

**The Impact of Israel Experience
Programs on Israel's Symbolic Meaning***

**Shaul Kelner
Brandeis University**

Introduction

Since the early 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Jewish adolescents and young adults from around the world have spent several weeks of their summer or winter vacations traveling to Israel in the company of their peers.¹ These communally sponsored educational pilgrimage-tours, now called "Israel experience programs," have been objects of research from the 1960s onward. The bulk of this research has been evaluative and has rarely taken an interest in the phenomenon's meaning in American Jewish life.² Perhaps with the passage of time, Israel experience programs will become subjects of interest to historians of American Jewry, who likely will view them as an important element of late-20th-century American Jewish youth culture. In institutional terms, they will be seen as a breeding ground where many of the community's professional leaders met and were socialized into a common culture, and as an arena in which the rising power of private foundations was especially manifest. Viewed as a feature of the relationship between Israel and the Jewish communities of North America, the travel programs will be seen as an instrument for making Israel a salient symbol to American Jews.

Writings on American Jewry's conceptions of Israel have focused on the ideologies embodied in works of culture, in formal institutions, and among organizational elites. Studies of wider segments of the American Jewish population have viewed the meanings associated with Israel as accomplished facts. In contrast to both these approaches, the ethnographic study of Israel experience programs reveals processes by which Israel becomes cognitively and affectively meaningful to American Jews. On these programs, the ideologies of sponsoring organizations confront the not-necessarily-normative meanings that emerge among participants. Observers of these trips often have noted that the experience of the group and the experience of Israel intermingle. This has led some to question whether an encounter with the realities of Israel ultimately is possible in such a setting. The question has been a source of persistent controversy, especially as the programs are intended to socialize youth into normative patterns of thought, feeling and behavior.

I will argue here that the conceptions of Israel typically produced by these pilgrimage tours can be understood in terms of Durkheim's

classic theory of religion, whereby feelings of fulfillment and empowerment created by an intense group experience are preserved in symbolic residue that re-evokes these feelings. Seeing Israel as emblematic of the Israel experience program helps explain how such programs can influence people who are not predisposed to care about the country. It also suggests that the conflation of the group-encounter and the Israel-encounter need not be seen as dysfunctional for either the programs or for the Israel-diaspora relationship. Finally, it helps us recognize that for American Jews, "Israel" is akin to what Sherry Ortner called a summarizing symbol, integrating a multitude of normative and non-normative meanings, and allowing for variability and idiosyncrasy.³

Background

Israel in American Jewish Culture American Jewry's relationship with Israel long has commanded interest because of its implications for American politics and for Jewish communal organizations and fund raising. Scholars attempting to understand why Israel has emerged as such a salient American Jewish symbol typically have blended historical and cultural explanations. In their historical aspects, these treatments have eschewed notions of inevitability and shown the relationship to be dependent on the work of organizations and activists that have actively interpreted Israel to the American Jewish populace through philanthropic and political work,⁴ and through cultural activities and products.⁵ As cultural analyses, they have explained how these interpretations of Israel have appealed to core values of American Jewry, such as liberalism, progressivism, missionism and survivalism.⁶

Some writers have held that American Jewish images of Israel have served better as projections of American Jewry's values and concerns than reflections of Israel's realities. Creating Israel in their own image, American Jews for decades have understood it as an outpost of American democratic ideals.⁷ Doing so has allowed them not only to defuse the suspicion (certainly in their own minds and perhaps in those of others) of divided loyalties, but, more important, to positively express their American patriotism through support for Israel. Thus, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis' statement that "[L]oyalty to America demands...that each Jew become a Zionist" was trumpeted as much for its messenger's impeccable American credentials as for its manifest content.⁸

Seeing Israel as a "model state" that would bring American-style liberalism and progress to the world also resonated with the belief—primarily associated with American Judaism's Reform movement—that Jewry existed to fulfill a moral mission to humanity. These imaginings of Israel comported with American Jewry's self-conception both as Americans and as Jews. Whereas these progressive and missionist

elements were present in the pre-state era, the post-1948 world also rooted Israel in other Jewish narratives. With eschatological overtones, it was seen as the culmination of a tale of resurrection from the ashes of the Holocaust to the redemption of national self-determination.⁹ This narrative enshrined communal empowerment and survival as paramount Jewish values. Jonathan Woocher argued that this ethic of “sacred survival” was borne by the federation movement to become a “civil religion” for American Jews.¹⁰

These conceptions approach Israel’s meaning to American Jews in terms of public culture, highlighting the normative, collective meanings associated with Israel. The objects of research—the data, as it were—have been cultural products and those who produce them: Prayerbook liturgies, World’s Fair pavilions, Hollywood epics, folk songs and dances, religious-school curricula, fund-raising appeals, synagogue gift-shop merchandise, Philip Roth novels and the like.¹¹ The pronouncements of organizations that speak in a collective voice, of leaders pronouncing on their behalf, or of polemicists with a soapbox to stand upon—have been treated as reflections and shapers of underlying communal sentiments.

Whereas historical-cultural approaches explain how and why Israel holds a place in American Jewish hearts, other studies accept as given that Israel has emerged as a prominent symbol in American Jewish public culture and seek to understand whether this is matched in the lives of individual Jews. Interviewing Reconstructionist congregants, Stephen Sharot and Nurit Zaidman found that even though the Reconstructionist movement has explicitly articulated Jewish peoplehood as its central religious principle, and even though Israel has come to represent Jewish peoplehood for most American Jews, Israel still bore little relevance to their religious lives. Reconstructionist leaders framed Israel religiously in their liturgies, but to little effect on the religious sentiments of the laity.¹² Likewise, in spite of what he called Israel’s place “at the top of American Jews’ public agenda,” Steven M. Cohen found in a national survey of American Jews that Israel figured only to a limited extent in their personal identities, as indicated by measures of salience and behavior. Moreover, only a minority—one out of every four or five Jews—could be characterized as very attached to Israel.¹³

In spite of the finding that Israel is not as salient to individual Jews as the public culture of American Jewry might lead one to expect, the two approaches are of a type. One addresses elites’ promotion of canonical images of Israel; the other assesses the extent to which these inform individuals’ lives. As two sides of the same coin, they exhibit the same limitations. In addressing what Israel represents to American Jews, both presume the primacy of normative meanings without

adequately explaining how individuals relate to these when forming their own understandings. Both lend themselves to the assumption that the collective cognitive meanings attached to Israel precede and are responsible for the symbol's salience to American Jews. Neither make room for the possibility that unconventional, even idiosyncratic, notions of what Israel means also may be responsible for generating American Jewish attachment to the country at the individual level, or that the meanings associated with Israel may be a superstructure built upon a base of gut emotional attachments forged by precognitive personal experience. An important move in this direction is found in Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's analysis of in-depth interviews with "moderately affiliated" American Jews, which found that many people deemed commitments to Israel important only insofar as they resonated with their individual concerns for personal Jewish meaning.¹⁴

Israel Experience Programs

Much research on Israel experience programs has been drawn from post-trip evaluation questionnaires and other surveys of program alumni. These works are primarily concerned with questions of recruitment and impact. They have generally demonstrated that the trips have an influence in shaping Jewish identity—particularly those aspects of it related to Israel.¹⁵

In recent years, the processes occurring on the trips have received growing attention. These have reproduced in miniature the broader contention that American Jewry eschews accurate portrayals of Israeli realities in favor of mythic constructions designed to serve American Jewish needs. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett encapsulated the thrust of the findings, writing that "the 'existential reality of Israeli life' is fundamentally incompatible with The Israel Experience... Neither the goals of the program nor the fundamental conditions of the youngsters' lives in Israel were conducive to experiencing the realities of daily life in Israel."¹⁶

This notion is captured in the image of the tourist "bubble." Harvey Goldberg invoked the metaphor to describe a high school tour sponsored by the Reform movement's National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY): The trip "entailed a kind of NFTY...bubble, moving along in a foreign land...with occasional stops, but basically being insulated from its surroundings."¹⁷ Goldberg saw this as resulting from deliberate policies designed to keep the outside out and authority in the hands of the staff. Participants were allowed to encounter Israel, but through a curriculum that "merg[ed] modern Israel into the ideology and educational program of NFTY."¹⁸

Studying a similar program sponsored by a Zionist youth movement, Samuel Heilman found a tourist bubble resulting from the

teenagers' preoccupation with their peer group experience. He concluded that for the participants, "the primary product of the summer" was "not a set of connections to Israel but to one another."¹⁹ The staff's emphasis on group-building, as well as the structure and pace of the program, focused the teenagers' attention inward on the group rather than on Israel or Judaism. "In essence, as the group becomes one of the only constants in an ever-changing fluid environment, it grows in importance, filling the life-world of the participants."²⁰ As a result, Israel and Judaism receded into the background, to become merely a "backdrop for an American teen adventure."²¹

In our study of the 10-day Birthright Israel trips for Diaspora Jewish young adults, my colleagues and I observed a dialectical process whereby the tourist bubble did not merely detract from an encounter with Israel, but also generated its own antithesis. In reaction to the organizational imperatives that standardized participants' contact with Israel, participants came to value uniquely personal encounters with Israeli society. These, however, did not remain individual experiences, but were commonly transformed into stories to be shared, and thereby became the property of group. This had the effect of communicating within the group the value of paying attention to the Israeli surroundings, even as it reinforced the importance of the group.²²

The assertion that the group tends to overshadow the experience of Israel is of special interest because it seems difficult to reconcile with the oft-noted finding that Israel experience programs, although they evince little impact on religious feeling or practice, produce marked changes in participants' sense of connection to Israel.²³ Why should Israel, the background during the trip, become such a salient foreground afterwards? Heilman posited a transitive process through which participants came to associate Maslowian "peak experiences" (defined as "'moments of highest happiness and fulfillment'") with the Israeli setting where they occurred.²⁴ Why there might be such a transitive process, why it might serve to link the peak experiences to Israel rather than to something else (such as the group leader or trip sponsor), and what the nature of the transitive process is, remained unspecified. The solution to these puzzles emerges when applying Emile Durkheim's theory of religious symbolization and Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual.

The Birthright Israel Program

The case studied here is a series of group pilgrimage tours that over the past five years has brought approximately 70,000 Jewish young adults from around the world to Israel. Known in Hebrew as *Taglit* ("Discovery") and in English as Birthright Israel, the tours represent a coordinated social intervention to influence religious and ethnic identity

among diaspora Jews. The core of the program is a 10-day guided pilgrimage tour to Israel, provided free to diaspora Jewish youth ages 18-26. The five-year \$210 million program was initiated by private philanthropists and at times has received support from North American Jewry's communal institutions and the Israeli government. The trips are run in winter and summer cohorts, timed to coincide with university intersessions. Two-thirds of the participants reside in the United States and Canada.

Actual operation of the pilgrimage tours is outsourced to approximately 30 organizations that fall into five categories: university-based, community-based, religious, for-profit, and secular non-profit. Birthright Israel coordinates these independent efforts, provides funding and support, and mandates curricular and logistical standards (*Taglit* 2001). These standards essentially codify what in any case had become common practice among many of these organizations, a number of which had been running similar programs for decades. The trip operators hire both North American and Israeli staff. In most cases, the former are employees of the sponsoring organizations and the latter work for Israel-based tour companies. Without insisting on too strict a division of labor, North American staff is charged with responsibility for group building, logistics, and interactive education—in short, creating an environment conducive to a positive group experience. The Israeli staff, on the other hand, tends to be responsible for presenting a narrative about the sites visited. They are professional teacher-guides in the classical Zionist mode.²⁵

During the period of the study (1999-2001), Birthright's only eligibility requirements were that applicants consider themselves to be Jewish, fall between the ages of 18 and 26, and not have participated previously in a similar "peer educational program" in Israel. In many regards, the North American participants were a homogeneous group—mostly white, middle- and upper-middle class college students or recent graduates. Still, they varied along lines of internal differentiation particular to American and Canadian Jews, a not-insignificant fact given the religio-ethnic goals of the program organizers. Initially, women outnumbered men on the trips, but the gender ratio reversed itself as violence escalated in the region. While the fact that the trip is free has been a major source of the program's appeal, most participants enter the program with a general awareness of Birthright's mission and an openness to the possibility that they might find the trip more meaningful than simply a free vacation.²⁶

The pilgrimage tour is a fast-paced bus trek across the length and breadth of the country, excluding the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Each group of approximately 40 people has its own itinerary, tour bus, driver, American staff and Israeli guide. Israeli medics and armed guards also

join the groups for periods of varying duration. Itineraries—which tend to be standardized due to established patterns, logistical constraints and curricular guidelines of the Birthright organizers—include visits to Jewish holy sites, tours of ancient and modern historical areas, nature hikes, meetings with Israeli youth, social events, and guest lectures on a variety of topics regarding Israel and Judaism. Regularly scheduled group discussion sessions also are central elements of the educational strategy. Free time is structured into the program, usually at night. Accommodations typically consist of hotels, youth hostels and kibbutz guest houses. Meals frequently are taken there, provided as boxed lunches, or eaten at local restaurants or shopping-mall food courts.

As part of an evaluation of Birthright undertaken by Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, participant observation was conducted on 20 Birthright groups during the winter trips of 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. In each cohort, seven observers under my supervision each joined a different Birthright group for the duration of the program. I was one of these seven observers in 2000-2001. In the previous year, I traveled among each of the groups under observation, while another researcher "floated" among an additional six Canadian groups. Groups were not selected randomly, but rather were chosen to reflect a diversity of sponsoring organizations and geographic regions. The discussion below is based on analysis of the assembled field notes, but focus primarily on those I collected with the group I observed in 2000-2001.

Ideology in the Age of Irony

Birthright Israel did not shy away from the canonical narratives about Israel. Its young travelers paid the requisite visits to Mount Herzl and Yad Vashem, discussed whether Israel should strive to be a special nation or a state like any other, and engaged in a host of other activities designed to inculcate notions of Israel as a phoenix risen from European Jewry's ashes, a light unto the nations, an embattled outpost of democracy, and font of Jewish history. Yet for all that they echoed the messages they were being taught, Birthright participants were neither blank slates nor dupes who blindly parroted ideological slogans. Outright dissent was rare, stifled by the discomfort of appearing an ingrate (it was, after all, a free trip) or of bucking peer pressure, which typically worked in favor of the program's messages.

Only the strongest personalities forthrightly opposed their staff and friends. Isabel²⁷ comes to mind. Park Avenue progeny, she would as easily discourse on Phoenician pottery and Roman conceptions of glory as drop names of young socialites who had passed out at her parties. During one of the formal group discussions (this one on the theme of spirituality), Isabel issued the sharpest dissent of the session. Another

person had just described his experience at the Western Wall in perfectly normative terms for Birthright: "I was rubbing the wall, I pushed my head up against it. I felt like I was speaking directly to God." The staff person thanked him and said that his comment was in line with what she had wanted to say next. To this, he responded enthusiastically, "Score! The segue!" Nearby, his friend pumped a fist in the air as a gesture of support. It was an attitude like this that generally allowed the structured conversations to hit their mark. But Isabel, by contrast, had no interest in playing along and refused to allow the discussion leader to draw a parallel between the experience at the Western Wall and spirituality through Jewish prayer. When the leader mentioned the *Shma* prayer, Isabel confronted her by saying that the words of the basic Jewish statement of faith "meant nothing" to her and were essentially a child's trifle, forced upon her by insistent parents. She made it known that she rejected the not-so-subtle subtext of the conversation that Jewish spirituality in and outside of Israel was both possible and of value. She then commandeered the conversation to delve into the finer points of the *Shma* prayer's Hebrew grammar, leaving most of the group, who did not share her Jewish day school education, at a complete loss.

Although most lacked Isabel's forthrightness, their efforts at resistance were by no means futile. Most often, those who felt uncomfortable or disagreed with a line of discussion simply refused to speak up, particularly during group conversations that were structured to encourage testimonials about one's Jewish identity and feelings about Israel. At other times, people commonly expressed dissent through humor, which maintained greater social acceptability than a frontal assault.

With expectations raised for the visit to the Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site, participants were easily underwhelmed. "Are the mountains here all so small?" one disappointed participant asked semi-rhetorically. To the guffaws of those who heard, another responded by poking fun at the holy site and at the goals of Birthright: "I hope Mount Sinai isn't such a piece of shit, or it might really shake my Jewish identity!"

Even *Masada*, typically a highlight of Israel experience programs, was greeted by some with a casual distancing. Several hours before the visit, the three dozen members of one Birthright group crowded into a drab hotel conference room in the desert town of Arad to discuss "the meaning" of Masada. All was normative narrative, even when a critical perspective was adopted: the mytho-historical account of a defiant mass suicide, the elevation of national identity over individual survival, the Zionist reading of the tale as metaphor for a garrison-state determined that "Masada will not fall again." When the group ascended the

mountain by way of an ancient Roman ramp several hours later in the pre-dawn darkness, these notions were fresh in mind. But they were not necessarily treated with reverence. "This is great!" one man exclaimed with a smirk as he wrapped his arms around the two women he was walking with. "I'm on top of a mountain with a mass suicide, with my good friends." Nearby, someone else poked fun at the overwrought ritualism of the nocturnal desert hike and continued the theme of sanctified death: "We sacrifice the virgin cat at sunrise!"

These were not outright rejections of the messages about Masada, but they testify to the sophistication of these affluent, college-educated tourists. This is a generation raised on David Letterman and Jerry Seinfeld. Their popular culture is irreverent, ironic, and always eager to undermine earnestness by shining a spotlight on the artifice behind it. They might enjoy their trek up Masada and be inspired by its story, even as they maintain a skeptical posture. But even if the environment overwhelms their defenses, or they choose to let themselves feel, or some combination of the two, the inculcation of normative meanings about Israel is not a simple process of inscribing upon blank slate.

Collective Effervescence

In spite of the travelers' inclination to think critically about the messages they were being given, Birthright, like other Israel experience programs, contained repeated moments that swept people away. These instances, which Heilman, drawing on Abraham Maslow, called "peak experiences," had a two-fold effect.²⁸ In one sense, they so absorbed participants in the immediate moment—or in social-psychological terms, enabled them to enter a state of "flow"²⁹—that they blunted critical reflection and enhanced receptiveness to the normative conceptions of Israel put forward by the program. At the same time, the peak experiences were perceived as so powerful and uplifting that they were valued as ends in themselves, and created new understandings of Israel that inextricably were tied to these moments.

On Birthright, peak experiences typically emerged in the midst or in the immediate aftermath of times when the encounter with powerful symbols, the intensity of the group experience, and the barrage on the body's senses were simultaneously maximized. The nature of these peak experiences comports with Durkheim's description of "collective effervescence," in which the "act of congregating" functions as a "powerful stimulant," unleashing passions and launching people to an "extraordinary height of exultation."³⁰ Although Durkheim's writings generally call to mind the hysteria of crowds, collective effervescence also can manifest itself in collective states so peaceful that they are perceived as sublime. Indeed, such states often emerge in the denouement of a group's frenzy. Both types of effervescence were

present on Birthright, as evidenced by one group's representative experiences on the trip to Masada just mentioned, and at a gala event held for thousands of Birthright participants one evening at Jerusalem's convention center.

Masada: Frenzied and Sublime

Birthright groups were only the most recent in a century-long stream of visitors who have climbed Masada to witness the sunrise, explore the archaeological ruins, and participate in the ongoing act of collective mythmaking. A point of Zionist pilgrimage since the 1920s, the diamond-shaped mesa in the Judean Desert continues to symbolize Jewish heroism and resistance unto the death, even though the legend associated with it increasingly is questioned for its historical accuracy and political implications.³¹ (The story's typical telling has it that from the years 70-73 C.E., Roman legionnaires laid siege to the mountain fortress in an attempt to subdue the last pocket of Jewish resistance to Roman rule. When the army finally breached the last defenses, they found that all but seven of 967 Jewish zealots who had sought refuge on top had taken their own lives in a final act of defiance.)

A pre-dawn hike up the Roman ramp was planned to allow Birthright participants to watch the sun rise over the Dead Sea. Departure from the nearby town of Arad was set for 4:00 AM. By 3:30, unshowered college students clad in sweatsuits advertising their universities, fraternities and sororities were trickling into a hotel meeting room whose fluorescent lights only brought out the dingy yellow of the walls. On a table in the front of the room was a dry brown cake that may have been chocolate or honey, and something else that could only be described as a "holiday fruit cake." The term was Lucas's, a staff member. He was one of the only people cracking jokes at this hour. Most of the others in the increasingly crowded room sipped coffee in silence or made small talk in low voices.

When we walked outside into the cool night air, we heard American disco music circa 1977 blasting from the tour bus stereo. Lucas's idea. "It's the last thing they expect at 3:00 AM," he said to me privately, adding that it excites the students and has the extra benefit of tiring them out so that by the time sunrise comes, they can enjoy it quietly. Lucas was only about 10 years older than his charges, but he had been doing this sort of work for enough time to know whereof he spoke.

As I climbed aboard, I saw that the bus had transformed itself into a dance club, filled not with tired tourists but three-dozen revelers. The bus doors closed, and we sped off into the desert night. As the center aisle filled with gyrating hips, the surrounding seats were occupied by others focused on the dancers, the music, the laughter and the "public

square” of shouted jokes and comments. The sensory barrage gave the moment an other-worldly character. The veil of sleep that had lingered from the 3:00 A.M. wake-up call was suddenly torn off by a far-from-routine assault of noise, rhythm, speed, motion and blackness. The limited visual field focused people on what they could see (each other), and enhanced the other physical sensations. Things felt different, and people acted differently. The bus aisle, normally an empty path during travel time, became a stage alive with movement. Seats still faced forward, but the people in them were positioned in a variety of ways that let them see in front, across and behind them—wherever the action was. Social lines that had not been crossed before were. The tongue-pierced Israeli medic, who usually huddled alone in a front seat with her Meir Shalev novel, was up in the aisle dancing, her backside pressed closed to the pelvis of one of the American men, grinding her hips in unison with his. People cheered them, while a threesome danced in an identical fashion further down the aisle.

Little in this intense group experience was related to symbolic aspects of Israel, save for its context as a prelude to the much-anticipated Masada. Otherwise it could have taken place anywhere. If anything on this group’s trip resembled the tourist’s “bubble,” it was this: the group, immersed in its reverie, oblivious to its surroundings, sealed in a small metal capsule careening down unseen roads toward a mountaintop that had been billed as a highlight of the trip. Later, I would be thinking about Arnold van Gennep and liminality, Victor Turner and *communitas*, Roy Rappaport and ritual performance. At the time, however, more vivid images raced through my mind as I considered the scene: A spaceship, a submarine, a zooming time capsule from 1977. Nothing could be seen outside the windows, which could have been made of polished ebony for all the view they afforded. The only light came from the bus itself—a faint blue glow in the ceiling that ensured that anyone who wanted to gaze into the desert night would see only his or her own reflection and that of the dancers. The eerie fluorescent blue contributed to the sense of being in outer space, under water, or in Studio 54 with a young John Travolta.

With the outside world sealed off, the excitement built upon itself, drawing people together and sweeping them away in the group revelry. Not everyone danced in the aisles, but everyone’s attention was directed to those who did, and many joined in by dancing in their seats. Not everyone shouted across the bus, but those who did (and those who listened) unified the public space. By the time the group reached Masada, it had become a unit.

Upon arrival at the mountain’s base, Lucas turned off the music and took the microphone: “We should thank Ofir [the bus driver] for handling the curves, Ravit [the Israeli tour guide] for shaking her

groove *thaannng*, and the Bus '194' dancers who sometimes bordered on the inappropriate." People stepped off the bus and made their way to the Roman ramp to begin the ascent. When we reached the top, the sky had lightened and people hastened to the eastern edge in order to see the sunrise. The group had quieted down since the bus ride, but was still in a jocular mood. It was at this point that the jokes about sacrificing cats and mass suicides were made. When we arrived at the place where we would watch the sunrise, Ravit briefly pointed out the wide, flat valley below us and what was left of the Dead Sea, saying it was "the lowest thing on Earth." Sam, a college junior who prided himself on his sense of humor, called out in a deliberately squeaky voice to a woman standing next to him, "See, Beth! I'm not the lowest thing on Earth."

The joking stopped as people went, alone or in clusters of two or three, to face the mountains of Moab to the east and to sit patiently in silent anticipation of the dawn. As the time passed, some people further removed themselves from the group by wandering down to the ruins below, where they sat alone closer to the edge. Most people appeared focused on making the moment special. Ravit left the group to do Tai Chi on a ridge above. Some members of the group joined the staff to recite the morning prayers, the women holding *siddurim*, the men wrapped in prayer shawls and *tefillin*. When members of a different Birthright group several hundred yards to our south began shouting out people's names, derogatory comments were made about them for disturbing the peace. The free-spirited atmosphere of the disco bus was now two hours behind us. It was about 6:10 A.M. The experience of collective effervescence had changed and was unifying people in quiet contemplation.

The paradoxically collective nature of the solitude was exemplified by the two people who stood alone and as a result became the focus of group attention: Ravit, the Israeli guide, who wandered off to move her limbs gracefully in the meditative martial art of Tai Chi; and Sam, who went to find a raised area from which he could stand and blow a *shofar* when the sun rose. Both cases encapsulated the simultaneously private and public, individualistic and collective character of the experience. Ravit and Sam separated themselves from the group, but in a conspicuously public way. Although from their vantage point they could not see themselves framed against their respective backdrops, I suspect they knew the shots they had established even before the cameras of their group mates began preserving both their poses for posterity—Ravit with arms extended and leg raised; Sam profiled on a ruined stone wall with a *shofar* raised to his lips. Each stood apart from the group, but neither was truly alone.

So it was with all of us. Sitting in relative silence, spread over a large area, we were still able to see the looks on each others faces and

hear the excited whispers as the ridge of the mountaintops to the east ripened from a diffuse brown on powder-puff blue to a pencil-thin black line sharply defined against the narrowest band of radiant gold. And we could observe those in the distance as part of the scene we were taking in. As I watched the sun rise over the mountains of Moab, I watched other people watch the sunrise. They became a part of my sunrise. The seemingly solitary experience in the midst of a group is hardly ever such, because the awareness of the presence of others invariably colors perception. On top of Masada, we participated in an experience of collective solitude. The solemnity of the experience cannot be understood outside of the social context that produced it. If the collective effervescence on the bus took the group's energy and reflected it back on itself in a feedback loop, the collective effervescence on the mountaintop echoed the group's stillness and the silence.

When the sun finally crested the mountain, we heard a piercing blast from the *shofar*. To the north, Sam was standing on a stone wall with the 2.5-foot ram's horn to his mouth, all traces of silliness gone for the moment. Lucas called out from below, urging Sam to sound the *shofar* again. He struck another single blast, then a string of several medium length blasts, recognizable to many as the traditional sounds of the Rosh Hashanah service. Some people sat in silence. Others snapped photographs. Two birds chirping "hee-hoo, hee-hoo" wove quickly from behind us to disappear in front of us below Masada's edge. When the sun was fully over the distant mountaintop, Sam let out one long final blast, a *teki'ah gedolah*. A Bedouin worker saw him on the wall and yelled, "Down! Down!" Sam ran over to me, smiling. He had earlier confided that he was nervous that he would "screw up" when it came time to blow the *shofar* at sunrise. The pressure was entirely self-imposed; Sam had decided on his own to blow the *shofar*, unprompted by staff or by anyone else. He rose to the occasion, and the group was appreciative. "That was definitely a moment!" a woman named Lynne exclaimed. Although I had never asked, she had taken to giving me regular updates about which activities she felt moved by and which she did not. This was only a quick report, and then she returned to some of her friends and screamed, "I'm king of the world!" only half-jokingly referencing Leonardo DeCaprio's signature line from the movie *Titanic*.

Birthright participants encountered Masada, a resonant symbol of Jewish fortitude and restoration, not only in terms of its normative meanings, but as part of a multifaceted set of experiences that extended from the pre-visit instruction in the traditional storyline, to the 3:00 AM dance party during the bus ride there, to the hike up the mountain, the watching of the sunrise, the subsequent tour of the ancient ruins and the final descent into the souvenir shop below. Would any subsequent

feelings of attachment to the site be reducible solely to Masada's place in Zionist iconography? Follow-up surveys later in the year showed that two out of every three Birthright participants (63 percent) said that the visit to Masada was "one of the best things" about their trip to Israel, second only to the Western Wall (74 percent). Several members of the group I observed described hearing the *shofar* blown at sunrise as one of the most "spiritual" moments of the trip. I never heard the disco bus described in these terms. Perhaps this was due to a poverty of imagination. The language of spirituality often is confined to a narrow and limited repertoire. But the staff person who instigated the disco bus did so deliberately in the belief that it contributed to the sense of excitement he was hoping to build for the sunrise. What was clear on the bus—best evidenced by the dancing and physical contact that "bordered on the inappropriate"—was that a loss of self-consciousness and level of camaraderie was attained that went beyond the norm for the group. The travelers did not appear to be discursively aware of its significance. This does not mean that it is ultimately unimportant. On the contrary, as we will discuss, the inability to articulate the meaning of the moment is a crucial element in the creation of summarizing symbols.

Gala: Political Spectacle

Among the more manifestly contrived elements of Birthright was the gala "mega-event"—a Saturday night festival at a Jerusalem convention center that brought together thousands of Birthright participants. Here, to my surprise, I observed even the most cynical skeptics swept away in the moment.

Every Birthright group in the country converged on the center's parking lot soon after sundown, when the Sabbath ended. Rumors were buzzing that Prime Minister Ehud Barak would be addressing the participants. One hint that the scuttlebutt was accurate came by way of a phalanx of security guards and metal detectors that greeted the arriving throngs. As thousands of people pressed into the same small entrance, it took an effort to remain with one's group. One by one, we passed through the security checkpoint to ascend stairs into a large reception area outside the convention center's main auditorium. Tables lining the staircase were piled with yellow and blue scarves emblazoned with the Birthright name and logo and small plastic Israeli flags on white plastic sticks. Attendants were thrusting the paraphernalia into the hands of all who passed.

Evan, a Birthright participant whom I had befriended, spotted me through the milling masses. He walked over, twirling one of the plastic flags, a mischievous smile pasted on his lips. "I never was given a flag at a political event before. I feel like we're at a Cuban rally," he shouted

to me over the blaring music and din of the crowd. He waved the flag high in the air and chanted, "Fi-del! Fi-del! Fi-del!" The jibe was not out of character. It was Evan who joked about Mount Sinai being "a piece of shit." (When I asked him following his Sinai comment, "Do you mind if write that down?" he replied with a dark smile, "Ohhhh, yes. *I'll* talk"—as if he was naming names to a tabloid reporter.) He prided himself on being a skeptic, but tended to keep quiet during the discussion sessions after it quickly became clear that he was much more ambivalent about his Jewish identity than many of his peers. The most he contributed to any of the group discussions was on the first night of the trip, when he reflected on his Jewish identity, saying, "I feel this pressure to dilute myself. Maybe it's just not really understanding my relationship to it... I don't want to sound like a traitor, but I have a lot of [mixed emotions]." He rarely spoke up in discussion sessions after this.

The tiny Israeli flags soon had competition. On a balcony above, three Canadian men unfurled a Maple Leaf to a roar of cheers and jeers from the thousands of people below. For a moment, there was a lull in conversations as people's attention focused on the flag. The display of Canadian pride evoked responding chants of "USA! USA!" and "Blame Canada!" (a reference to the *South Park* movie in which this became an American battle cry). Hummed strains of The Star-Spangled Banner began to swell in the room but were mostly drowned out by the amplified Klezmer music being played on a stage at the far end of the great hall.

Around me, people gaped and absorbed the scene. One man just shook his head and said, "I'm overwhelmed." (At least, that's what I thought he said. Due to the noise, I could only read his lips.) Next to me, a woman, Dina, looked shocked and impressed at the same time. "Whoa!" she said, looking at the flag-waving Canadians above and chanting Americans below. "So much animosity!" But suddenly she stopped seeing them as Americans and Canadians and exclaimed, "This is the coolest thing! I've never seen so many Jewish people in my life!" This surprised me, because I recognized her accent and knew the demographic make-up of her university. "Where are you from?" I asked, shouting to be heard. "White Plains, New York. The center of Jewish life." But even to her, this was a lot of Jews.

Because each group generally had tried to stick close together in the large entrance hall, people were able to proceed as groups to the seats in the large auditorium. When we finally started moving in, I walked with Evan, his friend Max, and a tag-along named Mark to some open seats in the balcony immediately next to the entrance.

The lights were cut. The hall erupted in applause and cheers. Most surprising to me was that even Evan was clapping enthusiastically. For

the moment, all trace of cynicism had drained from his face and he stood there wide-eyed. Max, too, was visibly excited, but I somehow had expected this more of him than of Evan. He was a staff person's model participant: intelligent, articulate, handsome, Jewishly knowledgeable, moved by the Israel experience, and willing to tell others he felt this way.

As a comedian warmed up the crowd, a French group sitting to our right tried to start a wave. The group I was with sat in seats strategically placed to block the wave from going any farther. Pinned in their corner by the sedate American group, the French never succeed in exporting their *joie de vivre* to the rest of the audience. One person, sitting a row in front of me, said, "I feel like such a crabby person—not to do a wave." But he apparently decided that it was better to feel bad about seeming "crabby" than to be the only member of his group to stand up and join the French. This reflected the fact that individual participation largely was conditioned by the behavior of the bus-group as a whole. The French were up the whole time, but the group I was with remained seated throughout the mega-event.

The master of ceremonies left the stage. Then, to blasting strains of *Hava Nagila* and *Heveinu Shalom Aleikhem*, recorded music that was piped in over the loudspeakers, the Israeli prime minister entered the room. The crowd roared to its feet. I heard someone shout, "Oh, my God!" People rushed forward to the edges of the aisles in order to see and touch Barak, and take photographs. Barak smiled widely, pressing himself into the cheering mass of young people, grasping and high-fiving their outstretched hands. It was probably the warmest reception he had received in months. I imagined Barak thinking, "If only they could vote." Weeks later, he would go down to a resounding defeat at the ballot box. For the moment though, the level of excitement was at a peak. Evan's skepticism of nationalist fervor was shed for the time being, as were Mark's right-wing political leanings. Regardless of how they felt at other times on the trip, both Evan and Mark were on their feet applauding with gusto.

Barak took his seat and the lights were cut again. A sudden burst of drumbeats and fireworks from the balconies on either side of the stage made people at first jump in their seats, then elicited gasps and wows. Small rockets shrieked overhead on invisible wires, and others boomed as sparks flew. One year earlier, the pyrotechnics almost lit a choir girl on fire, but not this time. Sitting next to me, Evan wore a look of rapture. I was amazed at the transformation that had come over him. Only the French group was still shouting. "*Yisrael, Yisrael, Yisrael!*" Others did not appreciate the disruption, Zionist though it may have been. "Shut up! Sit down!" came the response.

Barak lost the crowd with a boilerplate campaign speech that began for several minutes in Hebrew—just in time for broadcast on the 9:00 news, but understood by only a fraction of the people in the hall (judging from who applauded at the appropriate lines). When he finally did switch to English, he dwelt on acknowledging a laundry list of dignitaries and ended in precisely formulated campaign pledges. “I do not intend to sign any document that passes sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians.” Sovereignty over other areas of Jerusalem’s Old City was another matter that he chose to leave unsaid. Old rhetoric about a “united Jerusalem” was replaced by language about a “stronger Jerusalem.” His statements on Jerusalem received loud cheers, among the loudest heard during the speeches. Mark, Max and Evan parsed the nuances among themselves, asking each other, “Do you think people understand?” They obviously felt that at least the three of them did.

Produced by Birthright Israel, the extravaganza was more a celebration of the program than of Israel. It incorporated quickly produced but professional-looking videos set to popular music showing participants at various points in their trips. (Cheers went up from small pockets of the crowd every time people saw themselves or others from their group). A laser-light show set to the music of the rock band Queen interspersed symbols of Jewish ritual objects like Sabbath candlesticks and *kiddush* cups with the logo for Birthright and drawings of camels, the Western Wall and falafel. But the modern dance troupe avoided any explicitly Jewish themes, preferring instead to have a thong-clad androgynous chanteur/se on stilts gyrate lewdly over a 1930s-style microphone. Like Barak’s speech, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert’s speech was geared less to the young people in the hall than to the Israeli electorate who would hear sound bites on TV.

The only aspect of the program that could be said to convey something the participants might recognize as an expression of Israel’s Jewish character was the finale performed by an Ethiopian-immigrant children’s choir led by the *sabra* musician Shlomo Gronich. He played the *shofar* like a musical instrument, decontextualizing it from its familiar setting in the Jewish New Year worship service, and using it to introduce the choir’s riveting upbeat performance of *Adon Olam*, one of the most well-known synagogue hymns. People flooded the stage and began dancing a hora, but the scene quickly degenerated into the waving of large Argentine, Canadian and Jewish National Fund flags. Gronich threatened to walk off the stage. With order restored, the choir concluded with a song in English, Hebrew and Amharic about the 1984 trek that thousands of Ethiopian Jews made by foot across the deserts of Sudan to a secret Israeli airlift. “A little bit more, a little more / The dream will be fulfilled / Soon we will arrive in the land of Israel.”

All in all, the choir's performance seemed to convey a complex message that invoked tradition, suggested Israeli ability to comfortably manipulate it in novel and relevant ways to produce a unique fusion of ancient and modern, recalled the heroism of Israel and the Zionist ethos, and affirmed the diversity and unity of the Jewish people centered in Jerusalem where everyone had gathered. After the performance, people were still humming the choir's songs, and a few asked where they could buy its compact discs. Inspired, students in one group even prodded their Israeli bus driver to lead them in a round of Hebrew folk songs on the bus ride back to the hotel.

For most of the people there that evening, the mega-event was the largest gathering of Jews of which they had ever been a part. Designed to convey value messages about Jewish peoplehood and Israel's centrality to it, it even invoked one of the nation-state's most powerful symbols: its leader, the prime minister.³² And yet multiple assertions of identity were present. Canadian and Argentine flags, emblems of other allegiances, competed with Jewish and Israeli symbols. Conflict and cohesion across bus groups manifested themselves. Official messages of Jewish unity were lost in a tsunami of competing nationalisms, only to burst to the surface again and gather strength. Normative messages abounded, but the carnival-like atmosphere in which they were set defined the character of the experience. So much was going on that even before the performances started people reporting feeling overwhelmed.

Perhaps because they were unable to fully process the spectacle around them or construct a simple narrative about it, the mega-event was rated lower than things like Masada and the Western Wall. Still, my own analysis of post-trip evaluation surveys shows that about one in three participants (31 percent) rated it one of the best things about Birthright, and another 27 percent said it was "Great, but not the best." Whatever their ratings of it after the fact, the mass rally held the power to sweep along even established skeptics (like Evan) and political opponents (like Mark). Many of us, especially in the academy, like to consider ourselves critical free-thinkers whose ability to recognize a charismatic appeal confers on us some immunity to it. We believe we are too smart to succumb to a crass play for emotions. This may be little more than an affectation. I would caution against dismissing Evan, Mark and their peers as dupes. They, too, prided themselves on their intellect, their critical faculties, and their ability to see through manipulation. Not long before, Evan himself had drawn parallels between the mega-event and political rallies in communist Cuba—by no means a flattering comparison. Later, after Barak's embarrassingly flat speech chipped away at the excitement with which he entered the room, Evan and the others sat parsing the meanings of his carefully worded

phrases. These were sharp-minded young adults in the prime of their undergraduate years. And yet the power of charisma and collective effervescence was such that it produced behavior that was out of character for them but in tune with a collective consciousness that electrified the convention hall.

Reflecting on Effervescence

If one takes the position that American Jewry's passionate feelings about Israel are rooted in ideology, one might easily assume that Israel experience programs generate attachment to Israel by socializing new generations of Jews into these shared meanings. The occurrence of collective effervescence complicates matters. In understanding the nature of the Israel connection that emerges from programs like Birthright, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the ideological (symbolic) dimensions from the interpersonal and physical experiences that converge during these peak moments.

The pilgrim-tourists themselves hardly succeed in maintaining the distinction. In closing discussion sessions, as participants shared their reflections on the trip, some invoked national symbols but spoke of them in very personal terms. The following two comments are taken from a group different from the one whose experiences at Masada and the gala were focused on above. As evidenced by the remarks, this group underwent similar, if not identical, processes:

Ariana: "The way we bonded by all being silent at Masada was so special. We all got along so well, not just because we are all college students, but because we all have this connection that we discovered here."

Kim: "I've never felt as comfortable and as accepted as I have here. There are no words to describe that sunrise on Masada, or singing *Adon Olam* with 6,000 Jewish kids [at the mega-event]."

When they were able to draw a distinction between the connection to Israel and the connection to their group, it was more often than not the latter that was emphasized, as is evident in these representative comments drawn from two different groups:

Scott: "I don't want to go home at all, but if I stayed none of you would be here with me."

Melissa: "This will always be a place that I will envision that defines happiness. I've made friends for life here, and I know that we will always appreciate what we went through as a group to get to this point."

Dan: "This trip meant so much to me. The best part was being with the group and not necessarily any of the experiences."

Lest one conclude that participants left the trip feeling strongly about their newfound friends but feeling little about Israel, note that multiple indicators in surveys showed that the trips strengthened emotional attachments to Israel. Whereas 23 percent of participants in the 2000-2001 cohort said they felt very strongly "connected to Israel" prior to their trip, this proportion increased to 53 percent three months after the program. Likewise, whereas 44 percent of participants before the trip said that caring about Israel was very important to their way of being Jewish, this proportion increased to 60 percent three months afterward. In both cases, there was no corresponding change among control groups.

Comments made in group discussion sessions are subject to the constraints of the conversational situation and indicate only those aspects of experience that can be verbalized. Many people spoke of the friendships they made, each speaker setting a precedent for others to follow. On the other hand, few Birthright participants spoke of the physical aspects of the Israel trip. This, however, should not be taken as an indication that they were unimportant. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued that the ineffability of the physical experience attested to its importance. "[T]he pedagogy of The Israel Experience...appeals to the truth of the senses," she wrote. "Language will finally be inadequate to the task of communicating the youngster's experience...They will *feel*, not *understand*."³³ Her interpretation accords with notions of ritual that see their performative dimension—fully engaging the body's senses—as producing ineffable experiences of meaning.³⁴

Their limitations aside, the verbalized comments alone succeed in demonstrating that the nature of the Israel connection fostered on programs like Birthright is multidimensional. A purely ideological framework is inadequate to explain the complexities of the attachments that are generated.

This finding is consistent with earlier research on Israel experience programs, which has dealt with questions about the nature of the Israel connection the trips create. Because the trips have been developed to inculcate specific values,³⁵ their ability to shape perceptions of and

feelings about Israel has been no small source of controversy among scholars, policymakers, journalists and interested observers. For those who accept the Zionist underpinnings of the trips' sponsors, the primary questions have been whether they truly enable visitors to come to know the Israel of Israelis' daily life and whether they succeed in socializing youth into normative American Jewish understandings of Israel. Inasmuch as programs like Birthright lead to images of Israel that emphasize personal (physical) and interpersonal (group) experiences, the status of the normative attachments is left under a cloud of uncertainty. In Heilman's words, "Even the commitments to Israel cannot be guaranteed, for the Israel confronted by the campers is only a virtual reality."³⁶ To a community that sees its connection to Israel as one element in an integrated system of value commitments, the possibility that this might not be reproduced or that it might be superceded by a personalized (and therefore more capricious) form of attachment is a source of concern.

Enter Durkheim. One of sociology's founding thinkers, his theory of collective effervescence tramples the distinction between personal and institutionalized religion (or, in the present sense, personalism and normative commitment), demonstrating how and why the former easily blends into the latter.

The Ineffability of Effervescence

Durkheim's well-known theory of religion elaborated in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* links routine-shattering group experiences with the intuition of the sacred. The crux of Durkheim's argument is the notion of collective effervescence, a group phenomenon that brings people to emotional states they rarely achieve when alone and to behaviors that seem uncharacteristic even to themselves.

Collective effervescence does not emerge spontaneously; it is the product of precipitating causes that are central to the exceptional character of the phenomenon. Related to states of liminality and *communitas* discussed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, these include a withdrawal from economic routine, a gathering in a collective, and a preexisting or emergent consciousness of the group's existence *qua* group.³⁷ Such a reordering of social life creates circumstances in which the excited passions of the effervescent state become, for a brief moment, possible (although not foreordained).

Once in the throes of collective effervescence, people become sensitized to its special character by contrasting it with its opposite, the humdrum of daily life that they have left behind. The contrast forces onto consciousness a heightened (though not always fully articulated) awareness of two distinct worlds. One is a bland, individualistic routine. The other is a state of such extraordinary emotional and physical

excitement that it leads people to feel they are in direct contact with a source of life-giving power, external to themselves, that is its own justification.

Whether or not the individual understands the true nature of the situation, this power is real, Durkheim claimed, and is the force of society acting upon the individual. He argued, however, that people are unable to recognize clearly the actual social dynamics acting upon them and instead direct their attention to more concrete elements of the experience's setting. Typically, these are group emblems that are displayed prominently in such scenarios. Rather than understand the altered state as a function of complex group processes, a "transfer of feelings takes place" to the surrounding group symbols.³⁸ In the case of the Australian aborigines Durkheim wrote of, these symbols happen are representations of totemic animals. Durkheim explained that the "transfer of feelings" occurs because "[t]he clan is too complex a reality" for people's minds "to be able to bring its concrete unity into clear focus." He continued:

All [that the reveler] feels is that he is lifted above himself and that he is participating in a life different from the one he lives ordinarily. He must still connect those experiences to some external object in a causal relation. Now what does he see around him? What is available to his senses, and what attracts his attention, is the multitude of totemic images surrounding him...Thus placed at center stage, it becomes representative. To that image the felt emotions attach themselves, for it is the only concrete object to which they can attach themselves.³⁹

In other words, the group symbols decorating the physical setting seemingly call forth otherworldly forces and because of this are treated as sacred. The symbol, rather than the social experience, is presumed to be the force that transports people to otherworldly states both frenzied and sublime.

In Durkheim's view, the sensory, emotional and behavioral effects of collective effervescence are too complex to be recognized for what they are: the product of an extraordinary social environment. But the feelings these fleeting moments produce live on through transfiguration into symbolic form.⁴⁰ Preserved in the semiotic residue of the experience, the welter of meanings and emotions associated with collective effervescence can be comprehended and communicated. The communication can involve oneself at a later time and others both during and after the gathering. Symbolization is a collective act that transforms effervescence from a mass experience of assorted

individuals (e.g., an anonymous crowd) into a shared experience of members of a group (e.g., a Birthright Israel bus). Claude Lévi-Strauss expressed this notion even more clearly than Durkheim: “This permanence and solidarity [of the social group] can be based only on individual sentiments, and these, in order to be expressed efficaciously, demand a collective expression which has to be fixed on concrete objects...”⁴¹

If the Durkheimian theory is correct, then we would expect to find that the pervasive symbols of the Birthright Israel environment will be attributed with the power to evoke the special feelings that were experienced on the trip, and will be treated with appropriate reverence. One could argue that the disco bus, Masada sunrise and gala event each should be treated as discrete moments of collective effervescence that would be preserved each with its own representative symbol. However, as Heilman observed, the rapid succession of activities and locations in the unfamiliar terrain caused an “experiential overload” that led participants to “lose track of where they were going or where they had been, and generally [to] blur many of their experiences.”⁴² Birthright packed repeated and diverse experiences of collective effervescence into a period of only 10 days. There were two types of symbols that united all of these instances. Some were newly adopted emblems of the group, such as Bus 194’s mascot, Sababa the Stuffed Cat. Purchased by the junior *madrichah* (staff counselor) to commemorate two fornicating felines observed by the group during its visit to the Western Wall, Sababa’s presence graced many of Bus 194’s effervescent moments. The others were acknowledged symbols of Zionism and Judaism that thoroughly suffused the tour and the country. These were not limited to physical objects, as Durkheim seemed to imply. A basic principle of semiotics is that anything can be a symbol as long as it evokes thoughts of something else. The Sabbath, the Western Wall, Hebrew, falafel, the Judean Desert, a kibbutz, even the overarching symbol “Israel”—all these could come to represent the feelings that emerged in the effervescent moments on Birthright. Israel’s established position in traditional Jewish thought, its revered status in American Jewish civil religion, its symbolic breadth and ambiguity, and its focal role in the pilgrimage itself made it ripe for emergence as a summarizing symbol encapsulating the trip. Against this, Sababa didn’t stand a chance.

As a symbol, Israel’s ability to evoke the profound feelings associated with the tour was evident in an e-mail sent by a Birthright alumna to a CMJS researcher. In it, she attributes to Israel the power to elevate and energize, utterly ignoring the social environment of Birthright that formed the context for her encounter with Israel:

After leaving Israel, I find myself wanting to return so badly, I think about it at least 50 times a day and hope I never stop thinking about it. After letting everything soak in I realized how comfortable I felt while in Israel. I don't think I realized it at the time but there is just something about being there that is really special, like no other place in the world.

Is there truly “something about being there that is really special”—something intrinsic to the place, independent of the social and institutional context in which this person saw the country? In this e-mailed example the displacement is complete. The social experience has been associated with its setting, and that setting is believed to have the power to reproduce independently the feelings that were actually grounded in the specific social experience.

Discussion

“Israel” may be seen as a key *summarizing symbol* in American Jewish culture. Such symbols “operate to compound and synthesize a complex system of ideas, to ‘summarize’ them under a unitary form which...stands for the system as a whole,” while doing nothing to “encourage reflection on the logical relations among these ideas.”⁴³ Israel experience programs expand the meanings that Israel signifies in the minds of program alumni beyond the normative to incorporate images and feelings associated with lived experience.

In their ability to accomplish this, Israel experience programs have much in common with ritual. As Rappaport has taught, ritual—“the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers”⁴⁴—contains within it two basic elements: those fixed by convention and those that vary according to the performer and performance. Each element communicates different information. Fixed elements convey a culture’s *canonical* messages, whereas variable elements allow participants to transmit to themselves and to others self-referential information “concerning their own physical, psychic, or social states.”⁴⁵

Like ritual, Israel experience programs begin with canonical messages. These are the thematic curricula and the written itineraries that organize pre-existing tourist sites that are themselves often constructed in accordance with nationalist and religious ideologies. But unless these are enacted by tourists and tour leaders, all that we have are itineraries on paper and places in space; the Israel experience does not exist except in potential. The human enactment that realizes this potential adds the self-referential meanings conveyed by the Israel

experience program—those that emerge in and refer to the particular interpersonal dynamics and historical experiences of a given group.

Neither the Israel experience nor ritual fosters critical reflection upon the canonical and self-referential meanings they convey. “To perform a ritual,” Rappaport wrote, “is not to analyze it.” Instead, the many meanings “come swooping [in]...from all over experience simultaneously.”⁴⁶ Just as a chord does not summarize the individual notes of which it is composed, instead integrating them holistically, ritual creates meaning by bringing together a multiplicity of canonical and self-referential meanings that are experienced more than understood.⁴⁷ So, too, with the Israel experience. The behaviors enacted and performed on Israel experience programs do not reconstitute Israel merely as a *summarizing* symbol representing an array of canonical messages, but as an *integrative* symbol that signifies not only ideology but also the sensations lived, emotions felt, memories created and states of being experienced in a specific time and place in a person’s life.

The processes that reconstitute Israel and its associated elements as major and minor integrative symbols unfold in real time during the trip. Occurrences on day one condition those of day four, which shape those of day 10. As the trip goes on, the Zionist and Jewish symbols that are encountered find their canonical contents increasingly overlaid with self-referential meaning as well. To an extent, all people who travel on Israel experience programs therefore are accidental pilgrims, because much of the meaning they derive from their encounter with the country’s sites ends up being the result of emergent processes that cannot be known in advance.

This allows us to explain without recourse to particulars of the trips’ curricula how such programs can generate strong feelings of connection to Israel even among those who embark on the trips as tourists, not pilgrims. Perhaps prior socialization, the trips’ educational programs, or subsequent Jewish experiences will also succeed in inculcating some normative understandings of Israel. However, this will never be to the exclusion of the personal meanings that emerge out of individual experience. The tendency of integrative symbols to be diffuse rather than precise makes it likely that the multiple meanings evoked by the single symbol will interpenetrate and blur. The merger of the self-referential and the canonical serves to reinforce each element. In Rappaport’s words, “[A]s the eternal is made vital, so the vital may seem to be made eternal.”⁴⁸

Thus, we may ask both whether the connection to Israel can be sustained by associating Israel with the community of tourists, and whether the feeling of elevation generated by the community of tourists can be sustained by associating it with Israel. In the latter case, surely, if the encapsulating symbol did not have normative footing, the chances

would be far greater that the feelings associated with the trip would dissipate like a cloud. Program alumni may encounter any number of rabbis preaching about the Jewish state, but unless they maintain contact with their friends from the trip, who will invoke Sababa the Cat?

Israel's symbolic meanings emerge here not at the macro-level of American Jewish culture, nor at the micro-level of idiosyncratic experience, but at the meso-level, through the interaction of small groups of Jewish peers. The fact that they are a collective product produced by Jews interacting (under the auspices of communal agencies, no less) lends them a moral authority that contributes to their sustainability. Additionally, the consistency of the phenomenon across tour groups means that a sizable minority of American Jews shares an understanding of what the Birthright alumna meant when she wrote that "there is just something about being [in Israel] that is really special, like no other place in the world." True, it is only a minority sentiment. But even this is enough to demonstrate that ideological accounts of American Jewry's connection to Israel are incomplete explanations, because the ideological commitments to Israel are in many cases the result of, rather than the precursor to, deeply felt but unreflected-upon emotional commitments rooted in personal experience. Because the communal leaders promulgating the normative conceptions of Israel's meaning increasingly are exposed to programs such as these, or to adult equivalents—such as United Jewish Appeal fundraising missions and religious or secular study-abroad programs—their later pronouncements should be understood in light of these personal experiences.

Israel remains a sacred symbol to American Jewry. But its sanctity lies not merely in the ossified residue of prior generations' religious, ethnic and nationalist projects—those messages that are taught in Hebrew schools, declared in federation General Assembly resolutions, and promulgated in films like *Exodus*. Rather, a sacred power newly created and perceived in the first-person is a continual part of the symbol's vitality. It emerges anew from the life experiences of people in every generation. Durkheim saw symbolization as a means of preserving the evanescent experience of the sacred. The symbol "goes on calling forth and recalling those emotions even after the assembly is over...[It] lives beyond the gathering. By means of it, the emotions felt are kept perpetually alive and fresh."⁴⁹ For participants in programs like Birthright, Israel becomes an integrative symbol representing the individual's own fleeting experiences of collective effervescence and embodied sensations during a group tour of Israel. The symbol's other, more normative, associations are not lost. Indeed, the symbol's ability to sustain new content attests to its robustness. The canonical meanings may even be reinvigorated by the infusion of the potent personal

meanings. In the union of the two, the old symbol once again can become young.

NOTES

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¹ No comprehensive accounting of the total participation in these short-term programs exists. A reasonable estimate, based on Jewish Agency figures and including Birthright Israel, puts the worldwide figure at at least 240,000. American participation as a proportion of the total has varied widely from year-to-year. Erik H. Cohen and Eynath Cohen, *Ha-Chavayah Ha-Yisraelit* (Jerusalem, Israel: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2000), David Mittelberg, *The Israel Connection and American Jews* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

² Among the exceptions are Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Learning from Ethnography: Reflections on the Nature and Efficacy of Youth Tours to Israel," *The Israel Experience: Studies in Jewish Identity and Youth Culture*, ed. Barry Chazan (Jerusalem, Israel and New York: The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2002), and Mittelberg, *The Israel Connection*.

³ Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist* 75.5 (1973) 1338-46.

⁴ Deborah Dash Moore, "Bonding Images: Miami Jews and the Campaign for Israel Bonds," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal (Jerusalem, Israel and Detroit, MI: The Magnes Press of The Hebrew University and Wayne State University Press, 1996) 254-67; Melvin I. Urofsky, *We Are One! American Jewry and Israel* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978); Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁵ Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Homelands of the Heart: Israel and Jewish Identity in American Jewish Fiction," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal (Jerusalem, Israel and Detroit, MI: The Magnes Press of The Hebrew University and Wayne State University Press, 1996) 271-92; Stephen J.

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⁶ Allon Gal, "Overview: Envisioning Israel-the American Jewish Tradition," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal (Jerusalem, Israel and Detroit, MI: The Magnes Press of The Hebrew University and Wayne State University Press, 1996) 13-37; Jacob Neusner, *Stranger at Home: "the Holocaust," Zionism and American Judaism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Woocher, *Sacred Survival*.

⁷ Gal, "Overview"; Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1973); Jonathan D. Sarna, "A Projection of America as It Ought to Be: Zion in the Mind's Eye of American Jews," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal, 41-59.

⁸ Quoted in Sarna, "A Projection of America," 58.

⁹ Gal, "Overview"; Neusner, *Stranger at Home*.

¹⁰ Woocher, *Sacred Survival*.

¹¹ Many of these examples are taken from the contributors to Allon Gal, ed., *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*.

¹² Stephen Sharot and Nurit Zaidman, "Israel as Symbol and as Reality: The Perception of Israel among Reconstructionist Jews in the United States," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal, 149-72. For the conception of Israel in Jewish liturgies, see David Ellenson, "Envisioning Israel in the Liturgies of North American Liberal Judaism," *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal 117-48.

¹³ Steven M. Cohen, *Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline: Emerging Patterns of Jewish Identity in the United States* (New York: Florence G. Heller Jewish Community Centers Research Center, 1998) 23-5, 36.

¹⁴ Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ For a review of this literature, see Barry Chazan, *Does the Teen Israel Experience Make a Difference?* (New York: Israel Experience, Inc., 1997).

¹⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Learning from Ethnography," 286.

¹⁷ Harvey E. Goldberg, "A Summer on a NFTY Safari 1994: An Ethnographic Perspective," *The Israel Experience: Studies in Jewish Identity and Youth Culture*, ed. Barry Chazan (Jerusalem, Israel and New York: The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2002) 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁹ Samuel C. Heilman, "A Young Judea Israel Discovery Tour: The View from Inside," *The Israel Experience: Studies in Jewish Identity and Youth Culture*, ed. Barry Chazan, 207.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 166.

²¹ *Ibid*, 263.

²² Shaul Kelner, Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin, Rachel Canar, Matthew Lindholm, Hal Ossman, Jennifer Perloff, Benjamin Phillips, Rishona Teres, Minna Wolf and Meredith Woocher, *Making Meaning: Participants' Experience of Birthright Israel* (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2000).

²³ Naava L. Frank, "Adolescent Constructions of Jewishness: The Nesiya 1988 Summer-Trip to Israel," (Harvard University, 1996); Leora Isaacs, *Alexander Muss High School in Israel Project Evaluation*. (New York: Jewish Education Service of North America, 1997); R.R. Kafka, Perry London, S. Bandler and Naava L. Frank, *The Impact of 'Summer in Israel' Experiences on North American Jewish Teenagers* (Montreal, Canada: CRB Foundation, 1990), Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin, Shaul Kelner, Mark I. Rosen and Erez Yereslove, *A Mega-Experiment in Jewish Education: The Impact of Birthright Israel* (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2002).

²⁴ Heilman, "Young Judea," 253.

²⁵ Shaul Katz, "The Israeli Teacher-Guide: The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Role," *Annals of Tourism Research* 12 (1985) 49-72.

²⁶ Kelner, et al, *Making Meaning*; Saxe, et al, *A Mega-Experiment*.

²⁷ All names and identifying details have been changed.

²⁸ Heilman, "Young Judea"; Abraham H. Maslow, "Peak-Experiences as Acute Identity-Experiences," *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1968) 103-14.

²⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990).

³⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995) 217-8.

³¹ Nachman Ben-Yehudah, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Shaye Cohen, "Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 32 (1982) 385-405; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³² Liebman identified Israel's ability to reward its supporters with access to symbols of state power as one of the reasons pro-Israel activity was so popular among American Jews. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* 104-5.

³³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Learning from Ethnography," 313. Original emphasis.

³⁴ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 253-7.

³⁵ Birthright Israel's educational standards, for example, mandate three themes—contemporary Israel, the narrative of the Jewish people, and values of the Jewish people—and require visits to sites relating to ancient Jewish history, Zionist history, the Holocaust, and the Israeli state's national institutions.

³⁶ Heilman, "Young Judea," 264.

³⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

³⁸ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 222.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 223

⁴⁰ Durkheim's crucial insight that the *creation* of symbols results from an inability to reflect immediately upon overwhelming bodily and social experiences is supported by Dan Sperber's work on the obverse phenomenon, the *interpretation* of symbols. He, too, emphasized the relationship between symbols and deficiencies in person's abilities to process information cognitively. Sperber argued that human beings assimilate new information only by relating it to other information already stored in memory. When we fail in attempts to use the new information to directly invoke specific memories, we can treat the new information as a symbol that evokes a variety of memories that we then judge for their relevance. Both the production and interpretation of symbols, therefore, can be traced to an inability to encode information as directly accessible cognitions. Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. Alice L. Morton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press., 1975) 119-23.

⁴¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963) 60.

⁴² Heilman, "Young Judea," 218.

⁴³ Ortner, "On Key Symbols," 1340.

⁴⁴ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion* 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 52. To better understand the distinction, consider the differences between the recitation of the *Shema* prayer in an Orthodox service and in a classical Reform service. The canonical message (the text) is the same, but the variability in the way it is recited says much about who each group is and what it values.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 253.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 255-6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 230.

⁴⁹ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 222.

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