Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright*.

*Studies in Contemporary Judaism*


Taglit-Birthright Israel is one of the most important programs linking diaspora Jews and Israel to be initiated in recent decades. Since its inception in 1999, more than 300,000 diaspora Jewish students have traveled on free, ten-day trips to Israel. The program targets a student population (aged 18-26) with weaker ties to Israel or to the Jewish community. The massive promotion of short-term visits as a means of strengthening Jewish identity, combating weakened Jewish commitment, and increasing ties to Israel is nearly unprecedented, and can be compared only with the state-sponsored Israeli trips to Poland. Birthright participants visit significant historical and religious sites, guided by a professional tour guide who also acts as a role model. Each Birthright group, generally numbering about 40 participants, is also accompanied by local and Israeli tour leaders (*madrikhim*) and by Israeli soldiers who are about the same age as the students. The program includes encounters with Israeli public figures, discussion groups, Sabbath experiences and a concluding mega-event attended by all the groups. This combination is designed to create a multi-sensory, hands-on experience lived out entirely within the bubble of a Jewish and Israeli community. Rarely has tourism been
granted such a significant role in furthering Jewish identity or ties between diaspora and homeland. Indeed, Birthright has served as a model for other diasporic communities seeking to strengthen ties to ancestral homelands. This phenomenon invites investigation into its effectiveness and its implications for contemporary Jewish belonging, as well as for diasporic and religious identity and (trans-) nationalism in an age of multiple identity choices and increased mobility.

The two books reviewed here focus on North American visitors to Israel (by far the largest group) and have been written by authors who were part of Birthright's evaluation process and who are familiar with Israel, American Jewish life, and issues in contemporary sociology and education. Both are highly readable accounts, providing a thorough description of the origins, structure, and dynamics of the program.

Shaul Kelner's work, *Tours that Bind*, provides an analysis of the tours that is based on interviews, evaluations, personal reflections, and participant-observation of at least three Birthright trips. As reported by Kelner, the carefully chosen site tours, discussions, casual conversations, and follow-up responses provide a complex and nuanced description of Birthright. The book frames the trip as a cultural practice of political socialization, and asks: "What is the nature of socialization that occurs when tourism is used as a strategy for introducing diaspora ethnics to a national homeland?" (p. xvii). Kelner explores the negotiations and possible conflicts between the sometimes divergent visions of Israeli and diaspora organizers and staff, gaps between
organizers' intentions and staff implementation, and the contradictions that inhere in tourism itself. In his discussion, he strikes a balance between the structure of the trips as reflected in planning meetings, position papers, publicity and itineraries, on the one hand, and agency -- the actual performance by the participants in situ -- on the other. In contrast with most other studies that rely heavily on evaluation surveys (which often reify the trip initiators' goals), Kelner places more emphasis on the students' agency. He also expands his analytic purview beyond the tours of Jews coming to Israel through descriptions of homeland tours" (designed for African Americans as well as Lebanese, Indians, and Taiwanese living in the USA. In order to examine diaspora tours as a means of shaping identity, Kelner has developed methodological tools and a broad conceptual and comparative frame that highlights what the tours do, what they don't do, and especially, what one can and cannot expect such tours to do.

Kelner repeatedly reminds us of the nature of tourism as a semiotic enterprise, a particular mode of experience and a set of knowledge practices that center on scanning the touristed landscape for signs that can be interpreted as the essence of the place. This is what John Urry refers to as the "tourist gaze": "When tourists see two people kissing in Paris, what they capture in the gaze is 'timeless, romantic Paris' .... Without the tourist gaze, a kiss is just a kiss, even in Paris" (quoted in Kelner, p. 9).

While the tours seek to increase personal identification with Israel and Jewish history, the semiotic stance of tourism, by its nature, opens a gap
between toured sites and everyday life. The combination of nearness and distancing in inherent in tourism and is reflected in the variations and contradictions in the approach to Israel among the various groups sponsoring Birthright. Whereas Israeli leaders may preach aliyah, this is merely lip service to a project that seeks to foster connections to Israel, which in turn will invigorate a diaspora identity.

Few aspects of the tour escape Kelner’s gaze. Not only the guiding performances, but the self-understandings and the taken-for-granted social roles of Israeli tour guides, the perceptions of the Israeli soldiers accompanying the group, and the influence of group participants on each other (ranging from mutual affirmation to censorship to the dynamics of "hooking up"). Kelner also trains his eye on the integration of downtime into the text of the tour, and manages to elicit responses from the silent participants whose voices are rarely heard in group discussions. He has, moreover, a keen ear for language and an ability to draw rapid personality sketches (without caricature or kitsch) that contextualize the individual players within the group. We recognize the various participants: his Israelis speak "Israeli English," the speech of his non-committed participants expresses distance and ambivalence, and his New Yorkers sound like, well, New Yorkers. The same fine-tuned descriptions encapsulate the closed bubble of the bus, the open vistas of the outlook, and the fluid interactions of half-focused groups on tour -- thirsty for knowledge, but worn out after a night of hard partying. The pertinent but not overly lengthy theoretical introduction
on semiotics and social interactionism teases out the various strands of the
dynamics without overwhelming us with jargon. Kelner's reflections on how
trips to Israel shaped his Jewish scholarly interests and life choices lend his
arguments credibility as well as color.

In his conclusion, Kelner eschews both the delegitimization of the
diaspora still voiced by certain Zionist leaders and the glorification of
diasporic existence proposed by scholars such as Daniel and Jonathan
Boyarin. He argues that diasporic identity involves the formation of an
*imagined community*, no less than in the case of nations and nationalisms.

"Programs like Taglit," he says, "bring diaspora Jews to Israel as co-ethnics,
yet ... enforce tourists' awareness that they are engaging the country as
foreign nationals" (p. 200). Diaspora tourism, he concludes, is suited for
territorializing culture by inscribing meaning in place, enacting relationships
with those places, and incorporating experiences of place into understandings
of self. On the one hand, the attachment of emotional valence serves to
marginalize alternative self-definitions. At the same time, the evanescence of
the tour environment renders such constructions of self fragile. Furthermore,
the gaps between the ways of seeing and experiencing the world on tour and
those of everyday life make the translation of such experiences into other (off-
tour) behavior inconsistent. The sustained, broad reflection on the potential of
tourism to create links between diasporic communities and homelands is a
refreshing addition to a field often researched by "professional Jews" whose
horizons of inquiry are bounded by the Jewish world. Such studies often
implicitly confirm that Jewishness and the Jewish connection to Israel are *sui generis*.

Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan's *Ten Days of Birthright Israel* provides a complementary and partially overlapping view. Birthright's goals, as proclaimed in the book, are: "to promote Jewish identity, create a sense of Jewish Peoplehood and ... create love of Israel" (p. 185). The greatest strength of the book lies in its grounding of the program in an educational philosophy emphasizing multi-sensory experience, peer-group creation and "doing things Jewish" as the means of internalizing educational messages and fostering community ties and individual growth. It then shows how these aims are translated into organizational and programmatic terms, and documents the struggles among a variety of stakeholders (individual philanthropists, Jewish Federations, Israeli politicians, educators, and travel agents) with regard to the translation of desired messages into a workable project of unprecedented magnitude. These behind-the-scenes accounts of the structuring of the Birthright trip offer a broad and vividly rendered context of educational goals and Jewish communal politics.

Saxe and Chazan also offer a detailed, though less critical, description of trip events. Following an opening vignette of group members' ecstatic arrival at Ben Gurion airport, they present highly flattering portraits of Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman, going so far as to compare them with Theodor Herzl! Although *Ten Days of Birthright Israel* provides much in-depth
ethnography, its self-declared goal is to "share what we view as the extraordinary story of Birthright Israel and to ... explain how and why this has affected the lives of its participants" (p. 3). The understanding of "young adults' quest for meaning and the dynamics of identity formation" (ibid.) is mentioned as a second -- and secondary -- endeavor. The volume is primarily the detailed documentation of a success story, and only secondarily a sociological study seeking to raise theoretical questions.

Both books analyze Birthright events as they unfold, but have obvious differences in emphases and areas of strength. Kelner's description of the voyage is much finer. His character sketches display a wide variety of acceptance, negotiation, or rejection of program goals, whereas Saxe and Chazan's portraits are cooperative and sometimes hagiographic (as in the case of the philanthropists). It is not clear to the reader whether Saxe and Chazan were on the scene with their notebooks or whether they received reports from research assistants; Kelner, in contrast, was clearly there, as evidenced by his thick description of successes, misfires, and murmurings from the sidelines, as well as the characterization of his own position on the scene. Where *Ten Days* tends to generalize from an observed reaction, speaking of what a group "probably" or "undoubtedly" experienced, Kelner takes the opportunity offered by downtime to more deeply probe the reactions of various group participants. *Ten Days* often assumes basic familiarity with Judaism on the part of many participants, whereas Kelner graphically illustrates the tremendous distance to be covered between the students' life worlds and the
text of the trip organizers. Where Saxe and Chazan speak of muffled whispers of jokes or protest at the military cemetery, Kelner gets the voices on tape; where *Ten Days* sometimes waxes ecstatic over the value of face-to-face encounters with Israeli peers that lead to lasting personal ties, romances, and a few marriages, *Tours that Bind* ponders how "hooking up" may preserve and perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes.

Occasionally, Saxe and Chazan allow the assumptions of establishment-identifying Jews to slip into their descriptions, as when Israeli speakers are contrasted with what might take place "in a synagogue where students have encountered their rabbis" (p. 57) -- do most of these students *have* rabbis? Where Kelner sympathetically problematizes the political messages of the voyage and inquires as to how itinerary and voice make certain understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more salient than others, Saxe and Chazan raise the issue once, only to relegate it to the sidelines, conflating "Israelis," without caveat, with Israeli Jews (p. 71). Where Kelner critically examines the program's aims and structure, Saxe and Chazan are eager to present the project in a positive light -- thus "beer flows that night, to quench thirst, not to create drunkenness." (p. 76). (Some of my Israeli students who have accompanied Taglit groups beg to differ.) When speculating about long-term effects, Saxe and Chazan extrapolate from short-term surveys to predict that, in the long term, the Birthright experience will result in increased "bonding social capital" with other Jews, greater involvement with Israel, and even broader concern for the welfare of others (pp. 180-185). Kelner is far
more reserved: he insists that the translation of tourist practices into other

types of behavior "back home" is uneven and inconsistent (p. 192). He also
wonders if Israel-experience travel does not encourage the construction of
diasporic Jewish identities as "consumer identities to be realized through
consumption of commodified symbols, products and experiences" rather than
long-term commitments to communities (pp. 106-107). For many of Ten Days'
exclamation points, Tours that Bind substitutes question marks – reminding us
of the limits of our knowledge and challenging us to extend them by posing
new doubts and new theoretical and comparative reflections.

Saxe and Chazan have written a highly readable, if sometimes overly
celebratory report evaluating what Birthright attempts to do and how it does
it, and extolling its successes. Kelner describes and evaluates with a measure
of skepticism, posing new and extremely important questions on the nature of
tourism, diasporic identity and transnationalism. Beyond the merits and
weaknesses of each of the two books, their shared focus provides a unique
opportunity for educators in Jewish studies, education, and sociology to show
how different methodological orientations result in very different analyses of
a common object of study close to students' life worlds. I hope that educators
and college faculty will rise to the occasion and assign both books for reading
and comparison.

Jackie Feldman
Ben-Gurion University