

Does
the
Teen
Israel
Experience
Make a
Difference?

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November, 1997

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph analyzes the research on the impact of an Israel Experience on the subsequent Jewish identity and involvement of young Jews. Four conclusions emerge from this research.

First, almost 100% of the tens of thousands of the young people that have participated in an Israel Experience over the years have expressed satisfaction with this experience. They cite three reasons for their satisfaction: 1) they enjoyed spending a summer with a group of like-minded teenage peers 2) they looked upon their summer in Israel as a positive "Jewish" experience 3) they had fun. When compared with other studies of Jewish adolescents, this body of research points to the fact that the Israel Experience is the most highly regarded of any *Jewish* experience that young Jews have by the time they end adolescence. In addition, for many Jewish teens, the Israel trip ranks among the most positive life experiences of any kind – Jewish or general – that they have had.

Second, research on an Israel trip in the teenage years suggests that this experience contributes to several important dimensions of general adolescent development. An Israel Experience affords young people the opportunity to begin to experience independence and autonomy from parents. Israel trips encourage a healthy sense of self-esteem that emerges from a positive peer experience with other North American and Israeli teens. Young people who go to Israel learn about Jewish themes and events by actually experiencing them, rather than by formal learning in a classroom. A summer in Israel enables teens to interact with counselors who are role models of a freely chosen positive personal identity. Being in Israel enables young Jewish teens to spend a few weeks in a contemporary Jewish society that presents them with powerful examples of great fidelities and loyalties.

Third, the unique contribution of the Israel Experience does not seem to be in cognitive learning about Judaism per se, but rather in the development of positive Jewish attitudes and behaviors. Two attitudes that seem to be particularly affected by a summer in Israel are a sense of Jewish peoplehood and a pro-Israel predisposition. These findings

suggest that the Israel Experience is not a substitute for intensive synagogue life, high quality Jewish schooling, a rich Jewish family life or quality informal education, but rather is a valuable partner and complement to these institutions.

Fourth, several decades of research indicate that there is a connection between subsequent Jewish identity – both short and long term - and participation in a teen Israel Experience. The research points to the conclusion that more intense levels of Jewish identity and involvement are connected with having been to Israel as a teen, and the impact of such an experience sustains itself into adulthood. Some of the research suggests that this occurs because the Israel Experience serves as a catalyst that helps to move an adolescent along a continuum. Other research indicates that the impact is the result of the combination of an Israel trip together with such other critical influences as Jewish schooling, synagogue, Jewish camping and youth groups, and a positive Jewish home life. A third body of research argues that a summer in Israel can have an independent causal effect on Jewish identity, involvement, and in-marriage.

When taken as a whole, the body of research that exists concerning youth travel to Israel clearly demonstrates that such an experience is one of the most powerful resources that the North American Jewish community has at its disposal to face the challenge of adult Jewish identity and involvement.

FROM ABRAHAM TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Land of Israel has been part of Jewish consciousness from the earliest of times. Throughout the ages, Jews have cared for Israel in many ways. They have lived in Israel; they have prayed for her welfare; and they have contributed to Israel's well being. Jews have also traveled to Israel. Sometimes, these travels were individual pilgrimages and at other times they were collective returnings to a homeland. Throughout the ages, the Jewish psyche has not abandoned the idea of Israel.

In recent decades, there has been a new focus on the visit to Israel as a potentially powerful experience in the education and identity development of young Jews.¹ By the end of the twentieth century, the Israel Experience has increasingly been regarded as a promising and important new force in shaping Jewish identity and involvement.²

The emergence of the teen age Israel Experience³ as a factor in North American Jewish life has given rise to the question of the impact of such trips. Many people are interested in knowing whether trips significantly affect the identity of young people when they become adults. Does going to Israel on an educational program during the teen-age years lead young people to identify more as Jews?

In order to help lay leaders, educators, rabbis, communal leaders, parents, and young people deal with these questions, we have studied the body of research conducted over the past three decades on the subject of the impact of the Israel Experience on adolescent identity development. This document summarizes what research tells us about the impact of such an experience.

The Israel Experience has increasingly been regarded as a promising and important new force in shaping Jewish identity and involvement.

THE DATA

Over the years a potpourri of research has focused on the impact of a teen-age Israel Experience on the development of Jewish identity and involvement. This body of literature has included studies of participants' reactions after the summer; research on the immediate and long-term impact of the experience on subsequent Jewish identity, and analyses of the

1. For an overview of this subject see: Barry Chazan, "The Israel Trip: A New Form of Jewish Education" and Steven M. Cohen and Susan Wall, "Excellence in Youth Trips to Israel" in: *Youth Trips to Israel: Rationale and Realization* (1994).

2. A significant expression of the new preoccupation of contemporary Jewish life with the Israel Experience was the establishment of Israel Experience Inc in 1996. This agency was established by CJF (the Council for Jewish Federations), the CRB (Charles R. Bronfman) Foundation , the Jewish Agency/World Zionist Organization, the Ministry of Tourism of the State of Israel, and the UJA (United Jewish Appeal) in order to make the Israel Experience an integral dimension of North American Jewish life.

3. Since the mid-1980's the teen trip to Israel has increasingly been denoted by the phrase "the Israel Experience". The introduction of the word 'experience' rather than 'trip' signified the belief that going to Israel was more than a one time pleasure jaunt, but rather that it had the possibility of being an important formative educational event in a child's development. Since that time, the phrase "the Israel Experience" has become the terminology generally used to refer to a teen-age educational summer program in Israel.

contents and programs of trips.⁴ When taken together, this literature constitutes a sizeable body of data and information about the teen age Israel Experience.

IS THERE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ISRAEL EXPERIENCE AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT?

One body of research has focused on the contributions of an Israel Experience to the general dynamics of adolescent development.

The reliability of young adult commitments largely depends on the outcome of the adolescent struggle for identity

Adolescence is a time in which young people intensely explore their own sense of self and test increased independence from parental intervention and control. It is the age of the beginnings of the move towards autonomy (Erikson, 1997).

It is the period in which young people are beginning to consider diverse fidelities and belief systems in the search for what will become their defining adult loyalty:

The reliability of young adult commitments largely depends on the outcome of the adolescent struggle for identity (Erikson, 1997)

It is a time in which the peer group assumes a central role in shaping values, behaviors, and self-esteem. The friends and colleagues that one "hangs out with" play an important role in shaping who one is (Bruner, 1996; Papini et al, 1990).

In adolescence, young people increasingly turn to direct experiencing and experimenting as sources of learning about life and the world. It is an age of intense testing and "trying out" (Moreno, 1995).

Various research studies on the Israel Experience have indicated that a teen Israel trip can make important contributions to several of these themes of adolescence.

4. This research literature can be divided into four categories.

Evaluative Research tells us how young people who went to Israel felt about their experience after the trip. Did they like it? Do they think they changed as a result of the summer?

Impact studies examine the question of whether an Israel experience influences a young person's Jewish identity. *Pre/post* impact research measures changes in Jewish identity and involvement in young people after they have completed a summer in Israel. Long term *ex post facto* impact research looks for a statistically significant correlation between high levels of adult Jewish identity and participation in a teenage Israel experience.

Descriptive Research narrates what happens on an Israel teen trip. It encompasses analysis of the basic parameters of a summer Israel experience: the contents and programs in which youngsters participate during the summer; the major themes presented to participants; the role of staff; the composition and dynamics of the group during the summer; and the inter-action with Israel and Israelis.

Developmental Research examines the dynamics of general adolescent development: what kinds of biological and psychological issues do adolescents face in this period in their lives? What kinds of skills, attitudes, and abilities should be developed in this period? What are some of the characteristic needs and problems of this period?

The trip provides a format in which North American Jewish teens can be on their own, away from the daily intervention of parents. It is a brief venture into the world of adolescent autonomy (Goldberg, 1994).

The Israel trip is an intense experience of association with other teenagers with high levels of self-esteem (London, 1991; Levinson, 1995). On the Israel trip a youngster spends time with fellow North American Jewish teens who feel good about being together in Israel (Heilman, 1995). They meet Israeli teens who represent young people that feel very comfortable with their particularistic identity, and who, at the same time, share the same interests as teenagers throughout the world. They spend the summer with counselors who are role models of young adults that have freely chosen a positive identity and life-style (Heilman, 1995).

Being in Israel enables young teens to spend a few weeks in a contemporary society that presents them with powerful examples of great fidelities and loyalties. This experience enables North American teens to observe and think about their own lifestyle in the context of these diverse options.

The overall conclusion from this body of research is that a positive Israel Experience in the teenage years can make an important contribution to the development of healthy adolescent identity:

Sending adolescents to Israel between middle and late adolescence lessens developmental ambiguity and strengthens self-esteem... [it] has positive effects on their sense of Jewish identity, Jewish self-esteem, and overall happiness and satisfaction with life (Levinson, 1995)

WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENS ON A TEEN ISRAEL EXPERIENCE?

Several studies have focused on the elements that comprise an Israel Experience. This kind of research examines what actually happens during a summer (Heilman, 1995; Goldberg, 1995; Cohen and Wall, 1994).

The research tells us that spending a summer in Israel confronts young North American teens with a contemporary Jewish community that differs greatly from their prior stereotypes of Jewish societies. The summer in Israel presents youngsters with a Jewish country that is alive and real and that looks and acts dramatically different from either the Jewish suburbia in which they live or the traditional Jewish societies that they see in films or on the stage. It is a powerful experience of living in a modern integrated Jewish society in

← The Israel Experience makes important contributions to general adolescent development

Sending adolescents to Israel strengthens self-esteem... and overall happiness and satisfaction with life

←

which being Jewish is a positive norm.⁵ A summer in Israel is an experiencing of a contemporary Jewish society which is both very Jewish and very modern.

A summer in Israel is an experiencing of a contemporary Jewish society which is both very Jewish and very modern

This body of research highlights the fact that these summer programs are intense group experiences in which Jewish teens spend several weeks together as part of a tightly knit group of like-minded peers (Cohen and Wall, 1994). They eat, sleep, travel, and socialize with this group and develop intense loyalty to the other teens and to the group as a whole.⁶ A teenager on a summer program in Israel is not just in Israel but "Israel [is] the background for the summer, a place against which all the experiences happened" (Heilman, 1995).

The paradigmatic form of "learning" in these trips is experiential rather than frontal. On Israel Experiences young people learn about Jewish life and culture through visiting, seeing, and talking together, rather than through learning in formal classroom settings. The entire country becomes the classroom. Digging in the caves of Bet Guvrin, a sunset cruise on the Sea of Galilee, a pre-dawn ascent of Masada, and standing before the Western Wall are the venues of daily "lessons". (Chazan, 1994).

On an Israel Experience young people learn about Jewish life through visiting and seeing rather than through formal classroom settings

Numerous studies emphasize the critical role played by the staff – and particularly by the counselors - in these summer experiences (E. Cohen, 1996; Cohen and Wall, 1994; Chazan, 1994; Heilman, 1995; Goldberg, 1995; Kafka, London, Bandler, and Frank, 1990,). The North American staff serve as models of young Jewish adults who are relatively close to the teen traveler in age and who have freely chosen to adopt a positive Jewish and pro-Israel identity. The Israeli staff members serve as trusted prisms for understanding contemporary Israel and as accessible models of Jewish pride and self-esteem.

An increasingly important dimension of Israel Experiences in recent years has been the *mifgash*, the carefully organized meeting and inter-action of Israeli and North American teens (Ezrachi and Sutnick, 1997). The *mifgash* enables North American teens to meet Israeli teenage peers who exemplify the possibility of living comfortably as normal teenagers with strong Jewish loyalties.⁷

In short, the studies of what actually happens on teen trips to Israel describe a summer that is comprised of a mix of interesting planned and spontaneous experiences that are engaging and well-received by teens. Some of these experiences are about being Jewish

5. One of the interesting findings of research in this area is that adults and teens do not react in the same way to Israel as a "normal society". Many Jewish adults are disturbed about the "Americanization" of Israel as evidenced by such phenomena as Tower Records, Blockbuster Video and MTV. Several of the studies indicate that for teens these phenomena are positive statements that Israel is an alive and modern place (Goldberg, 1995; Heilman, 1995).

6. Heilman devotes much attention to the central role played by the group T-shirt which assumes mythical proportions almost like a flag (Heilman, 1995).

7. In 1994 the Jewish Agency/World Zionist Organization together with the Charles R. Bronfman family established a new organization (the Charles R. Bronfman Centre for the Israel Experience: Mifgashim) devoted to making the interaction of young Israelis and visiting North Americans a central dimension of all Israel Experiences. By 1997 approximately 4200 North Americans participated in a structured *mifgash* program during the summer.

and some are about being fifteen or sixteen, young, and adolescent. A summer in Israel provides an arena in which these both of these experiences can take place with ease and comfort.

Some of the experiences on an Israel trip are about being Jewish – and some are about being fifteen or sixteen, young, and adolescent

HOW DO TEENS FEEL ABOUT THEIR ISRAEL EXPERIENCE?

Over the years much attention has been focused on the extent of teenage satisfaction with their Israel Experience. Did they enjoy the experience? Was it fun? Did they feel that it was worthwhile?

There is extensive data about this question, encompassing surveys, trip evaluations, and anecdotal reports (E. Cohen, 1996,1995,1994; S. Cohen, 1991; Heilman, 1995; Isaacs, 1997; Tobin, 1996). The major analysis of this question is found in the research of Erik Cohen who has examined the reactions of tens of thousands of teenage participants in the Israel Experience at the end of their summer trip (Cohen,1996,1995,1994,1993,1992).

	SUMMER 1993	SUMMER 1994	SUMMER 1995	SUMMER 1996
Very satisfied	53	53	50	58
Satisfied	42	42	45	48
Not satisfied	4	4	4	3
Not satisfied at all	1	1	1	1
Total*	100	100	100	100

	SUMMER 1993	SUMMER 1994	SUMMER 1995	SUMMER 1996
Very satisfied	53	58	64	63
Satisfied	42	37	35	35
Not satisfied	4	5	1	2
Not satisfied at all	0	0	0	0
Total*	100	100	100	100

Almost 100% of teens that have participated in the Israel Experience over the years have been satisfied with their experience

These charts show us that, over the years, almost 100% of participants have described themselves as satisfied to very satisfied with the program. Cohen's research also indicates that almost 100% of the teens would recommend the trip to other teens.

In 1997 Leora Isaacs studied 490 individuals that had participated in the eight-week Israel Experience program sponsored by the Alexander Muss High School in Israel from its inception in 1972 until the year 1996⁸ (Isaacs, 1997). Nearly 93% of the respondents rated AMSHI among the three

RELATIVE TO ANY OTHER EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE	
The most influential	40.00
Within the three most influential	54.08
Neutral	4.69
Among the three least influential	0.20
The least influential	0.20
RELATIVE TO ANY OTHER JEWISH EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE	
The most influential	57.14
Within the three most influential	35.51
Neutral	3.06
Among the three least influential	0.20
The least influential	0.20

* All percentages are in rounded figures, so that total is not always 100%

8. The Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI) was established in 1972 by Rabbi Morris Kipper to provide an intensive high quality academic experience in Israel for qualified English speaking high school juniors and seniors. Participants receive high school or college credit for an eight week study and travel program in Israel. Five eight week sessions are conducted each year. Since 1972 more than 12,000 students have enrolled in the program.

most influential Jewish experiences of their lives, with 57% rating it as the most influential. More than 94% of those surveyed rated their Israel Experience with AMSHI as one of the three most influential educational experiences *of any type* that they had experienced in their life, with 40% rating it as the most influential.

In 1996 Gary Tobin studied a group of teenagers who had participated in a new Israel Experience program conducted by the Koret Foundation of San Francisco (Tobin, 1995). Tobin found consistently high levels of satisfaction with the trip. 100% regarded group discussions as excellent. 92% rated activities and sites as excellent. 50% rated learning about Judaism as excellent and 50% rated it as good. After the trip 100% of the sample felt more connected to the Jewish people.

In 1989, the late Perry London published a review of thirty years of research findings on youth trips to Israel indicating that the research unequivocally pointed to great teen satisfaction with summer Israel Experiences:

Teens returned home with stronger identity, stronger positive feelings for Israel, and a sense of kinship with Jews everywhere

By and large, people who had gone on 'Israel Experience' programs responded to them favorably whether the programs are of short or long duration. Their complaints ...spoke mainly to things that they felt were nuisances – poor scheduling, poor arrangements, rudeness –the praise on the other hand spoke to other matters – feelings that they returned home with stronger identity, stronger positive feelings for Israel, and a sense of kinship with Jews everywhere (London and Hirschfield, 1989)

What have teens meant when they have said that this was a positive and satisfying experience for them? First, the research indicates that they have regarded their Israel Experience as one of the most important *Jewish* experiences in their lives:

It had a huge impact on my Jewish identity (1982 AMHSI participant)

I had never read the Bible before and now I want to go home and read it (1998 Nesiya participant)

It helped me in my journey towards Judaism (1986 AHSI participant)

All through Sunday school I had heard about Moses and Pharaoh and it never meant anything. Now it does (1994 Ramah participant)

A gust of wind blew a chill up my spine as we walked through the gate and I got my first full view of the Wall... Suddenly it hit me – the flight, Israel, Jerusalem, everything... Maybe it wasn't the wind at all (1994 NFTY participant)

The second factor that has been reported to be a major source of satisfaction has been the experience of being together with a group of like-minded Jewish peers (Heilman, 1995). For most participants the Israel Experience is not only a positive Jewish experience, but it also is a positive social experience within the framework of a community:

I came on my own and thought I would not make new friends, but everyone was very friendly and I'm going back with many new friends (1997 JCCA Participant)

I loved it. I think a lot of it had to do with the group so I think what stands out the most for me are the friendships I made (1994 Young Judaea participant)

I was influenced by being in Israel but it was also the group a lot. Like a lot of the friends I made had very strong values about being Jewish- as did my counselors (1990 Ramah participant)

Third, decades of evaluative research indicate that for the vast majority of Israel Experience participants, the summer was not only about being Jewish or part of a group; it also was simply "Fun". In thinking back on their Israel Experience, young people have memories associated with good feelings, enjoyment, and pleasure. Adults have sometimes felt that the fact that these trips are regarded as fun means that they are frivolous and not serious. In fact, the accolade of "Fun" attached to this moment constitutes a dearly-to-be-cherished teen-age seal of approval:

As the details of the six weeks begin to blur with time and only feelings of happiness, exhilaration and camaraderie remain, the feeling the participants had that in Israel life was really good becomes the single memory and contour of the experience (Heilman, 1995)

The Jewish teenagers' positive response to the Israel Experience assumes even greater significance when seen in the broader context of contemporary American Jewish life and education. The Jewish world has been passionately preoccupied with creating Jewish experiences that can speak positively to the young in general and to teenagers in particular; and Jewish educators have been candid in admitting the difficulties and failures in identifying such experiences.⁹ The literature that we have just reviewed clearly indicates that several decades of Jewish teenagers have unanimously regarded a summer in Israel as one of their most positive memories and experiences. Indeed, there does not seem to be a comparable Jewish experience in the research annals of contemporary Jewish education that is as positively regarded by young people as an Israel Experience.

←.....
The Israel Experience
is Fun

.....
There is no other
Jewish experience
that is as positively
regarded by Jewish
teens as the Israel
Experience
←.....

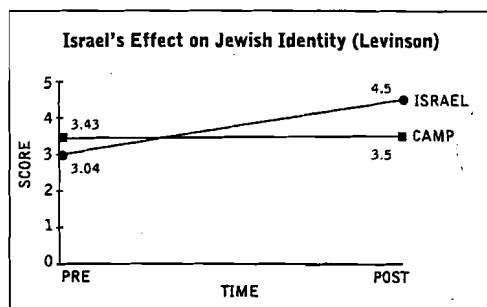
9. Walter Ruby "Just Call Me Smitty" *Reform Judaism* (1993); *A Time to Act* (1990).
Alvin Schiff, "The Jewish Supplementary School- A System in Need of Change" *Jewish Education* (1988)
Bernard Reisman, "On Transforming the Jewish School: A Call to Action, *Jewish Education* (1985)
Shimon Frost, "Any Change Will Be Better: On the Future of Supplementary Schooling" *Jewish Education* (1988)

DO TEEN ISRAEL EXPERIENCES AFFECT JEWISH IDENTITY AND INVOLVEMENT?

The central question that has been asked over the years about the Israel Experience is whether it affects Jewish identity. Does a summer on an educational program in Israel contribute to young people identifying more as Jews?

One body of research has studied this question by examining the Jewish attitudes and behaviors of teens before they depart for Israel and then after the summer in order to see if the summer experience caused significant change.

This body of research has consistently shown that immediately after a summer in Israel, Israel trip participants demonstrate positive changes on several dimensions of Jewish identity (Kafka et al., 1990; Levinson, 1995; E. Cohen, 1995). The two areas of Jewish identity that have most consistently been enriched as a result of an Israel Experience are: 1) increased concern with the State of Israel and 2) greater concern for Jewish Peoplehood and for the welfare of the Jewish people as a whole (Kafka et al, 1990; Cohen, 1995; Isaacs, 1997). Some studies have suggested that the same degree of change is not observable in *all dimensions* of Jewish attitudes and behavior after a summer experience (London, 1991; Levinson, 1995; S. Cohen, 1995). Two areas of identity and involvement in which there has not always been discernable change immediately after a summer in Israel are increased synagogue attendance and increased personal ritual observance. (Kafka et al, 1990; isaacs, 1997).



A few studies have focused on the immediate impact on Jewish identity of an Israel Experience as compared with other forms of Jewish education (Cohen, 1995; Levinson, 1995). Levinson found that the overall experience of a summer in an all-embracing Jewish environment (both in Israel and in camp in North America) was a significant factor in increasing several aspects of Jewish identity and of general adolescent development. However, the Israel Experience added unique dimensions and affected additional factors (e.g. sense of community, increased concern for Jewish history, positive feelings about physical self) over and above that of the camping experience:

While the sense of Jewish identity increased for both the Israel and the camp group participants, the results from the Israel group were more dramatic (Levinson, 1995).

These results are significant, but they do not preclude the possibility that the impact measured immediately after the summer may be short-lived. The critical question is whether the impact of an Israel Experience is lasting. Does going to Israel as a teen affect one's Jewish identity and involvement as an adult? Long term impact studies look at representative samples of highly identified adult Jews in order to see if a link can be established between more intense Jewish identity and having been to Israel as a teen.

This kind of impact research clearly points to a discernable long-term connection between going to Israel as a teen and increased Jewish identity and involvement as an adult (S. Cohen, 1995; Isaacs, 1997; Kafka et al, 1990; Mittelberg, 1994; Phillips, 1997). London and Kafka researched former Israel Experience participants some time after the summer and concluded that:

We were able to learn enough [about respondents] during their trips and to follow some of them for long enough afterwards to surmise that the trip had an immediate impact and a potentially enduring effect on them (London, p.7)

David Mittelberg compared a sample of more highly identified Jewish adults with less highly identified Jewish adults from the 1990 National Jewish population study and he concluded that the Israel Experience significantly affects all aspects of adult Jewish identity¹⁰:

The degree of religious practice is radically higher for those who have visited Israel once (45%) and higher still for those who have visited Israel more than once (56%) than for others. Of those who have never visited Israel, only 23% earned a high score on the index of religious practice... The same is true for the index of Jewish communal affiliation: on every measure of affiliation, those who have visited Israel once have a higher score than those who have never visited Israel... Respondents who have visited Israel outmarried at a much lower rate (15%) than those who have never visited (44%)... It is possible to isolate the relationship of a trip to Israel with measures of Jewish identity (Mittelberg, 1994)

It is possible to isolate the relationship of a trip to Israel with measures of Jewish identity

VISITS TO ISRAEL	LOW JEWISH PRACTICE	MED. JEWISH PRACTICE	HIGH JEWISH PRACTICE	TOTAL	ALL
Never visited	25%	52%	23%	100%	74%
Visited once	5%	50%	45%	100%	15%
Visited more than once	4%	39%	58%	100%	12%
All	20%	50%	30%		100%

10. Mittelberg has indicated that the NJPS data he utilized did not per se focus on teen trips of the adults sampled, and therefore in a strict sense his data points to the impact of going to Israel in general rather than the teen trip in particular on adult identity. However, he suggests that the relevant finding relates to the correlation he found between visiting Israel and Jewish identity for respondents under forty who can be assumed to have been on a teen or trip or a university-aged experience (private communication, September 9, 1997).

Visits to Israel By Measures of Jewish Communal Affiliation (Mittelberg)

ITEMS OF JEWISH AFFILIATION INDEX	NEVER VISITED ISRAEL	VISITED ISRAEL ONCE	VISITED ISRAEL ONCE +	WEIGHTED N=	UNWEIGHTED N=
Paid Subscription to Jewish Periodical (Yes)	17%	36%	51%	4826630	2045
Affiliation with at least one Jewish Organization	20%	43%	60%	4826630	2045
Close Friends or Family Living in Israel (Yes)	21%	35%	70%	4826630	2045
At least Some or Most of Closest Friends are Jewish	30%	59%	63%	4826630	2045
Live in Neighborhood with Some or Very Jewish Character	32%	44%	53%	4826630	2045
Any 1989 Household Contribution to Jewish Charity	43%	69%	82%	4826630	2045



Comparison of Attitudes and Behaviors with NJPS Study in % (Isaacs)

ATTITUDE/BEHAVIOR	AMHSI ALUMNI	NJPS - 1990
Israel Connection		
Feel strong personal connection to Israel	37	31
Philanthropy - Personally raising money for:		
Jewish Charity	56	62
Secular Charity	48	67
By Age group		
Group I (AGES 17-27 N=281)	(AGES 17-27 N=281)	(AGES 17-27 N=281)
Jewish Charity	46	36
Secular Charity	35	52
Group II (AGES 28-32 N=116)	(AGES 28-32 N=116)	(AGES 28-32 N=116)
Jewish Charity	70	37
Secular Charity	51	60
Group III (AGES 33-42 N=92)	(AGES 33-42 N=92)	(AGES 33-42 N=92)
Jewish Charity	70	48
Secular Charity	57	70
Communal Involvement		
Most/All Friends Jewish	63	45
Participating in/Volunteering for secular org.	43	39
Participating in/Volunteering for Jewish org.	64	20
Board/Officer of Jewish/Zionist org.	32	17
Current Synagogue Membership	63	35

In his follow-up studies to the 1990 NJPS sample, Phillips found that a marked reduction in mixed marriage was associated with participation in the following kinds of informal educational activities: 1) two or more years of a Jewish youth group 2) two or more years of a Jewish sleep away camp and 3) Israel trips during the teen years. Moreover, Phillips found that "an Israel trip in conjunction with camp and youth group reduced mixed marriage even further" (Phillips, nd).

Leora Isaac's study of the nearly 500 alumni of the Alexander Muss High School in Israel program revealed that AMHSI graduates had a consistently higher Jewish profile in terms of contribution to Jewish philanthropy, involvement in Jewish communal life, synagogue membership, and connection to Israel than the norm of respondents in the 1990 NJPS study (Isaacs, 1997).

Steven Cohen studied the extent of the impact of several forms of formal and informal Jewish education – including the Israel Experience- on adult Jewish identity and involvement. He found that all forms of formal and informal Jewish education (except for Sunday school) correlate positively with increased Jewish identity and involvement.

Specifically, he found that:

Both youth groups and adolescent Israel travel are associated with increments in Jewish involvement even after controlling for parents' Jewish involvement, Jewish schooling, and other factors (S. Cohen, 1995, 1997).

There is no debate within the Israel Experience research community about the connection between increased Jewish identity and an Israel Experience. The only debate is about the scope of the impact and the nature of the process. Some researchers, such as David Mittelberg and Bruce Phillips, point to a comprehensive impact of a teen age Israel Experience on a broad range of parameters of Jewish identity (Mittelberg, 1995; Phillips, 1997). Other researchers, such as Perry London, Tamar Levinson and Steven Cohen, suggest that the Israel Experience is particularly effective in influencing concern for Israel and concern for Jewish Peoplehood and that it may be less effective in influencing synagogue attendance and ritual observance (Cohen, 1995; Kafka and London, 1990; Levinson, 1995).

There are three different theories as to how the Israel Experience actually influences identity:

- The Domino Theory suggests that going to Israel leads to other positive Jewish experiences which lead to other positive Jewish experiences which eventually leads to a more intense Jewish lifestyle (S. Cohen, 1995).
- The Cluster Theory suggests that an Israel Experience influences identity by being part of a series of several healthy Jewish experiences (schooling; synagogue; camping; family) which cluster together to shape positive identity (Kafka and London, 1990).
- The Independent Causal theory claims that the Israel trip in itself can show independent causal influence on subsequent identity (Mittelberg, Phillips, 1997).

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

When taken as a whole, almost thirty years of research on the impact of the Israel Experience presents several consistent and concise messages.

An Israel Experience enables young people to have a positive Jewish experience at a time in their lives when they are shaping the patterns of their subsequent adult Jewish identity and involvement

The teen Israel Experience assumes special importance because it takes place at the critical period when young people are beginning to shape their ultimate adult identities and loyalties. A positive experience in Israel at this critical time affords unique opportunities for youngsters in the process of shaping adolescent identity patterns and attitudes. A summer in

Israel on quality educational programs enables young Jews to spend a few weeks together in a positive, all-encompassing, teen-age Jewish culture and milieu. Both general and Jewish research suggests that the intersection of an Israel Experience with the teenage years is a fortuitous opportunity for Jewish identity development. The teen Israel Experience is valuable because it comes at a critical moment in the developmental growth of young people.

An Israel Experience is a unique kind of Jewish education that contributes to the formation of positive Jewish attitudes and behaviors through experiential rather than frontal learning.

The Israel Experience's uniqueness is not in the formal study of Jewish history, tradition, religion, and contemporary Israel (although the experience may contribute to such learning), but rather in creating a setting in which young people can have a positive experience of being Jewish in the company of peers within the context of a contemporary Jewish society. The ultimate value of the Israel Experience is in the shaping of certain key Jewish values and behaviors, in addition to cognitive knowledge. The Israel Experience is not a substitute for intensive synagogue life or for high-quality Jewish schooling; rather, it is a valuable partner and complement to these institutions. The Israel Experience can affect those who have been deprived of a prior rich Jewish life, and its effect is enhanced when it is one link in a full continuum of Jewish experiences.

Young people who have participated in Israel Experiences regard their summer in Israel as one of the most positive Jewish moments and memories in their lives.

Research over the years says that the summer in Israel is one of the most highly regarded and memorable Jewish experiences that is available for contemporary young Jews. We know that positive moments and memories are central factors in the development of any kind of affirmative group identity; hence the existence of such positive feeling about the Israel Experience is a great asset for Jewish identity development. At a time when there are so few Jewish moments that can speak positively to the young, the teen trip to Israel has taken its place as a proven commodity. This makes the Israel Experience a powerful educational resource at the disposal of the community.

There is a link between adult Jewish identity and participation in a teen Israel experience.

Several decades of impact research on Israel trips indicate that there is some connection between more intense levels of adult Jewish identity and involvement and having been to Israel as a teen. It is not exactly clear whether going to Israel in itself causes one to be more Jewish, or whether it serves as a catalyst to further Jewish experience or whether it is one of several ingredients which together result in more intensive Jewish identity and involvement. While the nature of the dynamic is not yet clear, the operative conclusion is: if a parent or a community is genuinely interested in maximizing the possibilities of increased Jewishness of their youngsters as they become adults, an Israel Experience is a worthwhile investment.

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The fact that several decades of research have pointed to the powerful impact of a teen Israel Experience on subsequent concern for Israel and for Jewish Peoplehood is a very promising finding for Jewish philanthropy and communal life. This finding suggests that the Israel Experience is a useful vehicle for the creation of a cadre of North American Jewish adults who will continue to be committed to the State of Israel, to world Jewry, and to the philanthropic responsibilities which that commitment entails. The commitment of previous generations of Jewish leaders to Israel and world Jewry was shaped by their immigrant experiences, the experience of the Holocaust, and the struggle for the creation of Israel. The next generation's commitment to the Jewish people can be greatly affected by the experience of being in Israel as a teen.

←..... The next generation's commitment to the Jewish people can be greatly affected by the experience of being in Israel as a teen

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ISRAEL EXPERIENCE AND JEWISH IDENTITY?

Research about identity formation suggests that a series of well-coordinated, meaningful Jewish experiences is the best investment we have for strengthening Jewish identity. The combination of a positive Jewish family, vibrant synagogue life, ongoing Jewish schooling; a good Jewish camp and youth group experience, and a well-timed Israel Experience are important components of this total gestalt.

The scores of studies that we have examined suggest that the Israel Experience encompasses characteristics that make it uniquely effective in contributing to certain aspects of Jewish identity formation:

- It creates a positive peer culture
- It enables a young person to have the experience of being in a Jewish majority society that is inhabited by Jews with a high degree of self-esteem
- It enables young people to meet positive Jewish role models
- It is an effective venue for experiential learning about Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life.

WHAT ELSE WOULD WE LIKE TO KNOW?

The conclusive results of Israel Experience research do not contradict the fact that there is still much that we do not know. This field is still in its infancy and there is room for innovative research in the coming years.

The relationship between ideology, program content, and subsequent outcomes needs to be examined. Do specific contents of a summer program have decisive effects on participants or is the main effect the experience itself? What are the outcomes of different kinds of programs? Is there some core content that is critical for affecting identity?

We need to learn more about the relationship between the demography of participants and outcomes. Is this such a pre-selected group that the notion of impact may be exaggerated? Are there major differences between the impact of the trip on so-called affiliated as opposed to so-called non-affiliated?

The dynamics of the relationship between the Israel Experience and religious development, ritual observance, and synagogue attendance needs to be carefully examined. What exactly is the nature of the impact of a summer in Israel on short term and long term religious development? Are there ways of improving that connection? How can we maximize the co-ordination and mutual contribution of Israel trip, synagogue, youth movement, and school?

For decades, the common wisdom has been that middle adolescence is the right time for a first Israel Experience. We do not know definitively if there is an optimal age for an Israel Experience or if there is such a thing as "too early" or "too late". There have been voices urging more attention to the Israel Experience during university years. The increasing number of day school eighth grade class trips to Israel suggest that perhaps there is also great value in an early adolescent trip that is well-coordinated with a thoughtful school program.

It has also become common wisdom that six to eight weeks is the right length for an Israel Experience. This clearly has been the dominant model for many decades. Is it worth asking if there is a most desirable length for an Israel trip and if there are minimum or maximum thresholds for trip effectiveness?

Finally, the educational community strongly advocates the importance of pre-and post-Israel programming. We need to learn more about the effects of such programming and the extent to which such programming can significantly enhance the effect of a summer in Israel. Moreover, we need to learn more about worthwhile contents and activities of such programming.

We know that trips make a difference and now we would do well to invest in quality social science research of carefully formulated issues in order to enable better planning and implementation.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question that has preoccupied so many people over the years as to whether the Israel Experience makes a difference is “yes”. The trip to Israel very powerfully affects teen-age participants. The Israel Experience offers young Jews the opportunity to spend a summer during their teen years engaged in the adventure of carving out their own Jewish identity. An Israel Experience enables youngsters to engage in the challenge of shaping who they are going to be – as Jews and as human beings.

Research demonstrates that these few weeks can make a lifetime difference. The challenge of the next decades is to take this research and turn it into policy, programs, and practice for the generations to come.

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