Taglit-Birthright Israel – Encounters with Israel Changing Young Jewish Lives

By Leonard Saxe, Brandeis University

Earlier this summer in a Tel Aviv park, Taglit-Birthright Israel (also known as Jews ages 18-26 free 10-day trips to Israel – celebrated its 15 years ago, nearly 300,000 were U.S. Jewish college students and recent graduates. In light of increased concern about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), and Jewish young adults’ attitudes to Israel, the question of whether Taglit can meaningfully engage young Jews, both with their Jewish identities and Israel, takes on increased importance.

Over the last year, and in particular just prior, during, and after the Gaza War (Operation Protective Edge), Israel’s response to missile attacks from Gaza, my colleagues and I assessed the attitudes of those who applied to and participated in Taglit. In light of the conflict and controversy over Israel’s actions, a particular focus was their sense of connection to and support for Israel. We found that young adult Jews overwhelmingly support Israel. We found that young adult Jews, in general, are highly supportive of Israel and furthermore, those who do not participate in Taglit return home even more supportive.

The Taglit experience has the potential to challenge existing assumptions and understandings about political attitudes. Young adult Jews overwhelmingly describe themselves as liberal and, at least compared to less liberal peers, are not as highly connected to Israel. Nevertheless, their views toward Israel are positive and supportive, much more so than their non-Jewish young adult counterparts. Participation in Taglit has the greatest impact on these liberal Jews and, by the end of last summer, the attitudes of those who participated in Taglit looked closer to those of the Israeli public than non-Jewish young adult Americans.

What explains why Taglit is so effective? The not-so-secret key ingredient of each Taglit program is the refusah (encounter) between Diaspora participants and Israeli peers. Because most overseas Taglit participants are the age of Israelis who serve in the IDF, the majority of Israeli participants are soldiers. These individuals, who are released from their service for a week to join groups as participants, come from many different sectors of Israeli society – religious, secular, Ashkenazi, Sephardi. Miqdashim provides a way for the Diaspora participants to get to know Israelis and hear a diverse set of voices discuss Israeli life, culture, and politics.

The engagement of Diaspora and Israeli participants, the occurs in the context of Taglit’s educational program. The rules that govern the program require presentations that provide multiple perspectives on issues confronting Israel. Substantial evidence indicates that trips are successful in engaging most participants in a thoughtful – non-propagandistic – exploration of contemporary Israel. The program is experiential, so it is not quite like a college classroom, but there is no substitute for using Israel’s complex and varied historical landscape as the environment for exploration for many pressing issues.

The increasingly vitriolic debate about Israel on some college campuses, underscores the role that the program plays. For many young Jews, Israel is a mythical place – a refuge for Jews from Europe, the FSU and the other Middle East countries – and the historic home of the Jewish people. But most of these young people know relatively little about contemporary Israel and are at a loss when confronted with critiques of Israel. Taglit, we now know, opens a door for them to learn about Israel in a framework supported by Israeli peers and educators.

Taglit was designed to enhance Jewish identity among those of Jewish parents or who did not participate, also makes clear how they shape an adult Jewish identity – the lifelong involvement in Jewish education—and for others, who have had substantial Jewish education – the experience of being part of a Jewish group in Israel helps them shape an adult Jewish identity and influences the way in which they engage with Jewish life.

In the short term, Taglit’s impact is most palpable with respect to participants’ increase attachment to Israel. The practical implications, for Israel’s standing and its relationship with Diaspora Jewry are profound. But systematic tracking of alumni, and similar others who didn’t participate, also makes clear that participation leads to lifelong involvement in Jewish life. Participants are far more likely to marry other Jews and become involved in their Jewish communities.

In the wake of the 2013 Pew study on American Jewry, there has been a vigorous debate about the vibrancy of contemporary Jewish life. Some of the negativity is the result of misreading the results (see Tablet, “The Sky is Falling”), but it is also arise because of our natural inclination to privilege our own experience and history as the lens through which we see the present. Taglit serves as a reminder that through innovative programs the Jewish community can still educate and meaningfully involve the next generation. Taglit’s ability to engage a half million young Jews in an accomplishment worth celebrating and represents an opportunity to expands its lessons further as we attempt to enhance Klal Yisrael (the Jewish people) around the world.

Barbara K. Greenfield
Broker Associates • Lic. in MA & NY
413-637-4200 ext. 16
413-441-5986 cell
BarbeG333@aol.com

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Leonard Saxe
Leonard Saxe is Klutznick Pro-
fessor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Social Policy at Brandeis University, where he directs the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Insti-
tute. He is a summer resident in Stockbridge. For further infor-
mation about the studies dis-
ccussed in the article, see: uwm. brandeis.edu/cms/research-
projects/taglit/index.html.

The Jewish Federation of the Berkshires is an annual supporter of Taglit-Birthright Israel.