

Fasten your Seatbelts!

“Shalom, this is the pilot speaking. Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff.” I took a deep breath. It was time to go home. I buckled my seatbelt, content with the expectation that I never had to return. Enough was enough.

Not every experience in Israel is extraordinary. Between the pressure to “feel at home” and the overly pushy salesperson at the *shuk*, people often return from their experience in Israel deflated and uninterested. Others are surprised by the reality on the ground: Israel is much more than camels, falafel and the Western Wall, and some aspects are not so pretty.

Since 1999, many individuals’ first experience in Israel is on a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip, a free 10-day trip to Israel for Jewish young adults between the ages of 18 and 26. Taglit-Birthright Israel’s vision seeks no less than “to change the course of Jewish history and ensure the continuity of the Jewish people by strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and solidarity with Israel via an educational trip to Israel.”¹ The goal is not just simply to connect Jewish participants to the Jewish homeland, but also to connect them to their Jewish selves back home. This is the ideal, but not always the reality. As sociologist Shaul Kelner demonstrates in his book, “Tours That Bind,” Taglit-Birthright Israel trips actually serve to build stronger Diaspora Jewish identities in their participants rather than an attachment to Israel. While this is a worthwhile endeavor, it turns out that it is not the intended goal of Birthright Israel.

¹ <http://www.birthrightisrael.com/TaglitBirthrightIsraelStory/Pages/Objectives.aspx#>

Shaul Kelner is not alone in his analysis. Steven M. Cohen and Ezra Kopelowitz, also sociologists, researched Israel programs of various lengths and their impact on Jewish engagement and Israel attachment.² To gauge the participants’ feelings of attachment towards Israel, the participants of the survey answered the question, “How emotionally attached to Israel are you?” Surprisingly, only 33% of those who participated in one short-term program (like Birthright) responded that they felt “Very much connected to Israel.” On the contrary, 64% of those who participated in *more* than one short-term program reported feeling attached to Israel. Another category the survey explored was the participants’ “priority of being Jewish.” This topic looked at measures of Jewish identity. The results reinforce that one short-term program is not enough to increase the importance of Judaism in a person’s life, as follows:

	One short-term program	One short-term program, followed by another short term program (0-4 months)
Important to raise kids as Jews	54%	77%
Importance of being Jewish	53%	76%

As seen through this data, participants who only went on a single short-term program, such as Birthright, reported placing lower importance on being Jewish than their peers who went on longer, or multiple programs. While it may at first seem that this evidence points to longer experiences in Israel fostering stronger bonds with Israel and strengthening the participants’ Jewish identity, there is another, even more compelling interpretation of this data.

² <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/conferences/taglitconf/pdfs/CohenSteven4.pdf>

A more comprehensive explanation is that Taglit-Birthright Israel does not adequately prepare participants for what they hope will be a truly transformative 10-day experience in Israel. By their own admission, Taglit-Birthright Israel is not just about visiting Israel and the significant sites. It is about connecting Jewish young adults to a community, to a narrative, and to their Jewish selves. However, this goal cannot be accomplished solely between the arrival and departure gate at Ben Gurion International Airport. As a process of human change, it takes time and reflection both before and after the experience, and participants need and deserve this guided reflection.

One model that emphasizes the significance of reflection before and after an experience is the experiential education model known as, “Learn one, do one, teach one.” This technique is closely followed in medical schools in order to ensure that students fully internalize what they are learning. This model has much to offer Israel trip education, too. When a group of young adults travel and interact first hand with the land, the people and the society, this accomplishes the “do one” component of the model. As medical schools know, people cannot fully internalize an experience if they simply “do it,” without being a learner before or a teacher afterward. The beginning portion of the bridge between personal knowledge and experience, and the actual Taglit-Birthright trip is missing. Not only do the segments of wood need to be added to bridge the gap, but those first steps must also be welcoming.

This can be accomplished by creating a safe environment prior to the trip, like an orientation. This gathering will allow the participants to get to know their Jewish selves and their fellow travelers, and can also introduce them to tools, which will assist them as they journey to this new and largely foreign “homeland.” This type of orientation serves

as the “learn one” component. It gives participants a platform to begin thinking about the greater purpose of the trip. But even this is not enough. The participants also deserve an opportunity to “teach one.” For this, they could be blogging and/or creating a video composed of film clips taped by participants during their experience in Israel. These video clips could capture the feelings, the love and the challenges the participants are experiencing during their time in Israel. The video and blog entries should be widely circulated through the participants’ communities through which they can show a first-hand perspective of Israel. Through these forms of media, the participants will return as ambassadors of their own Israel experience to their home community.

Taglit-Birthright Israel answered and continues to answer the question of “how can someone create a meaningful relationship with Israel without actually traveling there?” by declaring, “You can’t! You must go there and see it for yourself.” Because of this philosophy, Taglit-Birthright Israel has changed the way young Jewish adults around the world engage with Israel, even through the simple fact of having brought over 350,000 young adults to Israel.³ Many of those individuals would never have otherwise had the financial means to travel to Israel, but Taglit-Birthright Israel removed that massive obstacle. They are doing good work—but it has the potential to be great. Millions of dollars are spent each year on this important work, but **only 33% of participants are coming home feeling attached to Israel.** This is one of Taglit-Birthright Israel’s main goals and with a 33% success rate it is failing. Participants should not be expected to bridge that gap by themselves. It is Taglit-Birthright Israel’s and Israel educator’s responsibility to push the limits of this extraordinary program and its

³ <http://www.birthrightisrael.com/TaglitBirthrightIsraelStory/Pages/Our-Achievements.aspx>

participants. Indeed, it is each and every Jewish person's birthright to have (at least one) Israel experience that leaves him or her breathless and wanting more. If participants are to encounter Israel as that "great warehouse of Jewish memories" as long time Jewish peoplehood expert Avraham Infeld claims it is, then birthright must come in the form of more than catapulting them into that complex country and saying, "welcome home."⁴

Instead, when Israel trip participants hear, "Shalom, this is your pilot speaking. Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff," they could be thinking to themselves, "When am I coming back?"

⁴ <http://www.melitz.org.il/avraham-infeld-melitz-jewish-education-venture-fund>

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