

# **Excellence in Youth Trips to Israel**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **ORGANIZED YOUTH TRIPS TO ISRAEL AND THEIR IMPORTANCE**

Every year, in one framework or another, thousands of North American Jewish young people travel to Israel. Some accompany their families; others go to study at a university or a yeshiva for several months to a year; and still others travel in the context of organized educational programs. For many, especially those in the later high school years, these organized programs constitute their first serious encounter with Israel. These experiences often become the gateway to more lengthy visits in the years ahead. The vast majority of college-age students who are now studying in the year-long academic and yeshiva programs first came to Israel as adolescents in some organized summer experience.

Both formal research and personal testimony demonstrate convincingly that the short-term summer-time Israel experience very often profoundly influences how youngsters relate to Israel and to their Jewishness. Of course, not all teenagers experience the same effects; but, in general, participants in Israel summer programs do come back changed in one or more ways. They certainly return to North America with a more vivid picture of Israel; they frequently acquire or strengthen friendships with other participants, and sometimes with Israelis as well; most are more willing and able to advocate Israel's cause in organized and informal settings; some become more involved in their local youth group or synagogue; some become more religiously observant; and many become interested in returning to Israel. For many, these changes are both enduring and dramatic.

The reasons underlying the power of the Israel experience are not hard to fathom. Israel, to say the least, is a compelling, absorbing, and complex country that inevitably speaks to the Jewish identity of Diaspora Jews. The landscape is rich and varied, as are the people who inhabit it. The society is alive with passions, conflicts and tensions that often command the world's attention. Moreover, the organized summer trips take place at a crucial point in identity development and, as informal educational experiences, they can touch individuals in many different ways.

In recognition of the potentially powerful positive impact the Israel experience can have upon North American Jewish young people, The CRB Foundation of Montreal has embarked upon a multi-pronged effort whose chief objectives can be summarized as follows:

- 1) To sharply increase the quantity of young American Jews who visit Israel; and,
- 2) To dramatically improve the quality of the educational experience of those young people who travel to Israel in organized programs.

This study of excellence in trips to Israel advances the latter objective. By better understanding what makes for excellence in trips to Israel, The CRB Foundation hopes to help practitioners, policy makers, and their supporters enhance the quality of the Israel experience for the young traveler. <sup>1</sup>

## **THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

The chief objective of this study is to identify and elucidate the key components of excellence in a short-term trip to Israel for North American Jewish adolescents. Our purpose here is neither to evaluate specific trips, nor to delineate which trips are better than others. Rather, we understand that there are elements of excellence in all trips and, frankly, shortcomings in all. We seek those elements that in the minds of trip purveyors, young participants, parents, and outside observers generally tend to enrich and magnify the educational impact of the adolescents' experience in Israel. As a matter of definition, we are concerned only with organized group trips to Israel, and not the experience of individual travelers or independent groups such as families and friends.

We readily concede that "excellence" is an elusive and ambiguous concept. Trips differ widely in their objectives and their clientele. What is good for one trip may not be good for another. Nevertheless, we do contend that these differences notwithstanding, certain features of

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<sup>1</sup> *As a stylistic point, in the text below we alternate between referring to excellence and goodness in trips to Israel.*

excellence generally characterize most sorts of organized experiences in Israel for Jewish youngsters. Indeed, with slight modification, we believe that the lessons we draw below can be extended to older groups as well. (Most readers who are familiar with trips for older participants should be able to readily identify those elements that are peculiar to adolescents and those which pertain to Israel travelers of all ages.)

One standard we have used to define elements of excellence is to focus on those features that further educational goals. This educationally oriented approach is consistent with the professed goals of the Israel youth programs. As contrasted with, say, tour operators who bring Europeans to Eilat's very attractive beaches, Israel youth program directors say they see themselves primarily as educators and measure their success in educational terms. Typically, they define the ultimate objectives of their programs in at least one of the following ways (if not all three):

- 1) Enhancing Jewish commitment, knowledge, skills;
- 2) Enhancing Zionist commitment, or knowledge of Israel, past or present;
- 3) Strengthening formal and informal ties to the community, in part by building relationships with Israelis and committed Jewish youth.

Aside from promoting Jewish and/or Zionist educational objectives, elements of excellence are those which are well planned and well implemented, that is, in accord with the highest of professional standards and with appropriate attention to detail.

We work off of the axiomatic premise that educationally sound trips are somehow "better" than those which violate very fundamental principles in the educational literature. By analogy, an excellent concert is not defined as one where the audience wants more, or wants to come back, or has had its musical senses aroused and satiated. Rather, an excellent concert is one that meets the highest aesthetic standards of musical performers, composers, and critics. Presumably, such performances will achieve the desired impact on their audiences as well. But, just as critics of music judge excellence by internal aesthetic standards and not by the

impact on the audience, so too do we identify excellence in trips to Israel in large part on the basis of standards internal to the world of informal Jewish and Zionist education. Fortunately, in this case, educational practice that is theoretically sound tends to produce the desired impact upon participants in organized youth trips to Israel.

## **INTENDED AUDIENCE**

We address three audiences in this report:

- 1) supporters of Israel educational travel, such as The CRB Foundation itself, Jewish federations, and private philanthropists;
- 2) communal professionals who organize, sponsor or recommend Israel educational travel, such as those who typically manage Jewish Community Center programs, Jewish schools, Boards of Jewish Education, synagogue youth groups, and others who work with North American Jewish youth; and
- 3) purveyors of Israel educational travel, that is, those who direct programs, large and small, that cater to groups of adolescent Jewish youth.

For the supporters of Israel youth travel, we hope to help them make wiser and more confident decisions about which trips and innovations to support. We are also ready to admit that we see a study of Israel youth travel as serving, in part, as a piece of advocacy that may well stimulate philanthropic agencies and individuals to extend further assistance to this important field of adolescent Jewish education.

For the communal professionals, we hope to alert them to the critical value of a highly planful, educational approach. We hope to alert them to the complexity of this field, the diversity of programs, and the importance of matching the right participants with the right programs. In our experience, educators who should know better all too often cede near-total responsibility for planning and executing Israel youth trips to outside agencies. In doing so, they often fail to attend to the particular

needs of their young people and fail to clarify or shape the specific objectives of their particular trip.

Last, we also hope to inform and provoke the purveyors of Israel travel, the true experts in this field. We hope that they will find some concrete uses for this document. One reviewer of an early draft thought it would serve to help train his middle- management and line staff. Another told us that our early research helped him advocate the cause of higher educational standards in a particular institutional context. We hope that this study will cause even some very experienced purveyors to re-think some of their procedures and to challenge some of their fundamental assumptions and educational philosophy. Perhaps it may remind them of some important issues that they themselves articulated to us but freely admitted that they had failed to attend to.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the last decade or so, researchers have published several works that seek to identify excellence in schools, large corporations, or other organizations. These works have been ethnographic in character; that is, they rely heavily on informal observations of the organizations at work, and in-depth interviews with key participants located at all points in the hierarchy, from top to bottom. Although less ambitious than those other well-known book-length monographs, this study on excellence in young people's trips to Israel is situated within this research tradition.

The research for this project took place during much of 1991 and early 1992. The period itself was one relatively free from the unusually disturbing events that have disrupted Israel travel in the past. However, just prior to this period, the Gulf War had seriously obstructed recruitment efforts during many of the crucial months when teenagers and their parents make decisions regarding summer travel and vacation plans. As a result, almost all of the Israel summer programs in 1991 experienced an "off-year," although enrollment certainly rebounded after the conflict ceased in late winter. As far as we can tell, the unusual events in this period had little impact on the conclusions we drew about what constitutes excellence in trips to Israel.

We decided at the outset to focus our research on North American Jewish youth trips for high school age youngsters participating in short-term,

summer-time programs. If more young people will participate in Israel educational travel programs, they are likely to do so in the context of these sorts of trips.

We began our research by developing a set of working hypotheses. These set forth our initial hunches as to what constituted the key ingredients of excellence. These were drawn from several disparate sources, most notably, some preliminary work by Dr. Barry Chazan, a cursory review of the literature on good schools, and our own professional experience. In consultation with about a dozen experts and leading practitioners, we then selected several groups to observe in the field, that is, while they were participating in a program in Israel. In all candor, we specifically sought out groups that had a reputation for excellence in one or more areas. We selected these and additional programs (see Appendix) so as to achieve diversity in terms of several characteristics: ideology of sponsor; geographic origins; duration; cost; selectivity; and other factors. We intentionally over-selected those groups possessed of certain initial advantages. Thus, we observed several groups that are the recipient of very significant philanthropic support or, in one case, of unusually high fees for participation. We also chose to observe several groups affiliated with camps and youth movements. We felt that we could more readily witness especially distinctive elements of excellence when a program operates without significant fiscal constraints or where the youth are among the most judicially committed and socially cohesive.

We or our research associates spent a full day or more with each group. We were free to ask questions of staff and participants. Universally, trip purveyors, staff, and the youthful participants welcomed our presence and were gracious and forthcoming in the interviews.

We also chose to observe groups at different sorts of sites while they were engaged in different types of activities. Examples include hiking, sight-seeing, lectures, meals, wrap-up sessions, bus travel, and social service projects.

During the next stage of our research, we spoke with roughly two dozen senior practitioners in the field of Israel travel for North American Jewish youngsters (see Appendix for list of interviews). Interviews typically lasted about two hours. The trip purveyors talked freely about their programs and the larger issues raised in this research. They also

readily provided a range of written materials that we requested and subsequently examined. These included: recruitment brochures, pre-trip information for parents and participants, training materials for counselors, itineraries, instructional materials, and source books.

Finally, we produced a penultimate draft version of this report and circulated same for comments from various experts in the field. We are grateful to them, to the senior professionals who gave us of their time and ideas, and to the participants and staff of the several groups we observed.

# **SUMMARY OF KEY ELEMENTS OF EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH TRIPS TO ISRAEL**

## **OVERALL**

The design, planning, and execution of the trip are all undertaken with a great degree of seriousness, with a keen attention to details, and with the awareness that both formal and informal experiences and all encounters, planned or unplanned, are part of the educational experience.

## **THE PARTICIPANTS**

Participants are recruited for and matched with the program that is right for them.

The program understands who the participants are and plans the trip accordingly.

The program provides the participants with accurate information before the trip so that the young people know what to expect and what is expected of them.

Programs get so-called “better kids” through selective recruitment or excellent preparation.

The participants undergo pre-trip preparation that enhances their cognitive, emotional, and social readiness for the trip.

The trip recruits young people who share common backgrounds, common interests, or common salient characteristics.

## **THE STAFF**

The director projects a clearly articulated vision and translates that vision into reality.

The counselors exhibit excellence as informal Jewish educators of Jewish adolescents. They can interact well with teenagers, they personally reflect the program's Judaic philosophy, they serve as positive and accessible role models, and they understand their role as informal educators rather than as glorified chaperons.

The staff is well-trained as informal Jewish educators, in the specific objectives of the program, and in how to make use of Israel as a learning experience.

The program manages to retain veteran staff from one year to the next.

The counselors are numerous enough to attend to the needs of the participants.

An experienced educator is a continual and ongoing presence with the group.

The guides see themselves as informal Jewish educators.

## **THE PHILOSOPHY**

The program has a clearly articulated Judaic and educational philosophy that the staff has "bought into" and that pervades the trip experience.

## **THE CURRICULUM**

The Jewish and educational philosophies strongly influence the choice of the sites to be visited and how they are utilized.

The trip is built around educational sub-themes; days are planned as educationally thematic units.

The program units are individually successful. Each such unit should stand on its own as an island of excellence.

The itinerary is planned with awareness of the sequence, flow, rhythm, and balance of experiences.

## **THE TRIP EXPERIENCE: FUNDAMENTALS**

Participants enjoy the trip; they have fun. But recreational activities have educational import.

The logistics of the trip run smoothly and they facilitate a flexible itinerary, one that can change during the trip in accord with the changing needs of the group. But the staff is committed to an educationally intensive schedule of activities.

The trip has clear safety guidelines that are well-understood and observed.

The staff articulates and enforces consistently clear disciplinary guidelines regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

## **THE TRIP EXPERIENCE: ELEMENTS OF DISTINCTION**

The program manages to engage the participants in conventional educational activities: e.g., classes, lectures, and readings.

The trip experience early on establishes group cohesiveness.

The participants develop pride in themselves and in their program as distinctive. The trip conveys and reinforces a shared sense of purpose or mission.

The program encourages active learning, rather than passive participation.

The program capitalizes on the adolescent life stage. It consciously provides intellectual, physical, social, and emotional challenges that allow the young adult participants to grow and mature within the context of an Israel experience.

The staff regularly monitors and evaluates the individual participants' and the group's experience as the trip proceeds and responds accordingly.

## **THE FOLLOW-UP**

The program or sponsoring agency at home provides follow-up for the individual, a way of internalizing what they have experienced after they return.

The broader community (parents, synagogues, communities, etc.) is involved in some way with the experience of the participants.

## FINDINGS

### **The First Principle: The Details are Important**

This report proposes several components of excellence in youth trips to Israel. But underlying all of them is a single, fundamental principle: Excellence is achieved when practitioners take very seriously the planning and execution of each of their operational decisions from recruitment to the return of the participant to the North American community.

To elaborate, experienced trip purveyors view every encounter, every experience, as loaded with educational potential. In our interviews, most spoke of extraordinary attention to detail, of the need to closely examine seemingly trivial decisions and to make those decisions in accord with the program's Judaic and educational philosophies.

Throughout our research on trips to Israel, we became impressed with the importance of detail, of the enormous significance of the very little things that make one program or one group, or one summer experience, better than another.

In their research on excellent corporations, Peters and Waterman write: "There is a value set—and it is a value set for all seasons. . . . However, it is executed by attention to mundane, nitty-gritty details. Every minute, every hour, every day is an opportunity to act in support of over-arching themes." [*In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*, p. 324.]

## THE PARTICIPANTS

- Participants are recruited for and matched with the program that is right for them.
- The program understands who the participants are and plans the trip accordingly.
- The program provides the participants with accurate information before the trip so that the young people know what to expect and what is expected of them.
- Programs get so-called "better kids" through selective recruitment or excellent preparation.
- The participants undergo pre-trip preparation that enhances their cognitive, emotional, and social readiness for the trip.
- The trip recruits young people who share common backgrounds, common interests, or common salient characteristics.

### The Right Trip for the Right Participants

Quite obviously, both participants and programs vary. Some participants are ideally suited for certain programs, and conversely, some programs are ideally suited for certain participants. Just as young people choose colleges with respect to such issues as academic intensity, campus life, size, intimacy, and other factors, so too should they be afforded the opportunity to select Israel educational programs that, at least "on paper," suit their needs and interests.

Many local educators who serve as sources of advice to youngsters and their parents shopping for the right trip to Israel fail to appreciate the importance of understanding both the youngster and the program. We are saying that the ideal process would match the right participants with the right trips.

## **Learning About the Participants**

The better trips learn about the participants, work on what they can do to help prepare them, and decide how the trip needs to be adjusted for the particular group of youngsters. Their age, their knowledge and background, their learning styles, their personalities, and their interests are all important considerations in determining their suitability for specific programs.

Ideally, well before the trip gets underway, the educational staff should know a little about the participants so as to be able to anticipate special needs and problems that may arise. To achieve this objective, some trips require extensive pre-trip meetings between participants and the educators. In a few programs, the top staff even make an effort to get to know the parents. The programs that grow out of schools or other agencies where participants and educators know one another for many years enjoy a built-in advantage that other trips would do well to acquire. Unfortunately, this level of attention is not always possible, and, to be sure, some educators responsible for planning and leading such trips lack the interest or ability to tailor-make the trip for their students (or campers or youth group members). We believe that at the very minimum, such educators ought to gather the most crucial background information in the first few days of the trip, and they should be attuned to the ways in which this information can be utilized to fine-tune the experience to meet the particular needs of their groups.

## **Truth in Advertising**

Program purveyors should accurately inform would-be participants of the salient features of the particular Israel experience they offer. Of course, some programs can more readily assume that their participants know what to expect. This is usually the case for those who are actively involved in a summer camp, youth group or movement. Many participants in these circumstances know for years in advance that they plan to visit Israel with one particular program.

However, quite a number of participants fall into one trip or another, because their rabbi suggested it, their school mate went on it, or they happen across an advertisement or brochure. For these participants in

particular, the presentation of the program prior to the trip needs to be accurate.

Well-designed promotional literature, candid recruiters, and the formal requirements of the individual programs allow the teenagers to self-select, to opt out of programs that are not suitable for them and opt into programs that meet their needs. "Applying to this program was more difficult than filling out my college applications," commented one participant.

One youngster explained that she had gone to a fair where representatives spoke about a number of trips. Other programs arrange for people in the local communities to meet with potential candidates. One trip purveyor remarked, "Our recruiters want to make sure that participants are aware of the nature of the program and that they develop reasonable expectations. Of course we also want to make sure the kids are suitable for the program."

In contrast, young people who found themselves on programs that vary markedly from what they initially had been led to expect were among those who were most disappointed with the summer encounter with Israel. In our observations, we encountered several youngsters (certainly representing a minority) who complained that some aspect of the program failed to meet their expectations. One young woman claimed, for example, that the literature sent out never explained the program's heavy emphasis on community-building. In another program, a teenager complained that she anticipated what may be called a Zionist catharsis, and instead found that the program was, at heart, philosophically neutral about some very fundamental Zionist principles.

Ideally, programs should be able to pick and choose participants to insure that in fact those who will be part of the trip do adhere to its basic philosophy. But it is only the trips with a limited number of highly sought-after openings that can afford to be that highly selective. One of the larger trips does interview each of the participants and even asks parents to fill out forms regarding their own religious beliefs. But, for the most part, programs are reluctant to turn away prospective participants. In part they are financially hard-pressed and need each participant to hold down unit costs; and in part they fear that the young person they turn away may lose interest in visiting Israel at all that summer.

Nevertheless, even recognizing these valid institutional considerations, many programs can do a better job of more fully informing their prospective participants of what to expect during their forthcoming Israel summer experience.

Programs may have some reason to shape their promotional materials so as to avoid discouraging would-be participants. But parents and local educators have no such institutional inhibition. Learning about differences among programs and youngsters, and making sure the potential participants are fully informed about the available alternatives are responsibilities that fall squarely on the shoulders of local educational practitioners.

### **The “Good Kids”: Knowledgeable, Motivated, and Sociable**

When asked what makes a trip work, the director of one of the programs replied: “This may sound a bit simplistic, but honestly, I think that the good trips are the ones with the good kids.” The same sentiment was echoed by a participant on another trip who, when asked what made his trip special, responded that “this program attracts better quality kids.” Although these statements are overly sweeping, they do point to the initial quality of the participants as one essential ingredient for the successful Israel experience. In our view, “good kids” can be found (through excellent recruitment) or they can be made (through assiduous preparation).

What are “good kids?” They are those who stand out along three critical dimensions:

- 1) Cognitive background and skills;
- 2) Motivation; and
- 3) Sociability factors.

By cognitive background and skills, we refer to familiarity with the subject matter of the trip (e.g., Israeli society, Jewish history, the Hebrew language, and so forth) and the ability to assimilate and process such information. By motivation, we refer to one’s interest in learning and in

grappling with the emotional challenge of the Israel experience. By sociability factors, we refer to all the issues that promote good relations between the individual and the group.

Very simply, we are saying that some individuals are more likely to benefit from the Israel experience and that groups with large numbers of these sorts of individuals are more likely to experience a successful summer program. Now, the truth of the matter is that some programs more readily draw upon youngsters who initially approximate the ideal model. But it is also the case that careful preparation can elevate the youngsters along those dimensions that make for success. Those who are ignorant can be taught. Those who are indifferent can be excited. And for those in groups with little familiarity with one another, one can start the process of building a cohesive, well-functioning group.

With respect to recruitment of ideally oriented youngsters, youth groups and movement camps are at a distinct advantage. They readily generate a large number of youngsters with the appropriate knowledge base, motivation, and group ties. Many build a summer program in Israel into their total program. "I've been involved in [XYZ Youth Movement] for what? nine years now? and this is something I've always looked forward to." Another teenager explained, "You hear in the youth group that this is the best summer of your life." They see a connection to what came before and to what will follow — whether they will return to their homes as youth group leaders, counselors in the camp, and in other capacities.

Participants from these camps and youth movements put into practice skills they have learned over the years. After conversing in Hebrew with an older Israeli in a senior citizen center, one young woman turned to her friend with real pride and said "Well I guess all that 'dikduk' (Hebrew grammar) finally paid off!" One staff member referred to the backgrounds of the participants as one of the features that made for a good trip. "They come to us with the [XYZ Movement] background," she remarked. "They have a sense of Jewish tradition that provides a point of entry into the subject matter we deal with".

Certainly, it appears that many camp and youth movement members come to their Israel program fully equipped in motivational and intellectual terms, or nearly so. When experts in the field speak among themselves about extraordinarily committed, attentive, and energetic

youngsters, the trips sponsored by camps and youth movements often come to mind. In fact, those programs that cater to both movement youngsters and others readily observe that their “own” youngsters constitute far better groups. The same agency, with the same ethos, and the same staff, then, does a better job (and sometimes a far better job) with the youngster who has been prepared for the Israel trip through years of camp or youth group participation.

Camp and youth movement youngsters certainly enjoy many advantages. But, with help, others can acquire these advantages as well. With the appropriate effort before the trip, the groups of less affiliated teenagers can also be primed to derive both more enjoyment and more learning from the Israel experience.

(One policy implication: Those interested in promoting Israel youth travel also have an interest in expanding the number of youngsters participating in camps and youth movements. Such youngsters not only stand a greater chance of traveling to Israel; they are also likely to participate in a high-quality program.)

## **Preparing the Participants**

As we have seen, one element of excellence is to be able to recruit and select “good” youngsters, that is, those who are highly knowledgeable, highly motivated, and highly integrated with other participants. But whatever the level of motivation, integration, and familiarity with Israel, programs improve when they can successfully enhance these qualities prior to the trip. Good preparation for the trip, then, aims at three related objectives:

- 1) **Intellectual orientation**: familiarizing the participants with Israel generally, with their anticipated experiences, with the specific issues and sites they will encounter, and with the larger historical, textual, and social background to learn more from their educational activities.
- 2) **Motivational orientation**: peaking the interest of participants in learning, in opening themselves emotionally, and in preparing themselves for a learning experience.

- 3) Social orientation: strengthening the individual's level of comfort and belonging to the group and thereby enhancing group cohesiveness.

The Israel experience can be highly demanding on all three levels. Participants must be ready to absorb a great deal of cognitive material transmitted through sight, sound, and action, and then be able to place it in a larger historical, geographical, social or political context. They must be sufficiently interested to withstand the physical discomfort of long days of touring, to engage in educational activities that are not purely recreational in nature, and to endure the emotional turmoil occasioned by the frequently intense confrontation with their identities as Jews and as developing adults. And, not least, they should do all this while functioning well as a group.

To prepare participants for the Israel trip, good programs try to establish or advance a uniform knowledge base, be it in Hebrew vocabulary, dates in Jewish history, or other fundamental features of Israeli society. This task can be accomplished possibly by distributing materials well before the trip, or by holding pre-trip orientation sessions.

*Materials to be Read Before the Trip:* Several trips send out source books, readings or suggested reading lists to the participants. The lists are generally excellent and comprehensive. However, unless specifically required to do so, few teenagers do any reading before coming to Israel. Many trip purveyors we interviewed believe it would be fruitless to demand that the young people read materials prior to the trip. Whether mandatory reading assignments are feasible remains, in our minds, an open question and worthy of some testing and experimentation.

*Pre-Trip Orientation:* Some programs gather the participants together for a weekend or longer prior to the Israel experience. Alternatively, groups that come from the same geographic area or school may have several meetings or classes spread over several weeks or months before the trip.

These orientation weekends are used for building group cohesiveness, orienting the young people to the program's philosophy, and building a common knowledge base. "I was insistent that they know fifteen basic dates/periods in Jewish history before we set foot on the plane," explained one teacher who accompanied her class to Israel. "How can

one understand or even appreciate what you are seeing in Israel if you have no idea when the Temples stood, when Herod ruled, when the Crusades took place?"

Trip purveyors report uniformly that pre-trip orientations are useful for all programs and are especially crucial for groups where the youngsters are unfamiliar with one another. One senior professional who works with less Jewishly affiliated youngsters said that pre-trip orientation was among the most important predictors of successful groups. In some cases this agency works with youngsters who have met beforehand. In other cases it serves participants who meet for the first time at the airport (earning them the internal sobriquet, "JFK kids"). With essentially the same philosophy, staff, and itinerary, the former sort of group more often enjoys a far better summer than the latter.

Notwithstanding the obvious value of such orientations, the financial cost and staff effort required to plan and conduct them make such orientation sessions too rare an experience.

### **Group Composition: the Advantages of Homogeneity**

To make it possible to achieve educational objectives, the group must undergo preliminary planning by means of serious recruitment, screening and preparation procedures. The prevailing atmosphere in the group affects the touring experience, for better or worse. And we have already seen homogeneous groups succeed despite the meager resources of the program, and heterogeneous groups undermine programs with ample means. [Ami Bouganim, *Short Term Programs: Tourism and Education*, p. 23.]

Most program directors with whom we spoke would tend to agree with the foregoing passage. They suggested that they found it easier to work with groups that are reasonably homogeneous with respect to Jewish background, familiarity with Israel, level of emotional and intellectual maturity. Nevertheless, they agreed that some diversity may be acceptable, if not desirable.

Certain sorts of diversity can do considerable harm to the impact on the trip. Commenting on one such experience in which a Judaically advanced group of about 20 youngsters was combined with a similar number lacking significant Judaic background, one trip director remarked, "It was an abysmal failure! We'll never do it again." One program director divides the pool of his summer participants into two groups by maturity and Judaic background. The director of this program also tries to assure that youngsters will find a reasonable size sub-group of peers with similar characteristics. The entire bus load of youngsters may be diverse, but sub-groups of 6-12 youngsters may be fairly homogeneous.

Why is homogeneity an asset? (Or more precisely, why do some directors see it as advantageous?) One reason is that the itinerary and curriculum can be adjusted to meet the particular and common needs, level of knowledge and interest of that specific group. The Israel experience can be made more intellectually rigorous for those with a strong Judaic background and familiarity with Israel.

We spent one morning in a seminar on the territories, planned by one of the programs whose participants come with significant formal Jewish educational background. It was obvious as the morning proceeded that these teenagers had the necessary vocabulary and knowledge base to allow the staff to conduct the program on a high level. They knew the alternative politically charged terms that could refer to what some call the occupied territories and others the administered areas. They understood what the issues were. Questions and answers flowed easily.

To focus on one illustrative issue, programs with religiously diverse participants that have no explicit denominational sponsorship face difficult challenges in providing religious experiences. If all pray together, does the entire group pray with the traditional barrier dividing men and women? Which prayer book does it use? But prayer can prove instructive and inspirational and abandoning prayer means foregoing certain opportunities. Praying as a group at the edge of the Machtesh Rimmon crater, or on a Friday afternoon in Safed, obviously provide opportunities for spiritual experiences to occur. That is not to say that spiritual experiences are absent from religiously diverse groups. However, the trip with a particular religious direction more easily finds more windows of opportunity.

One participant in a particular program where the Judaic knowledge base was very uneven, was frustrated that there were so many different levels, making discussion difficult. But here too, diversity could be overcome. She remarked that prior preparation of the group for an upcoming speaker sharply reduced many of the problems she experienced when preparation was absent. This incident certainly suggests that careful attention to preparation may work to reduce the objectionable aspects of diversity by bringing all participants up to a fairly common level of interest and familiarity.

Another advantage of homogeneity is that it offers greater opportunity to build cohesive, well-functioning groups, itself an important objective of the Israel summer experience. One of the axiomatic principles of small group research is that people who share common backgrounds and characteristics can more easily forge strong bonds of intimacy. This is not to say that diverse groups inevitably fail to cohere. It is to say that the chances for the emergence of strong and enduring in-group bonds increase when people share many characteristics in common.

In contrast with this general tendency to recruit or to shape fairly homogeneous groups, a few highly selective programs actually strive for diversity. Learning to cope with the diversity of the Jewish world and learning about oneself by interacting with those very different from oneself are at the heart of these programs' educational mission. For them, diversity is a tool rather than an obstacle. As the brochure of one program states:

Because the ...(participants)...are of widely differing backgrounds, the educational component of our program permits us to address these issues (of Jewish identity and unity) not only as a theoretical matter but also as a personal reality, all within the context of the Israel experience.

But, we note, these groups are diverse in only some respects; they are, in fact, quite homogenous with respect to their elitist quality. One such program limits its participants to those who are highly intellectually capable and motivated. To compensate for their diversity, these programs place a strong emphasis on unifying activities to the point that some participants complained to us about the intense pressure to forge intimate ties with other group members.

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*Our general point is that programs that bring together collections of youngsters who share little in common and know little about each other before the trip cannot succeed as well as those where several common features characterize most participants. Where elements of diversity exist, the challenge is magnified. The educational staff needs to anticipate, plan for, and address the difficulties that can often ensue. As a general rule, homogeneous groups stand a better chance of experiencing a successful summer.*

## THE STAFF

- The director projects a clearly articulated vision and translates that vision into reality.
- The counselors exhibit excellence as informal Jewish educators of Jewish adolescents. They can interact well with teenagers, they personally reflect the program's Jewish philosophy, they serve as positive and accessible role models, and they understand their role as educators rather than as glorified chaperons.
- The staff is well-trained as informal Jewish educators in the specific objectives of the program, and in how to make use of Israel as a learning experience.
- The program manages to retain veteran staff from year to the next.
- The counselors are numerous enough to attend to the needs of the participants.
- An experienced educator is a continual and visible presence with the group.
- The guides see themselves as informal Jewish educators.

Preliminary to understanding the importance of the staff and the quality of excellence in staff, we need to review the table of organization of the typical Israel summer program.

The program's basic social unit consists of the group or a bus load of participants, usually numbering between 30 and 40. Accompanying this group are generally three or four counselors, a tour guide (who may double as a counselor), a medic/security escort, and a bus driver. One of the counselors usually serves as the group leader with ultimate responsibility for decision-making.

Most programs run several bus loads of participants at once. If so, then one or two more senior professionals support and supervise several bus loads simultaneously. These may be the program directors themselves or middle-management personnel.

<sup>7</sup> Situated at the top of the organizational pyramid are the program directors. Their responsibilities include shaping the philosophy of the program; hiring, training, and supervising staff; planning the itinerary of the program; designing curricular materials; and managing recruitment and interactions with parents before and during the trip.

### **The Director: Energetic and Visionary**

The people most responsible for defining the school's vision and articulating the ideological stance are the principals and headmasters of these schools. They are the voice . . . of the institution. . . The literature on effective schools tends to agree on at least one point — that an essential ingredient of good schools is strong, consistent, and inspired leadership. The tone and culture of schools is said to be defined by the vision and purposeful action of the principal. [Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*, p. 323.]

With respect to the importance of leadership, Israel experience programs are much like schools (and corporations, too): They all require highly talented and dedicated leaders at the top.

The directors of good programs with whom we met impressed us in several ways. They could readily articulate their Judaic and educational philosophies. They had clear visions of the objectives of their programs. And, not least important, they defined themselves professionally as

educators and not simply as tour program administrators. Thus, their personal criteria for success revolved around the ultimate educational impact of their programs upon the young participants.

Moreover, all were in command of detailed information and ideas about running a successful Israel summer program. Directors spoke about how every detail is educationally important. They typically remarked that they are constantly tinkering with the details of itinerary, staff training, and staff supervision.

Programs with a reputation as unusually excellent are distinguished from the others by the regular presence and intervention of the director, or an educational supervisor. Directors report that they, or someone at nearly their level of seniority and expertise, are in constant contact and interaction with the counselors, guides, and participants. As Peters and Waterman write in *Search of Excellence*: "Leaders implement their visions . . . simply by being highly visible. Most of the leaders of the excellent companies . . . believe, like an evangelist, in constantly preaching the 'truth,' not from their office but away from it — in the field."

Accordingly, most directors with whom we met make it their business to personally go out with the groups, to participate in the activities, to lead selected program units, and to pepper the counselors, guides, and participants with questions to learn how the trip is progressing. In short, a hands-on presence of a senior, experienced, educationally oriented staff member (often the director him/herself) seems to distinguish good from not-so-good trips.

In sum, the qualities of seemingly successful program directors include the following:

- 1) Command of a comprehensive and detailed educational philosophy.
- 2) Ability to articulate and project that philosophy to staff and participants.
- 3) Attention to detail.

- 4) High level of energy.
- 5) Self-conception as an educator, and not an administrator concerned with logistics alone.
- 6) Readiness to engage in highly visible, hands-on contact with the staff and the groups in the field.

### **The Importance of Counselors**

Young participants on the Israel summer trip are in a strange and new environment. Most often, this is their first trip abroad, let alone their first trip to Israel. For many participants, the counselor is the person with whom they spend most of their waking hours, and is the principal mediator of the Israel experience.

Several quantitative studies have examined participant satisfaction. Almost uniformly, these studies demonstrate that, of all factors, the perceived quality of the counselors has the strongest impact upon the participants' overall impression of the trip. In simple terms, those youngsters who were most enthusiastic about their counselors were most enthusiastic about their trip.

When asked what they would change about their trip, all participants in one group we observed indicated that the staff had been problematic. When asked if they would recommend the trip to friends, they said they would — assuming that the staff would be different. In contrast, most participants in the other groups we observed listed the staff as the number one factor in what was good about their trip.

The lesson for directors of programs and locally based organizers of trips is that they need to pay considerable attention to hiring the right counselors for their groups. The level of compensation may well constitute a significant barrier to recruiting more qualified counselors. The possible impact of raising compensation on elevating the quality of counselors remains an open question worthy of further exploration.

## Ability to Interact Well with Teenagers

Israel summer programs hire scores of Israeli and North American counselors. Since most of them are college students, the Israeli staff tend to be about three to four years older than their North American counterparts. (Almost all Israeli counselors have served first in the Israeli army.) The counselors receive anywhere from \$400 to \$900 for several weeks of work in the field with the youngsters and a few days of pre-trip training and orientation. (It seems that programs with lower fees for participants pay less for staff than do the more expensive programs. Most programs pay more for veteran staff.)

These conditions are sufficient to attract a reasonable number of willing applicants. Nevertheless, the programs certainly are not flooded with applicants. (Whether expanded recruitment efforts can expand the pool of candidates and raise their quality is a policy issue worthy of consideration. One current source of ideal candidates are alumni of the programs themselves, a reservoir that the programs may be able to tap further than they do now.)

What makes a strong candidate for such a position?

Regardless of training, some people seem to have a natural ability to interact well with teenagers. That was immediately evident in viewing the groups. Some counselors were constantly interacting with the participants, joking, explaining, cajoling. The teenagers in fact sought out these counselors to ask questions, to show them something they noticed, to share their insights. Over the course of several hot summer weeks, the attention of teenagers understandably ebbs and wanes; certainly, the participants cannot always attend to the formal presentation. Often something will catch their fancy and they will stop and ask a question of the nearest staff member. It is quite likely that the difficult personal questions — those that challenge the individual's previous conceptions — will be asked in private of a staff member he/she trusts, rather than in front of the entire group. In such a situation, the availability of counselors who interact well with teenagers, combining both sensitivity and substance, is of paramount importance.

We also saw counselors who displayed relatively little enthusiasm for the youngsters or their activities. Some took every available opportunity to

withdraw from interaction with the youngsters. Many acted more like chaperons than educators, attending solely to the logistical problems of getting their groups to the right place at the right time rather than to the entire educational challenge and opportunity offered by the Israel experience. Clearly, all counselors should enjoy spending time with Jewish teenagers and know how to communicate with them. In addition, the Israeli counselors should have a special affinity for youngsters from North America who are, after all, members of a foreign culture and society.

### **Counselors as Models of the Program's Judaic and Zionist Philosophy**

Counselors, as the instructional staff with whom the participants interact most frequently, are inevitably Judaic and Zionist role models. Thus, program directors try to hire counselors who can reflect and personally embody their program's particular Judaic and educational philosophies. They look for staff members whose personal philosophies and religious observance approximate those advanced by the program.

For example, we spoke with one trip purveyor who wants to expose the participants to considering the Zionist challenge of living in Israel. As a result, he tries to hire counselors who were raised in the United States and have made aliyah, or attractive and accessible Israelis. Several programs sponsored by religious youth movements often use the Israel experience as a way of educating youngsters in the religious philosophy of the sponsoring movements, that is to living as a particular kind of Jew in North America. These programs hire those counselors who embody the religious ideals of these movements, even if they are not personally committed to living in Israel.

One way to find staff who are compatible with the program's philosophy is to hire counselors who a few years earlier had been participants on that trip to Israel, or at least veterans of the sponsoring agency's camp or youth movement. By virtue of their own experience, these counselors should more readily understand the overall philosophy of the trip.

## **The Staff as Positive Role Models**

The old adage, "Do what I say **not** what I do" clearly does not work, at least not with adolescents on an organized trip to Israel. Staff members are constantly being watched by the teenagers and the counselors' behavior makes a strong statement. For example, when counselors approach the grace after meals with personal reverence, the message to the participants is clear.

Our observation of groups going through Yad Vashem provided some instructive insights. Most counselors, particularly those living in Israel, have been to Jerusalem's Holocaust museum many times. They certainly have no personal need to re-experience Yad Vashem, and, several counselors chose to send their groups into the building and to meet them at the exit. In contrast, we saw many counselors going through Yad Vashem with their groups. Their comments and demeanor clearly demonstrated the powerful impact of the museum's exhibits. They were not only physically available to the participants, who at times needed their emotional support; they were emotionally in tune with the group and were in a position to deal with the participants' reactions, both at the time and (we imagine) at later points in the trip. (The issue of counselors choosing to participate with their groups or stand aside is not limited to Yad Vashem. Organizers of special activity units that serve many programs told us that some programs' counselors consistently take part in the planned activities, and others are happy to find themselves with a few hours or more of free time.)

Another time we observed a group spending part of the day at a JNF forest, clearing away brush, rocks and weeds to prepare the area for planting trees. The work was hard and the weather was hot. While some of the counselors circulated urging the campers onward, a senior educator, another counselor, and the program director who happened to join this group went further, setting a personal example by themselves chopping down weeds, trimming bushes, and digging up heavy rocks. These senior staff members stretched their own physical limits and made sure to maintain a positive attitude throughout the experience.

The role model approach, important in any educational setting, is certainly one of the key attributes that makes for a good staff. Its importance was only highlighted for us by the contrast with those staff

members who sat back, took little leadership role, and failed to set positive examples.

### **The Staff as Accessible Role Models**

The staff members should not only set positive role models, but if they are to capitalize on every educational opportunity, they need to be accessible as well. One director told us that he trains his staff to circulate on the bus rides, sitting next to different participants on each leg of the journey. He also demands that they seek out and publicly befriend the more introverted, less socially adept young people so as to help strengthen their confidence and buttress their standing within the group.

Although eating with other staff members does give the counselors time to plan and relax, it also serves to segregate them from the participants. The staff should be accessible during the informal moments — on the bus rides, at the table, during free time.

And yet, in order to be accessible the staff needs to avoid “burn out.” Some of the trips provide a rotation system so that the staff members have a day off to replenish their energy. One staff member, when asked why he chose to be with that particular trip, responded that this particular group not only paid well, but gave adequate time off “to re-fuel.”

### **The Staff as Educators**

The trips with a better reputation for excellence in the profession are distinguished by educationally oriented staff. On these trips, even the most junior-level counselors see themselves not merely as chaperons or mini-administrators, but as teachers. Ideally, they are keenly aware of their responsibility for shaping the participants’ understanding of Israel and for, more generally, achieving the educational objectives of the trip. The very best of them are sensitive to the emergence of teaching opportunities, the key moments in the young person’s encounter with Israel when the dedicated educator can successfully intervene.

This point can be well illustrated with a counter-example that emerged in our observation of a group about to leave for a trip to Hebron. The

counselor announced that the group should bring money for Kiryat Arba. "What's Kiryat Arba?" asked one of the teenagers. "A place to buy food, coke, chips, . . ." responded the counselor. And in fact, when they arrived, no further explanation of the controversial site of one of the earliest Gush Emunim settlements was given. "Guys this is Kiryat Arba. You have one half hour. Don't go far away."

## **Staff Training**

Although some individuals may be inherently better suited for serving as counselors to young North American Jewish visitors to Israel, the specific skills of good counseling need to be learned. Indeed, in our conversations with leading program directors, the training of high quality counselors emerged as one of the most crucial areas of need. All the better programs we observed train their counselors.

Counselors are trained in a variety of ways.

First, some programs require training during the period immediately prior to the summer experience. This segment may entail a single block of time, such as an extended weekend, or it may encompass several afternoons or evenings over several months.

Second, some programs are utilizing graduates of the Melitz courses for beginning and advanced counselors. These courses meet weekly during the academic year. (The emergence and growth of the Melitz training program both testifies to the urgency of training and signifies the evolution of youth counseling towards a profession in its own right.)

Third, some programs provide their counselors with fairly extensive and detailed instructional materials that are coordinated with the itinerary. These materials provide information on administrative procedures, the educational philosophy of the program, and specific educational objectives and activities for each site the group will visit.

Finally, a small number of programs involve the staff directly in planning the itinerary or the accompanying educational activities. The intensive involvement of the counselors in pre-trip planning heightens their personal investment in the program and certainly makes them more

familiar with the group's goals and how they are to be implemented.

However programs engage in staff training, the objectives of such training normally include (or should include) the following:

- 1) Skills in group dynamics and interpersonal communication.
- 2) Familiarity with and empathy for Jewish teenagers from North America (qualities that do not seem to come naturally to most Israelis).
- 3) Familiarity with the history and topography of the sites the group will visit.
- 4) The ability to utilize those sites to achieve the specific educational objectives of the program.
- 5) Commitment to the Judaic, Zionist, and educational philosophies of the program.
- 6) Familiarity with administrative procedures.
- 7) Establishing working relationships with the other staff members in the particular group and program.

Although the foregoing only very briefly outlines the components of good training, we do want to emphasize that a well-trained staff is essential to a successful Israel experience. The program directors we interviewed opined that better recruitment and training of staff was one of their highest priorities. When asked how they would utilize a hypothetical grant of \$20,000, many gave answers similar to that of one director who said he would raise his program's salaries to a level where he could insist that his staff members spend more concentrated time in training.

### **Retaining Staff**

Few program directors expect that their counselors will return for more than two or three rounds of duty. The advent of marriage, children, and

work responsibilities makes serving as a counselor less attractive for older potential candidates. Some, who might otherwise be available, experience "burn-out." One intense and exhausting experience of spending several hot summer weeks from morning to night with North American teenagers may be all that some staffers can handle. Although most counselors serve no more than three years or so, we did note that a number of groups have staff members who return year after year.

Almost all programs do try to look for experienced counselors. The veteran counselors are, obviously, very familiar with the trip's philosophy and goals. They command a superior grasp of the overall mission of the program. They know what to expect and can more easily prepare the teenagers for what they are going to see that day. They are able to help newer staff get acclimated. During our observations, several first timers remarked that they felt they could be much more effective the next time round, given that they now have gone through the experience once.

However, at the same time, one program director speculated that counselors peak in their third year. He suggested that too many years in the field dulls the excitement and spontaneity that are important qualities to bring to the intense summer experience.

One way in which programs retain their better staff is by promoting from within. A few programs are large enough to support several middle-management positions. Most of these supervisors of educational staff first started as front-line counselors.

But in the absence of possibilities for promotion, we are unsure of how best to address this issue. The presence of more such experienced staff could be encouraged by building in a salary scale which would pay more to those staffers returning. It could also be addressed by curtailing burn-out through regular days off for rest and recuperation. The specific ways by which to retain the more experienced counselors from year to year remains an unresolved challenge to the field.

### **Staff-Participant Ratio: How Much is Ideal?**

Most outstanding trip purveyors reported that their ideal ratio would be one staff member for every 8-9 participants. In point of fact, most trips

provide about one staff member for every 10-12 participants. Financial constraints limit the number of staff members.

One program director pointed out that whatever the ratio, each group should be assigned no less than four staff members. Invariably, one or another counselor is unavailable on any particular day. Some trips gave staff members days off. Often, a staff member needs to remain behind to stay with a sick teenager or to handle arrangements. The minimum critical mass of four staff members means that these unpredictable but anticipated demands will still leave three staff members with the group. In our observations, we saw no groups with fewer than four counselors assigned to a bus load, although at times only two were actually present.

### **The Ongoing Presence of a Trained Educator**

It stands to reason that Israel programs will function better as educational institutions if the groups benefit from the ongoing presence of qualified professional educators. Many groups, in fact, lack significant educational supervision. Although an educator may serve as the director of the program, other than administrative support staff, the counselors operate in a functionally autonomous fashion.

In contrast, several programs engage experienced educators as supervisors. They may be counselors with several years experience, or rabbis, or other senior personnel. In some cases, the person officially designated as educator accompanies the group throughout the trip. In other cases, possibly for budgetary reasons (educators cost more than counselors), the so-called official educator will move between two or more groups.

The augmentation of younger, less experienced counselors by trained educational staff certainly represents a step forward. The episodic appearance and disappearance of these senior educators constitutes something of a problem. If the entire Israel experience contains educational potential, and if these educators appear at only certain activities or just their preparation, then what does that practice say to the participants and the counselors about the educational import of the other sites, activities, and experiences? Does it suggest that snorkeling in Eilat or camping in the Galilee lacks educational import and potential?

Another drawback relates to the sense of professional mission among the counselors. At least one program draws a sharp distinction between counselors and the educational faculty whose members accompany the participants on some, but not all, activities. Does the occasional presence of senior educators relieve the counselors of the responsibility of functioning as educators, reducing them to chaperons and administrators rather than engaged instructors and role models?

These considerations suggest that programs need to give careful consideration to the timing and functioning of senior educators, be they supervisors or resource experts. In our view, the ideal approach would be to have the so-called official educator available at all activities and to make sure the less senior staff remains conscious of and committed to its educational mission.

### **The Guide as Educator and as a Constant Presence**

The role of tour guide in Israel demands a significant degree of training and expertise. Tour guides for the tourist industry must pass fairly rigorous licensing exams for specific regions of the country. Owing to this high level of expertise, it is not at all surprising that few candidates for counselors (even the Israelis) are initially equipped to function as competent tour guides for most of the sites that the trips tend to visit.

Accordingly, for many years, organized tours for Jewish teenagers have engaged the services of the specially trained tour guides. While theoretically one guide could accompany the group around the country, many groups link up with their guides at the sites and thus encounter different tour guides as they work their way around the country.

Among the drawbacks of this arrangement is that the guides have little familiarity with the participants or with the educational philosophy of the program. Also, some say the use of outside experts subtly undermines the authority of the counselor. Last, tour guides see themselves as tour guides, not as informal Jewish educators. The distinction between the two professions is subtle but consequential. The tour guide tends to place emphasis on understanding the site, its background and its context. The educator tries to get the participants to grapple with what being at this site means to them as developing Jews.

In contrast with the model of using different tour guides, most trip directors with whom we spoke strongly advocated combining the roles of counselor or educator and tour guide. In their view, the guide should be continually associated with the group, rather than drop in as an informed outsider. Having a single guide and one who also serves as a counselor means that he/she knows the group well, can adjust to the group's needs, is able to connect different segments of the trip to one another, and can relate the sites and activities to the particular philosophy of the group. As one director said, "We used different tour guides early in the program, but we found they tended to focus on sites rather than on the themes, which was not in keeping with our philosophy."

To elaborate on a point made earlier, the directors see Israel as a text waiting to be interpreted by the reader-participant. How one interprets that text depends upon one's environment, background, needs, and Judaic approach. To illustrate, leaders of all three denominational movements' programs (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) are quite convinced (and, in our view, quite rightly) that each of their programs interacts with the same sites and places (e.g., the Western Wall, Masada, or an absorption center) in a fashion distinctive to that denominational movement.

In exceptional circumstances, some directors endorse the use of specialists who have a distinctive and commanding approach to a particular topic or activity. But, obviously, these specialists do not accompany the group throughout the entire trip. Ideally, recognizing this shortcoming, the counselor/educators should participate along with the youngsters in the specialist's activity. The constant presence of the group's own educational staff allows for continuity in the educational experience that would otherwise be lost.

## **THE PHILOSOPHY**

The program has clearly articulated Judaic and educational philosophies that the staff has "bought into" and that pervade the trip experience.

Thomas Watson, Jr., [past CEO of IBM] has said that

“the basic philosophy of an organization has far more to do with its achievements than do technological or economic resources, organizational structure, innovation, and timing.” . . . Every excellent company we studied is clear on what it stands for, and takes the process of value shaping seriously. In fact, we wonder whether it is possible to be an excellent company without clarity on values and without having the right sorts of values. [Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies.*]

A clear and pervasive philosophy, one that is understood by the entire staff from top to bottom, is a key component of excellence. In the better programs, not only are their Judaic and educational philosophies clearly articulated by the director, but the staff and participants are also well aware of these philosophies and have adopted them as their own. In contrast, we learned of several programs where those responsible for leadership failed to formulate, project, or put into action a comprehensive philosophy.

### **Judaic Philosophy**

In our view, each program's philosophy must address the question of how one is to be a Jew in modern times. Thus, all programs cannot (and should not) hold up the same model of the good Jew. The good trips, consistent with their philosophy, choose to emphasize their own answer to the question of how one can be a Jew in the modern society. They may stress communal activity, feeling connected with the Jewish People, social action, politics, religious observance, God, study, prayer, Zionism, Jewish culture, Hebrew, or some combination of these elements. They may emphasize feelings (e.g., of belongingness and attachment), skills (e.g., text study), or knowledge (e.g., of Hebrew, Jewish history). But whatever they emphasize, they do single out certain elements of Jewish involvement as desirable, if not essential, to Jewish life.

Programs that operate within a denominational or movement framework have a distinct advantage here. Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform each offer a comprehensive model of the good Jew. In theory at least,

each proposes answers to a broad range of questions, ranging from Jewish law to prayer to relating to Gentiles to social action, and so forth. In like fashion, the ideologically informed trips sponsored by Zionist movements also draw upon a clear set of Judaic values. For many of them, the model Jew is one who accepts the classic Zionist critique of Diaspora Jewish life and settles in Israel (or, for some movements, on a kibbutz). Another illustration is offered by an educationally oriented Israel-tour program for adults. The United Jewish Appeal's missions focus on a particular segment of the model Jew: one who feels a sense of responsibility to Jews worldwide and participates in the rescue and relief of endangered or impoverished Jews.

In contrast, programs outside a denominational or ideological Zionist framework face a special challenge. They have no ready-made model Jew, no available philosophy of Jewish life that can inform their particular educational missions. These programs need to develop a clear sense of their purpose with respect to the Judaic message they want to deliver. One program emphasizes a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people generally and attachment to Israelis specifically. Another focuses on finding one's personal connection to Jews and Judaism. Yet another emphasizes intellectual growth, the political realm, and pluralism.

An inspection of programs' literature, itinerary, and activities convey their underlying Judaic philosophy, clearly stated or implied. Whether participants have extensive contact with Israelis (and which Israelis), debate current issues within Israeli society, or serve at an old age home, says a great deal about what the program stands for. Do they visit sites outside the Green Line? Do they spend time on kibbutz? How much time is devoted to Biblical Israel, and how much to exploring the natural wonders of the Negev?

Diverse examples of the Judaic objectives of various programs we observed include the following:

- 1) A personal encounter with the major challenges and conflicts within contemporary Israeli society; or
- 2) Studying the chronological history of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel from Biblical times to the present day; or

- 3) Exploring one's personal connections with other Jews and learning how to feel attached to others with widely different sorts of Jewish values and interests.

In good trips, the way in which day-to-day activities are planned also reflects the philosophy. For example, one trip has a clear goal that its young participants will remain in contact over the years and form a fellowship with a common language to interact on issues of Jewish import. We observed them when they saw a dramatic play in progress on the theme of the relationships between Israelis and Palestinians. When the play was over, they discussed their reactions in small groups, returned to ask questions, and shared some of these reactions with the entire group. Providing time for small-group discussion embodies the program's objective of building lasting ties among group members.

For another group it was clear that Jewish history was an important link to who they are as Jews. The Holocaust claimed an important place in that history. While almost every group goes to Yad Vashem as part of their summer experience in Israel, this visit was built as more of a key experience for this group. Their evening program the night before had focused on the Holocaust. The counselors asked the participants to dress with reverence, which they did. In addition to touring the museum, the participants took part in a service at the Hall of Remembrance and heard a Holocaust survivor tell her story for close to an hour.

We noted above that programs offer markedly varied approaches to Jewish life in the Diaspora. Another major axis of philosophical differentiation entails their approach to Israel and Zionism, a component of Judaic philosophy that in this context demands special attention. To what extent does the program try to present the young participants with the Zionist imperative of living in Israel?

In our observations, we discerned a spectrum of stances. At one extreme are explicitly Zionist programs that hold out the ideal of aliyah as the highest form of Jewish fulfillment. At the other extreme are programs that are explicitly neutral about Zionist commitment. And between these two extremes are the many programs that clearly confront participants with the distinctions between Israeli and Diaspora Judaism, and seek to engage them in the personal search for where they belong as a Jew. It is safe to say that almost all Jews on their first trip to Israel are struck by

Israel's extraordinary character and struggle with what this encounter with Israel means to them as a Jew living in the Diaspora. The good trips, in our view, are prepared to address the questions that inevitably arise. At bare minimum, they have a clear approach to the answers (Zionist or otherwise) they will offer.

## **Educational Philosophy**

In addition to defining their Judaic objectives, the programs must grapple with deciding on their educational goals, methods and approaches. In short, they need to determine the educational philosophy of the trip.

The specific policy issues that fall under the rubric of educational philosophy are numerous, complex, and difficult to specify. They include such questions as:

- the proper balance between experiential learning and text study;
- the recognition of different cognitive and emotional styles or, more specifically, the different ways in which people learn;
- the extent to which the youngsters will be granted autonomy, responsibility, and independence (and in which areas);
- the appropriate level of attention to group-building; and
- the extent to which counselors are to challenge the personal space of impressionable adolescents:

Clearly, the foregoing list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. The point is, any program with any set of Judaic objectives can (and must) also develop a particular educational style or approach. The choice of educational style is separate and distinct from the choice of Judaic philosophy.

Achieving pervasive Judaic and educational philosophies is easier in a small operation where those who create and develop the philosophy are in constant and direct contact with the participants and the rest of the staff. It becomes more difficult, but still feasible, in the larger programs

with many bus loads per summer. For these groups especially, the presence of veteran staff members, or staff members who themselves were products of the movement, youth group, or the program itself helps to re-enforce the centrality of the philosophy.

Once the Judaic and educational philosophies have been developed, good programs work to make those philosophies pervade every aspect of the trip. The philosophy should influence every step of planning and execution, from recruitment of participants, to selection and training of the staff, to the design of the itinerary and accompanying curricular materials, to the actual experience in the field. Ideally, the responsible staff needs to understand that there should be a reason for every decision, and the reason should be consistent with the basic philosophical underpinnings of the trip.

## THE CURRICULUM

- The Jewish and educational philosophies strongly influence the choice of the sites to be visited and how they are utilized.
- The trip is built around educational sub-themes; days are planned as educationally thematic units.
- The program units are individually successful. Each such unit should stand on its own as an island of excellence.
- The itinerary is planned with awareness of the sequence, flow, rhythm, and balance of experiences.

### The Program's Philosophy Informs the Curriculum

Each program utilizes its own distinctive curriculum. For the Israel experience, we are defining the curriculum as encompassing not only the itinerary, that is, the sites to be visited and the sequence in which they are visited. Rather the curriculum also embraces what the programs do with the sites once they get there.

Many groups visit many of the same sites in Israel: the Western Wall, Yad Vashem, Masada, the Diaspora museum, a kibbutz, and other conventional tourist destinations. Most also spend some time in certain regions of the country (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Galilee, and the Negev). But even when they view the same sites, various programs use the sites for different purposes and in different contexts.

Jerusalem, for example, may be “used” in a variety of ways. In no special order, these include:

- 1) To explore Jewish-Arab relations;
- 2) To emphasize the holiness of the Land of Israel;
- 3) To provide a window on three thousand years of Jewish history;
- 4) To illustrate the complexities of relations between religious and secular Jews (or between rich and poor, or between Ashkenazi and Sephardi).

The development of an Israel experience curriculum, then, entails expressing an educational mission that derives from the program’s Judaic and educational philosophies. The curriculum ought to include a specific and detailed written plan as to how to use the itinerary to achieve specific educational objectives.

### **Thematic Integrity**

Most program directors we interviewed advocated using educational themes in the planning and execution of their trips. They spoke of themes operating on two levels. First, thematic lessons (perhaps half a dozen in number) should thread their way through parts of the entire program. Second, units of time (typically of a day’s length) should be devoted to specific themes.

Examples of each will serve to clarify these notions.

We find that trips emphasize several sub-themes consistent with their larger educational mission. These sub-themes may apply to a specific chunk of time on the trip or they may constantly emerge and re-emerge throughout the trip at different points. Examples here include:

- 1) The Zionist mission of gathering in the Exiles; aliyah and absorption.
- 2) The struggle for Jerusalem.
- 3) The challenge of Judaic diversity and pluralistic responses.
- 4) Minority-majority tensions within Israeli society.
- 5) Historic persecution and anti-Semitism.
- 6) The holiness of the Land of Israel.
- 7) The interplay of modernity and tradition.

### **Days as Thematic Units**

Most directors agreed that the day constitutes a fundamental educational period. The argument in favor of thematic integrity, at least on the level of the day, has to be seen in contrast with what may be called a tourist's approach to seeing the sites. Thus, a tourist may arrive in Tel Aviv and visit the Diaspora Museum, the picturesque parts of Jaffa, the beach, and the cafes on Dizengoff, without any sense of order or educational purpose. In contrast, most good trips try to build the entire day around a specific theme, rather than move from sight to sight in random order. For example, several of the trips go from Yad Vashem to a tree planting ceremony. The rationale is to take the emotional experience of Yad Vashem, the horror and the sadness, and to somehow participate in the physical rebuilding, the act of planting, continuity, redemption.

Another group takes a day studying the battle for Jerusalem in 1967, visiting Latrun (on the road to Jerusalem), the Mandelbaum Gate (and museum), and then Ammunition Hill. By stopping along the way to see

the city from the various perspectives, they gain an enriched and powerful understanding of the struggle for control of Jerusalem during the Six Days War.

The use of themes on various levels provides an instructive context for the participant as learner. The themes, in effect, are the lessons, large and small, that the program is trying to convey. They provide the connections between and among the experiences, both during the day and during the entire trip.

### **Program Units as Independent Islands of Excellence**

The desirability of a thematic approach to the day and to the entire trip notwithstanding, each program unit — be it a lecture, a site visit, or group activity — ought to stand on its own as an individual island of excellence. We need to recall that the primary audience here is Jewish adolescents, 15-17 years old, who are traveling during their summer vacation months. It is certainly true that most are impressed by the noble ideals associated with a pilgrimage-like trip to Israel and by their participation in what is presented as a very special group of youngsters. However, these sentiments are, in themselves, not sufficient to overcome the disappointment that would ensue from several poorly executed activities. The potential for carping and frustration is rather high and incipient. As a consequence, each program, each day, each 2-4 hour chunk of activity needs to perform up to high expectations.

### **Rhythm and Balance**

One veteran Jewish educator remarked to us, “Many trips have a beginning, middle, and end; but not necessarily in that order.” The point he was making was that a good trip to Israel is not merely a collection of individual experiences — even excellent experiences — haphazardly thrown together. Rather, a successful curriculum involves experiences that build upon one another in a particular order.

When planning the itineraries and the curricula, educators need to take into account the ever-changing emotional and physical needs of the participants. One experienced program director told us he learned an

important lesson in trip-planning the first time he took youngsters to Eastern Europe in a week devoted to the Holocaust. The first few days after their arrival in Israel, the participants (all of whom were selected for their strong Judaic background and motivation) were unusually unruly and inattentive. Their behavior was especially perplexing if only because they had been so transfixed by the European segment. After holding a special meeting to attend to the difficulties, he learned that he had made a mistake by plunging them directly into the standard Israel program without giving the youngsters some recreational time to unwind after the emotionally draining experience in Europe.

The director of another group says he makes sure to begin and end the trip with a week in Jerusalem so as to convey the message that Jerusalem is home. Still another trip intentionally places Jerusalem in the middle of its itinerary. Its program director believes that his trip's outdoor activities in the Negev or the Galilee are more inherently enjoyable and contribute to group-building. In contrast, his trip's Jerusalem activities, entailing visits to several museums and archaeological sites, require a more socially cohesive and educationally motivated group, one that will emerge only after some time into the trip.

Concerns about rhythm and balance extend from the overall level of the entire trip down to the level of the single day. On many programs, the rhythm of the well-planned day begins with preparation for an activity, the conduct of the activity, time to reflect on the meaning of the activity, and time to unwind and relax. Good trips build in periods to digest and assess the recent educational experiences. Group meetings may occur as frequently as once a day, or once every three days, or as little as once a week.

As with the other elements we have discussed, we can report no clear consensus on the precise rhythm and sequence of activities; but we can report that the directors of all good trips devote thoughtful attention to those issues. The scheduling of particular activities, be it in the context of the entire trip or of a single day, inevitably carries with it certain advantages and disadvantages. Good program directors are aware of those concerns and plan accordingly.

## THE TRIP EXPERIENCE: FUNDAMENTALS

- Participants enjoy the trip; they have fun. But recreational activities have educational import.
- The logistics of the trip run smoothly and they facilitate a flexible itinerary, one that can change during the trip in accord with the changing needs of the group. But the staff is committed to an educationally intensive schedule of activities.
- The trip has clear safety guidelines that are well-understood and observed.
- The staff articulates and enforces consistently clear disciplinary guidelines regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

### Recreation: Necessary, But Not Sufficient

A fundamental pre-requisite of any successful trip is that it be enjoyable. In providing reasons for why they might consider a trip to Israel, young people readily admit that their chief interest in going is to "have fun."

Failure to provide youngsters with a thoroughly enjoyable summer experience may well sour them on Israel. They will be less likely to return (almost a universal goal of Israel programs) and less likely to enthusiastically recommend the program or Israel travel to their friends. (Recommendations are a major source of recruitment.) On the other hand, the association of the Israel experience with an immensely enjoyable summer (which is, fortunately, a very frequent occurrence) may implant some very positive feelings about Israel for years to come.

The very nature of the organized summer trip provides many of the key ingredients for a fun-filled experience. Youngsters are traveling abroad, perhaps for the first time, in the company of others their age, often including close friends. They are away from the responsibilities of school and the close supervision of parents. They are spending time outdoors in a very attractive environment, and are being treated to new and different experiences, sometimes several times a day.

Despite all these advantages, participants' post-trip evaluations often complain about impediments to having a good time. These include, most prominently, poor quality of food and uncomfortable accommodations.

Clearly, those planning trips need to strike a balance between competing objectives, and the balance should be struck differently for different groups. One critical choice is to decide how much time to devote to the more explicit educational activities, and how much to allow for heavily recreational experiences such as shopping, swimming, sunning, and free time. Trip directors are well aware that participants regularly complain that they wished for more "free time," that they feel the program is too jam-packed, even as they also typically state that they had a fabulous summer. Nevertheless, some directors we interviewed advocated maximizing the time devoted to more explicitly educationally oriented activities, and allowing for just enough recreational time to, in effect, "keep the troops happy." Moreover, one suggested that, as far as possible, recreational activities should draw upon the uniqueness of Israel. They should expose the participants to Israelis and to the ways in which Israelis enjoy themselves. To illustrate, an evening at an Israeli discotheque is preferable to a party for the group alone. An afternoon at a beach populated by Israeli families or swimming at Sachne are preferable to taking over a kibbutz swimming pool for an equivalent time.

Most directors believe that their programs must provide enough recreational time and experiences so as to facilitate the achievement of higher educational objectives. In other words, having fun is in part a means to other goals, rather than an end in itself.

### **Good Logistics and Some Flexibility**

Good trip planners strive to subordinate their logistical environment to their educational objectives, rather than the other way around. In other words, the availability of accommodations and transportation during the peak summer period can certainly constrain the itinerary. The problem is especially acute for programs that field several bus loads simultaneously. Better programs manage to develop the administrative skills, contacts, and relationships necessary to assure priority in scheduling itineraries so as to suit the educational design of the trip, rather than having the availability of accommodations dictate the itinerary.

Even a trip that is brilliantly planned can fail if plagued by poor logistical performance. Every trip has its occasional mishaps — buses that arrive late, or speakers who cancel at the last minute; but the good trips attend well to administrative detail and provide back-up systems to address the unanticipated foul-ups. Often they designate a special staff member who has the bulk of the responsibility for overseeing this area.

The test of a logistical system comes not only in its ability to recover from occasional glitches, but in providing room for mid-course adjustment. The good trips seem to be administratively flexible enough to allow for an occasional early-to-bed or morning sleep-in when the staff feels the participants are just too exhausted to stick with the pre-arranged schedule. One group we observed started their morning program an hour later than usual because the teenagers had just returned from a three-day camping trip. The staff decided that to push on without enough sleep would result in a wasted day.

But the lesson of flexibility should not be over-drawn. We sense that the better programs are driven by a commitment to their educational agenda. The staff — from the director to the bus group counselor — are committed to following the daily lesson plan, to sticking to schedule, to getting the most out of each educational activity. In contrast, we observed some groups that exhibited a lackadaisical ethos, where activities started late and where counselors routinely tolerated stragglers and late-comers. Group leaders certainly need enough autonomy and flexibility to make appropriate adjustments. But the supervisory staff needs to be in a position to check the frequent tendency of the generally less experienced (and less committed) counselor staff to advocate a slower pace and a less intense schedule than the group can tolerate.

## **Safety**

Few teenage participants are themselves concerned with safety issues. The possibility that they may break a limb on a hike or that, even worse, suffer from a terrorist attack is generally remote from their minds. However, these issues certainly concern parents, community supporters, and the trip purveyors themselves.

The directors hold diverse views as to what promotes safety, as is reflected in the diversity of their guidelines. Some insist that an armed guard always accompany the group, and others require one only on excursions to certain areas. Some trips stay within the Green Line, while other programs spend considerable time in West Bank Jewish communities. Some trips allow teenagers to take the bus to downtown Jerusalem by themselves, while others do not.

We find it noteworthy that the severity of the restrictions is inconsistent. One program that bars its teenagers from going by bus to the city, allows them to swim at beaches with no lifeguards, while, on other trips, the regulations are the reverse. The very diversity in guidelines, as well as some practices that seem questionable to our eyes, suggests that a consultation among the relevant senior staff from several programs is warranted.

### **Adolescent Behavior and Adult Supervision: The Issue of Discipline**

Young participants are very sensitive to maintaining their independence. Yet, all programs must establish guidelines governing such issues as lateness, drinking, sexual activity, drugs, smoking, and responsibility to the group. While most young participants we spoke with seemed satisfied with their level of regulation, many members of one group complained that there wasn't enough independence. The curfew, for example, was too early. "If our parents trusted us to come so far on our own, we should have a little more room to maneuver."

The better programs are clear about articulating which behaviors are discouraged and which are absolutely forbidden. All prohibit any use of illicit drugs. Some very strictly forbid alcohol consumption, while others are, in practice, more lenient. Some ban any "PDA" (Public Display of [romantic] Affection) as an inhibition to building a cohesive group. In contrast, one director remarked that he views the emergence of romantic relationships between Jewish youngsters as an important side-benefit of his program's Israel experience.

Clearly, programs need to select which elements of adolescent behavior they will tolerate, and which they will discourage, if not prohibit outright. And they also need to clearly communicate these rules both to

the participants and to their parents. Some programs require participants and parents to read and sign a contractual document in which the participants pledge to abide by the program's regulations.

Observations from a study of good high schools also apply to good programs for Jewish teenage visitors to Israel:

Good high schools provide safe and regulated environments. ... A strong sense of authority is reinforced by an explicit ideological vision, a clear articulation of the purposes and goals of education. Ideology, authority, and order combine to produce a coherent institution that supports human interaction and growth. These institutional frameworks and structures are critical for adolescents, whose uncertainty and vulnerability call for external boundary setting. In their abrupt shifts from childishness to maturity, they need settings that are rooted in tradition, that will give them clear signals of certainty and continuity. [Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, *The Good High School*, p. 350.]

In like fashion, Israel programs not only need to establish guidelines governing several areas of deportment; the staff also need to consistently enforce them as well.

## THE TRIP EXPERIENCE: ELEMENTS OF DISTINCTION

- The program manages to successfully engage the participants in conventional educational activities: e.g., classes, lectures, and readings.
- The trip experience early on establishes group cohesiveness.
- The participants develop pride in themselves and in their program as distinctive. The trip conveys and reinforces a shared sense of purpose or mission.
- The program promotes active learning, rather than passive participation.
- The program capitalizes on the adolescent life stage. It consciously provides intellectual, physical, social and emotional challenges that allow the young adult participants to grow and mature within the context of an Israel experience.
- The staff regularly monitors and evaluates the individual participants' and the group's experience as the trip proceeds and responds accordingly.

### **Formal Learning in the Informal Program: Classes, Lectures and Reading Material**

All organized youth trips engage in some sort of informal education. The better, more educationally oriented trips often use more conventional pedagogic techniques as well. Somehow, they manage to overcome the reluctance of youngsters on a summer vacation to engage in school-like activities.

To be clear, when we speak of "formal" learning in this informal context, we are not referring to grades, homework, written assignments and all the trappings of school. So-called formal classes are conducted in a very informal manner; gum-chewing, feet up on the chairs, and youngsters

sprawled on the floor typify these lectures. Nevertheless, program directors who incorporate formal learning are convinced their participants benefit from the experience.

Educationally intensive trips supplement the experience of touring and guiding at the sites with preceding preparatory classes, discussions, and/or lectures. All would agree that while learning takes place at the site itself, it may be counter-productive to give participants all they need to know while standing in the hot sun, or while crowding the entrance to a museum. The educational sessions prior to visiting sites provide the essential background for the upcoming experiences. One group we saw met the evening before the trip to Yad Vashem to review factual information about the Holocaust and to set the emotional tone for the visit by reading poems, and excerpts from Holocaust diaries. Another group participated in a program from the Jewish National Fund about the importance of trees to Israel as a prelude to a tree-planting experience the next morning. A third group held a seminar on the disputed territories a few hours before they physically explored those areas.

Aside from scheduling classes and lectures, several programs distribute source books to the participants once they arrive. They often include maps and background information on the sites they will visit. Counselors and guides hold the key to whether the source books are utilized. Sometimes they encourage participants to bring the source books with them on the tour and frequently refer to them during the trip. However, without the encouragement of counselors (as is generally the case), few participants seem to actually make use of the source books on the trip itself. Some trip purveyors claim that their primary usefulness comes after the trip when some participants may scan the source books to recall their summer experiences.

### **Promoting Group Cohesiveness**

By cohesive groups, we mean those where most adolescents enjoy one another's company, care for each other, and share a common set of symbols, myths, and memorable experiences. Participants in such well-functioning groups help each other appreciate the Israel encounter. These are groups where it is reasonable to assume that the educational impact will be that much more powerful and long-lasting. Group cohesiveness relates directly to several of the objectives enunciated by

many trip providers. Cohesive groups engender a sense of belonging to other Jewishly committed youngsters. They also forge an association of what may be the first Israel experience with a very positive and distinctive social experience. And, not least, informal educators claim that, as a general rule, more cohesive groups simply learn more readily. As one observer writes:

The tour guide must examine the cohesiveness of his group in order to know which *hadracha* [counseling] tools to use. A cohesive, disciplined group is likely to be more responsive to its guide's initiatives than a fragmented group. The tour guide must be sensitive to the internal dynamics of the group, knowing when and how to consolidate it, thereby creating the conditions for successful and enjoyable educational activities. [Ami Bouganim, *Sites and Sources*, Jewish Education Committee of the Jewish Agency, p. 13.]

Recognizing these advantages, the better programs use a variety of approaches to try to foster cohesiveness prior to the trip, as noted earlier, or certainly very early in the trip experience. One program starts with rigorous outdoors activities. Its organizers claim that the experience of helping one another overcome physical obstacles and fatigue builds familiarity, trust, and intimacy among the participants. Other programs specifically schedule break-the-ice activities to help introduce participants and staff to one another. Some encourage participants to share with the group their highly personal reactions to sites and activities. Other group-building techniques focus on the formation of a common knowledge base, of making sure each participant is familiar with the same themes, concepts, and vocabulary. Whatever the specific technique, good programs are keenly aware that they need to build ties amongst group members and to the counselors as well.

### **Pride, Spirit, and Ethos**

In our observations of trips in the field, we learned that many groups that were having unusually good Israel experiences were also those where the participants felt that they were special and that their trips were engaged in distinctive activities. They were proud to claim that their group was different from or better than others.

“Other trips are known as million star hotel trips. We do more than just see a lot of the sites,” bragged one teenager on a trip noted for an unusual amount of hiking and outdoors activities. A young woman in another group favorably compared her group’s tree-planting activity with that of another group she had been part of. “Here we really did something. With the other group the hole was dug for you and everything. It almost felt when you left that they took the tree out and gave it to the next person.”

Others saw their trip as *the one* with “the Zionist viewpoint,” or the “traditional approach.” “This program makes us part of Israeli society like no other program”, or, “On this program we make friendships that last for a lifetime.” On programs which emphasize intellectual freedom, the participants spoke of how the other more conventional programs are “full of propaganda. This was the only program I could have gone on.”

In these comments we find a sense of strong in-group elan combined with a sense of mission. Often, the very names of the program impart a sense of distinctiveness. Their titles include such educationally challenging terms as “seminar,” “fellowship,” and “pilgrimage.” Many staff members are quite conscious of creating this sense of group pride. “We build their motivation to experience more by telling them explicitly ‘This isn’t a trip, it’s a program’. They know they are doing things that other trips don’t do.”

On many trips, the very language the directors use to describe their programs seeps down to the front-line staff and to the participants. Our interview notes find the youthful participants were unwittingly mimicking the code words of the program directors. Clearly, group ethos and group pride start at the top.

### **Active Learning and Involvement**

Educational literature stresses the importance of active participation. As a rule of thumb, active participants learn more than passive listeners. Good educational programs consciously attempt to provide for active involvement.

For example, many tour guides lecture without interruption, but the better ones engage the participants by repeatedly throwing out

provocative questions. Rather than intoning, “We are entering the valley of Ayalon where David slew Goliath,” a more educationally oriented guide might start with: “We are now entering the Valley of Ayalon. Does anyone remember from studying the book of Samuel what famous interaction took place here?”

We saw the two contrasting approaches used at Yad Vashem. One guide stopped to lecture for about ten minutes in front of the mural at the entrance to the museum. He pointed out various symbols and interpreted what the artist wanted to express through them. As he spoke, other groups of tourists walked by and diverted the attention of many of the individuals in his group.

A guide with another group spoke for a moment about the mural as a statement by the artist of the world of the Holocaust. She then asked the youngsters to explain the symbols themselves. Their answers were so imaginative; they saw things that the guide admitted she had never noticed before. These young people were actively engaged in the discovery and interpretation of the symbols. In contrast with the former group, this group was so attentive that they hardly noticed the stream of tour groups heading into the museum.

Recent years have seen the emergence of specially designed program units that emphasize active involvement. One such unit, the Middle East simulation game, puts the participants in the roles of leaders of conflicting regional powers. Working with a team of fellow government leaders, the participants enact diplomatic and military maneuvers. The game allows the participants to directly experience the intractable difficulties of reaching some sort of international compromise that also serves their adopted countries’ national interests.

The Neighborhood Game, where participants are sent in teams searching for clues and symbols in one of Jerusalem’s oldest and most historic neighborhoods, also serves to bring learning to life. Here participants actively undergo lessons on Jerusalem’s past and present in a compelling game.

Many individual programs have devised their own activities which actively engage participants as they go through the Israel Museum, the Museum of the Land of Israel, David’s Tower, or the Diaspora Museum.

For example, one program has the young people divide up and each group goes into a different room of David's Tower. They are then asked to write a newspaper article as though they lived during that period. Another program asks the participants to spend some time on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall conducting man-in-the-street interviews of a random assortment of Israelis.

All of the foregoing is not to suggest that groups are abandoning the more standard lecture format, nor that they should do so. Games and other specially designed activities have their drawbacks as well. They are time-consuming (both in their planning and execution) and sometimes distracting from the central educational objective. Moreover, if so-called creative activities are used excessively, groups can become inured to them and their educational impact. Nevertheless, we see programs struggling to achieve what for them is the proper balance of traditional with less conventional styles of instruction, making sure to include active learning.

### **Making Choices, Taking Initiative, Assuming Responsibility**

When given the freedom to choose, or even the mere semblance of choice, people become far more invested in the what they have chosen. Owners of particular brands of personal computers report very high levels of satisfaction (with almost all brands) in part because their satisfaction confirms the wisdom of their prior act of consumer choice. In like fashion, the psychological literature speaks of the need for all individuals, youngsters as well as adults, to establish a locus of control, some domain where they can exercise influence. The experience of autonomy itself is satisfying and, on some level, necessary for psychological well-being.

The same lessons apply to education generally, and to youth trips to Israel in particular. Insofar as programs can allow participants to exercise genuine choices, to take initiative, and to assume responsibility, participants will respond with greater personal investment and satisfaction. Ultimately, they will benefit educationally as well.

Trips we observed allow for choice in a variety of ways. One program schedules a week during the course of the summer when the teenagers

could choose one of three activities, to wit, a sea-to- sea hike, an archaeology and agriculture program in the Negev, or para-military training in a Gadna camp. Another program offers a choice of classes ranging in subject matter from basic Judaism, to conversational Hebrew, to Spinoza. Still another program requires participants to express their experience in an individually designed art project. But the choice of medium (to say nothing of the project itself) is left to the participant. Alternatives include poetry, sculpture, drama, prose, dance, and graphic arts. Programs also offer choices of different Shabbat experiences, or simply different activities for an evening or afternoon.

Related to the issue of choice is the broader concern with providing for a sense of autonomy and independence, issues that are particularly important for developing adolescents.

One way to allow for independence is to give the participants some decision-making power not only over their own activities but over matters affecting the entire group. One program has participants volunteer to serve on committees to undertake such functions as planning prayer services or special evening activities. Good programs try to respond to the initiatives of the teenagers. For example, in one case, several participants had gone on their free time to the Diplomat Hotel in Jerusalem shortly after the massive rescue of the Ethiopian Jews. They had made some acquaintances among new arrivals. The group was scheduled to visit the Absorption Center in M'vasseret Tzion, a town outside Jerusalem, the next day, but due to the initiative of these participants, the program arranged to take the entire group to the Diplomat Hotel instead.

## **Levels of Challenge**

A good program capitalizes on the adolescent life stage. For adolescents experiencing growth and maturation, the Israel summer experience can offer highly rewarding intellectual, emotional, physical, and social challenges. In providing opportunities for the participants to meet those challenges, the program can help to create a sense of self-worth and personal accomplishment. In theory, the young adults will associate Israel with their positive sense of growth, maturity, independence, and coming of age.

**The intellectual challenge** can emerge out of the formal classes, lectures, debates, discussion groups, source books, preparatory literature and sites, to say nothing of the numerous informal conversations with Israelis, staff, and fellow participants. For the first time many of these young people are seriously confronting Jewish history, the Arab-Israeli conflict, what it means to be a Jew, the issue of religious coercion versus denominational pluralism, Israeli politics, and religious texts, to name just a few possibilities.

A good trip also offers powerful **emotional challenges**. For example, many participants have studied about the Holocaust in school, but going through Yad Vashem is a totally different, often wrenching experience. They may have some familiarity with the Zionist concept of “In-gathering the Exiles,” and Israel as a refuge for oppressed Jews; but it is when they visit an absorption center and meet families from Ethiopia or the Soviet Union that the young participants speak readily about their intense feelings of finally understanding the oneness of the Jewish people.

The emotional challenges embrace the spiritual realm as well. Young Jews react as much as their elders to first encountering the Western Wall. In one case, a proclaimed atheist questioned his beliefs as he watched his comrades’ faces when they prayed facing the sunrise from atop of Masada. Few can escape the haunting spirituality in the desert, the awe and majesty of creation. Some guides help participants picture Abraham and Sarah (or other biblical characters) on a particular landscape. Certainly, these experiences offer sharp contrasts both in character and potency with their sense of Jewishness that is expressed in classrooms back home or even in abstract discussions at youth group or camp programs.

Learning to function in a strange society provides another source of emotional fulfillment. One girl told us how she managed to return to Jerusalem by bus from a free weekend away. Not knowing Hebrew and never having been to Israel before, she reported a great sense of achievement in having successfully managed to find the right bus, buy the ticket, and work her way back to her base in Jerusalem — a minor achievement to be sure, but representative of many other such experiences these North American adolescents encounter during their trips to Israel.

Most programs provide some **physical challenge** as well. To the extent that the trips include hiking, climbing, and outdoorsmanship, participants come to learn how far can they push their bodies. Generally, teenagers are quite pleased to discover how well they can endure rigorous physical challenges. One young man told us of how he learned to overcome his fear of heights during one of these hikes. The outdoor activities also provide for a real physical attachment to the land of Israel, an experience that is common to young Israelis, but rare for Diaspora youngsters. They gain a sense of connection to Israel that only comes with walking and hiking the land.

While every camp experience certainly provides opportunities for **social growth**, these Israel trips offer an even more intense social experience. As noted, many programs provide the group with decision-making authority and the opportunity to regulate their own conduct. No counselors sleep in the participants' rooms, and no adult supervisor is on hand to oversee many of these informal moments. They are experiencing a great deal of freedom and responsibility, not unlike the experience they will encounter only a year or two later as college freshmen. And they are undergoing these new social adventures far away from home, from the familiar matrix of parental rules and regulations. More than in any other circumstance prior to this trip, the young participants need to learn to function as a supportive community.

For all these reasons, the trips provide a genuine feeling of independence that many of these young people have never previously experienced. Whether it is immersing themselves in the intense Jewish society of Israel, hiking for several days in a row, taking buses alone for the first time, confronting a foreign culture, being totally away from family, or making new friends quickly, these 15-17 year olds must learn to cope with new intellectual, physical and social challenges; and most do so, to their own immense satisfaction.

The curriculum planners associated with better programs attend to the issue of providing challenges and capitalizing on the feelings attached to meeting them. They make sure their curriculum provides opportunities for intellectual, social, physical, and emotional experiences. Moreover, the staff on these programs is prepared to support, enhance and utilize the sense of fulfillment and accomplishment that meeting these challenges engenders.

## **Ongoing Evaluation and Feedback**

The same well-founded principles of evaluation, feedback, and adjustment that apply to any organized endeavor apply to the Israel summer trip as well. Ideally, programs should collect information from the staff and participants, learn of problems as they arise, and attend to them in short order.

Almost all programs manage to field some sort of formal evaluation process at the end of the trip. Typically, participants and staff rate different aspects of the summer and provide critical comments and recommendations. Program directors claim to make use of these evaluations in planning for future groups.

But aside from end-of-summer evaluations, good programs manage to utilize feedback from the group during the trip itself. Programs vary in the extent to which this ongoing evaluative process actually takes place. Some programs engage in regular monitoring where counselors hold regular meetings with the participants to digest the last few days of activities, and educational supervisors regularly meet with both counselors and participants. These and other techniques assure that all members of the program, from top directors to supervisors to line staff to participants, feel that channels of communication are open, that others seek out and value their input.

Of course, even accurate information is useless unless someone is willing and able to respond accordingly. Again, the better programs claim to adjust and to intervene in response to emerging issues, but, frankly, not every program has the ability in terms of personnel and administrative support to be as responsive and as flexible as others.

In the ideal world, programs would assess their progress and difficulties both in the short term and at the end of the trip as well.

## THE FOLLOW-UP

- The program or sponsoring agency at home provides follow-up for the individual, a way of internalizing what they have experienced after they return.
- The broader community (parents, synagogues, communities, etc.) is involved in some way with the experience of the participants.

Educational theory suggests that follow-up programs with the participants after they return from their exciting trips to Israel could be extremely valuable; but hardly anyone does anything about it. Previous CRBF-sponsored research (Cohen, 1991) demonstrated that enthusiasm about Israel is both high and widespread in the few months after returning from Israel, but then begins to decay. Those who last visited Israel just over a year ago are considerably less enthusiastic than those whose memories are less than a half year old. Thus, one concrete goal of a concerted follow-up effort would be to increase the rate of return to Israel and, more specifically, to market trips suitable for those who have already participated on an organized program.

For this, if not for other reasons, programs would do well to maintain contact with their participants, if only to stimulate a high rate of return to Israel in the following years. The few programs that have the staff and resources to maintain contact with the former participants report considerable success in maintaining interest in Israel and ties among the group members. Generally, the teenagers are keen on maintaining friendships with the North Americans and the Israelis whom they met on their summer trips. Moreover, many (if not most) are willing and able to become active advocates of Israel travel generally and their programs in particular, if given the opportunity to do so.

A few programs, with considerable investment of staff time, manage to keep their "alumni" in constant touch with one another through reunions, a newsletter, or other activities. Other programs ask their participants to share written reflections on the significance of their experience. Still others publish a periodic newsletter keeping participants abreast of one another.

A few home communities and synagogues do make use of the “alumni” of Israel experience programs. Most typically they are asked to speak at Israel travel fairs or other Israel travel promotions. However, such occasions occur only sporadically. Hardly any synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish high schools, campus Hillels, or other such agencies — to our knowledge — have established systematic approaches geared toward recognizing the small fraction of American Jewish youth who participate in organized travel to Israel and to making use of their experience. Unfortunately, this is all too rare today.

Some directors with whom we spoke were skeptical about the value of what they might call “artificial” rather than “organic” follow-up. They argue that reinforcing the Israel experience can best take place when the youngster is involved in a youth group, synagogue, camp movement, or other context that values and makes use of his or her experience in Israel. We have no compelling evidence that follow-up efforts result in any noticeable educational payoff. However, it stands to reason that maintaining connections among the participants and reinforcing the lessons of the Israel experience should serve to make the impact of the Israel trip more enduring, if not more powerful as well.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The foregoing discussions have touched upon a wide variety of elements of excellence currently found among many organized Israel educational programs for North American Jewish adolescents. Implicit in our discussion of what works is a recommendation that all programs consider those elements that are currently lacking in their programs.

Any policy-maker, faced with numerous alternatives and limited resources, needs to strike a balance between the effort required to embark upon innovation and the likely benefits of that innovation. So it is with program directors or potential trip organizers considering the implications of this report.

We believe that most of the items we addressed require very little in the way of out-of-pocket expense to programs; rather they simply require the

studious and careful attention of the program director or other key educational leader. Included here are three areas: recruitment of participants; planning the curriculum; and developing and applying comprehensive Judaic and educational philosophies. This point is especially pertinent to the local Jewish educator in the North American community who is organizing a trip of area teenagers. There is no reason for these otherwise fully competent educators to abdicate their professional craft and responsibilities when helping to design the trip.

Among the more costly elements we identified were: pre-trip preparation; post-trip follow-up; and staff training. When asked how they would spend several thousand dollars in new discretionary funds, almost all trip purveyors pointed to some aspect of staff training. While the CRBF-funded Melitz counselor training program is certainly helping to raise the number and level of trained staff, programs still need to raise the caliber of personnel they recruit and to more fully train their counselors in their particular approach to the Israel trip. The program directors believe they currently are unable to pay enough to demand that high quality staff devote several days to intensive and extensive training. Some suggest that higher levels of compensation may well facilitate recruitment of better candidates. The issue of whether to spend additional funds on better training, higher compensation, or both remains a question open to further exploration. These findings also have important implications for local educators. The vast number of Israel programs, their diversity, and the diversity of young people all speak to the need for local experts to link the right participants with the right trips. As we have demonstrated, some trips are clearly more suited for certain types of youngsters and some programs are generally superior to other programs. The typical youngster and his/her parents cannot be expected to have this sort of information at their command and that is where the informed professional can prove especially helpful. Rabbis, educators, and youth workers are ideally situated to know the youngsters who are candidates for Israel trips and ought to be in a position to give them and their parents helpful advice on selecting the most suitable programs.

Throughout this report we have deliberately skirted the question of which programs in particular are better than others. Our mandate was not to evaluate trips but to discern and describe elements of excellence. However, as became clear to us and should by now be clear to the reader, some trips are indeed qualitatively superior to others. In varying degrees,

trips are characterized by: participants who are more thoroughly prepared and more cohesive; staff members who are more enthusiastic, capable, trained, and supervised; Judaic and educational philosophies that permeate every aspect of the trip; a well-designed curriculum; and extraordinary activities.

The undeniable variation in quality of program has implications for parents, local professionals, communal leaders, and purveyors. Parents, clearly, have an interest in learning just which programs are generally superior and which are most suitable for their children. As noted earlier, practitioners (local educators, youth workers, etc.) need to become familiar with the diversity of program offerings and how they vary in quality. Community leaders would do well to focus their financial and other support on the superior trips, and/or to target their support for improving those features of organized Israel travel that can most influence the overall quality of the Israel experience. And, not least, purveyors need to re-examine their programs (which many already do) so as to continue to strive to make what is generally a positive experience even better and more consequential.

As we have stated throughout this report, no accomplished professional associated with Israel education for young people would claim that there is a precise recipe for producing high quality trips. So many variations characterize these trips. Programs vary widely in terms of the participants they serve, the Judaic and educational objectives they adopt, and, consequently, the way they utilize the rich text that is the Land and People of Israel. Nevertheless, as we have also maintained throughout this study, certain educational principles and operational guidelines, if followed, should enhance the quality of the Israel experience and magnify its positive impact upon the participants. At the least, we hope to have advanced our collective understanding of those principles and guidelines.

## APPENDIX

### List of Sponsors of Trips Observed, Summer 1991

Alexander Muss High School in Israel  
Am Echad, Montreal  
Bronfman Fellows  
Camp Ramah  
Ezra Academy (spring, 1991)  
National Conference of Synagogue Youth  
National Federation of Temple Youth  
Nesiya  
Shorashim  
United Synagogue Youth  
Young Judaea  
Youth and Hechalutz Department, WZO, Short Term Programs Division

### List of Formal Interviews with Program Directors and Professional Staff

Etan Cooper (Young Judaea)  
Ross Culiner (Jerusalem Neighborhood Game)  
Rabbi Lee Diamond (NFTY)  
Rabbi David Forman (NFTY)  
Dr. Joe Friedman (Ramah)  
Jules Gutin (USY)  
Charles Herman (Nesiya)  
Annette Hochstein  
Avraham Infeld (Melitz)  
Alec Meir  
Nurit Orchan (Youth & Hechalutz)  
David Katz (NCSY)  
Hanan Naveh (Middle East Conflict Resolution Game)  
Rabbi Michael Paley (Bronfman Fellows)  
Dan Paller (Nesiya)  
Leah Praver (Middle East Conflict Resolution Game)  
Arna Poupko (Am Echad)  
Rabbi Benjamin Segal (Ramah)  
Shai Solomon (NCSY)  
Ina Strauss (American Zionist Youth Foundation)  
Moshe Toledano (Young Judaea)

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