

**Brandeis University**

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

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**Generation Birthright Israel:**  
The Impact of an Israel Experience on  
Jewish Identity and Choices

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The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.

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## Executive Summary

Since 1999, Taglit-Birthright Israel has sent nearly 225,000 young Jewish adults from more than 50 countries on free, 10-day educational tours of Israel. Established by a group of Jewish philanthropists in collaboration with the Israeli government and Jewish communities around the world, Taglit aims to encourage Jewish continuity, foster engagement with Israel, and forge a new relationship among Jews around the world. Earlier research on the impact of the program indicated that Taglit was very highly evaluated by participants and that those who took part had significantly more positive attitudes about their connection to Israel, their Jewish identity and their relationship to other Jews, compared to nonparticipants. Today, Taglit's early alumni are entering a new phase of their lives and are making critical choices regarding marriage, children, and community. This study examines the program's long-term (five to eight years) impact on participants' Jewish identities and behaviors.

### Methods

A sample of U.S.-based Jewish young adults who applied to go on Taglit trips between 2001 and 2004 was surveyed by telephone and the Web. The population studied included both applicants who went on a Taglit trip and applicants who did not go. Those who applied but did not participate served as a natural control group for assessment of program effects.

A total of 2,266 eligible applicants were randomly selected, and interviews were conducted with 1,223 respondents. The study achieved a high response rate of 62 percent for Taglit participants and 42 percent for nonparticipants. In addition, researchers

interviewed a parent or a close relative of nearly 300 applicants who could not be interviewed directly. Relatives were asked a few basic questions about the individual's Jewish affiliation and marital status. Including these cases, the response rate was 72 percent for participants, 56 percent for nonparticipants.

Using statistical models that controlled for any significant pretrip demographic differences between participants and nonparticipants, as well as any other factors that appeared to mediate or interact with Taglit's effect on the outcome in question, the analyses reported here isolate the long-term impact of Taglit on participants.

### Findings

This study documents participants' positive perceptions of their Taglit experience, increased connection to Israel, greater sense of connectedness to the Jewish people, and increased interest in creating Jewish families. Specifically:

*Participants evaluate the trip positively.* Five to ten years after the trip, nearly half of all participants (45 percent) felt the trip was "very much" a life-changing experience, and many more (28 percent) felt it was "somewhat" of a life-changing experience. Conversely, very few participants (2 percent) described the trip as "very much" a disappointment.

*Participants demonstrate a stronger relationship to Israel.* Participants were 23 percent more likely than nonparticipants to report feeling "very much" connected to Israel. Participants were 50 percent more likely than nonparticipants to report feeling "very confident" in their ability

to “give a good explanation” of the current situation in Israel. Participants were also over 25 percent more likely to have consulted Israeli news sources during the 2009 war in Gaza and southern Israel. Taglit’s positive effect on feelings of connection to Israel and confidence in ability to explain Israel’s situation was greater for those who came from less engaged Jewish households.

*Participants have a stronger sense of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood.* Participants were 16 percent more likely than nonparticipants to report feeling “very much” connected to the worldwide Jewish community. Participants were 24 percent more likely than nonparticipants to “strongly agree” with the statement, “I have a strong sense of connection to the Jewish people.” Participants, however, were no more likely to report feeling connected to Jewish customs and traditions or their local Jewish community.

*Participants show some increase in Jewish communal involvement.* Although only marginally statistically significant, controlling for age, marital status, gender, and having a child, participants were more likely than nonparticipants to belong to a synagogue, minyan, or other Jewish congregation. Participants, however, were no more likely to volunteer for Jewish causes.

*Participants show some increase in religious observance.* Participants were 28 percent more likely to attend religious services monthly than

nonparticipants. The effect of Taglit on attendance at services was greater for those who had less Jewish education growing up. Participants were no more likely than nonparticipants to have recently attended a Shabbat meal, the only other form of religious observance included in the survey instrument.

*Participants are more likely to marry Jews and show a stronger desire to raise Jewish children.* Among married respondents who were not raised Orthodox, participants were 57 percent more likely to be married to a Jew than nonparticipants. (Virtually all married respondents who were raised Orthodox were married to Jews.) Among unmarried respondents, participants were 46 percent more likely than nonparticipants to view marrying a Jewish person as “very important.”

Taglit participants were 30 percent more likely to view raising children as Jews as “very important.” The number of respondents with children was too small to permit direct analysis of Taglit’s impact on child-raising practices.

Finally, in response to an open-ended question about Taglit’s possible influence on their lives, one in six participants who answered the question volunteered that Taglit increased their desire to marry a Jewish person and/or raise their children as Jews. Several individuals who married a non-Jew emphasized the program’s influence on their plans for raising their children as Jews.

## Conclusions

This study demonstrates that an intense 10-day educational experience can produce a powerful, lasting impact. The findings are consistent with earlier studies of Taglit, which showed clear program effects on participants' feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people, and on their views regarding the importance of marrying a Jewish person and raising children as Jews. Moreover, as in earlier studies, this research finds the program had little or no observable influence on participants' religious observance, communal involvement, and on their feelings of connection to Jewish customs and traditions and to their local Jewish community.

These findings have significant implications for policy discussions regarding the Jewish future. The relationship of Diaspora Jews to Israel, intermarriage, assimilation, and the sense of Jewish peoplehood are each informed by this study. Although Taglit is not a panacea for the challenges of Jewish continuity in North America, this study suggests that it has been a highly successful educational experiment with positive, long-term effects on attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, Taglit's impact appeared to be stronger for those from less engaged Jewish backgrounds, as measured by ritual practice, years of Jewish education, or parental intermarriage. Because more recent Taglit

cohorts (those after 2005) included larger proportions of less engaged participants than those examined in the present study, it is possible that future research will show an even larger impact. Later cohorts were also much larger than those studied in the present investigation. To the extent that the program engages a majority of young adult Jews (at least 40,000 North American participants annually), the impact may be further strengthened as an Israel experience becomes a normative part of socialization for North American Jews.

The study has potentially profound implications for how other ethnic and religious groups, particularly those with ties to a homeland, think about education and socialization. Intensive informal education has powerful effects and may allow the creation of communities of meaning that transcend language and national borders. Nevertheless, as strong and clear-cut as the present findings are, we need to learn more about how the program affects participants from later years and the dynamics of the educational intervention. Taglit has provided an extraordinary laboratory to understand the development of Jewish identity and a window on how contemporary Jewish young adults think about their lives and find meaning.



## Introduction

Taglit-Birthright Israel<sup>1</sup> was created to promote Jewish continuity. The founders—philanthropists who created a coalition to fund the program—believed that an Israel educational experience was essential to fostering Jewish identity, creating a bond between Jews and Israel, and forging new relationships among young Jews from all corners of the world (cf. Beilin, 2009; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). The program was initiated in late 1999, when the first group of Diaspora young adults arrived in Israel for 10-day educational tours. In nearly a decade since the program began, almost 225,000 18- to 26-year-old Jews from around the world have participated. Taglit is a gift (i.e., it is cost-free to participants) and its governing principle is that an educational tour of Israel is the “birthright” of every young Jew. Previous evaluation studies of the impact of the Taglit program have necessarily focused on short-term outcomes, particularly changes in the attitudes of participants toward Israel and their Jewish identities. Given the time elapse from the program’s inception, we can now begin to assess and understand its long-term impact. This report examines Taglit’s impact on the Jewish identities and engagement of U.S. participants five to eight years after going to Israel.

Taglit has dramatically altered the scope and character of educational tourism to Israel among Jewish young adults. Prior to the emergence of Taglit, educational tours of Israel were typically conducted by groups affiliated with religious organizations and were tailored to pre-college adolescents. Taglit’s focus is on an older, more intellectually mature population, and most of the organizations that run Taglit’s informal educational tours are secular. Those who apply to participate in Taglit, particularly those

from North America, come from a broad swath of the Jewish population—from highly educated and engaged young Jews, to those who grew up in nonobservant homes with little or no formal Jewish education.

In Taglit’s first year, nearly 10,000 participants from around the world came to Israel under the program’s auspices; by 2008, that number increased to nearly 40,000 (Shoshani, 2008). The largest group of Taglit participants comes from the United States, but more than 50 countries are represented, sending participants roughly in proportion to the size of their Jewish communities. The program has required an investment of more than 650 million USD and has been funded by a consortium of philanthropies, Jewish communities, and the Israeli government.

Systematic evaluation research has been a requirement of the program since its inception (Kelner et al., 2000; Saxe, Kadushin, Kelner, Rosen, & Yereslove, 2002). Although evaluation studies of program impact have been conducted on participants from most of the countries represented in the program, the principal focus of evaluation has been on North American participants. Participants from the United States and Canada constitute nearly three-quarters of those who join Taglit. Extensive program evaluation data are available about the characteristics of these North American participants and their responses to the program. These data have consistently shown that the program is highly valued by participants and has substantial impact on their attitudes toward Israel and their Jewish identities (Saxe et al., 2004; Saxe et al., 2002; Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006b; Saxe, Sasson, Phillips, Hecht, & Wright, 2007).

A key design feature of the North American evaluation studies is that, on critical outcomes, equivalent groups of participants and nonparticipants have been compared. By comparing participants to those who applied but did not participate, researchers have been able to isolate the effect of program participation. A natural comparison group of nonparticipants has been available because there has been substantially more demand for the program than available slots. In most cases, random factors have led some to participate and others to be placed on waiting lists, and eligible nonparticipants have, for the most part, been very similar to those who participated (cf. Saxe et al., 2009; Appendix 1).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the extensive data available about participants and their responses to Taglit, the program's long-term impact can only now be assessed. Ten years after the program's inception, alumni from early cohorts are embarking on their mature adult lives and making critical choices regarding marriage, family, and their Jewish identities. In the short term, perhaps it is unsurprising that a cost-free trip to a foreign destination, particularly Israel—steeped in meaning and myth for many Jews—creates a powerful effect on participants. But to what end, and how are their lives affected by participation in Taglit?

The central research question that animates the present study is whether, over time, Taglit influences participants' trajectory of involvement with Israel and engagement in Jewish family and community. There are multiple ways in which program alumni might choose to enact their Jewish identities. In line with the program's goals, this study focuses on assessing the concrete ways in which Taglit

influences participants' relationship to Israel, feelings of Jewish identity and peoplehood, communal involvement, religious observance, and decisions about marriage and children.

*Relationship to Israel.* Recently, there has been substantial discussion among scholars and in the Jewish community, about whether Diaspora Jews are “distancing” themselves from Israel (Cohen, 2008; Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Sasson, Kadushin, & Saxe, 2010). A particular focus has been on whether young adult Jews have the same commitment to Israel as their parents' generation. Previous studies of Taglit found that participants not only developed higher levels of emotional attachment to Israel, but were also more likely than nonparticipants to get news about Israel from Israeli media and feel confident in talking with others about Israel (Saxe et al., 2004; Saxe et al., 2002; Saxe et al., 2009; Saxe et al., 2006b; Saxe et al., 2007). This study examines whether these patterns continue and whether attitudinal-emotional ties to Israel are reflected in actual behavior, including return trips to Israel.

*Jewish Identity and Peoplehood.* The grandparents of most contemporary Jewish young adults grew up with “Jewish” as their primary identity. The identities of the parents of today's young adults, in contrast, were often formed by harmonizing Jewish and American characteristics in ways that muted the unique elements of each (Fishman, 2000). In a departure from the past, many young adults today come from religiously mixed backgrounds and, for “Generation Birthright Israel,” Jewish identity increasingly functions as one among many identity “windows” that do not necessarily interconnect (Turkle, 1995). Previous evaluation research on Taglit has

documented the program's short-term impact on participants' sense of connection to Jewish heritage and history, and to the worldwide Jewish people (see citations, p. 5). This report examines whether participants' heightened connection to Jewish history, heritage, and peoplehood endures over the long term.

*Communal Involvement and Religious Observance.*

Research on contemporary American young adults from all faith traditions suggests low levels of affiliation with formal religious organizations (Wuthnow, 2007). Some suggest that strong ties to peer groups serve as substitute families during emerging adulthood (Watters, 2003). These ideas resonate for Jewish young adults, whose lack of involvement in formal Jewish offerings are in marked contrast to their desire for informal involvement within their peers (Sasson, Saxe, Rosen, Hecht, & Selinger-Abutbul, 2007). Whether the preference for informal connections over institutional ties will persist as young adults emerge into adulthood is not yet clear. The organizational disengagement of young adults poses a major challenge to the Jewish community, which has a variegated and highly elaborate network of organizations. Previous research on Taglit alumni has documented a modest increase in involvement with Jewish organizations among participants still residing on college campuses, compared with pre-trip levels (see citations, p. 5). Research has also documented a modest impact on the religious practices of participants, especially their propensity to light Shabbat candles and share Shabbat meals.

Whether, and to what extent, Taglit influences older alumni to affiliate with synagogues, volunteer for Jewish causes, or become more religiously observant, is an additional focus of the present study.

*Marriage and Children.* For almost two decades, since the 1990 National Jewish Population Study reported that the majority of recent marriages involving Jews were to non-Jews (Kosmin et al., 1991), there has been a high level of communal concern regarding the marital choices of young adults. This concern has opened up a broad debate in the Jewish community about the best policy responses to intermarriage. Various commentators have alternately championed outreach to the intermarried, increased Jewish education, and efforts to restore communal boundaries against intermarriage (Chertok, Phillips, & Saxe 2008; Cohen, 2006; Fishman, 2004). Previous research on the impact of Taglit identified significant differences in the importance participants and nonparticipants placed on marrying a Jew and raising children as Jews (see citations, p. 5). Until now, however, it has been impossible to see whether these differences in attitudes have influenced actual choices. Given the large number of American Jews who have participated in the program, any positive program effect has potentially significant ramifications. Accordingly, this study examines whether and to what extent Taglit influences decisions about marriage and family, including partner choice and attitudes on raising children as Jews.



## Methods

This study focuses on the group of U.S. young adults who applied to participate in a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip between 2001 and 2004. The oldest cohorts were chosen as the focus of this study to allow a preliminary assessment of the long-term impact of Taglit, and specifically, to maximize the number of individuals likely to be married and be parents. This group of applicants includes both those who participated in the program as well as those who did not.

### *Sampling Frame*

The sampling frame consisted of eligible applicants to Taglit winter trips during 2001, 2002, 2003, or 2004.<sup>3</sup> Winter (rather than summer) trips were chosen because baseline data were available on many of these individuals from prior surveys. There were few differences between participants in summer and winter trips during the years studied. Included in the frame were those who went on any one of the winter trips, as well as those who applied but did not go on the trip for which they applied, or on any subsequent trip.<sup>4</sup> Some individuals in the nonparticipant group did, however, travel to Israel in the years since applying to Taglit, either on their own or as part of another organized Israel program. Consequently, comparisons between participants and nonparticipants measure the effect of participating in Taglit specifically, not travel to Israel in general. In all, approximately 22,000 individuals who applied for these trips were eligible for inclusion in this study (Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1. Applicant Pool**

Winter Trip Year	Total Eligible Applicants for the study	Pct. of Total Population
2001	3,097	14%
2002	6,618	31%
2003	3,595	17%
2004	8,339	39%
Total	21,649	100%

Note: Winter 2001 includes only information on participants (nonparticipant information is not available).

The backgrounds of Taglit 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. As a whole, however, Taglit applicants come from somewhat more engaged backgrounds than those who do not apply to the program, and the sample is not fully representative of young adult American Jews. This is particularly true among applicants to the trips included in this study. At the time of application to the trip, 28 percent identified as “Just Jewish,” 21 percent as Reform or Reconstructionist, 23 percent as Conservative, 24 percent as Orthodox and four percent as other. The relatively large proportion of Orthodox applicants reflects, in part, the events of 9/11 and the second Intifada (which began in late 2000). During this period,

overseas travel in general, and visits to Israel specifically, were seen as dangerous by many potential participants and, in particular, by their parents. In more recent rounds, the proportion of Orthodox applicants decreased substantially, while the percentage of applicants with limited Jewish education and those who came from disengaged households increased. (See Appendix 2 for comparisons of Taglit participants in the cohorts covered by this study with those from more recent years.) Although the applicant pool that is the focus of this study overrepresents those with richer Jewish backgrounds, it includes many Jews from less engaged backgrounds: 16 percent of respondents had received no formal Jewish education, while close to 50 percent reported that their family religious practices during high school included lighting Hanukkah candles and celebrating Passover seders but did not include regularly lighting Shabbat candles or observing kashrut.

#### *Differences between Participants and Nonparticipants*

Because the number of slots available for each trip invariably failed to meet demand, only about half of each applicant group was able to participate. The selection process was more or less random (nonparticipants were either waitlisted or assigned inconvenient dates, cf. Saxe et al., 2004).<sup>6</sup> The only significant differences between participants and nonparticipants in the study sample were with respect to age, with participants being slightly younger at time of trip and the survey (see Appendix 1). Where relevant, these differences are statistically controlled for in the analyses reported below. Gender, high school ritual practice, Jewish education, parental intermarriage, and denomination raised did not differ significantly between

participants and nonparticipants (see Appendix 1). Because of the largely random nature of the selection process and the minimal differences between participants and nonparticipants, the pool of applicant nonparticipants serves as a natural control group for measuring program effects.

#### *Sampling Scheme*

The target achieved sample size for this study, based on Monte Carlo analyses, was 1,200 cases. In order to obtain a sufficient number of respondents by age and gender, and to facilitate equal coverage of the selected rounds, the sample was stratified by age, gender, round, and participant status. In terms of age, older individuals were oversampled in order to increase the number of those likely to be married and raising children. Participants were also oversampled to increase the reliability of estimates about those who experienced Taglit and to allow analyses of subgroups of participants (see Appendix 3 for details of stratification plan). A total of 2,387 cases were selected from the sampling frame in order to achieve the desired number of cases. Some cases were subsequently determined to be ineligible for the study and the final number of eligible cases included in the sample was 2,266.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Survey Instrument*

The instrument was based on previous surveys conducted with Taglit applicants and participants and included questions about the Jewish educational and family background of participants (both current and past), items about Jewish identity, and questions about involvement with Jewish organizations and activities (see Appendix 5). For participants,

additional questions were included about their Taglit experience. To ensure high response rates, the number of questions was kept to a minimum. Full telephone interviews averaged 10 minutes in length, with the shortest full interviews taking 7 minutes and the longest in excess of half an hour. Very long interviews were a product of respondents providing detailed comments. Prior to the launch of the study, extensive cognitive testing was conducted, together with pilot tests of the instrument and calling protocol. Most of the interview questions were close-ended, with an open-ended question asked at the end of the survey.

#### *Protocol*

The survey was a dual-mode telephone and Web survey (with a very small number of mail surveys). Because many email addresses—recorded in Taglit’s registration database five to eight years prior to our study—proved unreliable, most interviews were conducted by telephone. Telephone calls were made at the Cohen Center by interviewers, most of whom were Brandeis University undergraduate and graduate students specifically trained for this study.

Due to the high mobility of the demographic represented by this sample (between 18 and 26 at time of initial application) and the long period of time elapsed since applications (up to 8 years for those who applied to winter 2001 trips), much of the contact information available in the Taglit registration system was out of date. Using this information as a starting point, researchers utilized email messages, phone calling, data enhancement services, and extensive internet searching to obtain up-to-date contact information for

potential respondents. Locating respondents was facilitated by social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), which are heavily used by young adults. Field operations began on February 11, 2009, and ceased on July 31, 2009.

#### *Response Rates*

Interviews were conducted with 1,223 eligible respondents and the response rate (AAPOR RR4<sup>8</sup>) was 61.8 percent for Taglit participants and 42.3 percent for nonparticipants. Overall, the rate (weighted because participants were oversampled) was 55.1 percent. In addition, for 289 of those who could not be interviewed, researchers were able to interview a parent or a close relative to ask a few basic questions about the individual’s Jewish affiliation and marital status. Including these cases, the response rate (RR4) was 72.4 percent for participants and 55.8 percent for nonparticipants. The overall rate was 66.7 percent. Relatively few individuals explicitly refused to take the survey, although the rate for nonparticipants (8.4 percent) was almost double that of participants (4.5 percent). The cooperation rate for participants was 93.6 percent and 80.4 percent for nonparticipants. Tables of final dispositions and outcome rates are shown in Appendix 3.

Nonrespondents were overwhelmingly individuals who could not be located due to a lack of valid contact information in the registration system. The absence of valid contact information was particularly a problem for nonparticipants because significantly less information on nonparticipants was retained in the Taglit registration system for earlier cohorts. In particular, information that was often critical

to tracking down respondents, such as names and phone numbers of other relatives or name of school attended, was often lacking for nonparticipants. The differences between respondents and nonrespondents were examined for known demographic characteristics (denomination, age, and gender). The few differences that were observed were addressed in the weighting scheme developed for this study (for more details see Appendix 3.)

### *Weighting*

In addition to design weights developed to account for the differential probabilities of selection as a result of the stratified sample, poststratification weights were created using registration system information on age, Jewish

denomination, round, and gender. These weights correct for differences between the distribution of known characteristics of the respondents and known characteristics of the sampling frame (see Appendix 3).

### *Analysis*

The central findings presented in this report are based on statistical models (logistic or ordinal logistic regression) that control for salient differences between participants and nonparticipants, as well as interactions between participation in Taglit and variables that affect program impact.<sup>9</sup> Additional analyses are based on descriptive statistics summarizing participant characteristics and attitudes.

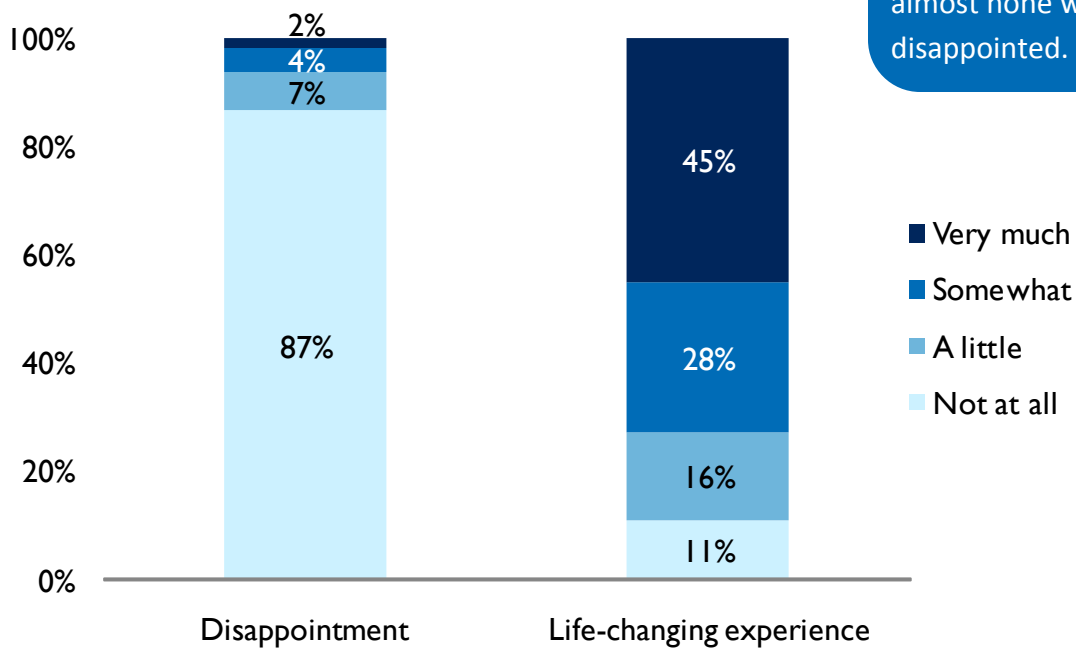
## Findings

The discussion below begins with the participants’ retrospective evaluation of the Taglit experience. The sections that follow assess Taglit’s impact on participants’ relationship to Israel, feelings of Jewish identity and peoplehood, communal involvement, religious observance, and decisions about marriage and children. Throughout the latter sections, the basic approach is to compare the survey responses of participants with a control group comprised of applicants to the program who did not participate.

### *Taglit in Retrospect*

Participants recalled their Taglit experience very positively, and few participants felt that their trip was a disappointment (Figure 1). In keeping with earlier evaluation findings, this study found very low levels of dissatisfaction with the Taglit experience. In positive terms, nearly half of all participants felt the trip was “very much” a life-changing experience, and many more felt it was “somewhat” of a life-changing experience (Figure 1). These figures are consistent with the results of surveys of recent cohorts several months after returning from Israel (Saxe et al., 2009).

Figure 1: Participants’ Feelings about Taglit (Estimated Proportions)



Most Taglit participants thought the trip was a “life-changing experience,” and almost none were disappointed.

Note: “Thinking back on your Birthright trip, would you say that the trip was a...”<sup>10</sup>

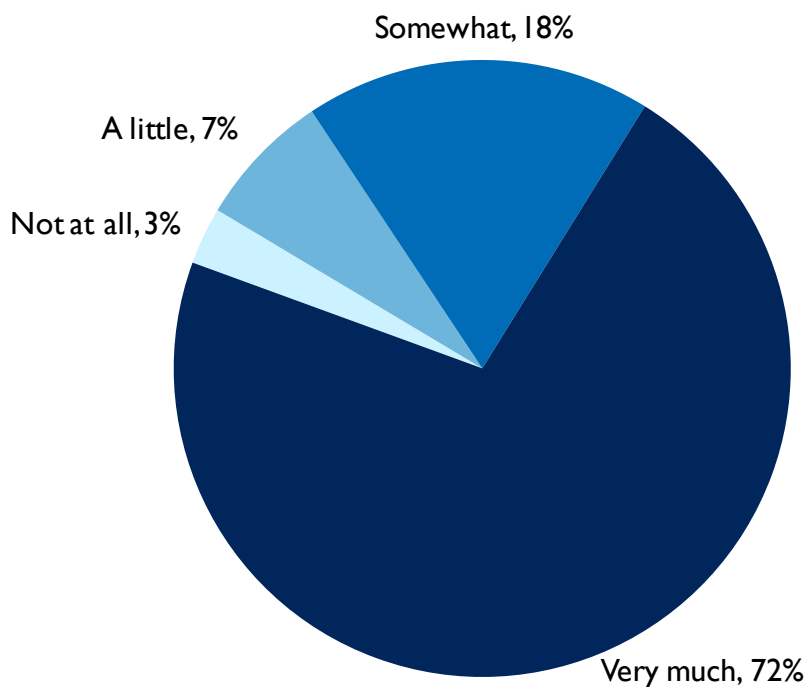
*Relationship to Israel*

The participants' positive assessment of the trip's impact extended to their feelings about Israel. Most Taglit participants in the present study felt that the trip had made them feel "very much" closer to Israel (Figure 2). Very few felt that the trip had only "a little" impact or no impact at all.

Both participants and nonparticipants were asked a number of questions about their

connections to Israel, making possible an objective assessment of Taglit's impact. The program was associated with significant increases in ties to Israel along a number of dimensions. In terms of perceptions, participants reported a greater sense of connection to Israel than did nonparticipants.<sup>12</sup> Compared to nonparticipants, participants were 23 percent more likely to "very much" feel a connection to Israel (Figure 3).

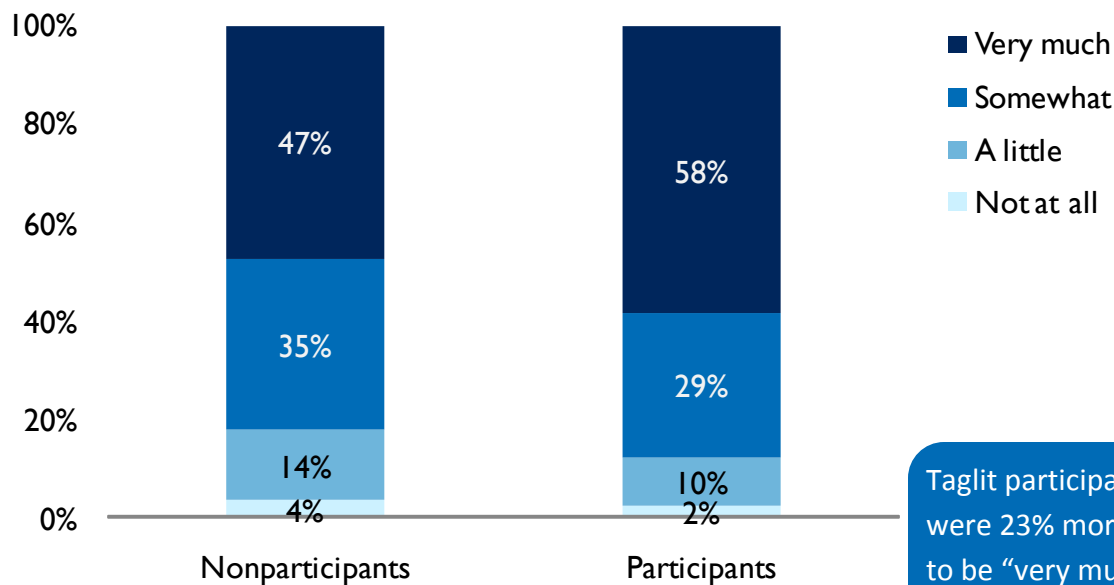
Figure 2: Participants' Perceptions of How Much the Trip Made Them Feel Closer to Israel (Estimated Proportions)



Over two-thirds of participants said the trip made them feel "very much" closer to Israel.

Note: "Thinking back on your Birthright trip, would you say that the trip made you feel closer to Israel?"<sup>11</sup>

Figure 3: Sense of Connection to Israel by Taglit Participation  
(Predicted Probabilities)



Taglit participants were 23% more likely to be “very much” connected to Israel.

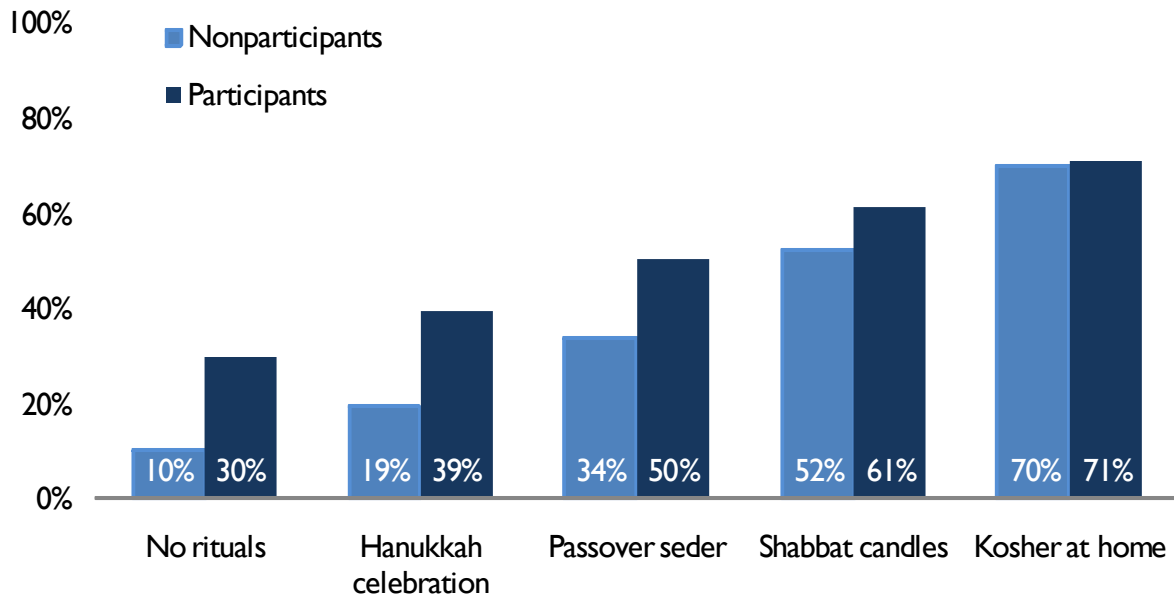
Note: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?”<sup>13</sup>

Notably, the predicted probability of Taglit participants feeling “very much” connected to Israel is similar to the predicted probability reported in previous studies, including previous two- and three-year post-trip studies of participants in the winter 2001 to winter 2004 rounds (Saxe et al., 2004; Saxe et al., 2006b).<sup>14</sup> Taglit’s impact on sense of connection to Israel appears to be stable and long-lasting, even after the initial post-trip “high” has worn off. The fact that even nonparticipants felt relatively connected to Israel (although significantly less so than participants) is a function of the generally positive feelings of American Jews toward Israel (Sasson et al., 2010).

Taglit’s impact on participants’ sense of connection to Israel was stronger for those

who came from less engaged Jewish backgrounds as measured by the level of ritual observance of their families. Respondents were asked if, during their high school years, anyone in their household observed Hanukkah, had a Passover seder, regularly lit Shabbat candles, or kept kosher at home. The most frequently practiced ritual was celebrating Hanukkah (92 percent), followed by the Passover seder (89 percent), lighting Shabbat candles (50 percent), and keeping kosher at home (36 percent). Respondents were given a score indicating the most intensive ritual observed in the household they grew up in, where 0 indicates no ritual, 1 indicates Hanukkah only, 2 indicates a Passover seder, 3 indicates lighting Shabbat candles, and 4 indicates kashrut observance.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 4: Being “Very Much” Connected to Israel by Taglit Participation and High School Ritual Practice (Predicted Probabilities)



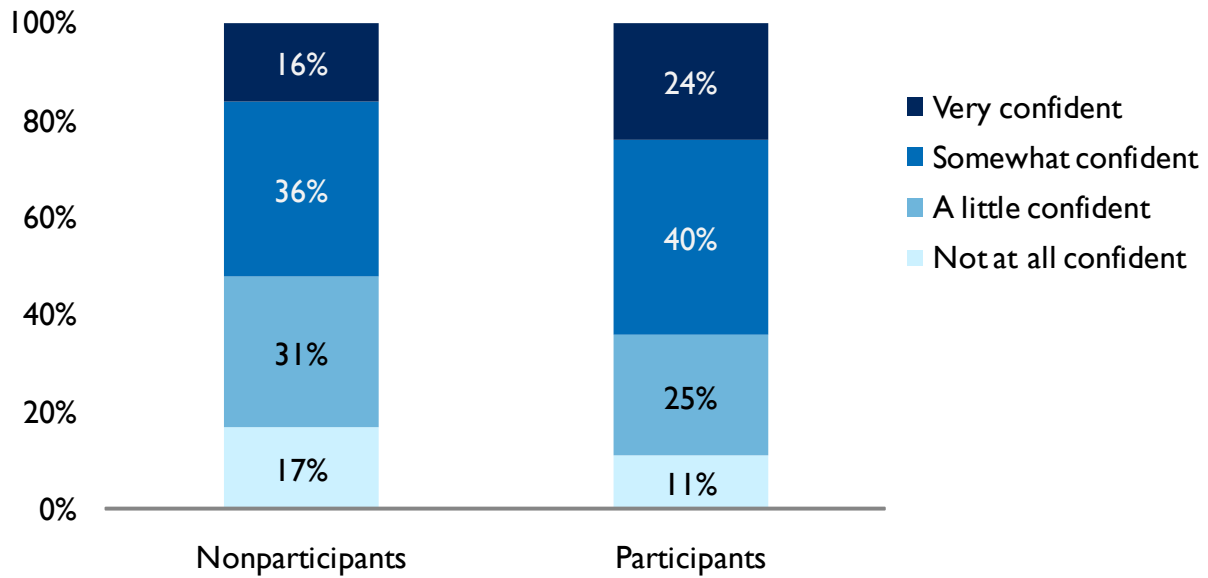
Note: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?”<sup>16</sup>

When grouped by the most intense ritual observed by their family during high school, Taglit’s stronger effect on those from less ritually engaged Jewish households becomes evident. Figure 4 shows that among those who did not perform any of the rituals in question, Taglit participants are three times as likely to be “very much” connected to Israel as nonparticipants. For those who celebrated

Taglit’s effect on connection to Israel is strongest for those who come from households with limited Jewish ritual observance.

Passover or Hanukkah but did not usually light Shabbat candles or keep kosher, Taglit still had an effect, but a smaller one. For those who came from households that regularly lit Shabbat candles or observed kashrut at home, there was little or no Taglit effect. Other than high school ritual engagement, no other variable mediated Taglit’s effect on participants’ connection to Israel.

Figure 5: Confidence in Ability to Explain Situation in Israel by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: “If someone asked you about the current situation in Israel, how confident do you feel in your ability to give a good explanation?”<sup>18</sup>

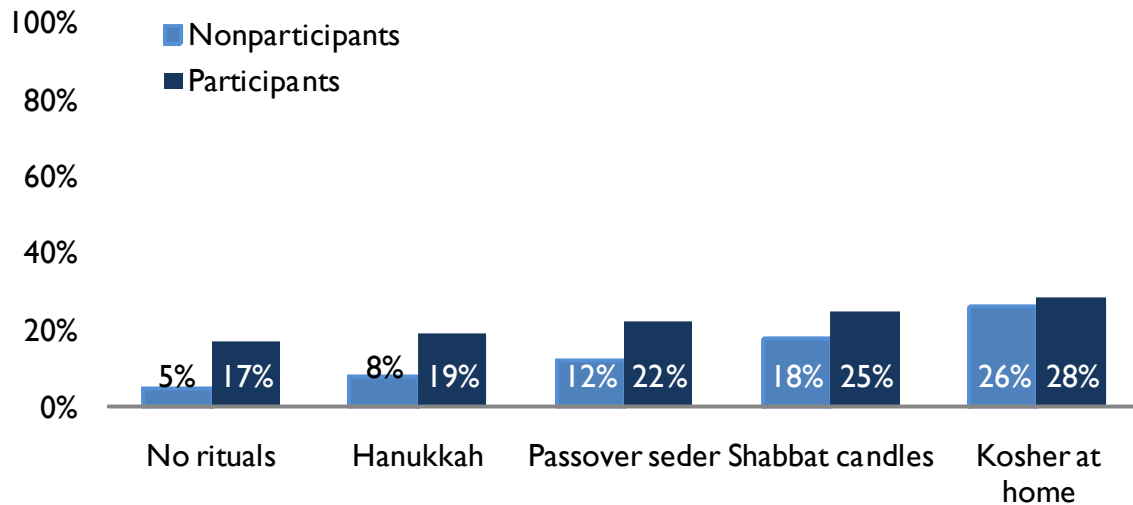
Taglit participants were 50% more likely to feel “very confident” of their ability to explain the current situation in Israel.

Participation in Taglit was also associated with greater confidence in respondents’ ability to explain “the current situation in Israel” (Figure 5). Participants were 50 percent more likely to feel “very confident” of their ability to explain Israel’s situation compared to nonparticipants. Because the situation in Israel varies over time, the context for the

question was different in earlier studies.

That being said, the Taglit effect is slightly smaller than the two- to three-year post-trip measures for the winter 2001 and 2002 rounds.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 6: Being “Very Confident” in Explaining Situation in Israel by Taglit Participation and High School Ritual Practice (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: “If someone asked you about the current situation in Israel, how confident do you feel in your ability to give a good explanation?”<sup>19</sup>

As with sense of connection to Israel, Taglit’s effect on confidence in explaining Israel’s situation was strongest for those from less religiously observant households (Figure 6).

Although it is not possible to determine cause and effect, the greater confidence of participants in being able to explain the current situation in Israel parallels participants’ greater use of Israeli news sources. In response to a specific question about how they kept track of the 2009 war in Gaza and southern Israel (Figure 7), participants were 35 percent more likely than nonparticipants to report using Israeli news sources, including the English language websites of newspapers such as

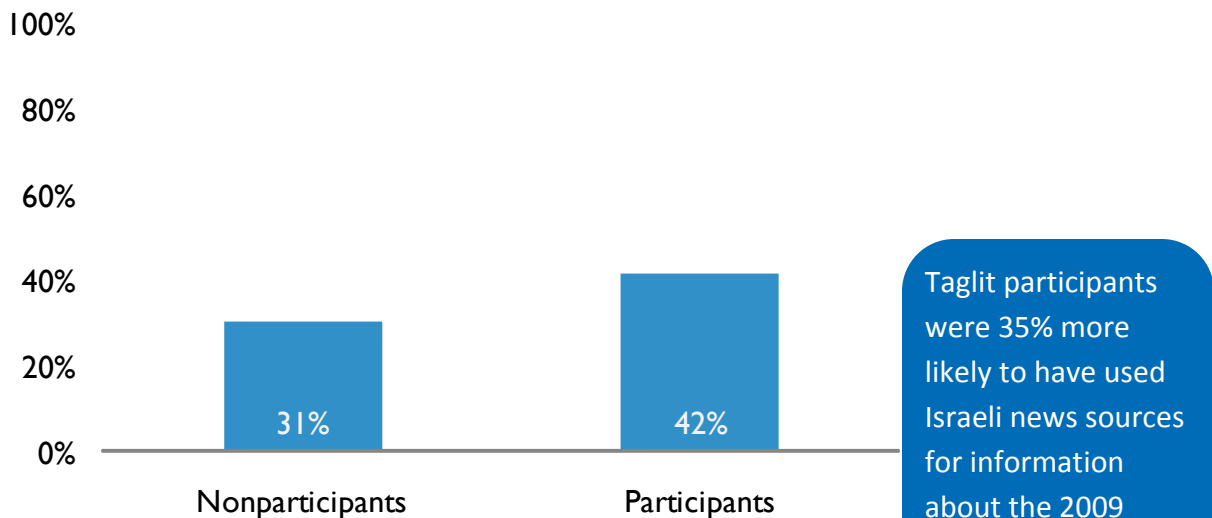
*Ha’aretz* and the *Jerusalem Post*. This is consistent with similar gaps between participants and nonparticipants reported in short-term studies (cf. Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006a).<sup>20</sup>

Although survey evidence indicates that participants feel more strongly connected to Israel, they were no more likely than nonparticipants to live in Israel at the time of the survey; overall, three percent of applicants (whether participants or not) lived in Israel in the first half of 2009.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps more importantly, 40 percent of participants made a return trip to Israel after their Taglit experience.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, five to eight years post trip, participation in Taglit clearly continues to exert a strong influence on participants’

Taglit’s effect on confidence in explaining the situation in Israel is strongest for those who come from households with limited Jewish ritual observance.

Figure 7. Use of Israeli News Sources to Keep Track of Events by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: “During the recent conflict in Gaza and southern Israel, which of the following, if any, have you used to keep track of events? ... Israeli news sources (*Ha’aretz*, *Jerusalem Post*, etc.)”<sup>23</sup>

identification with Israel. The stability of the effect over at least five years is striking. The quantitative data are reinforced by respondents’ comments in the open-ended section of the survey. Taglit participants were asked, “During the years since your trip, can you think of any decisions that you made that were influenced by your experience on Birthright Israel (for example, decisions about jobs, relationships, religious observance, how you spend your free time, etc.)?”<sup>24</sup> Over 20 percent of participants who answered the question mentioned that Taglit affected their relationship to Israel in some way, either in terms of political advocacy or involvement, or their decision to return or make *aliyah* (immigrate to Israel). One respondent

touched on all three of these ideas when he said:

*[Taglit has affected my decisions] a great deal. I became a Zionist, and somewhat obsessed with Israel, and Israeli life, affairs, politics, etc. I considered aliyah. I returned to Israel two additional times, and always want to go back, although time and money are obstacles. Birthright, and my subsequent trip to Israel, definitely helped increase my interest and study in Judaism and desire to live a Jewish life. But even before Birthright, I was committed to living a Jewish life, but seeing Israel has shown another side of Jewish life. I think of Israel often, and follow it in the news daily by reading [the] Jerusalem Post online.*

Another respondent who returned to Israel wrote:

*After the 10-day trip, I decided to enter a kibbutz ulpan [immersive Hebrew language study] program in Israel which lasted for 6 months.... I'm glad that I had the opportunity to attend the Birthright trip which also led into the ulpan experience, both of which had major impacts on my life.*

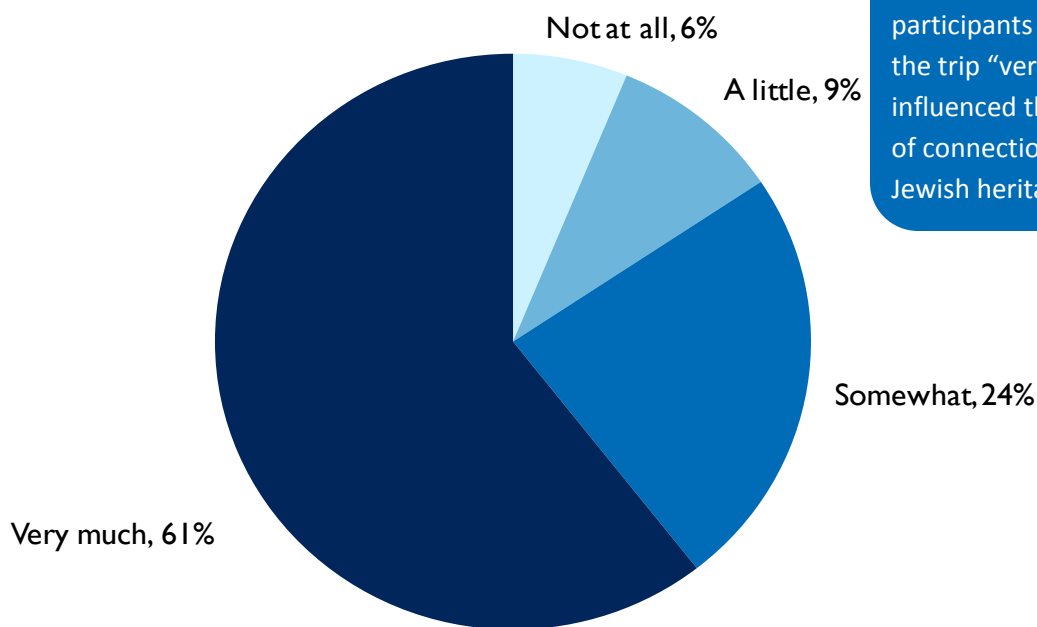
One respondent, who indicated that the trip resulted in a greater awareness of Israel politically, reported that he “[g]ot really involved in Israel activism, became president of the Israel club. Birthright really inspired me.” Another felt that Taglit had affected her decision to “vote for a political candidate that would support Israel.”

### *Jewish Identity and Peoplehood*

Taglit aims to encourage identification with Jewish history, heritage, and the Jewish people. Previous research, conducted up to three years after the trip, indicated that the program achieved these goals in the short term. This study permits analysis of the durability of these program effects.

From the subjective viewpoint of the participants in the present study, the answer is clear: Looking back on the experience from a vantage point of 5 to 8 years out, 61 percent of participants indicated that the trip “very much” increased their sense of connection to their Jewish heritage (Figure 8).

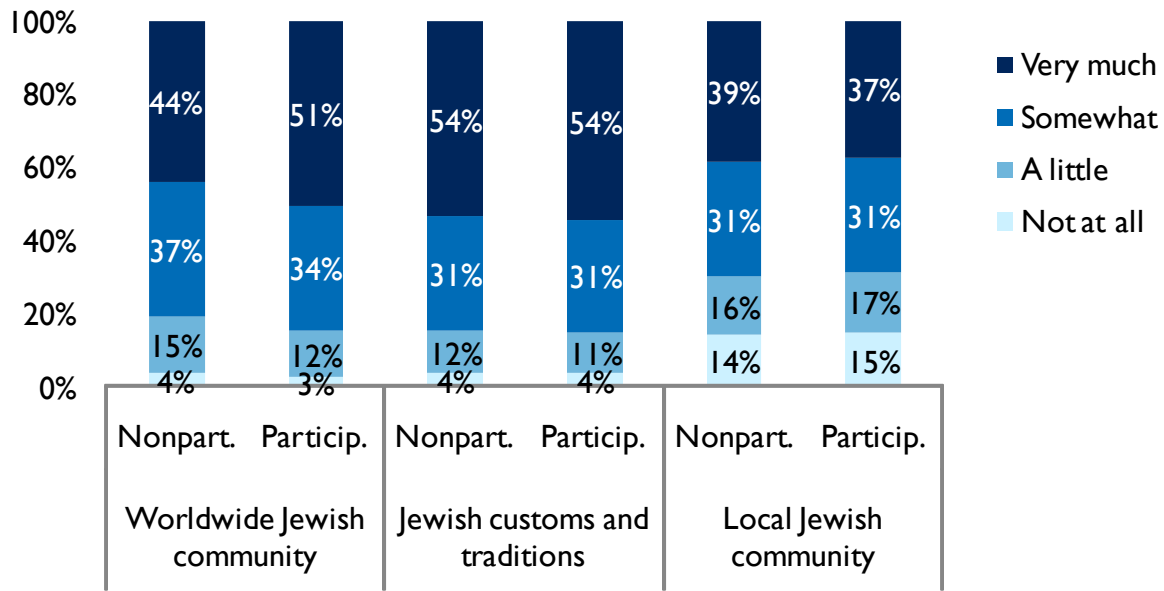
**Figure 8: Impact of Trip on Participants’ Sense of Connection to Jewish Heritage (Estimated Proportions)**



Over half of Taglit participants felt that the trip “very much” influenced their sense of connection to their Jewish heritage.

Note: “Thinking back on your Birthright trip, would you say that the trip made you feel closer to your Jewish heritage?”<sup>25</sup>

Figure 9: Sense of Connection to Aspects of Jewish Life by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: “To what extent do you feel a connection to...[a worldwide Jewish community/Jewish customs and traditions/the Jewish community where you live]?”<sup>26</sup>

Both participants and nonparticipants were asked about the extent to which they felt a connection to the “worldwide Jewish community,” the “Jewish community where you live,” and “Jewish customs and traditions.” Taglit participants were 16 percent more likely to report feeling “very much” connected to the worldwide Jewish community than nonparticipants (Figure 9). However, participants did not significantly differ from nonparticipants in their sense of connection to Jewish customs and traditions or to their local Jewish community.

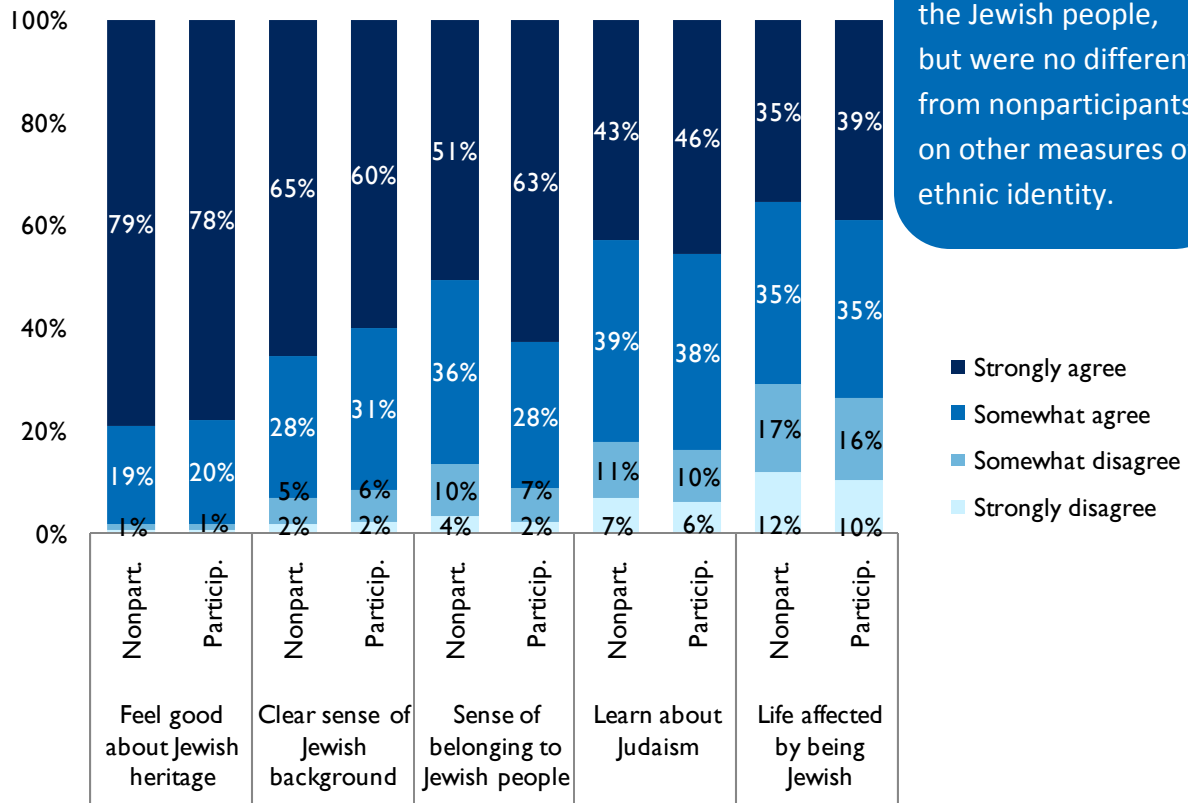
Taglit participants were 16% more likely to feel “very much” connected to the worldwide Jewish community but were no more likely than nonparticipants to feel connected to other aspects of Jewish life.

Another set of items, based on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Module (Phinney, 1992), also addressed respondents' sense of Jewish identity (Figure 10). The majority of respondents agreed "very much" with all of the statements that formed this set of items; the only significant difference between participants and nonparticipants was in regards to the statement, "I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people."

Taglit participants were 24 percent more likely to "strongly agree" with this statement than were nonparticipants. This statement appears to tap the same construct as the one above regarding the "worldwide Jewish community." Given the convergence among these sets of items, it appears that Taglit successfully instills an enduring sense of being part

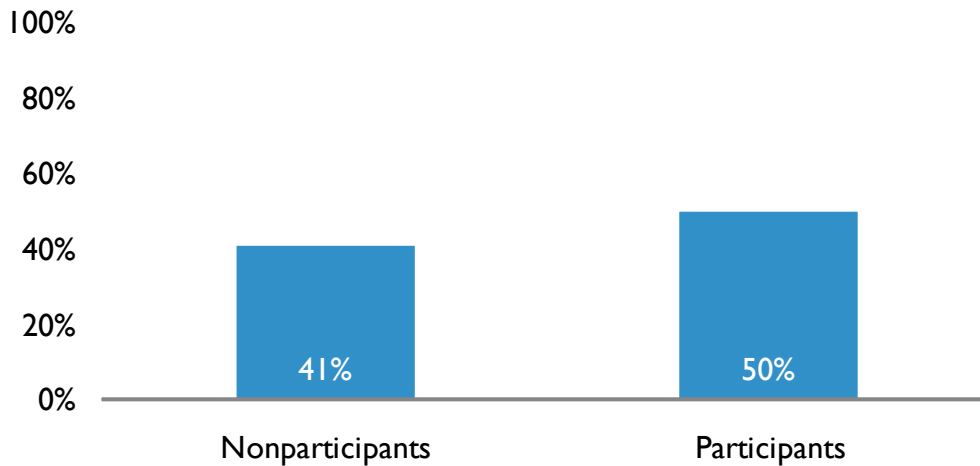
Taglit participants were 24% more likely to strongly agree that they had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, but were no different from nonparticipants on other measures of ethnic identity.

Figure 10: Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: To what extent do you agree with the following statement...[I feel good about my Jewish heritage/I have a clear sense of my Jewish background and what it means for me/I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people/I have spent time trying to learn more about Judaism such as its history, traditions, and customs/I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my being Jewish]? There was only a significant difference between participants and nonparticipants for sense of belonging to the Jewish people.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 11: Belonging to a Jewish Congregation by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: Do you belong to a synagogue, temple, minyan, havurah, or other Jewish congregation?<sup>29</sup>

Taglit participants were 22% more likely to belong to a synagogue, minyan, or other Jewish congregation.

of a global Jewish people and leaves other elements of participants' sense of Jewish identity relatively unaffected.

#### *Communal Involvement*

Affiliation with Jewish organizations such as synagogues or volunteering for Jewish causes has traditionally been an important marker of participation in Jewish life. Although it is clear that today's Jewish young adults seek to express their Jewish identities in less structured ways (Chertok, Sasson, & Saxe, 2009), it is nevertheless important to know how they relate to formal Jewish organizations and whether Taglit influences their choices.

Applicants to Taglit from the 2001-2004 cohorts had relatively high probabilities of membership in synagogues, minyanim, and other Jewish congregations. Nonetheless, controlling for age, marital status, gender, and

having a child (factors related to both participation and synagogue

membership), participants were 22 percent more likely to belong to a Jewish congregation than nonparticipants (Figure 11). Although this finding was only marginally statistically significant, additional analysis focusing on those not raised Orthodox suggests the same trend, i.e., participants are more likely to be members of a congregation than nonparticipants.<sup>28</sup> This finding differs from previous studies, which reported no consistent Taglit effect on participation in Jewish organizations beyond the college campus.

The responses of participants to the open-ended question support the finding that Taglit fostered certain forms of organizational engagement. Nearly eight percent of participants who responded to the open-

ended question discussed becoming more involved in Jewish organizations or getting a job in the Jewish world. Many mentioned becoming involved in a campus Hillel, Jewish federation, or Israel advocacy organization. For example:

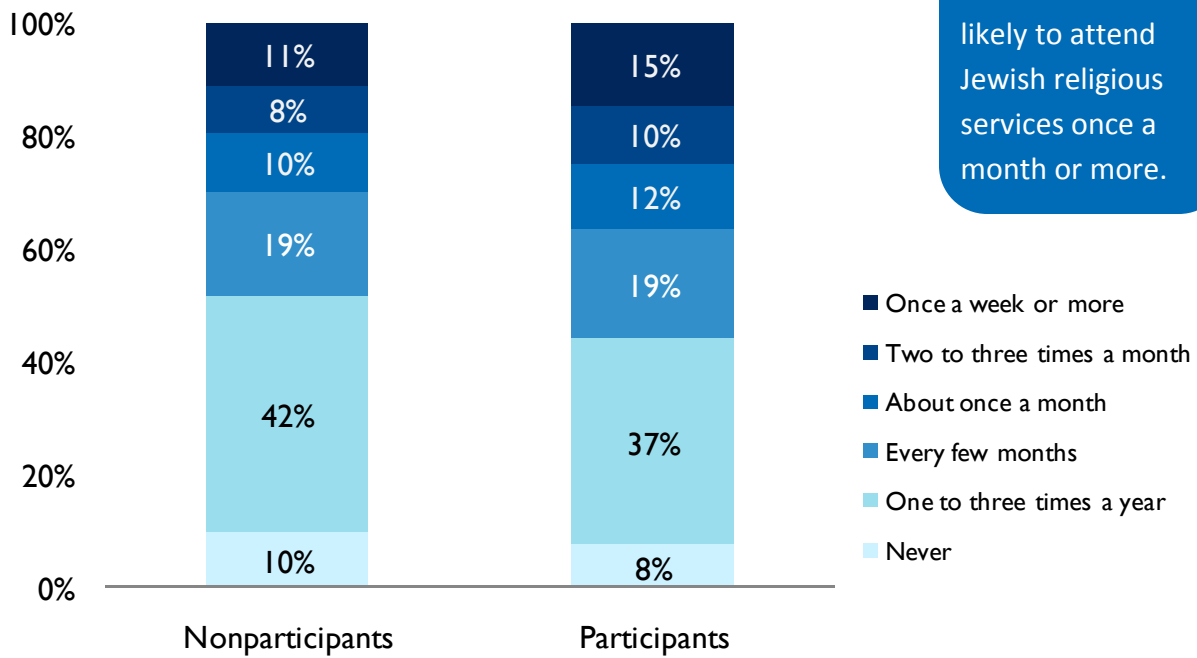
*My Birthright trip had a significant positive impact on how I view Israel and the Jewish people in relation to my everyday life. It is now very important to me to ensure my family is part of the Jewish community, through membership in a synagogue, and the JCC, and volunteering with Hadassah. My non-Jewish husband is very supportive and an active participant in these activities.*

Previous research on Jewish young adults has suggested that voluntarism, service, and other “universalistic” forms of organizational engagement may be particularly attractive for the present generation. In this study, however, participation in Taglit was not associated with increased likelihood of volunteering for Jewish causes.<sup>30</sup>

*Religious Observance*

Although Taglit does not seek to promote religious observance, it is nevertheless a potential outcome of the program. Indeed, participants were 28 percent more likely than nonparticipants to attend organized Jewish religious services once a month or more (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Service Attendance by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Note: Item coded from “In the past year, how often, if at all, have you attended some type of organized Jewish religious service?”<sup>31</sup>

As with connection to Israel, Taglit's effect on service attendance was related to respondents' Jewish backgrounds. Specifically, the effect was contingent on the amount of Jewish education received by applicants while growing up; the impact was greater for those who received less supplementary Jewish education and for those who attended Jewish day school for fewer years.<sup>32</sup>

Approximately 10 percent of those who answered the open-ended question about Taglit's impact on their lives commented that they had increased their religious observance after returning from the trip. In some cases this was mentioned only vaguely as "became more religious" without details. Often, the increase in religiosity was relatively slight. One respondent simply said, "I went to Shabbat more. I definitely thought I would want to live in Israel or find a way to be more observant. I remember thinking about it." For others, however, the change was more drastic. About a dozen respondents specifically mentioned making a decision to keep kosher in some form, and many others talked about celebrating Shabbat more frequently. One respondent discussed the trip's impact on his observance as follows:

*After the trip I became more observant, although I am not sure if it was the trip's organization (which wasn't very religious at all) or experiencing Israel and being around so many fellow Jews. One of the things that*

*stood out was one of my roommates, who was by no means a super-religious goody boy, was putting on tefillin after a night of...doing other things. He said he promised his grandpa to do this daily. I found that really inspiring and started to put mine on after getting back.*

Although it was clear that some participants increased their level of religious observance following Taglit, there were no significant differences between participants and nonparticipants with respect to the frequency of having a special meal on Shabbat, which was the only question besides attending religious services that touched on religious observance.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Marriage and Children*

Encouraging Jewish continuity was a central motivation in the creation of Taglit (cf. Saxe & Chazan, 2008), and understanding the program's impact on participants' decisions regarding marriage and children is of particular importance. Participants' decisions about whom to marry and in what kind of wedding ceremony, as well as their decisions about how to raise children religiously, are indicators of their Jewish identities and a commitment to remaining part of the Jewish people. This survey serves as a snapshot of Jewish young adults during the period in which many contemplate and embark on marriages and other long-term relationships.

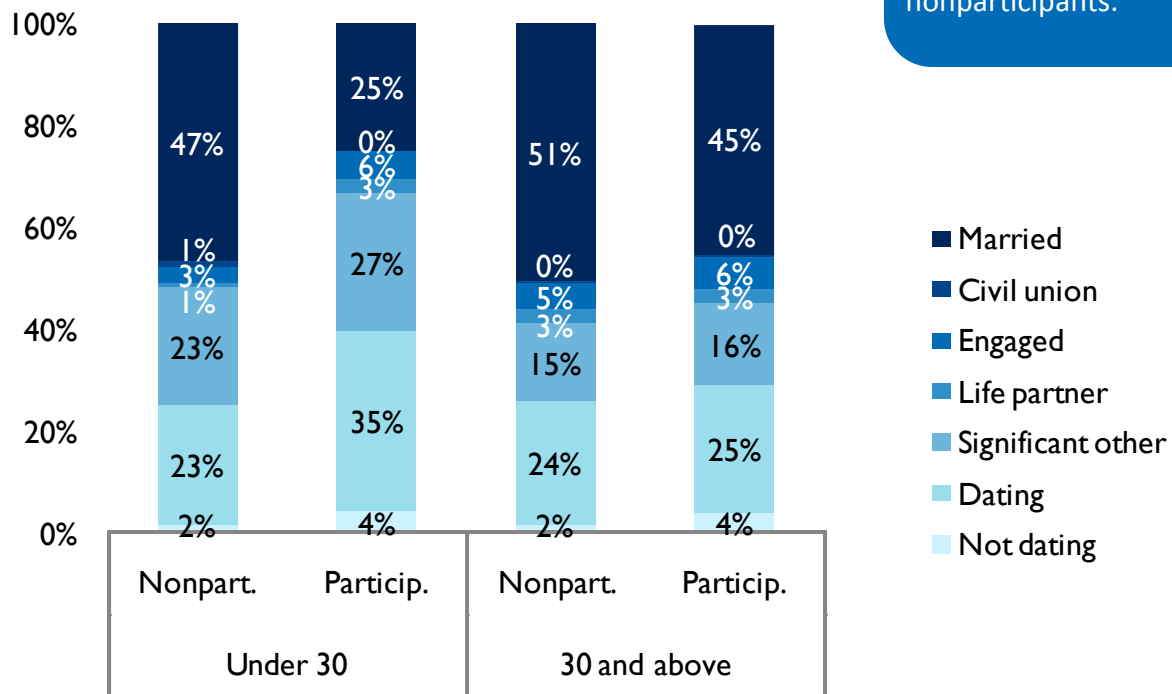
*Relationship Status.* A plurality of Taglit applicants aged 30 and above were married, whereas dating or having a “significant other” was the norm for those aged 29 and under (Figure 13). Above age 30, Taglit participants and nonparticipants looked very much alike with respect to their relationship status. Below age 30, however, Taglit participants were less likely to be married and more likely to be dating. We consider a possible explanation for

these differences below, following examination of the spousal choices of Taglit applicants.

*Choice of Spouse.* Virtually all of the married applicants in the study sample who were raised Orthodox married another Jew.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, analyses of the effect of Taglit on marital choice are restricted to respondents who were raised non-Orthodox.

Taglit participants under the age of 30 were less likely to be married than nonparticipants.

Figure 13: Relationship Status by Taglit Participation (Estimated Proportions)



Note: Item coded from “What is your marital status? Never married, engaged to be married, living with a life partner, married, in a civil union, separated/divorced, or widowed.”<sup>34</sup> Respondents who reported being never married were asked, “Do you have a significant other (e.g., boyfriend or girlfriend)?” Respondents who did not have a significant other were asked, “In the past year, how many of the people you dated were Jewish? Did not date, none, some, about half, most, or all.”

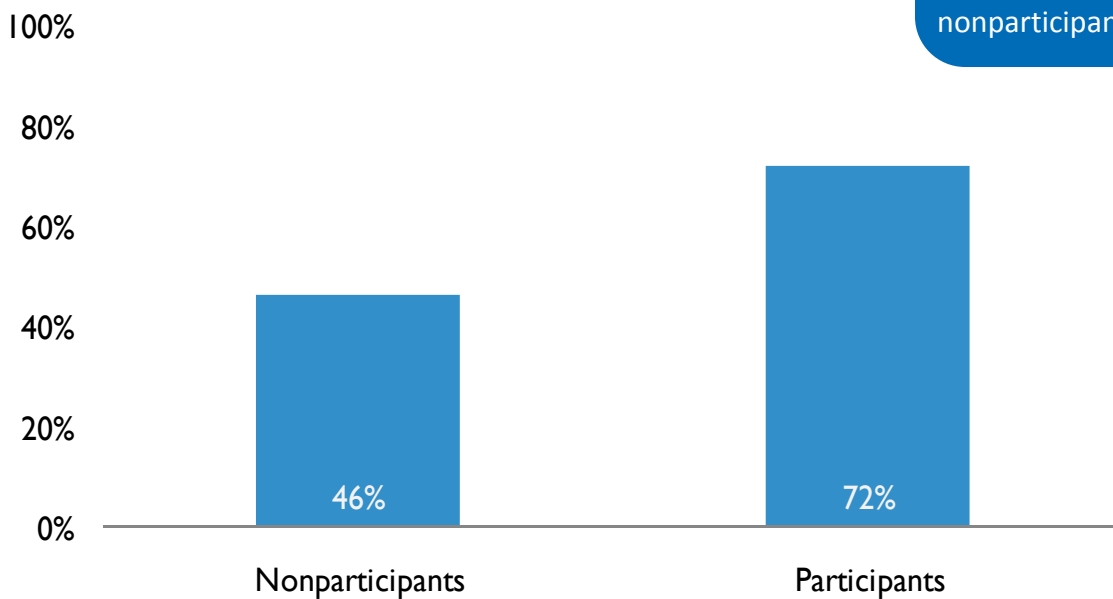
Among raised non-Orthodox Taglit applicants, who were married at the time of the survey, participants were 57 percent more likely than nonparticipants to be married to a Jew (Figure 14).<sup>36</sup> Additional analyses examined participant-nonparticipant differences, taking into account information gathered from close relatives of respondents we were unable to interview and including individuals who were engaged to be married. In both cases, similar findings were obtained.<sup>37</sup>

Additional efforts were made to explore Taglit’s effect on inmarriage. Taglit appears to have a stronger effect for those who had intermarried parents: Participants with

intermarried parents were over three times more likely to be married to a Jew than nonparticipants with intermarried parents.<sup>39</sup> Although statistically significant, the estimates for nonparticipants are based on extremely small cell sizes: Among married nonparticipants, there were only 19 cases with intermarried parents, of which 14 were intermarried and 5 were inmarried. The finding of an interaction effect with inmarriage and parental intermarriage should therefore be treated as tentative. Future analyses of subsequent cohorts, which were larger and had a higher proportion of applicants with intermarried parents, will allow for a more robust analysis of this phenomenon.

Non-Orthodox Taglit participants were 57% more likely to have a Jewish spouse than nonparticipants.

Figure 14: Having a Jewish Spouse by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities for Married, Non-Orthodox Taglit Applicants)



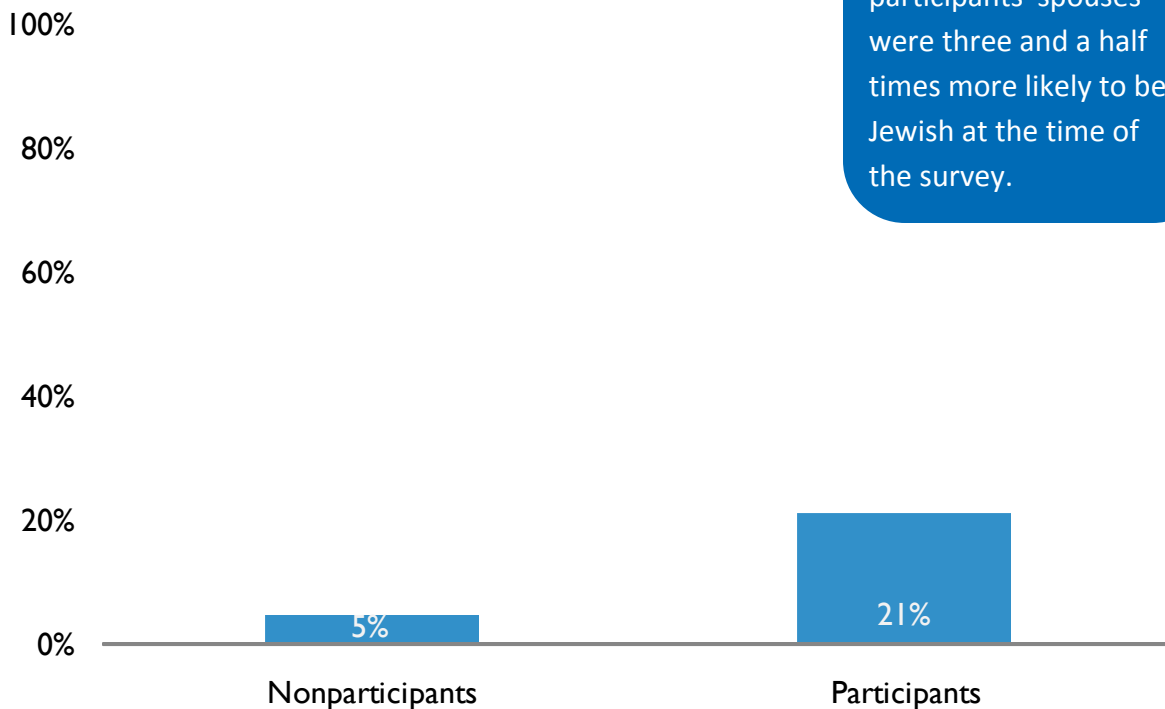
Note: Is your [spouse/former spouse] Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, no religion, or other?<sup>38</sup>

While not definitive, the results of this study may also indicate a substantially higher rate of conversion to Judaism among spouses of participants: Among respondents whose married partners were not raised Jewish, significantly more of the spouses of participants than nonparticipants were Jewish at the time of the survey (Figure 15).

The apparent higher rate of conversion among participant spouses may be related to the finding, noted earlier, that younger

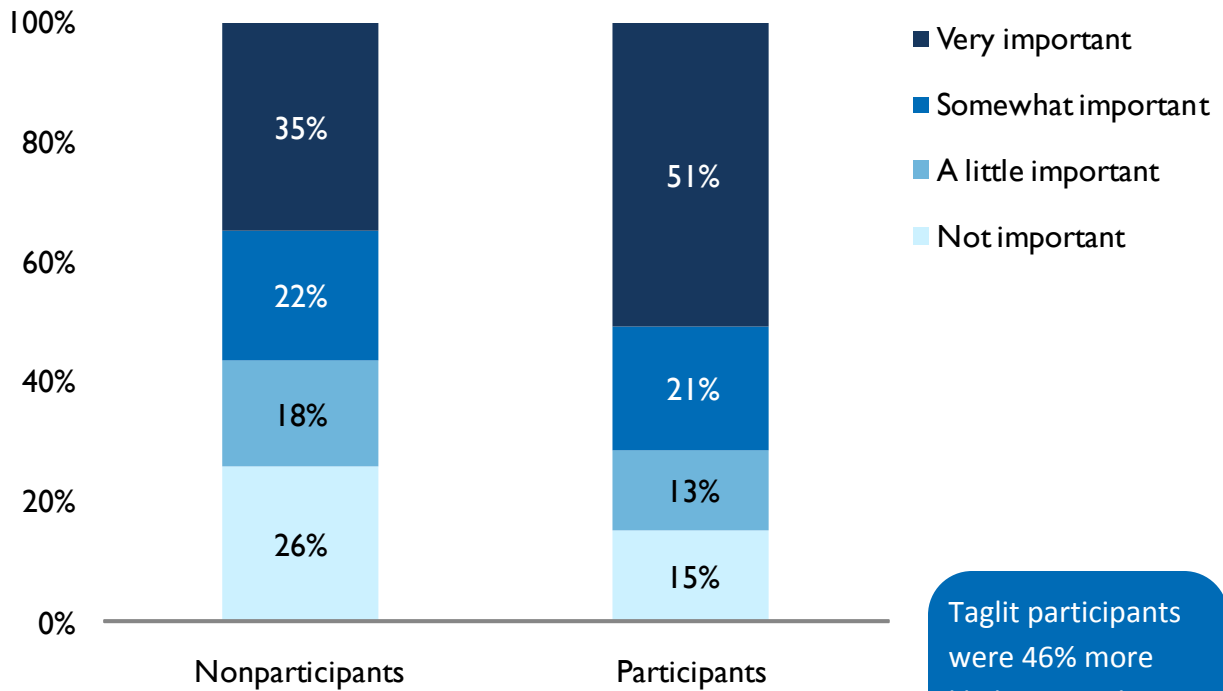
participants were less likely to be married than their nonparticipant comparisons. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that Taglit participants are more likely to want to marry a Jewish person and consequently spend a longer time searching for a suitable partner. Supporting this theory is the finding that unmarried Taglit participants are 46 percent more likely to view marrying a Jew as “very important” (Figure 16). Participants were, however, not significantly more likely to date Jews.<sup>41</sup>

**Figure 15: Spouses Not Raised Jewish But Jewish at Time of Survey by Taglit Participation (Estimated Proportions for Married to Not Raised Jewish Spouse Non-Orthodox Taglit Applicants)**



Note: Is your [spouse/former spouse] Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, no religion, or other?<sup>40</sup>

Figure 16: Importance of Marrying a Jew by Taglit Participation  
(Predicted Probability for Non-Orthodox Unmarried Taglit Applicants)



Taglit participants were 46% more likely to say that marrying a Jew is “very important.”

Note: How important is it to you to marry someone Jewish?<sup>42</sup>

*Wedding Officiation and Ritual.* Marrying a Jewish person is not the only measure of Jewish commitment. Although such a commitment is difficult to assess, the nature of the wedding ceremony is an additional indicator, particularly for intermarried couples. Although not a perfect predictor of future choices, decisions about officiation and wedding rituals provide a window into the place of Jewishness in the lives of these individuals.

For both inmarried participants and nonparticipants, sole officiation of Jewish clergy (rabbi or cantor) at their wedding ceremony was near universal (an estimated 96 percent).<sup>43</sup> In the case of intermarried respondents (both participants and nonparticipants), approximately half had no member of the clergy, Jewish or otherwise, present at their wedding. Among those intermarried couples who chose a religious officiant, however, an estimated 65 percent made an unambiguously Jewish choice by

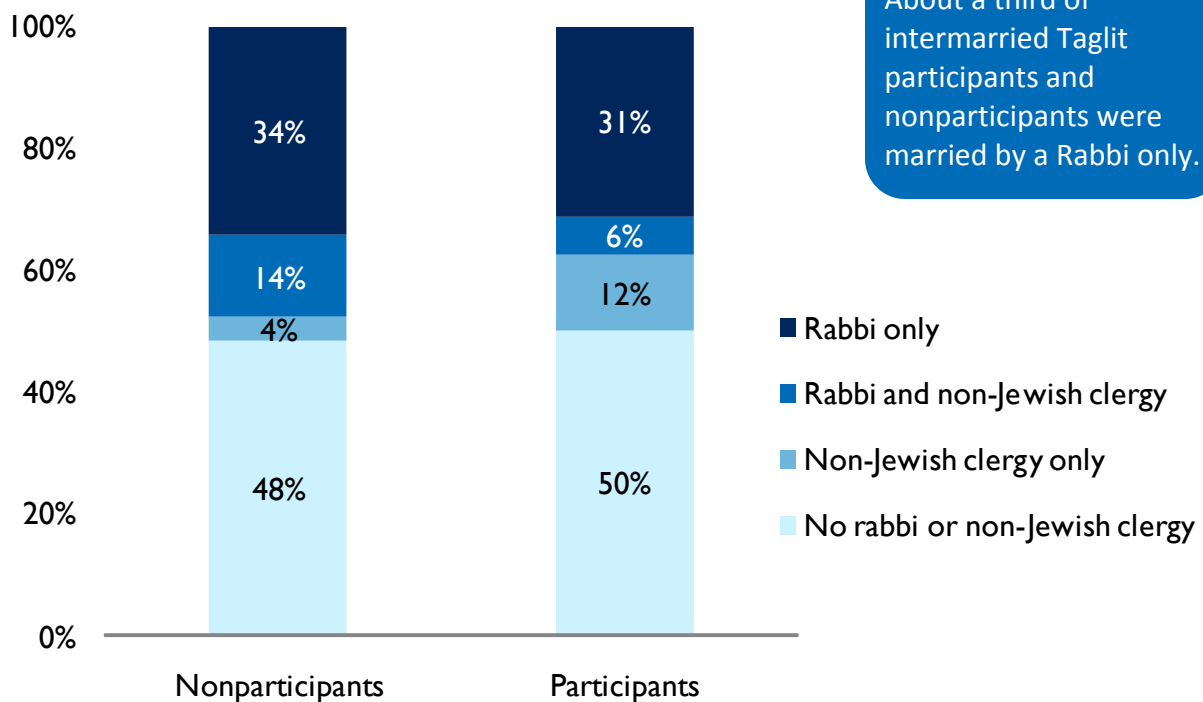
having a rabbi or cantor alone officiate. Just 15 percent had a non-Jewish clergy member as an officiant, alone or with a rabbi.<sup>44</sup> However, there were no significant differences between intermarried participants and nonparticipants with respect to wedding officiation (see Figure 17).

The Jewish rituals observed at weddings were very closely associated with officiation. Among weddings between a Jew and a non-Jew with a rabbi present (whether alone or with non-Jewish clergy), 93 percent had both a *chuppah* (wedding canopy) and a *ketubah* (marriage contract) and another 4 percent had one or the other. In contrast, only 20 percent of those married without a rabbi (whether a

non-Jewish clergy person was present or not) had both a ketubah and a chuppah and 20 percent had one or the other.<sup>46</sup>

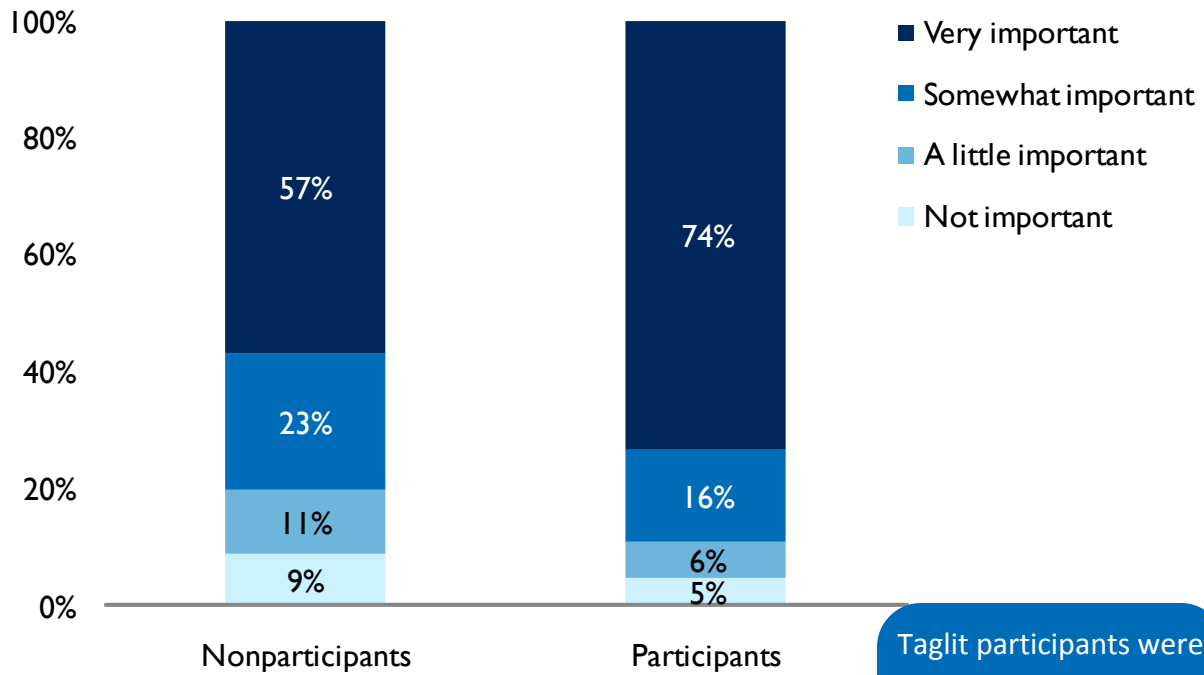
When intermarried participants who chose a Jewish wedding ceremony are added, figuratively, to those who married a Jewish person, the overall propensity for “marrying Jewishly” increases to include the vast majority of married participants. An average married non-Orthodox participant had a 72 percent chance of being inmarried; beyond this, those who married a non-Jew had a 31 percent chance of being married by a rabbi alone. Consequently, participants had a very high likelihood of being married in circumstances where Jewish identity was

Figure 17: Officiation at Intermarriages by Taglit Participation (Estimated Proportions)



Note: “Who officiated at your [wedding/civil union] ceremony? Please choose all that apply. A rabbi or cantor, a non-Jewish clergy member, or a judge or justice of the peace.” Orthodox excluded from analysis.<sup>45</sup>

Figure 18: Importance of Raising Children as Jews by Taglit Participation (Predicted Probabilities)



Taglit participants were 30% more likely to report that raising their children as Jews is “very important.”

Note: “How important is it to you to raise your children Jewish?”<sup>48</sup>

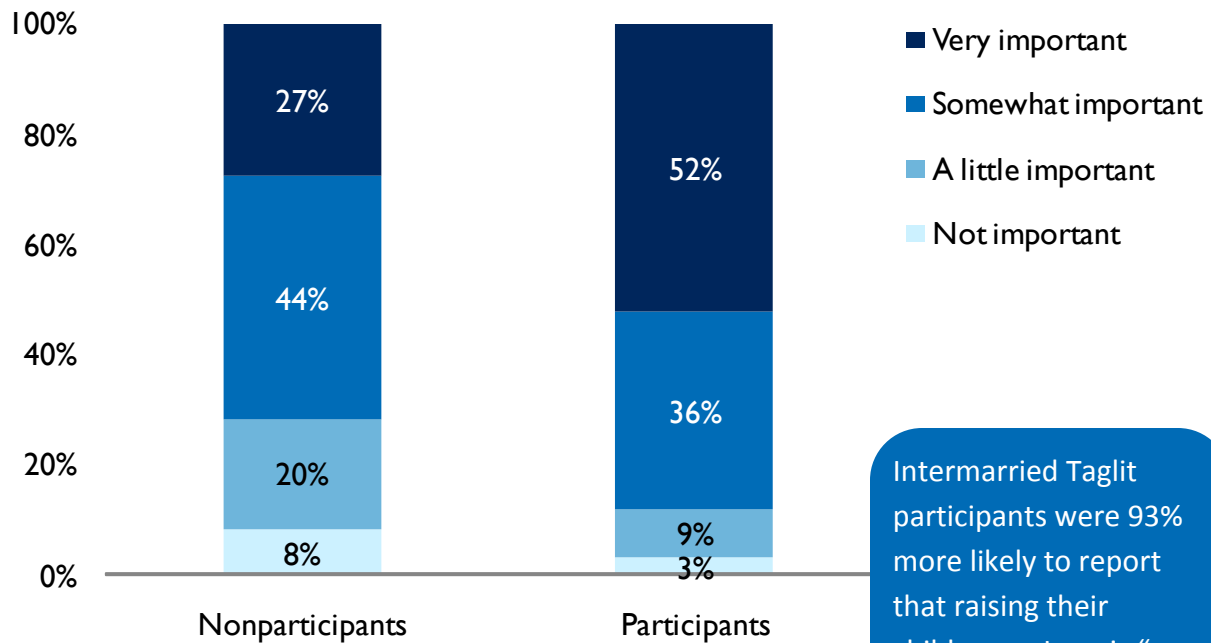
predominant. The likelihood of an average married non-Orthodox nonparticipant being married in circumstances where Jewish identity is preeminent was lower, with a 46 percent chance of being married to a Jew and, among those married to non-Jews, a 34 percent chance of being married exclusively by a rabbi.

*Raising Children.* Based on trends for young, well-educated U.S. adults, the bulk of Taglit participants from the 2001 to 2004 rounds are just entering their peak childbearing years. Of all Taglit applicants surveyed, 20 percent had at least one child, with 49 percent of married applicants having children compared to 1 percent of unmarried applicants.<sup>47</sup> Due to the small number of cases, it is not yet possible to

analyze how Taglit may have influenced parental decisions regarding the religious education and socialization of children.

Although it may be too early to analyze the decisions of alumni parents, the survey also asked respondents without children to indicate how important it was to them to raise children as Jews. A majority of Taglit participants and nonparticipants felt it was “very important” to raise children as Jews, but participants were 30 percent more likely to view raising children as Jews “very important” (Figure 18). This is greater than the short-term impact of Taglit for these cohorts (Saxe et al., 2004; Saxe et al., 2006b).

Figure 19: Importance of Raising Children as Jews Among Intermarried Respondents by Taglit Participation  
(Predicted Probabilities)



Intermarried Taglit participants were 93% more likely to report that raising their children as Jews is “very important.”

Note: Intermarried respondents without children.<sup>49</sup>

Notably, intermarried participants were almost twice as likely to say that it was very important to raise children as Jews, compared to intermarried nonparticipants (Figure 19).

*Respondent Comments.* The findings about the impact of Taglit on marriage are buttressed by comments respondents made at the end of the survey about the impact of Taglit on their lives. Seventeen percent of participants who responded to the open-ended question indicated that Taglit influenced their decisions regarding dating and marriage and their desire to raise children as Jews. Marrying another Jew and raising children as Jews are intimately linked in the minds of many respondents, as

evidenced by responses such as the following:

*Simply put, going on the Birthright Israel trip made me decide once and for all that I would marry a Jewish man, raise my children Jewish, and really hold on to my Jewish heritage.*

*My fiancée and I have always talked about raising our future children Jewish, but after going on the trip, it really made me want it even more.*

Even those who said they had or would be willing to marry a non-Jew stressed the importance of raising a Jewish family. After

going on Taglit, one respondent was “unwilling to date anyone that was unwilling to raise a family Jewish, implying that the religion of the spouse was unimportant as long as he or she made a commitment to being part of a Jewish family. Another respondent said that “in terms of my relationship, it has been clearly communicated that if I am to marry this person, my kids will be Jewish [and that] is all that is important.” A third respondent put it: “We wanted to raise my kids Jewish and carry on the Jewish

tradition. It was difficult marrying a non-Jew but it made me want to keep the Jewish tradition within my home.” The majority of these responses specifically mentioned that Taglit instilled or reinforced a desire to marry a Jewish person and/or establish a Jewish family. Almost a dozen respondents also mentioned that their current spouse or fiancé/e was someone they met on the trip, suggesting a more direct impact of Taglit on the marriage choices of participants.



## Discussion and Conclusion

This research echoes earlier studies of Taglit that found the program to be very positively evaluated by participants and result in substantial attitudinal change. Based on a comparison of participants and nonparticipants, this study further demonstrates that even five or more years after a Taglit experience, participants' connection to Israel and the Jewish people was significantly enhanced, as was the importance they attach to marrying a Jewish person and raising children as Jews. Particularly striking, however, is the substantial increase in the rates of inmarriage associated with participation in Taglit.

In terms of its methodology, this study is distinctive—particularly in the Jewish education field—for its large sample size, high response rate, and ability to compare equivalent groups of participants and nonparticipants. For these and other reasons, the findings are unlikely an artifact of research design. Including information provided by parents and other relatives, data were gathered on more than 70 percent of participants and 55 percent of nonparticipants in the sample. The estimates for participants would most likely be the same if information were available from 100 percent of participants (rather than 72 percent), as most of those who were not reached simply could not be located, and refusal rates were very low. Although the response rate is lower for nonparticipants, their refusal rate is low as well, suggesting an absence of systematic bias. Even if systematic bias among nonparticipants was an issue, however, it is likely that nonparticipant inmarriage rates in fact would be overestimated, as the survey was likely to be more appealing to engaged Jews.

Although those who applied/participated in Taglit during 2001-2004 were more Jewishly affiliated than the population of young adults who have participated since 2005, the sample was nevertheless extremely broad and included Jews from all types of backgrounds and levels of engagement with Jewish life, including those who were raised in households that did not celebrate near-universally celebrated Jewish holidays (Hanukkah, Passover) and did not receive any formal Jewish education as well as those who attended Jewish day school from kindergarten to 12th grade and were raised in highly observant homes.

The association between Taglit participation and inmarriage is positive and stable even when excluding the most highly affiliated (those raised Orthodox) from the analysis. The association remains robust even when including data about fiancées and data provided by parents and relatives.

The validity of the results is also suggested by the fact that, with the exception of choice of spouse, which could not be studied until now, the pattern of Taglit effects (and non-effects) is largely consistent with earlier studies. In short- and medium-term studies, as in the present long-term study, Taglit's effects were strongest with respect to participants' feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people, and their desire to marry a Jewish person and raise children as Jews. In previous studies, as in the present study, Taglit's effects were weaker or nonexistent with respect to involvement with Jewish organizations, attendance at Shabbat meals, connection to Jewish customs and traditions, and connection to the local Jewish community. Participants

and nonparticipants in the present study thus appeared very much alike in many aspects of their Jewish identities and practices, but quite different with respect to the factors that have been previously associated with Taglit.

Finally, in a number of areas where Taglit participants were significantly different from nonparticipants, the difference was magnified for those with less intense Jewish backgrounds. Taglit's effect on attachment to Israel was strongest for those from less ritually observant households. Taglit's effect on religious service attendance was strongest for those who received little or no formal Jewish education, and there was some evidence that Taglit's effect on the likelihood of marrying a Jew was stronger for those whose parents were intermarried.

The study's findings have implications for a number of Jewish policy debates, as well as the future of the Taglit initiative:

#### *Israel and Jewish Peoplehood*

In studying Taglit, it has always seemed evident (cf. Saxe & Chazan, 2008) that Israel is essential as the setting for the program. Although the experiment was never attempted, taking a group of young adult Jews to another foreign destination would unlikely have the same impact as being in the Land of Israel. For building connections to Israel, there is no substitute for bringing young adult Jews face to face with their history and engaging them with their Israeli peers.

Taglit's impact on how participants relate to modern Israel suggests a Jewish future that is markedly different from the one implied in recent policy discussions of the perceived

“distancing” of Jewish young adults from Israel (Cohen, 2008; Cohen & Kelman, 2007).<sup>50</sup> The present data indicate that five to eight years after their Taglit experience participants were 23 percent more likely than nonparticipants to feel a strong connection to Israel. This was matched by participants' greater propensity to use Israeli news sources to look for information about events in Israel. As a result of participation in Taglit, young adult Jews are both more connected and engaged.

In a similar vein, much recent discussion in the Jewish community has lamented a decline in “Jewish peoplehood.” According to some observers, American Jews, in particular in the younger generation, have become more highly engaged by spiritual pursuits and less interested in the fate of the Jewish people worldwide (Cohen & Wertheimer, 2006). Yet, the present data indicate that Taglit participants were more likely than nonparticipants to feel “very much” connected to the worldwide Jewish community. Perhaps participants' experience of being with Jewish peers from around the world during their Taglit trips created a concrete reference point for “the Jewish people” that influenced their feelings even several years after the fact.

#### *Religious Observance and Community Participation*

Although Taglit does not directly seek to influence religious behavior, participants were somewhat more likely than nonparticipants to belong to a congregation and frequently attend religious services. Like other contemporary American young adults, however, “Generation Birthright Israel” generally eschews institutional affiliations. As

the national president of Hillel, writing about college students noted, “This is the *chipoos* generation (Hebrew for search)” (Firestone & Cousens, 2008, p. 8). They are searching for meaning and have a high need to “own” and control what they do. Although the present study suggests, based on their rates of affiliation with synagogues, *havurot*, and *minyanim*, that some among this generation are joining traditional Jewish organizations, the present study does not adequately assess the full range of their communal involvement. We suspect that this generation will assume its place in the Jewish community differently from their parents (Chertok et al., 2009), but these patterns will only be evident over time.

#### *Marriage and Children*

The present study is the first to examine Taglit’s impact on participants’ decisions regarding marriage. Among married non-Orthodox applicants, participants were 57 percent more likely than nonparticipants to be married to a Jew. Among the unmarried, participants were 46 percent more likely than nonparticipants to view marrying a Jewish person as “very important.”

Participants were somewhat less likely than nonparticipants to be married at the time of the survey.<sup>51</sup> It is possible that participants are delaying marriage more than nonparticipants, in which case the full extent of Taglit’s actual impact on the marriage patterns of alumni cannot yet be established. However, it seems unlikely that the substantial differences between participants and nonparticipants will be reversed as the cohorts mature.

The marriage decisions of alumni appear to reflect, at least in part, participants’ greater desire than nonparticipants to be part of the continuation of Jewish tradition. Thus, the likelihood of an average participant indicating that raising children as Jews is “very important” was 74 percent while the same likelihood for an average nonparticipant was 57 percent.

Interestingly, Taglit’s influence on participants’ views regarding children extends beyond those who married Jews. Intermarried participants were nearly twice as likely as intermarried nonparticipants to think raising children as Jews was “very important.” Previous research has demonstrated that children with intermarried parents who are raised exclusively as Jews have similar levels of Jewish ritual practice, Jewish identity, and engagement with the Jewish community to the children of inmarriages, after controlling for Jewish upbringing (Chertok, Phillips, & Saxe, 2008; Phillips & Chertok, 2004). Although this remains a question for future research, the present data suggest that both inmarried and intermarried Taglit alumni are highly motivated to raise children as Jews.

These findings have important implications for the future of Jewish life in North America. If, in fact, participation in Taglit dramatically increases the likelihood of inmarriage and, even among those who intermarry, encourages them to create Jewish homes, it suggests a far brighter Jewish future than has been posited by some commentators (Cohen & Wertheimer, 2006; Wertheimer, 2001, 2005). It suggests that “Generation Birthright Israel”—at least those who have the opportunity to participate in Taglit—is

choosing to engage with Jewish life and sees itself in common cause with other Jews. The sociodemographic implications are profound as is the potential impact on the structure of the community.

### *Taglit's Future*

The present study is the first long-term assessment of Taglit's impact. As detailed above, the results—particularly those having to do with marriage and children—are remarkable.

Prior to the economic crisis of 2008, Taglit was on track to engage more than 40,000 participants from North America each year. If that rate were sustained, it is likely that the majority of North American Jewish young adults would eventually have the benefit of an Israel educational experience by the time they reached their mid-twenties (Saxe et al., 2009). The number of applicants to the program has kept increasing even as the number of places has been cut in half as a result of the financial crisis. For example, for the summer 2009 trips there were four times as many applicants as slots.

As impressive as the present findings are, the study raises a number of unanswered questions. One such question is whether systematic follow-up efforts are necessary to sustain or even enhance the impact of Taglit. The present study does not directly assess follow-up programs, such as those currently provided by Birthright Israel NEXT. NEXT did not exist when the alumni who were the focus of the present study returned from their trips. In addition, most participants from these early cohorts are now beyond the ages targeted by such programs. Finally, and in

contrast to the present situation, early participants returned to campuses and communities that had fewer Taglit alumni. The present evidence suggests that a high-quality peer experience in Israel, even in the absence of such programs, produces significant long-term effects. However, the needs of more recent program alumni who, on average, have lower levels of prior Jewish education, may be different.

A second issue concerns the specific impacts of program participation. However significant and dramatic the impact of the program on marriage and family issues, not all attitudes about Jewish life are equally affected, and there is limited evidence of the program's effect on traditional measures of Jewish engagement. Thus, for example, participants' views on the importance of Jewish tradition, or of their sense of connection to their local Jewish community, do not seem changed by a Taglit experience. Clearly, if Taglit participants are to continue their involvement in the Jewish community, in marriage and a desire to raise children as Jews may not be sufficient. It remains an open question as to what types of opportunities are most likely to be effective in supporting engagement with the organized Jewish community (cf. Chertok et al., 2009; Sasson et al., 2007).

Despite the focus on the earliest alumni, this research marks the start of a longitudinal study. While some in the target population have been alumni for nearly a decade, given that many are not yet married and/or do not yet have children, the story is far from complete. There is a need to continue to follow this sample and to extend the study to cohorts that participated in 2005 and later, as the program expanded and incorporated more

participants from weaker Jewish backgrounds. These later cohorts are more diverse than those who were part of the present study and the patterns of engagement may be different. The fact that many of the effects observed in these early cohorts were strongest among participants from less Jewishly engaged backgrounds has powerful implications with respect to the larger and more diverse population that Taglit has attracted in recent years. Developing the present study into a large-scale longitudinal study is a high priority.

Although Taglit cannot serve as a panacea providing educational inoculation against assimilation and disengagement from Jewish communal life, the present evidence demonstrates that the program is a highly successful educational intervention associated with long-term impact.

The study has potentially profound implications for how other ethnic and religious groups, particularly those that have ties to a homeland, think about education and socialization. Intensive informal education has powerful effects and may allow the creation of communities of meaning that transcend language and national borders.

Whether Taglit becomes a normative part of socialization for Diaspora young adult Jews—a Jewish bridge between emerging and full adulthood—is still an open question. As well, there is much to learn about why the program has the effects demonstrated here. Taglit has provided an extraordinary laboratory to understand the development of Jewish identity and a window on how contemporary Jewish young adults think about their lives and find meaning.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The program, now known as Taglit-Birthright Israel, was originally called “Taglit” (discovery) in Hebrew and “Birthright Israel” in English. This report will abbreviate the full name as “Taglit.”

<sup>2</sup> The pool of applicants does not perfectly mirror the total population of American Jewish young adults. Accordingly, the findings of previous studies, as well as the current study, do not indicate how the program might have affected those who could have applied but did not. Note: Study appendices can be found online at <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchareas/taglit-evaluation.html>.

<sup>3</sup> A sampling frame is the group of elements (here: people) from which a survey sample is drawn and defines the population about which inferences can be made.

<sup>4</sup> Applicants who went on a Taglit trip after 2004 do not qualify as “nonparticipants” and therefore cannot be included in the control group. Moreover, because such individuals participated in a trip after 2004, they also cannot contribute to an accurate picture of Taglit’s long-term impact; they therefore do not qualify as “participants” either.

<sup>5</sup> For winter 2001 trips, information on nonparticipants was not available, so only participants were included. For 2002, 2003, and 2004 winter trips, both participants and nonparticipants were included. Individuals lacking information on age or gender, which were elements of the stratification scheme, were excluded from the sample and treated as ineligible. This was most prevalent in the 2001 round and applied to some cases in the 2002 round.

<sup>6</sup> In one cohort (winter 2000–2001), there was significant dropout after registration because of concerns about the security situation in Israel (see Saxe et al., 2004). But across cohorts, there were few differences in concerns about security between participants and nonparticipants, and the main reason given for not going was that the “timing [of the assigned trip] was not convenient”. In general, high concern about security was more likely to be from parents than the young adult applicants.

<sup>7</sup> Ineligibility resulted, for example, when an individual that was identified in the database as a nonparticipant turned out to have gone on a later Taglit trip or was erroneously identified as eligible to participate (e.g., was not Jewish, had studied in a yeshiva in Israel, etc.).

<sup>8</sup> Response rates for this study were calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) standard definitions. The response rate is defined as the number of complete interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample. Response Rate (RR) 3 estimates what proportion of cases of unknown eligibility is actually eligible and includes them in the denominator. Response Rate 4 allocates cases of unknown eligibility as in RR3, but also includes partial interviews (AAPOR, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Figures containing results produced by regression analyses are titled “predicted probability.” Other figures are based on simple weighted tabulations of data. The report focuses on assessing whether, and under what conditions, Taglit had an impact on various outcomes. Thus, the regression models only control for variables where systematic differences existed between participants and nonparticipants (generally, only age at time of trip and survey), where such variables were significantly associated with the outcome in question, and variables that had a significant interaction effect with participation in Taglit (together with the main effect of such variables). Variables were entered using stepwise entry with an entry criterion of  $\alpha=.1$  and an

exit criterion of  $\alpha = .1001$  from a pool of variables consisting of gender, age at time of survey, age at trip, having attended Jewish day school for eight years or more, years attending Jewish supplemental school, a scale of high school ritual practice (see p. 16), and having intermarried parents. A dichotomous variable was used for day school, due to the extremely small number of cases with 1 to 7 years attending day school; treating years of day school as a continuous variable would have assumed a linear effect when the fitted line was based nearly exclusively on values of 0 and 12 and would have consequently been misleading. (Participation was included in all models, whether it was statistically significant or not.) As Stata 11 (the analytical software used) does not support stepwise entry for complex survey data, this initial regression was weighted and estimated with robust variance. Having identified possible variables for inclusion, variables for which significant differences existed between participants and nonparticipants were retained and interaction terms with participation were included for other variables found to be significantly related to the outcome in question in the stepwise model, correcting for complex survey design. Variables and their interaction terms with participation were dropped from the model if the interaction effect was not significant (i.e.,  $\alpha > .1$ ), beginning with those which had the highest  $p$  values. Variables were progressively dropped until only statistically significant interactions with participation remained. These interaction terms were included in the models, together with their main effect, along with any variables for which there existed significant differences between participants and nonparticipants that were associated with the dependent variable. This procedure was adopted to ensure that models were not, consciously or unconsciously, fitted so as to maximize the estimated impact of Taglit. Only the final model of this process is shown in Appendix 4.

In addition to the models used to generate the findings reported here, a further set of regression models that control for a standardized set of demographic parameters, regardless of statistical significance were run, along with simple weighted cross-tabulations. While we feel that the method of analysis that generates the findings presented in this report is the most appropriate, all three techniques produced generally similar findings with respect to Taglit's effect. All three types of models can be found in Appendix 4.

<sup>10</sup> See Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 4.

<sup>11</sup> See Table 3 in Appendix 4.

<sup>12</sup> Models for all regression analyses are included in Appendix 4.

<sup>13</sup> Estimates from ordinal logistic regression model. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .001$ . See Tables 5 and 6 in Appendix 4.

<sup>14</sup> The estimated proportion of nonparticipants feeling "very much" connected to Israel is higher in the present study than in recent evaluation studies (Saxe et al., 2009), most likely due to the greater level of Jewish engagement of applicants to the earlier rounds.

<sup>15</sup> The ritual practice variable was originally structured as a Mokken scale (Hemker, Sijtsma, & Molenaar, 1995) created from the sum of Hanukkah, Passover, Shabbat, and kashrut observance. (A Mokken scale is the probabilistic equivalent of a Guttman, 1950 scale; patterns of response must be correlated with item difficulty, but the relationship need not be absolute.) Overall Loevinger's  $H$  (Loevinger, 1948) was good at .836, with the lowest item-by-item comparison (celebrating Hanukkah and attending a Passover seder) being acceptable at .746. To simplify the explanation of the scale, scoring was changed to the form described in the text, essentially a Guttman scale by fiat, judged only by the most "difficult" a case was

associated with. The correlation between the two scales was .976, a testament to the very good fit of theoretical model underpinning the original Mokken scale. Thus, while the revised scale does not fully conform to item-response theory, the practical implications of the decision are minuscule.

<sup>16</sup> See Table 7 in Appendix 4.

<sup>17</sup> There were dramatic differences in the confidence exhibited by winter 2001 and 2002 participants at their respective three and two-year follow-up surveys, with both participants and nonparticipants in winter 2002 being far more confident in their ability to explain the situation than winter 2001 participants and nonparticipants (Saxe et al., 2004). The results of the present survey are very similar to the three-year post-trip results for the winter 2001 cohort. Two to three-year follow-up information on the winter 2003 and 2004 rounds is not available (Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006b).

<sup>18</sup> Estimates from ordinal logistic regression. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .001$ . See Tables 10 and 11 in Appendix 4.

<sup>19</sup> See Table 12 in Appendix 4.

<sup>20</sup> The items on use of Israeli news sources in surveys of more recent cohorts did not reference a specific event, making precise comparison difficult.

<sup>21</sup> See Table 18 in Appendix 4.

<sup>22</sup> An estimated 40 percent of participants had returned to Israel compared to 35 percent of nonparticipants (see Table 19 in Appendix 4). These figures, however, are incommensurable. Nonparticipant applicants to these rounds were removed from the sample if they reapplied to a later round. Were they to be included in the sample, the proportion traveling to Israel since their application to Taglit would be higher.

<sup>23</sup> Estimates from logistic regression. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .001$  level. See Tables 15 and 16 in Appendix 4.

<sup>24</sup> Over 90 percent of those who were asked this question gave some form of open-response answer, providing over 800 different responses. Some of these responses were short and direct; others were long and discursive, touching on many different aspects of the respondent's life since Taglit.

<sup>25</sup> See Table 20 in Appendix 4.

<sup>26</sup> Estimates from ordinal logistic regression. Coefficient for Taglit for worldwide Jewish community significant at the  $p \leq .1$  level; not significant for other models ( $p > .1$ ). See Tables 22, 23, 26, 27, 30, and 31 in Appendix 4.

<sup>27</sup> Estimates from ordinal logistic regression. Coefficient for Taglit for sense of belonging to the Jewish people significant at  $p \leq .001$  level; not significant for other models ( $p > .1$ ). See Tables 34, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 46, 47, 50, and 51 in Appendix 4.

<sup>28</sup> Because being Orthodox is not synonymous with synagogue membership (cf. inmarriage analysis), this model includes applicants who were raised Orthodox. Among applicants who were not raised Orthodox, participation in Taglit is associated with a 43 percent increase in the likelihood of belonging to a synagogue or other types of Jewish congregations, a relationship which is significant at  $p \leq .01$  (see Tables 54a and 55a in Appendix 4). There were no significant differences ( $p > .1$ ) in the rate at which participants and nonparticipants who were raised Orthodox belonged to synagogues or other Jewish congregations (Table 53a in Appendix 4).

<sup>29</sup> Estimates from logistic regression model. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .1$ . See Tables 54 and 55 in Appendix 4.

<sup>30</sup> Text of question was “In the past year, have you volunteered for Jewish causes.” See Table 58 in Appendix 4.

<sup>31</sup> Estimates from ordinal logistic regression model. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .05$  level. See Tables 61 and 62 in Appendix 4.

<sup>32</sup> See Tables 63 and 64 in Appendix 4.

<sup>33</sup> Wording of Shabbat meal item was “In the past year, have you had or attended a special meal on Shabbat? Never, sometimes, usually, or always.” Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .1$  level. See Table 67 in Appendix 4.

<sup>34</sup> Separated/divorced respondents coded as married (there were no widowed respondents). See Tables 69 and 70 in Appendix 4.

<sup>35</sup> Only a single raised Orthodox respondent reported marrying a non-Jew, and that respondent was divorced at the time of survey. The cell count of one for intermarried respondents raised Orthodox precluded substantive analysis of the impact of Taglit on intermarriage including respondents raised Orthodox because cases were predicted perfectly, causing regression models to fail. This is to say that the driving force of marital choice among raised Orthodox respondents in this sample was being raised Orthodox. Weighted frequency analyses of Taglit’s effect on inmarriage that do include Orthodox respondents, however, confirm the general findings reported here (see Tables 71 and 72 in Appendix 4).

<sup>36</sup> A number of alternative analyses of Taglit’s effect on inmarriage were run as well, all of which confirm the basic finding that Taglit participants are significantly more likely to marry a Jew than nonparticipants. See Tables 71-81 in Appendix 4.

<sup>37</sup> See Tables 77-81.

<sup>38</sup> Married respondents only, raised Orthodox respondents excluded from analyses. Jewishness is measured at time of survey. Estimates from logistic regression model. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .001$  level. See Tables 73 and 74 in Appendix 4.

<sup>39</sup> See Table 75 in Appendix 4.

<sup>40</sup> See Table 82 in Appendix 4.

<sup>41</sup> The coefficient for participation in Taglit was not significant ( $p > .1$ ). See Table 88 in Appendix 4.

<sup>42</sup> Unmarried respondents only, raised Orthodox respondents excluded from analyses. Estimates from logistic regression model. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at  $p \leq .01$  level. See Tables 84 and 85 in Appendix 4.

<sup>43</sup> Among inmarried Taglit applicants, 96 percent had weddings officiated by only a rabbi/cantor and 4 percent had weddings officiated by neither a rabbi nor a non-Jewish clergy person. See Table 90 in Appendix 4.

<sup>44</sup> To reduce the number of possible combinations of officiants, secular officials like judges and justices of the peace are omitted from this analysis. Thus, a ceremony coded as being officiated by a rabbi alone might in fact have also had a judge present. See Table 91 in Appendix 4 for estimates.

<sup>45</sup> Not statistically significant ( $p > .1$ ). See Table 92 in Appendix 4.

<sup>46</sup> For inmarriages, an estimated 99 percent of weddings officiated by a rabbi had both a ketubah and a chuppah, and virtually all others had one of these rituals (see Table 93 in Appendix 4). For inmarriages without rabbinic officiation, an estimated 56 percent had both a chuppah and ketubah and 6 percent had one or the other, with the remainder having neither (see Table 94 in Appendix 4).

<sup>47</sup> See Table 95 in Appendix 4. There were no significant differences in the rate at which married Taglit participants and nonparticipants had children. See Table 97 in Appendix 4.

<sup>48</sup> Estimated from ordinal logistic regression model. Childless respondents. Coefficient for Taglit participation significant at the  $p \leq .001$  level. See Tables 98 and 99 in Appendix 4.

<sup>49</sup> See Tables 102 and 103 in Appendix 4.

<sup>50</sup> Though see Sasson et al. (2010).

<sup>51</sup> However, the findings are similar when we include those who are engaged or planning marriage (which increases the size of the sample of married respondents by 12 percent). This observation suggests that the observed patterns of inmarriage will persist.



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