

## The Birthright Israel Program: Present and Possible Future Impacts

### *Interview with Leonard Saxe*

- By autumn 2008, nearly two hundred thousand young Jewish adults aged eighteen to twenty-six from around the world had participated in Taglit-Birthright Israel, which consists of ten-day educational experiences in Israel. Approximately 75 percent of the participants were from North America, with the majority coming from the United States. The remaining 25 percent came from more than fifty countries around the world. This makes Birthright Israel the largest-ever Jewish communal education project.
- The aim of Birthright Israel is to make the participants' Jewish identity more relevant to them, to enhance *ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel), and to promote a sense of Jewish peoplehood. Research shows a great uniformity of impact on each of these measures, regardless of the participant's previous attitudes toward Judaism.
- At an average cost of about \$2,300 per participant, about \$450 million has been spent on the program. The largest donors have been a group of philanthropists, followed by the Israeli government. The remainder has been contributed by various Jewish community organizations and the Jewish Agency. The future of the program is tied to the health of Diaspora Jewish philanthropy. In 2009, the challenge will be how to sustain funding of the program.
- The follow-up with participants in Birthright Israel trips remains a major issue and a number of efforts are underway. A new organization has been created in North America, Birthright Next, to enhance opportunities for alumni to engage.

"The program that is now known as Taglit-Birthright Israel was launched in late 1999-early 2000. The Israeli parliamentarian Yossi Beilin had proposed such an idea almost a decade earlier. He wanted to change Israel's relationship with the Diaspora from the country being a supplicant and a recipient of Jewish philanthropy to it becoming an educational center for the Jewish world. He proposed that the Diaspora, instead of giving money to Israel, should spend these funds on educating its youth. As part of this vision, it should make it the 'birthright' of every Diaspora Jew to have an educational experience in Israel."

Leonard Saxe, a social psychologist, is professor of Jewish community research and social policy at Brandeis University and coauthor of *"How Goodly Are Thy Tents": Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences*. Together with Prof. Barry Chazan he authored *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*.

Saxe elaborates on how Birthright Israel started. "Two American philanthropists, Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, were looking for an idea that would have a major impact on what they saw as declining interest and engagement in Jewish life. They adopted the idea of Birthright Israel and created an organization to make the program operational. To fund the project, they gathered a consortium of private philanthropists and garnered the support of Jewish

Federations in the United States, communities around the world, and the Jewish Agency for Israel. With the assistance of the Israeli government, they were able to launch the program."

## Earlier Programs

"Prior to Birthright Israel, Charles Bronfman was involved in supporting and developing Israel-experience programs for non-Orthodox youth. Other groups, including Hadassah and the Reform and Conservative movements were also involved in these efforts. Prior to Birthright Israel, however, most Israel-experience programs were designed as summer programs for high-school youth or gap-year programs after high school."

Saxe and Chazan describe in their book the project's launch: "Registration for Birthright Israel in North America began in August 1999, just as the academic year at colleges and universities was starting. The criteria for participation were designed to be simple and straightforward: one had to self-identify as Jewish, be eighteen to twenty-six years old, and never have visited Israel as part of an educational program." [1]

Saxe remarks: "By autumn 2008 nearly two hundred thousand young Jewish adults in the eighteen-to-twenty-six age group around the world had participated in the program, which consists of ten-day educational experiences in Israel. Approximately 75 percent came from North America, the majority of them Americans. The remaining 25 percent originated in more than fifty countries around the world. Large groups have come from Argentina, France, Germany, and Russia. This makes Birthright Israel the largest Jewish communal education project ever."

## Participation per Cohort

"Our estimate-which is higher than the official one of United Jewish Communities-is that in North America there are ninety thousand young Jewish adults in each age cohort (age eighteen, age nineteen, and so on). In the United States, among young adults born in 1985 and 1986, some 15-20 percent have by now participated in Birthright Israel. In Canada, Birthright Israel has reached nearly 25 percent of the young adults born in 1986 and 1987. [2]

"In the last two years, the program has expanded substantially. If the 2007-2008 numbers were sustained, the proportion of the young adult population who are program alumni could increase in the coming years to 35 percent. The program has not yet had the funding to send all of those who apply and it is possible, if the resources were made available, that the majority of North American Jewish young adults could participate in an Israel experience by the time they reach their mid-twenties. The current recession is likely to slow the program's ability to achieve this goal, but relative to the amounts spent on Jewish education, Taglit's cost is modest and I'm confident a way will be found to fund it.

"The Jewish community needs to decide if it wants an Israel experience to be a normative element for its youth. If the funding is available, and we can reach a point where well over 50 percent of the American Jewish population has had an Israel experience, my sense is that Diaspora Jewry would be transformed.

"Although Birthright Israel is by far the largest program providing educational visits to Israel there are many others, several of which are much more extensive. These include high-school, *yeshiva* (Talmud school), as well as various youth-movement programs. My estimate is that, in addition to Birthright Israel, another 10 percent of each Jewish cohort participate in other, typically longer programs.

"There is some overlap between Birthright Israel participants and those who later matriculate in university programs for foreign students in Israel. To reach the majority of a cohort, Birthright Israel has to take-on a consistent basis-40,000-45,000 young people per year."

## Characteristics of the Program

"The idea of developing a short-term program for college and post-college age participants-that would attract the least engaged in the community-represented a change in thinking about Israel-experience education and about Jewish education in general. It was based on models of informal/experiential education and focuses on developing personal connections."

Saxe adds: "Perhaps Birthright Israel's defining educational element is the *mifgash*, an encounter that allows Diaspora participants to get to know Israeli peers. It is an experience of young adults from the Diaspora living and seeing Israel in the company of Israeli young adults. The Israeli participants are similar in age, but most are soldiers and living a very different life. Nevertheless, they find a common language and develop profound connections with one another.

"The program aside, the organizational structure of the project is also very different from that of other programs. The Birthright Israel office in [Jerusalem](#) is relatively small. It works with private tour organizers, educational groups such as Hillel and the Chabad-affiliated Maayanot, as well as other bodies that run the trips. Birthright Israel sets the organizational standards and the parameters to evaluate the groups. Shimshon Shoshani, a former director-general of the Israeli Education Ministry, was the chief executive officer and founding director of the program. He created an original educational model."

## Funding

When asked how much money has been spent overall for the Birthright Israel program, Saxe answers: "The average cost per participant is about \$2,300. Given the costs of transportation from overseas, it's remarkable that they have been able to maintain relative stability in costs. In view of the number of participants an estimated \$450 million has been spent on the program.

"The original vision about the funding was that it should be an equal three-way partnership. One-third would come from private philanthropists; one-third from community bodies such as North American Jewish Federations, Jewish communities around the world, the Jewish Agency, and so on; and the final third from the Israeli government.

"Until now the original philanthropists together with others such as Lynn Schusterman and Edgar Bronfman, and more recently Miriam and Sheldon Adelson, have contributed more than their share. The Federations have put in less than they originally committed, in part reflecting the fact that each local Federation decides how committed it is to the project. The Israeli government has put in its proportionate share, though there was a period when it didn't contribute."

## Can It Work with Others?

When asked whether Birthright Israel is unique or could be applied by other ethnicities as well, Saxe replies: "A Catholic group has tried the model with visits to Ireland and there have been other proposals by Taiwanese, Armenian, and Korean groups.

"I do not have firsthand knowledge of how successful other groups have been, but it's not only an issue of resources. A key factor is that the attachment of Jews to the Land of Israel, to our heritage, tradition, and Torah, is different from the attachment of other ethnic and religious groups to the lands their ancestors came from.

"The more interesting question for the Jewish community about the model's applicability is what we have called the 'Cancun hypothesis.' What if we were to bring North American young adult Jews to a beautiful resort center in the Caribbean? Would it have the same impact on them as if one takes them to Israel? My sense is that it would not. Being in the land where the Jewish

nation was created is different. Being in an environment where Hebrew is spoken, where the calendar is Jewish, is a very different experience for young adults than going somewhere else with a Jewish group."

## Context, Identity, Peoplehood

"As the program is focused on personal relationships, in principle it should not matter where one goes to be part of a Jewish group. But context is critical. The context-the Land of Israel-reinforces the messages of identity and peoplehood that are central to Birthright Israel's goals.

"However assimilated a Jew is, as long as he or she acknowledges Jewish heritage, being in Israel and living as part of a Jewish group is a powerful experience. Our eight-year study shows that it affects virtually all who participate, but the greatest impact is on the most assimilated, most disconnected young Jews.

"This was confirmed during the intifada in the years 2001-2004. Because of concerns about security, those who participated in Birthright Israel were more likely to have come from homes with higher levels of Jewish practice and the percentage of assimilated young Jews was lower than before or after that period. While participants' experience was still very positive and transformative, the effects were even greater when there were more of the less affiliated and less knowledgeable participants."

## Key Indicators and Values

"In summer 2008 among the record twenty-four thousand participants who came from North America, the percentage of greatly disconnected increased. One of our key indicators is participants' knowledge of Hebrew. In recent cohorts, just about half of the participants report that they can read Hebrew but don't understand it. They went to Hebrew school, most until bar or bat mitzvah, but didn't learn to speak or understand the language.

"More telling, though, is that the number of those who do not know the Hebrew alphabet has by now grown to more than 20 percent of the North American participants. For this group, who have had little or no Jewish education, the impact of the program is even greater, in part because they have more distance to traverse in terms of their connection to Israel and Jewish identity.

"One element of the power of Birthright Israel, however, is being in a group that includes Jews from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. I doubt whether the program would be as effective if none of the participants on a bus spoke or read Hebrew. The key value of the program is in people being able to see and experience others who have different levels of knowledge, connection, and observance of Jewish tradition than they do. It would be much harder to engage a bus filled with individuals who had no such connection, even though that may be the group you want to engage most."

When asked whether there have been intentionally mixed groups of different nationalities, Saxe answers: "Not that I know of. Occasionally Canadians participate in American groups, and Americans in Canadian ones. Also the groups that come from Germany include mainly Russian-speaking immigrants to that country while a smaller number are Jews whose families have been in Germany for decades."

## How to Maintain Discipline

An important question is how to maintain discipline in heterogeneous groups. Saxe answers: "There are rather strict rules about not traveling without your group, about participating in

activities, and against the use of alcohol and drugs. Participants know that they are receiving a valuable gift and one of their ways of acknowledging gratitude is to follow the guidelines.

"The key problems are the normal ones that one might face with young adults. Surprisingly, given the population, there seem to be fewer problematic issues on the trips than on a college campus. Only a handful of participants have been removed for violating rules.

"Journalists sometimes ask about potential political troublemakers and about efforts to develop alternatives to Birthright Israel. An organization exists that rejects the idea that Jews have a special right to Israel. It seems that there are more journalists interested in hearing about this group than it has members."

## Uniformity of Impact

To the question of how it is possible to significantly strengthen identities in a period of only ten days, Saxe replies: "As a researcher who studies change in social behavior I'm not surprised. The Birthright Israel program creates what social psychologists call a 'cultural island.' It takes young people away from their normal environments and puts them into a unique setting and group context. The twenty-four-hour-a-day nature of the experience makes it possible to produce change. It is Birthright Israel's task to help inspire hunger and thirst for engagement with Jewish life and it does so with the vast majority of participants.

"The program's most surprising element is the relatively great uniformity of its impact and how differently participants describe their relationship with Jewish life and Israel.[3] We have interviewed tens of thousands of them and almost as many applicants who didn't have a chance to go on the program. It is extraordinary how consistently participants describe the program as an 'amazing experience.' This is true for those who are intellectually inclined as well as for those who are not, for those who were already before the trip connected to their Jewish identity in various degrees and those who were not. There are differences in the magnitude of their response depending on their starting point, but the pattern of change is identical.

"What they learn is mostly about people, but they also report that 'they learned a great deal about Israel's landscape and natural environment, Israeli culture, modern Israeli and Jewish history.' They learn less about Jewish customs and practices, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Israeli social problems, but in part that is because the program eschews a religious focus, as well as a political orientation." [4]

## Shabbat in Jerusalem

Saxe adds: "If I were to describe the overall strategy, one might call Birthright Israel a model of social engineering that has been under development for more than three thousand years. The way in which the Jewish community organizes itself, and the values it has, together form a very powerful system. Many people in the Diaspora have no experience of being part of that.

"If before the trip we asked Birthright Israel participants what they would want to do in Israel, I doubt that a significant number would answer that they'd like to spend the twenty-five hours of Shabbat in Jerusalem. They would not have an idea of what that is. But when participants return from the trip, the Shabbat that they all spend in Jerusalem is often one of the most powerful memories.

"The Shabbat experience is not necessarily a religious one, though participants are offered that opportunity. Rather, it's a time to participate in the rhythm of Shabbat. For many participants, it connects to their earliest memories of Judaism and their reading *Bereshit* (Genesis). The program provides a context, but it is the setting and the group within which the experience is created.

"The essence of what Birthright Israel does is to make a participant's Jewish identity salient. Some scholars use a computer metaphor to describe identity. Each of us has multiple identities-national, professional, gender, and a myriad of others. For many Diaspora Jews, Judaism is similar-in the computer metaphor-to a program on a hard disk that is never executed. Birthright Israel executes the Jewish program and, by putting it on the desktop, makes it relevant.

"Hopefully, it begins a process. Nobody claims that in ten days one can provide young adults with an educational experience that will make up for not having studied Hebrew or having learned the history and traditions of their people."

## After Returning

Research on program participants has found that many of them change their attitude toward Judaism as a result of the visit to Israel. Saxe says: "Our studies show that the impact lasts for a number of years. To date, the strongest impact we can document is on attitudes-toward Israel and Jewish identity. Impact on Jewish behavior is not as dramatic, but perhaps enough time hasn't elapsed for these effects to be evident.[5]

"One of the issues with follow-up after participants return home is that, often, the members of the group are physically dispersed, as are the Diaspora educators who traveled with them. Even with students, they graduate and leave the campus community. Birthright Israel participants are at a time in their lives when mobility is normative.

"At the same time, those who traveled 'with friends or on campus or community-based trips identified their newly established Jewish network as critical to their subsequent decision to attend Jewish activities.' The follow-up of what has been initiated with the Birthright Israel trip remains an issue where much needs to be done. Compared to the challenge of bringing two hundred thousand young people to Israel, it seems a modest one."[6]

## Changes on Campus

Saxe observes: "One of our studies found that 'half the respondents strongly agreed that the trip encouraged them to become more involved in their Jewish communities back at home.'[7] The fundamental problem is that the Jewish communities that many participants were disconnected from when they came to Israel remain the same ones they return to. Birthright Israel may not be able to change that, but it is not unreasonable to ask Diaspora communities to do so. My own community, Boston, has taken the challenge and sees working with this population as one of its strategic priorities.

"We see the most change on campuses. The fact that so many Jewish students have participated in Birthright Israel trips leads to a difference in the way many Hillel and Chabad organizations on campus function. As the participants' level of interest in Judaism has changed there is more involvement in courses on Jewish studies and Israel.

"Perhaps the most difficult group to reach are young Jewish adults after college. In previous generations, most people got married at that point in their lives. They had rabbis marry them and they created their own families. which often brought them into contact. Today the average age of marriage is postponed by five or more years, as is the age of childbirth. The result is that young adults don't have good reasons to be involved with the traditional Jewish institutions."

## Birthright Next

"To respond, in part, to the problem, there's now an organization, Birthright Next, which is trying to create opportunities for young people to be engaged in Jewish life in their communities. It's

now up to the Diaspora communities to restructure themselves, to empower young people, and to provide meaningful opportunities for them to engage Jewishly on their own terms.

"That process is still in its infancy. Yet there is a dramatic difference in community attitudes over the last ten years. Hillel has gone from a 'backwater' of Jewish institutional life to being prominent, and there has been an explosion of programs designed to engage young adult Jews.

"A number of communities are at the forefront of these efforts. Along with Boston, Toronto has a well-developed system for trying to engage participants. It starts with recruitment and orientation to the trip. Other communities are not quite as cohesive. The largest Diaspora community is based in the New York area. Nearly one-quarter of the participants come from there. But this is a huge area and, in some ways, is a collection of smaller communities. Developing an effective strategy for New York will be critical to whether the follow-up of Birthright Israel can be successful.

"Talking about follow-up now is like taking a snapshot of a moving stream. There are likely to be major changes in the coming two years. There are, for example, efforts to develop Shabbat dinners and to make involvement in Shabbat activities a focus of enhanced Jewish life after the participants return. It follows to some extent the Israeli model where Friday night is the central time for the family to get together, however secular its members are. Michael Steinhardt is very much involved in developing Birthright Next and it has gained support from the Jim Joseph Foundation, among others."

## Conclusions

"Along with studying about how Jewish education can be done more effectively, we are also learning about the Diaspora's evolving relationship with Israel. There's been concern that American Jewry is growing more distant from Israel, but our work with Birthright Israel participants suggests just the opposite.[8] A large subset of the Jewish young adult population has been positively engaged with Israel as a result of the program. In the past, young adults were the least likely to be committed to Israel. The new form of engagement is based on friendships and social networking and has the potential to transform the fundamental connection among Jews around the world.

"Another conclusion concerns the distancing of Jews from Judaism through marrying out, which leads to distancing from Jewish identity and Israel. We have learned from Birthright Israel that the program has an attitudinal impact irrespective of whether your parents are both Jewish, whether one parent was a convert to Judaism, or whether he or she never converted. The children of intermarried parents also come out of the program with strengthened Jewish identities.

"Program alumni do not necessarily return to their Diaspora homes ready to defend Israel against criticism. They do, however, have actual connections with Israelis and knowledge about the country, which most Americans don't possess. That allows them to hear and understand the media reports on Israel in a very different way. They have seen that Israel is a vibrant democracy where issues are passionately discussed, even in the face of challenges. From an American point of view, which holds free speech and freedom of association as fundamental values, Israel 'makes sense.'

"Clearly, part of what shapes Birthright Israel and its impact on young adult Jews is the reach of communication. Participants can stay in contact with one another, whether they live in North America, Israel, or elsewhere. Because of the internet, it is just as easy for participants to read Israel's English newspapers as it is for them to read U.S. ones. That also makes it easier for Birthright Israel participants who decide to return to Israel, either to make *aliyah* or to study there temporarily.

"Another observation concerns the Israeli participants. One of our recent findings is that Israeli participants report the same kinds of positive impact as their Diaspora peers. Young adult

participants come to see themselves as members of *Klal Israel* (the Jewish people at large), not just as Israelis.

"In our study of *mifgash* participants, the vast majority of Israelis indicated that the program made them feel pride-pride in service to the IDF, pride in their country, and pride in being Jews. To a lesser extent, but still significant, we found that it also stimulated them to want to learn more about Judaism.[9]

"Although the worldwide economic downturn will likely result in fewer participants and longer wait-lists than in 2008, the program seems assured of providing an Israel-education experience for twenty-five thousand or more Diaspora young adults each year."

*Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld*

\* \* \*

## Notes

[1] Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 13.

[2] Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Shahar Hecht, and Graham Wright, "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation: 2007 North American Cohorts," Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2007, 13.

[3] Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, and Shahar Hecht, "Taglit-Birthright Israel: Impact on Jewish Identity, Peoplehood, and Connection to Israel," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2006.

[4] Saxe et al., "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation," 1.

[5] Theodore Sasson, Leonard Saxe, Mark I. Rosen, Dana Selinger-Abutbul, and Shahar Hecht, "After Birthright Israel: Finding and Seeking the Jewish Community," Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2007, 5.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Saxe et al., "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation," 1.

[8] See also Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the 'Distancing Hypothesis,'" Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2008.

[9] Theodore Sasson, David Mittelberg, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, "Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2008, 2.

\* \* \*

Leonard Saxe, a social psychologist, is professor of Jewish community research and social policy at Brandeis University and coauthor of *"How Goodly Are Thy Tents": Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (Brandeis University Press, 2003). Together with Prof. Barry Chazan, he authored *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Brandeis University Press, 2008).