

References:

Chazan, B. and Cohen, S. *What We Know About American Jewish Youth and Young Adults, Some Implications for Birthright Israel* in *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 77:2, 2000

Cohen, S. *Geographic Variations in Participation in Israel Experience Youth Program, The CRB Foundation Geo-Coded Survey* in *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 71: 2,3, 1995.

Ezrachi, E. *Israel and Identity Building: Educating American Jewish About Israel* in *The Reconstructionist* 62:2, 1998.

Finkelstein, M. and Shimon, S. *A Federation Approach to Israel Programs: Allied Jewish Communities and the Jewish Education Council of Montreal* in *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. 67:3,1991.

Habib, J. *Imagining Israel, Belonging in the Diaspora: North American Jews' Reflections on Israel as Homeland, Nation and Nation State*. National Library of Canada, 1999.

Isaacs, L. W. and Silverman, D. A. *It's Israel, Chochem!: Factors Affecting Participation of Youth in Israel Experience Programs* in *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. 74:4, 1998.

Levran, Z. *Israel Experience Youth Program Statistics (US) Spring/Summer 2004*, The Jewish Agency for Israel, Department of Education and Identity.

Mittleberg, D. *Impact of Jewish Education and an "Israel Experience" in A New Jewry: Studies in Contemporary Jewry VIII* 1992.

Rosenberg, S. *The New Jewish Identity in America*, Hippocrene Books 1985.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Deborah Kantor Price views the "Israel eXperience" as a wake up call for Jewish education in the United States. Do you agree that the decline in participation in Israel trips in recent years reflects a deeper problem at the core of our educational curricula? What is the place of Israel in your educational institution(s)' philosophy and curriculum?
- The author references current research that has aided in developing and understanding the Israel trip and its role for Jewish education in the United States. How does your community or educational institution utilize research to make policy decisions regarding educational ventures like the Israel Experience? What additional research is needed to inform decision-making in this area? How can such research be financed and conducted?
- Price argues strongly that lifelong learning and family engagement is critical for successful Israel education. Do you agree that families must be the next community of learners engaged actively in Israel education? Which other populations are priorities for Israel Education? How might your community develop programs and initiatives to engage these groups?
- What does, "all roads lead to Israel" mean to you? How does your interpretation affect your thoughts about the Israel experience?

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In this article, Michael Rukin, presents the *birthright* experience as one model of Israel education, and articulates his vision of how this Israel trip could be an even more successful vehicle towards developing Jewish identity amongst college youth in the United States.

Looking for the Keys?

MICHAEL RUKIN

A policeman came upon a man, crawling on his hands and knees, at the base of a lamppost. At 2 a.m., his behavior seemed odd. "What are you doing?", the policeman asked. "Looking for my car keys," came the reply. The policeman proceeded to get down on his hands and knees to help look. After 10, unsuccessful, minutes he asked: "Where did you drop them?" Pointing down the street, the man replied: "In the middle of the block, near the fire hydrant." Puzzled, the policeman asked: "Why are you looking here?" "Because the light is much better."

I became a believer in the power of an “Israel Experience” in the mid-1970s. I was in the hills outside Beit Shemesh, on a hot summer day. I was spending the day, as I did each summer in my role as Chairman of the Reform Movement’s Israel Education Committee, with a group of NFTY (National Federation of Temple Youth) kids during their summer trips. They were digging that day, in small caves, teams of them...passing buckets of dirt upwards where other teams would “run it through” five-foot-square sieves. It was hard work for 16-year-olds, sifting heavy loads of dirt through those sieves. From time to time they would uncover a shard...a piece of a pot, a lamp, etc. They were interested and, despite their complaining, having fun. I was engaged, but not prepared for the look of awe on their faces when; suddenly an intact oil lamp, dating to Maccabian times, appeared in the sieve. In that instant, I understood what being “connected to The Land” really meant and I knew the experience had marked their souls.

It is five years since the first *birthright israel* trips began in 1999. Appropriately, we *qvell* over the phenomenal success (over 40,000 North American young people have gone). We also often *qvetch* over the idiosyncrasies of the various “partners”. And, as is our nature, we “eat our *kishkas* out” over the effect of the *matzav* and the “new” data from the 2000 NJPS. In the midst of these complex dynamics we sometimes lose sight of the blessing, derived from the vision and courage of the few who “made it happen.”

The conviction of those few who generated *birthright* has, I believe, dramatically altered the paradigm through which change occurs in our sluggish communal system. Its repercussions continue to resonate and be amplified in other areas of Jewish life.

But we (and they) can hardly rest on these laurels. At this juncture we need to examine the veracity of our assumptions (with roots in the 1990 NJPS study) that led to *birthright*, objectively evaluate its impacts (and shortcomings) and give voice to our communal objectives in the light of *today’s* realities. We need to do it with the courage of a Stephen Hawking, capable of confronting the flaws in our own creation. We must look in the places

where we “lost our keys,” not where the light is good. I suggest there are a number of challenges to be met, if we are to achieve the *birthright* promise and succeed in changing the tide of Jewish demographics in North America.

Challenge One

There are approximately 500,000 young people in the age cadre 18–26, of whom 270,000 are university students.¹ We have reached only a small portion of them – less than 6% if we account for the total numbers who have “rolled through” the age category in the last five years. The numbers we have sent on *birthright* trips are insufficient to create a critical mass of community. We must have the will and provide the resources to reach a sufficiently larger number of them. And we must be open to their creating their vision of community.

Challenge Two

The “Jewish” college student population is comprised of 50% who have two born Jewish parents.² The arithmetic corollary is obvious: Close to 50% of college students with Jewish “roots” have only one “born Jewish” parent. We do not know how to say hello to most of them. In fact, the very nature of our language rejects them. Imagine your reaction, as the child of an intermarried family, to the question: “How important is it that you marry someone who is Jewish?” We need to develop the language to connect to this population and, using the power of the Israel Experience, invite them to connect to their Jewish selves.

Challenge Three

There is little disagreement about Israel educational trips being an important *component* in forming Jewish identity. The trips can be very effective in jump-starting a journey of discovery, by inspiring an internal conversation. They are, by no means, a wished for magical inoculation against assimilation. Our emphasis on this *component*, without empowering programs that continue the journey is, I believe, a failure of monumental proportions. We take them on a *birthright* experience and provide only minimal follow up programming. In our penchant for measuring affiliation in conventional terms, we do not empower them to create their communities and programs that will produce

vibrant post trip opportunities to “do Jewish with other Jews.” A similarly massive community building effort is needed particularly for the age cadre 21–30. And they, not we, must be the owners of it.

Challenge Four

We need to look at this generation through its eyes, not through the nostalgia of generations past (or even our own). Our evaluation criteria need reflect that perspective. We cannot educate based upon the last generation’s understanding of the Shoah, the State of Israel or Jewish Peoplehood. Nor can we produce re-ethnication of those who have lost their ethnic identity, as Mittleberg suggests.³ They are American Jews whose collective memories have been built on different foundations. We must join with their realities and open new, inviting, attractive Jewish vistas for them.

Challenge Five

The evaluations we conduct must illuminate longitudinal measures of effect within a framework of a clearly articulated community policy. We need the courage to confront the myths and puzzle over what it means when:

- We accept unchallenged evaluations based on interviews of participants conducted virtually as they board the flights to return home.⁴
- We bemoan the “non-affiliation” status of *birthright* participants when over 80% have had formal Jewish Education and 75% report having become *Bnei Mitzvah*?⁵ Do we expect them to be “affiliated” in our image?
- The demographics of *birthright israel* partici-

pants show only 10% come from mixed married families,¹ contrasting with approximately 50% in the undergraduate student population.²

- Only a small percentage of the *birthright* participants responded to the follow-up surveys, despite significant efforts to contact them.
- Only 75% of the, already skewed, population of *birthright* participants think raising Jewish children is “Extremely Important”⁸ and only 52% think it “Extremely Important” to marry someone Jewish, contrasting with 41% of non-participants.⁹

The Israel Experience, as recreated by *birthright*, has the potential to affect the Jewish future in North America. It will succeed only if it operates within the framework of a clearly stated communal framework and policy. That policy needs to grapple with the changed Jewish demographics that reflect diminished classical indices of identity and an increase in children from intermarried families. I further suggest that policy need include the total Jewish identity development needs of this generation and age cadre guided by their realities. We cannot leave them “out in the cold” after a *birthright* experience and expect them to continue the conversation whose beginnings we have jump-started. Let us finish the job.

Michael Rukin has served as Chairman of the Board of The Combined Jewish Philanthropies (Boston) and of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. He has co-chaired the Demographic Studies of the Boston Community in 1985, 1995 and 2005.

¹ National Jewish Population Study presentation to Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, January 2004, p. 6.

² Ibid. p. 27.

³ Mittleberg, *The Israel Connection and American Jews*, Westport, CT, 1999.

⁴ Cohen, E. (1994), *Toward a Strategy of Excellence: A Structural Analysis* (The Israel Experience, Ongoing Survey and Evaluation 2), Jerusalem, Youth and Hechalutz Department, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education.

⁵ Saxe, Kadushin, Keiner, Rosen & Yereslove. A Mega-Experiment in Jewish Education: The Impact of *birthright israel*. Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis; *birthright israel* Research Report 3, January 2002, Figure 5, p. 13.

⁶ Ibid. Figure 4, p 13.

⁷ National Jewish Population Study presentation to Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, January 2004, p. 27.

⁸ Saxe, et. al. op. cit. Figure 10, p. 19.

⁹ Ibid. Figure 9, p. 19.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Michael Rukin asserts that the *birthright* model has dramatically altered the North American Jewish community's thinking about the Israel experience. How has *birthright* (or other efforts to encourage Israel experience participation) affected your community?
- Rukin identifies five challenges facing all Israel trips, including *birthright*. How might these be addressed on the local level? On the national level?
- Rukin passionately argues that the current generation of young adults must be understood and addressed on its own terms. What should be the criteria of success for engaging the current generation?
- Rukin argues for the need to provide support and opportunities for *birthright* alumni to connect with the Jewish community upon their return. What are some ways that your community could enable community-building for this age cohort?