

**GUEST-HOST ENCOUNTERS IN DIASPORA-HERITAGE TOURISM:  
THE TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL MIFGASH**

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## GUEST-HOST ENCOUNTERS IN DIASPORA-HERITAGE TOURISM: THE TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL MIFGASH

### Introduction

Cross-cultural encounters that occur in the context of diaspora-heritage tourism are an increasingly important vehicle for constructing homeland attachment, transnational solidarity and mutual understanding. A specialized form of educational travel, heritage tourism entails visits to places of historical or cultural significance (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Discourse that develops in the context of such visits often serves as a “signifier of the nation as a community with common beliefs, an historic homeland and as a common culture” (Palmer, 1999, p. 319). Thus, heritage tourism can serve as a vehicle for constructing national identities and nationalism (Palmer, 1999). In addition, when tourists are diasporans visiting their homeland, heritage tourism can contribute to the construction of “long-distance nationalism,” defined by Glick Schiller as “a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to specific territory that they see as their ancestral home” (Glick Schiller, 2004; see also Anderson, 1998, pp. 58-77; Pryke, 2003). When diasporans and homelanders encounter one another in the context of heritage tourism the experience may also lead to feelings of solidarity within the group and transnational solidarity with the broader collective. Such interactions can also lead to mutual understanding about the cultures, values, and lifestyles of diaspora and homeland societies, although not necessarily in a symmetrical fashion.

This paper focuses on the case of the Taglit-Birthright Israel (Taglit) educational trips and, in particular, one component of the program: the cross-cultural encounters—*mifgashim*—that occur between young adult participants from North America and their Israeli peers. The present analysis of *mifgashim*, developed from data that captures the perspectives of both North

Americans and Israeli participants, is used to suggest the multiple ways diaspora-heritage tourism can influence personal and collective identities. Taglit mifgashim are treated here as a form of “experiential education” (Dewey, 1938) in which individual interactions and group experiences – developing against the backdrop of site visits and tour-guide narratives – combine to foster the program's educational goals (cf. Saxe & Chazan, 2008, pp. 99-101). This approach entails a research focus on both formal and informal aspects of the encounters, as well as the meanings that diasporan and homeland participants derive from the experience.

### Background

The “Israel experience” youth tour first emerged in the 1950s and, in the intervening sixty years, has matured into a plethora of programs and organizations that connect diaspora and homeland youth and young adults (Cohen, 2008; Mittelberg, 1999; Shapiro, 2006). Although substantial numbers of diaspora youth participated in Israel educational programs during the 1970s and 1980s, the scale of these efforts dramatically increased in late 1999, with the launch of Taglit-Birthright Israel. The program, sponsored by American Jewish philanthropists, with additional support from the Government of Israel and Jewish communal funds, provides free ten-day trips to diaspora Jewish young adults (see Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Each diaspora tour group of about 40 visitors is accompanied by five to eight Israeli young adult counterparts who join the trip as participants rather than as members of the staff. More than 220,000 diaspora tourists (three-quarters from North America) and 40,000 Israeli young adults have participated in trips during Taglit’s first decade (Saxe et. al., 2009).

Taglit trips are conducted by more than a dozen independent educational tour organizations, each of which receives per-capita payments from the Taglit organization. Taglit establishes and enforces logistical and educational standards for trip providers. Although there

are required thematic elements, tours vary somewhat in their emphasis and how they deliver educational content. Thus, for example, some programs are conducted in the context of outdoor adventure or hiking, while others emphasize intensive interaction with Israelis, peace and justice, spirituality, and/or varying degrees of Jewish religiosity. All trips, however, share a common core itinerary that includes visits to iconic Jewish-Israeli tour sites such as the Western Wall, the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, and Masada (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Taglit has become a pioneer in the field of diaspora-heritage tourism and other state-linked diaspora communities have sought to emulate its example (Kelner, 2010; see also, Sheffer, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Taglit's aim is to "send thousands of young Jewish adults from all over the world to Israel as a gift in order to diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world; to strengthen the sense of solidarity among world Jewry; and to strengthen participants' personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people" ("Taglit-Birthright Israel/About Us," n.d.). With an explicit focus on cultivating Jewish identity and global Jewish solidarity (i.e., "peoplehood"), Taglit differs from some earlier models of Israel experience tourism that emphasized the virtue of *aliyah* (immigration to the homeland). Taglit's central aim is to foster Jewish identity and solidarity for those who will remain in the diaspora.

Field observations of Taglit tours have recorded the most common educational themes (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). At archeological sites, tour guides tend to emphasize the historical origins of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. At sites associated with the Holocaust and founding of the state, they emphasize the rise of Zionism (Jewish nationalism) in response to European anti-Semitism. Finally, at sites commemorating Israel's wars, they emphasize Israel's struggle to maintain its foothold in a hostile Middle East environment. The trips present other narratives as well—including Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews and Israel as a high-tech

industrial powerhouse—but less prominently and consistently. Thus, although tour guides’ personal political orientations span the political spectrum from center-right to center-left, the narratives they develop during the trips tend to reflect Zionist themes and be aimed at fostering strong ties to the Jewish state.

The *mifgash* (sing.) component of Taglit has evolved since the first trips in 1999. Initially, most tour groups did not include Israeli young adults as participants. Instead, most groups participated in structured encounters with Israeli peers that lasted a couple of hours, typically consisting of a facilitated conversation and a meal or visit to a shopping mall. Observers noted that “although some mifgashim fostered greater dialogue and relationships than others, in most cases there simply was not enough time to meet the curricular goals that motivated the inclusion of the mifgash” (Kelner, Saxe, & Kadushin, 2000). The few tours that included Israelis for longer periods of time inspired program sponsors to experiment with a more robust mifgash format. Beginning in the second year of the program, groups of Israelis were included as participants on all Taglit tours, typically for two days, although some tour providers included Israelis for the entire duration of the trip. The response to the intensified mifgash was positive, and the program was further expanded. Since 2006, Taglit tour groups include a group of Israelis for at least half of the duration of the tour; many include Israelis for the full ten days. Because Taglit participants are 18 to 26 years old, their peers are typically young adult Israelis doing army service. The army (IDF) has become a partner with Taglit and gives soldiers leave in order to participate.

As the mifgash component of Taglit expanded, its intellectual and programmatic rationale also evolved. During the first two phases of its development, the mifgash focused exclusively on the diaspora visitors; in effect, Taglit leaders treated the encounters as a tool to advance

educational goals. As experience with the more substantial mifgashim accumulated however, Taglit leaders became increasingly aware of the impact on Israeli participants as well as diasporans. The mifgash is now considered not only an educational tool for diaspora participants but also a vehicle to foster pride among Israeli participants—in the state of Israel and military service—as well as increased identification with global Jewry and Jewish identity (“Taglit-Birthright Israel/About Us,” n.d.).

Taglit leaders have also begun to describe the goals of the mifgash in broader terms. In the most expansive description of the program, it is seen as a reciprocal exchange in which diaspora visitors learn about Jewish life in Israel and Israelis learn about life in the Jewish diaspora (Saxe & Chazan, 2008, p. 74). According to this view, alongside its other objectives, the mifgash provides participants with an opportunity to learn about the diverse models of identity and culture that comprise both diaspora and homeland Jewish life. Thus, for example, North American Jews learn about Jewish life in a Hebrew-speaking majority Jewish society in which “Jewishness” is taken for granted and Jewish culture is largely secular. Simultaneously, Israelis learn about alternative expressions of Judaism (e.g. egalitarian worship services) that flourish outside of Israel as well as the American Jewish emphasis on liberalism, feminism, and social justice (see Liebman & Cohen, 1990; Moore & Troen, 2001).

Previous research on Taglit—including surveys conducted before and at various intervals following the trips—has consistently documented the program’s impact on diaspora tourists. Participants reported stronger feelings of connection to Israel and the worldwide Jewish people than their peers who applied to the program but did not go (i.e. the control group; see Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2008). Such feelings persisted several years after the trips (Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006). The evaluation studies also consistently

identified the mifgash as a major reason for the program's impact on diaspora participants (Ibid.). Previous research on Taglit mifgashim has employed qualitative methods to examine mainly social psychological dynamics (Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Wolf, 2007). In particular, such research has examined aspects of the encounters that foster awareness of national differences versus aspects that advance awareness of commonalities (Wolf, 2007). The present research is the first to employ survey research techniques alongside qualitative methods to investigate the mifgash phenomenon in a comparatively large sample of cases. The goal of the present study is to understand the significance of the mifgash for both homeland and diaspora participants, and its potential for fostering homeland attachment, transnational solidarity and mutual understanding.

### Methodology

The study collected qualitative data through participant observation, field observation, and interviews with participants. Quantitative data was gathered through internet and telephone surveys.

#### *Qualitative Data*

During the summer of 2007, a sample of twenty four groups, each including approximately 40 diaspora visitors and six to eight Israeli mifgash participants, was selected. The sample included several tours organized by each of the eight largest Taglit trip providers. Field observers attended the orientation sessions for Israelis participating in the program. Observers also attended the "wrap-up" discussions held on the final day of each trip. In addition, one Israeli participant was recruited from each tour group to volunteer as a participant-observer. These individuals were asked to keep a diary describing the formal and informal aspects of the program as well as their own reactions to the experience.<sup>3</sup>

Approximately one month following the trips, focus group interviews (with three to five Israelis per group) were conducted with Israeli participants on six of the twenty tours.<sup>4</sup> Questions pertaining to the mifgash experience were also asked in focus groups of North American participants convened for various research purposes during the year 2007.<sup>5</sup>

### *Survey Data*

A sample of 85 tour groups (including the 20 groups selected for qualitative study) was selected for a telephone survey of Israeli participants conducted approximately three months post trip. Four hundred and forty-one Israelis responded to the survey. The overall response rate was 67%. Survey questions (in Hebrew) were designed to tap themes and concepts that surfaced during the qualitative phase of the project.

Surveys of the North American participants were also conducted, both pre- and post trip as part of the evaluation of Taglit (see Saxe et al., 2008; Saxe, Sasson, Phillips, Hecht, & Wright, 2007). The pre-trip survey asked applicants about their Jewish backgrounds and attitudes toward Israel and Judaism. All North Americans who applied to the summer 2007 trip were invited to complete a pre-trip survey during March-April 2007. A post-trip survey was conducted in October-November 2007, approximately three months after the summer trips. The survey was administered online to 16,557 participants; overall response rate was 38%. Data were weighted for non-response to reflect the entire participant population in terms of age, gender, country of origin, Jewish affiliation, and trip organizer. Demographic data on North American participants were collected through the Taglit registration system.

### *Participant Characteristics*

The majority of North American participants were from the United States (88%); the remainder from Canada. Participants were 18 to 26-years-old, but the distribution was skewed



somewhat toward the younger end. The Jewish backgrounds of the North American participants reflected North American Jewry as a whole: 37% identified with the Reform movement, 28% Conservative, 24% no affiliation, and 5% Orthodox. During their elementary school years, the largest group (47%) reported attending a supplementary Hebrew school several afternoons per week. During their high school years, most received no formal Jewish education. Although representative of the Jewish mainstream, Taglit applicants are less representative of the margins: Young adults who grew up in highly Jewishly engaged households may not have qualified for the trip due to their previous experience in an Israel education tour; young adults from highly assimilated backgrounds were generally less likely to have applied to the program.

The description of Israeli participants in the summer 2007 trips was developed from a telephone survey of a sample of participants in 85 tour groups. Most Israeli participants were 20 or 21 years old and 57% were male. Religiously, most identified as secular (67%) or traditional (Masorti, 26%); 3% identified as Orthodox (dati). Soldiers constituted 70% of the respondents; students comprised the remainder. In terms of ethnicity, Israeli participants were disproportionately of European descent.

Israeli student mifgash participants were recruited through their universities. Soldiers joined the mifgashim by a variety of means, including nomination by commanders and their own personal initiative. In the focus groups and post-trip survey, the Israeli mifgash participants reported being motivated to join the program chiefly by a desire to cultivate strong ties to Israel and Judaism among their diaspora peers. Some also wished to encourage immigration to Israel (aliyah). In the Israeli cultural context, the soldiers were motivated by what they call *shlichut* or a sense of mission to engage in outreach to diaspora Jews. Comparatively few indicated that getting time off from military service was their primary motivation for participating in the

program. Nevertheless, Israeli participants can be considered self-selected as a result of their motivation to promote Taglit's goals, as well as their facility with English, a prerequisite for their participation.<sup>6</sup>

### Formal Aspects

Drawing on field observations, participant-observer diaries, and focus group interviews, a portrait emerged of the formal components of the mifgashim. Encounters began with "ice-breaker" exercises to mix Israeli and North American participants, and ended with "wrap up" discussions that explored the mifgash in the context of the overall Taglit experience. In addition, each group of Israelis was asked to prepare an activity (*peula*) for the North Americans on their trip to teach about an aspect of their lives as soldiers or students. The most common activity organized by the Israelis was a simulated military training exercise, as described in the following extract from the diary of an Israeli participant.

In the morning we, all the Israelis, wore uniforms, and had a sudden wake-up call for the Americans. We organized them in a row. Yaniv shouted at them in Hebrew, and Ran translated into English. We divided them into groups, did a roll call, and organized a running competition. We ordered them to do push ups and, for half an hour, we tried to give them a sense of what basic military training is like. Much to our surprise, they were very amenable and did their best to do well.

(Diary Entry)

All tour groups also visited the national military cemetery at Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. The central role the Israelis play during the visit makes this a formal aspect of the mifgash. The Israeli soldiers visit Mt. Herzl in military uniform, a break from their routine appearance in civilian clothing. On many trips, the cemetery visit is the first occasion when the soldiers don

their uniforms. During the visit itself, the Israelis are often called upon to discuss relatives or friends who have died in Israel's wars. In some cases, the soldiers hold an honor guard at the end of the visit. The following account, from an Israeli diarist, is illustrative:

I spoke about Goni Hernick (of blessed memory) who was the commander of the Golani commando unit and was killed during the incursion to the Beaufort fortress. After that, everyone came to us crying and thanked us for the stories. It was a moving moment. (Diary Entry)

On many trips, the visit to the Mt. Herzl cemetery is preceded by a visit to Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. The soldiers do not have a formal role in the visit to Yad Vashem, although they are required to appear in uniform.

#### Informal Aspects

The core of the mifgash develops against the background of the rest of the Taglit experience: on the tour bus, during visits to historical sites, in hotel lobbies, over meals, during walks on the beach. This section draws mostly on the qualitative research to describe the informal educational aspects of the mifgash.

#### *Comparing Lives*

During orientation sessions, and later by the tour guides, the Israelis were told to spread out among the diaspora visitors and to get to know as many as possible. They were told not to sit with one another on the buses and not to speak to one another in Hebrew. In practice, they abided by these guidelines, and their willingness to do so ensured a great deal of interaction with their North American counterparts.

The essence of the mifgash is talking, and much of the conversation consisted of exchanges of information about the lives of mifgash participants. The North Americans posed

questions to the Israelis about their military service, Israeli society, politics, customs, and family life. The Israelis asked the North Americans about their studies, recreational activities, families, and Jewish life in the United States and Canada. The following quotation from a diary describes the contents of such informal conversations:

They [North Americans] used the bus rides for quick naps along with questions such as, ‘How was it in the Army? How was it in the recent Lebanon war?’...I was also asked if all the bananas are green or just not ripe yet, and [they were] impressed by the cultivation of black sunflower seeds in Israel. We ended the day at the hotel bar. It was nice to talk over a glass of beer and to get to know them better. I’m looking forward to tomorrow. (Diary Entry)

The surveys of Israeli and North American participants indicated that large majorities of both groups agreed that the *mifgash* helped them discover what they share in common with their opposite number (see Figure 1). Such commonalities included a shared fondness of music, film, and other aspects of youth culture, as well as a shared Jewish heritage. Participants also learned about their differences. Israelis were perceived (by themselves as well as by the North Americans) as more mature and responsible, a fact that both groups attributed to their military service. North Americans were viewed as more advanced in terms of their studies and careers. Many Israelis also noted that North Americans seemed less family oriented, due primarily to their willingness to study and pursue careers far away from their parents.

Figure 1

### *Youth Culture*

Among similarities that Israeli and North Americans discovered was a shared enjoyment of music, film, partying, and other aspects of youth culture (cf. Wolf, 2007).

Sharing music, in particular, enabled the two sides to bond and simultaneously introduced one another to their unique cultural scenes. The following quotations, from a diary and a focus group discussion, illustrate the significance of youth culture as a medium and lubricant for the cross-cultural encounter. The first quotation describes the participants' playful appropriation of a famous Beatles song.

A song that Mark and I sang together on the bus the night before the end of the trip: I say *ken* [yes], you say, *lo* [no]. You say *atsor* [stop], I say *lech, lech, lech* [go, go, go]. You say *shalom*, and I say *shalom, shalom, shalom*...I say *lemala* [up], you say *lemata* [down]. You say *lama* [why], and I say *ani lo yodaat* [I don't know]. Oh... (Diary)

The second quotation, from an Israeli focus group, describes "partying" as a universal cultural practice. In the context of the Taglit trips, partying generally meant talking in small groups late into the evening, often while consuming alcohol.

They asked me, 'how is it among your friends? Do you party the same way? How do you have fun?' And I thought about it a little bit and realized that it's exactly the same. Young people all over the world probably have fun in exactly the same ways. I think that the differences are very subtle. (Israeli Focus Group)

### *Exchanging Views*

The Israelis reported feeling free to express their own personal opinions, notwithstanding an initial concern, mentioned by some, that they would be expected to express only the official views of the Army or Taglit. In the post-trip survey, most Israeli participants reported feeling "very much" free to express opinions about Israeli lifestyle, military service, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>7</sup> In their diaries and group

discussions, the Israelis occasionally discussed the tension between representing the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and state and expressing their own personal views. In no instance, however, did an Israeli participant indicate that she or he concealed or misrepresented her/his personal feelings or viewpoint. Both Israelis and North Americans engaged in open and apparently frank discussion of diverse issues, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, as the following diary extract illustrates.

There was a discussion on whether Jerusalem should be the capital of Israel or [should it be] Tel Aviv?...I expressed my opinion (opposition), and said that we need to leave the past behind us, there is an Israeli identity, which should be the primary identity in Israel, and that after all Israel is very diverse....Many people approached me afterwards and told me that they weren't aware of the diversity of opinions on this matter in Israel and bombarded me with questions. (Diary)

According to one Israeli participant, by relating to the North Americans' questions in an honest, forthright, and open fashion, the Israelis cast Israel in the best possible light: "I felt that the most effective marketing I can do is to honestly tell them what I think about everything, be it good or bad." (Focus Group)

### *Jewish Ties*

Israeli and North American participants also connected to one another on the basis of their shared relationship to Judaism and common membership in the broader Jewish collective. On both sides, participants were happy to recognize the other's familiarity with Jewish rituals and shared reverence for historical events and places. In the following example, an Israeli participant describes reciting the *Shema* declaration of faith at the Western Wall in the company of the North Americans.

At the *Kotel* [the Western Wall] I had an amazing experience. I went to the Wall, and it was moving but just to an extent, and suddenly one of the girls started praying *Shema Yisrael* [‘Hear, Oh Israel’] and stood right next to me. I started praying with her and we both had tears [in our eyes]. And then I saw three or four girls leaving there with tears of excitement in their eyes. It was an incredible experience for me—one of the greatest of my life. (Israeli Focus Group)

Participants also discussed their Jewish practices. Many Israelis reported surprise at the level of Jewish knowledge and engagement of their North American visitors whom they believed to be thoroughly assimilated. The North Americans, in contrast, often discovered that their seemingly secular Israeli counterparts actually celebrated the same Jewish holidays and knew a good deal about Jewish religious practice (cf. Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

#### *Friendship and Romance*

Making friends and forming relationships, including occasionally romantic relationships, was also an essential feature of the *mifgash*. According to their survey responses, the vast majority of North Americans agreed that their encounters with Israeli peers led to personal connections with individuals. Israeli participants likewise indicated that the *mifgash* made them feel more connected to their North American peers.<sup>8</sup> In many instances, both Israeli and North American participants expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed their counterparts. Consider the following comment from a North American focus group:

When we were first meeting [the Israelis] I assumed that they would think that their lives were so much harder than ours, and that we were pampered and spoiled and didn’t know what it truly meant to feel any type of pride in your country.... And it was just so much easier to find a common ground. We are so similar even

though we'd experienced such different lifestyles. These people were our friends; they weren't [just] people who happened to be our age that were in the Army.

(North American Focus Group)

### *Tensions*

Over the course of several days of intense travel and cross-cultural exchange, tensions sometimes developed. On occasion, soldiers expressed exasperation with the North Americans' attitudes toward military service. In the following diary entry, we learn of one soldier's reaction to questions and comments posed by the Americans on her trip:

The girls in my room kept saying 'wow, I would have never been able to manage in the Army' and other things like that, and it really bugged me.... The reason I was probably mad at the Americans at first, was that...they live in the United States leading their normal lives like everyone else, and don't really care that people their age protect the country [Israel] for them... (Diary)

Another Israeli diarist expressed frustration with her American counterparts who slept during the testimony of a Holocaust survivor at the Yad Vashem memorial. She writes that although she understood that the Americans were exhausted due to their travel schedule, that fact was not an excuse to be disrespectful to the elderly survivor. Tensions also occasionally surfaced between the Americans and Israelis over divergent interpretations of religious and gender roles. For example, Americans on one trip expressed surprise and dismay over the relatively smaller area at the Western Wall designated for women. The Israelis described traditional gender roles (reflected in the allocation of public worship space) as a basic characteristic of Judaism.

### Meaning for North Americans

Previous research comparing Taglit participants and nonparticipants (applicants who did not go on trips) documented Taglit's consistent impact on participants' feelings of connection to



Israel and the worldwide Jewish people (Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2008). The present study examines the meanings North American participants attach to their interactions with Israeli peers in their tour groups, and the significance of those encounters for their subsequent feelings about Israel and the Jewish people.

### *Personal Guides*

In their discourse on the significance of the mifgash, North American participants described their Israeli hosts as highly effective tour guides who fielded questions that would not have been posed to the regular guides. They were more accessible than the regular guides by virtue of being more numerous and dispersed on the buses, at the tour sites, and in the hotel rooms. Unlike typical guides with multiple responsibilities, they were able to focus completely on the diaspora visitors. They were available to narrate background and offer opinion. As a consequence, the North Americans claimed to learn a great deal from their Israeli counterparts. This was evident in the post-trip survey of the North American participants (see Figure 2).

### Figure 2

The contribution of the Israelis as personal tour guides was also evident in the North Americans' comments during the wrap-up sessions, as indicated in the following comment:

I thought you'd be more like guides, but you were totally with us...and it was great to be with you, it really added a lot to have the Israelis as part of the group.

It's different to hear things from Israelis who live here all the time, and experience these things, and not in a lecture or from the guides. (Wrap-up Discussion)

Thus, the Israelis were valued as tour guides not only for the information they imparted, but also for their opinions, feelings, perspectives, judgments, and experiences. Participation by the

Israelis enabled many North American participants to feel they had penetrated Israel's surface and connected to a reality beyond the reach of most tourists.

### *Authentic Personal Encounter*

The participation of Israeli peers helped shift the tourist character of the Taglit experience toward something that felt more personal, authentic, and meaningful. Israeli participants often brought their guests to favorite clubs and restaurants; in some instances, they hosted the visitors in their homes. At the Mt. Herzl military cemetery, the Israelis told stories of friends who had died while serving in the IDF and described the personal meaning of their military service. Such emotional encounters established among the North Americans the profound sense that they were in touch with the essence or "soul" of Israel. Similarly, albeit with less emotional intensity, the basic training exercises organized by the Israelis as part of the *peula* (activity) gave North Americans a sense of direct connection to the military experience, as indicated in the following comment during a wrap-up discussion:

Speaker 1: Yesterday we had a kind of a basic training that the soldiers organized for us. It was for only two hours, in comparison to what you do for such a long time, [but] it was amazing. I really felt a change after that. Thank you.

Speaker 2: I never knew what life is like for an Israeli soldier, until now.

Especially the [basic training] experience we had yesterday opened my eyes to what you go through in the Army and in the country. (Wrap-up Discussion)

By befriending Israelis, the North Americans developed a direct connection to Israeli society, a connection that could not have been accomplished through routine site-seeing. "They are not soldiers anymore," commented one participant, "they are my friends" (Wrap-up Discussion).

### *Welcoming and Inspirational*

Many North American participants expressed gratitude to their Israeli counterparts for making them feel at home in Israel. Some had apparently expected to be intimidated by the Israelis and expressed surprise at how warmly they were received. More generally, the Israelis' willingness to welcome the North Americans and describe Israel as their home added credibility to the idea that Israel is a homeland for all Jews—a notion that otherwise might have come across as an empty slogan. The following comment is typical:

Before we met you, we read the newspaper and saw the news. I saw you and I even considered the Israelis as “them” or “you” the Israelis. From now on you are family....You're fighting for the entire Jewish people. *Atem mishpacha* [You are family]. You are family, thank you! (Wrap-up Discussion)

Several North Americans also expressed surprise at the dedication of their Israeli counterparts to service to the country. The Israelis seemed to be patriotic and selfless in ways that were unfamiliar. As one diaspora participant noted, “I am inspired and amazed by the Israelis' sense of pride and connection to the country. I didn't expect that, and it's not something you see in America.”

### Meaning for Israelis

A major theme that emerged in Israeli focus groups was that the Taglit experience fostered feelings of pride. Asked about such feelings in the post-trip survey, Israeli participants indicated that the mifgash experience made them feel proud —of service to the IDF, of country, and of Israeli and Jewish identity. To a significant, but lesser extent, the program also made them feel connected to the Jewish people worldwide and cultivated a desire to learn more about

Judaism (Figure 4). This section explores these highly salient dimensions of the Israelis' Taglit experience.

Figure 3

Figure 4

### *Pride in Military Service*

Asked what the *mifgash* means to them, many Israeli participants explained that the experience made them feel more positive about their military service. Consider the following comment:

Serving in the Army is not always fun, and we all wait for the end of our service. And I think that they perceived us as a sort of ideal, that 'wow, he's such a hero, he serves in the IDF.' This is something very empowering, because we never saw how [we're] perceived by diaspora Jewry, and they really told us, half joking half serious, that as far as they're concerned we are the guardians of the Jewish people. This is something that is very empowering. (Israeli Focus Group)

The Israelis likely experienced the *mifgash* as encouraging pride in service to the IDF for a number of reasons. From a cognitive standpoint, the tour guides tended to narrate Israel's history as a series of hard-won military victories against implacable foes. This is a narrative in which Israeli soldiers appear as heroic defenders of the Jewish state and Jewish people. The soldiers have heard all this before, but in the company of their admiring diaspora visitors, the classic Zionist framing of Israel's history, and their role within it, gains new currency. Emotionally, they became open to viewing their own contribution to the state in non-cynical, even heroic, terms. They come to view themselves as they believe others view them, a process Cooley (1902) described more than a century ago as the "looking glass self." Basking in the

glow of admiring diaspora visitors, they experienced pride in their roles as soldiers of the Jewish state.

### *Love of Country*

Israeli participants also reported a deepening of their affection for Israel and appreciation of their lives in the Jewish state. A few commented that the program solidified their desire to continue living in Israel. Guides established a plausible context for these feelings and most provided a meta-narrative that linked the various sites into a coherent story. This narrative typically included: the historical presence of the Jewish people in the ancient Land of Israel; Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and dispersion of Jews in the first and second centuries of the common era; anti-Semitism in Europe culminating in the Zionist movement and the Holocaust; Zionist settlement of Palestine and establishment of a Jewish state; ingathering of Middle Eastern, North African, and Russian Jews; and the ongoing challenge of defending the state against displaced Palestinians and hostile Arab regimes. Although primarily geared toward the North Americans, this "ashes to redemption" narrative also touched the Israelis and contributed to their appreciation of the modern Jewish state.

Israeli participants also experienced the pleasure of hosting their diaspora guests in their homes. Just as they gained pride in their service to the IDF by seeing how North Americans reacted to their uniforms, they also deepened their affection for their country by seeing it admired by others. Consider the following comment from a focus group:

Bottom line: I've already been to all of the places we visited...and still, I was amazed by how moved I was each time at every place. Being at the Kotel [Western Wall]...it becomes ordinary, [but] suddenly I was really moved. Or at Yad Vashem [Holocaust memorial], I was really moved.... Even at the Dead Sea,

I was suddenly excited that you can float!... I just saw it through their eyes. And something that really moved me was that on the bus, on our way back, I asked someone how would you describe [the trip] in one word, and he said that the thing that had the greatest impact on him was actually to see *us* in all these places, like, the opposite from me. For me, the thing that had the most impact on me was seeing them! (Israeli Focus Group)

### *Jewish Peoplehood and Identity*

Israeli participants typically began the trip identifying primarily as Israeli and only secondarily as Jewish. In the context of the trip, many described discovering a more salient Jewish identity. Through their interaction with diaspora Jews, and in response to the educational narrative provided by guides, many Israeli participants came to feel connections to the Jewish people worldwide. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 4, more than 40% of Israeli respondents to the post-trip survey agreed “very much,” and an additional similar-sized proportion agreed “somewhat,” that the Taglit experience made them feel part of a worldwide Jewish people.

In the following comments, the speaker describes how the Taglit experience increased the salience of the Jewish component of his identity:

A question that always comes up in this trip is a question of self definition, all the time—how you define yourself. I think this is the essence of the trip...So [before the trip] I perceived myself as being Israeli, and Israeli-Jew only a little bit, [and] now I’m more Israeli-Jew. (Israeli Focus Group)

Many of the Israelis knew little about Jews living outside of Israel. For the first time, they realized that there are Jews—who are in some respects like themselves (i.e., non-Orthodox), and to whom they feel a strong connection—living throughout the world:

You are the only Jews I know outside of Israel. Up until now Jews and Israelis were the same thing for me. I understand [now] that it's not the same thing.

(Wrap-up Discussion)

Jews outside of Israel were, for me, either religious or people that are on the verge of losing their identity. The greatest thing I've learned during these past days is that I do have brothers outside of Israel. Talking to some of you was as exciting as finding a missing brother. I feel related to all of you. (Diary)

### *Knowledge of Diaspora Jewish life*

Israelis entered the program viewing North American Jewish young adults as precariously Jewish. Most Israelis wished to inculcate love of Israel among American Jews; some, as well, hoped to persuade American Jews to consider immigration (aliyah). At the conclusion of the program, their views of American Jews were more variegated. Some reported finding the North Americans to be immature, materialistic, uncommitted to family life and unknowledgeable about Jewish life. In general, these were stereotypes they brought to the encounter. For some, such stereotypes survived relatively intact. Interestingly, however, many of the Israelis reported surprise at the level of Jewish knowledge and engagement among the diaspora Jewish visitors. Some Israeli participants commented that they learned about aspects of North American Jewish life, including, for example, feminist perspectives on Judaism. Such views were borne out in the post-trip survey, in which 40% reported having learned “very much” and an additional 40% reported having learned “somewhat” about Jewish life in the United States or Canada.

However, in focus group discussions, Israelis minimized the extent of their learning about North American Jewish life. Asked whether they learned much about how Judaism is practiced

in North America, some answered that they did not, and that such learning is neither an explicit nor implicit goal of the program. Some, like the Israeli participant below, claimed that the program seeks only to influence the North American visitors and not the Israeli participants:

They bring them here...they connect them to our world and not us to their world, so we are not really exposed to new things that we can learn from and change our opinion and our trajectory. On the other hand, we do, explicitly, try to do that to them. To present things to them, to engage them in discussions about things that they have doubts about, things they are not sure about. And yes, to connect them, again, to their roots, to the Jewish people, to the land of Israel, to their Jewish identity. (Israeli Focus Group)

From the standpoint of this Israeli participant, the mifgash was a vehicle for teaching North Americans about Israel and not for mutual exchange between Israelis and Americans.

#### Discussion

The present study documents the ways in which Taglit-Birthright Israel fosters attachment to Israel and the Jewish people among Israeli participants. Previous research (Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2008) documented comparable program effects among diaspora participants. The qualitative analysis of the mifgashim in the context of the broader Taglit experience suggests several mechanisms responsible for these program effects. First, the tour guides' trip narratives—which highlight the rootedness of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel and assert the historical imperative of Zionism in response to anti-Semitism—were made more compelling for diaspora and Israeli participants by the presence of the other. For diasporans, the Israeli counterparts served as auxiliary guides who often underscored the veracity of the official tour guides' key points. For the Israelis, the diasporans constituted a “looking glass” (Cooley,



1902) through which they could better appreciate the significance of their own lives as Israelis. Thus, the mifgash contributed significantly to the development of patriotic sentiments among Israeli participants and “long distance nationalism” (Anderson, 1998) among diaspora visitors.

Second, the group interactions associated with the mifgash—against the background of dramatic historical sites and narratives—provided a concrete reference point for a “Jewish people” that includes both Israeli Jews and North American Jews. Israelis and North Americans formed a single tourist community sharing the experience of living and traveling together and perceiving toured objects “through the eyes” of the other. Shared activities, informal interaction, and the discovery of commonalities created ideal circumstances for reconstruction of distinctive Israeli, American, and Canadian collective identities into an inclusive Jewish collective identity. The process was further facilitated by the liminal nature of tourist spaces in which participants were “free from the constraints of daily life” (Wang, 1999).

Third, the manner in which authenticity (Charne, 2000; Palmer, 1999; Prentice, 2001; Wang, 1999) was constructed during the trips made the resulting identities more personally compelling. Taglit participants filtered the experience through the perception of authenticity at several levels.<sup>9</sup> They perceived the objects they toured as authentic in the sense of real and genuine, and they perceived one another as authentic representatives of their respective societies, i.e., as authentic Israelis, Americans, and Canadians. In addition, the tour guides’ authoritative historical narratives encouraged them to regard the Jewish people as an authentic corporate entity, with a shared history and common fate, and to imagine themselves as part of it. In this context of “objective” and “historical” authenticity, the problem of “existential authenticity” often claimed center-stage. As one Israeli (quoted above) phrased it, “the question of self definition...is the essence of the trip.” Thus, for many participants, authenticity—being “true to

oneself” in the existential sense of the phrase—necessitated an identification with the broader Jewish collective.<sup>10</sup>

In short, the mifgash goes beyond merely Taglit’s educational message to diaspora visitors. The program clearly affects both diaspora and Israeli participants—but not in a perfectly reciprocal fashion. For both Israelis and diaspora visitors the experience consistently promotes knowledge of Israeli culture and society, Zionist values and transnational Jewish solidarity (i.e., “peoplehood”). However, it does not consistently promote understanding of life in the Jewish diaspora. The lack of symmetry and reciprocity in the diaspora-homeland exchange is a reflection of both structural and ideological components of the program. From a structural standpoint, the program takes place in Israel and consists mostly of visits to historical sites related to the history of the Jewish people and to the modern state. In addition, the Israelis’ role as “hosts” and their small number relative to visitors in any given tour group places them in the role of instructors rather than fellow learners. Ideologically, the program emphasizes narratives that stress anti-Semitism and the struggle for national independence in a Jewish majority state. Although the classic “negation of diaspora” (Ha-Am, 1997 [1909]) discourse is not central to most Taglit trips, the emphasis on the positive virtue of life in a Jewish-majority state is at the very core of the experience.

In a context in which Taglit trips are overwhelmingly focused on Israel, a genuinely symmetrical exchange—one that would enable Israelis to learn about diaspora Jewish life—is difficult to accomplish. Educators who believe that Israeli young adults have much to learn through exposure to North American Jewish culture—for example, about alternative expressions of Judaism and the American Jewish culture of liberalism, feminism, and social justice activism—may have to look to alternative models to accomplish their vision of a more

symmetrical exchange. For example, delegations of Israeli young adults could visit North American Jewish communities in “reverse Birthright Israel” tours. Alternatively, encounters could be structured into new programs located on more “neutral” turf, for example, in the context of heritage tours of Europe or volunteer programs in developing countries.

### Conclusion

Literature on heritage tourism (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008; Palmer, 1999; Poria et al., 2003) has established its role in the construction of national identities and nationalism. The present study suggests, however, that diaspora heritage tours which include an encounter with homeland participants have their own distinctive qualities and achieve somewhat broader impact. In such encounters, alongside patriotic feelings about the homeland, new forms of shared collective identity and solidarity can emerge that transcend the nation states of either the homeland where the program is taking place or those of the diasporan guests. These findings are relevant to many state-linked (Sheffer, 2003) diaspora communities seeking vehicles for reproducing collective identity, social solidarity, and homeland ties from within their places of dispersion, and to homeland entities seeking ways to strengthen engagement with far-flung diaspora communities.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank members of the field researcher staff, including Noa Milman, Edna Lapidot, and Carmit Padan. Noa Milman also coded the qualitative data and translated many of the quotations. The survey of Israeli participants was conducted by the firm Research Success under the supervision of Ezra Kopelowitz. We also thank Michelle Shain and the anonymous reviewers for this journal for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Taglit does not fit neatly into a single theoretical framework, but it is clearly a kind of heritage tourism (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008). To be sure, most diaspora visitors were not born or directly descendent from parents or grandparents who lived in Israel. Nevertheless, Jews worldwide—including North American Jews—regard the Land of Israel as their ancestral homeland and feel strong ties to the modern Jewish state. Moreover, in the context of the trips, they are encouraged to relate to both historical and modern Israel as “their home,” and most participants accept this construction. Diaspora Jews can and do participate in heritage tourism in the lands of their immediate forebears, including Poland, Spain, and Russia. As a long dispersed people, Jews have multiple heritage sites.

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<sup>3</sup> Not all diarists fulfilled their volunteer commitment. In all, 12 diaries were collected.

<sup>4</sup> Most diary entries and all focus group discussions among Israelis were recorded in Hebrew. The wrap-up discussions during the trips were conducted in English but were recorded contemporaneously in Hebrew. The translations appearing here are of the contemporaneous Hebrew summary. The supplemental North American focus group discussions were conducted in English. All field notes, diaries, and interviews recorded in Hebrew were transcribed in Hebrew. Translations were made following coding and analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Focus group interviews with North American participants, conducted as part of the 2007 “After Birthright Israel” community study, were also examined (see Sasson, Saxe, Rosen, Selinger-Abutbul, & Hecht, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Israel has near-universal conscription: Israeli Jewish men are drafted to serve three years; women for two. Jewish women who are religious and most Arab Israeli citizens are not drafted (some Arab Israelis from the Druze, Bedouin and Circassian minorities volunteer for military service). Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men are typically granted waivers for study that exempt them from service. A small but possibly growing minority of draft-eligible Israelis seeks exemption on medical grounds or evades the draft.

<sup>7</sup> The survey indicated that 55%-88% felt “very much” free to express their personal opinions about their military service, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Judaism in Israel, and Israeli lifestyle.

<sup>8</sup> Eighty-eight percent of North American participants agreed (either “strongly agree” or “agree”) that the mifgash led to personal connections with Israelis. Seventy-seven percent of Israelis agreed (either “strongly agree” or “agree”) that the mifgash made them feel more connected to their American and Canadian peers.

<sup>9</sup> The three levels of authenticity discussed here are derived from the sizable literature on authenticity in tourism. The distinction between objective and existential authenticity is from Palmer, 1999; Prentice, 2001; and Wang, 1999. Wang (1999, p. 351) further distinguishes these two forms from “constructed authenticity”: “Things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives or powers.” This latter form corresponds to our concept of “historical authenticity.”

<sup>10</sup> The Taglit experience encourages but does not require an essentialist view of authenticity. Participants may believe that “authenticity is about...maintaining an honest view of the process by which we construct the identities and traditions we need to survive” (Charme, 2000).

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## FIGURES

Figure I. Perception of commonalities

“My interaction with Israeli/North Americans on my bus made me aware of what we have in common.”

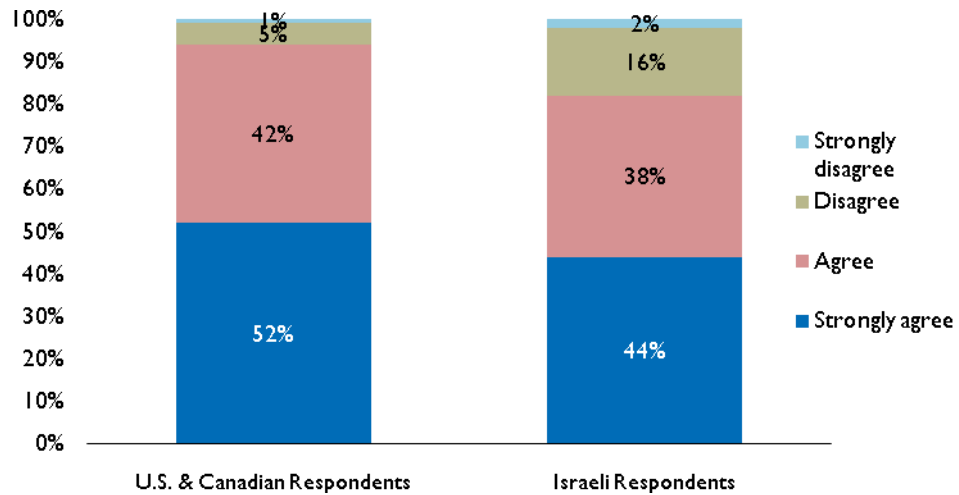




Figure 2. Understanding of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the IDF, and life in Israel

"My interactions with Israelis on my bus"

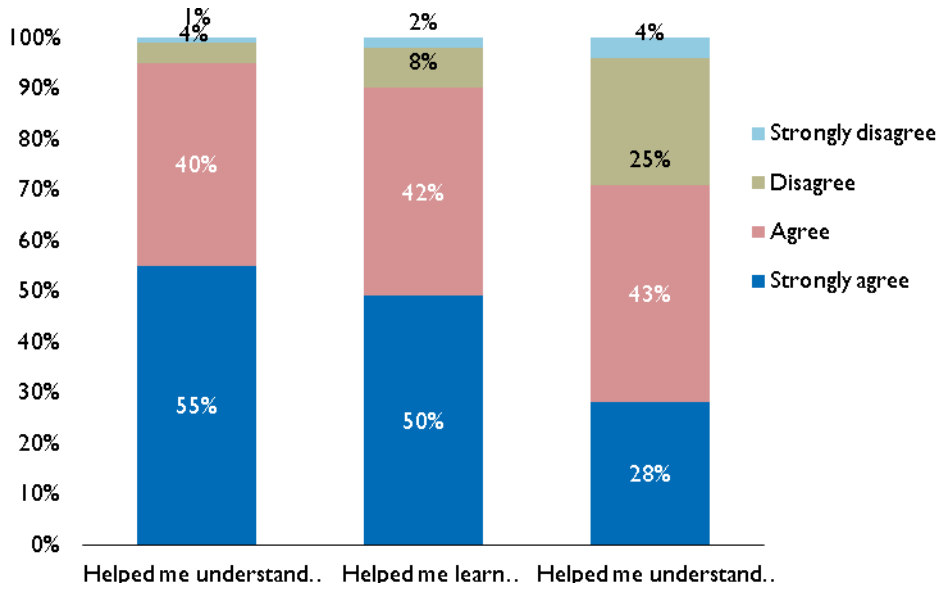


Figure 3. Pride in Israeli identity, military service, Israel, and Jewish identity

“To what extent did the trip make you feel...”

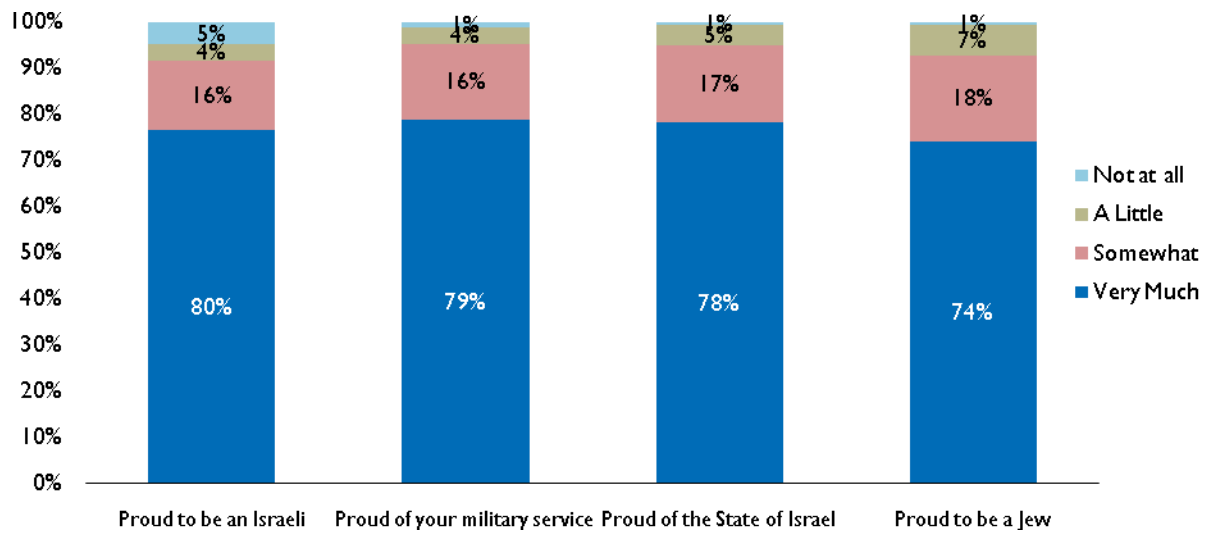


Figure 4. Jewish peoplehood, desire to learn about Judaism, and jealousy of North American Jewish lifestyle

"To what extent did the trip make you feel..."

