. She wanted this to be her trip, and it was. She definitely felt more independent with it. (Parent)

During the trip, participants, with the support of staff, were asked to be responsible for their daily routines of self-care, to cope with the discomforts and stresses of travel, and to make decisions about what to eat and how to use their discretionary funds. It was not lost on participants that they were often being asked to meet standards of independence that were new to them and beyond their “comfort zone.” As a result, most felt a growing sense of personal agency.

I’m more independent when I’m in Israel because I have to be. (Participant)

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE INDEPENDENCE

If we just got on the plane and got to Israel, and got off the plane and came back, that’ll be a huge accomplishment. If they spent one night there, that’s also a huge accomplishment. But it’s really, if you break it down, it’s having to navigate a hotel, how to navigate the sink and the toilet [that] work differently. And the breakfast foods are different. Every single thing is different. (Trip Professional)
I had to do a lot of stuff by myself, like do my bedtime routine by myself... Order my food... and add money up. (Participant)

Paying for things and taking the plane to New York on my own, shopping in the merchant stores, and being treated like a mature adult. (Participant)

I’d wake myself up there without having to be woken up. I got to go to shop independently, what I wanted to buy. (Participant)

Trip staff described one of their goals as helping participants to be as independent as possible while still keeping in mind that some aspects of the travel experience would require additional supports. For example, several staff recounted working with participants to help them adjust to their hotel rooms, learn how to use amenities, such as showers, that were different from what they had experienced at home, be ready on time for the daily bus departure, or prepare for the move to a new hotel.

The first couple of nights, just teaching them how to use the showers. That was one of the big challenges in the evening at the beginning... Days when we moved from one hotel to the next were extremely stressful for them, because they had to repack everything. Just getting out in the morning was a challenge in itself, but getting out, plus getting all your luggage, and, ‘Oh, do you have everything you need?’ (Trip Professional)

Every morning, we would go at whatever time wakeup was, and then start knocking on doors, reminding everyone, what they needed for the day, helping them get ready. During meals reminding everyone to eat, and drink water, reminding them to take all of their things with them. If they had questions, we could help them; if they needed any sort of support, we were there for them. (Trip Professional)

When we spoke to parents following the trip, many noted substantial changes in their child’s sense of personal responsibility and agency. They described young adults who were proud of what they had accomplished in completing the trip and were starting to see themselves as more independent.

It was a huge independence step for him. I think, from a self-image perspective it allowed him to grow some. I feel like he has built up a lot of confidence having done that. And so you know, from that perspective, I think the whole experience has really been a wonderful and an exceptional and positive experience for him. (Parent)

When she came back from the trip, she was a different person... Her processing speed, her reaction times to conversations and to various stimuli, her speed of performing chores, her self-confidence, her explanation and description of events, the level of detail—it all changed. And that effect is still continuing. I do see her movements getting ready in the morning are much speedier. I cannot visualize any other reason—than just her trip and for her to have been on her own, without the parents around, with the proper support, but having to go through a fairly extensive daily schedule of events and chores that she needed to do to become ready to get on the bus, and go to wherever they were going. It has had a tremendous impact on her. (Parent)

I think that she feels proud that she went and she was very excited that she made the effort, and that was hard for her but she did it anyway. (Parent)

We have seen kind of higher levels of self-esteem and also a bit more independence about things. It might not sound like much but like walking himself with his walker to the bathroom. (Parent)
[Participant attended a conference on Israel following the trip] He said he didn’t need any [breaks]. He had his own schedule. He found each conference room on his own, he was there on time or early to each one. He was sitting in the front row, like he was really right up there. I’m sure it contributed, the trip to Israel. Just the very grueling schedule and his knowledge about Israel and his capacity to fend for himself more, be more independent in a context like this. (Parent)

Reflecting on the potential impact of their young adult’s Birthright experience, many parents described an increased sense of hope about the future. Like the participants’ view of themselves, parents were seeing these young adults in a new light. After the trip, parents were better able to envision them living more independently, making social connections, and engaging in meaningful employment or training.

When she came home, about a week after, we were talking about when she graduates and that kind of stuff. She’s always said she’s going to live with her best friend for years or her boyfriend. After she got back, she said maybe I need to meet new friends and live with someone new. So that was pretty significant. (Parent)

I think she has the capability of being independent, and it showed her that she could. I think the point is that she did learn she could do it, that she was proud that she could do it. It was really fantastic. (Parent)

I think it was an amazing social opportunity for him and to show his independence and to show his flexibility and being with a group like that for ten-plus days and going and flying from Israel to New York, New York to LA and then LA to home. That’s huge and he just did it and didn’t complain and followed directions, and it was just a huge milestone for him. It was huge thinking about how he’s gonna be able to function eventually in some kind of residential living situation. (Parent)

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS WITH ISRAEL AND JUDAISM

Almost universally, participants described their experiences in Israel as engaging, personally meaningful, and fun. In many ways, their recollections of their Birthright trip were very similar to those of participants without disabilities (Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

Participants on specialized trips, like young adults without disabilities, were excited to be in the Jewish state—to learn about its history, culture, and foods—and to get to know Israeli peers.

I’ve never been there, so it was neat to go to the homeland the Jewish people were from. I thought that was fun. (Participant)

She hasn’t stopped talking about it to anyone and everyone who will listen. She tells people about her new friends, about the country, where she was, the highlights. (Parent)
I asked him, ‘How did you enjoy your time in Israel?’ He said, ‘You know, Mom, I wanted to go there my whole life and now I finally did.’ (Parent)

The **mifgash**, or encounter of Israel soldiers and diaspora peers, is a feature of all Birthright Israel trips and one that appears to be just as important for participants with and without disabilities. Many participants were very positive about getting to know the Israeli soldiers who traveled with them. These soldiers had signed up specifically to participate in a specialized trip, in some cases because they had family members or friends with disabilities, and others because they intended to pursue careers working with children or adults with disabilities.

I’d say they [soldiers] were nice, they were friendly. I spoke Hebrew with them. We had food with them. (Participant)

[Soldiers] were awesome, I liked them. We played games with them. They taught us some Hebrew. So it was pretty cool. (Participant)

Some trips also meet with Special in Uniform, a program that integrates young adults with disabilities into the Israel Defense Forces. Participants were very positive about this experience. One trip leader underscored that the trip itself shows participants “the experiences they could have if they were living in Israel with their special needs.”

I liked hearing about what they do with [Special in Uniform] soldiers. A lot of the same supports that I have. (Participant)

Participants on the Birthright trips observed Shabbat, danced, and put notes in the wall at the Kotel, and on one trip, had bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies at Masada. Unlike participants on most standard Birthright trips, the young adults we observed on specialized trips took part in Jewish daily prayers. For many participants, these religious experiences were the highlight of their time in Israel.

Talking about her experience at the Kotel, one participant told us, “I just got the holy experience out of it.”

My favorite place was the Western Wall. We got to put the notes in there. It was like sending out a letter in the Wall. There were hundreds of letters in there. (Participant)

When we went to the Western Wall and put the little papers and prayed, that was pretty nice. (Participant)

I wanted to go because I read about the Western Wall. I’ve heard it’s really powerful there to be connected with God…I loved it there. It was really cool, a really nice experience at the Western Wall. As a group, before we went to the Western Wall, we were at the hotel and then we got into like a group, so we would write notes for the Western Wall. Then we went to the Western Wall. We did a lot of like dancing. It was really fun dancing when we first got there. Then we went up to the Western Wall. Then we prayed and then we did some more dancing. (Participant)

It made me feel like more like my religion, I guess you can say…When we went to the Western Wall and put the little papers and prayed, that was a pretty nice [moment feeling] connected. (Participant)

She was just elated that some of the people in her group had a bar mitzvah, a bat mitzvah. She thought that was the greatest thing on Masada. Watching her newfound friends have a bar mitzvah and a bat mitzvah there. She hasn’t stopped talking about that. (Parent)

I think, certainly the Western Wall was one of his highlights. He put in a note about my dad at the site. (Parent)
Participants on specialized trips reported that the trip increased their connection to Israel. Many participants voiced their desire to return and some recounted steps they have taken to find opportunities for return travel with another peer group or with their family.

I want to go back. I keep looking at plane fares. (Participant)

I feel more knowledgeable about Israel, more confident to express my opinion and knowledge. I had a recent tele-convention that I attended that week. There were discussions there about Israel, which I really participated in. And I enjoyed listening to them and hearing about what was happening. I was able to give my opinions. (Participant)

The first thing she said when she came back was, “When can I go back?” She loved it. (Parent)
LIMITED AWARENESS OF BIRTHRIGHT SPECIALIZED TRIPS

Often parents and siblings spearheaded the search for a specialized Birthright trip. We also heard from participants who searched on their own for a trip. Although, as previously discussed, some families were familiar with the agencies organizing specialized trips, many families described having to navigate a confusing and often frustrating route until they found a trip that would be suitable for and accept their young adult. One parent described the disappointment experienced by her young adult who was rejected for a trip organized by the campus where he was taking classes. This young adult was told that they were not appropriate for the trip due to their autism spectrum diagnosis, and no effort was made to refer them to a trip that would better meet their needs.

It actually took us awhile to find a special needs trip. In hindsight the path seems a pretty bright line but on the other side of that, not knowing exactly who to ask and searching on the internet, asking various people, we hadn't come up with anything. (Parent)

Ongoing Challenges

BROAD RANGE OF PARTICIPANT ABILITIES

Each of the trips we studied had participants spanning a broad spectrum of abilities and disabilities. Even participants that had the same disability diagnosis presented diverse cognitive, social, emotional, and physical issues and needs. Although most participants described their trip groups as cohesive and a community of peers, the presence of a broad array of disabilities within the same group presented problems for trip staff as well as for some participants. Many of the challenges presented in this section of the report have, as one of their root causes, the wide spectrum of abilities within a trip group.
Some are more independent than others. Some of our participants live by themselves in an apartment, and have a full-time job, and go to work every day, while others may live at home, or they might be in a program at a college, but it’s more structured, like [a] special education type of program. So, we had a variety. (Trip Professional)

But the thing that was really most striking to me is the comorbidity. The anxiety, the ADHD…A person looks perfectly well dressed and goes to a college program and can be your kid’s college roommate, except when she has a complete screaming tantrum meltdown in the dining room. (Trip Professional)

Some participants felt embarrassed by the inappropriate behavior of other members of their group or frustrated by the limited number of peers with whom they could relate on the same cognitive level. As discussed in greater detail below, other participants felt that they were higher functioning and did not require the level of staff oversight appropriate for other members of their group.

I was not particularly fond with some of the company I had on the trip...This trip...it didn’t just have like people with Asperger’s. It had people on all ends of the autism spectrum. I didn’t like how when we were in public around other people, some people on the trip were doing embarrassing things…When you put people that are complete opposite ends of the spectrum together, they’re not always compatible. (Participant)

Some of the higher-functioning participants would make comments, like, ‘You know, he doesn’t have Asperger’s. This is an Asperger’s trip,’ talking about some of the lower-functioning people….But I think some of our participants were expecting that they were going to have people who were just like them at their own functioning level. And we did have some people who were a lot lower-functioning and needed a lot more support than other people. (Trip Professional)

He believed he was the most independent. Something that might have been good for the group as a whole, but a little not challenging or stimulating for him, is they went into a chocolate factory. (Parent)

Having a very wide range of abilities in one group of participants posed challenges to the educational aspects of the program. Trip educators had to be ready and able to tailor material for disparate cognitive abilities and attention spans. One site in particular, Yad Vashem, highlighted the implications of having diverse levels of functioning within a group. On several of the trips, staff made the decision to either tour the museum itself or to limit their experience to the garden exhibits outside, viewed as a less emotionally demanding experience. Some participants were overwhelmed by the former choice while others felt short-changed when their group opted for the latter choice.

The Holocaust Museum. I didn’t really expect it to be so depressing…I knew it would be emotional, but I didn’t expect to see that much…We were indoors for the tour and by halfway of the tour I got a little bit overwhelmed so I left the tour. (Participant)

I think the higher functioning group felt ripped off. They didn’t have the Yad Vashem experience because they didn’t get the full Yad Vashem. And one of the recommendations is that we might want to consider breaking into two groups. (Trip Professional)

To address the diversity within their group, one trip allowed participants to make their own choice about whether they would tour inside or outside of Yad Vashem.

We, for the most part, left that choice up to the participants, knowing that for some of them it was going to be more difficult, and being clear about what sort of content and expectations there were about going on the inside….Some of our participants aren’t able to make that sort of choice, and we were able to do that for them. But for a lot of our participants, it was a viable choice, and it was something that they could make on their own. (Trip professional)
PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY CONCERNS

The one thing I didn’t like, and I’ll be honest with you, was how non-accessible Israel is. When we went to Tzfat, it was a beautiful place. It was just so cobblestone-like that it was just terrible in a wheelchair. (Participant)

Physical accessibility is a major concern of participants, parents, and trip staff. Although the trips we observed each had only one or two participants who required the use of mobility devices or aides, other participants also had issues that limited their ability to traverse the sites. For example, there were participants who had poor muscle tone, arthritis, or sensorimotor issues that made it difficult to deal with multiple or steep flights of stairs, uneven walkways, or long distances between parking lots and sites. The trip organizers reported having to balance their desire to provide participants with a Birthright experience that is as close as possible to that of peers without disabilities, while negotiating the difficulties presented by the physical realities of many iconic sites in Israel. One trip always brought along an extra wheelchair in case participants without a designated physical disability needed that support.

The group was billed as a pretty mobile group with one participant with mobility issues. But [trip staff] completely overestimated everybody in the group’s ability to keep up. So like the 123 steps in Masada for example, or the person who can walk but has got pretty severe arthritis. (Trip Professional)

So we literally decided that we would cancel going to Har Herzl, the military cemetery, because of all the steps. (Trip Professional)

Concerns about physical accessibility occurred not only at predictable locations such as the steps of Tzfat, Jerusalem, and the Dead Sea, but also in modern buildings and facilities. On one trip, parents and participants were disappointed when one activity—tree planting—was not accessible for participants in wheelchairs. Another parent complained that trip staff did not know the location of elevators in a mall.

A few times along the way they would get somewhere, and there were clearly no arrangements made for accessibility. So I mean, we kind of knew it was going to happen in Tzfat and the Kotel, but it was even with tree planting and again the Army base. The trip needed to be more accessible. They didn’t seem to take into account that they had someone with limited mobility. (Parent)

BALANCING INDEPENDENCE WITH SAFETY CONCERNS

In 1972, Robert Perske introduced the concept of “dignity of risk,” noting that “there can be healthy development in risk-taking and there can be crippling indignity in safety!” Research on the travel motivations of individuals with disabilities notes their strong desire to have new experiences and to take risks (Kastenholz et al., 2015).

One of the challenges facing specialized Birthright trips is balancing the need to safeguard the wellbeing and health of participants with their right to take reasonable risks, try out new activities and behaviors and, when necessary, recoup from mistakes.
Several participants described how meaningful it was to them to have the opportunity to move out of their comfort zone even when they made mistakes and to learn to cope with new situations. For example, one participant told us that he “had a couple of mistakes.” He went on to describe situations in which he felt he did not listen well to peers or tried to talk to staff when the group was in a learning session. But, in the next sentence, this same participant told us that even though he had these missteps, he felt included and accepted in the group.

On the plane it was a little uncomfortable, I’d say it was a challenge because I didn’t know anyone, which kind of scared me because I had to make friends. Which again, I don’t have a problem per se with, it was just like a new thing—it was just new. (Participant)

One of the ways that specialized Birthright trips differ from non-specialized trips is that other than when they are in their hotel rooms, participants on specialized trips are never out of the sight of staff. The trips we observed implemented early curfews, and participants were not allowed to spend time away from the group, to leave the hotel without staff accompaniment, or to wander around the hotel in the evening.

Safety always came first—staff was always with the participants, which is different from other Birthright trips when you go to Ben Yehuda, or you have a free lunch. On other trips, participants are free to go, and then you just have to show back up at a certain time. On our trip, we were with the participants, so we would break into groups based on, ‘These are your lunch choices, and if you want this, this, or this, go with this staff person.’ (Trip Professional)

For the most part, participants were unbothered by these restrictions on their movement or choices. Talking about the rules on the trip, one participant told us, “Nothing bugged me, I knew exactly what to do, I followed them all.”

However, some participants, especially those with more experience of living independently, reported frustration with the rules imposed on them. As discussed earlier in the report, this sense of unnecessary restriction seemed related to the wide range of abilities present among participants in each trip group. Although some participants would have liked more freedom to come and go especially inside the hotel, this was a minor frustration for most, and did not seem to detract from their overall trip experience.

One thing I didn’t like was that some of the policies on the trip felt too restrictive. Like we couldn’t go anywhere without a staff member being present. I think we couldn’t even wander around the hotel by ourselves. And that kind of bothered me. Like we’re adults. Granted there were some people on the trip who weren’t as good with independent skills, and I get that. So there were some people on the trip who I wouldn’t trust to be on their own. But now everyone else has to be restricted thanks to that…I’ve been on my own, I’ve lived on my own, so I feel like I shouldn’t have to do that. (Participant)

They said you can’t really leave without a staff member. I didn’t like that we always had to have a staff member when we walked back to the hotel. (Participant)

I thought the rules were kind of strict. We had to go to bed at like 8:30 PM. I was fine about that, but I always wished I had stayed up until like 10 PM in the lobby because that’s where like only the Wi-Fi was so everyone had to go to their rooms and there was no Wi-Fi. We talked in the room but all of my roommates, we really wanted to be in the lobby and hang out. (Participant)
[Participant] talked about sometimes feeling like it was too restrictive an environment for people who could’ve handled more. Like, they were told they couldn’t wander around, even in the hotel, and he was like, ‘I could’ve walked around in the hotel. I wouldn’t have had any problem with that,’ but I guess those were the trip rules, so what he felt was they were applying the most restrictive—they were applying rules based on those on the trip who needed the most control or the most structure. (Parent)

TRAVEL BEFORE AND AFTER THE TRIP

On a non-specialized Birthright trip, the expectation is that participants are responsible for arranging and financing their travel to and from the airport where they will meet their Birthright group and depart for Israel. They are also expected to independently make their way to the gate for their departure flight to Israel. The parents we interviewed were aware of this expectation but many also reported that their young adult was not capable of this level of independent travel, especially in a large and sprawling airport such as JFK (the departure airport for the trips we observed). As a result, many parents made the decision to travel with their young adult to and from JFK, adding substantially to the cost of the experience.

You can’t give them a free trip and then say, ‘oh, but, you [parents] have to fly back and forth to California, or spend ten days in a hotel in New York for this free trip.’ Can you guess what the most difficult part of the trip is? It’s the airport, going to Israel. (Trip Professional)

She’d never traveled on a plane by herself. To go from Los Angeles to New York to connect at Kennedy Airport, from one terminal to another terminal to get on El Al, to go that long distance to Israel. (Parent)

I had to go up to JFK with him and spend the day. Actually, I had to spend an entire day at JFK because of the way the flights were to get him to the group and then be there when he returned because the [trip organizer] said they don’t make any accommodations at all to get them from their domestic flights to the international flights. (Parent)

They had said in advance that they didn’t have the ability to shuttle the individuals from one terminal to another terminal, so I knew I had to be there, basically to drop him off and I needed to be there to pick him up. So you know, that’s a difficult aspect of this thing. You wouldn’t have to necessarily deal with it if you had someone who was able to switch planes and change terminals without needing assistance. There’s no way he would have been able to handle moving from one terminal to another in that airport. (Parent)

One trip organizer made arrangements to mitigate the difficulty and stress of navigating the airport. This organization arranged for staff traveling from the same home airport as participants to be on the same flights. When this was not possible, the trip organizer arranged for staff to meet participants at their domestic arrival gates and accompany them to the departure gate for Israel. This same organizer reserved a meeting room at JFK where the group could gather and where parents could meet the group and trip leaders. These accommodations were appreciated by parents and participants.
LITTLE INTERACTION BETWEEN TRIP GROUPS

Although participants on specialized trips do not attend the “mega-event,” where many groups converge, specialized trips do travel to many of the same historic, recreational, and educational sites around Israel and often stayed in the same hotels and kibbutz guest houses as participants on other Birthright trips. Our observers noted only one instance of interaction between participants with and without disabilities. This occurred on Shabbat when the leader of a group of participants without disabilities, impressed by the ruach of the singing of the specialized trip group, asked if his participants without disabilities could join the celebration. The ensuing joint singing and dancing seemed to be enjoyable for all.

Non-specialized Birthright trips do not typically include scheduled interactions with other trip groups. However, participants often come into contact organically during their evening free time in hotels and as they venture out to experience local nightlife. As previously noted, participants on the specialized trips we observed were asked to not leave their hotel rooms after the completion of formal evening programming. This practice may represent a lost opportunity to allow young adults with and without disabilities to be on an equal footing, not as givers and recipients of help, but as Jewish young adults exploring Israel and their Jewish identity.

WHAT COMES AFTER THE TRIP?

The specialized Birthright trips we studied gave participants and their parents a taste of what it would be like to have a network of Jewish friends with whom to share their Jewish journeys. But once they return home, participants found few or no opportunities to continue to experience Judaism with Jewish peers in their home communities. Local Jewish institutions such as synagogues and Jewish Community Centers lacked programming for young adults with disabilities and most participants were not on college campuses where they could take advantage of follow-up programming offered through Hillel organizations. In discussing getting more involved in Jewish life in his home community one participant told us, “I don’t know if there’s anywhere I could do that.”

Throughout Hebrew school I’ve always been a part of special ed. I said to our rabbi, ‘What are you doing for people with special needs? Like what are you doing for that?’ And he’s like, ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ I’m like, ‘Well that’s kind of a problem when you have a big amount of people with disabilities in our temple, in our congregation.’ (Participant)

All these kids, once they get out of high school, especially once they’re age 22 or over…it is as hard as can be to figure out what to do, what is successful for them. We really have not done very much at all outside of what he does with my congregation, going to congregational celebrations, Shabbat dinners, services, etc., in the community. (Parent)
In 2006, the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identified access to the benefits of tourism, including educational tourism, as a basic human right (United Nations, 2006). Participants on the specialized Birthright trips we studied had authentic, normative, and meaningful experiences in Israel, came away with more confidence in their abilities to be independent, and left with a wider network of Jewish friends. The pacing, structure, and supports available on specialized trips enabled these young adults to experience Israel first-hand, to create connections with Jewish peers, and to stretch beyond their typical comfort zone. Participants had the opportunity to open themselves up to new and more independent experiences and to connect their Birthright story to the larger narrative of hundreds of thousands of their peers without disabilities.

At the same time, there are critical challenges that still face participants on specialized Birthright trips. The following discussion begins with recommendations to address these concerns and to continue the growth and development of Birthright Israel’s specialized trips. This section is followed by several recommendations aimed at expanding the opportunities for Jewish young adults with disabilities to interact with peers without disabilities as part of their Birthright experience and to continue their Jewish journeys after they return from Israel.

**Get the Word Out About Specialized Trips:**
As previously noted, many young adults with disabilities and their families had little knowledge of the Birthright options available to them. Birthright Israel is increasing its efforts to make information about specialized trips more accessible through its website. However, promotional information also needs to be disseminated through secular and Jewish organizations that work with young adults with disabilities, including providers of transition and vocational training programs, campus Hillels, denominational movements, and disability advocacy organizations.

**Develop More Trips with More Homogeneous Groups:**
Trip groups, even those focused on a particular disability, included participants with a broad range of issues and levels of ability. Related issues are, to some extent, a result of the limited number of specialized trips for young adults with disabilities and the lack of awareness of the range of trip options. Although trip leaders do some referrals to other trips when a potential participant is not a good fit for their program, for the most part organizations try to accommodate all interested parties.

The availability of a greater number of specialized trips may allow for the development of groups with more homogeneous levels of functioning.
example, the array of choices might include trips focusing on higher functioning young adults with more capacity for independence. The development of more homogenous specialized trips is, of course, dependent on increasing the number of young adults interested in these offerings.

**Think of Trips as Starting and Ending at Home Airports:**
We learned that participants with disabilities often needed additional support as they traveled from their home community to the airport where they departed for Israel. For many participants with disabilities, the trip begins when they arrive at their home airport and not when they take off for Israel. As noted previously, at least one trip organizer has instituted protocols for accompanying participants on flights or meeting them at domestic arrival gates and helping them move to the gate for their departure to Israel. Funding should be developed to support these types of assistance for travel from home to departure airports. Although not every participant will need these supports, their availability will ensure that the economic burden on parents to travel with their young adults to the departure airport does not become a barrier to their young adults’ participation on Birthright.

**Expand Physically Accessible Options or Accommodations:**
Specialized trips include a small number of individuals that rely on mobility devices to get around. Many additional participants have disabilities or physical conditions that make it difficult to maneuver steps, traverse changes or uneven grades in walking surfaces, or travel long distances on foot. We observed that physical accessibility was a challenge on specialized trips and, as a result, some participants were unable to participate fully in trip activities. To address this challenge, the organizers of specialized Birthright trips might work with Israel-based disability groups to explore potential solutions and alternatives for typical Birthright destinations. Accessibility knowledge also should be shared across trips and with non-specialized trip providers to create an institutional knowledge base.

**Develop a Community of Practice among Staff of Specialized Trips:**
As Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2015) propose, a community of practice is a group of people “who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Leaders of specialized trips have already begun to create a community of practice by making applicant referrals between the trips. Trip organizers can work together to “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice.” This collaborative approach could help all of the trips define and expand on best practices for working with young adults with disabilities. As these resources are developed, they could also be shared with organizers and providers of non-specialized Birthright trips that may include individuals with disabilities.

**Encourage Interactions between Specialized and Standard Trip Groups:**
The primary goal of specialized trips is to provide a meaningful and authentic Birthright experience to young adults with disabilities. Without losing sight of this goal, it is also possible to utilize the Birthright experience to build the comfort, sense of mutual respect, and shared Jewish peoplehood between young adults with and without disabilities. Shared meaningful experiences in the service of larger shared goals are the exact conditions most conducive to reducing prejudice and
stereotypes (Gaertner et al., 1990). Many specialized and non-specialized Birthright trips already travel to the same sites and stay in the same hotels in Israel, allowing for the possibility of planned interaction and shared activities.

**Explore Expansion of Opportunities for Inclusion on Non-specialized Trips:**
Most of the young adults on the trips we studied preferred to be on a specialized trip and felt secure in the adaptations and supports that were available to them on these trips. However, some of these young adults, especially those that are more experienced with independence, felt constrained by the rules imposed on specialized trips and wondered if their experience would have been better on a non-specialized trip. Anecdotally, trip organizers, providers, and participants tell us that an untold number of young adults with some disabilities are already participating on non-specialized Birthright trips, often in the company of siblings or other family members. More research should be conducted to explore the experiences of these participants and to identify the supports that would optimize the Birthright engagement of young adults with similar disabilities. This effort should be accompanied by discussions between organizers of specialized and non-specialized trips about the potential for inclusion of more young adults with disabilities on non-specialized trips.

**Expand Follow-up Opportunities in Home Communities:**
Participants on specialized Birthright trips often reported that they came back to home communities with few available options for them to continue their Jewish journey, especially in the company of peers who also have disabilities. Although follow-up programming for Birthright alumni is available on many college campuses and in major metropolitan areas, it may not be fully welcoming to or meet the needs of participants with disabilities. Campus and community-based programs for young adults should be encouraged to develop both integrated and specialized options for young adults with disabilities.
REFERENCES


