

Interview with Leonard Saxe

The Birthright Israel Program: Present and Possible Future Impacts

“The program that is now known as Taglit-Birthright Israel was launched in late 1999—early 2000. The Israeli parliamentarian Yossi Beilin had proposed the idea almost a decade earlier. He wanted to change the Israel-Diaspora relationship from Israel being a supplicant and a recipient of Jewish philanthropy to it becoming an educational center for the Jewish world. Beilin proposed that the Diaspora, instead of donating to Israel, should spend its funds educating Diaspora youth—making it the ‘birthright’ of every Diaspora Jew to have an educational experience in Israel.”

Leonard Saxe elaborates on how the actual Birthright Israel program (now known as Taglit-Birthright Israel) started. “Two American philanthropists, Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, were looking for a way to have a major impact on what they saw as declining interest and engagement in Jewish life. They adopted the idea of Birthright Israel and created an organization to make the program operational. They gathered a consortium of private philanthropists and they garnered the support of Jewish federations in the United States, communities around the world, and the Jewish Agency for Israel. With the assistance of the Israeli government, they were able to launch the program.

“Prior to Birthright Israel, Charles Bronfman was involved in supporting and developing Israel-experience programs for non-Orthodox youth. However, most Israel-experience programs were designed as summer programs for high-school youth or gap-year programs after high school.”

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

Saxe remarks: “By autumn 2009, nearly 225,000 young Jewish adults in the eighteen-to-twenty-six age group around the world had participated in the program, which consists of ten-day educational experiences in Israel. Approximately 75 percent came from North America, the majority of them Americans. The remaining 25 percent originated in more than fifty countries around the world.

Large groups have come from Argentina, France, Germany, and Russia. This makes Birthright Israel the largest Jewish communal education project ever.”

Participation per Cohort

“Our estimate is that in North America there are eighty to ninety thousand young Jewish adults in each age cohort (age eighteen, age nineteen, and so on). In the United States, among young adults born in 1985 and 1986, more than 15 percent have now participated in Birthright Israel. In Canada, Birthright Israel has reached nearly 25 percent of the young adults born in 1986 and 1987.²

“In 2007–2008, the program expanded substantially. If the number of participants from these years were sustained, the proportion of the young adult population who are program alumni could increase in the coming years to 35 percent. The program has not yet had the funding to send all of those who apply and it is possible, if the resources were made available, that the majority of North American Jewish young adults could participate in an Israel experience by the time they reach their mid-twenties. The recession of 2008–2009 slowed the program’s ability to achieve this goal, but relative to the amounts spent on Jewish education, Taglit’s cost is modest and I’m confident a way will be found to fund it.

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

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

Characteristics of the Program

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

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

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

Funding

When asked how much money has been spent overall for the Birthright Israel program, Saxe answers: “The average cost per participant from North American is about \$2,300. Given the costs of transportation from overseas, it’s remarkable that they have been able to maintain relative stability in costs. In view of the number of participants, by the end of 2009 nearly \$500 million had been invested in the program.

“The original vision for funding the Birthright gift was that it should be a three-way partnership. One-third of the funding would come from private philanthropists; one-third from community bodies such as North American Jewish Federations, Jewish communities around the world, and the Jewish Agency; and the final third from the Israeli government.”

Context, Identity, Peoplehood

“A key factor is the attachment of Jews to the Land of Israel, to our heritage, tradition, and Torah. Being in the land where the Jewish nation was created is central to Birthright. Being in an environment where Hebrew is spoken, where the calendar is Jewish, is a very different experience for young adults than going somewhere else with a Jewish group.

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

“However assimilated a Jew is, as long as he or she acknowledges Jewish heritage, being in Israel and living as part of a Jewish group is a powerful experience. It affects virtually all who participate, but one sees the greatest impact on the most assimilated, most disconnected young Jews.

“This was confirmed during the intifada in the years 2001–2004. Because of concerns about security, those who participated in Birthright Israel were more likely to have come from homes with higher levels of Jewish practice and the

percentage of assimilated young Jews was lower than before or after that period. Although participants' experience was still very positive and transformative, the effects were even greater when there were more of the less affiliated and less knowledgeable participants.

“We released a study of the long-term impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel on participants, looking at those who applied to the trip in 2001–2004, some of whom went to Israel and others who did not.³ The results are, in some ways, stunning: along with confirming long-term positive attitudinal changes about Jewish identity and Israel, we also found that non-Orthodox married alumni were nearly 60 percent more likely to be partnered with someone Jewish. The surprising finding was the strength of the marriage effect. Participants were ‘voting’ to be Jewish by their marital decision-making.”

Key Indicators and Values

“Although predicting the future is always uncertain, we suspect that program impact may be even stronger in the future because more of the post-2004 cohorts come from families that are not highly engaged in Jewish life. Impact is greater on those without prior engagement.

“In terms of indicators of prior engagement, we have been tracking knowledge of Hebrew. It indicates both prior Jewish education and involvement in Judaism. In more recent cohorts, just about half of the participants report that they can read Hebrew but don't understand it. They went to Hebrew school, most until *bar* or *bat mitzvah* [coming-of-age ceremony], but didn't learn to speak or understand the language. “More telling, though, is that the number of those who do not know the Hebrew alphabet is now more than 20 percent of the North American participants. For this group of individuals who have had little or no Jewish education, the impact of the program is even greater, in part because they have more distance to traverse in terms of their connection to Israel and Jewish identity.

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

Uniformity of Impact

To the question of how it is possible to significantly strengthen identities in a

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

“Perhaps the program’s most surprising element is the relatively uniform way in which it affects participants and how they describe their relationship with Jewish life and Israel.⁴ We have interviewed tens of thousands of participants and almost as many applicants who didn’t have a chance to go on the program. The consistency of participants’ descriptions of the program is extraordinary. The vast majority describe it as an ‘amazing experience’ and our long-term data indicate that most regard it as ‘life-changing.’ This is true for those who are intellectually inclined as well as for those who are not, for those who prior to the trip were connected to their Jewish identity in various degrees and those who were not. There are differences in the magnitude of their response depending on their starting point, but the patterns of change are identical.

“What they learn is mostly about people, but they also report that ‘they learned a great deal about Israel’s landscape and natural environment, Israeli culture, modern Israeli and Jewish history.’ They learn less about Jewish customs and practices, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Israeli social problems, but in part that is because the program eschews a religious focus, as well as a political orientation.”⁵

Shabbat in Jerusalem

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

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

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

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

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

Tour Operators

The uniformity of reactions to Taglit, and the role played by experiences such as Shabbat in Jerusalem is, perhaps somewhat surprising given that multiple tour operators are responsible for delivering educational content. The operators have different orientations to Judaism and to the narrative of Jewish peoplehood and Israel.

According to Saxe, two elements contribute to ensuring that participants have a broad and balanced experience. First, Taglit’s educational standards provide a common framework. Although *morei derekh* [educators] have flexibility in how they meet Taglit’s educational requirements, the standards—for which operators are held accountable—impel them to include diverse perspectives in every trip. Second, and perhaps most important, the *mifgashim* level the “playing field.” Engaging Diaspora participants with their Israeli peers ensures that the narrative of Israel and the Jewish experience is based on the reality of contemporary Israel.

Saxe notes that there has been “mostly healthy” competition among the tour operators; they compete for applicants and must sell their approach to Israel, including how much “fun” participants have on their trips. As a decade-long observer of Taglit trips, he believes that the current tour operators do an increasingly good job balancing ‘substance’ and fun. “It’s a traditional Jewish notion to make the study of Torah ‘sweet’ and Taglit *madrichim* [youth group leaders] are experts at knowing how to deliver sophisticated content in a way that is both palatable and meaningful to college and postcollege young adults. As the program evolves, efforts are underway by Taglit to enhance the educational armamentarium available to *madrichim* and find the ‘sweet spot’ between content and group process.

“As Taglit evolves, perhaps one direction will be to encourage tour operators to differentiate their trips in terms of educational content. Already, some groups are organized by professional focus (e.g., medical students). But I could see groups being organized for those interested in improving their Hebrew or to study

archeology. And, if Taglit were to become more involved in helping participants postprogram, there are dozens of opportunities to enhance the educational value of programs.”

After Returning

Research on program participants has found that many of them change their attitude toward Judaism as a result of the visit to Israel. Saxe says: “Our studies show that the impact lasts for a number of years. Until recently, the strongest impact that we documented was attitudinal—views of Israel and Jewish identity. What is now clear is that this extends to important life choices.”⁶

“One of the issues with follow-up after participants return home is that, often, the members of the group are physically dispersed, as are the Diaspora educators who traveled with them. Even with students, they graduate and leave the campus community. Birthright Israel participants are at a time in their lives when mobility is normative. Initiatives based on the assumption that participants will return to the communities from which they originated are bound to fail.

“At the same time, those who traveled with friends or on campus- or community-based trips identified their newly established Jewish network as critical to their subsequent decision to attend Jewish activities. It seems to work best for college students who go with campus groups and return there, at least for one to three years. How to follow-up on what has been initiated with the Birthright Israel trip remains an issue. Much needs to be done, but compared to the challenge of bringing well over two hundred thousand young people to Israel, creating follow-up programs seems a modest goal.”⁷

Changes on Campus

Saxe observes: “One of our studies found that ‘half the respondents strongly agreed that the trip encouraged them to become more involved in their Jewish communities back at home.’⁸ The fundamental problem is that the Jewish communities that many participants were disconnected from when they came to Israel remain the same ones they return to. Birthright Israel may not be able to change that, but it is not unreasonable to ask Diaspora communities to do so. My own community, Boston, has taken the challenge and has made working with this population one of its strategic priorities.

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

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

Birthright Next

“To respond, in part, to the follow-up problem, there is now an organization, Birthright Next, which is trying to create opportunities for young people to be engaged in Jewish life in their communities. It will be successful to the extent that it fosters change. Diaspora communities need to restructure themselves, to empower young adults, and to provide meaningful opportunities for them to engage Jewishly on their own terms.

“That process is still in its infancy and Birthright Next will have to find a way to be more than another organization that provides programming for the community. One hopeful sign is that there has been a dramatic difference in community attitudes over the last ten years. Hillel has gone from a ‘backwater’ of Jewish institutional life to being prominent, and there has been an explosion of programs designed to engage young adult Jews.

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

“Talking about follow-up now is like taking a snapshot of a moving stream. There are likely to be major changes in the coming years. In part, the changes are the result of a dramatic increase in the number of program alumni, but as well, the creation of Birthright Next. It is going to be interesting, for example, to see whether their efforts to promote Shabbat dinners will ‘take.’ Their goal is to make involvement in Shabbat activities a focus of enhanced Jewish life after the participants’ return; it is the obvious ‘Jewish starting point.’ It follows to some extent the Israeli model where Friday night is the central time for the family to get together, however secular its members are. Birthright Next has the backing of philanthropists, from Michael Steinhardt to the Jim Joseph and Schusterman foundations.”

Conclusions

“Along with studying how Jewish education can be more effective, we are also learning about the Diaspora’s evolving relationship with Israel. There has been concern that American Jewry is growing more distant from Israel, but our work with Birthright Israel participants suggests just the opposite.⁹ A large subset of the Jewish young adult population has been positively engaged with Israel as a result of the program. In the past, young adults were the least likely to be committed to Israel. The new form of engagement is based on friendships and social networking and has the potential to transform the fundamental connection among Jews around the world.

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

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

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

“Another observation concerns the Israeli participants. One of our recent findings is that Israeli participants report the same kinds of positive impact as their Diaspora peers. Young adult participants come to see themselves as members of *Clal Yisrael* [the Jewish people at large], not just as Israelis.

In our study of *mifgash* participants, the vast majority of Israelis indicated that the program made them feel pride—pride in service to the IDF, pride in their country, and pride in being Jews. To a lesser extent, but still significant, we found that it also stimulated them to want to learn more about Judaism.¹⁰

“Although the worldwide economic downturn will likely result in fewer participants and longer wait-lists than in 2008, the program seems assured of

providing an Israel-education experience for twenty-five thousand or more Diaspora young adults each year. As said, it perhaps needs to serve close to fifty thousand youngsters per year in order to reach its transformative potential, but that's not an unreachable goal."

Notes

1. Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 13.
2. Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Shahar Hecht, and Graham Wright, "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation: 2007 North American Cohorts," Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2007, 13.
3. Leonard Saxe, Benjamin Phillips, Theodore Sasson, Shahar Hecht, Michelle Shain, Graham Wright, and Charles Kadushin, "Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2009.
4. Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, and Shahar Hecht, "Taglit-Birthright Israel: Impact on Jewish Identity, Peoplehood, and Connection to Israel," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2006.
5. Saxe et al., "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation," 1.
6. Saxe et al., "Generation Birthright Israel," 2009.
7. Fern Chertok, Theodore Sasson, and Leonard Saxe, "Tourists, Travelers, and Citizens: Jewish Engagement of Young Adults in Four Centers of North American Jewish Life," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2009. See also Theodore Sasson, Leonard Saxe, Mark I. Rosen, Dana Selinger-Abutbul, and Shahar Hecht, "After Birthright Israel: Finding and Seeking the Jewish Community," Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2006.
8. Saxe et al., "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation," 1.
9. Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the 'Distancing Hypothesis,'" Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2008.
10. Theodore Sasson, David Mittelberg, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, "Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash," Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2008, 2.