

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM

REFLECTIONS ON TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL

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Spring 2010

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Political Science and Philosophy
with honors in Jewish Studies

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ABSTRACT

In December 1999, under the umbrella of Taglit-Birthright Israel, an initial group of Jews ages 18-26 boarded a plane for a free trip to Israel. Now, to date, over 225,000 young Jewish adults from over 50 countries have been sent to Israel on a free educational trip provided by the Taglit-Birthright organization (Saxe, Phillips, et al. 2009, 1). Jewish philanthropists and the Israeli government have donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the program-all in hopes of rebuilding the Jewish identity among the Diaspora youth. Given the mass number of participants, high expectations of the program, as well as the extraordinary amount of resources being spent, it is important to study the effects of Taglit-Birthright Israel accurately and comprehensively. While Birthright funds an extensive and ongoing body of research that surveys participants about the impacts of their trip, a qualitative, individually focused approach can uncover a great deal of insight about the Birthright experience and identify possible areas that require improvement. Through the narratives of eleven Birthright Israel alumni, I show how Birthright affects a small sample of participants on an individual level in hopes of revealing the areas in which the program has been succeeding, and also the areas that may need reform.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am honored to extend my gratitude to all of those who have helped me through the process of writing this thesis. I would like to thank Dr. Brian Hesse for his guidance and valuable advice. He taught me the importance of the individual experience and the significance of narratives in social science research. I am also grateful for the insights and suggestions of Dr. Alan Benjamin, as well as his willingness to lend his expertise to my project. Also, I am indebted to Dr. Gretchen Casper for encouraging me to pursue research on a topic that I was deeply interested in, and also for her help during the writing process.

This thesis would not have been possible without the stories of the Birthright alumni who took the time to share their experiences with me. I would like to thank them for their openness, sincerity, and enthusiasm. Each interview invigorated my project, and I am honored to have had the privilege of meeting with each of them and listening to their diverse experiences and perspectives.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mother for always offering the best advice in my most stressful moments. Thank you for always believing in me.

Chapter 1

Background

It is widely thought that there is no culture that has survived and prospered, through countless obstacles, as long as the Jewish culture. However, many believe that Judaism currently faces a threat from within: a loss of connectedness to Jewish identity and to the state of Israel among the Jewish youth (Halkin 2007, 127). Trips to Israel had been used in the past and had been proven successful in giving young adults a substantial link to their Jewish heritage (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 9). However, the number of participants on these trips was always too small to make a significant contribution in the overall Jewish community, mainly because of the price of the trips (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 10). Also, those who participated in the “Israel Experience Tours” were most likely already involved in Jewish life, and therefore were not at risk for losing touch with their Jewish heritage (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 10). In order to reach out to the majority of the Jewish community in the Diaspora, who do not consider their religion to be central to their personal identity and therefore everyday lives, philanthropists Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman came up with an ambitious project that hoped to reconnect young Jews to their Jewish identity through the gift of a free trip to Israel (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 12).

The inspiration behind Birthright is Steinhardt and Bronfman’s idea that it is every Jew’s “birthright” to visit the land of Israel, and that doing so would “plug the dam of assimilation” that had been occurring within the Jewish community (Saxe and Chazan 7). This idea was novel back in 1995 when the plan was devised, and was met with

intense criticism within the Jewish community. Isi Leibler, a prominent Australian businessman and leader within the Jewish community, called the Birthright project “bizarre” and accused Steinhardt and Bronfman of adopting a “quick fix” solution that they mistakenly thought would “overcome all of the problems of Jewish identity and miraculously generate a Jewish renaissance” (Leibler 1999, 8). However, despite this type of criticism that was coming from all sides, Steinhardt and Bronfman proceeded with their plan and donated a total of \$10 million of their own funds to get the project off the ground. They later enlisted the help of other Jewish organizations, such as the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, and eventually were able to secure the backing of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who committed \$7 million from the State of Israel for the Birthright program (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 11). The first Birthright trip was in December 1999, almost exactly one decade ago.

To date, over \$450 million dollars has been spent on the Birthright program, about \$2,300 per participant (“The Birthright” 1). However, Birthright is an umbrella organization, and therefore its donors do not directly set the agenda for each individual Birthright trip (“The Birthright” 1). Instead, Birthright accredits various trip organizers that must meet basic Birthright criteria, and are allowed to organize the rest of the trip in a manner that they choose (“About Us”). There are about twenty trip providers which send Birthright trips to Israel in the summer and winter. According to Birthright’s website, the basic criteria that each trip must meet to fall under the Birthright umbrella are (“About Us”):

- Israeli tour guides
- 5 or 10 days spent with Israeli peers (mostly soldiers and students)

- Tour of the Old City of Jerusalem and the Western Wall
- Tour of Masada and the Dead Sea
- Travel to other cities/towns like Tel Aviv, Haifa, Tsfat and Eilat
- Accommodation in three and four star hotels
- Uniform safety and security procedures

Aside from the major sites that Birthright trips are required to see, there is also a “narrative” that leaders use to weave together and frame each participants’ experience. In their book, Ten Days of Birthright Israel, Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan list the major points of the narrative as:

- Israel is a contemporary modern society
- Israel is connected to main themes of Jewish history
- Key sites in Israel explain the origin of Zionism, the struggle for Statehood, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- There are core Jewish values reflected within the context of the places visited
- There is a connection between Israel, the Holocaust, contemporary Jewish life, and your personal Jewish identity.
- Visiting and learning about these sites should evoke deep positive individual emotion, and pride in each Birthright Israel participant for being Jewish.

The stated goal of Birthright is to “diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world; to strengthen the sense of solidarity among

world Jewry; and to strengthen participants' personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people" ("About Us"). The founders of Birthright hoped to engage young Jews with the Jewish community and their own Jewish identity through an educational trip to Israel, aware of the fact that traditional methods of education were not as effective as they would have hoped.

Chapter 2

Survey of Birthright Research Literature

Two months after Birthright's launch, in a presentation to the co-founders of Birthright, researchers from the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University proposed to study Birthright participants in an effort to evaluate the effects of the trip (Saxe and Chazan 1008, 137). Although they were initially met with skepticism, Birthright donors agreed to fund the research, agreeing with the researchers that such an extensive project deserves evaluation with scientific rigor. Dr. Leonard Saxe and his associates at the Cohen Center have been researching Birthright since its inception in 2000, and continue to poll participants before and after their trips. This research group is the primary evaluator of the Birthright program, publishing annual reports of their findings.

The quantitative research is done by surveying both Birthright participants and applicants who are placed on waiting lists or who canceled their trip. This is so that those who are not accepted on the trip can be used as the control group (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 140). A control group is the group that is not affected by the independent variable, in this case the Birthright trip (Bernard 1994, 52). Researchers at Brandeis claim that the fact that the control group is people who applied for the trip and did not go rules out the possibility that the behavioral changes are only due to motivations that may have compelled people to sign up for the trip, such as prior involvement (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 140). Since both the experimental and the control group applied for the trip, the variable between them is the actual trip to Israel, according to the researchers. In this

way, they claim that it is more accurate to say that the differences noted in their behavior can be attributed to the trip, and not prior attitudes and experiences they may have had (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 140).

This method, however, does not include those who did not apply for a Birthright trip at all. There are a number of potential effects that this could have on Saxe and Chazan's results. For example, young people who have participated in another organized trip to Israel that lasted more than seven days are not eligible to participate in Birthright, and therefore are excluded from the study ("FAQs"). This leaves out the effect of their other trip as opposed to a Birthright trip. Also, it is likely that those who have not applied for Birthright are less involved in Jewish life, since Birthright is advertised through Jewish organizations like Hillel. This starting point may affect the difference between participants and non-participants, and may even make the effect of Birthright more apparent. Essentially, the model used by Saxe and Chazan at Brandeis leaves out a very large population who are pertinent to the data and conclusions that their study draws.

In the research conducted by Brandeis, participants are surveyed before the trip, immediately after, and at intervals ranging from three months to four years after the trip (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 147). Examples of questions asked include "What the trip meant to participants" with response choices ranging from religious pilgrimage to fun vacation and "The extent to which they feel more connected to the people of Israel" (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 147). Although not always overwhelming, the survey results always indicate at least some positive correlation between participants of Birthright and connection to Jewish identity. For example, the 2007-2008 study revealed that 60% of

participants said that they felt “very much” connected to Israel, as opposed to 25% for non- participants (Saxe, Sasson, et. al 2008, 24).

Although the Cohen Center states that the attitudinal changes in participants vs. non-participants is significant, the behavioral changes are less so (Saxe, Sasson, et. al 2008, 28). Involvement in both Jewish community activities, such as Hillel, and religious activities such as attending synagogue, the difference between Birthright participants and non-participants is negligible, and therefore inconclusive (Saxe, Sasson et. al 2008, 29).

In their most recent study released in October 2009, Generation Birthright Israel, researchers at Brandeis aimed to determine the long-term effects of Birthright by surveying participants five to eight years from their Birthright trip (Saxe, Phillips, et al. 2009, 1). They concluded that they have demonstrated a “powerful, lasting impact” of Birthright (Saxe, Phillips et al. 2009, 3). Their findings show clear indications of attitudinal changes in participants caused by the trip, such as greater connectedness to Jewish people and Israel and the importance of raising Jewish children. However, as with past studies, the researchers found “little or no observable influence” on participants’ religious observance or involvement in the Jewish community (Saxe, Phillips et al. 2009, 3). The study lists six specific findings:

- *Participants evaluate the trip positively:* 45% said that it was “very-much” a life-changing experience, only 2% said that it was “very much” a disappointment.
- *Participants demonstrate a stronger relationship to Israel:* 23% more likely than nonparticipants to feel “very much” connected to Israel.

- *Participants have a stronger sense of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood:* 16% more likely than nonparticipants to feel “very much” connected to the worldwide Jewish community, 24% more likely to “strongly agree.”
- *Participants show some increase in Jewish communal involvement:* Marginally more likely to belong to a synagogue, but not more likely than non-participants to volunteer for Jewish charities.
- *Participants show some increase in religious observance:* 28% more likely to attend a monthly service than non-participants, but no more likely to have recently attended a religious observance.
- *Participants are more likely to marry Jews and show a stronger desire to raise Jewish children:* Among married respondents, 57% were more likely to be married to a Jew than non-participants; among unmarried respondents, participants were 46% more likely to view marrying a Jewish person as “very important” than non-participants.

The data gathered in this study about the long-term effects of Birthright largely mirror the data gathered in short term studies, in that changes in attitude are much more apparent than changes in behavior (Saxe, Sasson et. al 2008, 29). However, all research on Birthright by the Cohen Center shows at least some positive correlation between various aspects of Jewish identity and participation in Birthright trips.

The qualitative approach to my research, which I will discuss further in the **Methodology** section, was inspired in large part to some shortcomings that I noticed in the Brandeis research. One obvious question that must be raised is the validity of some

of the claims made by the Cohen Center due to the source of its funding, which happens to come from Birthright's founders. Although I do not personally believe that the Center publishes any false data, they may have motivation to portray their findings in the most favorable light in regard to Birthright's goals and agenda. Therefore, I hoped that my own research would provide an addition to the literature that is not from a source under the Birthright umbrella.

Additionally, I believe that some of the claims made by the Brandeis researchers are only vaguely tied to their statistical evidence, and do not offer much descriptive value¹. For example, if 45% of participants claim that the trip was "very much a life changing experience" and 28% viewed it as a "somewhat life-changing experience," I think it is valuable to investigate further questions. Specifically: What made it life-changing? In exactly what way was the participants' life changed? How does a "very much" life-changing experience differ from a "somewhat" life-changing experience? Answers to these types of questions would provide greater details in evaluating Birthright and locating where it can be improved, and I structured my research with these motivations in mind.

Two of the researchers at Brandeis, Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, compiled their data up until 2008 into the comprehensive book, Ten Days of Birthright Israel. The book details the history of the program, the educational methods that it uses, and the survey data gathered by the Cohen Center. Each of the ten chapters analyzes a different aspect of the trip, from the various sites to the diversity among trip providers. They also

¹ In this case, the term "descriptive value" refers to "an interest in illuminating social conditions" (Pomer 1985, 1).

consider the wider implications of such a program and how it can be translated into broader lessons about “how young adults struggle with issues of personal identity and meaning- making” (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 4). Although the authors offer mild criticism of Birthright, such as the lack of observable behavioral changes in participants, they adamantly maintain that “Birthright Israel models the best of educational programs” (Saxe and Chazan 2008, 3).

In his book review of Ten Days, Erik Cohen acknowledges the expertise of the authors and vast quantity of information they have compiled. However, he believes that the book exaggerates the “uniqueness” of the program, as other educational trips to Israel have yielded similar results. For example, trips organized by local Jewish communities also demonstrated the importance of the group, role of the counselor, and a use of diverse instruments of instruction (Cohen 2008, 252). For Cohen, the main differences between Birthright and these other organized trips to Israel are the marketing techniques and the large donations by philanthropists, which are “a bit obsequiously praised in the book” (Cohen 2008, 252).

Cohen also raises a question that he believes the authors have not confronted: “What kind of local Jewish community does the Taglit-Birthright tour envision or hypothesize their alumni will be part of, given that all the tours are organized through the centralized agency of the Taglit foundation?” (Cohen 2008, 252). He believes that the “single-brand” model of Birthright creates a collective, and most-likely temporary, identity which cannot be re-created upon return to the participant’s local communities. Also, Cohen disagrees with Saxe and Chazan that the program is “counter-cultural,” in that it emphasizes belonging to a peoplehood rather than the increasing individualistic

attitude present in America's youth. Cohen believes that the popularity of this "homogenous" tour may indicate that American society is "less individualistic than is widely supposed" (Cohen 2008, 252). He points to the fact that young people often seek out ethnic belonging due to the increasing number of broken families and communities as further evidence. Cohen believes that although the book "offers a valuable look" at the Birthright phenomenon, it could benefit from a more critical approach to several of the issues he indicated (Cohen 2008, 253).

I agree with Cohen in that Ten Days of Birthright Israel is an extensive and comprehensive effort to study Birthright, but also lacking in meaningful critique of the program. As I previously mentioned, the fact that the researchers are funded by Birthright donors raises questions about their analysis, and as Cohen noted, the founders are "obsequiously praised" in the book (Cohen 2008, 252). However, while Cohen disagrees with Saxe and Chazan that Birthright is unique in engaging participants in all three channels (emotionally, cognitively, and physically), he does not acknowledge the importance of their other claim for Birthright's "uniqueness": It attracts participants not already engaged in the Jewish community, as other tours of Israel had. In my research, I investigate the extent to which participants were previously involved in the Jewish community, or if Birthright was their sole window into Jewish life.

One of the central tenets of Birthright is the claim that a connection to Israel connects Jews around the world and strengthens Jewish identity. Founders Steinhardt and Bronfman have stated that Birthright is, among other things, a "project to link Diaspora Jews to the Jewish state as a resource for Jewish learning and values" (Steinhardt and Bronfman 2000, 9). However, the book New Jews: The End of the

Jewish Diaspora questions the role of Israel in Jewish identity, an ideology central to the Birthright model of engaging young Jews in the Diaspora by connecting them to the Jewish state. Authors Carol Aviv and David Shneer maintain that contemporary Jews feel increasingly “at home” in the Diaspora, and that their connection to the state of Israel is beginning to lack descriptive value. Their book suggests that the old notion of “Diaspora,” in that there is dispersion from a center, is no longer valid, and that Jews should be considered “global,” rather than “in Israel” or “in the Diaspora” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 19).

The chapter “Encounters with Ghosts” focuses on youth tours of Israel, and devotes a section to Birthright. The authors claim, with the evidence of one quote from a participant, that there is a conflict between participants’ desire to “have a vacation” and being forced to discuss and reflect on all aspects of the trip “to death” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 59). The authors maintain that conflicts like this, in addition to the public’s perception of the dangers of Israel and lack of connection to the state, “suggest that using Israel as a backdrop for developing American Jewish identities at home was useful at a particular historical moment,” but is no longer (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 70). They believe that the idea of “birthright” should not be a nationalistic claim to land, but rather an encounter with other Jews and Jewish history. Aviv and Shneer end the chapter by stating that this encounter can be realized as effectively, if not more so, in Vilnius or Berlin as in Jerusalem (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 71).

In my research, I hoped to investigate several of the critical claims that Aviv and Shneer make in their book, New Jews. First, I was interested in the role of Israel in the minds of modern Jews, and whether they felt that a connection to Israel strengthened

their Jewish identity. While researchers at Brandeis claim that Birthright participants are more likely to feel a connection to Israel than non-participants, Aviv and Shneer believe that even if this claim is true, the connection is an outdated avenue to achieve an increased sense of Jewish identity. In my research, I was very interested in investigating the role of Israel in the Jewish identity of young people further. Also, I was critical of Aviv and Shneer's statement that the reflective aspect of Birthright conflicted with participants' appreciation of the trip, as it was only supported by one quote from a participant. I hoped to further study this claim through my interviews of Birthright alumni.

In his review of New Jews, Noam Pianko commends Aviv and Shneer's "effort to push the ideological envelope," but believes that their notion of "global Jews" is at the least, premature (Pianko 2008, 190). He believes that the reference to the Birthright program actually "reinforce[s] the narrative that Aviv and Shneer hope to displace" (Pianko 2008, 190). According to Pianko, the popularity of the program indicates the centrality of Israel in encouraging a sense of Jewish identity in young people (Pianko 2008, 190). Although Aviv and Shneer believe that "trips to Vilnius" will be more popular in the future due to their relevance to the Jewish condition, Pianko does not see evidence of this claim to be happening in the near future. Therefore, he thinks that their description of "today's reality [...] remains premature" (Pianko 2008, 190).

I tend to agree with Pianko that there is little evidence to Aviv and Shneer's claim that the Diaspora-Israel relationship is losing relevance, especially with reference to Birthright, but am unsure of the use of Birthright's popularity to refute their claim. However, I am skeptical of the claim that the mere fact that Birthright is popular

necessarily means that the Diaspora-Israel connection is still relevant, but rather one would have to show that the trip strengthens Jewish identity in order to refute Aviv and Shneer's claim. In my research, I was interested in noting the feelings participants had toward Israel before and after the trip in order to illuminate this question further.

Along with concerns about the effectiveness and relevance of the ideologies which are foundational to Birthright, other critics question its neutrality and openness to diverse perspectives. The article on Salon.com, "Come, See Palestine!" states that some Birthright participants claim that "there is no such thing as a free holiday," citing the religious and political agenda that is delivered with the free trip (Shabi 2006, 2). One participant describes an instance where the tour guide "pushed a little too hard" for the group to have an emotional experience at the Wall, making him question the genuineness of the experience (Shabi 2006, 2). The tour guide had everyone close their eyes and place their hands on each other's shoulders while he told them about their ancestors praying at the Wall, and when this participant opened his eyes, he saw tears streaming down everyone's faces (Shabi 2006, 2).

The article continues by describing the views of many critics, which is not the "I love being Jewish" attitude that results from the trip, but rather the "underpinning political goals of Taglit" (Shabi 2006, 3). Another participant was "struck by the levels of Zionism" and "anti-Palestinian comments" made on the trip (Shabi 2006, 3). While the group adamantly discussed the Western Wall, there was little mention of the concrete wall of separation in the West Bank. The Birthright trip, according to another participant, aims to connect being Jewish with need for the Israeli state, while discussions that are critical of Israeli policy are not welcome (Shabi 2006, 4). Also, pro-Israel activism is

encouraged upon return from Birthright, as leaders stress how “Israel is suffering from constant insecurity and a state of war against them,” and needs the help of Jews abroad (Shabi 2006, 4).

The criticism against the Zionist political agenda of Birthright has prompted the creation of a new trip called Birthright Unplugged. The program was co-founded by Hanna Mermelstein, an American Jew, and Dunya Alwan, an American-Iraqi of Muslim and Jewish descent, who are both members of the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), which supports Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation (“Birthright Unplugged” n.d.). Birthright Unplugged takes groups of Jews and non-Jews to Palestinian villages and refugee camps in the West Bank. The trip is not free, as participants are asked to “make a sliding scale contribution” of \$750-\$850, and asked to donate more if possible (“Birthright Unplugged” n.d.). One former Birthright Unplugged participant said of the trip:

“Mostly, it just takes you to places and you see things with your own eyes, things that are self-evident and require no explanation whatsoever. It's enough just to see the effect of the separation wall and countless checkpoints on daily Palestinian life” (Shabi 2006, 4).

Some Birthright participants use their free trip to Israel as a gateway to involvement in the pro-Palestinian cause, either through Birthright Unplugged or other avenues. The article “Birthright participant turns pro-Palestinian activist” in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* tells the story of one such participant. Laura Gordon of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was 20 years old when she took her Birthright trip in 2002, and within months of her arrival to the area became a spokeswoman for ISM, the International

Solidarity Movement (Young 2003, 1). During Birthright, Gordon heard the stories of Israelis wounded in Palestinian bombings and the honor in being an Israeli soldier, but was interested in hearing the other side because of emails she had received from an American friend in Rafah. Her friend told her about the “Palestinians’ daily subjection to fire and violence” (Young 2003, 1). This inspired Gordon to visit the Gaza Strip, initially for a month, but later she decided to stay. In response to criticisms that she has “betrayed Birthright,” Gordon stated “Birthright does not come with a stipulation that you must espouse certain values” (Young 2003, 3). She concluded that she truly believes that her involvement with the ISN is “furthering the safety and long-term stability of the Jewish people” (Young, 2003, 3).

Recently, the number of Birthright participants who stay in Israel to support the pro-Palestinian cause has prompted worry from the Birthright organization (Shabi 2006, 4). Gidi Mark, Birthright’s director of Marketing, says these “birthlefters” are “taking advantage of the Jewish money that sends people to Israel, exploiting this money to promote an agenda which is not the agenda of the people who funded Taglit” (Shabi 2006, 4). Furthermore, Shabi’s article states that potential Birthright candidates are screened for a “hidden agenda,” which, if found, are not allowed on the trip (Shabi 2006, 4). However, the “birthlefters” do not think they are misusing Taglit money because part of it is provided by the Israeli government, which receives money from U.S. taxpayers (Shabi 2006, 4). To them, Birthright is fundamentally flawed in that it does not give a voice to the other side of the Israeli-Palestinian debate, and that connection to Jewish identity does not necessarily mean loyalty to the state of Israel (Shabi 2006, 4). Jacob Rosenblum, another Birthright alum who received ISM training after his trip, says that

traveling to Israel both with Birthright and to other territories made him more connected to Judaism, and that he “got really into claiming Judaism as [his] own” (Shabi 2006, 5).

In an editorial response to Shabi’s article, Andrew Silow-Carroll finds the gap between those that see visiting Israel as a chance for religious and ethnic connection and those that view the experience as purely political “troubling” (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). Silow-Carroll calls the “birthlefters” “disillusioned Jewish kids” and is critical of how Shabi “helps them along” with her transition sentences between their quotes (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). He gives the example of how she says “there is no such thing as a free holiday” for Birthright participants, alluding to the political message they are supposedly fed (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). Silow-Carroll also mocks a participant who was bothered by the tears of his fellow group members at the Western Wall, sarcastically remarking, “The horror! Tears at the Western Wall!” (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). Silow-Carroll believes that birthlefters are not wrong on some level, in that the trip is “heavy on tourism and light on discussion of the conflict,” which some may find not conducive to open discussion on important issues (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). However, Silow-Carroll is more concerned with Birthright Unplugged’s insistence that the “very existence of Israel [...] is still an open question” (Silow-Carroll 2006, 4). For this author, it is not Birthright that is reducing the trip to a purely political agenda, but the “birthlefters” quoted in Shabi’s article.

These radically opposing conceptions of Birthright, which have fueled the Birthright Unplugged program, raise more questions about Birthright which I take into consideration in my research. In my interviews, I aim to discover the impressions of the participants I interview regarding the questions of a “political” Birthright agenda.

Although in my experience of Birthright I found the message to be more ethnocentric than political, I was interested in whether other participants translated their newfound connection to Israel (if any) into an opinion on the conflict situation. While I agree with Silow-Carroll that the very notion of a trip to Israel does not necessarily imply an anti-Palestinian agenda, I hope that my research will illuminate the issue further with a wider range of view points from various participants.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Using the frame of Birthright's intentions, findings of the Cohen Center at Brandeis University, and criticisms of the program in other literature, I conducted interviews with eleven participants in order to obtain narratives about their individual Birthright experiences. In my survey of previous literature on the Birthright program, I identified several questions to study and guide my interviews. I was largely focused on the changes in behavior and attitude after the trip, educational value of the program, the relevance of Israel to modern Jewish identity, and a noticeable bias of the Birthright agenda. The methods that I chose to conduct my study were mostly guided by H. Russell Bernard's Second Edition of Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.

I aim to flesh out the statistical evidence gathered by the Cohen Center with this qualitative approach. Although there is value in gathering and analyzing the survey data collected from participants, many social scientists believe that the quantitative approach "focuses attention on aggregates rather than on individuals" (Bernard 1986, 16). In order to contribute to the growing body of literature on Birthright, I have chosen to assume a "learning role," rather than a scientific testing role, in order to more deeply understand the current situation of *individual* Birthright participants through an ethnographic approach (Agar 1986, 12). Ethnographies attempt to describe a culture and make sense of it (Agar 1986, 12). This requires abandonment of the traditional concepts of the "received view of science," such as measurement, hypothesis, and instruments in favor of "intensive personal involvement" and an "improvisational style" (Agar 1986, 12).

Although my results will not be predictive, I agree with Michael Agar in that one “cannot possibly know what to do next unless you know what just happened” (Agar 1986, 16). I hope that the narratives I have collected shed light on the individual Birthright experience in order to better understand the effect of this growing phenomenon.

Selection of Participants

The method of participant selection that I have used is known as “snowball sampling” (Bernard 1994, 97). I chose not to use a method of probability sampling, such as simple random, stratified random, or cluster sampling due to resource and time restraints, and also in order to obtain more detailed accounts of experience. These three types of probability samples are representative of a larger population, while snowball sampling is not (Bernard 1994, 73). In snowball sampling, the researcher seeks out one or more people who are likely candidates for her research, and asks them to name other qualified candidates who may be willing to participate (Bernard 1994, 73). Snowball sampling is used most effectively in relatively small populations where the potential research participants are likely to be in contact with one another (Bernard 1994, 73). However, it is less effective in large populations, because “every person does not have the same chance of being included,” and better known people in the community are more likely to be selected than less well known people (Bernard 1994, 97).

I chose the snowball method of participant selection because the community of Birthright participants are known keep in contact with one another after their trip (Saxe and Sasson 2008, 2). I am aware that this method makes it more likely that certain people were selected for research over others. However, due to time and resource constraints, I was unable to choose a “representative” method of sampling. This is

because representative samples must guarantee that every individual has the same probability of being selected as any other participant, and also the size of the sample must be large enough to be credible (Bernard 2008, 74). Given the 200,000+ Birthright participants and diversity of backgrounds among the participants, it would not have been feasible for me to obtain a truly representative sample.

Bernard acknowledges that “it is often impossible to do strict probability sampling in the field” (Bernard 2008, 94). In these cases, nonprobability alternatives are appropriate (Bernard 2008, 94). Although these methods, including snowball sampling, have “low external validity,” in that you cannot generalize beyond the sample, they are “often highly credible” when “backed up by ethnographic data” (Bernard 2008, 94). Since I have chosen to conduct in-depth interviews to compile ethnographic data, and will not generalize beyond my sample, the non-probability method for sampling that I chose was appropriate.

I began to recruit past Birthright participants by speaking with people who I personally knew who went on Birthright. Avra is a close friend who was on my same Birthright trip, and she later introduced me to the manager at her work, Jacob, who also went on Birthright. Hannah and David are family friends. I found the rest of the research participants through Leah, the Engagement Director of Penn State Hillel. I emailed her to ask for the names of students who had gone on Birthright through Hillel. She graciously replied by offering to send out an email to the group that she had led on a Birthright trip over winter break to ask if any of them would like to be interviewed. I interviewed the six people that she referred me to, and also Leah.

The Interviews

For each interview, I used an “interview guide,” or set of questions that guided the topics I wished to discuss, but still followed the leads of the interview participants in order to obtain the complete picture of their experience. This method is called “semistructured interviewing” (Bernard 1994, 209). The main rule in this method is to “get an informant on to a topic of interest and get out of the way” (Bernard 1994, 212). In this manner, the participant is given the opportunity to provide the information that he or she deems most important, while still covering the subject matter defined as the focus of the research.

My interview guide included 22 questions, which can be found in the Appendix. I developed these questions from the previous research and findings of the Cohen Center at Brandeis and the overall goals of Birthright, while keeping in mind the criticisms mentioned in the literature review. I was interested in issues raised by previous scholars on the topic of Birthright, such as a noticeable bias on the trip, whether a connection to Israel is relevant toward Jewish identity and if any behavioral changes could be observable after the trip. However, each interview did not include each of these topics or every question on my list, as I attempted to allow the conversations to develop through what the participant was most interested in talking about. I also used “probing” techniques to obtain more information on specific topics by asking participants to expand on previous statements they made, but without directly leading their responses (Bernard 1994, 215).

The semistructured method of interviewing fit this project because I did not have the opportunity to speak with each research participant multiple times, in which case an

unstructured interview may have been best to obtain the most information (Bernard 1994, 209). However, I did not use a fully structured interview, where each participant is asked the exact same set of questions, because I felt that it was crucial to maintain the opportunity to follow the leads of the research participants. Since many of my questions are also asked in other Birthright surveys, I hoped that my research would provide a more holistic picture of the individual Birthright experience within the narrow scope of my sample.

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed after. I asked each participant for their permission to be tape recorded, and ensured their anonymity in the final project. Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval was received for this study for human participant research. All names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity of the research participants.

Chronology of Narratives

I have chosen to recount the narratives that I have obtained in two groups. The first group is the narratives of the four participants who went on separate Birthright trips with various providers. The second group includes seven participants who were on the same Birthright trip, from Dec 31, 2009 to Jan 10, 2010. One of them is their group leader, Leah. The trip organizer for this trip was Israel Experts, which is affiliated with Penn State Hillel. It is important to note that one of these interviews, Judith and Sarah's, is different from the others in that I interviewed two sisters in one sitting for their convenience. I anticipated that their responses may have been affected by the presence of the other. For example, they may remind each other of experiences that they may not

have recalled on their own, or that some responses are given only to add onto the responses of the other.

Analysis and Conclusions

After reporting the narratives that I obtained through interviews, I analyze my results, draw conclusions, and make suggestions for future Birthright trips based on my data. According to Bernard, “qualitative analysis [...] is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain the existence of those patterns” (Bernard 1994, 360). Before conducting my research, I developed several “ideas” or theories about Birthright through previous research on the program. I developed questions around these ideas and focused the interviews around them, and then reported the patterns in the data that both confirmed and conflicted with these ideas. From the statements of participants which did not conform to the theories of Birthright set forth by its founders and other researchers, I developed my own suggestions that may be able to reconcile the conflicting opinions.

As Michael H. Agar explains in Speaking of Ethnography, an ethnographic study combines the perspective, methods, and socialization of the ethnographer with the experiences of the group that is being studied (Agar 1986, 18). My research project is ethnographic, in that it aims to describe a particular group through qualitative research methods, and is therefore “neither subjective nor objective” (Agar 1986, 19). Rather, it is “interpretative” (Agar 1986, 19). The result does not claim to portray a universal reality “independent of the historical or cultural context of the act of describing,” but is valid in that it is still a “function of the group [that is] studied” (Agar 1986, 19). The conclusions that I draw in this thesis take into full account the limited scope of my research and the influence that I, as the researcher, had on the results.

Chapter 4

The Narratives

Group 1:

Avra

Avra is a friend of mine from high school who currently attends the University of Pittsburgh. Avra and I went on the same Birthright trip with the trip organizer Oranim in May of 2008. She came to my house for the interview, and we began our conversation by recalling how we chose Oranim. We remembered how extensively we researched other trip providers, and how happy we were with our final choice. Imagining, for example, ourselves on the “Israel by Bike” tour provide by Israeli Adventures gave us a good laugh, given how tired we constantly were even on a more traditional trip focused on sightseeing, rather than exercise.

Avra said that she was also happy that we ultimately chose Oranim for its secular reputation; because that is the type of trip she expected and had wanted. She hoped to learn some things about her religion, but did not want anything to be “shoved in her face.” Although she had gone to Hebrew School for about ten years, and describes her father as religious, Avra does not feel that she is very “connected” to her Judaism. When she was younger and went to synagogue, she would find herself “tuning out” the service and “listening to nothing” for three hours. However, her motivation for going to Israel, aside from the free trip, was that her roots are there and also that she had always heard about the country in Hebrew school and wanted to see it for herself.

When I first asked Avra what she thought about the program and the way that it was run, we immediately began to talk about our tour guide, Uriel. Uriel had a very strong personality from the very beginning, as we both recalled. When we first got onto the bus after arriving at the airport, he began to talk about how President George W. Bush is actually very well liked in Israel, as opposed to in America. Avra described Uriel as “sexist, at times condescending, and intimidating.” Although she appreciated his extensive knowledge of Jewish history, she wishes that he was more in tune with what the group wanted to learn about, rather than what he personally wanted to discuss.

Our conversation shifted to speculation that Birthright, and Oranim in particular, places a large emphasis on marrying Jewish and raising Jewish children. Avra mentioned that “shoving 40 young Jews together” caused some romantic sparks, but she does not believe that this is the main goal of Birthright, rather just an inevitable side effect. Although she doesn’t know of any long term relationships that lasted past the trip, she does recall the director of Oranim telling our group that many weddings come out of Birthright. In fact, he offered to pay for a honeymoon in Israel for any couple that met through Oranim and sends him an invitation. Apparently, he has gotten several. For Avra, marrying Jewish has always been in the back of her mind due to her upbringing, and Birthright did not really enhance her opinion on the matter.

Upon return from Israel, Avra felt motivated to become more involved in the Jewish community because of all that she had learned about Jewish history and the importance of maintaining the traditions of her heritage. However, she soon realized that her schedule does not afford her much time to commit to Jewish life. Also, she believes that she would be more likely to go to Hillel, for example, if she knew other people who

were going to its events. While she did make many Jewish friends on her Birthright trip, they all live too far away to realistically expect that they would get together for Shabbat or other Jewish traditions. This lack of a connection to other Jewish people in her college and local community, in combination with her busy schedule, has stopped Avra from being as involved in Jewish life as she had hoped immediately upon her return from Israel. Upon reflection, Avra wishes that she had gotten more involved, especially in the Birthright-related activities that she often gets emails about.

The aspect of the trip that left the greatest impression on Avra was being surrounded by such a large group of other Jewish Americans. She says that it was a unique experience to not feel like a minority as Jewish person, and that it made her realize that there actually is a significant Jewish population in America. Also, she learned a great deal about Israeli life from the soldiers, and still occasionally keeps in contact with one of them, who she had grown close to over the course of the trip. The main difference that she noticed between American and Israeli youth is that while Americans are very career oriented upon graduation from college, most Israelis choose to travel and explore the world after serving their mandatory time in the army. She concluded that it seems, probably due to the different responsibilities of young people in each country, that Israelis are “more about exploring and finding out about themselves and the world rather than immediately making money,” which she thinks is “pretty cool.”

While she expected to have a fun experience on the trip, and she did, Avra pointed out that “all of the partying really blends together, all that stuff was just fluff.” The opportunity to see and learn about her roots in Israel and to feel like a part of a

larger, more coherent Jewish community are the more lasting impressions that she has taken away from Birthright.

Jacob

Avra got me in touch with Jacob, the manager at the restaurant and brewery where she works. Jacob has been the event manager there for the last three years. We sat down at the bar for this interview when he was available at work.

Jacob went on Birthright with the Israeli Experience program in May 2009. His father, the educational director of his synagogue, had been telling him to go on the trip for years, while his mother offered to pay him not to go. Jacob says this is because she was scared to send him to Israel, but when he turned 26 he decided he was definitely going, since it was his last chance. His motivation was the “not free, but greatly reduced” price of the trip, the fact that he had never been to Israel, and his fondness for traveling. When I asked him what he meant but “not free,” he pointed out that he had spent about \$900 of his own money on food and various souvenirs, including the five days that he spent in Israel after Birthright.

Jacob describes his involvement in the Jewish community as doing “everything up to confirmation,” but not doing anything significant throughout college or after. His previous involvement was mainly due to having a close knit group of friends who also attended synagogue and Hebrew School. Although his main expectations of the trip were to meet people and have fun, he did also expect to feel “something a bit deeper” in regards to religion, “not on the surface from what [he has] experienced reading about religion.”

Although Jacob had always acknowledged Israel's importance to worldwide democracy and freedom, he did not have a personal connection to it until seeing the country for himself. If asked where his homeland was, he would have answered "Germany, Poland, Russia, America..." but now, he also considers Israel among that list. He enjoys the idea that if he ever wants to go to his homeland, he can go to "some desert country with a beach." The Dead Sea was his favorite sight because he could relate it to his memories of Hebrew School, and had always hoped that he would get the opportunity to float in it.

Although Jacob really enjoyed many of the tourist sites in Israel, he most enthusiastically spoke about the group dynamic on his trip and his relationships with his bus companions. Originally, Jacob believed that he had signed up for a trip for people in his age group, 24-26. However, it turned out that he ended up on a regular trip where the majority of the participants were 18 and 19, and about ten were over the age of 23. Jacob says it was "cool to meet a bunch of young people that kind of looked up to [him] on the trip, because [he] was 'learned' and had a cool job." He enjoyed having a "new audience" for all of his stories and jokes, but admitted that that if he could change anything about the trip, it would be to have more people that were his age. Although he says it was "cool for a few days being the older brother," it got "annoying" after four or five days.

Jacob felt most connected to the soldiers on his trip, and even stayed at one soldier's house for a few days after Birthright. He thought that the juxtaposition of college students, who are in the middle of an "awesome" time in their life, and Israeli soldiers of the same age who are in the army rather than having "crazy freshman years"

was especially interesting. Jacob says that he could not imagine being in the situation of the soldiers, and acknowledges that he has been brought up in a country where freedom is taken for granted. Living in America, he does not feel the need to go into the army when he is 18 because he can go to college instead. However, Jacob believes that the Israeli situation was best encompassed by one soldier on his trip who said:

“If someone asked you if America is going to be there in 20 years, you would say yes, but if they ask you if Israel is going to be there in 20 years, you say ‘I hope so.’” For Jacob, this was an enlightening viewpoint of the responsibilities of young Israelis, in contrast to those of young Americans.

Jacob learned a lot about Israeli history and the conflict situation, but says that his group leaders acknowledged that they were only “scratching the surface” of a much larger, more complex picture. Jacob said that when learning about all of the issues, it was as if he would have 100 more questions for every five questions that were answered. Even after his Birthright experience, Jacob doesn’t feel informed enough to have conversations with people about the conflict. Although he is decidedly pro-Israel, he admits that he does not know everything that there is to know, and therefore does not purposely get involved in war debates.

When asked about any change in his involvement in the Jewish community, Jacob quickly answered that “the simple answer is no.” However, Jacob did attend an event in New York City sponsored by Birthright celebrating Israel’s 60th anniversary. He felt that the two hour trip was worth it to see his friends from the trip. Although he has not attended synagogue since his return from Israel, Jacob does feel more connected to his Jewish identity. This year, when his mother’s side of the family celebrated Christmas,

Jacob did not want to participate. He decided he would take a year off from “this half stuff.” However, his most poignant impression of Birthright remains the social aspect and the opportunity to share an experience with a large group of young Jewish people.

“Now that I have 46 more Jewish friends on Facebook, I can post a joke that more people will get.”

David

David went on Birthright in May of 2008 with the trip organizer Mayanot, which he chose because it is affiliated with his university. About 75% of his group attended his university, and the other 25% included his cousin who had signed up for the trip with him. David says that he was motivated by the “obvious,” a free trip to Israel, but also to learn more about his own history as a Jewish person. He expected that it would be a fun experience because he would be spending time with people his age, and also the fact that he was not 21 at the time and could legally go to bars. He also expected that the majority of the trip involve “trekking through the desert,” which did not turn out to be the case.

Another aspect of the trip that surprised David was how “warm” Israelis were. Even though his group was obviously American, people would just come up and talk to him in the street. He recalled that this was especially true in Jerusalem. However, he also remembered that the marketplaces were an exception, as they were too hectic to have a friendly atmosphere.

David pointed out that Mayanot is one of the few trip organizers that had a rabbi accompany the trip. The rabbi on his trip was Hassidic, and David said he was the “coolest” Hassidic Jew he had ever met. The rabbi made an effort to form a special relationship with each participant and was extremely gracious. One particular story that

the rabbi told the group made a significant impact on David. The story takes place at a mikvah, a traditional bathhouse with symbolic value to Judaism. A rabbi and his student are at the mikvah, but the student did not feel comfortable undressing because he had tattoos, which is not accepted in the Jewish faith. Then, an older man comes over to the student and rolls up his sleeve to reveal a holocaust number tattoo.

“And the student just started crying. And the guy is like, “we are the same.” And then he felt much more comfortable and he took off his clothes and did the same thing. That was the most like, powerful story that I remember from there. That although we may look different, you know Sephardic, Ashkenazi, dark skin, light skin. We’re all the same people. It was so powerful.” David remembered.

Another significant aspect of the trip for David was the bond that his group formed through the course of the experience. He said that the group became a community, “Mayanot 55”, as they referred to themselves. The running joke on the trip was “The Real World Israel: 55 Neurotic Jews Trekking though Israel.” David said that it was really easy to make friends on the trip, and still sees many of his bus companions on campus.

Unlike himself, many of the people on the trip were religiously observant, some even Orthodox. Before Birthright, David never attended synagogue or Hillel at his university. He did experience a connection to his Jewish identity while in Israel, but admitted that it was only temporary.

“When I was there I felt like ‘I’m a Jew in the Holy Land.’ Our rabbi was like, you know, every ten steps you take in Jerusalem is a mitzvah, and I’m like ‘wow I’m doing all the mitzvahs I need for the rest of my life’” he said.

David says that if he had gone on a winter session trip, he may have been more likely to attend services for the High Holidays with some of his friends from his group when they returned to school, but since he went in the summer, he had some time to “cool down” from the Birthright excitement. This is because he lives at home during the summer, but his Birthright friends are all at his college. By the time he returned to school, David says that his enthusiasm toward Jewish life had faded. However, he did say that he “finally understand[s] what they are fighting for.”

At an army base, David had the opportunity to talk to an Israeli soldier who had left the United States during the Vietnam War because he did not want to fight in it. Upon moving to Israel, he joined the Israeli Defense Force. David believes that this is because Vietnam was not a cause that this man believed in, whereas the plight of the Israeli people, “keeping ‘Jewish identity’ alive,” according to David, is a cause worth fighting for.

Although David’s opinion about marrying Jewish was not affected by Birthright, he does believe that encouraging young Jews to marry among themselves and raise Jewish children is at least one of the main goals of Birthright. His group seemed to agree:

“We had this one night that everyone was like, ‘So what’s the point of Birthright?’ And everyone’s like, ‘Jewish babies!’ Pretty much that is the point, bringing American Jews to Israel and then having them mingle and have them be like, ‘alright I want to move here, marry a Jewish woman or man, and continue the culture and the race.’” David explained.

One unique aspect of David's trip was that each two participants had a Shabbat lunch with a different Orthodox Jewish family. David described the different personalities of the husband and wife of the family that he talked to, and how they made him feel at home with their stories, food, and engaging conversations. He said that the wife, who was from New York, was "really gung-ho like, you have to join the army and defend the land," and the husband, who was from South America, had more of a "hands-off, pacifist approach." David said that this experience showed him that Orthodox Jews are diverse in themselves, making them not much different are not much different from himself and other people that he knows.

David learned a lot about Jewish history on the trip, as he had hoped to before going to Israel. However, while some people were writing down the "hours and hours" of history lessons that the tour guide told them about, David says that he is "not really like that." One of the stories that did stick with him, though, was the story of the Jews at Masada who commit suicide upon defeat to the Roman army. He says that stories like this made him realize "how much as a race we have had to endure, and that we are still here."

Hannah

Hannah is a junior at the University of Pennsylvania who went on Birthright the summer after her freshman year of college. We met at her house, as our families are close friends. Hannah had many thoughtful insights about both her Birthright trip and the three weeks she spent traveling in Israel by herself after the trip.

One interesting facet of Israeli culture that Hannah learned from a conversation with the guard on her trip was the way the more "secular" members of Israeli society

practice Judaism. The guard told her that he observes Shabbat, but Hannah asked him what he means by this, since she had seen him “do work” on Fridays, and noticed that he does not seem like a religious man. He told her that since he lives in the modern world, he is not going to “lock himself in a box and sit there and do nothing.” Instead, he consciously makes an effort to relax and do things that he enjoys on this day, in order to be less stressed by everyday life. Hannah believes that in the United States, Jews sometimes feel guilty for not strictly practicing Judaism with traditional principles that cannot be upheld in modern life. Even she believes that Judaism doesn’t have a concept of “sin” the same way that Christianity does, Hannah thinks that many American Jews, even secular ones, feel as though they are sinning when they do not practice Judaism strictly. However, she noticed that secular Israelis have “reconstructed their religion, or culture, in a way that suits their daily lifestyle.”

Hannah extended her stay in Israel for three weeks after Birthright. During this time she spent ten days working as a cook on a kibbutz, and then traveled to Tel Aviv-Jaffa with a couple that she had met at the kibbutz. The kibbutz often held retreats to raise money, such as the only “naked retreat” in Israel and has famous “yogis” from India come to visit. It is maintained by Israelis inspired by Indian meditation, and Hannah vividly remembers the kitchen’s iPod which played meditations and lessons spoken by a yogi in a monotone, hypnotic voice. She called the recording “creepy,” but noted that the experience opened her eyes to the secular, yet spiritual, doctrines that many Israelis live by.

The distinction between her Birthright trip and her experience after extending her trip, according to Hannah, is mainly marked by how the group dynamic affected her

experience. She said that the specific surroundings of Israel made everyone very expressive about their feelings, which was magnified by the frequent discussion sessions led by the group leaders. The fact that the group spent so much time together caused tensions among the group, and the way everyone expressed themselves made clear what each person was taking away from the experience.

“For some people it was a serious experience, for some people it was a partying experience, for some people it was a ‘how many soldiers can I do inappropriate things with’ experience...” she said.

The diversity within the group caused complex interactions which were interesting for her to be a part of, but the kibbutz was more of a “personal exploration.”

One of the factors that impacted her interactions with the rest of her group was the fact that she was one of the youngest participants on her trip. She did not think that this would be a problem, since she had always been friends with older people through her sister, who is eight years older. However, she thinks that the tension on her trip was caused by the smaller age gap of about three years between her and many of her bus companions. At the beginning of the trip, Hannah was treated like a “little freshman,” especially in situations that involved alcohol. By the end of the trip though, she felt as though she had proved herself.

Like many other Birthright trips, Hannah’s group met a Kabbalah artist in Tsfat who spoke of his religious revelation in Israel. Although she says that most of her group was mesmerized by the artist, Hannah had met many other people who lived a similar, “hippie” lifestyle through her sister, who is also an artist. Therefore, she was not shocked or impressed, like many of her group members. Instead, Hannah believes that “it was an

experience taken out of context” because understanding Kabbalah involves very in-depth knowledge of the bible, which very few, if any, of the people on her trip had. She believes that it was difficult to take anything practical away from the experience outside of a memory of a man telling about his own personal religious revelation.

“I thought how is this going to change my life anyway? It’s like any experience; I just don’t know what to do with it. How do you apply this to your real life, what am I doing to do, sit in my room and paint circles and pretend like I understand the interpretations of very complex texts?” she said.

Although Hannah did not find this part of the trip particularly useful, she did think that the reflections and “circle talks,” as she called them, were a positive aspect of the trip. She enjoyed hearing the “heartwarming and moving” experiences of others, even though there were times where she would have rather sat alone and thought about her experiences by herself. She believes that it was important for the group leaders to “force” everyone to reflect on what they had seen, because if this step had been bypassed most of the group would have just left Israel with a series of things they did, rather than thinking about what those experiences meant.

“At age 18, 19, 20 you should be forced to think about things because that’s not really a natural habit for a lot of people” she said of the value of group discussions being a mandatory part of the Birthright trip.

Hannah had always felt a special connection to Israel, but interestingly feels “like it is more special from a distance than it is there.” Although I was surprised by this statement, as it is the opposite of one of the main tenets of Birthright, Hannah does not think that this is completely counter-intuitive. She explained by describing her

connection to people of Jewish origin, whether or not they are religiously Jewish. She believes that their upbringing with Jewish values and culture can often be seen in their views on certain issues, such as family, with which she identifies. Therefore, she feels defensive of Jewish people, and specifically the Jewish state of Israel, in discussions with her peers in America. However, she began to “wobble in [her] position after visiting Israel.

“So when you are closer to the conflict, not that we were even in immediate danger by any means, but you did pass those kind of, Palestinian settlements, also I spent some time in Beer Sheva when I was going down to the south, which is a really scary place. It’s probably the scariest place I’ve been to in Israel. There’s a lot of poor people, homeless people, a lot of really desperate people. [...] So, did it make me change my view of Israel? It made it more conflictual.”

I asked Hannah if she had possibly been looking for these negative sides of Israel which are counter to the image of Israel that Birthright aims to portray to its participants. She said that it is possible that she looked for them because of the discussions she had with several of the Palestinian students that attend her university. Although she had previously mentioned her tendency to “defend Israel” in such conversations, she also carefully listened to the difficult life experiences that these students had been through.

One event that shaped Hannah’s perception of the complex situation in Israel was one of two terrorist attacks that happened while she was there. A man drove a truck into several people in the middle of a street in Tel Aviv just a few days before Hannah’s group walked that very street. She had learned that the man had illegally acquired a pass

that allowed him into that area of Tel Aviv, because he legally only possessed an identity card which allowed him into certain areas of the city.

“So that brought to my attention this card system. Which sounds kind of archaic, right? It brings to mind East/West Germany, and before that it sounds kind of like the Jewish star, it’s just kind of reminiscent of really horrible times,” she said.

Hannah’s experience in Israel made her realize that she is not in a position to draw any conclusions about right and wrong, because she is “not in the position to understand.” She believes that anyone who goes to Israel is bound to change their mind about the situation, but not toward one side or another. Instead, she personally, has become “more confused,” and more “sad for the people.”

“I don’t think it is anything for me to solve. I think it is for the people that live there and are experiencing it to deal with it” she concluded.

Group 2:

Michal

Michal is a junior at who transferred to Penn State this year from a university in New York. Although she immediately became involved in Penn State life by joining a THON committee, Michal was interested in meeting more people at her new school in her second semester. She viewed a winter Birthright trip with Hillel as the perfect opportunity to meet friends at Penn State with similar interests and a background in Jewish life. She had also known Leah, Hillel’s Director of Engagement and staffer of Hillel’s Birthright trip, from her involvement in the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization (BBYO) in high school, making this trip to Israel an obvious decision.

Apart from wanting to make new friends at Penn State, Michal had another, more personal motivation for participating in Birthright. Her father, who passed away when Michal was eight years old, had a life-long dream of going to Israel which he never had the opportunity to fulfill. On the car ride to the airport, Michal says that she was almost in tears because she was really nervous to go and did not feel ready. Her mother told Michal that if she did not want to go, she would take her ticket, expressing how badly she herself wanted to go. At that moment, Michal knew that as much as she wanted to go to Israel for herself, she was also going for her family.

The most poignant moment of Michal's Birthright trip was her experience at the Western Wall. She described the site as "amazing and breathtaking," explaining that she began to cry behind her sunglasses at the overlook point. At first she could not explain why she reacted this way, and even tried to make herself stop. When she turned around to look at her group members, she noticed that many of them were crying too. Upon further reflection, Michal says that it was the fact that there was "so much history" at the site that made it overwhelming. She thought about all of the people, including her father, who died without having the opportunity to touch the wall, making her fully appreciate this moment in her life. She also made it her "mission" to bring her mother to the Wall, knowing how much it would mean to her.

"Everyone needs to experience what this is like," Michal said passionately.

Also at the Wall, Michal remembers an incident that caused a heated debate among her group members. By the time her group had gone to Shabbat at the Wall, they had gotten very close to one another. They stood in a circle, singing songs and enjoying this emotional and pivotal moment of their trip. Their circle was quickly broken up,

however, by Kotel guards who told them that the men and women had to separate. Michal described this as “hard to handle,” and was even more bothered by the fact that the women’s side was so small and crowded, while the men’s side was large and spacious. A discussion of this issue followed the incident, revealing that some people thought that the separation was appropriate, while others, including Michal, disagreed. Although she appreciated hearing the opinions of others, Michal did not think that this discussion really changed anything, and felt as though she just wanted to “get out” of the conversation.

Like many other Birthright participants, Michal believes that the soldiers taught her a lot about the similarities and differences between American and Israeli life. While they are “just regular people, like us,” the soldiers also displayed some of the defining aspects of Israeli culture. Michal mentioned how they told her that Israelis never stand in line, and she even decided to try out the “when in Israel!” mentality by cutting the line for food at the Mega Event (an annual celebration that Birthright holds annually for its participants). Also, she had a conversation with the soldiers about arriving for things on time, in which they told her that in Israel, being ten minutes late is never really a big deal. On the contrary, Michal believes, American culture is much more fast-paced and arriving late is sometimes considered “the worst thing in the world.”

The most notable difference, however, that Michal noticed between the life of Israeli and American youth is the way observing Judaism is viewed among their peers. In Israel, it is the norm for the soldiers to “party on Friday night” and also observe Shabbat with their families, while in America, an explanation would always be needed. Since the majority of Israel’s population is Jewish, no one would ask what Shabbat is or view it as

a “really religious thing,” as they might in America. Also, she mentioned when she tried to explain to the Israelis that an American’s lifestyle can be so fast paced that they cannot rest for a day on Shabbat, they could not understand. Michal admires the fact that Shabbat is the norm in Israel, and feels that it is a shame that life in America is not the same.

On the topic of any changes she has noticed in herself upon her return, Michal discussed an incident in the news that she may not have noticed before the trip. A plane flying from New York to Kentucky was grounded in Philadelphia because a man wrapping Tefillin and praying was thought to have a bomb. Michal was astonished by this event because this man was obviously not bothering anyone and was only observing his religion. However, she does not think that she would have “cared [about] or noticed” this news before going to Israel, because this trip was the first time she had been on a plan with Orthodox Jews who may have been doing this same thing.

Michal describes herself as “pretty spiritual,” and has been involved in the Jewish community throughout her life. Her family is fairly religious, keeping kosher and attending synagogue. Michal stresses that she was not only raised on the “religious part” of Judaism, but also on the “spiritual part.” The belief in living life “morally, ethically, [and] righteously” has been passed down from her parents to her, and she considers this part of her religion a very important part of her life. Since she has always felt connected to her Jewish identity, Michal does not believe that the Birthright trip has changed anything in her attitude or behavior.

However, the trip did affect her connection to Israel, making an “expectation a reality.” Although she had always heard about Israel being her homeland, and knew that

she would feel connected to it because “so many people [there] are Jewish,” actually being in the country made this “make sense.” Michal describes her time in Israel as a series of revelations, in which her notion of Israel as her homeland was actualized. She described the country as “beautiful” and “amazing,” and takes comfort in the fact that she can “come back [there] anytime [she] wants” and that it is truly her “home.”

Rachel

Rachel is a freshman at Penn State who always had wanted to go to Israel, but waited until she was 18 so that she could go with Birthright, describing it as an “opportunity you can’t turn down.” While her parents were excited for her to go, especially for free, they were worried about the fact that she wouldn’t return home, given her vast previous interest in Israel. Before college, she considered deferring a year to live in Israel to receive college credit there, having heard from her friends how amazing the country is. Rachel’s involvement in the Jewish religion and culture is mainly self-motivated, as her family does not attend synagogue.

Her interest in Israel was also cultivated through participation in BBYO, a major pillar of which, she says, is support for Israel. There she met Israeli friends who had told her about the country, which really sparked her interest. She describes herself as having more of a fascination with Israel and Judaism than following the religion strictly, and says that she is “definitely not a source of knowledge on Judaism.” However, she is on the Hillel board and usually attends Friday night Shabbat dinners.

Having been looking forward to the trip for some time before going, it is no wonder that Rachel had very high expectations. She says that she “hyped it up” in her mind, and was sure that she would get a “feeling” in the holy land. She expected that

praying there would be very different than praying anywhere else. She also expected, mainly from hearing other accounts of Birthright, that she would make many new friends on the trip because of their “bond over Judaism and Israel.” As a freshman, this was especially exciting for Rachel going into her second semester at school.

While some of these expectations were met, Rachel admits that she had so many that it would have been impossible for the trip to turn out exactly as she had pictured. For her, the “land and history” did not disappoint. She describes looking out into the landscape of the Old City in awe, and getting that “feeling” which she had expected. However, the trip organizer left something to be desired. She ended up with Israel Experts because she is involved in Hillel, and that is the organizer that they chose. She believes, though, that she would have had a more satisfying experience with a trip that was more religious. According to Rachel, the people on this trip were more comfortable with an “Israel experience” than a “Jewish experience,” which made the trip secular.

One example she describes is the group’s first Shabbat, her first Shabbat in Israel, which she was extremely excited for. However, she could tell that the rest of the group was not as eager to have a traditional service as she was. In fact, Rachel says that they did not even have a service in the way that she envisioned. As the candles were being lit, she made a joke that the candles should have been lit an hour ago, and that technically they were breaking Shabbat at that moment. While she recognizes that this was the experience that the majority of her trip wanted, and stressed that she was thankful to have even gotten that experience, Rachel wishes that there was more religion in her trip. She believes that, personally, she would have had a more fulfilling experience with a different, more religious, trip organizer.

Rachel's favorite part of the trip was the 24-hours in which she stayed in the Bedouin tents for the night, woke up at 4:30 in the morning to take a bus to Masada, and then climbed Masada in time to see the sunrise. After that, the group went to an oasis and then to the Dead Sea. This was also the same day that the soldiers had been added to the trip, which added a new, exciting dimension to the group. Rachel joked that they were all "very attractive in uniform." During this time, her favorite single moment was at the Bedouin tents, when she and a few friends took a walk further away from the tents into the pitch dark, and laid down to look at the stars. As she lay on the ground of the Negev desert, she felt as though she was in a "planetarium," and described the sky as looking "huge and infinite."

"Mental picture taken" Rachel said of this moment.

Another memorable, but perhaps more negative, experience for Rachel was her attempt to barter on Ben Yehuda Street. On her last night, she realized that she needed to buy a mezuzah for herself. When she picked one out, the seller told her a price that she realized sounded expensive, but was distracted by the exchange rate and his enthusiasm over how she will definitely not find a better price than the one he is offering. He even offered to throw in some other souvenir, and before she knew it, he was swiping her credit card and she was signing a receipt that said "NO RETURNS!"

"Um, did I just buy a \$150 mezuzah?" Rachel thought to herself as she walked away from the stand. This is where she realized she is a "terrible barterer."

When discussing the group dynamic, Rachel said that it was definitely "cliquey," but that this was to be expected because there were 40 people on the trip, and that everyone could not become best friends. However, everyone was nice to each other and got along

for the most part. At times, though, she did feel out of place being one of only three freshmen, and the only one from Penn State. She admits being teased at the bar, but not letting this ruin her excitement of ordering a legal drink. Many people, according to Rachel, treated the trip as a “vacation,” taking on an “anything goes” attitude. This involved “hooking up” and other behavior generally associated with college students.

The soldiers, Rachel believes, added a necessary element to the group dynamic and helped to “shake things up.” Since everyone was interested in meeting the Israelis, their presence helped to break up some of the “cliquiness” that had developed. They also helped Rachel and the others to understand Israeli culture better, and allowed them to relate to Israelis on a more personal level. While at first the fact that they were in the army seemed astonishing to her, when a few of them told her that they are in intelligence and “just sit behind a desk” she instantly realized that many of them are not much different from herself and her peers.

For Rachel, the discussions that the group had were helpful in organizing her thoughts and memories, which was often difficult due to the compact and rapid nature of the trip. The last discussion, where everyone reflected on their favorite parts of the trip, was an especially “nice summarizer.” One discussion that had a particular impact on Rachel was with the soldiers about how they viewed their Judaism. The trip leader had asked the Israelis whether they consider themselves Israeli or Jewish first, and most immediately responded “Israeli.” A few were unsure, but no one answered “Jewish.” Although they do live in a Jewish state, Rachel was surprised by how secular many of the Israelis were. She mentioned how they even admitted to “taking advantage” of the fact

that they are surrounded by other Jews in their country, in contrast to American Jews who are the minority.

The trip has strengthened Rachel's already apparent connection to Israel, because now she "can talk about it." While before it was distant place in her mind, she now has a point of reference in discussions about where she wants to visit again and what she wants to discover more about. She has also developed a more nuanced understanding of the conflict situation, citing her conversation with Israeli Arabs as one valuable source of knowledge on the trip. She admits that before the trip she was "naïve" toward the complexity of the situation, and did not understand why it could not be resolved peacefully. However, the trip has helped her to understand the situation better and how complicated it really is.

For Rachel, 10 days of Israel was not enough. She believes that this is the point of Birthright, however: to establish a desire to go back to Israel. She hopes to return, this time to experience the country in a more spiritual and religious way. She mentioned that she would like to go with a program, rather than by herself, because she would not feel comfortable traveling there alone. She has considered a summer abroad, but discussed the difficulty of finding a program conducive with her major (Marketing) since most of the Israel abroad programs have to do with fields like archaeology. As Rachel, and her family, expected, Birthright was only a temporary fix for her thirst for immersion in Judaism and Israeli culture.

Noah

Noah and I met at the HUB, where he told me he is a senior and plans to go to medical school next year. Throughout our interview, he made it clear that he had little to

no previous affiliation with Jewish life before Birthright, and while that still remains to be the case, he has taken away other valuable memories and impressions from his trip to Israel.

When asked about his motivations for going on the trip, Noah said that it was a “why not kind of thing.” He viewed it as a “free vacation,” and said that he would probably not have such an opportunity later in life. He said that he had no specific expectations for the trip, rather than having a “blast” and getting a better picture of the “massiveness of the world.” He admitted that along the way, the trip gained more meaning to him than he thought it would initially. However, he stressed that he only found meaning in cultural and historical aspects of Israel, such as the cemeteries and Independence Hall, rather than religious sites such as synagogues.

Noah described himself as the “least Jewish person you’ll ever meet” when I asked him about his involvement in the Jewish community before Birthright. He said that during Birthright, he had done more Jewish things in ten days than he had in the last ten years of his life. Besides for on this trip, he can barely think of any other time that he even thinks about the fact that he is Jewish, other than when his grandmother tells him that she wants him to marry another Jew. Upon return, he has not increased his involvement in the Jewish community, other going to events where he can see his new friends from the trip.

“I am planning to go to this Hillel Shabbat dinner on Friday, but not because I want to do Jewish things but because I want to see them [friends from trip] and get free food” Noah said.

He also stressed that the bond he formed with his trip companions was not due to the fact that they were all Jewish, but rather because they became close through their shared experiences in Israel.

One memorable aspect of the Birthright experience for Noah was the chance to spend time with Israeli soldiers. Noah was roommates with a soldier for one part of the trip, from whom he learned a great deal about Israeli culture. He said that at first their conversations revolved around what Israel was like, but then, as they got to know each other, started to ask more questions about each other's personal lives. For example, he began with questions such as "why is gasoline so expensive?" and later moved to topics such as keeping kosher and marrying Jewish. Noah said that he noticed that Israelis have a great sense of pride for their country, and are "very close to the land." He also said that they are "not as materialistic" as Americans.

Before coming to Israel, Noah says that he did not know much about the conflict situation in the Middle East. He "basically knew that there was a conflict between Israel and Palestine, more or less because they both wanted the land" and not much else. However, through the trip discussions and lectures he learned a lot of different aspects of the conflict, getting a better picture of "who is where, why they want that, why they don't like you, what they are after, [and] ultimately what may happen." Although he has not actively sought out more information about Israel upon return, he is able to contextualize news that he hears into the places he has been and the information that he has learned on his Birthright trip.

Overall Noah says that he "didn't have any complaints," and that the trip was the best he has ever had, but he did offer one criticism of the program. He says that the trip

was too compact, and that everyone was too sleep-deprived to really appreciate many aspects of the trip. He would have liked to have more time to “have fun” with the people he had met on the trip, and even though his group often made time, it was at the expense of less sleep and “feeling the effects” the next morning. In particular, he says that the Holocaust museum was especially difficult to give the appreciation it deserved because of having to stand for three or four hours in a crowded area, after having spent the last 48 hours in equally crowded areas.

The effect of Birthright on Noah had little to do with Judaism, but rather he was more shaped by the opportunity to see a different culture and the way that they live. This unique experience changed his perspective on how he wants to live his own life, noticing the way that others live. He says that upon return, he has tried to “appreciate more simple things, being nicer to people, that kind of thing.” This attitude was also propelled by the being in a group with 39 complete strangers for a ten day, unique experience.

“I met them being able to project myself as I wanted to be seen, but without any prior biases, and things like that. I could go in and make friends and they didn’t know my history, a clean slate kind of thing. And yea, some of that carried back into here.”

Adina

Adina and I met at Starbucks about two weeks after she had returned from her Birthright trip over winter break. Adina is a junior who transferred to the main campus of Penn State from a branch campus this year and was excited to make new friends at her new school and become involved in the Jewish community.

She says that she can't pinpoint a time that she "heard" about Birthright, but rather had always known about it through her involvement at her temple. Adina enthusiastically recounted starting Hebrew School in third grade, joining the temple choir in 5th grade, having her Bat Mitzvah, being a teacher's assistant for Hebrew School throughout high school, and helping kids with special needs learn Hebrew her senior year as very important parts of her life. Unfortunately though, there were not many opportunities to be involved in a Jewish community at the branch campus. Although she tried to get involved in the Jewish Club, there were not enough members for it to be a meaningful experience. Also, the temple was too far to get to without a car. However, now that she is at the University Park campus, Adina is actively involved in Hillel.

Despite some apprehensions expressed by her father about her safety in Israel, Adina had no hesitations about taking the trip. She says that she had no expectations of what the trip would be like, other than that she had hoped that the hotels would be nicer. With a smile, she said that it was "a little deceiving" that the accommodations looked a lot nicer on the Birthright website than they actually were. Adina was already very familiar with Israeli culture from her Israeli friends and had heard from past Birthright participants that they loved Israel, so Adina was ready to experience it for herself with an open mind.

In Israel, Adina noticed that some aspects of the culture were exactly as she had expected and others were surprising. For example, the food in Israel was very similar to the food that her Israeli friends make, including falafel and the use of tomato, cucumber, and hummus in most meals. However, she was surprised by the varying extremes of Jewish religion in Israel. She was simultaneously surprised by the secularism of the

majority of the country, and the Orthodox Jews that she saw at the Wall. She pointed out that in America, Jews define themselves as “Jewish,” but in Israel almost everyone is Jewish, so there are more variations. She was not prepared for the diversity of Jewish people in Israel and found it very surprising.

For Adina, the most memorable parts of her Birthright experience were the times that she could connect her previous memories of Jewish and Israeli culture with her experiences in Israel. For example, at the Mega Event, Adina remembers knowing all of the lyrics to one particular Israel song which she had known she was about 14. Her whole group was singing and dancing together, but they were surprised that Adina knew all of the words. She considered it an especially memorable moment because she was able to connect what she had already known to present day Israel, which strengthened her connection to the country.

For Adina, there were many of these moments because she had felt a connection to Israel from a very early age. She had always been told that Israel is her home, and that it is her “birthright” to someday visit it. When her plane landed in Israel, she did not feel like she was half way around the world, despite the fact that she had never previously left America. This feeling stems from her life-long commitment to Jewish life, and family members who encouraged her Jewish identity and commitment to Israel. She told me about her grandmother, who she affectionately described as “Super Jew” who had visited Israel several times and encouraged Adina’s connection to Israel and Judaism.

Adina believes in the Jewish state and Israel’s right to an army and protection of its borders because of the history of persecution suffered by the Jewish people, especially the Holocaust. As one of her Israeli friends says, “isn’t it funny that half of our holidays

are celebrated because someone didn't kill us or somebody was going to kill us?"

However, she acknowledges the complexity of the situation in Israel regarding non-Jewish people living in and outside of Israel, and for this reason tries to stay out of debates about Middle Eastern conflict. She does believe that Birthright gave a neutral overview of the situation, especially citing the "coexist" seminar that her trip was involved in. She recalls visiting an Arab at his house "outside of Israel's borders," and how the man said that he considered himself Israeli first, and Arab second. However, since he isn't Jewish, he does not have proper representation in government. Adina recognizes the complexity of the situation and the conflicts in her own beliefs, because while she believes in the Jewish state, she "feel[s] bad for him" that he does not have the same rights as a Jewish person despite having family that has lived in this location for a long time.

Although Adina's Birthright experience was mostly positive, she believes that she would have been better suited to a more religious trip. She was surprised that most of the people on her trip were not at all religiously observant, and almost felt as though they "cheated" the experience by not knowing even basic prayers before coming. She quickly said that she does not want to judge anyone, but thinks it would have been a nicer experience if she had people on the trip who "shared the same cultural identification and Jewish religion" as herself.

Upon return from Israel, Adina does not think that much has changed in terms of her involvement in Hillel and Jewish life.

"I was involved, and now I am involved again," she says. She would still go to Hillel even if she had not gone on Birthright, but she is happy that she went on Birthright

with Hillel because she now knows more people at Penn State. It is nice for her to see people she knows at Hillel, especially the few from her Birthright trip who participate, but says that not having friends at Hillel would not keep her from going.

“Having friends makes you want to go, but it shouldn’t be the reason” she said of temple and Hillel, and perhaps of involvement in the Jewish community more generally. Even at times in her life when none of her friends continued involvement in Jewish life, such as her senior year of high school, Adina continued to observe Judaism because she feels that it is an important and irreplaceable part of her life.

Although she had always felt a connection to Israel, perhaps the most lasting effect that Birthright had on Adina was instilling a desire to go back again. She kept 150 shekels after her trip which she did not convert to dollars as an incentive to go back. Although she acknowledges how difficult it is to go back, due mostly to financial reasons, she mentioned that she is considering doing a civilian service in Israel as her way of contributing in a few years.

“Even though I don’t have citizenship, it is my country, too,” she says.

Judith and Sarah

My interview with Judith and Sarah was slightly different from the others, as I met both of them together at Irving’s. They are sophomores at Penn State and had gone on Birthright over their winter break with Hillel. Both Judith and Sarah consider themselves to be fairly involved in the Jewish community, as their mother is going to be the president of their temple next year. Sarah had a close connection to Hillel through her Peer Network Engagement Internship, making this particular Birthright trip an obvious choice. Their older sister was also on their trip.

Judith was motivated to go on Birthright because she described it as a “once in a lifetime experience,” both because it is free and because it is during the most convenient time in her life to take 10 days off, as this may not be a possibility after college when she enters the “real world.” In addition, she hoped to have a spiritual experience that would bring her closer to her Judaism, similar to one that Sarah had this past summer. Sarah did a workshop in Georgia, which she described as a “Jew Camp,” with about 500 other Hillel Interns. She says that the experience made her religion and spirituality more personal, and that it helped her through some of the things she was dealing with in her life at that point. She felt that going to Israel would reaffirm the connection that she already had and would help to “keep [her] going through the semester.” Sarah mentioned that Judith is trying to find her place in Judaism at Penn State, and while Hillel had already been that connection for Sarah, they hoped that Birthright would be Judith’s connection.

When she landed in Israel, Judith had a “warm feeling in her body” and thought to herself, “alright, this is where I am supposed to be.” Her connection to the county was solidified during her favorite part of the trip, in the city of Tsfat. There, they met an artist from Denver, Colorado who had moved to Israel permanently after spending five weeks there and finding, for the first time, her connection to Judaism. When hearing her story, Judith began to cry because she could see her own experience in the artist’s. Like Judith, the artist did not have a serious connection to Judaism before coming to Israel, but after learning about it, she realized that Israel is where she belongs. For Judith, this was the “first time that [she] felt like this is a possibility for [her] life,” too. She went on to tell

me some of her options, such as joining the Israeli Defense Force, upon graduation from college.

Sarah's most memorable experience came at the Wall, where she could not stop crying while thinking about the centuries of Jewish persecution, and especially her family in the Holocaust. For Sarah, the connection to Israel and Judaism was already there, as was a desire to eventually live there and "be a good member of Israeli society." She has picked up a Hebrew minor at Penn State, and looks forward to living in Israel, possibly with her sister for at least a few years. She joked that their mother has said that she does not want them moving further than Mississippi, but if it is to Israel, it is ok.

Both Judith and Sarah thoroughly enjoyed having the soldiers with them on the trip and learning about Israeli culture through them. Sarah said that she sees the value of the draft system in Israel, because it "adds a certain amount of responsibility and honor to the country." She also thinks that the mandatory duty gives Israeli youth "time to grow and figure out what they want to do with their lives." She also said that meeting the soldiers gave her more insight into their way of life, such as the danger they live with on a daily basis and their "cynical" attitudes, which gave her more pride and a personal connection to the country. Judith added that she wishes the soldiers had spent more time with them, rather than only four days, and that the short time made it harder to connect to them. However, she loved the Israeli nature that they personified: "like a cactus, prickly on the outside and warm on the inside."

One aspect of Israeli culture that particularly stuck out to Sarah was the emphasis on investment in future generations. Sarah discussed a particular conversation she had with a man at the vineyard that they visited, who told her about his father's dream to

create this vineyard so that it would be there for his children, grandchildren, and so on. Sarah contrasted this to an American mindset, in which people also work hard for their children to have a better life, but in a less direct way.

“It is more like, I am going to have a job, [so that] they are going to have a job” she said of the American mindset. But for Israelis, “it is more about having a job and starting a foundation and having your children grow with it and have the things that you made more prosperous. [...] It’s a very Israeli, Zionist way.”

Another important aspect of Birthright for both sisters was the discussions and reflections that their group had, which Sarah said “brought back the idea of why people are there and why people invest in us and the program.” She said it helped her sort out her own feelings regarding Israel and Judaism. Judith enjoyed hearing the diverse perspective of the other members of her group. She remembered the discussion that they had at the Wall about the separated sides for men and women. While she was “hysterical, in total awe” the first time at the site, the group’s second trip to the Wall during Shabbat was a bit more hectic and crowded, especially on the women’s side. Although Judith has her own perspectives, she enjoyed hearing the opinions and perspectives of others on this, and other issues.

When asked about their connection to Israel prior to their trip, both Judith and Sarah that they had some connection to the country, but that the trip made it much more personal. Judith said that she had always felt defensive of Israel, especially when she would see the Palestinian flags on the HUB lawn to commemorate Palestinians who had died in various wars. However, after Birthright, her connection to Israel was strengthened because when she came home, she felt like she wasn’t “home,” but rather

belonged in Israel. Sarah also said that meeting the soldiers and other Israelis gave her a more personal connection to the country.

As they had previously mentioned, Judith and Sarah were raised in an observantly Jewish family, which has possibly contributed to their desires to marry Jewish. Judith told me about family members on her father's side who had been killed in the holocaust, and her grandmother who survived Auschwitz. Although she says that her family does not force the notion of marrying Jewish on her, she feels that it is important because the "whole culture is dwindling." In addition, she feels more of a connection to a person when she finds out that they are Jewish, and is instantly more attracted to them. Sarah added that their older sister is dating a Muslim, and her parents do not mind. Sarah, like Judith, also hopes to marry Jewish and raise her children Jewish, and believes that the trip may have slightly added to this notion that she already had.

"Going there it was like, oh great, there are so many Jewish Israelis here!" Judith joked about how her prospects for marrying Jewish could increase if she moved to Israel.

As a final thought, Sarah wanted to add that anyone who has the opportunity to go to Israel should go. She said that even if you don't like it, it is only 10 days, but she is more than positive that everyone will enjoy their time there. It is hard to describe everything about the trip to people who have not been, she says, but the opportunity to share the experience with a group of other Jewish people was the most poignant part of the trip for her. She said that there was an automatic connection with the whole group, all being Jewish and seeing the holy sites in the Jewish state. Judith added that it does not matter if you are barely religious or completely Orthodox, the bond between Birthright participants is the same.

“It’s just very overwhelming, it’s powerful, it’s very hard to explain. You laugh about a bunch of stuff and no one else gets the jokes. It’s just great” Sarah said.

Leah

I got in contact with Leah, the Engagement Director at Hillel, through email to ask her for names of Birthright participants that I could interview. Although she told me that she could not give me names without their permission, she sent out an email to the group on the trip she had staffed over winter break asking if any of them would like to participate in my study. The previous five narratives are from the students whom she staffed and were interested in participating. Leah also offered to be interviewed, so I met her at Webster’s Bookstore to hear her unique perspective on Birthright.

Leah’s trip to Israel as a Birthright participant was in December of 2005, and since then she has staffed three trips as a Hillel professional. She was the group leader of the previous five participants. After her first trip to Israel as a Birthright participant, Leah says that she had wanted to get more involved in the Jewish community, but was displeased with the state of Hillel at the time that she was a student. Instead, she fed her curiosity and interest in Judaism and Israel by researching Jewish history on her own. Her current involvement in the Jewish community came as an accidental career opportunity, as she is currently the Engagement Director at Hillel. Her favorite part of her job is staffing Birthright trips. She says that the main difference between being a participant and a staffer is that as a staffer, her experience is entirely centered around the needs of the participants, while participants are mainly focused on their own personal experience.

According to Leah, one challenging aspect of the trip is accommodating all of the different types of participants. Religious background is usually one of the clearest dividing factors, and it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the different levels of religious observance among participants. Leah says that she usually stays on the less conservative side, which unfortunately leaves out some of the more conservative people. Also, some participants have grown up their whole lives expecting to some day visit Israel, while for others the idea was completely novel. Leah says that, as a staffer, she attempts to reconcile these different viewpoints during orientation and reflective discussions on the trip. Overall, she says that varying viewpoints and opinions lead to a positive, diverse experience.

Leah believes that while various parts of the trip resonate with everyone differently, the Western Wall seems to be one of the sites that has the most impact on most people's Birthright experience. She pointed out that this is "for better or for worse," as some people are upset by how small the women's side is compared to the men's side. Also, while some people feel very emotional and connected to their Jewish identity at the Wall, others feel guilty for not having the same powerful experience. This guilt is often alleviated by reflective discussions after the trip, in which participants learn that they are not the only ones to feel a certain way at any given time. Apart from the historic sites, Leah believes the aspect of Birthright that is most memorable for many people is being surrounded by 39 other Jews on the trip. This is especially powerful during the Mega Event, an annual Birthright celebration that some trips take part in, when all of the Birthright groups in Israel at the time gather together for a large concert.

Another aspect of the trip that has a “huge impact” on the participants is the time spent with the soldiers. Leah does an activity where participants draw pictures of what they believe soldiers will look like before they meet them. While the pictures are usually meant to be comically stereotypical, participants are often genuinely surprised by what the soldiers are like in actuality. For example, many do not know that women could be soldiers, or that the draft was mandatory in Israel. Leah also pointed out that the experience is not only beneficial to the Birthright participants, but also to the soldiers. She cited a study that found Israeli soldiers to be more committed to their duties as soldiers after participating in Birthright, “because they understand the American connection, and understand more what they are fighting for, because you know, they now have American friends,” she said.

On the emphasis on marrying Jewish that is often attributed to Birthright, Leah believes that it simultaneously goes against and is compatible with what she believes are Birthright’s ideals. On one hand, Birthright encourages plurality, so it would seem that an emphasis on marrying Jewish would be counterintuitive, but on the other hand Birthright emphatically encourages commitment to Jewish life, and having a Jewish family may be one way to ensure this. In either case, Leah has noticed that someone, whether a speaker or soldier, usually makes some comment about the issue, which sets off a wave of discussion, and often anger.

One notable example occurred on the most recent trip that she staffed, where a woman showed the group a video she had produced about an Israeli soldier who was killed in battle, who was originally from Philadelphia. Everyone had enjoyed the video, but during her talk afterward, the woman stated that intermarriage was the “silent

holocaust.” Leah said that, “understandably so,” many people were very upset at this comment. However, she said that “some great conversations” followed, where some people said that they partially agree, while others said, “no, that’s terrible.” Although, Leah doesn’t believe that encouraging participants to marry Jewish is a fundamental goal of Birthright, her experience has shown that the topic often gets brought up and participants are forced to think about the issue after the trip more than they had previously.

Leah thought that one of the most unique and beneficial parts about the last trip she staffed was the “coexist” program, where the participants met and spoke to an Israeli Arab at his home. She said that the experience “really opened some people’s eyes” and motivated them to learn more about the conflict on their own after the trip. I mentioned to her that a couple of the participants from her trip that I had already interviewed also told me about this experience, but that they seemed confused about whether or not his home was inside Israel, and if he was actually Palestinian. Leah confirmed that they never left Israel’s borders, and that the man was an Arab Israeli citizen. Leah said that this point is “one of the challenges with doing something like that,” since participants “don’t have the basic knowledge to contextualize” each experience. She believes that an orientation on these issues may be beneficial to solve the confusion.

After Birthright, Leah notices some participants’ increased involvement in Hillel, especially at Shabbat dinners. She believes that this is mostly because they want to see each other, but also occasionally to “hold on to what they experienced in Israel.” However, she says that involvement in Hillel is not the goal of Hillel sponsored Birthright trips. Instead, she hopes that people come back from Israel interested in

Jewish life, and act on that interest in their own way, not necessarily with Hillel. Due to the fast paced and compact nature of the trip, there is a large emphasis in Hillel, though, on “Birthright follow-through.” This is because they have noticed that people often process much of what they have seen once they return, and have questions after. She occasionally has coffee with past group members to follow-up with them. Although she says that Hillel does not have any sort of measure of the impression that Birthright left them with, she believes that, “overwhelmingly, people have an amazing trip.”

Ultimately, Leah believes that the goal of Birthright is to revitalize Jewish life by “making people feel part of a community, a larger community they did not know of.” She believes that the program has been successful thus far, because it has revitalized the Jewish community by “mak[ing] people aware of what is important to them in Jewish way” and “giving people ownership back of being Jewish.” Although the excitement of the trip may fade after a few weeks, and not everyone commits to attending synagogue or learning Hebrew upon return to their normal lives, she believes that each individual takes away from the trip what is meaningful to them. Some may decide to raise their kids Jewish, others have a desire to return to Israel some day, while others just seek out some sort of Jewish community upon moving to a new city. In any case, she doesn’t think that the effects of Birthright ever fade, and ultimately, it “is what will revitalize the Jewish community.”

Recently, Leah saw an article that said that Birthright has made being Jewish “cool,” and upon reflection, she agrees. Although she isn’t sure how Judaism was described 15 years ago, she does not think that it would have been described as “cool.” Birthright has become a rite of passage for many young Jewish adults, and has

contributed to the sense of pride that many young people feel for their Judaism.

However, Leah wished to emphasize how great of a gift Birthright is to each participant, and should not be taken for granted. Even in this economy where there are a shortage of Birthright seats, hundreds of young people still get this amazing opportunity. She thinks that this is attributable to the unique values of the Jewish community: the “emphasis on the next generation and perpetuating the community.” Also, the emphasis on philanthropy is prominent in Jewish culture.

“So, Birthright isn’t going away,” she said. “It may have lessened its seats for now, but it isn’t going away.”

According to Leah, this is not only due to the values of Jewish culture, but also because of the effectiveness of the program in revitalizing the Jewish community in the long term.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The idea of Birthright is both simple and intuitive: send as many Diaspora Jews to Israel as possible, by means of a free trip, in order to instill pride in the participants' Jewish identity in hopes of perpetuating Jewish culture in future generations. Through the analysis of surveys and focus groups conducted by researchers at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, it seems as though the program has, at least for the most part, been extremely successful in accomplishing most of its objectives. My research, which obtained in-depth narratives of 11 Birthright participants, has also painted a largely positive picture of Birthright and has shown that the impressions that the participants were left with reflected many of the themes that the Birthright creators had hoped for. Although specific criteria, such as amount of involvement in the Jewish community, importance of marrying Jewish, and connection to Israel, varies, I have seen overwhelming evidence that participants become more thoughtful and appreciative toward their Jewish identity upon return from Israel. However, it is also important to note the experiences and reflections that participants spoke of that are outside of Birthright's objectives in order to improve the program and ensure its success in the future.

Motivations and Expectations

The initial criticisms of the Birthright program, that the \$2,300 per participant would be wasted on nothing more than "a good time at somebody else's expense" is

interestingly best echoed in many participants' initial expectations and motivations for going on the trip. Many cited a "free 10-day vacation" as their sole motivation, and expected to meet a new group of friends on the trip. Several participants even cited the drinking age, which is 18 as opposed to 21 in America, as a motivating factor. However, this motivation was expected by the founders, and even desired. The idea behind the free trip is that those not previously involved in Jewish life may still participate, rather than the already involved group that was going on the Israel Experience tours.

However, many given reasons for participating also reflected deeper motivations for participating in the trip. Some mentioned that they wanted to "see Israel for themselves" after having heard about it on the news, from friends, or in Hebrew school. Another expectation shared by some participants was a feeling of "something deeper," religious or spiritual, which they believed was unique to the state of Israel. For example, Rachel had hoped that praying in Israel would be more special than praying anywhere else, and that she would get a special "feeling" in the country. Also, Judith had hoped to instill the personal connection to Judaism in Israel that she felt she lacked. Many respondents said that they had believed they would come out of the experience with these "deeper feelings" because of what they had heard about Birthright from former participants.

Even out of the participants who admitted that they initially were motivated to go to Israel to have "fun," none of them mentioned the beach or the bars as their favorite part of the trip. Everyone seemed to have taken away a deeper, more personal connection to some aspect of the trip that was outside of their initial expectations of a ten day, fun vacation.

“All the partying really blend together, all that stuff was just fluff” Avra said, after sharing that hearing about a pivotal moment in Jewish history atop Masada had the most lasting impact on her.

“Not a Minority”

One core goal of Birthright, to “strengthen the sense of solidarity among world Jewry”, shows evidence of success through many of the responses of those I interviewed. It seemed that one of the strongest impressions that Birthright left participants with was the novel experience of being completely surrounded by other Jews. When describing their bus companions, many participants commented on the how it felt to not be a “minority” as a Jewish person, but rather as part of a larger, coherent community, as Avra said. For David, the opportunity to have 46 new Jewish friends who “get it,” namely his Jewish humor, was an especially poignant aspect of his experience.

As a staffer, Leah also noticed that the bonding that occurs on Birthright among the group of young Jewish people is a novel experience for most of the participants, and often times the part of the experience that remains most notable. After Birthright, participants become aware of a “larger community that they did not know of,” that some choose to seek out in their future endeavors. The truly unique experience of a trip to Israel, made even more special by the companionship with other Jews experienced by each group, is one that several participants described as an “unexplainable” bond.

On a similar note, several participants reflected on how it felt to be surrounded by other Jews in the Jewish state, echoing Birthright’s goal to “diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world” (“About Us”).

Michal was most moved by the fact that the soldiers were able to observe Shabbat every

Friday evening with their families, while still maintaining ordinary social lives. Michal noted that while her friends would assume that she was “really religious” if she told them she could not meet up with them because she was observing Shabbat, this type of behavior is seen as the norm in Israel, a notion she found appealing. Judith and Sarah also commented on the personality of many Israelis, which they described as “cactus-like,” to be extremely endearing, and made them feel at home. They also jokingly talked about the prospect of moving to Israel because of how easy it would be to find a Jew to marry in a country full of Jews.

Connection to Israel

The unique nature of Israel itself, with its rich culture and Jewish tradition, makes it a perfect place to teach young people about Jewish history and immerse them in the culture. When asked about their favorite part of the trip, most participants responded with a specific site that the group was taken to, validating the intuition that seeing Israel itself would leave participants with the most poignant, lasting impressions. Two of the most popular answers were the Dead Sea and Masada, and many mentioned that they were excited to see these sights because of having heard of them prior to the trip. For many, their most memorable 24-hours of Birthright actually involved both of these sights, as they spent the night at in Bedouin tents, climbed Masada before sunrise, and traveled to the Dead Sea immediately after. Several other participants mentioned the Western Wall as their favorite sight, reflecting on the sentimental value and the immense amount of history represented in the Wall.

Apart from sightseeing, many participants cited their friendships with the soldiers as a connection to Israel that is on a deeply personal level. These are young people who

are “just like [us],” except that they happen to live in Israel, mentioned Rachel and Noah. Jacob formed a close bond with one particular soldier who he ended up staying with for a few days after Birthright, who opened his eyes to the duties and responsibilities of Israeli youth, and how they differ from Americans’. Apart from learning about Israeli culture from the soldiers, it is clear that the connections formed with them have a lasting impact on how participants view their connection to Israel.

From those that I have spoken to, it seems that Israel is still very relevant to their personal Jewish identity, contrary to Aviv and Shneer’s belief that the focus is shifting toward other places on the “Jewish map,” such as Eastern Europe (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 71). It seems that participants are able to connect the landmarks of Israel to their experiences from Hebrew School or from speaking with family members, which gives them a personal connection to the sights that they visit in Israel. Also, while Aviv and Shneer are correct to point out that Jewish culture can be found all over the world, the fact that Israel is a “Jewish state,” with the majority of the population being Jewish, seems to really create a lasting impression for participants.

Group Reflections

Another prominent aspect of Birthright is the group discussions and reflections. In order to ensure that participants are getting the most intellectual value out of their trip, group leaders often facilitate discussions about Jewish identity, culture, and the history of the various sites in Israel. Those who I spoke with believed that hearing the opinions of others enhanced their experience and helped them to synthesize their numerous experiences. Many believed that the reflections balanced out the fast paced and overwhelming nature of the trip. Rachel said that she often could not remember all of her

different experiences, but hearing everyone pick out their favorite part of the trip on the last day was a “nice summarizer” that helped her to organize her memories. Hannah believes that people of Birthright age are not able to “interpret what they saw immediately and externalize it to everyone immediately,” so without being “forced” into reflection, the whole experience might be reduced to just a series of events.

Another benefit of the discussions, as explained by Leah, is that they allow everyone to hear each other’s opinions, which may validate their own or open them up to a new point of view. An interesting example that she gave was how some people feel guilty at the Wall for not having deep emotional experiences like others, such as crying. However, hearing the opinions of other people often made them feel more comfortable with their own viewpoint. While she recognizes that, at the time, discussions may seem less appealing than other options (free time, more sightseeing), she believes that in the end most participants appreciate the opportunity to express their feelings and hear the opinions of others. Those who I talked with echoed this sentiment. This was contrary to the quoted participant in Aviv and Shneer’s book, who did not appreciate the discussions because she “just wanted to have a vacation” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 59). From the narratives I gathered, it seemed as though the reflections are an effective way to counteract the rapid nature of the trip and allow participants to analyze and make sense of their experiences.

Lack of Preparation

Although many of the responses were in line with the objectives of Birthright, there were several points that should be taken into consideration for possible improvements to the Birthright program. One area that several participants brought up

was the disconnect between their expectations and the agenda of the trip providers. For example, Rachel and Adina both said that a more religiously focused trip would have made their Birthright experience more fulfilling. They said that they expected more traditional Shabbat services and a greater attention to the spiritual and religious sites in Israel. Also, they expected their bus companions to be more knowledgeable about the Jewish religion and willing to participate in religious services. Although they both chose this trip provider because it was affiliated with Hillel, perhaps they would have chosen a different trip if they had known about the secular nature of the trip.

Other participants also had concerns that could have been alleviated with more information before the trip. Michal was extremely worried before boarding the plane, and was even driven to tears. Several people from the Hillel group were taken aback by the division of men and women at the Wall enough to have it negatively affect their experience. Adina believed that the hotels looked much nicer on the Birthright website, and was surprised to experience their true quality. Many Birthright participants are unfamiliar with the details of the conflict situation and the current state of Israel's borders, leading to some confusion about where they had met the Arab man on their trip. Also, some are unable to recall the overwhelming amount of information presented to them in the short time period of the trip. Although the impact of being "surprised" by certain aspects of the trip may not have drastically worsened the overall Birthright experience for most participants, it is clear that some points need to be addressed before participants embark on their journey to Israel.

Lack of Behavioral Changes

One of the most pressing puzzles of Birthright is the lack of noticeable change in participants' involvement in the Jewish community and commitment to religious observance. While the changes in attitude toward a greater appreciation of Jewish identity and history and for the significance of the state of Israel seem apparent, Birthright program has more trouble achieving behavioral changes. The responses I gathered in interviews seemed to cohere to the pattern that the Cohen Center noted in its findings: Birthright participants who were involved in cultural and religious Jewish life before Birthright continued to be, and those who were not did not start after the trip. As Adina said, "I was involved, and now I am involved again."

However, my conversation with Hannah may have touched on the reason why Birthright has been unsuccessful in producing behavioral changes it desires. In her discussion of the visit with the Kabbalah artist, Hannah said that it was an "experience taken out of context." Although many in her group were moved by the life-changing transformation that the artist experienced during his visit to Israel, Hannah was unsure how it could apply to her everyday life. She does not have the in-depth knowledge of the bible that would allow her to study Kabbalah, nor does she have the desire to leave her life behind and dedicate her life to Judaism. How can she, and other Birthright participants, translate their intensive Birthright experience into meaningful life changes in the real world?

Room for Improvement

The narratives that I have collected paint a largely positive picture of the Birthright experience. All participants that I spoke with were enthusiastic to talk about

their ten days in Israel for a variety of reasons, and all have fond memories of their Birthright trips. However, my research has also demonstrated that there is room for improvement in the operation of Birthright. Two areas which I believe require the most development are pre-trip orientations and the contextualization of unique Birthright experience into the everyday lives of participants.

Birthright Israel does not require trip providers to have any sort of pre-trip orientation, and from my own personal experience and those of the participants I interviewed, meaningful orientations are virtually non-existent. This has led to gaps between the expectations of participants and the actual trip, and also a lack of preparation for what their experience in Israel will be like. One area that should more clearly be addressed is how religiously focused each trip provider is, so that participants can more easily decide which provider best suits their needs. While Rachel and Adina expected the provider that Hillel chose to be more religious, it would have been beneficial for them if Israel Experts had clearly stated that they would not be heavily focusing on religious traditions.

Also, a more extensive pre-trip orientation could address other worries that people may have, or that may develop, while in Israel. For example, questions of safety could be addressed in the orientation period. Also, the issue of separation of men and women at the Wall, which came up several times in my conversations and had a lasting impact on the way participants viewed Judaism, and is obviously a worthwhile discussion to have before the trip in order to prepare participants. Lastly, the complexity of the conflict situation is often addressed at length during the trip, but many participants, justly so, are not able to fully recall the large amount of information presented to them during the fast-

paced, fully packed, and exhausting trip. If they had been presented with general information beforehand, it may have made the trip less overwhelming and confusing. Although an actual in-person orientation may be difficult to organize before the trip, given the various locations that bus companions come from, at least engaging reading material should be provided a week or two before the trip.

In the second area where improvement is needed, it is more difficult to pinpoint a solution to the problem. It is clear through the extensive research of the Cohen Center, and affirmed by my interviews, that Birthright does not lead to noticeable changes in Jewish communal involvement and religious observance. I believe that the narratives I collected shed light on the reason that this is the case: a lack of contextualization for the trip and its implications to everyday life. The fast paced nature of the trip, combined with the extraordinary content packed into ten days leaves participants overwhelmed and unsure how to translate their experience into anything other than changes in attitude. Since the state of Israel is so unique, due to the mostly Jewish population, it is more difficult to translate the lifestyle participants are exposed to in Israel over to their home country in the Diaspora. As Michal pointed out, no one in Israel thinks that observing Shabbat is anything out of the ordinary, but her friends in America may think that it is a sign of being ultra-Orthodox.

Birthright already offers programs that attempt to involve participants in Jewish life upon return from Israel, but none of the participants that I spoke to put forth long-term commitments to these programs. A pre-trip orientation may also help with this second problem of contextualization of Jewish life, but I am not sure how effective it would be. This could be an area for further research for those with expertise in the area

of education. Personally, I agree with Leah that the long-term effects of Birthright, although they seem to be more apparent in attitudes than behavior, are long-lasting purely for the reason that each participant is able to take away from the experience aspects of the Jewish religion and culture that they personally value. In the narratives I gathered, it is clear that the effects are deeply personal and to each individual, and while they do not uniformly equate to measurable participation in Jewish life, they signify a revitalization of thoughtfulness toward Jewish identity among young adults.

Final Thoughts

The Birthright program is an initiative that dedicates an astonishing amount of resources to a cause whose success is arguably intangible and perhaps, ultimately immeasurable. The philanthropist donors, like the vineyard owner that spoke to Judith and Sarah, hope to lay a foundation for future generations to grow and prosper within the context of Jewish life through massive donations, time, and effort. Even in the downtrodden economic state of the world, thousands of young Jews are given the gift of over \$2,000 in the form of a free trip to Israel. Is it all worth it?

Through the course of my research, I have gathered narratives from eleven individuals who were more than happy to take the time out of their day to tell me about their memories and reflections on their Birthright trip, most of which were joyful, emotional, and at times even life-changing. Although not all aspects of every experience were positive, and it is impossible for me to predict the long-term effects that the trip will have on these individuals, I believe that the enthusiasm about Birthright expressed by all of the research participants already signifies the impact of the trip. Whether it is the novel experience of being surrounded by all Jews or climbing Masada to see the sunrise,

each participant has taken away the part of the trip that means the most to them, and will carry it into their future endeavors. The experiences and reflections of each individual are as unique as the Birthright program itself. Although I have not attempted to answer whether Birthright is a successful program overall, the discussions I have had with former participants lead me to believe that Leah is right: Birthright is not going away.

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Appendix
Survey Questions

1. When did you go on Birthright?
2. What program did you go with?
3. What were your motivations for going on Birthright?
4. What were your expectations of the trip before you went?
5. How connected did you feel to your Jewish identity before going on the trip?
6. How involved were you in the Jewish community before going on the trip?
7. What do you think the goals of Birthright are?
8. How would you describe your trip?
9. What was your favorite part?
10. What role did the soldiers play?
11. How do you think they affected your experience?
12. Did your experience a change in your connection to your Jewish identity after the trip?
13. Do you feel more connected to Israel having gone on the trip?
14. Do you feel more confident explaining the situation in the Israel after going on the trip?
15. Would you say that you've kept up with the news about Israel more now that you know more about it?
16. Did the trip impact how involved you are in the Jewish community?
17. Were your opinions on the importance of marrying a Jew and/or establishing a Jewish family affected by the trip?
18. Do you keep in contact with your bus companions or the Israeli soldiers that were on your trip?

19. What would you change about the trip?
20. Do you want to go back to Israel some day?
21. Anything else you would like to add?
22. Do you know of any other Birthright participants that would be willing to participate in this study?

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