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**AFTER THE IMMERSION
EXPERIENCE: WHAT NEXT?**

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Photos courtesy of contributors.

AFTER THE IMMERSION EXPERIENCE: WHAT NEXT?

In recent years, the Jewish community's widely successful forays into total-immersion experiences have received much attention and praise. From long-standing institutions like summer camps to more recent innovations like Birthright Israel, immersion experiences offer unparalleled opportunities for intensive Jewish encounters shorn of the distractions of everyday life. Much effort has gone into the expansion of these programs, with an eye towards broadening their appeal and effect on even greater segments of North American Jewry.

But what happens after the experiences end? Until now, not enough thought and energy have gone into post-immersion programming. Part of the problem is that communal institutions have not prepared themselves sufficiently to engage alumni of these programs, but part of the challenge lies with the programs themselves. With limited staff and resources, program providers naturally focus on the immersion experiences rather than on what comes next. Besides, the intensity and pizzazz of the retreat is invariably more attractive to potential funders than the relatively mundane and complicated efforts to engage participants once they've returned home. It is somewhat natural, then, that follow-up has not received the attention it deserves.

But without follow up, the very success of immersion programs can be their downfall: Jewish experiences can come to be seen as otherworldly vacations that have no bearing on or relevance to everyday life. Ultimately, if the effects are not expanded, immersion experiences risk becoming a virtual reality whose impact on Jewish life diminishes every day upon return.

This issue of CONTACT is devoted to the theme of follow-up on immersion experiences. Authors examine the challenges of follow-up both in its theoretical and practical applications, and consider existing and potential ways of making follow-up work. The goal throughout is to transform the immersion experience from a temporary thrill into a catalyst of continued Jewish exploration.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley

Ask random Taglit-Birthright Israel participants about their trip, and nine times out of ten they'll smile, their eyes will glow, and they will say something to the effect of "it was ten awesome, life-changing days!"

It is rare to hear such high praise for a Jewish educational program. Considering that 25,000 of these young people have never been exposed to a single day of Jewish education, who can argue with such success? "Awesome" is a good way to describe the peak experience of pride and wonder that the participants feel after their whirlwind tour. But once they come down from the initial Birthright high, does the experience truly qualify as life-transforming?

Nearly every Jewish professional or volunteer leader we meet has a great story about a young adult who went on Birthright and who is now involved in Hillel, a synagogue, a Jewish cause, or who made Aliyah or entered a Ph.D. program in Jewish or Israel studies. And the many stories about Birthright participants falling in love not only with Israel but with one another are truly extraordinary. But as wonderful as it is to hear these tales, we cannot fool ourselves with isolated successes. The fact remains that the vast majority of stories concern young adults who came back gung-ho about being Jewish, but couldn't find anything to connect to.

What we mean by connection (or lack thereof) is two-fold. First, their private lives are not marked by a great new intellectual, political, spiritual or social interest in Judaism. Second, their public lives are unchanged — they do not go to Jewish events or get involved in JCCs, synagogues or Jewish causes. They may think differently about being Jewish, but current evidence suggests that the majority are not getting involved Jewishly. This should concern all of us who care about the Jewish future.

We must ask: If the trip is so awesome, then why aren't they getting involved afterwards?

The obvious answer is that Birthright does not teach participants how to be Jewishly involved outside the confines of a ten-day bus tour. All the enthusiasm, connection and pride the trip instills do

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What's Next?

Harnessing the Enthusiasm of the Birthright Israel Experience

by **MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT** and **RABBI DANIEL S. BRENNER**

not naturally translate into any real Jewish engagement either in the Diaspora or in Israel.

And many of those who do try to find some Jewish connection when they return are often sorely disappointed. Clearly, one reason is that our organizations were not prepared for Birthright Israel's success. These include Federations, Hillels, synagogues and advocacy organizations. For example, most Federations have young leadership groups in which the average age of participants is in the late-thirties. These leaders are not peers of Birthright Israel participants and in many cases they are fifteen years older. Synagogues have the same problem. They focus on young parents who are often twenty years older than the average Birthright participant. While a few Federations and synagogues have tried other methods of attracting Birthright alumni to programs especially geared for them, the results have been mixed. Young adults can sense in the first five seconds whether a crowd feels like the right fit.

Things are not that much different on campus. There are a few exceptional Hillels that are revitalizing their campuses in the wake of Taglit-Birthright Israel's success. But there are still many Hillel professionals who don't bother to reach out to their Birthright alumni. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the students who are most active in Hillel tend to look down on Birthright participants as being less than literate Jews. A lot has to change in both mentality and behavior.

Even Israel advocacy organizations, which should be potentially appealing to returning Birthright participants, are not attracting large numbers. Some organizations are beginning to see an up-tick in involvement, but unless they give real leadership roles to Birthright alumni, they are going to have a hard time keeping them engaged.

So how do we get people involved in

Jewish life? Some people think that simply sharing the email list of Birthright Israel participants with all Jewish organizations will be the magic quick-fix. But bombarding alumni with emails from organizations for which they generally have negative or at best apathetic feelings is no solution. We must approach this challenge with great care.

For these reasons, we are committing our energy and resources to undertake a monumental new effort. Our task is to help Taglit-Birthright Israel participants see that after those ten days, there actually are some next steps that will work for them in Jewish life. Over the next year, we will enhance the process of recruitment, registration, orientation and staff training. We will create many more peer-led follow-through opportunities in major urban centers across the U.S. These efforts will focus on interest-based projects, lively Friday night Shabbat experiences, arts projects such as the recently launched "Birthright Israel Monologues" show, mentoring and informal Jewish education. These endeavors will require the training of young leaders on a much higher level than has been undertaken before with this age group.

We are dubbing this new stage of Birthright as "Birthright Israel NEXT." Rather than give it a fancy new name or acronym, we chose to stick close to the powerful brand name that Birthright has become and to say in one short word that there is more to come.

Will Birthright Israel NEXT be life-changing? In the coming years, we will be devoting our energy and passion to ensure that the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience is not simply a ten-day vacation but the catalyst for a lifetime of Jewish pride. It is the great task of Birthright Israel NEXT to harness the energy and enthusiasm of Birthright Israel alumni and to create opportunities for them to renew Jewish life for the next generations. ■



Following Through On Service and Relationship

by SIMON GREER

After breakfast on the second day of a recent Jewish service learning trip to southern Louisiana, the student participants began to ask difficult questions. “What is the point of us being here?” “We can do so little.” “What’s Jewish about service learning?”

It’s upsetting to confront the extent of devastation in the Gulf Coast or the poverty of inner-city Los Angeles. It’s frustrating to realize how little a group can physically accomplish in a single week. It’s confusing to unpack the relationship between acting as a Jew and acting as a concerned citizen.

Rather than avoiding these difficult conversations, we embrace them. This is the turning point of the week, when students begin to think about what they can

do long-term that will make even more of a difference: how they can fight poverty at its root and why they might do so as Jews. Through the act of service, they realize for themselves that the significant work of repairing houses with their hands is important but insufficient.

Our Jewish service learning trips last a week. The pursuit of justice as Jews lasts a lifetime.

Over the course of our week-long programs, our curriculum guides students through a difficult process. First we explore the most obvious question: “Why am I here?” Each day brings new queries: “How did things get so screwed up?” “What can people do to fix this?” By the end of the trip, students are asking themselves, “When I get back to my high school or university campus, what am I going to do about what I saw?” and “What is my responsibility as a Jew?”

In this way, the entire curriculum of our service trips is dedicated to the idea of follow-through.

In the spring of 2007, Spark: the Center for Jewish Service Learning at the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) partnered with the Reboot network of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies to take a group of talented, creative, under-40 Jews to the Gulf Coast. The group worked in Boothville, Louisiana with the Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA), a partner of JFSJ.

Inspired by their experience and knowing that a few days of service was just a start, the group decided to spread word about the region’s ongoing needs after returning home.

When they returned, they created a short video from footage of the devastation and of the Boothville community members they met. Working with JFSJ,

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they helped to create www.happybirthdaykatrina.com to showcase the video and to provide information about the state of the Gulf Coast two years after Katrina. A public service announcement to promote the website appeared for three days on the Reuters screens in Times Square.

The Rebooters' message was clear: Get involved. Do something. We have only begun the task of repair. The website received thousands of hits during the weeks after the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, bringing the immediacy of the Rebooters' experience to a much broader audience.

On a different service trip, a University of Michigan student was shocked that devastation and government neglect could exist in her own country. She published an op-ed in the *Detroit Jewish News* about returning to campus "with a new sense of awareness of my responsibility as an American and as a Jew." This student's experience in the Gulf affected the way she thought about troubled communities much nearer at hand. "My experience in New Orleans has also opened my eyes to my responsibilities as a citizen here in Michigan," she wrote, "where many inner-city neighborhoods are as devastated as those that fell victim to Hurricane Katrina."

She was also determined to continue her work as a volunteer with the Jewish community. "This spring, I intend to return to New Orleans as a participant in U-M Hillel's first ever interfaith Alternative Spring Break trip comprised equally of Jewish and Muslim students. Furthermore, when I vote next fall, I will undoubtedly consider my first-hand knowledge of the poverty in this country. As a Jew, I must continue to help those in need throughout my life."

There are common threads between these two service experiences: the participants' realization that the work is not finished when the trip is over, and the challenge that service presents to their own sense of Jewish obligation and identity. With our support and the support of their home communities, trip participants have the responsibility to decide how to continue service work in ways that are most compelling to them. For our organizational partners such as BBYO and Hillel, the trips often help deepen the participants' Jewish engagement.

Why do so many trip program alumni feel a long-term Jewish commitment to the region in which they volun-



...we believe more and more Jews will understand community service as a habit of Jewish expression...

teered, and to justice? Part of it has to do with a theme that underlies the structure of our Jewish service learning trips: *relationship*.

The encounter between two individuals is a sacred extension of the I/Thou experience on which Buber reflected when he considered the Jews at Sinai. When we introduce trip participants to members of communities like Boothville, we explore our shared humanity to understand how the lives of service participants are bound up with the lives of the people they meet. We will judge the long-term success of our service learning programs by whether participants continue to feel that these relationships call them to act.

On a broader level, all of JFSJ's departments and programs share this emphasis on long-term relationship. We don't simply send volunteers to a local group. The community organizations that host our service learning programs are allies or grant or loan recipients of JFSJ. These organizations know that after volunteer groups return home, our commitment to them endures.

We currently support the involvement of 100 synagogues in interfaith

organizing networks, a process that can take years to nurture and develop for a single congregation. We train rabbinical students in creating intentional relationships as a basis for broader social change. Our TZEDEC program supports community-minded and financially savvy credit unions, which make responsible loans to help develop lower-income neighborhoods.

Because of the relationships we are building through our range of programs, we have the relationships in place to facilitate the follow-through sought by many trip participants and their host communities.

All of this work requires patience. Even the most successful service learning trip is unlikely to transform a participant in just one week, regardless of how inspired the person is in the weeks and months that follow. Yet over time, we believe more and more Jews will understand community service as a habit of Jewish expression and as a way to stay involved in service and in the Jewish community. Ultimately, we expect our work will have a cumulative effect on the lives of those we touch and on the culture of our community. ■



Jewish Service and Global Citizenship: Transforming Experience into Action

by RUTH W. MESSINGER

American Jewish World Service/H Max, courtesy www.ajws.org

Bringing young people *panim el panim* (face to face) with people in Africa, Asia and Latin America is life-changing. Young Jewish leaders emerge from the field inspired by their service experience and eager to act on what they have learned. However, maintaining, encouraging and channeling that enthusiasm has proven to be a significant challenge in the Jewish service movement.

Motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to alleviate hunger, poverty and disease in the developing world. AJWS service projects are distinguished not only by their innovative philosophy and curricula, but also by a thoughtful alumni program that is transforming today's Jewish leaders into activists. AJWS volunteer programs are creating a cadre of global justice leaders with lifelong, passionate commitments to both social action and Jewish learning, forging a movement for social change.

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The AJWS volunteer experience

AJWS offers numerous opportunities for young people to live and work in communities in the developing world. AJWS Alternative Breaks offer college students meaningful ways to participate in service projects over their spring breaks. AJWS Volunteer Summer is an opportunity for high school seniors and college-aged students to volunteer abroad for seven weeks, followed by a year-long domestic learning program. The AJWS World Partners Fellowship provides college graduates and young professionals the opportunity to work for a non-governmental organization in a developing country for nine months. The service programs bring students to countries as diverse as Thailand, India, Guatemala and Uganda.

These programs offer an innovative and unique perspective on the volunteer service trip. Participants work hand-in-hand with local communities, while simultaneously immersing themselves in the study of Jewish text and *tikkun olam*. AJWS takes these trips very seriously,

ensuring that the volunteer experience is mutually beneficial for both the participants from North America and the host communities. The trips are distinguished by a fresh approach to global justice and Judaism — one that lays the groundwork for change perspectives and practices.

The service programs are also characterized by the innovative curricula used in each trip. The education department of AJWS mines Jewish texts and tradition to create learning materials that demonstrate the intersections of Judaism and social justice. The AJWS educational curriculum, which is taught by trained leaders, asks important questions such as “who are the people I am obligated to, and how do I help them?” and “how does the experience of being in a developing world community change my life, now that this community has a face?” Rather than being prescriptive, the curricula challenge young Jews to integrate the answers to these questions into their personal priorities and life choices, both during and after their travels with AJWS.

Transforming experiences abroad into action at home

Participants in AJWS service programs return with a profound sense of awareness and a strengthened commitment to social justice. “When I came back from World Partners Fellowship, I really felt like more of a citizen of the world,” said Rebecca Shaloff, an AJWS alum who now works for a non-profit in Washington, D.C. that addresses issues of labor and fair trade. “I felt that I understood not only that what happens across the world is important, but that what we do every day in the U.S. impacts the rest of the world. That to me is the most powerful concept that I walked away with as a World Partner and it is what drives me still today.”

Recognizing that international experiences can — and should — have resonance at home, AJWS alumni programming draws connections between domestic and global issues, and provides opportunities to explore ways for our alumni to translate their values into daily action. The alumni program aims to reinforce the participant’s experience abroad, working to ensure it will continue to have ongoing value for the participant.

AJWS alumni programming works in partnership with AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps to nurture a Jewish social justice community across the United States. Over the last year, the AJWS-AVODAH partnership has brought together young people in New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. for events such as “Inside the Activist’s Studio,” which showcased local Jewish

change-makers and offered a variety of skill-building and networking experiences; an intensive leadership development course for emerging Jewish social justice leaders; and an educational series focused on Jewish philanthropy and social justice. Additional programming includes educational and advocacy sessions with representatives from AJWS grantees, Jewish holiday celebrations and local service opportunities.

One example of an emerging Jewish leader is Rachel Steinberg. After returning from a Volunteer Summer in Thailand, Rachel wanted to make the Princeton University community more aware of issues confronting the developing world. With an AJWS grant, Rachel planned a fair entitled “Emerge! A Global Bazaar.” In November 2007, over 700 people attended “Emerge!,” which featured the works of entrepreneurs and artists from the developing world and included lectures and workshops to raise awareness about economic development and social change.

“Were it not for AJWS, I would never have been doing this kind of work,” Rachel says.

In addition, alumni of AJWS service programs have stated that their relationship to Judaism is often changed by the experience. AJWS service programs bring together Jews of different levels of observance and education: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated participants learn, pray and live together in an effort to create a pluralistic community. In survey

responses, participants continually cited Shabbat observance in a pluralistic community as having most significantly impacted their Jewish identities.

For many participants, this “wow” moment provides a new connection and relationship to Judaism. As one participant remarked: “I feel as though I actually understand the importance of Shabbat now and plan to continue observing Shabbat in my home.” As a result, AJWS alumni typically commit themselves to active participation in the Jewish community upon their return.

The service programs work to transform the Jewish community so that future Jewish leaders are activists committed to global social change. For AJWS, the trip abroad is only part of a continuum which begins with orientation and, ideally, remains with the volunteer for his or her whole life. The transformative nature of the trip is channeled, through AJWS follow-up, into action and advocacy at home.

With over 2,000 alumni and a growing number of retreats, skill-building sessions, electronic newsletters and coordinated participation in ongoing AJWS advocacy campaigns, AJWS volunteer and alumni programs are expanding the constituency of young American Jews committed to a global perspective. It is our hope and our mission that these young alumni will spread their views, passion, first-hand knowledge of developing countries and visions of global responsibility to others within the American Jewish community. ■



American Jewish World Service/D Rotbard, courtesy www.ajws.org



American Jewish World Service/J Berman, courtesy www.ajws.org



As we build relationships with students and invent with them what their Jewish lives can be, we look for and respond to new possibilities. They lead us.

Journeying through Jewish Life

by WAYNE L. FIRESTONE and BETH COUSENS

Is college relevant anymore? In July 2007, the New York Times ran an essay contest, inviting students to respond to this question. Over 600 students wrote back saying “Yes!” They elaborated that they are practicing independence and activism, creating and pursuing aspirations for themselves and the world. Just what we would want for young Americans. But in one essay, a student described feeling a powerful sense of tediousness. The student’s bio explained that “her immediate plans include dropping out at the end of the year to write and/or travel.” In other words, the world will become her classroom.

In fact, the world is every student’s classroom. We know the story: in a shrinking world, with longer life-spans and with unprecedented wealth, confident and curious emerging adults spend their late teens and twenties trying to

figure out what the world means to them. This is the *chipoos* (Hebrew for “search”) generation. Young adults define themselves by compiling a series of character-building, eye-opening experiences and by asking questions out loud about morality and meaning in as many settings as they can find.

Colleges are profoundly aware of students’ quests. College is relevant precisely *because* it gives students the opportunity to explore themselves, their questions, their strengths, the “other.” On campus, boundaries are dissipating between learning outside and inside the classroom, between immersive experiences and regular life. To put it simply, in this environment of students’ global self-exploration, the journey is taking place on campus, and the beginnings and ends of itineraries are becoming blurred into everyday life.

American Judaism is not unfamiliar with the journey metaphor. As Bethamie Horowitz argued in *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity* (New York, 2000), our Jewish involvement increases

and decreases throughout our lives. Hillel’s opportunity to help students develop an enduring commitment to Jewish life lies in the potential created by the intersection between their journeys through the world and their journeys through Jewish life.

To explore the intersection between these journeys, staff members take on fundamental roles as experiential educators during immersive experiences like Taglit–Birthright Israel and Alternative Break. Staff members carefully help students consider the meaning and implications of their experiences. In these immersion experiences, students expand their self-conceptions as Jews. When students return to campus, these opportunities to reflect on who they are continue precisely because the relationships between staff members and students continue. Through relationship-based engagement, staff members help students maintain their reflections on Judaism in daily life.

The following four ideas expand what we mean by relationship-based engagement as applied to immersion experiences. They guide Hillel’s work to

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integrate immersion experiences into the Jewish lives of students. Each idea, it should be noted, builds on the one described before it.

Follow-through, don't follow-up: "Follow-up" assumes the experience has been closed or finished. "Follow-through" suggests a more open approach, one in which the experience continues from that which preceded it and leads to something further. Follow-through presumes that every step of the process can help us build strong relationships with students. For example, many Hillel professionals interview participants for Taglit–Birthright Israel and then meet with them again prior to the trip in an effort to understand who they are and what they are seeking. As a result, while away and upon their return, these relationships continue to grow and flourish.

Continue and strengthen mentoring relationships with students: Each student has a unique response to an immersive experience and each student has personal and unique ideas about Judaism. The group experience does not offer a recipe for an individual student's future. Instead, through a strong relationship with a student, which includes listening and talking, we help identify the next steps and opportunities on that student's Jewish journey. In Israel, a Hillel professional discovered that a student had a talent for music and asked him to play later that year at *Kol Nidre*. In the Gulf Coast, a Hillel professional found that a student was interested in meditation and

asked her to explore and then create opportunities for Jewish meditation on campus. Through relationships, we help students find their next steps.

Support students' efforts to build the Jewish lives that they envision: Students conceive of opportunities for themselves that we cannot imagine. As we build relationships with students and invent with them what their Jewish lives can be, we look for and respond to new possibilities. They lead us.

Sometimes, the experiences that they envision involve the student alone. At the University of Colorado-Boulder, the Hillel Director worked with a Taglit–Birthright Israel participant before, during and after his experience. The Director encouraged the student to explore his Jewishness and the choices his Jewish father and non-Jewish mother made to raise him with little Jewish education or celebration in a small Midwestern community. Together, the Director and student studied and talked. When the student wanted to have a formal conversion ceremony, the Hillel Director helped him to understand Jewish tradition and found other rabbis to help. The student crafted an outdoor ceremony that included a ritual dunking in the Colorado River with his father present. The student gave us a first-hand account of his immersion through a short movie that integrated his passion for film with his new interest in Judaism.

Build on one immersive experience to create more: Students lead us to opportunities that they want, and we create

opportunities that will inspire them. We link these large-scale or ongoing opportunities to the moment and to their interests, inspiring students to want more while they are in the midst of their first immersive experiences. At the University of Virginia (U.Va.), students have typically returned from Israel to enroll in Hillel's mini-courses on subjects related to their Israel experiences. This year, a U.Va. Jewish Studies professor led the pre-Israel orientation, will join students on their Taglit–Birthright Israel experience, and will teach a mini-course when the students return to campus.

The busy schedules and the many commitments that students explore during their college years suggest that a once-connected student may feel his Jewishness strongly but still walk fluidly in and out of Jewish circles. This is the Jewish journey. Through plentiful immersion experiences as well as post-immersion Jewish outlets, we can help students to integrate their curiosities about life with their curiosities about Judaism.

After a week spent in Gulfport, Mississippi volunteering with Hillel to rebuild the area, a GW sophomore chose to leave school to spend a year working in Mississippi with AmeriCorps. She has since returned to GW to complete her degree and plans to work in global health development after graduation. Her journey took her through the Southeastern United States, away from college and back again. Her Jewishness inspires her to keep exploring. Her journey continues. ■

Following Up on Intensive Jewish Experiences

by AMY L. SALES

At her bat mitzvah, my daughter stood before the congregation and explained that she deigned to live at home and go to school for ten months because she knew that, in return, she got to go to camp for two months. The former was payment for the latter. A true camper, she divides the year into the “two months” and the “ten months.” Unfortunately, for many such children, Jewish life and learning exists almost exclusively during the two months. Is it feasible to bring the two months into the ten, to extend the Jewish possibilities of camp into the school year?

Three main qualities give Jewish camp its power. One is its *intensiveness*. Campers are immersed 24 hours a day in a special community and place. They cannot go home at the end of the day, and their contact with the outside world is limited. Unable to leave, they must deal with whatever situation arises. Time is compressed: Relationships form quickly and strongly, community is built almost overnight, and participants soon take on behaviors appropriate to the program. They literally eat, sleep and breathe the experience.

The second quality is *separateness* from home. Camp works in large measure because it is not home. Removed from everyday life and from the everyday self, participants are able to try on new identities (note the prevalence of camp nicknames), experiment with new behaviors (note widespread, excited reports of first-time experiences), and make new friends.

The third quality is its finitude. The camp experience is powerful because it ends. The preciousness of camp — what makes participants relish the experience and yearn for it during the year — is the fact that, unlike school, it does not seem to go on and on. Rather, it has a trajectory that builds to a climax (think final banquet) and ends with both exhilaration and tears.

Given these qualities, the goal of follow-

up cannot be to make home like camp or to extend camp into the school year. Given the reality of life, school-year programs cannot be immersive. Given the importance of separateness, camp needs to maintain its distinctiveness. And given the preciousness of limited time, it must end and should not be drawn into the school year.

This analysis suggests several possible avenues for camp follow-up.

1. Camps can stay on message year round.

Unlike junk mail, communications from camp are welcomed and read. Camps can use this foot in the door not only to promote camp but also to continue Jewish education in the style of camp. Camp CDs with Jewish prayers, blessings, songs and other camp tunes have met with success. Counselors and campers report putting the music on their iPods, listening to it during the year, and sharing it with others. With their creativity and energy, camps could surely find other ways to use communication tools to maintain and further Jewish learning in the camp style during the year.

2. Educators back home can learn from camp.

Even though the immersive quality of camp cannot be reproduced back home, the principles of Jewish life and learning at camp can be adapted to other settings. For example, campers have great camp spirit: They take pride in their camp and feel that they are part of something special. Camps intentionally foster this spirit with all-camp events, tee-shirts, traditions, inter-camp rivalries and the like. Children have little such feelings for their religious schools. They evince no sense of school spirit or of being a part of a special community. But if educators examined how community spirit is fostered at camp, they could abstract the general principles and adapt them to the school setting.

3. Programmers back home can take advantage of camp friendship networks.

Camp friends are special, in part because of shared experiences and the intensity of living together day in and day out and in part because of the camp's intentional focus on friendships, group dynamics and teamwork. A participant on another immersive summer experience — a teen trip to Israel — once wrote to me the following: “Living with people for a straight month, having Shabbat services with them, not showering for four days with them, singing with them ... brought me closer to these people than I have ever been to anyone and taught me a lot about myself.” These friendships are a gift to programmers who can use them to build post-camp group experiences — whether organized formally or

informally, in-person or on-line.

4. Institutions can create camper-friendly settings where skills learned at camp can be exercised during the year.

When done well, Jewish life is seamlessly integrated into the camp experience. Campers sing *Birkat Hama-zon* with all of the noise, hand motions, and enthusiasm that they do any camp song; they shout out “*boker tov*” in the morning as if speaking Hebrew were normal; they light the *havdallah* candle and sing with arms linked as if they always marked Shabbat's ending. Counselors are sometimes able to recreate the camp experience at Hillel, but there are few places for campers to do so. When the synagogue tries to mimic camp, the effort is seen as “lame.” The fact that Jewish behaviors are learned and engaged in with gusto at camp tells us that they are possible. It seems that we simply have not as yet found the way to create such environments back home.

At the very least, educators can work with camps to coordinate learning. For example, the child who learns about Israel from the *schlichim* at camp should be given the opportunity to study about Israel in school, to communicate with an Israeli pen pal during the year, to visit Israel on a community trip, to attend an Israeli film festival, to meet the Israeli consulate, to do Israeli cooking in scouts, and so on. Camp can introduce and motivate the learning; the local community can follow up and build on this learning. Together, the two-months and the ten-months could create a spiral of learning.

Recently, there have been calls for making a Jewish camp experience mandatory for children in congregational schools and for extending camp beyond the summer months. These calls are not surprising, but they are misguided. The Jewish community regularly shifts focus from one arena to another, always in search of the next big thing — the magic bullet that will make more committed Jews out of its children. Unfortunately, the institution in the spotlight is often expected to be the be-all and end-all of Jewish education. As the focus moves to summer camp, the field can easily become freighted with unrealistic expectations and demands for action outside of its realm. Rather, we should envision a community with a series of worthwhile Jewish educational experiences and a mechanism for assuring that, once engaged, participants readily move from experience to experience. Camp alone cannot create committed and educated Jews, but rather needs to be part of a continuum of Jewish education. The two months can best serve the ten months by perfecting their own realm, by providing insight into their educational principles, by building strong Jewish social networks, and by inspiring institutions back home to think anew about how they can capture the imagination of Jewish children and youth. ■

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The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel

by DANA RAUCHER and RABBI SHIMON FELIX

This past February, almost 200 alumni of The Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel, which represented over a third of the alumni community, gathered in New York City to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the program. This was not merely an evening affair at which old friends reconvened to reminisce, but rather an entire weekend of activities in which alumni aged 17 to 38 met in eleven locations across the city for text study and Shabbat meals. Beyond marking the successful longevity of the program, the event displayed the level of achievement the Fellowship has attained in playing a continuously meaningful role in the lives of its participants.

The central program of the Fellowship is a fully funded, five-week trip to Israel for North American high school seniors from a wide range of Jewish backgrounds. However, the goal of the project was never simply to create a premier Israel program. In the words of Edgar M. Bronfman, the program's founder, the vision was "to create an interdenominational cadre of young Jews who would... model a different quality of discourse for the Jewish community. I hoped the program would create a core of young leaders who would remain in contact throughout their lives, and that even when they fundamentally disagree, they would bring the values of mutual respect and civility to the debate." To this end, selection for the Fellowship has always been highly competitive. The participants are academically outstanding student leaders who display promise in becoming the leaders of tomorrow. Furthermore, the renowned faculty is recruited from each of the major Jewish denominations and is a model of pluralism and diversity.

At the very outset, the Fellowship program was intended to be a long-term investment, maximized in such a way as to bring dividends not only to the participants, but, through them, to the Jewish community as a whole. This strategic thinking has been the key to our success with our alumni community, and their subsequent success as Jewish leaders and activists. Participants enter the

Fellowship with the understanding that they are beginning a life-long journey. Indeed, commitment to the program also includes attending a follow-up seminar in the fall and engaging in 40 hours of community service the year after the trip.

After the summer program, all alumni join an online alumni network and listserv, which builds lines of communication between various Fellowship cohorts. On a regular basis, BYFI hosts a series of events throughout the county ranging from small events to weekend seminars for over 100 participants. Beyond social events, these programs will generally have a text study or discussion component, reprising the kind of Jewish study and communal discussion first experienced by the Fellows during their summers in Israel. They also provide opportunities for networking, mentoring and discussion of alumni projects and social action.

Central to BYFI's alumni engagement strategy was the establishment of an Alumni Advisory Board, which aims to give alumni more buy-in and leadership in the life of the community. A grants pool was also created, largely through the contributions of alumni, to help provide funding for communal initiatives of fellow alumni. Over the past six years, BYFI has supported over 75 alumni projects, including *Kavod House* in Boston, a center for social action and creative Jewish study and life; *Voices of Rwanda*, a project that films testimonies of survivors of genocide; the *Jerusalem Bayit*, a residential project in Jerusalem whose participants engage in Jewish study and community service; and a number of alternative and experimental *minyanim* and study groups in New York, Washington DC, Toronto, Boston, Seattle and Denver. Many recipients of these grants have moved on to become professionally involved in various aspects of Jewish life or have become active lay leaders in their communities.

Having now spanned 21 years of participants, we have learned that our Fellows need varying types of support at different life stages. While they are in college, we encourage alumni to be active in their Hillels and to hold special events and seminars just for college students that focus on campus activities. For our cohorts who have begun professional careers, more than 10 percent of whom work for Jewish organizations, we help make connections to various employment and profes-

sional development opportunities. Subsequently, we also facilitate a mentoring relationship between our more seasoned alumni and younger alumni who are considering graduate school or new careers.

Over two decades of experience have taught us the following basic lessons:

- From the start, the commitment to follow-up must exist as an integral part of budget, programming, communications and staffing decisions. Programs should make sure to cover the basics: talented, dedicated staff and sufficient funding are necessary to make sure that contact information is updated regularly and proactively — "no alumnus left behind" is the rule.
- Communications systems must be set up to keep alumni in contact with each other and with the parent organization. These systems must be regularly updated, improved and fine-tuned to meet the needs of the growing number of diverse cohorts in one's alumni community and the standards of today's online, virtual world.
- In-person programming, which revisits and updates initial experiences, values and interactions, must occur regularly. This programming must serve to strengthen the social aspect of alumni life, deliver content and value, and speak to the varied interests of a wide range of alumni cohorts.
- Since most North American Jews live in big cities, regular programming in a few major centers will cover most constituents. For those who live outside of these areas, efforts must be made for both virtual and real interaction.
- As alumni mature, efforts to help them take active leadership roles must become regular, systematic parts of the organization's ongoing activity.

Overall, we feel that an intensive, quality Jewish experience should be transformative and should be positioned as a central event in the life of the participant. Maximizing that experience by continuing to deliver the messages and values of the program as alumni mature, and inspiring and supporting them as they evolve into Jewish leaders, is the logical extension of our basic educational and communal goals. We are exceptionally proud of our more than 500 alumni, many of whom have become distinguished artists, scholars, rabbis, lawyers and community leaders. The exceptional achievements of our alumni include seven Rhodes Scholarships, seven Fulbright Scholarships, fifteen Wexner Fellowships, thirteen Dorot Fellowships and four Supreme Court clerkships. As we now enter the 22nd year of the program, we look forward to helping empower our current and future alumni in continuing to have a powerful impact on the Jewish community and the larger world. ■

Dana Raucher is Executive Director of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation. *Rabbi Shimon Felix* is Executive Director of The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.

Nurturing Tomorrow's Leaders Today

by RABBI YONATAN GORDIS

Much of the power of Jewish peoplehood lies in our capacity to offer community members experiences that carry high emotional and intellectual impact — key elements in the pulse of Jewish identity and tradition. The past decade has witnessed unprecedented funds directed towards experiential programs that demonstrate the Jewish community's ability to do just this. Revolving around key pillars of Jewish community — such as Israel, culture and innovation — the programs target younger generations with increasing impact.

As an operating foundation, the Center for Leadership Initiatives (CLI) focuses much of its efforts on using the connective space between short-term, real-time (aka face-to-face) programs that offer training and networking opportunities to current leaders and in particular to emerging leaders in the global Jewish community. We gather participants from around the world, offer intensive experiences emphasizing professional development and networking, and then send them back to their home communities to do their work as part of a more ongoing global context. Supporting this context is where we maximize the return on our investment.

Why do these short-term programs work? Many of them can be seen as part of a generational perspective that sees

short-term or sound-byte experiences as the most effective way to access the average young person today. Commitment trouble — even to long term programs — plagues the early 21st Century in many realms. Thus programs, particularly for North Americans, have been created to focus on short-term Israel experiences, service and other programs in line with the values of young people that can fit into the crowded (my) space of their lives today. Creating links between the short-term programs turns them from experiences into high potential community.

One of CLI's key vehicles for working with the younger generation of Jewish global leadership is the ROI program (www.roi120.com).

ROI is a community of Jewish innovators that is a partnership between CLI and Taglit-Birthright Israel. Launched in 2006, with funding from philanthropist Lynn Schusterman, this program began as a Summit in Jerusalem of 120 young Jewish innovators from around the world for five days of intensive programs rooted in networking.

With approximately half of its participants alumni of Birthright programs, ROI was developed as one of the first follow-up programs to the Birthright experience. Certain Birthright Israel participants clearly wanted more programming and more contact with one another. ROI was conceived as a vehicle to use the energy and inspiration instilled by Birthright to move emerging leadership forward.

From the outset, we learned important lessons about ROI and its potential effectiveness. We clearly heard from

Summit participants that without useful connectivity between each of the Summits, ROI could fall into the pattern of the numerous conferences that are spicing up the Jewish world today — great short events whose investments are not fully actualized because after the gatherings, the energy dissipates. Seeking longer term impact, the ROI program has evolved dramatically.

Now headed into its third year, we have expanded ROI into an ongoing program that consists of physical gatherings and virtual networks. Participants meet face-to-face at the ROI 120 Annual Summit in Jerusalem (the entry point into the network) and at a series of regional gatherings in cities in Israel, the U.K. and the U.S. These programs are complemented by ongoing online communications that participants use to share information, garner support (technical and otherwise) from each other, collaborate and innovate. From their end, our participants efficiently populate a community listserv, Facebook, blogs and other online tools (including online video) to keep each other in the loop and particularly to meet face-to-face as often as they can. From our end, we produce weekly emails and monthly newsletters that include news about their projects, funding, job opportunities and ROI-specific programs. We do not strive to be their social networking vehicle but rather stay focused and allow them to use whatever networks are working for their social interactions, which ultimately support ROI's networks as well. The offline and online components continue to be refined to increase their complementary nature. This year, CLI bolstered the program by creating a \$100,000 small grants pool that will be allocated this spring to projects run by past ROI Summit participants.

Whether we call it interstitial programming, synaptic programming, follow through or community, we are investing in a diverse portfolio of program components for ROI and our other programs because we believe that this is our best way to contribute to the new model of the Jewish town square. It must be part virtual, part face-to-face, part short-term and part long-term. For us, the endgame is a dynamic and diverse Jewish community led by a group of impassioned and skilled global leaders. ■

Rabbi Yonatan Gordis is Executive Director of the Center for Leadership Initiatives (www.leadingup.org).

One Whole Jew

by SETH GAFFNEY



I opened my Gmail and clicked on an e-card from a friend.

“May all your Hanukkah wishes come true, even though you’re half a Jew.”

Funny, I thought. I don’t think I laughed out loud, but not because I was offended. I appreciated the humor, but I was more wrapped up in how Someecards.com chose to spell Hanukkah. That happens every year. Oh, the paradox of choice! I can spell Kwanzaa in my sleep, yet second guess the n’s and k’s in our holiday. So it wasn’t until I clicked Send A Reply and found the picture of Santa with the copy “I Don’t Exist” that I let out a chuckle.

I always took pride in being an Irish soda bagel, as they say on the streets — the streets being Deer Park Avenue in Dix Hills, Long Island. It made me different from the other Jews, which was something I liked. It is something I still like.

I wouldn’t have needed to differentiate myself from Jews had it not been for my Catholic dad, Vincent Thomas Gaffney II. You see: having gone to Catholic school for his entire childhood, my father saw value in receiving a religious education. My mother was never enrolled in Hebrew School, nor did she have a Bat Mitzvah ceremony, and she turned out more than fine. (Though she did go to Israel twice, so maybe that had something to do with it.) It was not a subject of much debate, nor was it a mandate. However, my father put the option on the table. And when all my friends from Little League were going somewhere together after practice, I didn’t want to miss out. That, my friends, is how Jewish journeys begin!

My Hebrew schoolteacher took attendance.

“Seth Gaffney?”

“Here.”

“Gaffney, you have a very Jewish last name. Is it Orthodox?”

“Huh? My dad’s Irish Catholic.” I said this with less confusion than bitterness.

How could she try to take my uniqueness from

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Israel this past June at age 25. My love of travel and my decision that I would have to be crazy not to take a free ten-day vacation helped me justify going on the trip. I thought there was

learn in Israel and like to be reminded, perhaps reassured, of back in the U.S. From my perspective, this is something post-trip planners understand and have been able to leverage. In fact, the most rewarding Jewish experience I've had since my return has been my participation in Birthright Israel Monologues. Just as the original trip dovetailed nicely with my interest in travel, this program had me revisit my experience and write an original piece about it by dangling before my eyes the chance to work with a Def Jam Poet.

I'm not talking about bait and switch. I'm not talking about sneaking in the Jewish part. Continuing to provide a wide variety of options, including Shabbat dinners, speaker series, Hebrew lessons and holiday parties, allows us returnees to pursue Jewish enrichment on our own terms. It helps us find where our outside interests intersect with Judaism, making the Jewish experience more personal. It helps like-minded Jews connect and build micro-communities in which participants have more in common with one another than their shared religious background.

Post-trip planners have the opportunity to reach a generation of people who look upon their identity with new eyes. The openness of recent participants should be matched by the openness of Birthright Israel to find people, partners and non-traditional passions with the capacity to inspire. Of course, it is best to re-engage Birthright participants soon after their trip has ended, as it's a lot easier to maintain the momentum that the trip creates than to start from scratch. Each time we engage with Judaism, we're more likely to consider another aspect of Jewish life. I attended my first Shabbat dinner ever last month.

After the trip has ended, Taglit-Birthright Israel can help alumni embrace Judaism as the ultimate mash-up of culture, religion and community. I hope my story serves as a reminder that Jews are like snowflakes. We each come with unique backgrounds and expectations, and the Birthright Israel experience impacts each person uniquely. Setting universal expectations for the effects of this trip is a nearly impossible effort.

Sometimes the change is small but significant. For the last six months I have not been half-Jewish. I'm half Irish and half Russian, but I'm 100 percent Jewish — and my Jewish education and journey continues. ■

me? At my Bar Mitzvah ceremony, after summarizing the content of my *Haftorah* portion, I echoed the words of many years of Reform Jews who stood on the *bimah* before me: "I hope to answer these and many more questions in my future studies at Temple Beth Torah." (Read as: Hebrew high school.) One year later my Jewish education ended, as did my Jewish journey — for the time being.

My search for self-identity continued at Georgetown, where I took "Introduction to Biblical Literature" in one of the many classrooms adorned with a cross. I didn't join the Jewish Student Association, but neither did I hide the fact that I was half-Jewish. I fasted on Yom Kippur, the day our sophomore class committee decided to have our fall barbecue; I think to make a point. My friends knew to which side they should attribute my drinking abilities, and I liked that they called me Hebe (pronounced He-be). But when one of these friends suggested, "Isn't being Jewish more like a culture or a club than a religion?" I once again felt defensive. Yet this time puzzlement overtook resentment.

How could he ask such a thing? How could I have so much trouble answering? After college, I spent my first few years in the real world, again not hiding that I was a Jew. I certainly did not have to, since I work in advertising. I certainly did not advertise it either. I bet coworkers that they couldn't guess my ethnicity and made a point of mentioning my family's annual Christmas party.

I still considered myself to be "half a Jew" when I went on Taglit-Birthright

a chance I'd become a little bit more religious. I did not realize I would connect to a country, a people and its culture. I didn't realize I'd want another chance to respond to my friend's suggestion, back in college, that Judaism was more than a religion.

It is pointless to even attempt to pinpoint one defining moment in my Birthright experience. My Jewish completion, so to speak, did not come in a spiritual awakening at the *Kotel*; nor through a community embrace at a beach bonfire in Nachsholim; nor in an impassioned speech at Independence Hall; nor in bonding sessions with my Israeli counterparts.

If I could sum up my Birthright experience in one word, it would be "dancing." True, we may have danced only a few times — at a bar in Jerusalem, in a boat ride in Tel Aviv, and in our final night in a kibbutz classroom. Yet, the feeling you get when you dance without a hint of self-consciousness was present throughout our ten days.

Since I've been back, the barriers to being Jewish no longer seem to exist. Mainly, the feeling that because I am not religious, I am not sufficiently Jewish disappeared. Of course, it helps when the Facebook profile of one of my new Israeli friends reads "Religious views: Atheist." Overall though, I have been relieved of my guilt as a High Holiday Jew because I don't define my Jewishness by religiousness.

Now I know that being Jewish is at its best when it is many things. I believe this is something many Birthright recipients

Peoplehood and Return

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

The intensity of an immersion experience, whether it be Birthright Israel, summer camp, a service trip, or a retreat, is difficult to maintain or replicate in any kind of follow-up or continuing programming. Away from home and one's normal routine, a typical program participant can try on new and different perspectives on what it means to be part of a Jewish community. Learning and seeking meaning can come more easily. A suspension of disbelief, if you will, costs less psychologically and experientially when one is basically on vacation. The social experience of being with one's peers 24/7 helps to cement the sense that various educational elements are somehow more real, authoritative and sustainable than similar elements might be back home. However, we risk much if we expect the power of the immersion experience to translate automatically into increased Jewish involvement and behavior when the trip ends. If momentum is to be captured, the seeds for continuing the experience must be planted before the immersion experience is over.

And so, many who have been grappling with how best to take advantage of the identity breakthroughs that are thought to happen during these experiences suggest building the possibilities of the "post" into the "pre," being purposeful to "follow through" in program planning from the outset. And so goes the conventional wisdom. There is much value in this wisdom. But perhaps the fundamental difference between immersion experiences and the American Jewish life to which participants return, is not only one of intensity but also of quality. That is, a quality that cannot be replicated unless American Jewish life itself is wholly transformed. The sense one feels that Jewish life is somehow "sovereign" when one is in a total immersion Jewish experience is fundamentally not built into the fabric of what

most American Jews experience in being Jewish in America. The disconnect, then, between the immersion experience and the possibility of following that experience through is not only caused by a lack of programmatic continuity but results from the fact that American Jewish life and the immersion experience fundamentally contradict each other.

Birthright Israel participants regularly report that what they wake up to on their ten-day trip to Israel is not necessarily a deeper appreciation for the religious and theological elements of Judaism but rather to the fact that being Jewish is essentially about being part of a living, breathing people defined by an elemental familial connection. Prior to the trip, participants feel that being Jewish is of an exclusively religious category; being on the trip, they experience something quite different. They find out that the Jewish People is their family. When they return home, they genuinely seek out experiences that will capture this sense of Jewish Peoplehood only to discover that much of the apparatus of Jewish communal institutions and their offerings are organized around the principle that being Jewish is a matter of belonging to an American religious denomination, a community of faith — a religion, not a people.

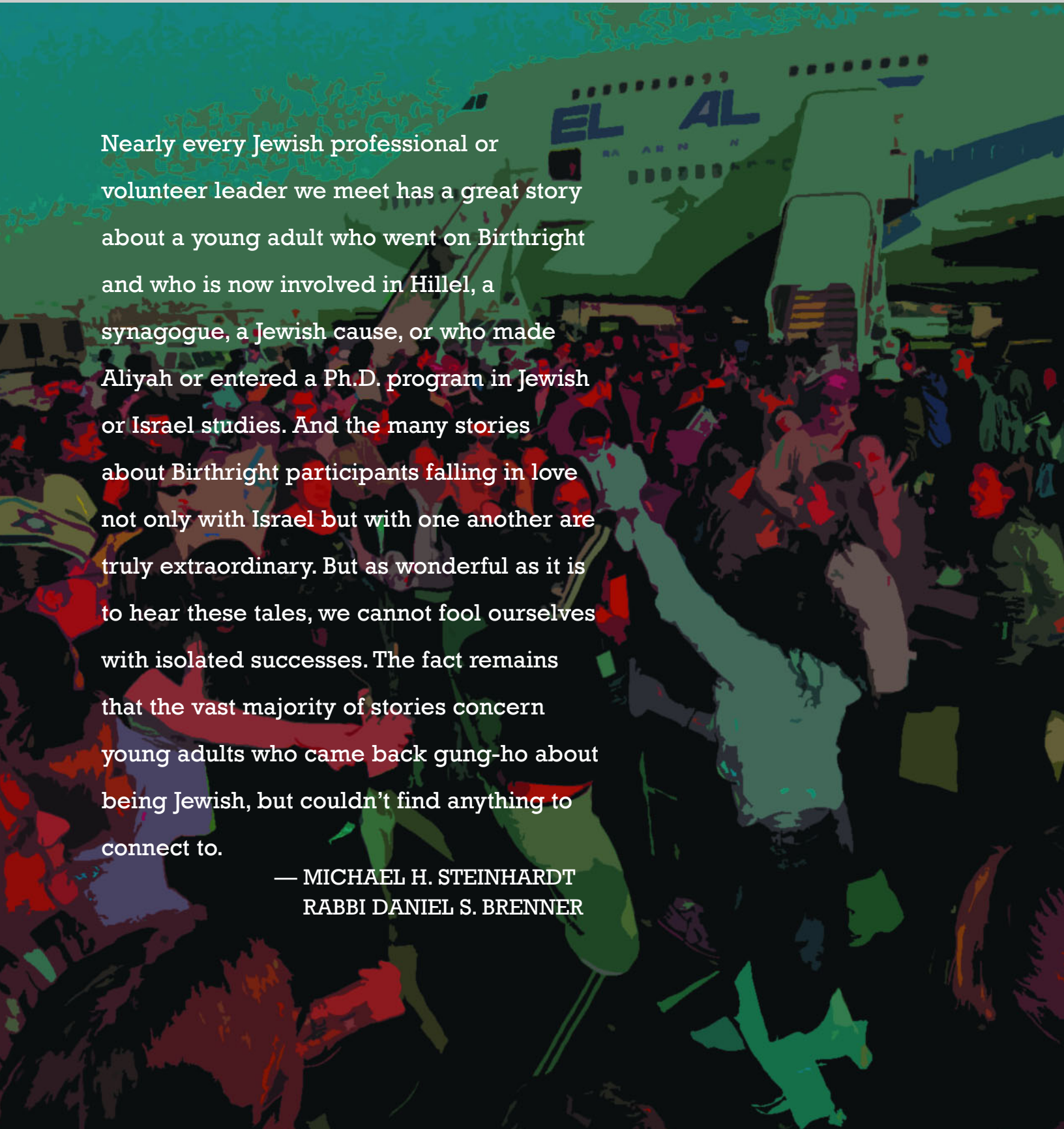
One might argue that the disconnect between the Birthright immersion experience and American Jewish life is not reflective of immersion experiences in general, but specifically relates to an immersion experience in Israel, where Jewish Peoplehood, not theology, is at the heart of a common national identity. Fair enough. But do we really believe that what makes a Jewish camping experience, for example, powerful and different is the opportunity to share a common theology, as might be the case at evangelical Christian summer camps? Jewish camps and Christian camps may look similar on the outside, but what gets shared and reinforced is something very different. Jewish cultural sovereignty and Peoplehood is a central aspect of the experience one has at

Peoplehood and connectedness have a better chance of being resonant for those who have been sparked and inspired by intensive Jewish immersion experiences.

Jewish camp. It is interesting to note that camps organized by the religious denominations, which are not primarily Zionist at their core, have been, nonetheless, historically programmed with trappings of Israel and Zionism for decades. These camps feel, to some extent, like a taste of Israel with Hebrew names for bunks and age groups, Hebrew announcements pouring over the loudspeaker, Israeli counselors ever-present, and a sense of connection that transcends a strictly religious proposition. Yet, campers return to synagogue educational contexts in which Modern Israeli Hebrew takes second place, if not third or fourth place, to the far less relevant Hebrew of the prayer book. Rabbis sometimes complain that their best students come back from summer camp having experienced fullness and belonging that the synagogue cannot match. Perhaps the synagogue is built not to teach the comprehensive nature of Jewish Peoplehood but to religiously enhance a life whose center is elsewhere. Synagogues that incorporate, for both children and adults, a broader educational agenda that includes the arts, culture, the real life of contemporary Israel, a passion for Modern Hebrew, and a comprehensive sense of community, Peoplehood and connectedness have a better chance of being resonant for those who have been sparked and inspired by intensive Jewish immersion experiences.

A surprising phenomenon among returning Birthright Israel participants is a widespread interest to enroll in classes in Modern Hebrew language. This comes at a time when many Jewish educators have sadly given up on the prospect that American Jews could ever be interested in learning Hebrew. Perhaps Jewish educators, rabbis and lay leaders might be wise to take their cues from the intuitions of Birthright Israel alumni. They have decided that they want a Jewish life that isn't afraid to be particular and culturally sovereign; if we, as a community, were bold enough to match their passion, we might be ready for their return. ■

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Nearly every Jewish professional or volunteer leader we meet has a great story about a young adult who went on Birthright and who is now involved in Hillel, a synagogue, a Jewish cause, or who made Aliyah or entered a Ph.D. program in Jewish or Israel studies. And the many stories about Birthright participants falling in love not only with Israel but with one another are truly extraordinary. But as wonderful as it is to hear these tales, we cannot fool ourselves with isolated successes. The fact remains that the vast majority of stories concern young adults who came back gung-ho about being Jewish, but couldn't find anything to connect to.

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT
RABBI DANIEL S. BRENNER