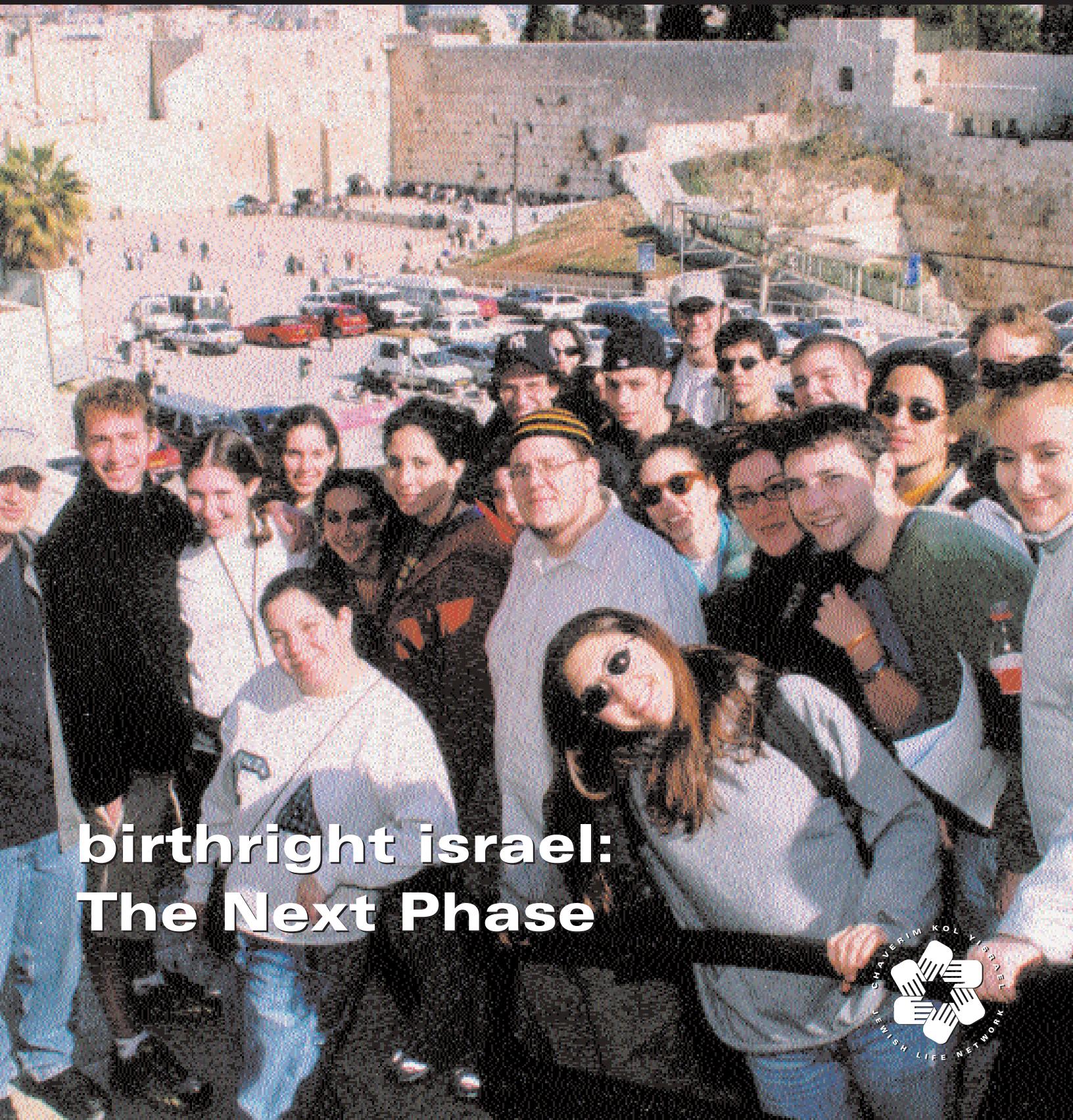


CONTACT

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birthright israel: The Next Phase



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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Cover photograph by David Karp. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs in this issue by David Karp.

birthright israel: The Next Phase

birthright israel began as a dream. In its earliest form, the program envisioned a radical change in the Jewish world, one that would plant within even the most assimilated young Jews the seeds of their heritage. Its scope was grand and quixotic: the creation of a new Jewish life cycle event, the cementing of the relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, and the reinforcement of the selfless communal bonds of the Jewish people.

Next came implementation. Visions of a revitalized Jewish community are well and good, but setting up the infrastructure is the real challenge. How to schedule scores of planes and buses to shepherd thousands of people into and around Israel? How to divide the financial burden between individuals, federations and Israel itself? How to design a program that balances education and leisure in just ten days?

At last, birthright israel is a tangible reality involving airplanes, buses and even camels shuttling Jews through the archetypical landscape of their heritage. The popularity of the trips has exceeded even the most fantastic projections of its founders, with lotteries and wait-lists attesting to the vitality of a new mass movement. There is a temptation, as we watch the planes landing from all parts of the globe, to congratulate ourselves on a beautifully accomplished mission.

But to stop now would be to squander birthright israel's greatest potential. The most salient criticism of the program is that ten days alone cannot affect a lasting imprint on one's identity. No matter how exhilarating the Israel experience can be, there is the risk that as time passes and alumni return to their normal lives, the trip will recede into the background like yet another memorable college vacation. For this reason, the larger work of birthright israel has only just begun. We should increasingly place our energies not only on solitary ten-day trips, but on a sustained educational and cultural experience that begins in Israel but continues long after participants return home. Granted, it is a greater challenge to provide enchanting programs outside the made-to-order Jewish backdrop of Israel. Nonetheless, our goal is to extend birthright israel by providing original and inspiring post-trip programs that rival the intensity of the trip itself. Indeed, by focusing on the larger scope of the birthright israel dream, we can turn an illuminating experience abroad into a lifetime commitment to Jewish living.

This issue of Contact will examine the next phase of birthright israel. We will study the program's impact from the vantage point of participants themselves, and explore ways of expanding that impact beyond the length of the trip. We will also consider how the philosophy behind the free gift of birthright israel can potentially invigorate the Jewish community and inspire those who feel cut off from Jewish life. Finally, we will analyze how in the new terrain of Middle East unrest, the connection between Israel and the Diaspora — once the founding tenet of the birthright israel dream — is more pertinent today than ever.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley



An Experiment to Strengthen Jewish Identity

by LEONARD SAXE,
CHARLES KADUSHIN,
and ARCHIE BRODSKY

birthright Israel may be the largest-ever attempt to alter Jewish identity. It presents an excellent opportunity to answer questions about the next generation of Jews. Nearly 100,000 young adults from Diaspora Jewish communities will participate in the first five years of birthright Israel. Can such a brief intervention — a ten-day, cost-free educational tour of Israel — have much of an impact? As researchers, our role has been to try to understand the impact of this experiment on participants' Jewish identities and on their relationships to Israel and to the Jewish community.

Since the program's inception, we have followed the groups that went to Israel from North America, surveying participants before and after trips, and comparing their attitudes and subsequent involvement with those of individuals on waiting lists. The goal has been to discover who participates, what the nature of the experience is, what impact the trip has, and why and how it works to affect Jewish identities.

Who Participates?

The initial year of the program involved a diverse group of young Jews. By dint of denomination, Jewish education and practice, participants were as varied as the communities they represented. Some were Jewishly engaged, but many were at risk of becoming "lost to the Jewish people." Only a small number had been to Israel before, but almost all were highly motivated by prior exposure and interest.

Their readiness was amplified by the gift of an expenses-paid trip. Most participants told us that cost had prevented them from visiting Israel before. Consequently, they expressed overwhelming gratitude for the gift. By conveying the message that the community had shared something precious, the gift created a compelling reason to become more closely attached to the community. Even before the trip began, its sponsors had prepared a receptive emotional ground.

What They Experienced

In the first year, we surveyed participants both one and three months after the trip. At three months post-trip, the evaluations were overwhelmingly positive; the expe-

Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin, and Archie Brodsky are faculty members of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.

rience was seen as both meaningful and educational. When asked what part of the trip had been most positive for them, participants talked mostly about their sense of being part of a community and interacting and bonding with people. They also talked about the impact of the sites they visited: the Kotel, Yad Vashem, Masada, and the Golan Heights. For these mostly unengaged Jews, these sites came to have personal significance. One student put it:

"At the Western Wall, first just touching it ... then hearing the singing ... mixed with the sounds of someone really praying seriously ... and someone crying ... all those sounds kind of mixed together and gave me the sense that there was really something profound happening there."

What Impact?

According to a column by Marlene Post, Chairperson of birthright israel USA,

nected to Israel, were exploring their Jewishness more, and felt a greater connection to the Jewish people after the trip than before. Participants were considerably more likely than nonparticipants to feel strongly that being Jewish involves caring about Israel and feeling a connection to other Jews. After the trip, participants were much more likely to see their Jewishness as important to their self-image.

Participants' increased cognizance of their Jewish identity was reflected in several ways. They thought about their Israel experience nearly every day and kept in contact with others in their group. Many were spending more time learning about Israel and participating in Jewish activities than before. The majority said they were likely to return to Israel within two years, to study, work, or vacation.

Why?

Many participants traveled with students they already knew, and would continue to know,

gram with thousands of other Jews.

The formation of community during the trips was both a means and an end. It was a means to create significant personal experiences — insofar as an individual's feelings and reactions were confirmed and amplified by others. Community was also an end, for the core purpose of birthright israel was to bring participants into a closer relationship with the Jewish community. Its success was expressed by various participants in their own words: the trip "made me feel that I am part of something bigger than just myself."

It seemed critical that this community experience took place in Israel. The people, places, and events they encountered were reminders of shared traditions and communal belonging. For some, being "Jewish" in America meant being set apart by religious practices or by a chosen way of life. In a country where "everyone" was Jewish, however, one could feel comfortable expressing a Jewishness that fit into society.

The initial assessment of birthright israel may seem too positive to be trustworthy. Perhaps it is surprising that the impact of the trip lasted beyond the first weeks and appears to have become generalized for months beyond the program. But the key question is why and how did birthright israel come to have a powerful impact on participants.

birthright israel was developed to change young people's lives. Its impact was to give participants a context to extend or reclaim their identification with the Jewish people and Israel. The educational experience notwithstanding, participants seemed particularly receptive to a community experience. Living in an extraordinarily individualistic society, they lack opportunities for non-competitive group experiences. birthright israel was such an experience; as such, it met an unfulfilled need.

The next stage in our research will examine how participants fare over time. Perhaps connectedness will decline as the glow of the experience wears off and as they try, unsuccessfully, to recapture the birthright israel experience in their home communities. But part of the experiment is to find ways continually to engage these young adults. If the key to birthright israel was the successful creation of community, then the lesson for back-home organizations is clear.

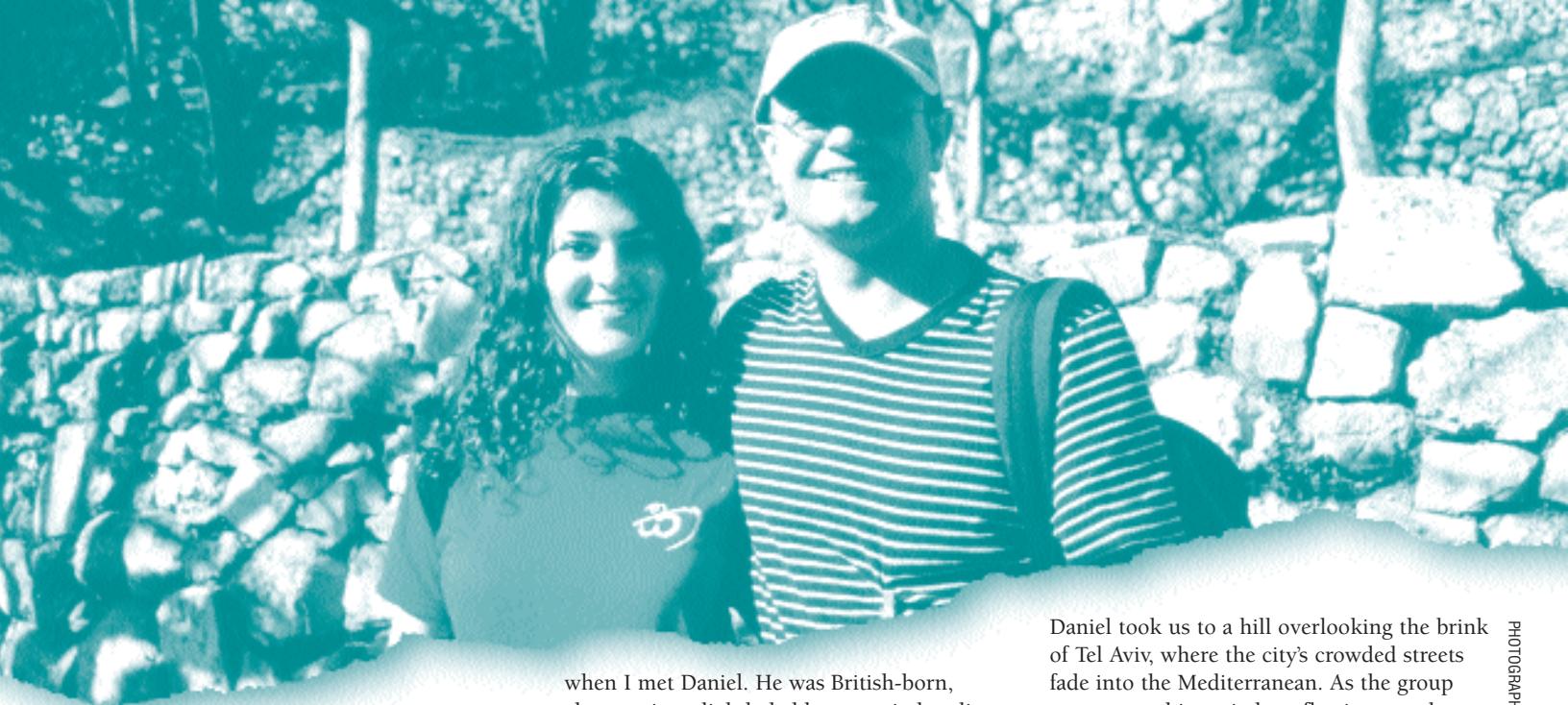
The organizers of birthright israel are not merely tour operators bringing young people to Israel. Rather, they are social experimenters seeking to strengthen the Jewish people and create Jewish community. Our tradition teaches that one should "say little, do much." birthright israel, whatever its ultimate impact, has moved beyond rhetoric to try to enhance Jewish identity. Our task now is to learn as much as we can about this process. 



The success of birthright israel was expressed by various participants in their own words: the trip "made me feel that I am part of something bigger than just myself."

birthright israel was designed "to spark interest, involvement and a thirst for enrichment," so that participants would "appreciate and remain in the Jewish fold." (*The Jerusalem Report*, December 20, 1999) It will take years to learn how well the program achieves this goal. We measured its immediate impact both by retrospective "before and after" questions and by comparisons between participants and those who were wait-listed. Participants said that they felt more con-

through their campus Hillel organizations and JCCs. They were accompanied by guides and educators, many from their campus or community. Participants liked the people they traveled with and recognized in them a sameness as well as diversity. The way they have kept in contact with their traveling companions is one measure of the success of this communal bonding. More globally, three-quarters of participants experienced a strong emotional impact from being part of a pro-



PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC WEISS

David Ben Gurion once said, "We will know we have become a normal country when Jewish thieves and Jewish prostitutes conduct their business in Hebrew." No doubt, this man had a sense of humor. And yet, as I left Israel this past January, having visited the country for the very first time, I found his remark to be surprisingly poignant. In a sense, it encompassed what I found to be one of the most unbelievable aspects of the state. Here in Israel, the Jews are a people. They are the people driving the buses and the people writing songs. They are the people in the hospitals and the people on the streets. And as I would come to learn, they are the people with charming British accents, black skin, vanilla blonde dread locks and Hawaiian heritage. They are a motley people, built on history, facing conflict, seeking growth and yet remarkably walking on the greatest of common grounds.

Before I left for Israel, my mother informed me that Israeli tour guides are quite unlike the "peppy brochure-readers" we Americans try to pass as tour guides. Indeed, she said, Israeli guides are incredible. Did I know that they went to college to become tour guides? That they studied for two years just to show me around Israel? Did I? Well now I did, and the expectations were set. My tour guide would be the most informed Israeli. An Oxford student gone tour guide, with a love of falafel, a big bold Star of David hanging from his neck, and a head of dark hair. He would have served in the army, taught Israeli folk dance and spoken very broken, heavily accented English.

Perhaps that is why I was dumbstruck

when I met Daniel. He was British-born, always witty, slightly bald, not entirely religious, and strikingly intelligent. I genuinely did not believe he was to be our Israeli guide. And although I came to love Daniel, as did the entire bus full of 30 other Penn students, he beautifully failed my stereo-

Daniel took us to a hill overlooking the brink of Tel Aviv, where the city's crowded streets fade into the Mediterranean. As the group went around in a circle, reflecting on what we'd found on birthright israel, or what we hoped to one day discover, something became explicitly clear. Among comments that ranged from "finding a true family in Israel" to "not quite connecting here," I real-

Tearing My Stereotypes to Shreds

by REBECCA SILLS

types. I quickly began to debate between two possible scenarios — either he is Israeli, and the accent's a gag, or he's British, and doesn't have a clue what Israel could mean for a Jewish person. It seems I was eager, if not simply accustomed, to seeing Jewish people as either/or. But thankfully, for the next ten days I would have Daniel there to lead us — making sharp quips, reviving history, and tearing my stereotypes to shreds. For indeed, with his Monty Python humor and Manchester background, Daniel was as Israeli — as Jewish — as the sabra born in Haifa.

By trip's end, under the guidance of Daniel and in the company of friends, I had been exposed to many different facets of Israeli culture. As Daniel commented on what was passing us by in the window or what we saw in the colorful neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, he did his job: History. Conversation. Humor. But more than that, he provided each of us with the opportunity to get to know Israel through the eyes of an Israeli. It is difficult not to look like a tourist when roaming the streets of the Old City, camera in hand, name-tag intact; but as Daniel guided us throughout the country and we repeatedly encountered welcoming faces, it was hard to imagine that we didn't belong.

It was on our last evening in Israel that

ized that after a ten-day trip, each of us understood the Israel of hotels and kibbutzim, friendly soldiers and miscounted shekels, perfect photographs of new friends against an ancient backdrop. But understanding the deeper Israel — the connection, the history and the people — was just out of our reach. And for that I am so very grateful. For I believe that to attempt a complete grasp of Israel in all its entirety would reduce it to terms far too simple for such an affecting experience. The issues of religion, state, tradition and family cannot be fully understood before our plane lifts off to bring us home.

Now that the trip has ended, I hope that we first-timers, some Orthodox, others who doubted their faith, will use the reflection of hindsight to begin to understand the essence of Israel. I hope that the powers of Israel — the state, the people, the nation — will remain overwhelming, complex and, at the very least, provocative throughout my life. May the same concepts that are leading me to question Israel in all its depth constantly leave me in awe. For all of us, birthright israel was our very first experience in Israel. Or perhaps, it was just our first. For ultimately, who fully understands those inaugural moments of a lifelong journey? Only those who have traveled far. *

Rebecca Sills, a Freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, returned from the birthright israel trip in January 2001.

We are not trying merely to show the exoticism of a foreign land. We are trying to connect what is experienced in Israel with life back home.

Thinking Beyond the Mountain-Top Experience

by SIMON KLARFELD

The question facing all “mountaintop experiences” is how to maintain the participants’ new enthusiasm and ideas beyond the time- and place-bound program. What happens once they go home?

Thinking Anew

We need to be thinking in a broader way about the birthright israel experience as part of a larger continuum of Jewish life and as an opportunity that reaches far beyond a ten-day trip. Israel is a powerful tool for the Jewish educator not only because of its history, traditions and culture, but also because of its relevance to the lives of Jews living in the Diaspora. We are not trying merely to show the exoticism of a foreign land. We are trying to connect what is experienced in Israel with life back home. Therefore, it is critical that guides, educators, community planners and Israeli partners continually link experiences there with experiences here.

birthright israel is a catalyst for greater Jewish involvement. Israel provides a field in which key Jewish values and concepts can be sewn. We must plant seeds during the Israel experience that can be nurtured and grown upon the participants’ return to their home communities.

If one of the aims, if not the primary aim, of Jewish educational experiences such as birthright israel is to empower people to integrate Jewish values, traditions and peoplehood into their lives, then we must enable alumni of such mountaintop experiences to take home tools as well as ideas in order to live an enhanced Jewish life. In addition, we must engage them in the planning, implementation and leadership of Jewish life in their home communities.

birthright israel participants are not a homogenous population. We need to recognize different types of birthright israel alumni, for example:

1. the already involved and affiliated who have never been to Israel on an organized trip; and
2. the less affiliated who experience Judaism anew in Israel. This sub-group has less experience in connecting with the wider Jewish community.

Our response to and objectives for each of these sub-groups are probably different. In

our program design and communal infrastructures we must provide a plethora of opportunities to engage all types of alumni in the Jewish community.

Intrinsically, Judaism has multiple pathways to involvement: spiritual/religious, social, cultural, educational and philanthropic. Any one of these spheres can serve as a basis for engagement, involvement, and empowerment within the Jewish world. In my opinion, follow-up programs are too narrow in their scope, focusing on only one or two of these spheres and therefore reducing the possibility of engagement with young adults who are “turned on” by other spheres of interest.

Through recent interviews I conducted with birthright israel alumni, it is clear that all had been affected by their Israel experiences, but for each it was meaningful for a different reason. For one student, it was about the relationships formed with a couple of Israeli students who had been with him throughout the ten days; for another, it was the experience of seeing the dynamics between secular and Orthodox Jews as they negotiated the streets of Jerusalem; for another, it was the first time that she had experienced life away from home in a new country with a different culture, language and traditions. For each, then, the impact of the Israel experience was different. Although they all wanted to connect with someone when they returned — to talk, to reflect, to remember and to analyze — their exact interests and needs were clearly unique.

Program Ideas

We need to educate and train mentors to model I-Thou relationships based on the concept of *b’tzelem elokim* (in the image of God). One idea is to establish internships for college credit within Jewish organizations or social welfare agencies with a parallel mentoring program in which a relationship based on Jewish values can enrich alum and mentor alike.

Tzedek (justice) as a fundamental Jewish value should be incorporated and intertwined throughout the Israel experience and beyond, not only because it is a key Jewish value but also because of the potential of involving alumni in *tzedek*-related activities in their communities upon their return.

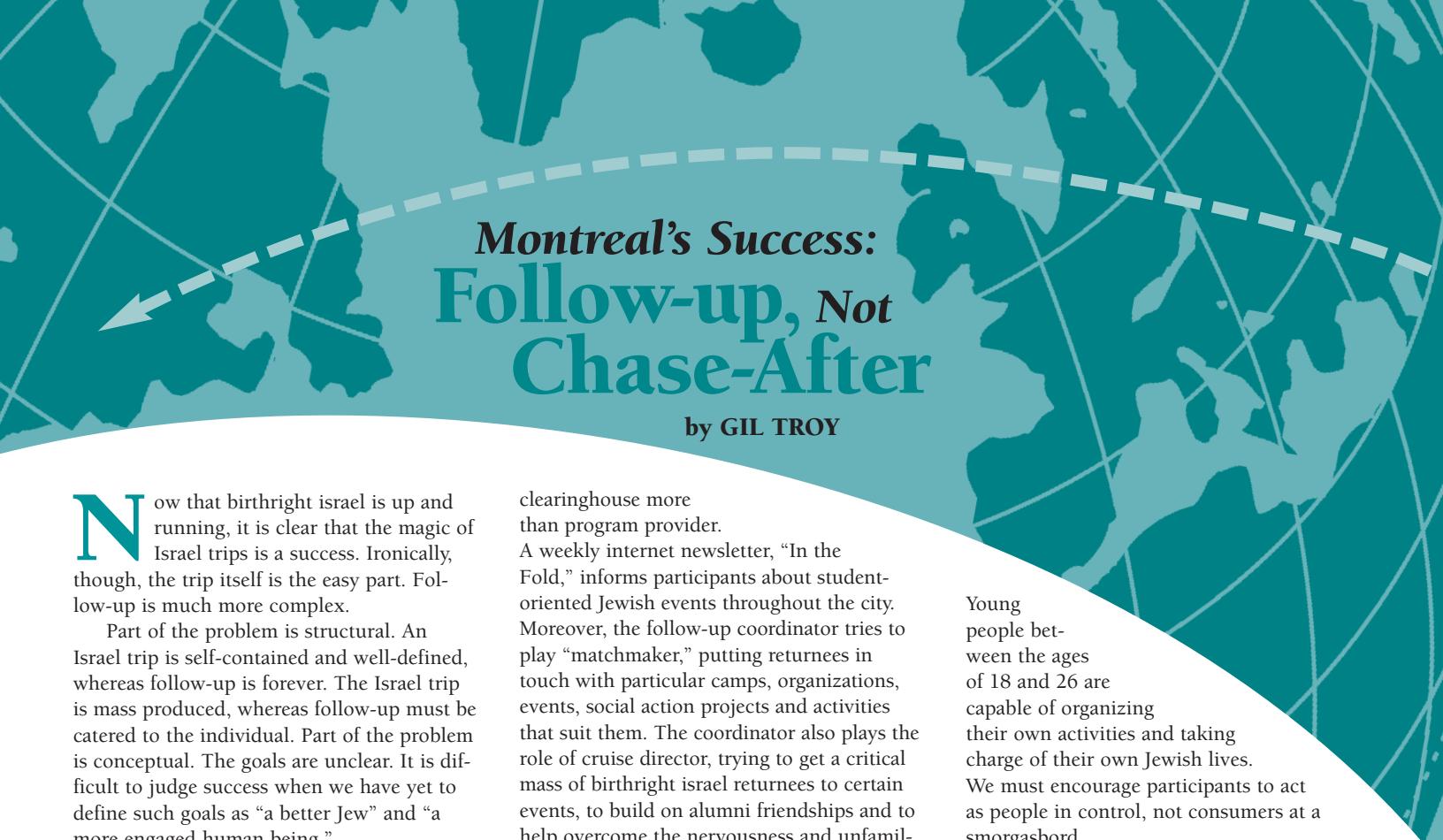
With the creation of niche trips to Israel, the notion and themes of follow-up are built into the program. For example, a birthright israel trip for law students – nationally recruited from law schools across the country – would focus its attention on legal questions while in Israel (e.g., international law on sovereignty, questions relating to the legal authority of the rabbinate, historical questions of Jewish emancipation and rights of citizenship). In addition to providing a wonderfully creative approach to an Israel trip, it also provides an excellent opportunity for continuing dialogues and engagements once the students return home. For example, seminars on *halakha* and contemporary society and legal approaches to the peace process could be provided on either a local or national level. Legal internships could be created for these alumni in Jewish advocacy settings, welfare organizations, and inner city labor organizations. Leading legal authorities and thinkers could be invited to present lectures and discussions online through the use of the internet and video conferencing.

Questions for Further Discussion

Several key questions need to be addressed: Whose responsibility is it to follow up with alumni of transformative experiences? How can we create meaningful partnerships with national and local organizations to promote a smooth transition for alumni back home? How can alumni become integral constituents in the program? What is the role of reunions and follow-up programs and conferences in the lives of alumni? How should such endeavors be prioritized within the community? How will these initiatives be funded? How should we use technology to maintain connectedness among alumni of Israel experiences? If we are to use technology to its fullest capacity, what are the constraints of the virtual rather than real world in community building?

Ultimately, if birthright israel and its components are integrated into a much broader notion of a Jewish continuum of experiences, what impact would that have on the Jewish world? 

Simon Klarfeld is the Founding Director of Genesis at Brandeis University.



Montreal's Success: Follow-up, Not Chase-After

by GIL TROY

Now that birthright israel is up and running, it is clear that the magic of Israel trips is a success. Ironically, though, the trip itself is the easy part. Follow-up is much more complex.

Part of the problem is structural. An Israel trip is self-contained and well-defined, whereas follow-up is forever. The Israel trip is mass produced, whereas follow-up must be catered to the individual. Part of the problem is conceptual. The goals are unclear. It is difficult to judge success when we have yet to define such goals as "a better Jew" and "a more engaged human being."

Still, follow-up remains an essential part of the birthright israel educational process. In Montreal, the Federation has recognized this and hired a follow-up coordinator. We believe this position is the first of its kind in North America. Thanks mostly to the energy and charisma of these young coordinators, one who had been a leader and the other a participant in birthright israel trips, Montreal boasts a first-rate follow-up program that has involved over 80 percent of birthright israel returnees in one program or another.

In Montreal, we see follow-up operating on three levels. Level One keeps participants within the birthright israel bubble, and tries to extend the intensity and joy of the Israel trip. Most of our madrichim are student activists who will serve as peer leaders and entry guides into the Jewish world back home. Activities are planned before the participants return from Israel and include "Shabbat in the city," during which madrichim host members of their respective buses at their homes for dinner, and a city-wide reunion with prizes, music, dancing and lots of pictures. Last year we featured the Carlebach-style band Inasense.

Level Two recognizes that the goal of birthright israel is not to create another self-perpetuating Jewish organization. As a result, the follow-up coordinator plays the role of

clearinghouse more than program provider.

A weekly internet newsletter, "In the Fold," informs participants about student-oriented Jewish events throughout the city. Moreover, the follow-up coordinator tries to play "matchmaker," putting returnees in touch with particular camps, organizations, events, social action projects and activities that suit them. The coordinator also plays the role of cruise director, trying to get a critical mass of birthright israel returnees to certain events, to build on alumni friendships and to help overcome the nervousness and unfamiliarity newcomers to the Jewish world often experience.

In trying to integrate returnees into the Jewish world, we have initiated some post-trip programs that open up beyond birthright israel participation. This year I ran Think-

The Israel trip is the poetry; follow- up is the prose.

tank, a freewheeling, open-ended seminar about the basics of Jewish identity and Jewish history. It met weekly at Hillel and averaged about 60 percent non-birthright israel alumni. Similarly, on Tuesday nights we initiated the Late Night Torah Society, a study and singing group that once again had a majority of non-birthright israel alumni. This year, we will start Think and Drink, a four-part interactive lecture series which ends with cocktails, co-sponsored by birthright israel and Concordia University's Jewish Studies Program.

In the next step, Level Three, we try to encourage returnees to become leaders themselves. In that spirit, several returnees joined Montreal's spunky youth delegation to the General Assembly in Chicago; two returnees initiated Hillel's first Jewish student movie festival; and two have joined Hillel's staff. Follow-up must not be chase-after.

Young people between the ages of 18 and 26 are capable of organizing their own activities and taking charge of their own Jewish lives. We must encourage participants to act as people in control, not consumers at a smorgasbord.

At the same time, we have to recognize that all these activities are only one dimension of follow-up. The success of birthright israel should not be judged by how many students show up at Federation or at Hillel. Reading Jewish books, thinking Jewish thoughts, celebrating Jewish rituals, making Jewish friends, dating Jewish people — all are ways of being Jewish that do not show up on the organizational radar. We must not forget them. After a year involved with Montreal's follow-up, proud as I am of its great strides and exciting programs, I also realize that organized follow-up activities can only accomplish so much. They are all condemned to pale in comparison to the excitement of the trip itself, an intense, all-encompassing experience for the participants. Is it any wonder, especially when alumni return to the very Jewish community that may have failed to inspire them before, that almost any follow-up activity will not measure up?

The Israel trip is the poetry; follow-up is the prose. We need, of course, to build more — more classes, more Shabbat experiences, more holiday celebrations, more social action projects, more web interactions. But we also have to recognize that everyone's educational, spiritual and personal Jewish journey is long and winding. Once participants return to the demands of their daily lives after the marathon of birthright israel, it is not surprising that a slower pace sets in. The real impact of birthright israel will take years and very subtle barometers to assess. *

Gil Troy is Professor of History at McGill University and Chairman of the birthright israel Montreal Steering Committee.

THE NEWBORN GIFT: *Extending birthright israel and Renewing Community*

by RABBI YITZ GREENBERG
and MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT



Think of the fundamental change we will have accomplished if instead of seeking only returns from our fellow Jews, we promote the view that being Jewish has its own intrinsic reward.

birthright israel was conceived as an opportunity to change the basic infrastructure of the American Jewish community. Now that the bulk of American Jewry has chosen full integration into American culture, it is clear that we need to enrich the inner life of American Jews so that they will choose Jewishness as the anchor of their identity in a polyphous society. The key is to provide a chain of Jewish experiences that are so vital in impact and nurturing in identity that the recipient makes a full-hearted decision to live as a Jew for life. Ideally this chain should consist of day school education, Jewish camping, youth movements, college programs, Israel experience, and young adult activities.

The founders of birthright israel chose this project because there were enough private philanthropists who loved Israel to initiate the needed alliance of private philanthropy with community institutions and the Government of Israel. Day schools were still too foreign to major givers, camping too marginal, youth movements too modest, intense learning too much of a stretch. We started with the Israel trips in the belief

that successful partnering in one area would help strengthen the other links.

For this reason, we concluded that the birthright israel trip must be a free and full-hearted gift. Detractors argue that it is not right for the community to pay for those participants who can afford to visit Israel. But this line of reasoning fails to appreciate the purpose of the gift. It is not merely financial. birthright israel is targeted at less affiliated Jews, because those who are most integrated into American life are far less likely to travel to Israel on their own. Such people typically see the Jewish community as self-centered, external to their lives and interested in approaching them only when raising funds. The free gift, by contrast, is a noble concept that touches souls. The gift communicates to families that we are one people; we care about you because you are Jewish; we have a cultural and historical memory to share with you. Surveys of birthright israel participants indicate that the gift — the love and caring implicit in the generosity — excites them and deepens the impact of the trip.

The ultimate vision of birthright israel is that the entire cohort of young Jews, in every



age bracket, will be offered the trip. But how can we bring the less connected families closer so they anticipate and even plan their children's future involvement in birthright israel trips? A crucial answer lies in the birthright israel newborn gift, which can also provide financial support for a permanent birthright israel program. It is proposed that the Jewish communities (the logical agency would be the Federation) identify all newly born Jews. The community could then reach out, by letter or preferably by personal visit, to the parents of the newborn. This is a moment when new parents are extraordinarily aware of being part of the chain of life and of history; at this time, new parents are open to others sharing and deepening their joy.

The community representatives would wish the parents Mazel Tov and say that their newborn child has a birthright israel gift of a trip to Israel when they grow up. They would inform the parents: As we meet, the community is giving your baby a present. The sum of \$180 is being deposited in a special account in the name of your newborn child. The gift will bear interest; while it will be available only to pay for this future trip, the family can add gifts or other funds along the way to enable the child to extend or deepen the trip. This trip is an expression of the bonds between our people, one people worldwide, with no expectation in return and no condition except taking the trip itself.

Think of the fundamental change we will have accomplished if instead of seeking only returns from our fellow Jews, we promote the view that being Jewish has its own intrinsic reward. The gift is thus more than a mere \$180. It signifies the appreciation and sensitivity we will show young Jews as they enter the unknown territory of parenthood. Parents won't consider their Jewishness to be merely an accident of birth. Instead, they will gain the necessary sense of a peoplehood bound by a common destiny and an emotional commitment to one another. They will recognize that just as the birth of their child represents a cosmic connection between the past and the future, so, too, the Jewish people have a profound connection to their collective history and common future. In this way a material thing will be invested with the loftiest spiritual implications. The gift becomes a very real symbol of our love for clal yisrael, our joy in being Jewish, and our concern that all our brothers and sisters experience the soaring power of their heritage. Suddenly, new parents will be intrigued by what the community has to offer, including nursery schools and summer camps. Never underestimate the capacity of Jews to respond to an act of nobility and compassion.

There are a number of administrative issues to be solved for the newborn gift to work. In order to identify newborn Jewish children, not easy at present, the

entire community will have to upgrade its outreach efforts tremendously. Federations will have the opportunity to revitalize themselves as they appeal to the next generation of Jews. The very networking that birthright israel demands will reinforce the concept of a chain of Jewish destiny, of *am echad* as our community reorients itself towards service and mutual welfare. How do we learn when a new Jewish baby is born? Can we organize effectively to reach out and even make a personal visit to each of these families? How do we avoid over-marketing in soliciting the families? How can we keep in touch over the years as families move, change priorities, careers, etc? What new resources are needed to pay for this gift? To realize the full scope of the newborn gift, we need increased cooperation from partners on an individual and organizational level.

The Jewish community must weigh its understanding of birthright israel. Is this a burdensome success whose financial cost outweighs its benefits? Or is this the opportunity of a lifetime for new community organizations and the embrace of whole new cohorts of Jews on a staggering scale? The decision is in our hands. A strong effort now can pave the way for a demographic flowering over the next decades. *

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Michael H. Steinhardt are President and Chairman, respectively, of Jewish Life Network.

Visiting Israel in Times of Crisis

We asked two birthright israel trip organizers, one from the Diaspora and one from Israel, to reflect on Israel programs during periods of increased tension in the region.

The View Outside

by DORON KRAKOW

It has been more than six months since the advent of the most recent Palestinian riots in Israel. One result is that Israel's tourism industry, so heavily dependent on American Jewish visitors, lies in tatters. With few exceptions, Jewish organizations and institutions have called off programs, events and activities due to take place in Israel. Young people are opting out of programs in Israel in numbers not seen in more than a decade. Among long-term programs with young people currently in Israel, the impact of the violence has been equally devastating. With few exceptions, like those programs run by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism and Hadassah's Young Judaea, participants have left programs in alarming numbers.

Nonetheless, these past few months have witnessed the second successful winter season for birthright israel, with almost 9,000 young people from around the world (6,000-plus from the United States) visiting Israel on free ten-day missions given to them through the generosity of the Jewish people. These young people made their first visit to Israel notwithstanding the crisis, notwithstanding the manner in which it has been represented in the media and notwithstanding the fact that the overwhelming majority were not committed Zionists before making the trip. At the end of the trip, all participants returned safely to their homes.

As the National Director of Young Judaea, which operates Year Course, a ten-month work-study program for recent high school graduates, my foremost responsibility is the safety and well-being of our more than 200 participants. Careful planning, consultation with Israel's security authorities and responsible guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of our program and participants have resulted in not one participant leaving the program due to security concerns on their part or on the part of their parents. In fact, we in the Jewish community are eminently capable of providing safe, secure, outstanding programs for ourselves and for our children.

As Israel confronts this latest stumbling block on its inexorable path to peace, we have a responsibility, as citizens of the Jewish Nation, to stand at her side. Our outspoken support and our unwillingness to be intimidated by exaggerated accounts of danger in Israel require that we continue to go, to learn and to send our children. Should there come a time when our ability to provide for the safety of young people on our programs is truly compromised, these programs will not run. But now is not that time.

In December, I spent time in Israel with the young people on Year Course. They'd been there since the start of this latest cycle of violence. As a result, they probably had as good an understanding of what was going on as the Israelis with whom they lived and worked. Though acutely aware of each day's events, their lives continued essentially as planned. So, too, do the lives of almost all Israelis and of Israel itself.

Groups of Year Course participants are located in a number of cities and towns throughout Israel where, among other elements of their program, they volunteer as teachers, helpers and aides in a variety of community institutions. At the conclusion of these volunteer segments, they invite the Israelis with whom they've worked to a party, to thank them for the opportunities and for the support and assistance they have been given. We had 30 participants in Tiberias, a town on the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) heavily dependent on tourism, which was suffering tremendously as a result of the crisis. When word of the party got out, more than 500 local residents, including the town's Mayor, turned out — not to be thanked, but to thank the kids, for coming and for staying.

Now, as much as ever, we need to stand together as a people. As long as the situation remains safe, we need to keep bringing our young people to Israel, a vital component in their education as Jews. birthright israel, though originally responding to a need, has now become the spearhead of an educational movement.

Doron Krakow is National Director of Young Judaea.

The View Inside

by ESTHER ABRAMOWITZ

Zeh gam ha 'birthright' shelanu. [It is also our Birthright],” proclaims Ora Merin, Manager of Kenes-Tlalim Educational Tours. Mother of four, born and raised in Israel, Merin explains that she is now beginning to understand the importance of her connection to the Jewish People. “It is not enough to only live in Israel. I am now beginning to understand the depth of my Jewishness. This was missing to us just the same as it was missing for the American students coming on birthright israel.”

I have lived in Jerusalem for ten years, and have worked with thousands of overseas students who have spent short and long periods in Israel. Last Fall, birthright israel struggled for months with the question of how to deliver a safe and secure trip while ensuring a celebratory Jewish journey. In the end, birthright israel was able to maintain strict security while not compromising the complete philosophy, operation, educational content and implementation of the trips. The impact of the experience was felt not only by the American students, but also by the hundreds of Israelis who participated in *Mifgashim* (encounters), served as tour educators and guides, and worked behind the scenes to create this powerful experience. The trips had their impact on the average Israeli as well. People on the streets, shop and restaurant owners, even my friends and relatives not connected with the project were touched in some way by the birthright israel student presence in the country. This “side benefit” of birthright israel was not necessarily anticipated, yet it is of paramount significance to the future of the Israel-Diaspora relationship.

Ezra Korman, Educational Director for Da'at Travel Services, comments that many Israeli-born tour educators felt that birthright israel was “like a breath of fresh air.” It was an opportunity to encounter world Jewry in an uncontrived and non-synthetic manner. The feeling was not that students were coming from America because they felt bad for the “poor” Israelis, but because they wanted to be in Israel. Korman continues, “The students showed that Israel

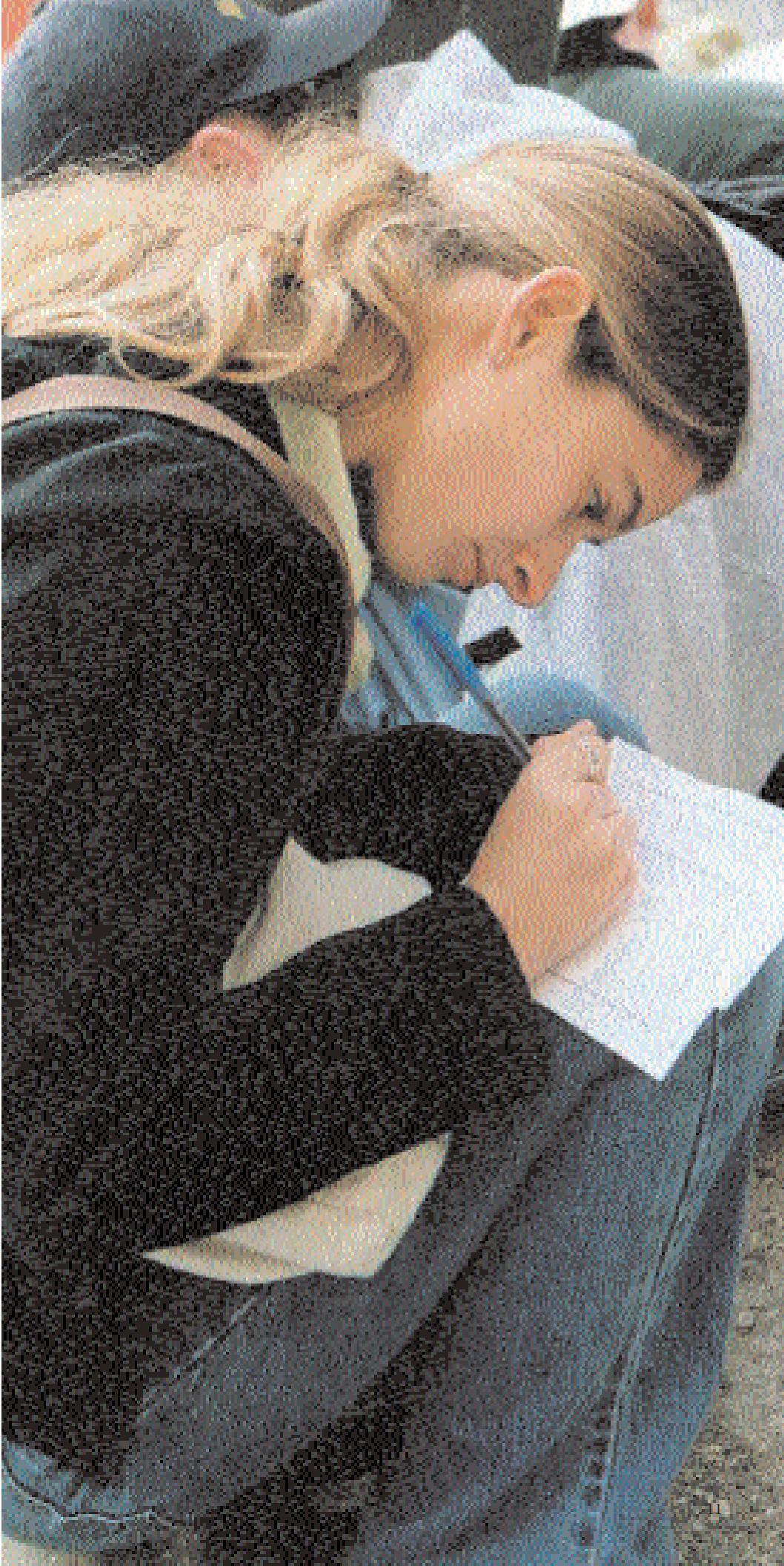
is not a place to come because it is in trouble, but because it is the Jewish homeland. The students came on birthright israel to be a part of our history. That is a very powerful statement."

While greeting one of the large Hillel groups at the airport, a tour educator came up to me with tears in her eyes and thanked me. She had not worked for three months, as all of her other groups had canceled. My "adopted" Israeli family, who generally does not understand my work with American students and frequently asks me when I am going to do "real social work," was overwhelmed with pride that the students came now. Ben Yehuda Street, desolate for months, was suddenly teeming with students in bright colors.

Letters of thanks have been pouring in from the various schools, army bases, and institutions that hosted the birthright israel students, asking when the next groups are coming. After spending three days touring with one of the buses, Israeli soldiers pleaded with their commanders to allow them to stay with their newfound friends. At Ohel Shalom Elementary School in Rosh Ha'ayin, American, Yemenite and Ethiopian students played a spontaneous game of soccer. Throughout the encounters, emails and addresses were exchanged.

At the recent humus and champagne party opening the spring semester at Hebrew University Hillel, a student ran up to me and said: "I know you. You taught that *niggun* on Friday night to our group on birthright israel last year. I'm back at Hebrew U. for the semester and so happy to be here!" I gave her a big hug, welcoming her while holding back my tears. As an American-born Israeli, I am inspired with hope that birthright israel students will continue to come to Israel not only to show solidarity, but to experience a rich and important piece of our Jewish heritage together with Israelis. This has wonderful implications for the future of the Jewish people as it connects the world Jewish student community with Israelis on a very basic Jewish level. 

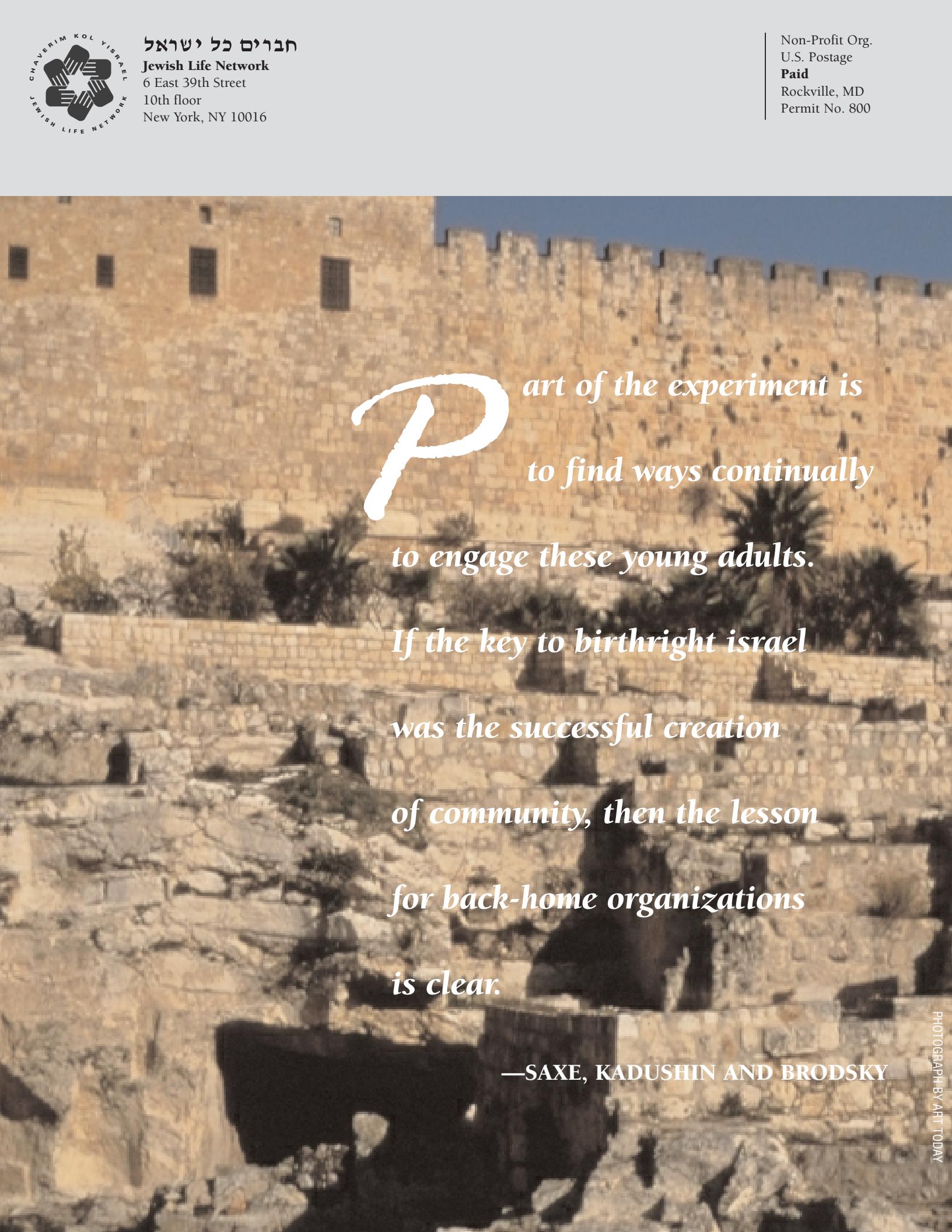
Esther Abramowitz is Associate Director of Programming at Hillels in Israel and the Former Soviet Union.





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*P*art of the experiment is
to find ways continually
to engage these young adults.

If the key to birthright israel
was the successful creation
of community, then the lesson
for back-home organizations
is clear.

—SAXE, KADUSHIN AND BRODSKY