

**COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY:
STUDIES OF BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL ALUMNI**

**PHASE I:
Jewish Young Adults and their Lives in Four Centers of
North American Jewish Life**

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More than 125,000 young adults from North America have already participated in Birthright Israel. Evaluation studies make clear that the program has a consistent and strong impact on participants' Jewish identities, connections to Israel, and their feelings about being part of the Jewish people (see Saxe, Sasson & Hecht, 2006; Saxe, Sasson, Phillips, Hecht & Wright, 2007). These findings are based on comparisons between participants and similar peers who have not participated in the program, and there is evidence that the attitudinal impact is sustained one to three years after the experience. Nevertheless, alumni do not consistently translate their heightened interest in Jewish life into involvement with Jewish organizations or the broader Jewish community (Sasson, Saxe, Rosen, Selinger-Abutbul & Hecht, 2007). This proposal describes the first phase of a research effort to understand how Birthright Israel alumni interact with Jewish communities. Our goal is to develop knowledge about members of the "Birthright Israel generation" that can be used more generally to understand how best to engage young adult Jews. The specific focus of Phase I is to gather data about young adult Jews and Jewish organizations in four of the largest communities in North America.

Substantively, it should not be surprising that participation in a program such as Birthright Israel primarily influences attachment to Israel and the Jewish people and appears to have limited effects on engagement of young adults with Jewish communal organizations. As Wuthnow (2007) has recently shown among primarily non-Jewish young adults, engagement in religious organizations has generally declined in the U.S. population. As longevity has increased, behaviors associated with adulthood—including forming a family and joining a religious congregation—increasingly occur later in life, if at all. Similar findings have been reported in research on Jewish young adults (Reboot, 2005; Reboot, 2006; Ukeles, Miller & Beck, 2006).

However, several recent studies suggest the possibility of transforming the tendency among young adults to disengage from Jewish communal life. Recent research by Cohen & Kelman (2007, 2005) identifies several innovative programs that have captured the interests of many Jewish young adults. In addition, new pilot research on Birthright Israel alumni in five communities (Sasson, et al., 2007) reports a significant divergence between their tastes and aspirations and the opportunities for Jewish engagement in their immediate environment. The pilot study also found a general

demand for innovative programs that connect Jewish young adults to their peers outside of the conventional synagogue and Hillel frameworks. Although provisional, these findings suggest the possibility of transforming the connections of Birthright alumni into multiple and lasting connections to Jewish communal life.

Building on this foundation, the proposed study will assess the identities, experiences, and aspirations of Birthright Israel alumni, and how they relate to opportunities for engagement in their communities. We also seek to understand how well programs targeted, more broadly, at Jewish young adults meet their diverse needs and aspirations. What kinds of new institutions and initiatives will encourage Jewish communal engagement in the next generation of Jewishly-identified but organizationally-disengaged Jewish young adults? The study builds on the program of research that the Cohen Center/Steinhardt Institute has conducted with Birthright Israel alumni over the last eight years. The research includes dozens of surveys (with nearly 75,000 respondents, see, for example, Saxe, et al., 2007) as well as observational/interview studies (e.g., Sasson et al., 2007), and peer reviewed scientific articles (e.g., Kadushin et al., 2007). The goal is to provide a knowledge base for efforts (including Birthright Next) to enhance engagement among Jewish young adults.

This proposal describes Phase I of an anticipated multi-year project. The overall plan will be to conduct research in each of the cities targeted for inclusion in the Birthright Next alumni initiative. During the first phase, research will focus on four large metropolitan areas that are also centers of American Jewish life: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Toronto. In each city, data collection will be designed to: (a) Map the diverse Jewish identities of the alumni population; b) Understand the Jewish aspirations and needs of Birthright Israel alumni, as well as their experiences with existing Jewish programs and organizations; and (c) Describe the “opportunity structures” for Jewish engagement by young adults in each of the research sites. The sections that follow describe each of these goals as well as the attendant research tasks.

Jewish Identities

Existing research on the identities of Jewish young adults (Reboot, 2005; Reboot, 2006; Ukeles, Miller & Beck, 2006) identifies important, generation-specific characteristics, such as a tendency of contemporary young adults to embrace multiple

identities, and to seek to customize and personalize their worlds. Rather than provide nuanced descriptions of the various types (“market segments”), such studies describe the young adult demographic in broad brush strokes. To better understand the diversity of identities among Birthright alumni, 60 in-depth interviews will be conducted with a sample of alumni aged 22-30.

The sample will be gender-balanced, and varied systematically across a number of additional variables, including year of trip, Jewish background, and city of residence. Interviews will be conducted in the four cities included in Phase I of the community study, plus a test phase in Boston. After completion of the first two-thirds of the interviews, the sampling strategy for the final third will be modified, as necessary, to ensure broad representation of young adult identities and lifestyles.

Interviews will be conducted in-person by members of the Cohen Center field research staff. An interview protocol will be developed and interviewers will be trained to insure comparability across interviews. The interview will include questions on the respondents’ interests and commitments, extending from the casual and time-limited to the more serious and enduring dimensions of their lives. Questions will thus focus on preferences in entertainment, recreation and hobbies, as well as choices regarding career, life-partner, and family. The interviews will aim to uncover what respondents care about, and how they organize their lifestyles in relation to their commitments. The interviews will simultaneously explore the place of Jewish practice and identity in the broader mix of interests, commitments, identities, and practices. Accordingly, the interviews will trace respondents’ Jewish experiences prior to and since Birthright Israel, including their experiences with young adult Jewish activities designed for the Birthright Israel alumni population. The interviews will last 60-90 minute and they will be transcribed for later analysis.

Needs and Aspirations

Assessment of alumni needs and aspirations will utilize procedures tested in the pilot community study (Sasson, et al., 2007). Insofar as the focus will be on common experiences and shared aspirations, the research protocol will include focus group interviews. At least four focus groups (each comprised of 10-12 participants) will be conducted in each of the research cities with alumni aged 22-30. To provide breadth

beyond the focus group participants, 25-30 additional interviews will be conducted by telephone in each city. Participants both for the focus groups and individual interviews will be drawn from respondents to Birthright Israel evaluation surveys and will include those with different levels of attachment/engagement to Jewish life.

Interviewers and focus group leaders will be drawn from Cohen Center field researchers, supplemented by consultants based in each of the communities. Consultants will be selected for their interviewing skills, their knowledge of a specific Jewish community and their ability to relate to young adults. We have an existing network of consultants upon which to draw.

The focus groups conducted in each community will probe the experiences of the alumni population with Jewish organizations and programs since the Birthright Israel trip. Participants in the discussions will be asked what kinds of Jewish programs they have attended and how they felt about those experiences. They will also be asked to discuss the attractiveness of a variety of specific program ideas, and more generally the kinds of Jewish experiences they would like to have in the future. The focus group setting will enable participants to respond to and build upon one another's ideas, and in so doing reveal the experiences and assumptions they share in common.

Individual telephone interviews (25-30) will also be conducted in each community to broaden our ability to understand the diverse needs of members of the Birthright Israel generation. Along with focus group participants (about 40 per city) and intensive face-to-face interviewees (about 12 per city), the telephone interviewees will increase the overall sample per city to about 80 individuals. The broader research population achieved by the telephone interviews will improve the generalizability of findings, and provide an opportunity to investigate how background factors and specific Birthright Israel experiences affect participants' involvement in the community.

Jewish Opportunity Structures

The identities, needs and aspirations of Birthright Israel alumni are only part of the picture we want to bring into focus. The other part consists of the range of existing opportunities for young adult Jewish engagement in the four research sites. What programs and organizations are currently engaged in outreach to Jewish young adults in these centers of American Jewish life? What specific techniques do they utilize to reach

Birthright Israel alumni and with what results? How do their offerings address the needs and aspirations of diverse categories of Birthright Israel alumni and other Jewish young adults?

Using and adapting the protocols developed in the pilot community study, interviews will be conducted with directors and staff members of Jewish organizations engaged in outreach to Jewish young adults in the four research sites. The interviews will map the organizational and programmatic opportunities available to Birthright Israel alumni, the strategies of recruitment and engagement, and future plans to meet the needs of the next generation of American Jewry. In selecting individuals to interview, a wide net will be cast for programs and institutions that have contact with Jewish young adults, to provide as broad a context as possible for understanding patterns of engagement and prospects for change.

Reports

The results of the field research during Phase I will be synthesized and integrated into two primary research reports. The first report will focus on the engagement of Birthright Israel alumni in each of the communities and develop the implications for strategic planning in these communities and elsewhere. The report on each community will be contextualized by survey data (from the evaluation studies of Birthright Israel) that describes the characteristics of alumni in each community. In conjunction with the survey data and with additional information being collected as part of a longitudinal study of the Birthright Israel alumni population, the report will identify opportunities and frame key decisions for funders and policy makers concerned about the Jewish opportunities of the Birthright Israel alumni population, and the broader population of Jewish young adults in North America.

The second report will examine the identities of Birthright Israel alumni. Drawing on coded transcripts of the intensive interviews, the report will identify constellations of interests, commitments, and lifestyles, and on that basis, identify a range of alumni types. The typology of alumni will be conceptualized with an eye towards its ultimate utility in the allocation of resources and crafting of programs to meet the needs of the alumni population. Estimations of the distribution of types across geographic, age, and other variables will be included. The final report will distill key findings and also

provide rich, detailed narrative. The goal will be a report that is immediately useful, but also nuanced, subtle, and of enduring value as a description of the multiple identities and commitments of a key segment of the American Jewish community.

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