

Taglit-Birthright Israel

Lauren Allison, University of Southern California
2013

Aim: Taglit-Birthright Israel, or Birthright, brings non-Israeli Jewish young people between the ages of 18 and 26 years old to Israel for a 10 day trip with the aim of connecting the greater Jewish diaspora, creating external advocates for Israel and strengthening the Jewish identity worldwide.

Scenario: Birthright's first trip was in the winter of 1999. Named Taglit-Birthright Israel ('Taglit' means 'discovery' in Hebrew), it was founded by businessmen Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt who are known for their philanthropic work, especially within the Jewish community. The funding for the program is shared between the founders and the Israeli Government as well as other Jewish philanthropists and organizations. In part, the project was in response to a 1990 survey by the National Jewish Population Survey which revealed that 52% of Jewish Americans were marrying non-Jewish partners. The issue of assimilation and general need for greater connection with Israel inspired the project. Bronfman and Steinhardt sought to strengthen Jewish identity amongst the Jewish diaspora and create external support for the Israeli state by designing an exchange program bringing young people of Jewish ancestry to Israel. Founder Bronfman thought of the start of the program as "the selling of Jewishness to the Jews." The founders and supporters hoped that this initiative would have a positive impact on the views held by participants regarding Israel and the Jewish religion by allowing them to engage with their heritage in a tangible way.

Program Activity: Twice a year, over 15,000 18 to 26 year olds are brought to Israel for a 10 day all-expenses paid trip to Israel. Birthright is only open to those who have at least one parent of Jewish ancestry, who do not actively practice a religion apart from Judaism and who have not been to Israel after the age of 12 year's old. The participants stay in a group environment with fellow Birthrighters from their country and are given a tour of Israel by professional tour guides, top historians and educators. The trip also includes 'Mifgash' ('encounters')- which are young Israeli's, usually IDF soldiers, who meet with the group and travel with them for around 5-7 days. The groups visit important historical and cultural sites such as The Western Wall, the Dead Sea or Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. They also participate in group activities such as kayaking, wine tasting and pita bread making. The tours are arranged by contracted tour companies and have core sites which must be visited and core themes that must be discussed such as The History of Zionism.

The founders of the program picked this age group as they believed that the age range presented a time when people try to determine and define their own identities. The founders wanted to show the participants aspects of their Jewish ancestry not normally experienced by the diaspora in the hopes that Judaism would play some part in their future lives. As Israel is considered the spiritual home of Judaism, this program has a double-edge aim and impact in generating support for

Israel abroad in the form of these participants acting as advocates upon return. The importance of this cultural diplomacy activity as a foreign policy tool for Israel is reflected in support given to Birthright by the Israeli government. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced in 2011 that the Israel government would increase funding to \$100 million over three years (that amount was the entire total provided by the Israeli government to the program over the 10 previous years). This led to an increase from 30,000 participants a year to a predicted 51,000 for the year 2013.

It is estimated that by 2015, one in every two Jewish young diaspora adults will have participated in this program. To date, there have been over 340,000 participants from 62 countries.

Analysis: While very little evidence has been collected in relation to negative experiences on the Birthright program, there have been some examples of individuals lying about their heritage and religious beliefs in order to get a free trip to volunteer in the Palestinian Territories.

Overwhelmingly, most researchers believe that this program has positively impacted the Jewish diaspora youth. Reports by Brandeis University have revealed that alumni were 46 percent more likely to feel 'very much connected to Israel' than those who applied but did not participate in the program (additionally, an estimated 17,000 Birthright alumni now have settled in Israel). They noted the greatest 'Taglit' effect was amongst those from relatively weaker Jewish backgrounds. This factor is important to note in relation to the initial aim of the program of engaging diaspora members who were likely to assimilate and move away from Jewish culture. Additionally, participants were 51 percent more likely to marry another Jewish person. This will undoubtedly have long-term results in relation to future assimilation rates.

This example also demonstrates a success in NGO and government partnership. The common and complimentary goals linking Jewish diaspora community and the State of Israel maximised the funding base for the initiative. Funding is crucial to Birthright. The 'free' element of the trip is an important incentive for participation and creates wide accessibility.

The results of this example demonstrate the positive effect that exchange programs to 'home countries' can have on diaspora youth. The combination of religious identity, historical context and building of diaspora community networks have provided an interesting framework that should be analysed further to evaluate how such programs can be adapted as a cultural diplomacy tool for other contexts. Recognising the significance of this program, Hungary, Greece and Armenia have emulated this program with their own initiatives to bring diaspora on tours to their respective 'homelands'.

Learning Points:

Taglit-Birthright highlights the importance of engaging diaspora as a foreign policy goal. From the increasing Israeli government support, it is clear that the administration hold this form of engagement as an important form of diaspora diplomacy.

The program also highlights the value of leveraging a religious identity and its ready-made symbolism to create a greater sense of community amongst diaspora. The Birthright experience is reported to be a very 'emotional' program, tying religious historical events with a sense of common-shared history amongst participants.

Another major important point to highlight is that of 'natural audiences'. While impact rates seem to be successful, this program appealed to an age range and overall demographic which generally possess a natural empathy towards the values and aims of the initiative.

Key Sources:

Taglit-Birthright Israel Website

<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/Pages/Default.aspx>

Key Online Resources & Research:

Brandeis University, Jewish Futures Project 'The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2010 Update' by Saxe et. al (2010)

Accessible at :

<http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/jewish%20futures/Jewish.Futures.02.08.11.pdf>

Cohen, Eric H. "*Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*(review)." *American Jewish History* 94.3 (2009): 250-53.

Accessible at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ajh/summary/v094/94.3.cohen.html>

Feldman, Kiera. "Exchange: Birthright Israel's Jewish Journey." *The Nation* September 19th (2011): n. pag. *The Nation*. A=

Accessible at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/163047/exchange-birthright-israels-jewish-journey#>

Saxe et. al. (2010) 'Intermarriage: The Impact and Lessons of Taglit-Birthright Israel'

Accessible at:

http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/Intermarriage_Impact.12.13.10.pdf

Ben-Moshe, Danny, and Zohar Segev. *Israel, the Diaspora, and Jewish Identity*. Brighton, England: Sussex Academic, 2007. Print.

Cohen, Erik. *Youth Tourism to Israel: Educational Experiences of the Diaspora*.

Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2008. Print.

Kelner, Shaul. *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*.
New York: New York UP, 2010. Print.