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Jewish Futures Project

Beyond 10 Days: Parents, Gender, Marriage,
and the Long-Term Impact of Birthright Israel

Executive Summary

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Parents, Gender, Marriage and the Long-Term Impact of Birthright Israel

Executive Summary

Birthright Israel is the largest Jewish educational intervention in the world, having sent more than 400,000 Jewish young adults from North America to Israel for a ten-day, immersive educational experience. Its scope and reach suggest the program has the potential to shift the Jewish identities and involvements of a generation of Jewish young adults touched by the program.

Assessing Birthright's long-term impact began in 2009 with the Jewish Futures Project (JFP), a longitudinal study that follows several thousand Jewish young adults who applied to the program between 2001 and 2009. The present report draws on data from the fifth JFP survey, conducted in 2015-2016. Telephone and Web interviews were completed with over 2,700 respondents, including those who went on a Birthright trip and a "control group" of those who applied to the program but did not participate ("nonparticipants").

The study documents Birthright's long-term impact (up to 14 years post trip) and explores how it manifests itself in different subgroups: those with one versus two Jewish parents, men versus women, participants who are single versus those who are partnered, and those whose sole Israel experience was a Birthright trip.

Key findings:

- Birthright participants are more likely to feel a connection to Israel, have a Jewish spouse, raise children Jewish and be engaged in Jewish life, even a decade or more after the trip.
- In contrast to reports of "distancing" from Israel among young American Jews, Birthright's effect on connection to Israel persists and is significant. Most JFP panelists feel at least "somewhat" connected to Israel, and participants report higher levels of connection than their nonparticipant peers.
- Birthright's effect on participants with one Jewish parent is similar to that on participants with two Jewish parents. Compared to nonparticipants, Birthright participants who have one Jewish parent remain more connected to Israel a decade or more after their trip. They are also more likely to have a Jewish spouse.
- Birthright's impact is evident even for participants who have had no other Israel experience, when compared to similar nonparticipants who have never been to Israel.
- Among those who are married, engaged, or living with a partner, Birthright has a positive impact on virtually all areas of Jewish engagement, including Jewish communal involvement, social and cultural engagement, and religious observance. Among those who are not partnered, Birthright has an impact on only a few measures of Jewish engagement.

- The impact of Birthright on partner choice is different for men and women. For men, Birthright participation has a positive impact on having a Jewish spouse, fiancé/ e or partner; a positive impact on the likelihood of spousal conversion to Judaism; and a positive impact on the likelihood that children are being raised Jewish by religion, even if the other parent is not Jewish. These effects are weaker for women. This difference may be related to traditional Jewish views on matrilineal descent or gender dynamics in the contemporary “marriage market.”
- For men who participated in Birthright, their greater likelihood of marrying a Jewish spouse decreases as their age at marriage increases. Among men who married after age 30, there are no differences between participants and nonparticipants in terms of their likelihood of marrying a Jewish spouse. Whether the diminishing impact of Birthright on spousal choice as participants age is due to changes in participants’ priorities, their opportunities in the marriage market, or a combination of both is not clear.

The study also provided an opportunity to examine the Jewish choices made by different groups of young adults. For example, even as Birthright has a lasting, positive impact on participants with only one Jewish parent and those with two Jewish parents, the levels of engagement of these two groups are different. Strategies for engaging these individuals likely need to be tailored to their unique backgrounds. Similarly, that Birthright’s impact on Jewish engagement is concentrated among those who are partnered, suggests the need to rethink how the Jewish community engages Jewish young adults in the years before they partner and form families.

Although childhood experiences influence adult Jewish engagement, our findings suggest these trajectories are not immutable. Birthright demonstrates the potential to influence Jewish identity and behaviors in significant ways. The full story of this generation will only emerge over time.