

## Israel and the Future of American Jewry

**Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

The creation of the modern state of Israel is arguably one of the five most important events in Jewish history. Yet, at this very moment the opportunity to translate this accomplishment into renewed life and vitality for Jewry is being piddled away in a failure of imagination and leadership.

Only the original Exodus from Egypt, which created

the people, and the Sinai Revelation, which shaped the message and the mission, can be compared to contemporary Israel's rebirth as positive events of central significance to Jews and to the world. (The Shoah and the destruction of the Second Temple are negative events of comparable impact.) Out of covenantal wisdom, the Exodus and Sinai were placed at the heart of the religion. God, Torah, covenant, family-centered sacrifices, ethical principles such as justice, human dignity, concern for the weak, etc. were all derived from Exodus or validated by Sinai. In good times and bad, Exodus/Sinai were lived and relived in the Jewish way of life. These re-enactments — Shabbat, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, prayer, Kashrut — gave Jewry the strength to survive setback (and to not be seduced by

### From the Editor

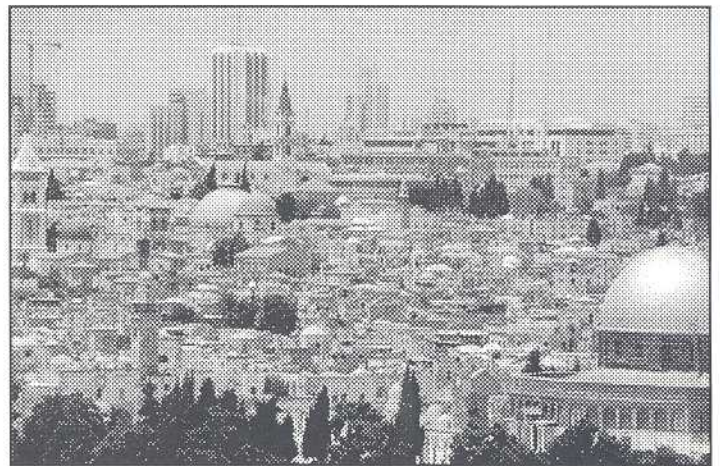


ISRAEL. For centuries it has been the object of the prayers, hopes and dreams of the Jewish people. Yet for the last fifty years it's been a political reality, a modern nation state that the majority of today's Jews have been able to take as a given in their lives. Some Jewish thinkers now argue that we live in a post-Zionist age, an era

in which Diaspora Jews should turn inward (through religious education and spiritual development) and not look to the Jewish State as the foundation of our identities or the concretization of our yearnings and ideals. Others claim that Israel must remain central to the Jewish people and the Jewish consciousness, both as a national/cultural entity and as a catalyst for spiritual revitalization.

With *Contact*, we intend to reach — and hear from — a wide range of activists in the American Jewish community: rabbis, educators, lay leaders, professionals, and leading philanthropists. In this issue, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg challenges those who minimize the miraculousness of Israel's presence and underestimate its power to transform our lives, while Michael Steinhardt presents his vision of making an Israel experience the birthright for all of world Jewry, laying down a challenge of his own to Jewish philanthropists and leaders about the possibility of bringing such an ambitious project into being.

**Rabbi Niles E. Goldstein**



success). In turn, these ideas reshaped world civilization, both directly and through other religions.

Has Israel become as central to our lives? On the contrary, at this moment of great anxiety for the viability of Jewry, Israel is increasingly treated not as an incredible resource but as a foreign country. Yielding to the absence of the crises which brought world Jewry together in the 60's and 70's, Diaspora leadership is allowing a process of separation from Israel to operate

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# Universal Birthright Israel: A Rite of Passage for Every Jew

**Michael Steinhardt**

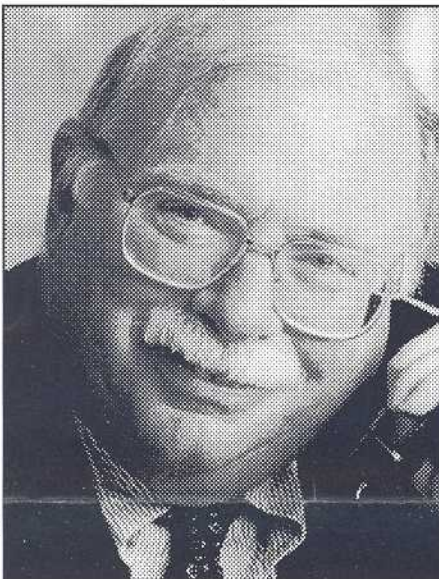
This is the 50th year of Israel's existence, a time when we should be exultant at the incredible political and economic achievements of Israel and world Jewry and at the restoration of Jewish dignity and power from the depths of the Holocaust. Yet there is widespread despair at the loss of vigor in Jewish life and a sense of alienation and even distancing from Israel.

At such a moment, we who love the Jewish people should step up together to rally the world Jewish community. All people whose souls are intertwined with Israel should join together now to make a statement of hope and vision that is also a practical step toward assuring the future. We should respond to this despair with an approach based on the principle that there is a universal Judaism — with an inclusive sense of Jewish values that speaks to everyone, from secular to *haredi*. To give substance to the principle of one people there should be a *living link* between Jews - an actual concrete connection that is available and relevant to every family. If it takes an extraordinary effort to create a new, inclusive partnership to accomplish our dream, then now is the time to do it. We offer this plan in the belief that the Jewish people can still accomplish miracles.

The core of this vision is that, henceforth and forever, *every young Jew born on this planet will be offered, as a birthright, the privilege of a trip to Israel as a gift from the Jewish people.* This could take the form of a free two-week trip with many other options for longer periods, but the Birthright core period is a gift from the Jewish people. The trip should have sufficient educational content to imprint Jewish values for life. Our goal is to work with and change the culture of local communities and federations worldwide so that every young Jew, whatever his/her background, would expect to undergo this rite of passage. Ideally, within a generation, a new tradition will have been created comparable in its universality to Bar and Bat Mitzvah!!

The worldwide cohort of young Jews year by year is estimated at about 85,000. At best, about 15-20% of those groups go to Israel. (The numbers need to be researched reliably as part of this project.) We should set as a goal a percentage of 40% or 50% or higher over time.

When this concept surfaced, I turned to my friend Charles Bronfman, the pioneer and role model in making Israel Experience central to the community, the man who



*Michael Steinhardt, Chairman of Jewish Life Network.*

has devoted himself to a vision of the Jewish People with its heart in Jerusalem. I asked if we could together work to build on the accomplishments of the Israel Experience (a) by establishing a wide age eligibility, from 16 to 30, (b) by expanding the underwriting to make this privilege into a universal birthright, and then (c) by setting as a goal a substantial increase in the number of participants. I am happy to say that we have come together as partners and agreed to fund the feasibility stage of the project.

I believe that there are three indispensable components needed to accomplish the transformation of an Israel living and learning experience from a privilege too rarely invoked into

a universal birthright.

1) **Private philanthropy.** We will turn to the world's major Jewish givers, to recruit 20- 25 partners who would each give \$1 million a year for 5 years to raise \$100 million plus. Can we successfully recruit such a group? There is no guarantee, as the scope of this approach is well outside traditional fund raising. But galvanized by the chance to create a universal birthright as a gift to the Jewish People and to send a statement of connection to inspire Jews everywhere, we will undertake this task to reach out to our peers. We expect to devote nearly a year to this effort. Our goal would be to include philanthropists worldwide — to have at least one participant in each country with a substantial Jewish population.



2) **Federations.** We would need matching funding from local communities throughout the world as well as their deep involvement in recruitment and follow-up. Again, the core of this commitment is already present in many federations' current programs for Israel experiences, and in joint programs with synagogues and families. Now we turn to Federation leadership for advice and help on how to widen these programs into a worldwide birthright with more extensive underwriting and intensified recruitment. Knowing the pressures, as well as the multiple needs and demands on the Federation system, we still ask the lay and professional leaders to show us how to attain an unprecedented level of peacetime partnership that could match the philanthropic funding with an equal level of community support.

3) **The Israeli Government.** As the final partner, we turn to the Israel Government and its agencies. Establishing (and underwriting) this birthright would make clear that Israel cares passionately about Diaspora and world Jewry's growth. In return, Diaspora Jews would tie their rank and file to the living society and people of Israel. We would need substantial financial participation (perhaps not all in cash but rather some in-kind). While the idea of financially aiding the Diaspora is new

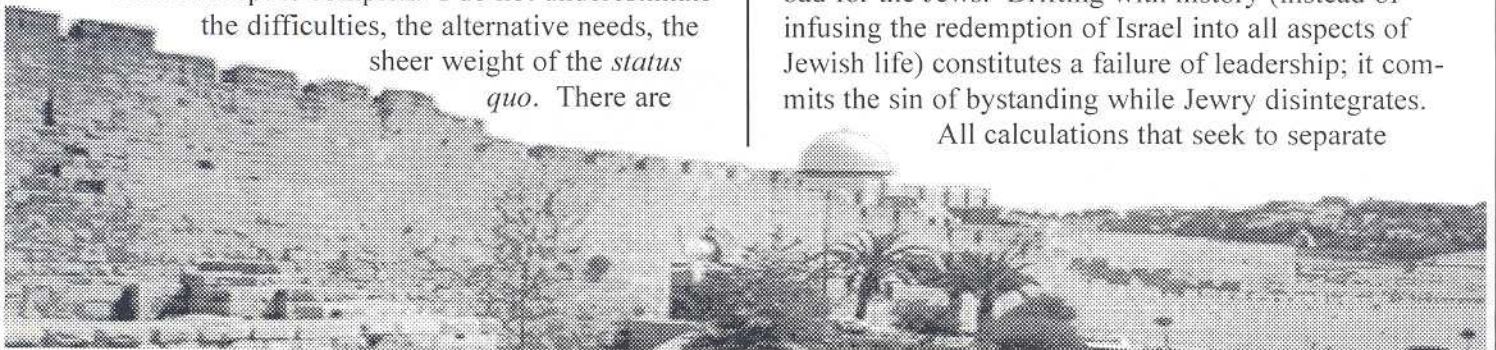
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for Israel, leading Israeli figures, in the initial discussions, have been enthusiastic about the concept. I believe that if we put together an impressive, inclusive Joint Partnership Plan, the government of Israel will respond in extraordinary fashion.

This concept is complex. I do not underestimate the difficulties, the alternative needs, the sheer weight of the *status quo*. There are



numerous issues that need to be worked out. We need to assure that trips truly shape the Jewishness of young people. We expect to develop meaningful encounters with young Israelis and their families. We need to enhance trips to deal with follow up, to integrate with Israel Experience, to recruit in new ways, to encourage new types of trips. I urge that, for now, we not get bogged down over these specific, albeit important, details. The solutions are best reserved for stage two. I assure you that we will work together to deal with these myriad issues when the time comes.

For now, let us prove that there is sufficient vitality in the Jewish People to rally for great causes. If we tap into that vitality now, we can accomplish great things, for the sake of national renaissance and spiritual rebirth — on the same scale as the heroic efforts we've made for our security and physical survival. I dream that we can put this program together — or at least arrive at the basic agreements needed — in this year of Israel's Fiftieth Anniversary so that we can make this grand statement of hope for the future and for the next millennium. ☆

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(continued from cover story)

unchecked. An unspoken consensus is emerging that since Israel is a vicarious experience for Diaspora Jews, it is an inauthentic and inadequate focus for the American Jewish community. Significant numbers of quality educators and lay leaders have concluded that Jewish life must be rebuilt primarily through an infusion of spirituality and education — not infrequently at the expense of funding for Israel. A JESNA survey con-

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***"It is time to tap Israel's power to electrify Diaspora's inner life."***

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firms the continuing neglect of the topic of Israel in day and supplementary Hebrew school education. This is bad for the Jews. Drifting with history (instead of infusing the redemption of Israel into all aspects of Jewish life) constitutes a failure of leadership; it commits the sin of bystanding while Jewry disintegrates. All calculations that seek to separate

Judaism and Jewish continuity from Israel are fundamentally mistaken. Israel is a powerful magnet for Jewish loyalty. Judaism is a historical religion whose central message is that history can be redeemed through inspired, albeit flawed, human efforts; the way to build a better world is country by country, people by people. The creation of Israel validates that claim and can serve as a role model for people everywhere.

The Torah teaches that religion is not a doctrine of truth. Rather, our faith offers a model of *tikkun olam* that must be incarnated in a people, in a society and in a way of life. If we dismiss this model because it is too messy and complicated in its actual Israeli form, if we settle for a spiritualized and privatized Jewish faith in America, we have impoverished Judaism. Even an injection of mysticism and religious inspiration cannot offset the loss in the spirit of community and justice and in the relevance of Judaism worldwide.

Furthermore, for secular Jews, Israel is the only living secular society suffused with (or at least, wrestling



Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, President of Jewish Life Network.

with) Jewish values in every aspect of life. Israel's culture teeters between being swallowed up by modern civilization and being charged up by an unceasing encounter with Jewish language, history, memory and culture. That dynamic tension can be harnessed to rejuvenate world Jewry's inner life.

Israel is a total Jewish environment thanks to its Jewish majority population, its Hebrew language culture, its space saturated with Jewish memory and

history. We know that such an environment of immersion is the key to creating vital Jewish communities in the world. In the effective Diaspora programs — i.e., day schools, camps, adult retreats and youth movements — total environment creates the setting for the successful internalization of Jewish identity and absorption of living values. For this reason, trips to Israel increase Jewish commitment for almost all who go. We know that learning and living in Israel causes a quantum leap in Jewish knowledge and practice among participants.

It is time to tap Israel's power to electrify Diaspora's inner life.

For Jewry to flourish in freedom, we know that every Jew will have to have vital Jewish experiences

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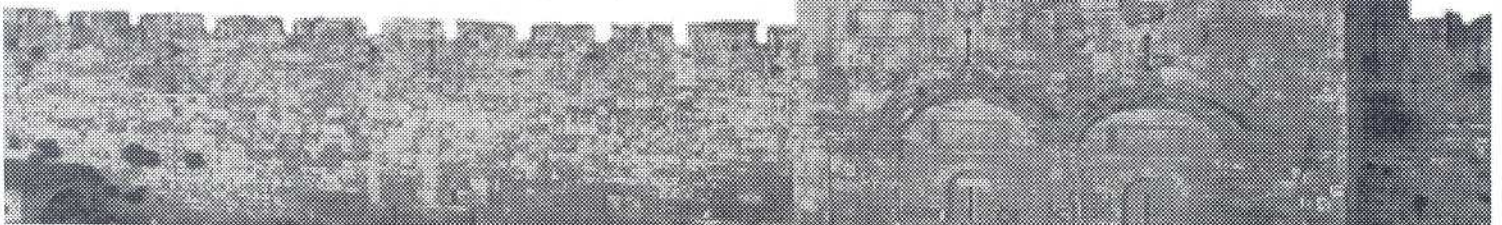
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and a fund of knowledge and experiences that nurture a rich inner Jewish life and identity. The Birthright program proposes as a goal that every Jewish young person in the world be Judaically enriched by the experience of living and learning in Israel (at a minimum for a few weeks, ideally for an extended period, even up to a year). Moreover, Birthright will require contact with a living Israeli society and peers, not just exposure to the classic past. This bold proposal challenges the drift to assimilation and alienation from Israel as one.

There is no time more appropriate for leadership to act than now, in Israel's fiftieth year. According to the Bible, the fiftieth, or jubilee, year is the year to imagine and live Jewish life at its highest level. In ancient times, this was a year long Shabbat. Liberty was proclaimed throughout the land and slaves went free. The land was redistributed to restore economic equality and assure the basic dignity of all families.

Jubilee is the year to make whole the Jewish world. The place to start is with a universal upgrade of Jewish living. Just as the Jubilee lifted the level of Israel's ancient society and held up the ideal to change the daily reality, so in this fiftieth anniversary, we must strive for transformation in a way that speaks to the unity of the worldwide Jewish people. A universal Birthright program can provide the content of an enlightened, even learned, Jewish life that would armor Diaspora against assimilation while connecting every Jew to Israel's tradition and reborn culture. We owe it to the world and ourselves to rise to this occasion. ✧



## From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Jewish Life Network is devoted to strengthening the inner life of American Jewry through the creation of needed new projects and institutions. Its agenda is driven by both negative and positive considerations. Michael Steinhardt, JLN's Chairman, is concerned that there is a serious erosion of loyalty and identity among Jews, especially those who are high achieving and successfully integrated in American life. This results from a spiritual and cultural enervation so deep it demands a major communal transformation if we are to insure Jewish continuity, especially among non-orthodox Jews, through the generations.

The positive consideration is that Jewry is involved in one of the great transformations of its history. We are in transition to a life of freedom and voluntary choice in an open society marked by unprecedented liberty, affluence and access to power. While the initial impact of increased access for Jews has led to assimilation, were the Jewish community properly prepared for choice, America could be the scene of a Jewish Renaissance.

We believe that democracy is the finest system through which to create the right conditions for human dignity and spiritual fulfillment and that, given the facts, people will choose wisely and will flourish. Yet Jewry has been slow to respond, even though the best Jewish values are now widely shared and opportunities are great. However, if we create a more effective, proactive and educated communi-

ty, it will ultimately lead to a flourishing Jewry.

We at JLN are convinced that Jewish values can compete for loyalty in American society and can even enrich American life. Thus we need a re-articulation of Judaism in a universal language that is truly pluralist, life affirming and just. Only then will it begin to speak to all of us.

This transformation — to create new institutions, to revitalize lay and spiritual leadership, to achieve much higher minimum levels of knowledge — is achievable. However, it is beyond the capacity of any one individual, foundation or movement. JLN is thus committed to partnership with other foundations, philanthropists and institutions in all of its work.

We believe that there must be free discussion and unrestrained debate about vital Jewish issues and the Jewish future. We hope to use *Contact* to stimulate this conversation. The combined intelligence and provocative thinking of all your talents are needed in order to solve our challenges. We welcome your insights, your questions and even your alternative approaches.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. In this, the fiftieth year of Israel's national life, let us begin together. All the best,

**Jonathan J. Greenberg**



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## The Birthright Israel Proposal

*The concept.* Every young Jew in the Diaspora would be given, as his/her birthright and gift from the Jewish people, the opportunity to live and learn in Israel. This opportunity would include (a) living experiences and study that would deepen Jewish identity and values and (b) encounters with Israeli peers to better understand contemporary Israel and to experience Jewish peoplehood. The gift could range from a free short trip to a partially-underwritten extended period of living and learning.

The gift would be underwritten by a coalition of the major Jewish philanthropists of the world with the Federations/communities and the Jewish Agency (Government of Israel). The degree of underwriting, program standards, possible support for new and exciting program providers, costs and projections all remain to be defined and decided. A partnership of Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman and their staffs are working on this project. They have commissioned a feasibility study under the name Birthright Israel Project. Mr. Avraham Infeld, President of Melitz Organization, has been appointed the International Director of the Birthright Project, and Mr. Gideon Mark, on leave from Israel's foreign ministry has been appointed Israel Director.

- \* The vast majority of young people who have participated in Israel Experiences regard their summer in Israel as one of the most positive Jewish moments and memories in their lives.
- \* An Israel Experience in the teenage years affords young people the opportunity to have a positive Jewish experience at a time in their lives when they are shaping their ultimate patterns of Jewish identity and involvement.
- \* The unique contribution of the Israel Experience is not that it “teaches” about Judaism, but rather that it contributes to the formation of Jewish attitudes and behaviors.
- \* There is a link between positive adult Jewish identity and participation in a teen Israel Experience.

**Conclusions from a recent presentation on the Israel Experience by Dr. Barry Chazan, Professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Educational Consultant to the Charles R. Bronfman Foundation.**