

Brandeis University

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**Steinhardt Social Research Institute**

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**Connecting Diaspora Young Adults to Israel:  
Lessons from Taglit-Birthright Israel**

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Leonard Saxe, Ph.D.

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at the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen  
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Brandeis University  
Mailstop 014  
415 South Street  
Waltham, MA 02454  
[www.brandeis.edu/ssri](http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri)

Leonard Saxe, Ph.D.  
781.736.3952  
[saxe@brandeis.edu](mailto:saxe@brandeis.edu)



## Connecting Diaspora Young Adults to Israel: *Lessons from Taglit-Birthright Israel*<sup>1</sup>

I am honored to be present and have a chance to share some ideas about the connection of Diaspora young adults to Israel. I have been overstimulated by the last four days of discussions. As I listened to the presentations, at several points I was reminded of the debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai about whether study or action should have primacy. What, I puzzled, is the role of studying or discussing the world as it is or as we would like it to be *versus* trying to change the world? On reflection, I realized my good fortune. I am able to do both. I engage in action research and study the actual “doing” of education and identity transformation. Today, I want to talk about what I have learned from studying tens of thousands of young adults who are part of the Birthright Israel generation. Many have participated in *Taglit*-Birthright Israel, and others are simply part of the same cohort. Although I want to talk about these individuals, my goal is to use what we have learned to foster change.

### What We Know

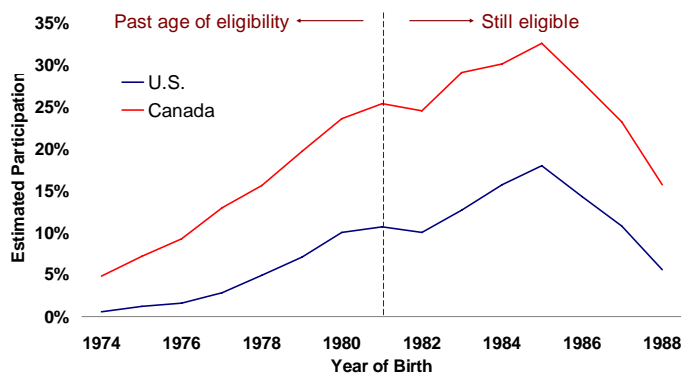
The outline of the *Taglit* story is well known. For details, I recommend Dr. Shimshon Shoshoni’s recent CEO report. Since the first El AL jet carrying *Taglit* participants landed at Ben-Gurion Airport in late December 1999, more than 160,000 Diaspora young adults have come to Israel on the program. They have spent ten days in *Eretz Yisrael* learning about their heritage, engaging with modern Israel, and with Israeli peers. Three-quarters of the 18- to 26-year-old participants come from North America. In addition, forty-four countries are represented among program alumni. Notwithstanding the large number of those who have come, at least 100,000 who applied to participate remained at home because of a lack of space.

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1. Presentation to the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Herzliya Conference, Herzliya, Israel (23 January, 2008).

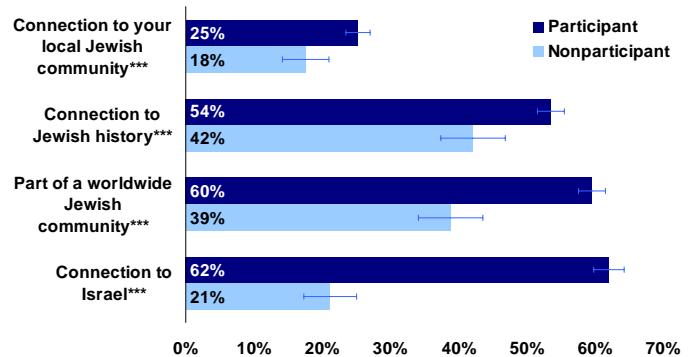
*Taglit* is rapidly moving towards achieving a critical mass; perhaps, a “tipping point” in its ability to change a generation. We estimate that there are more than 90,000 North American Jewish young adults in each 18- to 26-year-old age cohort. For current 21- to 22-year-olds (those born in 1985), nearly 15% have participated in *Taglit* (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> These young adults have four more years of eligibility, and we expect that nearly 25% of this cohort will eventually take part in the program. For those born after 1985, as long as the current level of resources is maintained, one-third will have a *Taglit* experience by the time they are 27 years old. The goal of providing an Israel educational experience to the majority of young adult Diaspora Jews is not an unrealistic dream.

Figure 1. Estimated Participation in *Taglit*: Eligible Population by Year of Birth



We have tracked the impact of *Taglit* experimentally, comparing participants with those who apply but do not receive a program slot (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> These comparisons yield unequivocal evidence that the program transforms attitudes to Israel, participants’ Jewish identities, and their interest in being engaged with Jewish life. The impact is immediate, but effects persist three months, a year, and even three or more years after the program.

Figure 2. Jewish Connections by Participation Estimated Percentage “Very Much” (winter 2006-07)



\*\*\* p < .001

Controls: Pre-trip attitude, gender, age, denomination, Jewish education, summer camp, childhood religious observance, parental intermarriage, and student status.

2. Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Shahar Hecht, and Graham Wright. *Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation: 2007 North American Cohorts*. (Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies 2007).
3. Ibid.

## Lessons

Our findings have been disseminated in multiple reports and in a forthcoming book with Professor Barry Chazan.<sup>4</sup> I won't dwell on them. Today, I would like to go beyond data about the success of *Taglit* as an educational project (the “*pshat*”) and draw a set of four more complex lessons about the Jewish, Diaspora and Israeli future.

### *Young Adult Jews in the Diaspora Want to be Connected to Israel*

Some believe—even claim to have evidence—that younger Diaspora Jews are distancing themselves from Israel. Those who make this claim posit that a spiral of declining attachment has been set in motion, with grave consequences for the Jewish people.

First, the belief is incorrect: younger Jews have always been less likely than older generations to see themselves as connected to Israel and, if anything, young adults today are more interested and engaged with Israel than previous generations.

Second, the key lesson of *Taglit* is that contemporary young adults want to be engaged in Israel; they, in fact, yearn for meaningful connections. In North America, registration for program slots has consistently and dramatically exceeded availability. Interest in

*Taglit* continued through the darkest days of the Intifada and, in many cases participants did the un-Jewish act of defying their parents who were concerned about the security situation. At present, when registration for each round opens, more than half the available slots are filled within 24 hours. Marketing is by word-of-mouth. With last summer's record number of participants—more than 20,000—there was concern that the pool of interested young Jews had been drained. In fact, the large number of participants who returned to their Diaspora communities only served to increase interest and broaden the number of applicants to this winter's trips.

Diaspora young adults, at least from North America, are and want to be connected to Israel—to the land and to the people.

### *Person-to-person encounters must be at the heart of Diaspora-Israel Connections*

Throughout Israel's history, North American Diaspora Jews have been connected in a myriad of ways, but actually visiting *Eretz Yisrael* was never prominent. Giving money was a way to connect, as was political advocacy; and, religious ties were central. And, I would be remiss this week not to mention the connection that existed through the planting of trees (or, at least, the paying for the planting of trees). *Taglit* has brought Israel to the foreground and made it the focus of experiential education. Critical is that

4. Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, forthcoming); Saxe et al., 2007; for additional Birthright Israel studies, see <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/ResearchAreas.cfm>.

the experience is framed by interaction with Israelis—*madrichim*, educators, and encounters—*mifgashim*—between Diaspora participants and Israeli peers.

Mifgashim are, perhaps, *Taglit's* signature feature. They create a means for Diaspora young adults and Israelis to interact on their own terms. In the five or more days that Diaspora young adults and their Israeli counterparts—most *hayalim*—travel and live together, the overseas participants learn about Israel directly from Israelis. Along with their experience as part of their own group, they discover what they have in common. What is, perhaps, most surprising is that the impact is profound—not only for Diaspora participants, but for Israelis. Both come away feeling that they are part of *Klal Yisrael*. Their individual and national identities are re-framed by their common Jewish experience and connection.

People-to-people connections are not only at the heart of the program, but the basis for the long-term attitudinal change that results.

*Jewish education must engage heart, mind, and body*

I call it the “Kishkes, Kortex, and Kinesthetics principle”: *Taglit* has created a successful model of education because, simultaneously, it is emotionally stimulating, intellectually rich, and behaviorally engaging. Too often, educators treat pedagogy as a zero-sum game, where emotional expression and “walking the talk” are

seen as digressions from serious learning. *Taglit* has taken a different approach.

Like any good education, however, *Taglit's* educational strategy has been adapted to the contours of its target audience: in this case, 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish young adults. Today's young adults are a unique breed, with needs and interests, skills, and resources that are unlike previous generations.

Fun—emotional engagement—for this generation is different than the older adult generation's version. I doubt that they would enjoy the lavish banquets and florid speeches that we, mostly of another era, have enjoyed this week. As well, their cognitive approach is likely different than ours. To use a computer metaphor, they know how to operate with multiple windows open simultaneously—it is who they are. They may not, as yet, have graduated to the Blackberried executive world, but their i-pods and i-phones are an integral part of their personalities. Their multi-tasking cognitive abilities may, however, be their Achille's heel: They live too much and too far into the virtual world. An actual interactive experience—living 24/7 with peers from the Diaspora and Israel—fills a behavioral void.

The multi-faceted, engaging, and adaptive model of education promoted by *Taglit* is central to its success. It is also a model for all Jewish education and, for that matter, provides universal lessons for how educators need to engage young adults.

### *Institutions must adapt*

*Taglit* was an attempt to reconfigure traditional approaches to organizing Jewish education in the context of an Israel experience. A new organization had to be created to develop and manage the program. Creating something new was, perhaps, easier than trying to re-engineer an existing organization. But what about the future, what about the 11<sup>th</sup> day? What happens when tens of thousands of *Taglit* participants return to their home communities? When they leave Israel they may be highly motivated to participate in the extraordinary project called the Jewish people, but will they find a place in the communities that, by and large, were not engaging them before they left?

Our data suggest that while *Taglit* alumni are different than their non-alumni compatriots—along with stronger feelings of being part of the Jewish people, they support Israel more strongly, they are more likely to be in communication and to visit—their behavioral engagement post-trip fails to match their attitudinal enthusiasm. But it is also the case that our Diaspora Jewish institutions and, indeed, Israeli institutions neglect these young adults. They have failed to create programs that this highly motivated group wants to be a part of. Perhaps our institutions believe that this generation is uninterested or believe that this market isn't willing to pay its fair share of costs. Whatever the reason, it represents institutional failure—a failure to adapt to a

changing world and to the changing character of our people.

For those of you who represent these institutions, I can tell you that the Birthright Israel generation is looking for—is, indeed, hungry for—meaningful communal engagement. The programs, the structures, the approaches are likely not to look like things that you have done in the past. But the lesson of *Taglit* is that the only alternative to institutional or organizational change is for new institutions to replace the old.

### Future

*Taglit* is neither a perfect educational program, nor a panacea for all that ails Jewish education. As I often tell those who bemoan programs that fail, the only failure of an attempt to institute change is to ignore the lessons of that effort. I have shared four lessons drawn from our work with *Taglit* participants: Young adult Jews want to be connected, people-to-people connections are essential, education has to involve all of the senses, and institutions must change and adapt. These lessons—and others that each of you could draw—are as important as the individual changes that the program has wrought.

*Am Yisrael* faces a host of challenges. *B'aretz*, difficult decisions will need to be confronted about how to achieve peace; in the Diaspora, the dilemma of how to ensure a vibrant future in the face of assimilation will continue for the

foreseeable future. Nurturing Jewish peoplehood has become ever more important. The particular lessons of *Taglit* suggest how we can foster *Klal Yisrael* and tap the energy, the intellect, and commitment of our young adults. We live in cynical times, and perhaps I should apologize for being optimistic and hopeful. But I won't. Instead, let me conclude with a wish and a prayer. May our time of study and debate here in Herzliya be translated into action. May we leave Herzliya recommitted to working together to strengthen *Klal Yisrael*.







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