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Israel at War: *The Impact of Peer-oriented Israel Programs on Responses of American Jewish Young Adults*

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Although very grateful for the help of others, any errors in the present report are those of the authors. The views expressed in this document are our own and are not, necessarily, those of CLSFF or Brandeis University.

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Introduction

Observers of American Jewry increasingly express concern over the strength and vitality of attachments to Israel, especially among Jewish young adults.¹ For example, the 2000 American Jewish Committee's Annual Survey indicated that "65 percent of Jewish Americans under 40 reported feeling "very" or "fairly" close to Israel, compared to 75 percent of the 40-59-year-olds, and 79 percent of respondents age 60 and over."² Noting several recent studies, Ukeles and associates conclude that "Israel is not central to young people's Jewish identity."³ Similarly, pollster Frank Lutz described the ties of Jewish college students to Israel as "frighteningly weak and ill-defined."⁴

Responding to these trends, Jewish activists and organizations have increased support for pro-Israel activism on college campuses and sponsored a number of new programs aimed at bringing American Jewish young adults to Israel. Organizations such as the Israel on Campus Coalition and Scholars for Peace in the Middle East have emerged to spearhead and coordinate Israel advocacy on campus.

In terms of travel and education programs, the largest initiative is *Taglit-birthright israel*, a program that provides Jewish young adults aged 18-26 with a free 10 day tour of Israel. Since 1999, more than 100,000 Jewish young adults have participated in the program. In addition, the Jewish Agency for Israel established *Masa* in 2004, a program that provides scholarships for long term programs in Israel. Programs sponsored by Jewish youth movements, Israeli universities, and the federations continue to bring younger Jews to Israel as well.

Israel's war against Hezbollah during July and August, 2006, provided a context for assessing the impact of programs bringing Jewish students and young adults to Israel. How did American

Jewish young adults who participated in such programs respond during the war and how do they compare to their peers who had not traveled to Israel on a peer-oriented program?

Methodology

The present study was conducted in September, 2006. Data were gathered through online surveys of two groups: The first group included applicants to *birthright israel*, including both those who eventually went on a trip and those who did not. Participants were sampled from the summer cohorts of 2001, 2002 and 2006. Non-participants were sampled from the summer cohort of 2006. All *birthright israel* respondents were combined for purposes of analysis. The second group included individuals on Hillel mailing lists of three large universities. The schools included one on each coast and one in the Midwest. The mailing lists included a wide range of Jewish young adults, not simply Hillel "regulars."⁵ Up to four requests for participation were sent to each potential respondent. More than 1000 respondents completed the survey.

The survey included items created expressly for the current study as well as items developed in previous surveys of *birthright israel* groups. The target population for this study was Jewish young adults under the age of thirty. Two screener questions determined respondents' eligibility: those who did not consider themselves Jewish or were older than thirty were eliminated from the survey. The survey instrument took about ten minutes to complete. Respondents who completed the survey received a \$10 electronic gift certificate to Amazon.⁶

A key aspect of the analysis examines the impact of participation in a peer-oriented Israel program. Respondents completed a questionnaire and indicated programs in which they had participated either by checking a box or by writing in a program under the category "other." Entries into the latter category were

recoded as either a peer-oriented Israel program or a non-peer oriented program (for example, a family tour). Peer-oriented programs included high school peer trips, *birthright israel*, college study abroad, ulpan, volunteer programs, yeshiva, synagogue and federation trips and youth movement programs. Roughly half of the Hillel respondents who had traveled to Israel on a peer-oriented program had gone on *birthright israel*. The balance participated in a wide range of programs. Excluded from the analysis were those who went only on private family trips to Israel (N=82).⁷

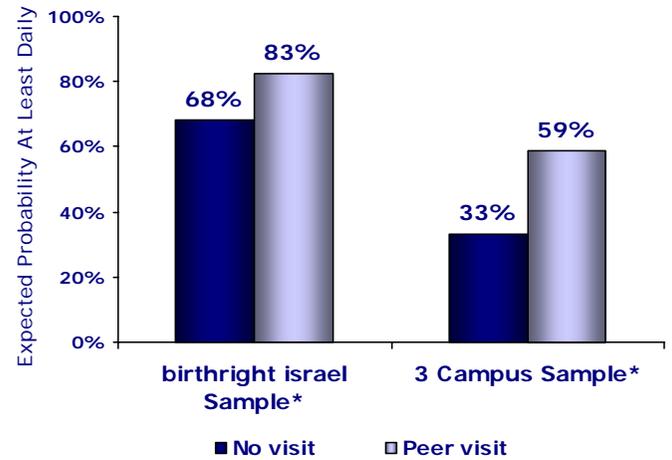
Most data analysis employs logistic regression. Explanatory factors including age, gender, Jewish denomination, political views and family ties to Israel were entered into the models. Non-significant factors were omitted from the models to obtain the best fit. The charts present adjusted expected probabilities of the outcome controlling for other variables in the model. Unless otherwise specified, values of all variables are held at their mean. The sections that follow describe the study's findings.

Monitoring the News

The survey asked respondents how often they actively sought news of the war and what media they consulted. In each sample, at least half of the respondents reported actively seeking out news about the conflict at least once a day. In both samples, moreover, having visited Israel on a peer program is significantly associated with actively seeking news of the conflict when controlling for age, gender and political views. For example, Figure 1 shows that male Israel program alumni were more likely to report having consulted the news at least once a day than their counterparts who had not visited Israel. Notably, gender also plays a role, with men generally more attentive to news of the conflict than women.

The impact of an Israel experience is also evident in the respondents' selection of media

Figure 1: Actively Seeking Out News about the Conflict at Least Once A Day

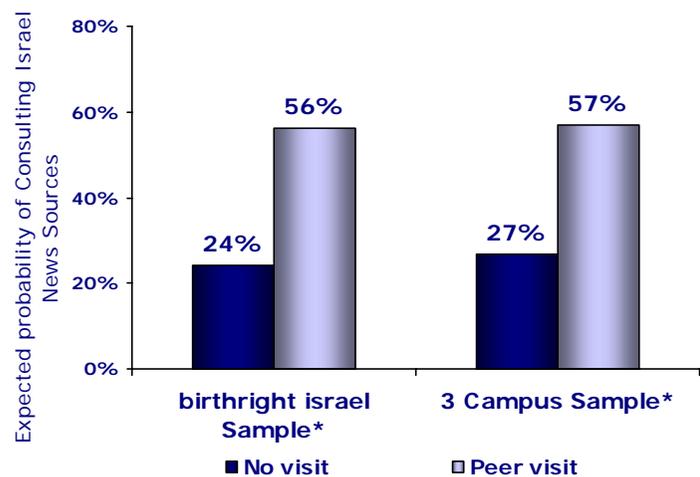


* P < .05

Note: Adjusted estimates for men. Other variables in model held at mean: political views and age .

outlets. The survey asked respondents which media outlets they consulted for news of the conflict. The top choices were CNN and network news. Among those who had traveled to Israel on a peer program, however, nearly half indicated that they sought news from an *Israeli* media outlet, including the on-line newspapers *Haaretz*, *Ynet* and the *Jerusalem Post*. The

Figure 2: Consulting Israeli News Sources



* P < .05

Note: Adjusted estimates for men. Other variables in model held at mean: political views.

difference between those who had been on an Israel program and those who had not is statistically significant in both samples.

Thinking about the War

The survey asked a number of questions on Israel's conduct in the context of the war. Factor analysis showed responses to these questions to be highly correlated, suggesting an underlying construct "Israel was justified." Responses to the following items were therefore combined into a scale:

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

The war was a result of Hezbollah's strategy to destroy Israel

Israel strived to minimize civilian deaths

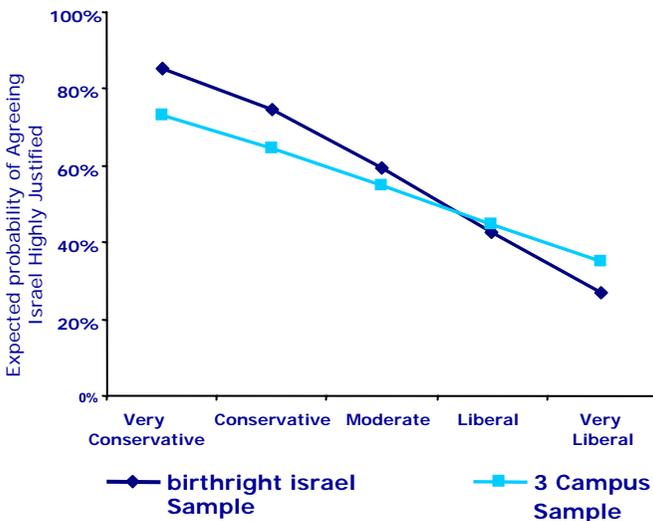
Israel was wrong to target roads, bridges and the airport in Lebanon

Israel was justified in the military action it took

The level of support for Israel's position in the war was quite high but sufficiently varied to permit further analysis. Unsurprisingly, respondents' political orientation was the key factor shaping responses to the war, above and beyond a high base-line level of support for Israel's position. Those who described themselves as politically conservative (and also those who opposed dismantling of Jewish settlements in the West Bank) were more likely to believe that Israel was fully justified in its war-related conduct, as indicated in Figure 3.

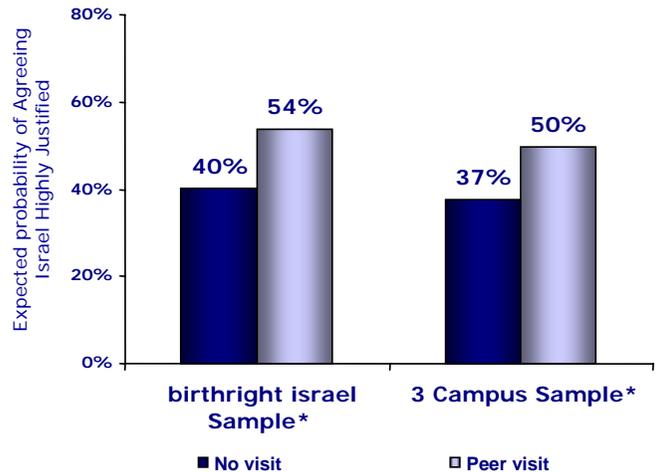
Participation in an Israel program is also related to evaluation of the war. Israel program alumni were more likely than their counterparts to indicate support for the Israeli position, as indicated in Figure 4. This trip effect is manifest independently of general political orientation or specific views on the future of the West Bank.

Figure 3: Israel Highly Justified in War



Note: Adjusted estimates for visiting Israel. Other variables held at mean: views on dismantling settlements

Figure 4: Israel Highly Justified in War



* P < .05

Note: Adjusted estimates. Variables in model held at mean: political views, views on dismantling settlements.



Feeling Connected to Israel

Many respondents were clearly interested in news of the war and sympathetic to the Israeli position. To what extent, however, did their interest translate into feelings of connection to Israel and Israelis? The survey asked a number of questions on feelings of support for and connection to Israel. The responses to these questions were highly correlated and therefore items were combined into a single scale. The items included in the scale appeared in the survey as part of a single battery of questions:

Thinking about the conflict, to what extent did you...⁸

Feel concern for the lives of Israelis

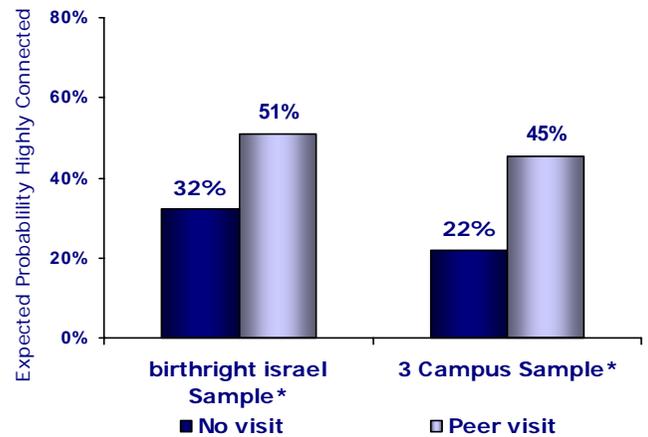
Feel a connection to Israel

Feel a responsibility to help Israelis affected by the war

Feel support for Israel

The regression model suggests that several factors are associated with feelings of connection to and support for Israel. These include going on a peer trip, age, political views, views on the future of the West Bank and family ties to Israel. Younger individuals, those who are more politically conservative and those who have family in Israel are more likely to be highly connected and supportive of Israel. As Figure 5 shows, when all other factors are controlled for, Israel program alumni are substantially more likely than their peers to indicate the highest level of connection to Israel. This relationship can be observed in both samples and the difference between program participants and non-participants is statistically significant.

Figure 5: Connection to and Support for Israel



*P < .05

Note: Adjusted for having family in Israel. Other variables set to mean: Age, political views, views on dismantling settlements.

Taking Action

Learning about the respondents' level of interest in and support for Israel is important. However, it was also important to learn how and to what extent their interest and feelings translated into action. The survey asked a number of questions about actions respondents might have taken in response to the war, including attending lectures about the conflict, contributing money to Israel and attending a pro-Israel rally. Findings show that age is significantly related to taking action with younger individuals more likely to act than older ones. In addition, Jewish denomination is significantly related to engaging in support activities during the war. In both samples the Orthodox respondents were more likely to act than those identifying with other denominations. However, having visited Israel on a peer program was also a significant factor; within

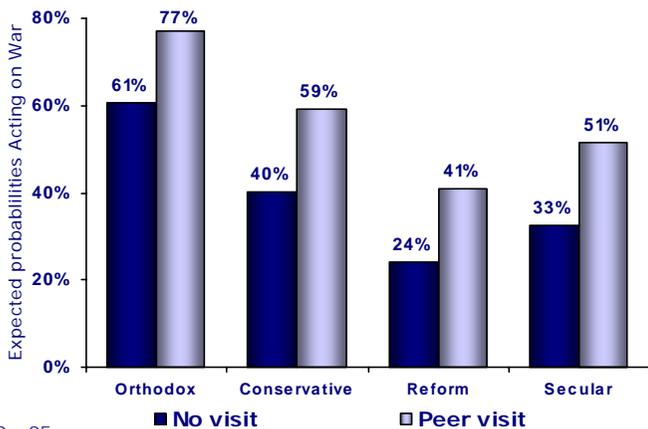
each denominational category, participants in Israel programs were more likely than their counterparts to have acted in support of Israel (see Figures 6 and 7). It is likely that had the conflict taken place during the school year, rather than the summer, the level of activity in support of Israel would have been higher among the students in our samples.

Discussion

This study examined the responses of Jewish students at three large universities and of applicants to *birthright israel* to last summer’s war. The analysis focused especially on the impact of peer-oriented programs in Israel. The results were consistent and striking. In models that adjusted for a wide variety of alternative factors, including Jewish denomination, family ties to Israel, political orientation, age and gender, the impact of the Israel experience was clearly in evidence. Having participated in a peer-oriented program in Israel meant that a respondent was more likely to have actively sought news of the war, to have sought news from an Israeli news source, to have supported Israel’s position in the war, to have felt connected to Israel and Israelis, and to have taken action on Israel’s behalf. Other factors were influential with respect to one or another of these responses to the war, but only visiting Israel on a peer program was consistently influential across the full range of responses.

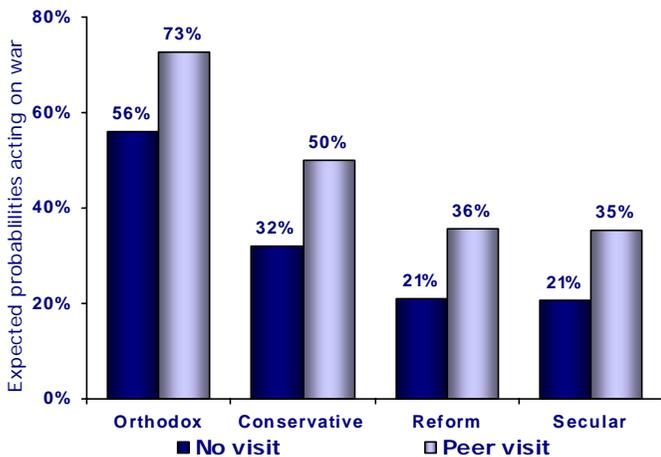
The impact of the Israel programs is all the more remarkable against a backdrop of heightened concern among most respondents to the survey. Indeed, the overall level of attachment, engagement and support among those who had not been to Israel was also quite high. As Phillips, Lengyel and Saxe (2002) have noted in reference to American Jewish adults as a whole, support for Israel tends to peak during periods of crisis when Israel is perceived to be in need. The war in Israel’s North during the summer of 2006 was certainly one such occasion. It is perhaps therefore understandable but nevertheless reassuring to note the overall high level of concern and support for Israel expressed by the majority of all respondents to our survey.

Figure 6: Taking Action – 3 Campus Sample



*P < .05
 Note: Adjusted estimates. Variables set to mean: Age.

Figure 7: Taking Action – *birthright israel* Sample



*P < .05
 Note: Adjusted estimates. Variables set to mean: Age.

If sending young Jewish adults to Israel makes a predictable difference in their views and behavior then could longer programs be still more influential? To test the possibility that program duration mediated program effects, respondents who attended only a short term program, such as *birthright israel*, were compared with those who attended a longer term program, such as study abroad at a university, a volunteer program, or yeshiva study. Respondents who attended both long and short term programs were assigned to the latter category. Although one would predict longer term programs to produce stronger effects, no such effects were detected. Perhaps in the future, during a period of relative quiet rather than heightened conflict, or with a different sample, such differences will be demonstrated.

Evaluation studies of *birthright israel* and our prior research studies of Jewish life on campuses in the United States make clear that Israel programs have powerful effects on participants' Jewish identities and ties to the Jewish state.⁹ The present study demonstrates that such programs also influence participants' support for Israel in a time of crisis. The study therefore provides additional evidence of the central role played by direct connections between Jewish youth in America and the land and people of Israel. It further suggests the need to redouble efforts to make a peer experience in Israel a universal experience for North American Jewish young adults.

Conclusion

Jewish young adults are distant from the drama that attended the founding of the State of Israel. The heroic images of the state that their parents absorbed during the Six Day War, the peace with Egypt, and the rescue at Entebbe, likely have little resonance. Their own childhoods featured more mixed images: political violence, suicide terror, and now, grim nuclear threats. They live in a society that touts diversity but, in fact, treats all forms of particularism as retrograde. Israel festivals, federation campaigns, pro-Israel information campaigns ("*hasbara*") and slogans of unity with Israel ring dissonant for many. Moreover, on many American college campuses, Israeli policies have become controversial, and Jewish students are on the defensive.

Fostering ties to Israel and Jewish peoplehood in this context is a significant challenge. The means for meeting the challenge, however, are known and readily available. Programs that enable Jewish young people to experience Israel directly and to develop concrete ties to people and places generate strong and enduring effects. Jewish organizations, philanthropists and the Israeli government have recently made great strides to expand access to Israel programs for Jewish young adults. Still, thousands more American Jewish youth express a desire to visit Israel each year than are accommodated. This report underscores what has been accomplished, but also, what remains to be done.

Notes

1. See for example Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People." *Commentary Magazine*, June 2006. Other measures of adult Jewish attachment appear to be more stable. See Benjamin Phillips, Eszter Lengyel and Leonard Saxe, "American Attitudes Toward Israel." Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, November 2002.
2. Quoted in Jacob Ukeles, Ron Miller and Pearl Beck, "Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today." American Jewish Committee, New York City, 2006, pp. 34-5.
3. Ibid, p. 34.
4. Frank Lunz, "Israel in the Age of Eminem." Frank Lunz Associates, Washington DC, 2003, p.7.
5. The Hillel lists averaged 1500 names for each university.
6. Conservative estimates of the response rates range from 12% to 37% across groups. Lower response rates are associated with the older *birthright israel* participant cohorts for which contact information was 4-5 years old. Characteristics of non-respondents were unavailable for analysis of bias due to non-response. It is likely that many non-respondents likely did not receive/read the invitation to participate.
7. This group did not have enough cases in each sample to constitute a meaningful analytic category.
8. Responses shown are those that were included in the scale. The survey instrument included additional statements interspersed with those that appear in the text, including: "Feel concern for the lives of the Lebanese", and "Feel personally threatened."
9. See Leonard Saxe, Ted Sasson, and Shahar Hecht, "*Taglit-birthright israel: Impact on Jewish Identity, Peoplehood, and Connections to Israel.*" Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, June, 2006. Also, see Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe, *Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on College Campuses.* Avi Chai Foundation, 2006.

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