How to Avoid the Most Expensive Oversight in Jewish Educational History

Since its inception, Birthright Israel has maintained that, “it is every Jew’s birthright to visit Israel.” With that unflinching conviction and the financial capital to support it, the program has availed the opportunity to over two hundred thousand young adult Jews; its vision has become reality. These young adult Jews received a gift of Israel education, worth an estimated $3,000. Stakeholders note the high impact of the trip and desire a way to transfer the trip’s momentum to participants’ local communities upon their return. With this in mind, the question surfaced about post-trip programming. Unfortunately, recent studies such as “Generation Birthright Israel” (Saxe, et al., 2009) reveal that despite the two year old post-trip educational initiative called Birthright Israel NEXT, many Birthright Israel alumni are ill-equipped to return the investment and engage in Jewish life once back in their home communities. Although much research exists about the importance of encouraging engagement, a lingering question begs to be asked. While so many ask what happens to continued identity formation once that El Al flight returns; shockingly, no one is inquiring about what happens before it even takes off.

The trip is designed to introduce participants to all aspects of Israel; people, places, sights, smells, and sounds. It is not, however, designed to be a first lesson in Jewish education. Herein lies the issue: though Birthright is an Israel education trip and markets itself as such, its current participants are not the same Birthright Israel participants of 2000. Ten years ago, 75% of Birthright Israel participants were involved
with Hillel on campus and represented a degree of affiliation with the Jewish community (Saxe, 2000). To varying degrees, someone with that level of commitment is part of some social network with other Jews and engaged with his/her Jewish identity formation. Participant trends today are different; it is a new decade and with it comes a new generation of Birthright Israel travelers.

The mission has stayed the same, but the demographic has grown and changed to reflect a more diverse American Jewish experience – that of the sovereign self, as Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen put it in their book, *The Jew Within* (2000). The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University frequently analyzes this program, and their data reflects this change. In “Generation Birthright Israel,” findings show that “the backgrounds of applicants cover virtually the entire spectrum of Jewish experiences from those who grew up completely disengaged from Jewish life to those raised in highly engaged households.” Furthermore, at the time of this study, 28% of these applicants identified as “just Jewish,” 21% Reform or Reconstructionist, 23% Conservative, and 24% Orthodox (Saxe et al., 2009, p. 9). It goes on to note that in recent years, “the proportions of Orthodox applicants has decreased substantially, while the percentage of applicants with limited Jewish education and those who came from disengaged households increased.” These numbers point to a noticeable disconnect between participants’ prior Jewish knowledge and the program’s current objectives. This is further supported by the fact that when it comes to affiliation with Jewish organizations, this generation “seeks to express their Jewish identities in less structured ways” (cited in Saxe et al., p. 23).
Low Jewish education levels, combined with limited Jewish experiences and community affiliation, show that numerous Birthright Israel travelers go on the trip without any of the prior Jewish background knowledge needed to frame their intense 10-day experience. Instead of enhancing these participants’ understanding of Judaism and their Jewish selves, the trip gives them but a taste of what Jewish life and Jewish community can be in their daily lives. The current post-trip initiative called Birthright Israel NEXT, which seeks to integrate the Birthright Israel experience of continued identity formation and communal involvement, and its “no strings attached motto,” might miss the mark in our communities. While NEXT attracts a crowd for mega concerts, it has yet to work with communities to tap into the Jewish communal interests of Birthright Israel alumni. As Fern Chertok, co-author of “Tourists, Travelers and Citizens” reports, “Alums are happy to eat free food and drink free beer at those big events, but they don’t feel it meets their needs to find Jewish community” (quoted in Fishkoff, 2009).

If it can collaborate with local communities, it is possible for Birthright Israel to impact Jewish communal life too. Accommodating 40,000 of these young Jewish adults between ages 18 - 26 per year, it is like the largest Jewish youth group ever; it is a movement in and of itself. This number is so significant that if financial support continues, there will come a time when “the majority of North American Jewish young adults would eventually benefit of an Israel education experience by the time they reached their mid twenties,” (cited in Saxe et al., 2009). Therefore, with the partnership of Jewish communities, Birthright Israel can redefine communal activism for participants and educate them how to get involved. People tend to care about things that have direct impact on them, after all.
Despite their limited Jewish education and weak communal ties, young American Jewish adults yearn to experience the phenomenon of Birthright Israel for themselves. The waitlist is so large in Los Angeles, for example, that as recently as January fifth, 2010, the Los Angeles Jewish Federation granted the organization $2.1 million to get its community members off the waiting list and on the trip. Outpourings of trip funding like this send more to Israel, but do not address the overlooked issue at hand: Participants want to learn more about their Jewish roots and culture (Fishkoff, 2009). While attending services may not be their thing, the notion of *klal Yisrael*, is.

Given Birthright’s prominence, it seems logical that it would facilitate learning and bolster identity formation *before* the intense ten-day trip. The fact that it does not is no less than a missed opportunity for shaping the future of the Jewish world. Jewish education is key; and as our young adult generation seeks people-to-people connectivity, it will take more than a “Go Learn” section on the program’s website. As difficult as it might be to think up a more formal approach, some ideas for experimentation are seminars, webinars, and perhaps college credit for a preparatory Birthright course. The core curriculum should cover Jewish heritage from antiquity to today including Jewish history, with an emphasis on American Jewish history, holidays and ritual objects, Israel education, and optional Hebrew. Combining the experiential with the practical could create a solid program that teaches one how to apply Birthright Israel’s lessons. *Klal Yisrael* should be a guiding principle of the program not just because it is one’s “Birthright,” but if a formal education component continues to be ignored, Birthright Israel could be the most expensive oversight in Jewish educational history.
Works Cited


