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Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A quarter of a century of research on the *Israel Experience* has focused almost exclusively on the Jewish visitors from the Diaspora. Increasingly, however, Israel Experience trips—and Taglit-Birthright Israel trips in particular—include a substantial *mifgash*—an “encounter” between the Diaspora Jewish visitors and Israeli peers. On a typical Taglit trip, six to eight Israelis, usually soldiers, join the tour group for half or more of the ten-day experience. The aim of the present report is to improve understanding of the formal and informal components of the *mifgash*, as well as the significance of the experience for North American and Israeli participants.

Data for the present study were collected during the summer and fall of 2007. The study consisted of qualitative research on twenty tour groups and post-trip surveys of more than 400 Israeli participants and approximately 6,300 North American participants.

Program Components

During the course of the *mifgash*, all trips included several formal activities focused on the interaction between the Israeli and North American participants. Formal activities typically included “ice breakers” and visits to the Mt. Herzl military cemetery and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Other activities included simulations in military basic training and exercises in values clarification. Every trip concluded with a wrap-up session that included discussion of the *mifgash* in the context of the overall Taglit-Birthright Israel experience.

Mifgash Experience

Mifgashim develop against the backdrop of the Taglit-Birthright Israel tour. On the bus,

during visits to historical sites, in the hotel lobbies, and during walks on the beach, Israeli and Diaspora participants engage in intense conversations. The discussions typically include exchanges of information about the lives of the *mifgash* participants. The North Americans pose questions to the Israelis about their military service and Israeli society, politics, customs, and family life. The Israelis ask the North Americans about their studies, recreational activities, families, and Jewish life in the United States and Canada. Large majorities of both groups reported that the *mifgash* helped them discover what they share in common; in particular, their interests in music and film and their shared Jewish heritage. Differences were also evident. The Israelis were perceived (by themselves as well as by the North Americans) as more mature and responsible; the North Americans were viewed as more advanced in terms of their studies and careers. Nevertheless, Israeli and North American participants also connected to one another on the basis of their shared relationship to Judaism and their common membership in the broader Jewish collective. Participants also discussed their Jewish practices with one another. Occasional tensions developed over issues such as religion and gender roles and North American attitudes toward military service.

Meaning of the Mifgash

In the post-trip survey, the vast majority of Israeli participants indicated that the program made them feel pride—pride in service to the IDF, pride in country, and pride in being Jews. To a significant, but lesser extent, the program also made the Israelis feel connected to the Jewish people worldwide and cultivated a desire to learn more about Judaism. The program's impact on Jewish identity was experienced almost as intensely by secular Israeli participants as by the Masorti (traditional) and Orthodox participants.

The Israelis began the program viewing North American Jewish young adults as precariously Jewish. At the conclusion of the program, their views on North Americans were much more variegated. Although some did not change their views of their Diaspora counterparts, others reported surprise at the level of Jewish knowledge and engagement among the Diaspora Jewish visitors.

Among the North Americans, the mifgash was often described as the most important component of the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience. North American participants described their Israeli hosts as effective tour guides. Further, they explained that the presence of the Israelis for a large portion of the trip enabled an authentic encounter with the “real Israel.” Finally, they described their Israeli hosts as welcoming and inspiring.

Although the mifgash is a structured encounter between individuals, it is also a meeting of Jewish worlds. The mifgash challenges the cultural identities of all its participants and enhances their sense of collective belonging to the global Jewish people. Both groups recognize commonalities

in Jewish background and practice, and this acknowledgement serves as a basis of their sense of common belonging to the Jewish people. Through the encounters, participants examined previously taken-for-granted assumptions regarding religion, nationality, and peoplehood. In so doing, they came to reject antagonistic dualisms of either/or religious or non-religious, Israeli Jew and Diaspora Jew. By creating a common framework of identification, participants came to better understand not only their counterparts— but themselves as well.

Challenges and Opportunities

Researchers concluded that three aspects of the program could be strengthened to further enhance its impact on both Diaspora and Israeli participants:

- Review and modify the orientation sessions so as to better, and more efficiently, prepare Israeli participants.
- Consider how the program could better introduce Israelis to the lives and Jewish practices of the North Americans and, in so doing, serve the educational goals of Taglit-Birthright Israel.
- Extend the mifgashim to the duration of the program, as resources permit, in order to fully support the program's impact on the Jewish identities and motivations of the Israeli participants.

INTRODUCTION

A quarter of a century of research on the *Israel Experience* has almost exclusively focused on the Jewish visitors from the Diaspora who experience Israel. Increasingly, however, Israel Experience trips—and Taglit-Birthright Israel trips in particular—include a *mifgash* or encounter between the Diaspora Jewish visitors and Israeli peers. In a typical Taglit trip, six to eight Israelis, usually soldiers, join the tour group for five or more days of their trip. These Israelis join the tour as participants rather than as staff. Research on Taglit Diaspora participants documents the transformative impact of these cross-cultural encounters on visitors' Jewish identities and practices (Mittelberg, 2007; Saxe, Sasson, Phillips, Hecht, & Wright, 2007).

For North American Taglit-Birthright Israel participants, the *mifgash* is regarded as one of the most meaningful components of the experience (Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006; Saxe, Sasson et al., 2007). To date, however, there is only limited information about the impact of the *mifgash* on Israeli participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in *mifgashim* is also important for the Israelis. Yet, the nature of this impact and its potential for Jewish identity formation has received little systematic attention (but see Wolfe, 2007). The expansion of Taglit-Birthright Israel in the last several years has dramatically increased both the number of Diaspora and Israeli Jews experiencing Israel together through the *mifgash*. In the summer of 2007, at least 4,000 Israeli soldiers and university students participated in Taglit *mifgashim*. This new level of Israeli involvement presents an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the Israeli side of the *mifgash* equation.

This report draws upon qualitative and quantitative observations of *mifgashim* to

answer several questions. What happens during the *mifgash*? How do the participants experience the *mifgash*, and what significance do they attach to the experience? Describing the key features and dynamics of *mifgashim* is a first step toward a systematic evaluation of their impact during future phases of the research. This report is part of a program of research on Taglit-Birthright Israel, including surveys of North American participants, ethnographic analyses of the trips, and a study of Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni in their communities.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to describe the *mifgashim* and how they are experienced by North American and Israeli participants. For the North Americans, our line of inquiry focuses on one aspect of their Taglit experience: their encounter with Israeli peers. For Israeli participants, the inquiry is broader, since the “encounter” is synonymous with their entire Taglit-Birthright Israel experience.

Data for the present study were collected during the summer and fall of 2007. The study employs a variety of methods to capture various dimensions of the *mifgashim*. For the Israelis the study did not entail collection of pre-trip or control group data, which would be necessary for a rigorous assessment of the program’s impact. Such data will be collected in the next phase of the evaluation. The study consisted of qualitative research on twenty tour groups and post-trip surveys of more than 400 Israeli participants and approximately 6,300 North American participants.

Qualitative research

A sample of twenty buses was selected for observational and interview research. The sample included several tours organized by each of the eight largest Taglit-Birthright Israel trip providers. Buses were selected to represent tours of younger and older participants and *mifgashim* of shorter (five days or fewer) or longer (more than five days) duration.

Field observers attended the preparatory sessions for all of the tours in the sample, as well as the wrap-up discussions at the end of the trip. In addition, one Israeli participant was recruited from each bus to keep a diary (see Kadushin, Sasson, Hecht, & Saxe, 2008 for a methodological overview of this

approach). Approximately one month following the trips, focus group interviews were conducted with the Israeli participants on six of the twenty tours. We also asked relevant questions in focus groups of North American participants convened for various research purposes during the year 2007.

Survey research

To verify that the findings of our qualitative research on the Israeli participants are representative, we conducted a telephone survey of more than 400 Israeli participants on 85 buses from the 2007 summer trips. Surveys of the North American participants are routinely conducted before their respective trips and again three months following the trips. Based on the results of the qualitative research, a number of questions were added to the North American survey questionnaires administered to participants in the summer 2007 trips. Below, we report on findings from relevant questions in both sets of surveys. Further details of the study’s methodology can be found in the Appendix.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS

The description of North American participants in the summer 2007 trips derives from the registration database and pre-trip survey (see Appendix). Eighty-eight percent of North American participants were from the United States and 12% from Canada. The ages spanned the spectrum from 18 to 26, but proportionally more participants were ages 19 and 20 (see Figure 1).

The Jewish backgrounds of the North American participants tend to reflect those of North American Jewry as a whole. Thirty-

seven percent reported identification with the Reform movement, 28% Conservative, and 24% no affiliation. During their elementary school years, the largest group (47%) reported attending a supplementary Hebrew school several afternoons per week. During their high school years, most received no formal Jewish training (see Figures 2 & 3).

Figure 1. North American participants: Age

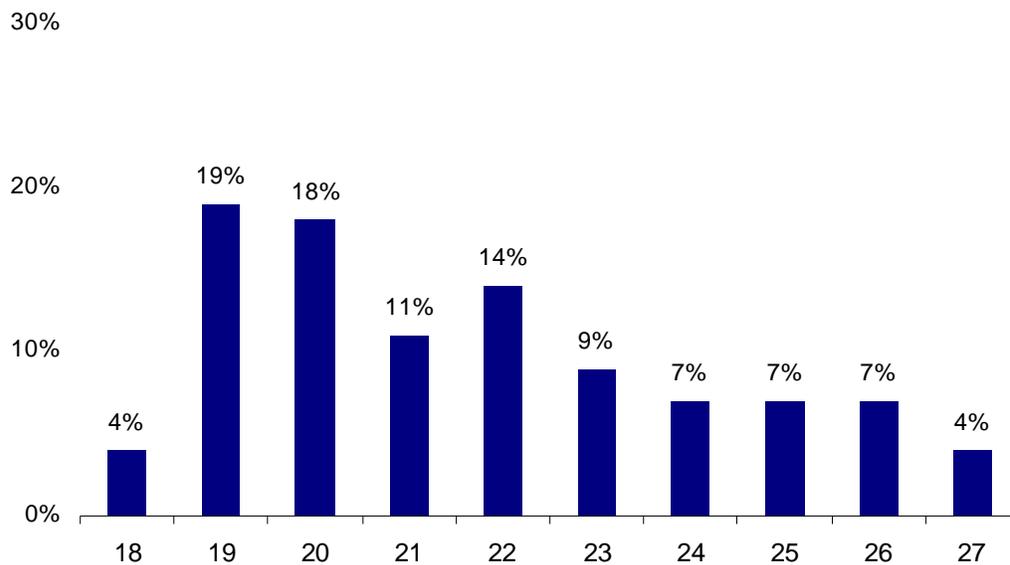


Figure 2. North American participants: Jewish affiliations

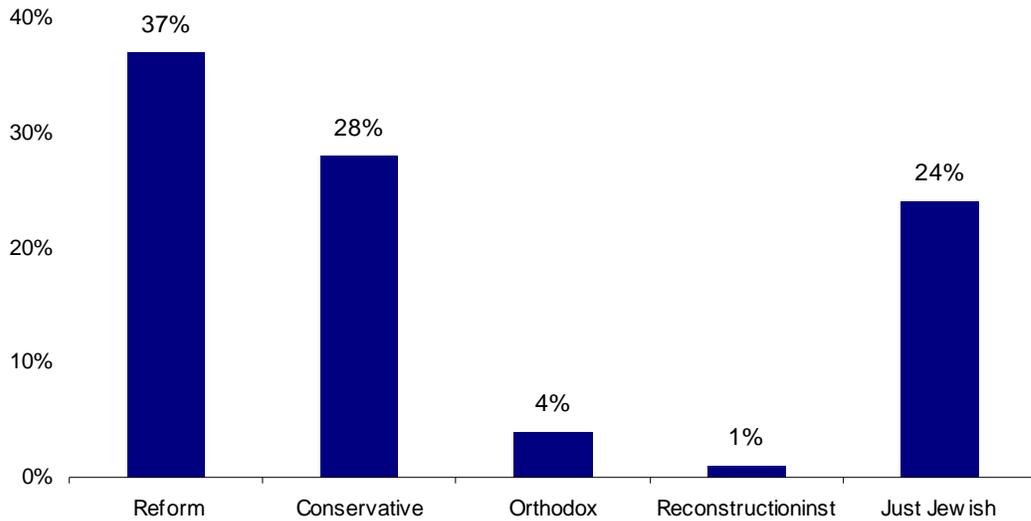
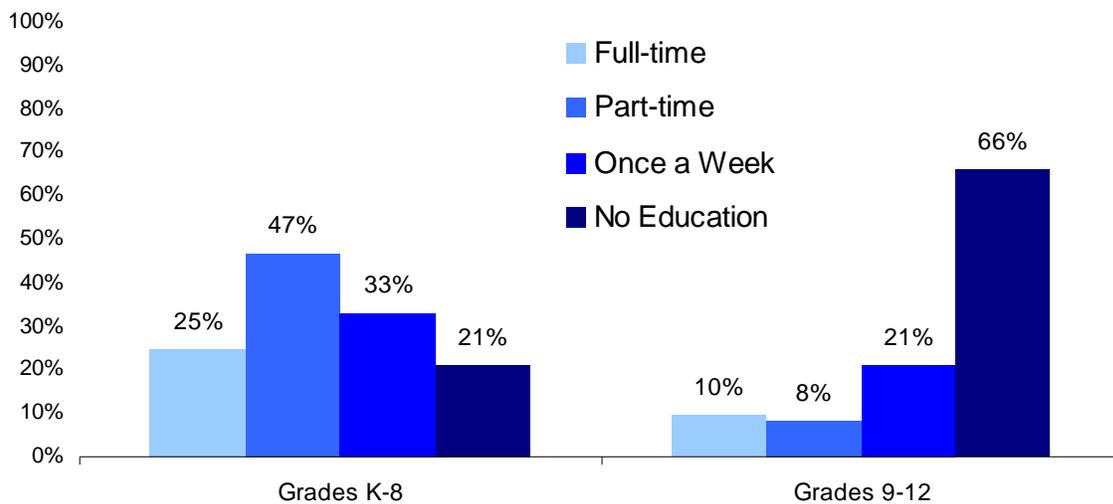


Figure 3. North American participants: Jewish education, elementary and high school



CHARACTERISTICS OF ISRAELI PARTICIPANTS

The description of Israeli participants in the summer 2007 trips derives from our telephone survey of a sample of participants on 85 buses. Most Israeli participants were ages 20 or 21, and 57% were male (Figure 4). Most identified as secular (67%) or traditional (Masorti) (26%), with 3% identifying as religious (Figure 5). Soldiers constituted 70% of the respondents; students comprised the remainder. Of the soldiers, 28% were in combat units (Figure 6). In terms of ethnicity, they were disproportionately of European descent, like their North American counterparts.

Figure 4. Israeli participants: Gender and age

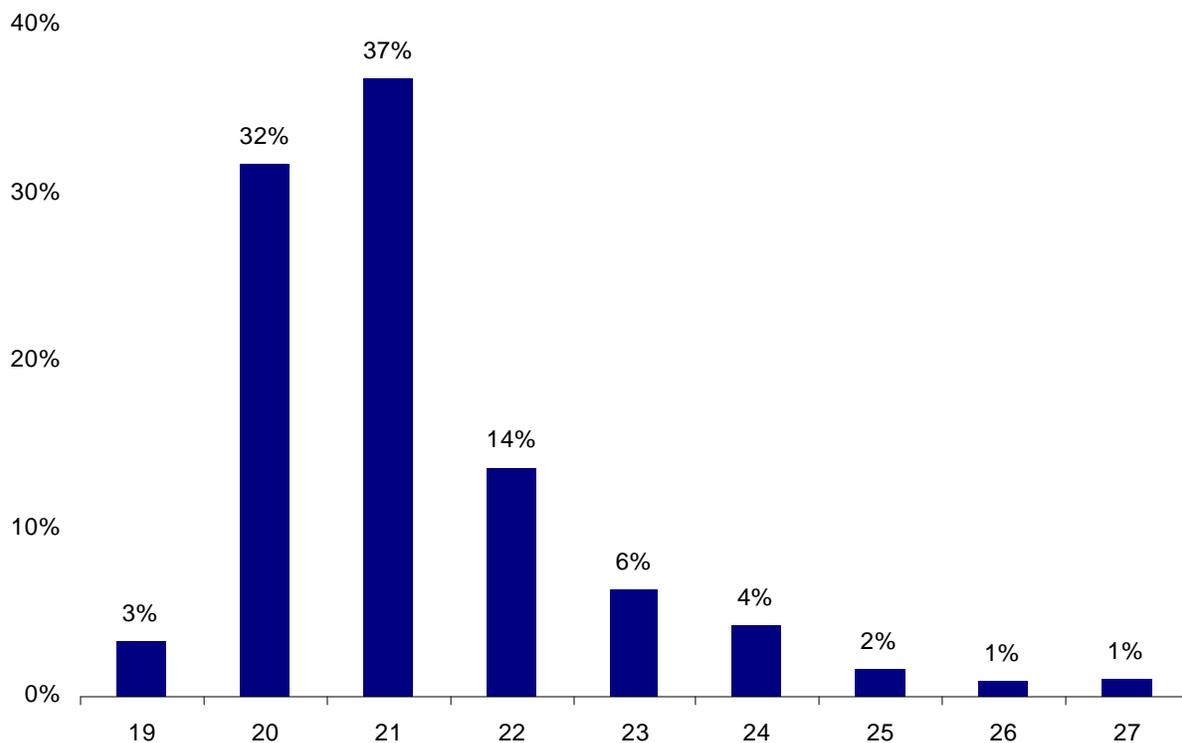
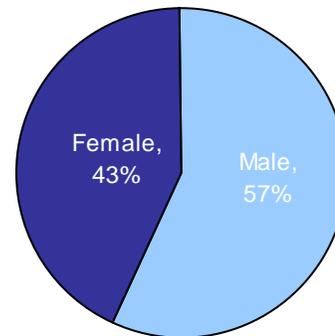


Figure 5. Israeli participants: Religious characteristics

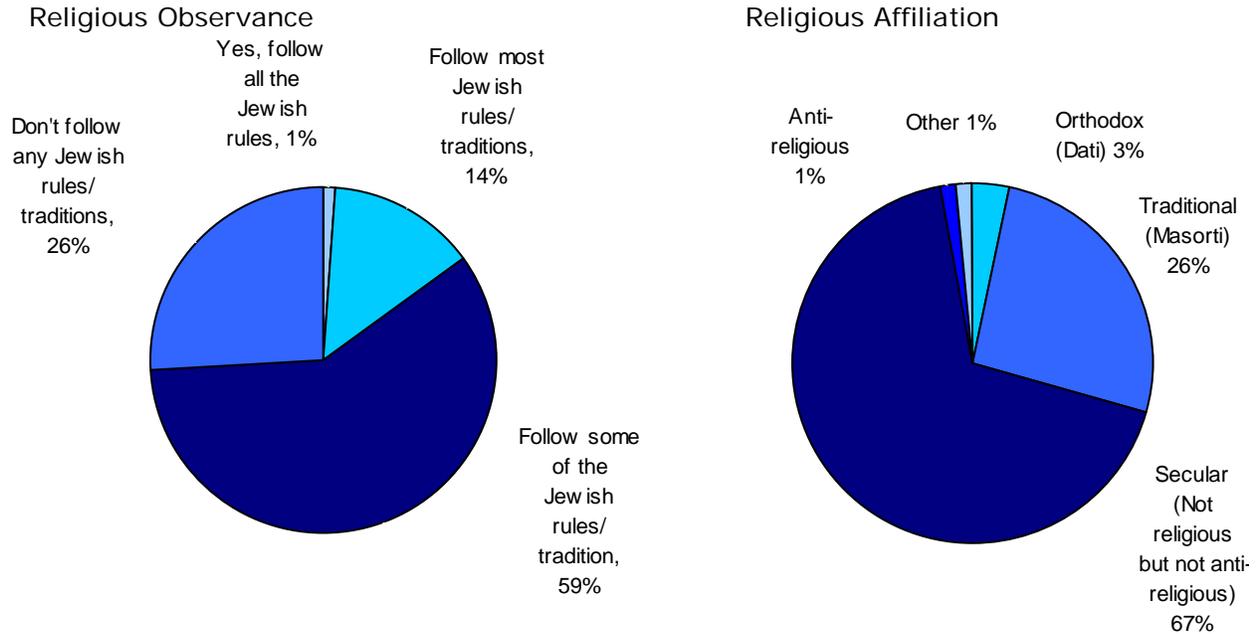
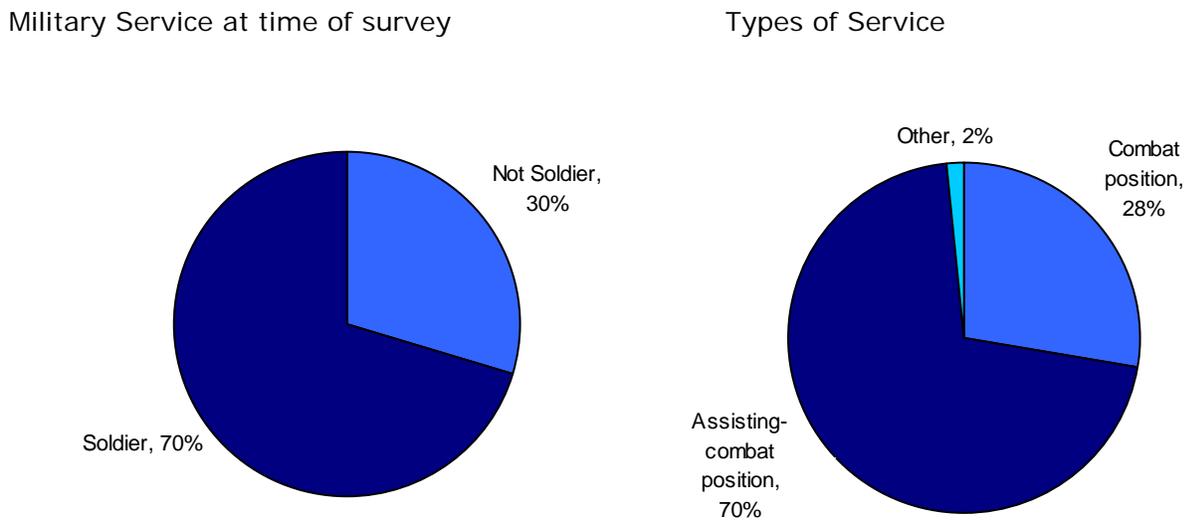


Figure 6. Israeli participants: Military service

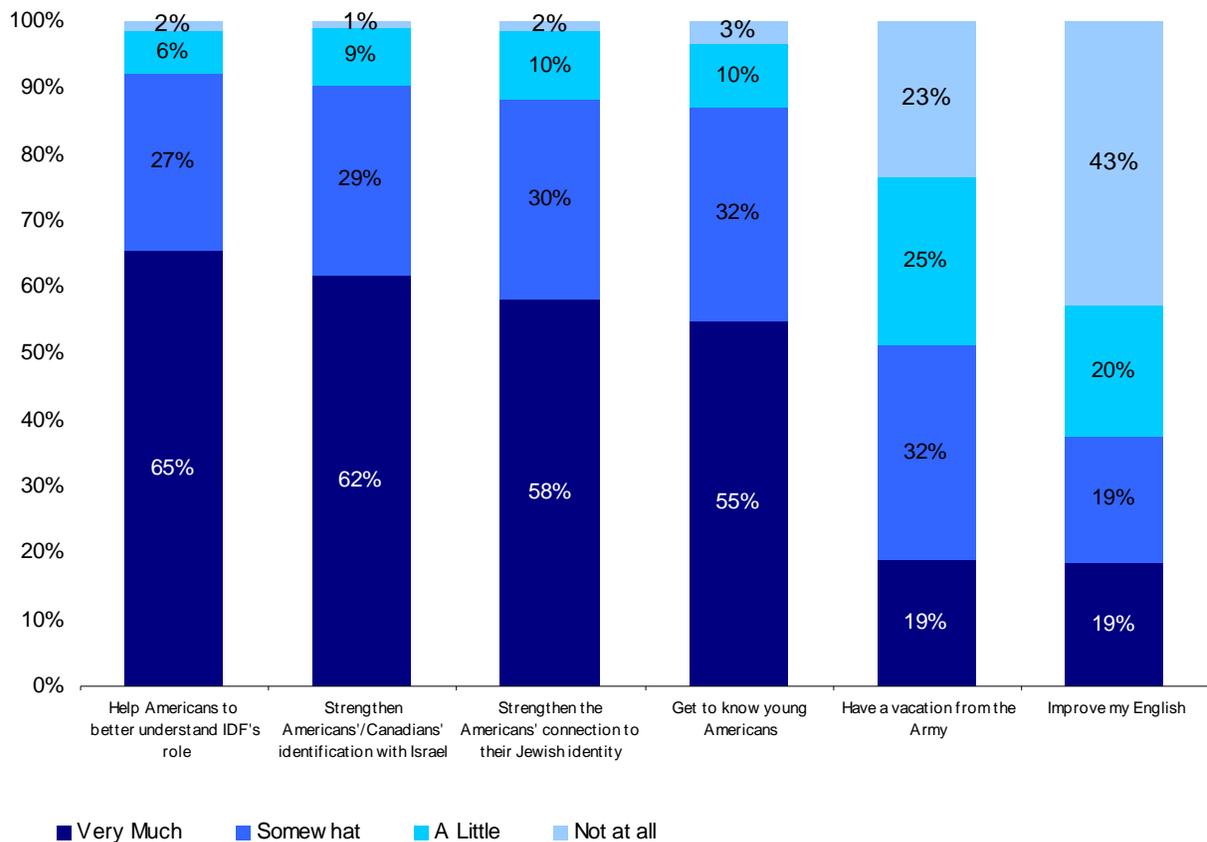


Student participants in the mifgashim were recruited through the universities. Soldiers joined the mifgashim by a variety of means, including nomination by commanders and their own personal initiative. In the post-trip survey, the Israeli mifgash participants reported being motivated chiefly by a desire to cultivate strong ties to Israel and Judaism among their Diaspora peers. Some also wished to encourage aliyah (immigration to Israel). Comparatively few indicated that a vacation from military service was their primary

motivation for applying to the program (see Figure 7).

In interviews, Israeli participants elaborated on their motivations for joining the program. Echoing Taglit’s core mission, they emphasized their desire to help Diaspora visitors develop a personal sense of connection to the Jewish state and Jewish people. They hoped that as a consequence of their visit, the North Americans would become strong supporters of Israel in the Diaspora and that

Figure 7. Motivations for applying to Taglit
 “Did the following influence your decision to apply? I wanted to.... ”



they would return for future visits. Some further stated that they would be very happy to persuade at least one or two of their visiting peers to make aliyah and enlist in the IDF.

Soldiers' primary motivations notwithstanding, a majority of survey respondents indicated that their decision to join the program was influenced, at least to some extent, by their desire to have a "vacation" from military service. Several interview respondents also mentioned that this was an initial attraction. However, even these respondents commented that, in the end, the experience proved much more meaningful than a mere holiday from military service.

The following extract from a focus group discussion illustrates how Israeli participants viewed their participation. Members of the discussion group were asked to describe their motivations for applying to the program:¹

I wanted them to feel something for the country, to feel some connection. Because after all, this is the state of the Jewish people, and this is something I truly believe in. I think that you do need to strengthen the support, and economic support, and sympathy [for Israel], it's important. But even more, I wanted them to feel sympathy for Israel. I wanted them to feel: yes, this is the Jewish state, and this is my land; and that they will feel that they want to protect it, that they need to protect it. And it doesn't have to be that they'll join the army, but that they'll feel they belong in order to appreciate it. (Oranim focus group)

In the sections that follow, we describe the formal and informal aspects of the mifgash.

We then go on to describe the meaning of the mifgash for the Israeli and North American participants.

ORGANIZING THE MIFGASH

This section describes the formal program components of the mifgash and how they were evaluated by the Israeli and North American participants.

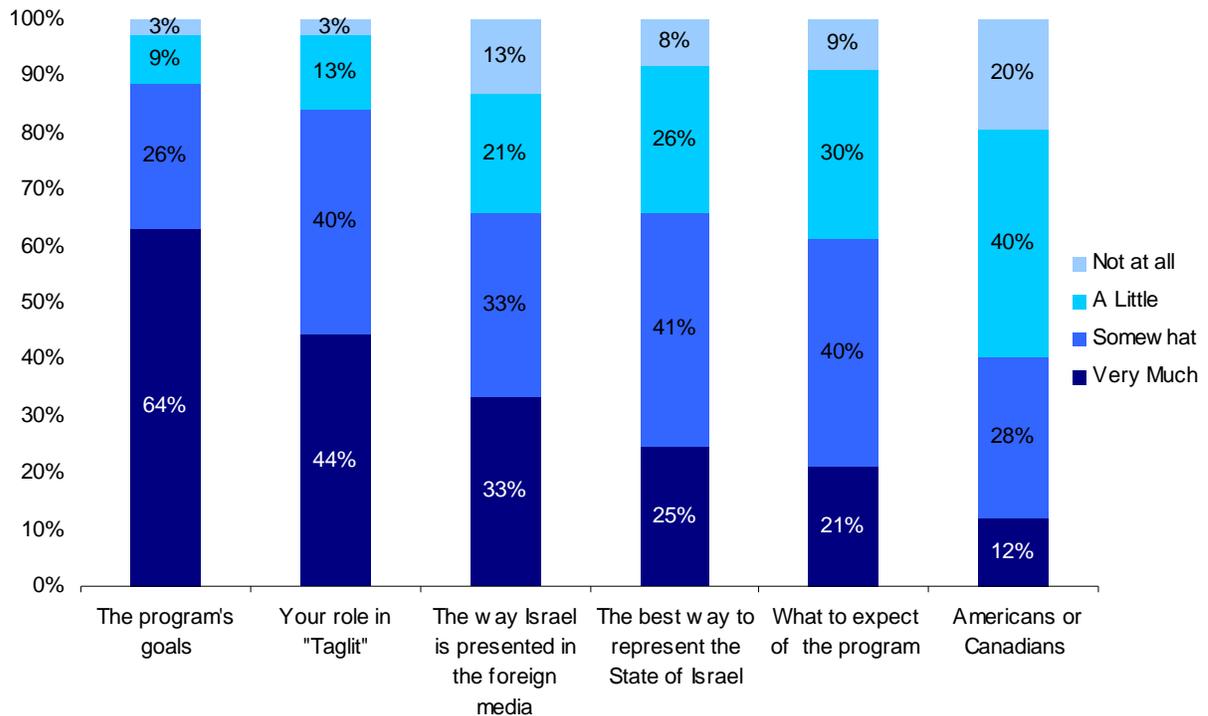
Orientation

All Israelis attended orientation sessions of approximately four hours, including presentations by a Taglit representative, an IDF spokesperson, a Taglit-Birthright Israel alumnus who subsequently came on aliyah, and the trip providers. The sessions described the program’s aims and the role of the Israeli participants. Presenters also sought to educate Israeli participants about aspects of Diaspora

Jewish life, including the Diaspora political context in relation to Israel and anti-Semitism, as well as trends in assimilation and intermarriage. Finally, the sessions provided guidance on how best to represent Israel to North American young adults.

The sessions received mixed reviews. Some Israeli participants felt they were excellent, whereas others expressed reservations. Figure 8 indicates the Israelis’ evaluations of key components of the orientation sessions.

Figure 8. Contribution of orientation session “How much did orientation session help you to understand...”



In interviews, Israelis elaborated upon their reactions to the orientation sessions. Many felt that the sessions provided useful information regarding their roles in the mifgash. The Israeli participants especially appreciated the contribution of the Taglit alumnus who came on aliyah and enlisted in the IDF.

Among those who expressed reservations, some felt that the sessions were too long or that complicated issues were presented in overly simplistic terms. Some also took issue with what they perceived to be mixed-messages regarding how they were to relate to the North Americans. One perceived message was that participants should express their opinions freely and only seek to connect to their Diaspora counterparts as individuals. Another held that participation in Taglit was more akin to a mission and, as such, participants represented the IDF and the state.

Such sentiments were also evident in the post-trip survey. Eighty percent of Israeli respondents agreed “very much” that Taglit wanted them to represent the State of Israel, and 56% similarly agreed that Taglit wanted them to represent the IDF. In comparison, only 20% felt that Taglit wanted them to express their own personal opinions.

However, when asked subsequently if they felt free to express their views in the context of the program itself, the vast majority responded in the affirmative.² This assessment was validated in the post-trip survey, as well as in the qualitative data (see below). Thus, any tension between representing the IDF and the state, on the one hand, and connecting as genuine individuals, on the other, was mostly

felt in the abstract, and pertained to the orientation sessions and not the actual experience of the mifgash.

Mifgash activities

During the course of the 5-10 day mifgash, all trips included several formal activities focused on the interaction between the Israeli and North American participants. Such formal activities typically included games of introduction (“ice breakers”), group activities organized by the Israelis, and visits to the Mt. Herzl military cemetery and Yad Vashem.

Ice breakers were typically organized by staff early in the trip to mix Israelis and North Americans. Asked if the guides organized such activities, 69% of the Americans answered in the affirmative, and an additional 16.5% agreed “to an extent.”³ Such activities were often conducted on the bus and included exercises in which the Israelis shared information about their interests and backgrounds (examples of ice breaker games include “the wind blows” and “if you were an animal what would you be and why?”).

Each group of Israelis on the buses was also asked to prepare a *peula* (group activity) for the North Americans to teach about an aspect of their lives as students or soldiers. The most common activity organized by the Israelis was a simulated military training exercise, as described in the following extract from the diary of an Israeli participant.

In the morning we, all the Israelis, wore uniforms, and had a sudden wake-up call for the Americans. We organized them in a row. Yaniv

shouted at them in Hebrew, and Ran translated into English. We divided them into groups, did a roll call, and organized a running competition. We ordered them to do push ups and, for half an hour, we tried to give them a sense of what basic military training is like. Much to our surprise, they were very amenable and did their best to do well and to be on time. We, the Israelis, were embarrassed and didn't feel comfortable having them run and humiliating them too much. Ultimately, I think it was a formative experience for the Americans on the trip. (Diary, Shorashim)

Other activities organized by the Israelis included simulations of a military decision making and exercises in values clarification.

Every trip concluded with a wrap-up session that typically included discussion of the mifgash in the context of the overall Taglit-Birthright Israel experience. In some cases, there were additional opportunities for organized discussion of particular topics (e.g., life in the military). Researchers observed twenty wrap-up discussions in connection with the present study. Quotations from participants in those sessions appear in the next section of the report. Several Israeli participants mentioned the wrap-up discussions as among the most memorable aspects of the mifgash. It was during the wrap-up discussion that the Israelis learned how valued their participation was to the North Americans.

Visit to Mt. Herzl and Yad Vashem

All tour groups visited the military cemetery at Mt. Herzl. The central role the Israelis play during the visit makes this a core activity in the mifgash. The Israeli soldiers visit Mt. Herzl in military uniform, a dramatic break from their routine appearance in civilian clothing. In many trips, the cemetery visit is the first occasion when the soldiers don their uniforms. During the visit itself, they are often called upon to discuss relatives or friends who have fallen in Israel's wars. In some cases the soldiers hold an honor guard at the end of the visit. The following account, from an Israeli diarist, is illustrative:

I spoke about Goni Hernick (z"l), who was the commander of the Golani commando unit and was killed during the incursion to the Beaufort fortress. After that, everyone came to us crying and thanked us for the stories. It was simply a moving moment in life. (Diary, Oranim)

In many trips, the visit to the Mt. Herzl cemetery is preceded by a visit to Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. The soldiers do not have a formal role in the visit to Yad Vashem, although they are required to appear in uniform. The structure of activities on these days is geared toward emphasizing the "ashes to redemption" narrative of Israel's establishment for both North Americans and Israelis.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The core of the mifgash does not develop during the formal activities described in the previous section. Rather, the encounter between Israeli and Diaspora young adults develops against the background of the rest of the Taglit experience: on the bus, during visits to historical sites, in the hotel lobbies, and during walks on the beach. How did the encounter develop during these in-between moments? How did the Israelis and North Americans connect with one another? What were sources of tension and how did they arise? In this section, we draw mostly on the qualitative research to describe the informal aspects of the mifgash.

Comparing lives

During the orientation sessions, and later by way of the tour guides, the Israelis were told to spread out among the Diaspora visitors and to get to know as many as possible. The instructions were quite explicit: The Israelis were told not to sit with one another on the buses and not to speak to one another in Hebrew. In practice, they abided by these guidelines, and their willingness to do so ensured a great deal of interaction with their North American counterparts.

The essence of the mifgash is talking, and much of the conversation consists of exchanges of information about the lives of the mifgash participants. The North Americans posed questions to the Israelis about their military service, Israeli society, politics, customs, and family life. The Israelis asked the North Americans about their studies, recreational activities, families, and Jewish life in the United States and Canada. The following quotations, the first from a diary, the second from a focus group discussion of Israelis, describe the contents of such informal conversations:

It seemed as if they were still tired from the flight, they didn't ask many questions, and used the bus rides for quick naps along with questions such as, 'How was it in the army? How was it in the recent Lebanon war?' (in which I didn't participate). I was also asked if all the bananas are green or just not ripe yet, and [they were] impressed by the cultivation of black sunflower seeds in Israel. We ended the day at the hotel bar. It was nice to talk over a glass of beer and to get to know them better. I'm looking forward to tomorrow. (Diary, Shorashim)

First, it was important for us to have fun. After all, there is less formal teaching in this trip, and really, it's more important to connect to these guys and have fun with them. It was important, and also we naturally started talking about the cultural gap, the security situation in Israel, and it was nice that they did it like that. That they didn't sit us down in a class and lecture to us. It was done in the most social and fun way. (Focus Group, Oranim)

In the surveys of Israeli and North American participants, large majorities of both groups agreed that the mifgash helped them discover what they share in common with their opposite number (see Figure 9). As described below, such commonalities included a shared fondness of music, film, and other aspects of youth culture, as well as a shared Jewish heritage. To be sure, participants also learned about their differences. The Israelis were perceived (by

themselves as well as by the North Americans) as more mature and responsible, a fact that both groups related to their military service. The North Americans were viewed as more advanced in terms of their studies and careers. Many Israelis also noted that North Americans seemed less family oriented, due primarily to their willingness to study and pursue careers far away from their parents.

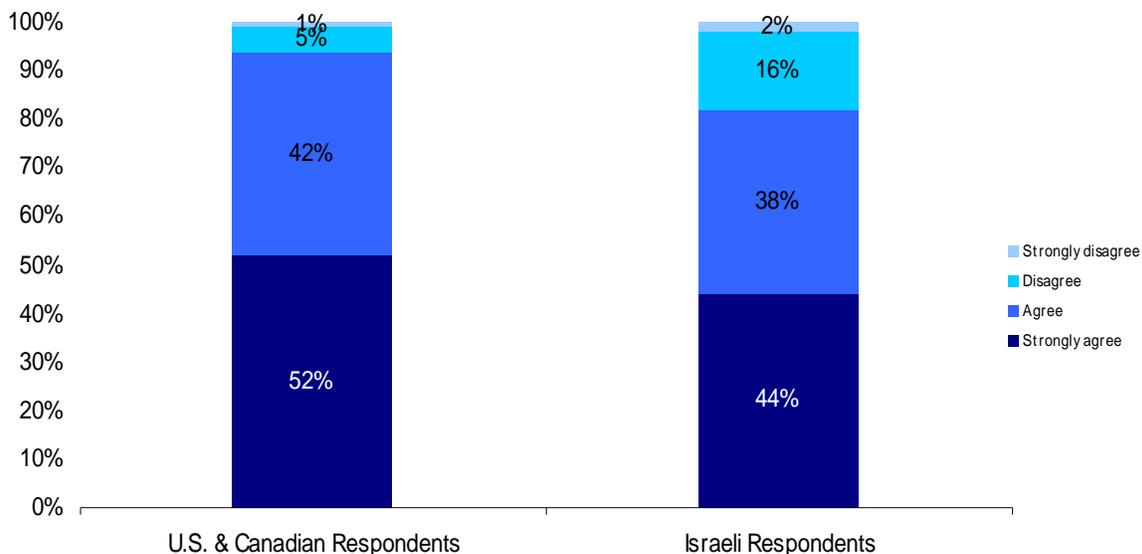
Youth culture

Among the similarities that Israeli and North American young adults discovered was a shared enjoyment of music, film, partying, and other aspects of youth culture. Wolfe (2007) stresses the importance of such commonalities in her doctoral dissertation on Israeli-North American *mifgashim*. Sharing music in particular enabled the two sides to bond and

simultaneously introduced one another to their unique cultural scenes. The following quotations, from diaries and a focus group discussion, illustrate the significance of youth culture as a medium and lubricant for the cross-cultural encounter. The first quotation describes the participants' playful appropriation of a famous Beatles song.⁴

A song that me and Mark sang together on the bus the night before the end of the trip: I say ken [yes], you say, lo [no]. You say atsor [stop], I say lech, lech, lech [go, go, go]. You say shalom, and I say shalom, shalom, shalom....I say lemala [up], you say lemata [down]. You say lama [why], and I say ani lo yodaat [I don't know]. Oh...
(Diary, Shorashim)

Figure 9. Perception of commonalities
"My interaction with Israeli/North Americans on my bus made me aware of what we have in common"



The next quotation, also from an Israeli participant's diary, illustrates how Israelis and North Americans shared videos as well as music during their frequent bus trips across the country:

I sat next to Steve, and he wanted to show me a movie about the West Bank...a movie that won the Oscar. It was an interesting movie, a parody on a famous musical, the movie presented the conflict as a conflict between competing food stands. Later, Robin let me listen to some songs on her iPod, I listened to some rock songs that were too heavy for me, but there were also some that were good. (Diary, Shorashim)

The participants also enjoyed "partying" together, which typically meant talking late into the night while also consuming alcohol, although not necessarily to excess. In the following quotation, the Israeli speaker describes partying as a shared, universal, cultural practice:

They asked me, 'how is it among your friends? Do you party the same way? How do you have fun?' And I thought about it a little bit, and realized that it's exactly the same. Young people all over the world probably have fun in exactly the same ways. I think that the differences are very subtle. They told us that they are heavy drinkers; on the contrary, I actually saw that they drink less than we do. (Focus group, Daat)

Speaking freely

Despite the concern of some Israeli

participants that they were being asked to represent the views of the IDF rather than their own, the participants noted that, during the mifgash itself, they were actually under no constraints concerning the expression of personal opinions.

This was evident in the post-trip survey, as illustrated in Figure 10, as well as in the qualitative data. In their diaries and group discussions, the Israelis occasionally discussed the tension between representing the IDF and state and expressing their own personal views. In no instance did an Israeli participant indicate that she or he concealed or misrepresented her personal feelings or viewpoint. Both Israelis and North Americans enjoyed the open and frank explorations of diverse issues, including the Arab-Israeli conflict. The following two examples are illustrative:

On some level I always gave the IDF position and then what I thought about it. But I always truly said what I felt and what I see as right. (Focus group, Daat)

There was a discussion on whether Jerusalem should be the capital of Israel or [should it be] Tel Aviv?...I expressed my opinion (opposition), and said that we need to leave the past behind us, there is an Israeli identity, which should be the primary identity in Israel, and that after all Israel is very diverse...Many people approached me afterwards and told me that they weren't aware of the diversity of opinions on this matter in Israel and bombarded me with questions. (Diary, Shorashim)

Moreover, as one Israeli participant explained, by relating to the North Americans' questions in an honest, forthright, and open fashion, the Israelis cast Israel in the best possible light: "I felt that the shlichut, [the mission], the best marketing I can do, is to honestly tell them what I think about everything. Be it good or bad" (Focus group, Daat).

However, in interviews following the trips, several Israelis denied feeling any significant ambivalence over whether to express their own viewpoints or those preferred by the IDF or Taglit. As it happens, their own views and motivations were, in large measure, in accord with those of the IDF and program. Thus, when speaking freely, such participants tended nevertheless to express views consistent with their roles as soldiers and representatives of the Israeli public. One participant explained the correlation in an especially cogent fashion:

When they asked political or non-political questions about how

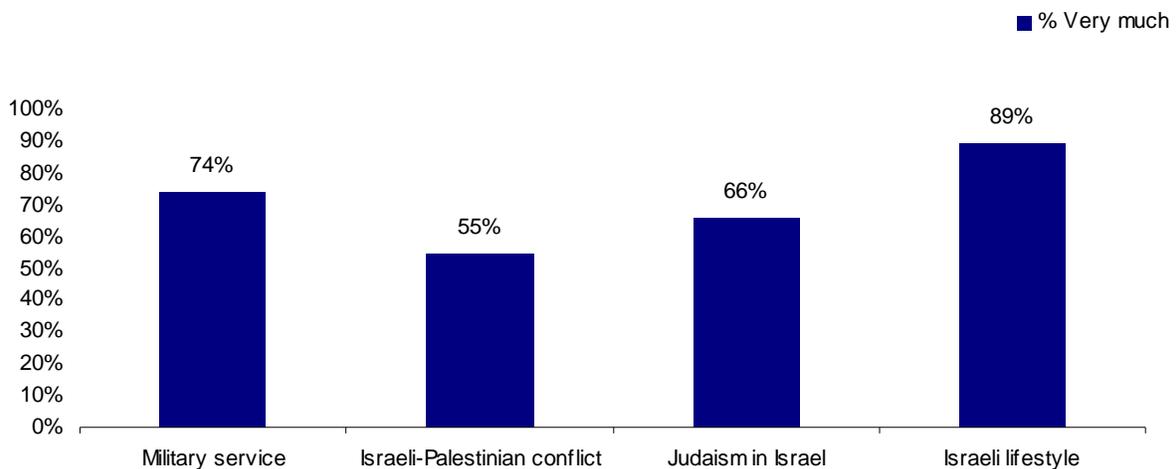
things happen, then I don't give the answers that I know, which are the IDF policy for example. Rather, I give them my own personal opinion. But my personal opinion is also a personal opinion as someone who is inside the system. My world view, part of its construction is that I'm in the system, and it does influence the way I understand things. (Focus group, Shorashim)

According to this Israeli participant, because he is part of "the system," his own personal worldview largely correlates with that of the military, the state, and the broader Israeli public.

Jewish ties

Israeli and North American participants also connected to one another on the basis of their shared relationship to Judaism and their common membership in the broader Jewish

Figure 10. Expression of personal views
"To what extent did you feel free to express your views about..."



collective. On both sides, participants were happy to recognize the other's familiarity with Jewish rituals and shared reverence for historical events and places. In the accounts that follow, Israeli participants describe visiting a synagogue with their North American counterparts, and reciting the "Hear, Oh Israel" declaration of faith at the Western Wall.

I chose to do the Kabbalat Shabbat in a religious synagogue (instead of going to a lecture in the hotel), simply because I followed the others...In retrospect, it turns out that the choice was right, and it was really nice. We sang Lecha Dodi—a song for welcoming Shabbat that describes the Shabbat as a bride that we need to welcome in. I joined Michael's singing and explained to him the meaning of the song. Ironic, isn't it? An atheist explains to an American Jew what Kabbalat Shabbat is. (Diary, Shorashim)

At the Kotel [the Western Wall] I had an amazing experience. I went to the Wall, and it was moving but just to an extent, and suddenly one of the girls started praying Shema Israel ["Hear, Oh Israel"] and stood right next to me. I started praying with her and we both had tears [in our eyes]. And then I saw three or four girls leaving there with tears of excitement in their eyes. It was an incredible experience for me. One of the greatest experiences in my life. (Focus group, Daat)

Participants also discussed their Jewish practices with one another. Many Israelis reported surprise at the level of Jewish

knowledge and engagement of their North American visitors whom they believed to be thoroughly assimilated. The North Americans, in contrast, often discovered that their seemingly secular Israeli counterparts actually celebrated the same Jewish holidays and knew a good deal about Jewish religious practice.

Friendship & romance

Making friends and forming relationships, including occasionally romantic relationships, was also an essential feature of the encounter. According to their survey responses, the vast majority of Americans (88%) agreed (either "strongly agree" or "agree") that their encounters with Israeli peers led to personal connections with individuals. Israeli participants likewise indicated that they made new friends in the context of the tour. In many instances, both Israeli and North American participants expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed their counterparts. Consider the following two illustrations from an Israeli and then a North American focus group discussion conducted after the trips:

I finally got it when, just before the end of Shabbat we sat in a circle and talked. And it's like suddenly we had our internal jokes and everyone was laughing. It was amazing. It was only five days, like, only five days and we already had so much in common. Like jokes that a newcomer wouldn't have understood. And this all happened in five days. This just doesn't [ordinarily] happen. (Focus group, Daat)

When we were first meeting [the Israelis] I assumed that they would think that their lives were so much harder than ours, and that we were

pampered and spoiled and didn't know what it truly meant to feel any type of pride in your country...And it was just so much easier to find a common ground. We are so similar even though we'd experienced such different lifestyles. These people were our friends; they weren't [just] people who happened to be our age that were in the Army. (Focus group, Austin, Texas)

Tensions

Over the course of several days of intense travel and cross-cultural exchange, tensions occasionally developed. Thus, for example, some Israelis described frustration with the tour guides. In one instance, the soldiers were incensed that the group's tour guide described their service in the IDF as an obligation. The soldiers felt proud of their service and did not wish the Americans to perceive it as having been imposed upon them. "She [the guide] has destroyed everything we tried to build over the past five days," the Israeli participants complained.

On occasion, soldiers expressed exasperation with the North Americans' attitudes toward military service. In the following diary entries, we learn of one soldier's reaction to questions and comments posed by the Americans on her trip:

The girls in my room kept saying 'wow, I would have never been able to manage in the army' and other things like that, and it really bugged me. I kept thinking, 'if only you were here and had to enlist, you would have known.' (Diary, Hillel)

The reason I was probably mad at the Americans at first, was that they didn't feel like me, that they live in the United States leading their normal lives like everyone else, and don't really care that people their age protect the country for them...but during the trip I realized that I have no reason to be mad at them...maybe if my parents didn't make aliyah [immigrate] to Israel I would have been living in the Ukraine now, going to college and coming on Taglit for Russians in the summer. (Diary, Hillel)

Another Israeli diarist expressed frustration with her American counterparts who slept during the testimony of a Holocaust survivor at Yad Vashem. She writes that although she understood that the Americans were exhausted due to sleep deprivation and an intense travel schedule, those factors did not excuse the disrespect they displayed to the elderly survivor.

Tensions also occasionally surfaced between the Americans and Israelis over divergent interpretations of religious and gender roles. For example, Americans on one trip expressed surprise and dismay over the relatively smaller area at the Western Wall designated for women. The Israelis on the tour described traditional gender roles (reflected in the allocation of public worship space) as a basic characteristic of Judaism.

Finally, as noted, many Americans were fascinated by their Israeli peers' service in the much mythologized IDF. A great deal of drama thus attended the soldiers' appearance in civilian clothing or uniform. The former signified accessibility and familiarity; the

latter distance and difference. The tensions caused by the soldiers' dress were generally productive and revealed something of the inner dynamics of the mifgash. Consider the following comment, by an American at one of the wrap-up discussions:

Thank you for wearing civilian clothes, because if you wore uniforms I would have been intimidated and would have never spoken with you. But also thank you for wearing uniforms during the last day because it sums up all that we have learned about you during the trip. (Wrap-up, Shorashim)

MEANING FOR ISRAELIS

The current study is based upon data gathered among participants during and after the Taglit-Birthright Israel trips. As a result, we cannot compare the views of Israeli participants after the experience to their views before or to a similar group of Israelis who did not go on a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip. We cannot, therefore, ascertain the impact of the experience independently of the participants’ subjective viewpoints.

It is possible, however, to pose a different but equally important question: What significance do the participants attribute to their Taglit-Birthright Israel experience? Asking the question in this fashion, we can discover what the trip means for the alumni, and we can

establish hypotheses regarding trip impact that can be tested in future research.

In the post-trip survey, most Israelis indicated that the program made them feel pride—pride in service to the IDF, pride in country, and pride in being Jews. To a significant but lesser extent, the program also made them feel connected to the Jewish people worldwide and cultivated a desire to learn more about Judaism (see Figures 11 and 12). This section begins by exploring these highly salient dimensions of the Israelis’ Taglit-Birthright Israel experience.

Figure 11. Pride in Israeli identity, military service, Israel, and Jewish identity “To what extent did the trip make you feel....”

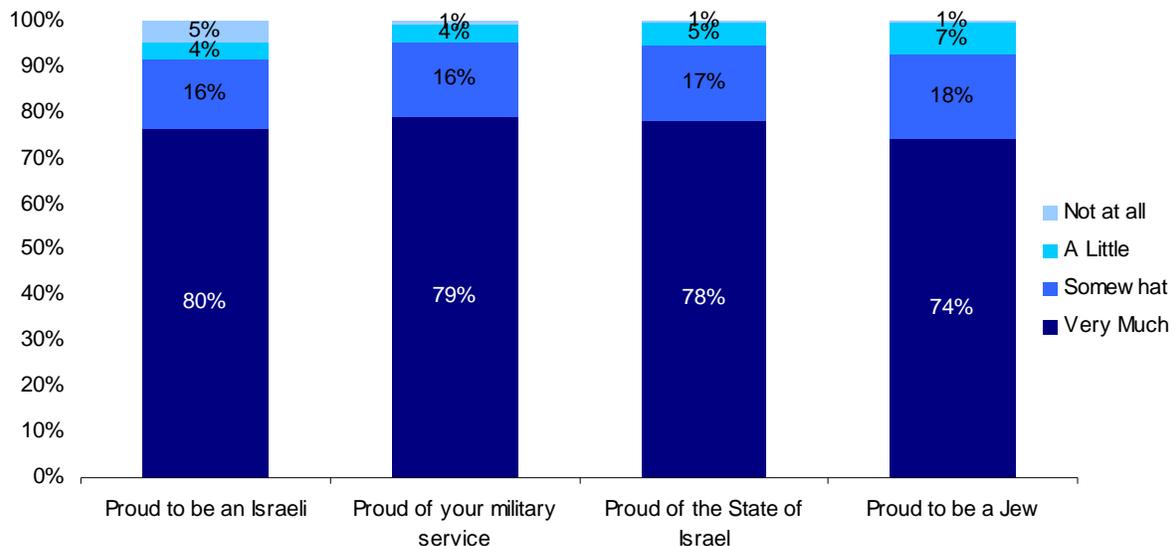
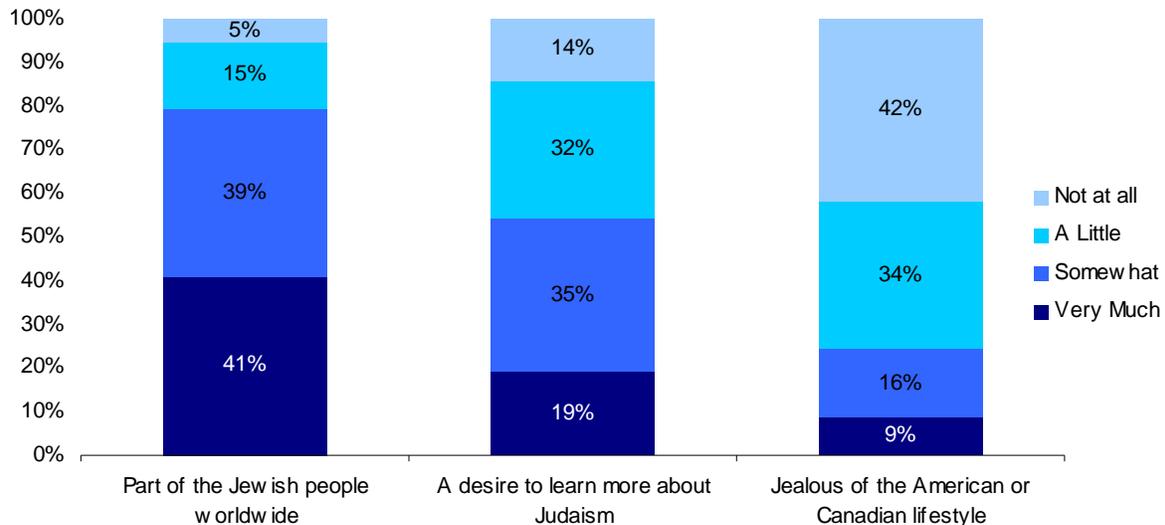


Figure 12. Jewish peoplehood, desire to learn about Judaism, and jealousy of North American Jewish lifestyle
 "To what extent did the trip make you feel..."



Pride in service in the IDF

The Israelis developed pride in their service to the IDF for a number of reasons. From a cognitive standpoint, the tour guides tended to narrate Israel's history as a series of hard-won military victories against implacable foes. This is a narrative in which Israeli soldiers appear as heroic defenders of the Jewish state and Jewish people. The soldiers have heard all this before, but in the company of their admiring Diaspora visitors, the classic Zionist framing of Israel's history and their role within it gained new currency. Emotionally, they became open to viewing their own contribution to the state in non-cynical, even heroic, terms. To borrow a classic concept from social psychology, they came to view themselves as they believed others viewed them, a process Cooley (1902)

termed the "looking glass self." The following quotations, from interviews and a wrap-up discussion, illustrate these themes:

Facilitator: What was the meaning of the *mifgash* for you?

Participant: A great support for my work in the army. The *mifgash* showed me the big picture, what I really contribute. That I don't see in my daily life. They helped me regain the feeling that my service, my very being in the army, is crucial. I'm proud of my service much more than I was before. I feel pride. Before the trip I came with the feeling that I'm joining as an officer and that's cool and that's it. [But] I've realized that for them an officer is someone who protects the

state of Israel; that I have a very important role in the world. (Focus group, Shorashim)

Serving in the army is not always fun and we all wait for the end of our service. And I think that they perceived us as a sort of ideal, that ‘wow, he’s such a hero, he serves in the IDF.’ This is something very empowering, because we never saw how [we’re] perceived by Diaspora Jewry, and they really told us, half joking half being serious, that as far as they’re concerned we are the guardians of the Jewish people. This is something that is very empowering. (Focus group, Mayanot)

Before we met, I took everything for granted. I didn’t think about the meaning of Israel as the Jewish state, and about the IDF service and protecting the country. Now, I have more respect for the state, for the IDF, and for everything I do, after seeing things through your eyes. (Wrap-up, Shorashim)

Some soldiers reported that the experience made them feel more “at peace” with their service in the IDF or their decision to extend their military service. According to these individuals, appreciation for the military is in decline, and some of their Israeli peers questioned their decision to serve in the IDF. However, their Taglit-Birthright Israel experience made them feel more confident in the correctness of their decision to serve. Observing Diaspora Jews relate to the soldiers of the IDF helped them to understand the value and importance of their service. The

following extract, from a focus group discussion, illustrates this theme:

Today in Israel, there is this attitude in many places that if you are a combat soldier you are a ‘sucker.’ They don’t see it like this. This whole thing of appreciating the IDF is so much in decline [in Israel], this whole thing of enlisting to the IDF, we can learn from them, this motivation to know that what we do is the right thing, and to not just see how can I advance myself as quickly as possible. (Focus group, CIE)

Love for Israel

The soldiers also reported a deepening of their love for Israel and appreciation of their lives in the Jewish state. A few commented that the program solidified their desire to continue living in Israel throughout their lives. How can we explain this aspect of the Taglit experience?

The tour guides’ master narrative is clearly part of the answer. Most guides, in order to lend coherence to the trip, developed a master narrative to link the various sites into a coherent story. The master narrative typically included several features: the historical presence of the Jewish people in the ancient land of Israel, especially during the ancient Kingdom of David, and the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties, Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem and dispersion of Jews in the first and second centuries of the common era; anti-Semitism in Europe culminating in the Zionist movement and the Holocaust, the settlement of Palestine and establishment of a Jewish state against tremendous odds, the ingathering of Middle Eastern, North African, and Russian

Jews, and the ongoing challenge of defending the state against displaced Palestinians and hostile Arab regimes. Although primarily geared toward the North Americans, this master narrative—one that might be labeled the narrative of “ashes to redemption”—also touched the Israelis and contributed to their appreciation of the modern Jewish state.

The Israeli participants also experienced the pleasure of hosting others in their homes. Just as they gained pride in their service to the IDF by seeing how Americans reacted to their uniforms, they also deepened their affection for their country by seeing it admired by others. They saw familiar sights through “others’ eyes” and hence appreciated those aspects of their culture in a new way. Thus, they came to appreciate many otherwise taken-for-granted elements of the landscape, including the beauty of Israel’s beaches, deserts and cities; the diversity of its population; the use of Hebrew as an everyday language; the organization of the public clock and calendar according to Jewish time; and the sheer presence of so many Jews living alongside one another. Consider the following quotations from wrap-up discussions and a focus group:

It’s amazing that this country that looks so natural for us and so taken-for-granted, suddenly through your eyes we understand that this is a special place and sometimes crazy. This trip did not affect us any less than it affected you. (Wrap-up, Shorashim)

Thanks to you I feel more proud to be Jewish and Israeli, especially now that I’m in the army. After we spoke so much and I saw your perspective, I feel more pride. I

understand that it’s different for you to be around Jews, for me it’s natural. (Wrap-up, Oranim)

In the following account, a soldier explains that she had previously visited all of the main tourist sites but that this time her visits felt different. Seeing the sites through the eyes of North Americans made them seem extraordinary. Notably, she also reports that the same proved true for some of the North Americans; for the latter, seeing Israeli sites in the company of Israelis, and imagining what they might mean for them, proved especially meaningful:

Bottom line, all the places we visited, I’ve already been to all of them...and still, I was amazed by how moved I was each time at every place. Being at the Kotel...it becomes ordinary, [and] suddenly I was really moved. Or at Yad Vashem, I was really moved. All sorts of places that really, really moved me. Even at the Dead Sea, I was suddenly excited that you can float...I just saw it through their eyes. And something that really moved me was that on the bus, on our way back, I asked someone how would you describe [the trip] in one word, and he said that the thing that had the greatest impact on him was actually to see us in all these places. Like, the opposite from me. For me, the thing that had the most impact on me was seeing them. And it gave [me] a really good feeling. (Focus group, Daat)

Moreover, their own commitment to Israel intensified as they sought to convey its meaning to their North American peers. In the following quotation, an Israeli diarist

contemplates devoting her life to the development of the Negev Desert, an ambition she attributes to her description of the importance of such work to her North American visitors:

I don't know what I want to do after the army, but suddenly I felt that maybe I found a solution. Maybe I want to develop the Negev. When we left there on our way to Kfar Hanokdim I spoke about it with the Americans, [on] why it is important to develop the Negev, and I never thought about it myself, but when they asked me, and I had to explain it to them, I actually explained to myself as well. (Diary, Daat)

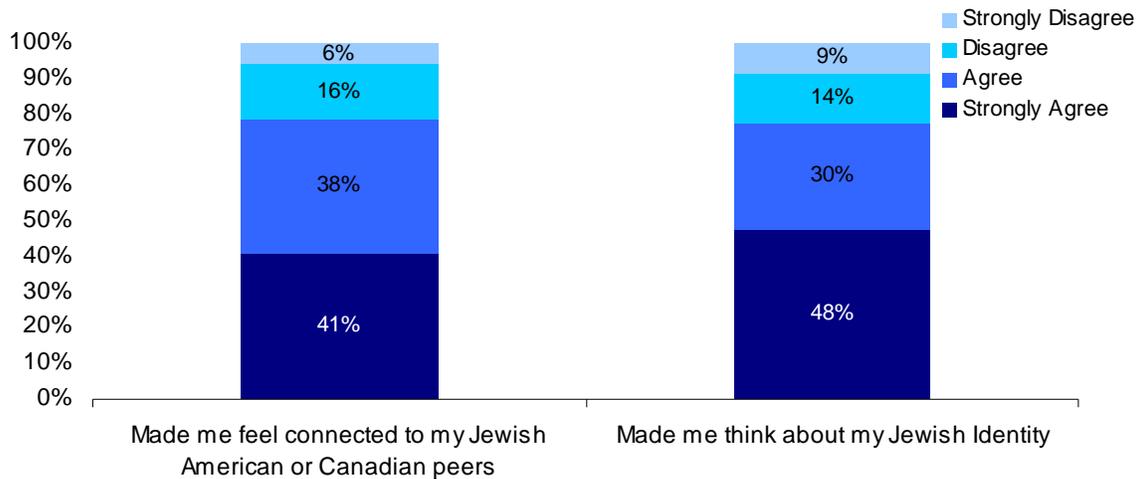
Jewish people & identity

The Taglit-Birthright Israel experience also strengthened the Jewish identities and feelings

of connection to the Jewish people of many of the Israeli participants. Such individuals typically began the trip identifying primarily as Israeli and only secondarily as Jewish. In the context of the trip, they described discovering a more salient Jewish identity.

Through their interaction with Jewish individuals from around the world, and in response to the teaching narratives of the tour guides, guest speakers, and trip staff, the Israeli participants came to feel connections to the Jewish people worldwide. The experience often caused them to think about their own Jewish identities in new ways. Thus, as illustrated above, in Figure 12, 41% of Israeli respondents to the post-trip survey agreed “very much,” and an additional 39% agreed “somewhat,” that the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience made them feel part of a worldwide Jewish people. As Figure 13 illustrates, comparable numbers reported that the experience made them feel close to their U.S.

Figure 13. Jewish Identity and peoplehood “The mifgash with U.S./Canadian Jews...”



and Canadian peers and caused them to think about their Jewish identities.

The following quotes, from a focus group, a wrap-up discussion, and a diary express this theme. In the first, the speaker describes how the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience increased the salience of the Jewish component of his identity and motivated him to consider certain Jewish practices when he has his own family and children:

A question that always comes up in this trip is a question of self definition, all the time—how you define yourself. I think this is the essence of the trip. To change things so that they will see in their definition of themselves, that they are Jews, not religious Jews, but Jews that belong to the Jewish people. So I perceived myself as being Israeli, and Israeli-Jew only a little bit, [and] now I'm more Israeli-Jew, and it doesn't mean that I'm going to be Orthodox or religious, but to keep those traditions that I feel I need when I have a family and kids. (Focus group, Daat)

In the next two quotes, the speakers confess that, prior to participating in Taglit-Birthright Israel, they knew little about Jews living outside of Israel. For the first time, these individuals realize that there are Jews—who are in some respects like themselves (i.e., non-Orthodox), and to whom they feel a strong connection—living throughout the world:

You are the only Jews I know outside of Israel. Up until now Jews and Israelis were the same thing for me. I understand [now] that it's not the same thing. (Wrap-up, CIE)

Jews outside of Israel were, for me, either religious or people that are on the verge of losing their identity. The greatest thing I've learned during these past days is that I do have brothers outside of Israel. Talking to some of you was as exciting as finding a missing brother. I feel related to all of you. (Diary, Hillel Daat)

Moreover, as illustrated in Figure 14, the program's impact on Jewish identity was experienced almost as intensely by secular Israeli participants as by the Masorti and Orthodox participants.

Beyond Jewish identity and peoplehood, the experience also inspired a portion of the Israeli participants, albeit a minority, to explore Judaism (see Figure 15). In general, for the Israeli participants, the program's perceived impact was greatest in relation to feelings about Israel and the IDF, and weaker in relation to feelings about Jewish identity and religion. It remains notable, however, that half of the secular participants reported that the program either somewhat or very much heightened their interest in Judaism.

Figure 14. Jewish identity by religious orientation
 "The mifgash made me think about my Jewish identity"

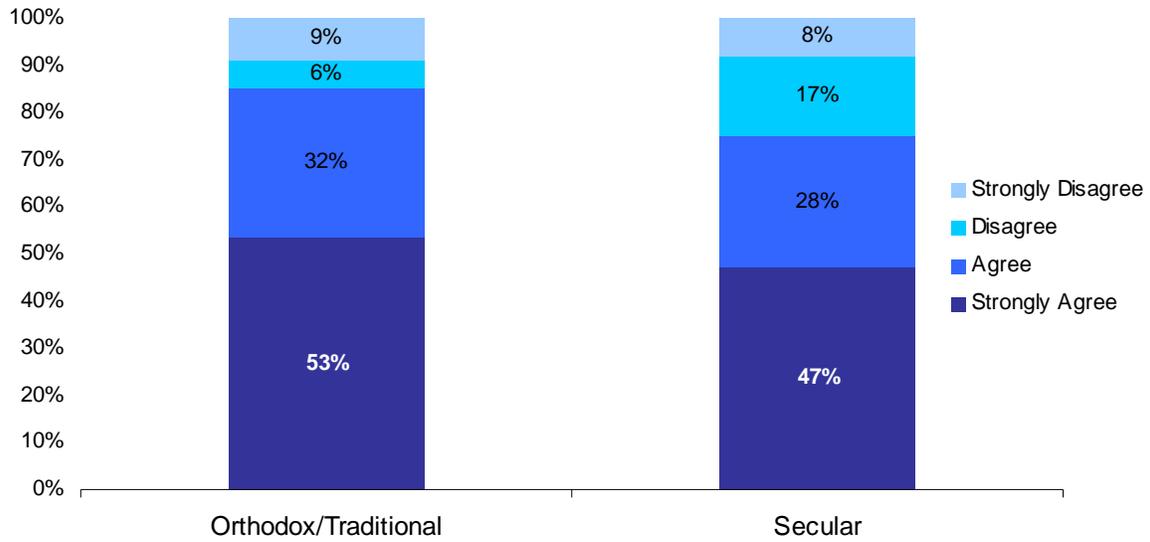
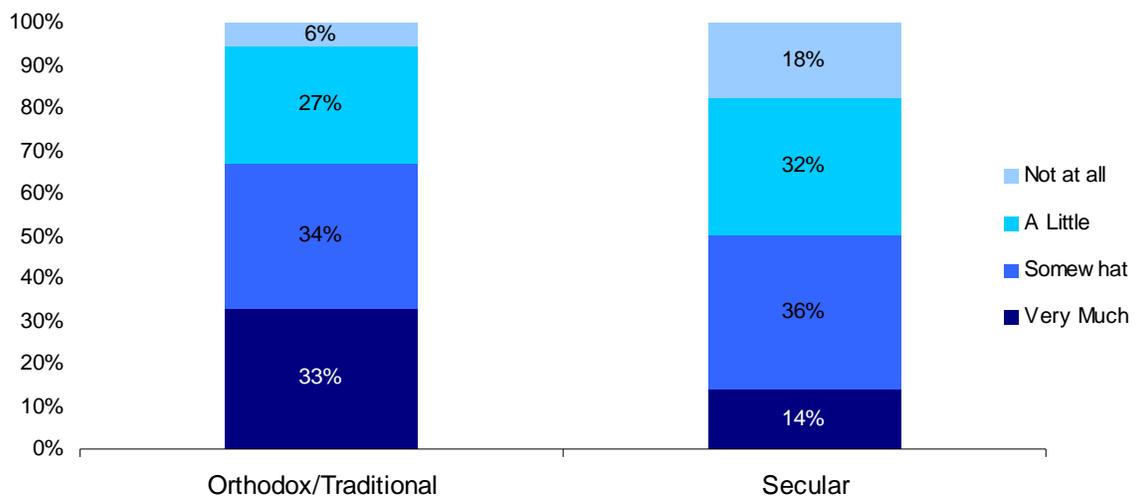


Figure 15. Desire to learn about Judaism by religious orientation
 "The mifgash made me want to learn about Judaism"



Finally, for a small number of Israeli participants, Taglit-Birthright Israel took on the qualities of a personal identity quest. The following speaker analogizes Taglit to the mythic post-army trek to India. In fact, she wonders whether she might not prove more successful in finding her own personal identity by “seeking” closer to home:

I was thinking about the post-army trek, that we go to India or other such places in order to ‘search for ourselves,’ and you come here to ‘search for yourselves.’ It made me think that maybe instead of going outward, I should return inward and search here for my roots. (Wrap-up, Shorashim)

Knowledge of Diaspora Jewish life

The Israelis began the program viewing North American Jewish young adults as precariously Jewish. In joining Taglit, most Israelis sought to inculcate love of Israel among American Jews. Many also hoped to persuade American Jews to make aliyah, or barring that, to marry Jewishly and avoid assimilation.

At the conclusion of the program, their views on North Americans varied somewhat. Some reported finding the North Americans to be immature, materialistic, and uncommitted to family life. In general, these were stereotypes they brought to the encounter, and in some cases such stereotypes survived relatively intact. Moreover, some reported that the North American Jews were as ignorant Jewishly as they had expected. Others, however, reported surprise at the level of Jewish knowledge and engagement among the Diaspora Jewish visitors.

Some Israeli participants commented that they learned about aspects of North American Jewish life, including feminist perspectives on Judaism. They also learned about American Jewish lifestyles in general. Such views were borne out in the post-trip survey, in which 40% reported having learned “very much” and an additional 40% having learned “somewhat” about Jewish life in the United States or Canada.

However, in the focus group discussions, the Israelis minimized the extent of their learning about North American Jewish life. Asked whether they learned much about how Judaism is practiced in North America, some answered that they did not, and that such learning is neither an explicit nor implicit goal of the program. The speaker in the following quotation goes farther than most, claiming that the program seeks only to influence the North American visitors and not the Israeli participants:

They bring them here...they connect them to our world and not us to their world, so we are not really exposed to new things that we can learn from and change our opinion and our trajectory. On the other hand, we do, explicitly, try to do that to them. To present things to them, to engage them in discussions about things that they have doubts about, things they are not sure about. And yes, to connect them, again, to their roots, to the Jewish people, to the land of Israel, to their Jewish identity. (Focus group, Shorashim)

From the standpoint of this Israeli participant, the mifgash was a vehicle for teaching North Americans about Israel, and not for mutual exchange between Israelis and Americans. The theme is developed in the next quotation as well:

Facilitator: Did you ask them questions as well?

Participant (female): I asked them if they celebrate or are even familiar with the holidays.

Participant (male): But it's not the same kind of questions. It's not like I'd go and ask them questions so that I can learn from them to implement in my life. These are more questions of curiosity, to know how they perform things. That's why it's different also. And their answers can't really make a change in my life because this is not the goal of the question. It's more out of curiosity.

Facilitator: What did you get from the conversations?

Participant (male): It helped us perform our mission better. Based on their answers [we could better] connect them, talk to them, questions and answers that build the conversations in which we better connect them and attach them to Judaism and to the [Jewish] people, and build the conversation. The goal is not to get the [Jewish] concepts from them. (Focus group, Shorashim)

To be sure, some Israeli participants described the mifgash with North Americans as reciprocal and reported learning a great deal about their North American peers. However,

given the program's emphasis on Israel, the guidelines provided during the orientation sessions, and the pre-trip motivations of many of the Israeli participants, it is hardly surprising that many Israelis perceived the mifgash as tilted asymmetrically toward exchanges about Israel rather than between Israelis and North Americans.

MEANING FOR NORTH AMERICANS

In general, the North Americans appeared to give little thought to the role of the Israelis prior to the trip. However, during the wrap-up conversations, and in interviews conducted in the United States months and years after the trips, they identified the mifgash as a key component. In many cases, it was described as the most important component of the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience. The following exchange between two U.S. participants during the wrap-up discussion is typical:

A: It was only after the soldiers joined us that I really felt that I was in Israel, and, you know, got to know the culture.

B: You [the soldiers] were the most important and most meaningful part of the trip. (Wrap-up, CIE)

Why is the mifgash so important to the North Americans? What specific significance do they attach to the presence of Israelis on their tour buses during half or more of the ten-day visit to Israel? In this section, we examine the “value-added” by the mifgash to the North Americans’ Taglit-Birthright Israel experience. We do not consider the full dimensions of the experience as a whole, or the significance the North Americans attach to it, as those topics have been explored in depth in existing published reports (see Saxe et al., 2007; Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

In their discourse on the significance of the mifgash, North American participants described their Israeli hosts as effective tour guides. Further, they explained that the presence of the Israelis for a large portion of the trip enabled an authentic encounter with the “real Israel.” Finally, they described their Israeli hosts as welcoming and inspiring. We

address these themes in turn.

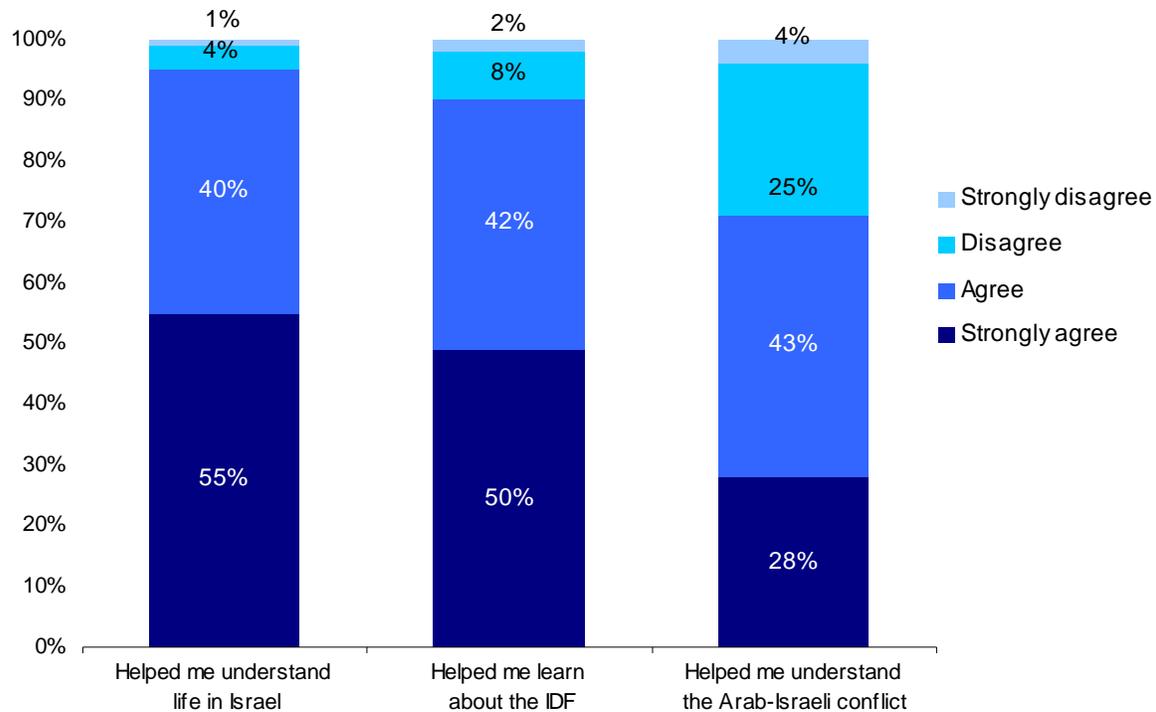
Personal guides

In the daily routines of the Taglit-Birthright Israel tours, the Israeli participants served the North American visitors as personal guides. They fielded questions that would not have been posed to the regular guides. They were more accessible than the regular guides by virtue of being more numerous and dispersed on the buses, at the tour sites, and in the hotel rooms. Unlike typical guides with multiple responsibilities, they were able to focus completely on the Diaspora visitors. They were available to narrate background and offer opinion. As a consequence, the North Americans claimed to learn a great deal from their Israeli counterparts. This was evident in the post-trip survey of the North American participants (see Figure 16).

The contribution of the Israelis as personal tour guides was also evident in the North Americans comments during the wrap-up sessions, as well as in the Israelis’ own accounts. Consider the following quotations, the first from a North American speaking during a wrap-up session, and the second from an Israeli in one of the focus groups:

I thought you’d be more like guides, but you were totally with us, like everyone, and it was great to be with you, it really added a lot to have the Israelis as part of the group. It’s different to hear things from Israelis who live here all the time, and experience these things, and not in a lecture or from the guides. (Wrap-up, Shorashim)

Figure 16. Understanding of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the IDF, and life in Israel
"My interactions with Israelis on my bus"



When we arrived at the Dead Sea they went in [the water] and asked, what, float? You can really float there?Some of them came and asked me, what, you can really float in the water, how is that possible?! So I tried to explain to them a little bit from what I've learned in Chemistry [class].
(Focus group, Tlalim)

The Israelis were valued as tour guides not only for the information they imparted, but also for their opinions, feelings, perspectives, judgments, and experiences. The participation of the Israelis enabled many North American participants to penetrate Israel's surface and connect to a reality beyond the reach of most

tourists. In short, the Israelis enabled many North Americans to experience, as we discuss in the next section, an authentic personal encounter with the Jewish state.

Authentic personal encounter

The participation of Israeli peers helped shift the tourist character of the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience toward something far more profound. For example, Israeli participants often brought their guests to favorite clubs and restaurants; in some instances, they hosted the visitors in their homes. At the Mt. Herzl military cemetery, the Israelis told of friends who died while serving in the IDF, and described the personal meaning of their

military service. Such intense, emotional encounters established among the North Americans the profound sense that they were in touch with the essence or soul of Israel. Similarly, albeit with less emotional intensity, the basic training exercises organized by many of the Israeli bus groups gave North Americans a sense of direct connection to the military experience. This latter point was developed during one of the wrap-up discussions:

A: Yesterday we had a training that was kind of a basic training that the soldiers organized for us. It was for only two hours, in comparison to what you do for such a long time, it was amazing. I really felt a change after that. Thank you.

B: I never knew what life is like for an Israeli soldier, until now. Especially the experience we had yesterday [basic training] opened my eyes to what you go through in the army and in the country. (Wrap-up, CIE)

The core of the personal encounter was, however, not through the Israelis to the country beyond but rather with the Israelis themselves. To the extent the North Americans felt that they befriended Israelis, they felt a strong, direct connection to Israeli society, a connection that could not have been accomplished through routine site-seeing. In the follow-up survey of North American participants, as noted above, 88% agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) that their own personal interactions with Israelis on their bus led to personal connections with individuals. “They are not soldiers any more,” commented one participant, “they are my friends” (Wrap-up IEEI).

As another individual stated, “Being with the Israelis for the entire ten days of the trip was extremely meaningful for me. The way to connect with Israel is by creating friends, connections. I felt in this trip that you showed me your home” (Wrap-up, Shorashim).

Welcoming & inspirational

Many North American participants expressed gratitude to their Israeli counterparts for making them feel at home in Israel. Some had apparently expected to be intimidated by the Israelis and expressed surprise at how warmly they were greeted. More generally, the Israelis’ willingness to welcome the North Americans and describe Israel as their home as well added credibility to the notion that Israel is a homeland for all Jews—a notion that otherwise might have come across as an empty slogan. The following comment, from one of the wrap-up discussions, is typical:

Before we met you, we read the newspaper and saw the news. I saw you and I even considered the Israelis as “them” or “you,” the Israelis. From now on you are family...You’re fighting for the entire Jewish people. Atem mishpacha [Hebrew], you are family, thank you! (Wrap-up, CIE)

Several North Americans also expressed surprise at the dedication of their Israeli counterparts to service to the country. The Israelis seemed, to many of the North Americans, to be patriotic and selfless in ways that were unfamiliar. As one Diaspora participant noted, “I am inspired and amazed by the Israelis’ sense of pride and connection to the country. I didn’t expect that, and it’s not something you see in America.” The North American visitors responded in different ways.

In a Boston-area focus group conducted several months post-trip, one participant explained that she began volunteering at a local food bank as a consequence of her experience in Israel. Others hoped to emulate their Israeli counterparts, by contributing to Israel as activists or by returning one day to join the IDF.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Following the trips, Israeli and North American participants typically kept in contact with at least some of their counterparts. The most common medium for maintaining contact was Facebook, but participants also reported exchanging email and phone calls. In several cases, North Americans remained in Israel following the trip and visited with their Israeli counterparts. In focus group discussions with North Americans who participated in earlier Taglit-Birthright Israel rounds, we routinely heard about subsequent trips to Israel that included visits to Israeli friends from Taglit-Birthright Israel.

In the post-trip surveys, we asked the North Americans how frequently they kept in touch with their Israeli counterparts. Figure 17 indicates that nearly half were in contact either often or occasionally with Israelis from

their bus during the three months after the trip. The Israelis were asked for the number of North Americans with whom they kept in touch. Half of the Israeli participants indicated that they kept in touch with 1-5 North Americans; 39% indicated that they kept in touch with six or more. Just 11% indicated that they did not keep in contact with any North Americans from their tour group (see Figure 18).

Figure 17. North American participants keeping in touch: Frequency
"Since your return from Israel have you been in contact with Israelis who joined your bus?"

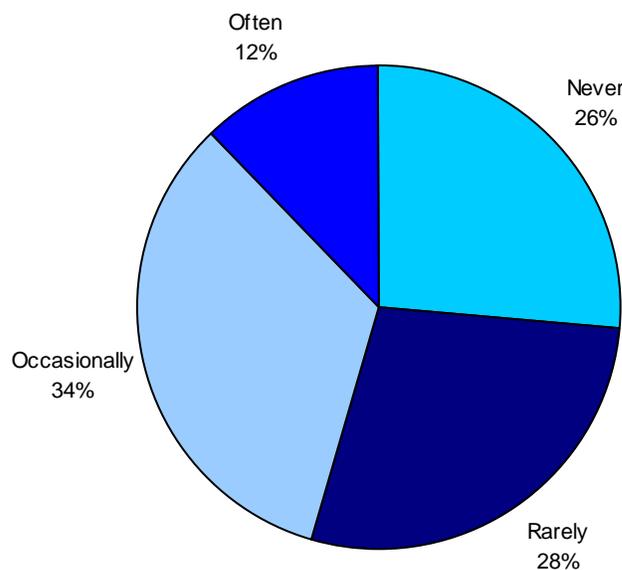
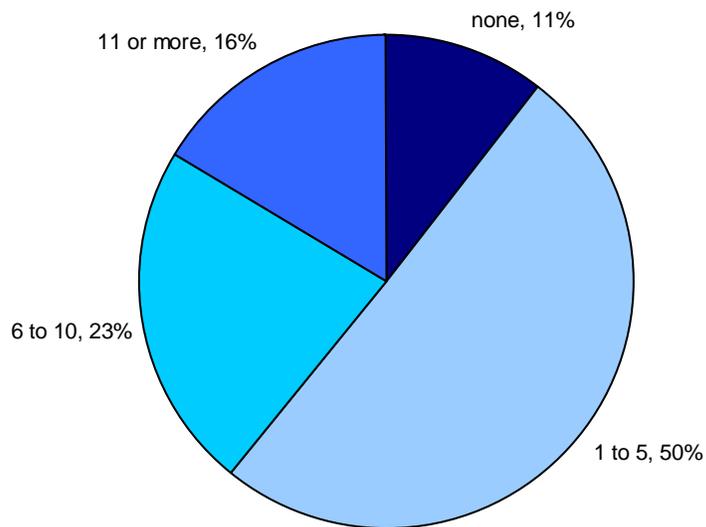


Figure 18: Israeli participants keeping in touch: Number
"With how many Americans/Canadians did you keep in touch with since participating in the program"



CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Judging from the reactions of the North American and Israeli participants, the *mifgash* constitutes a very successful and key component of the Taglit-Birthright Israel program. Relatively few dimensions of the encounters were identified as problematic; indeed, the feedback from participants makes clear why Taglit-Birthright Israel has been so successful an educational venture. In this section, we consider three aspects of the program that could be strengthened further to enhance its impact on both Diaspora and Israeli participants.

Orientation sessions

Of all the aspects of the Taglit-Birthright Israel experience for Israeli participants, only the orientation sessions received mixed reviews. Across the board, the Israelis appreciated learning about the program and enjoyed the presentations by program alumni. However, a significant minority of participants felt that other presentations presented complicated political issues in a simplistic fashion and sought to constrain, unnecessarily, how Israelis should interact with their North American peers. Many also felt that the sessions were too long. One challenge will be to review and modify the orientation sessions so as to better, and more efficiently, prepare Israeli participants.

Symmetry and exchange

The program fits a paradigm in which Israeli young adults represent Israel in a program aimed at cultivating attachment to Israel and Jewish identity among Diaspora Jews. In the context of the program, most Israelis reported having been personally affected by the experience, in a host of positive ways.

The program, as designed, does not seek to establish a fully symmetrical encounter between Diaspora and Israeli young adults. The programmatic goal is for Diaspora visitors to Israel to understand modern Israel and its history and engage with Israel and Judaism. Israeli participants are not expected to learn about Diaspora Jewish life, including liberal forms of Jewish practice and religious innovation. To be sure, individual Israelis ask and learn about aspects of Diaspora Jewish life, and some tour groups perform rituals that are more familiar to Diaspora Jews, such as the ceremonial Havdalah service at the conclusion of Shabbat. But these experiences are not core elements of the program.

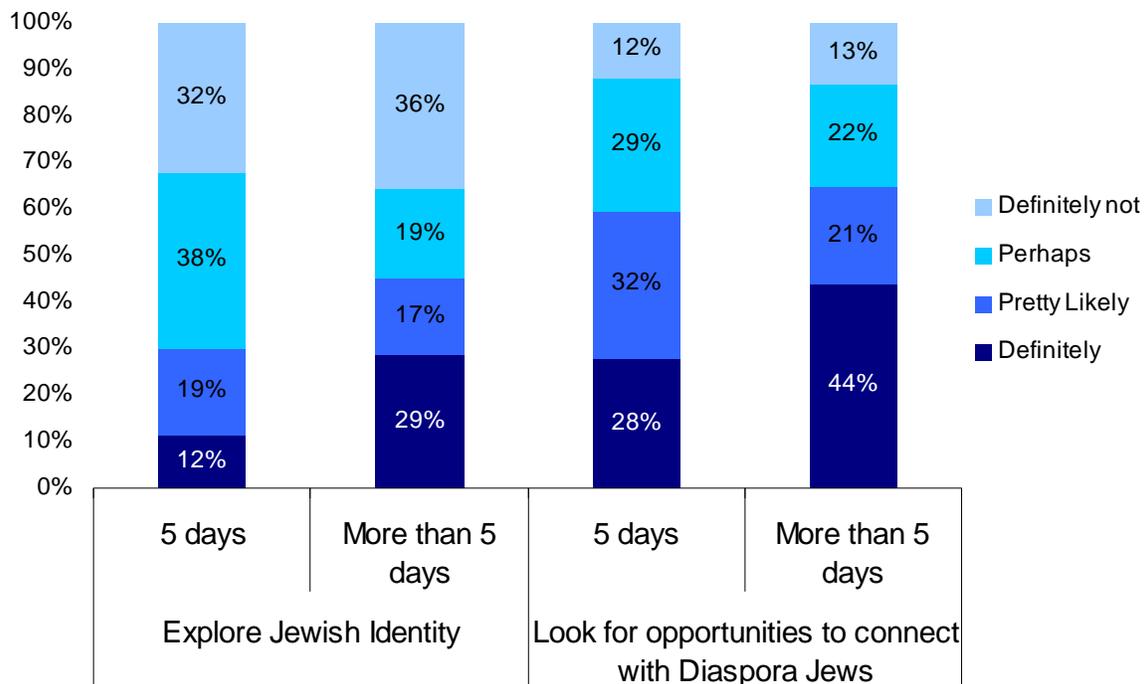
One question for future development of the *mifgash* experience is whether the program impact—on both Diaspora and Israeli participants—would be enhanced by making the encounter more symmetrical. Doing so might enhance the connection between Israeli and Diaspora participants and establish a stronger basis for continued interaction after the program. As the Israelis whom we interviewed pointed out, a degree of asymmetry is an inescapable feature of the *mifgash*. The program takes place in Israel and emphasizes the history, landscape, and sociology of the modern Jewish state. Nevertheless, within this framework, a module on Jewish life in the Diaspora for both North Americans and Israelis might be included as part of the trip. Short of sponsoring “reverse *mifgashim*” on a large scale, the challenge is to think of how the program could better introduce Israelis to the lives and Jewish practices of the North Americans and, in so doing, serve the educational goals of Taglit-Birthright Israel.

Duration of the mifgash

Both the Israeli and North American participants perceived the mifgash as successful and important and wished it had lasted longer. The Israelis by a wide margin indicated that they would prefer a mifgash that lasted the length of the program. Moreover, the longer mifgashim in our sample had a greater impact on participants' desire to explore their Jewish identities as well as opportunities for future personal connections with Diaspora Jewry (see Figure 19).

Moreover, 52% of Israelis in longer mifgashim (compared to 36% of those on shorter mifgashim) indicated that they will “definitely” consider becoming a *shaliach* (emissary) in a Jewish community abroad.

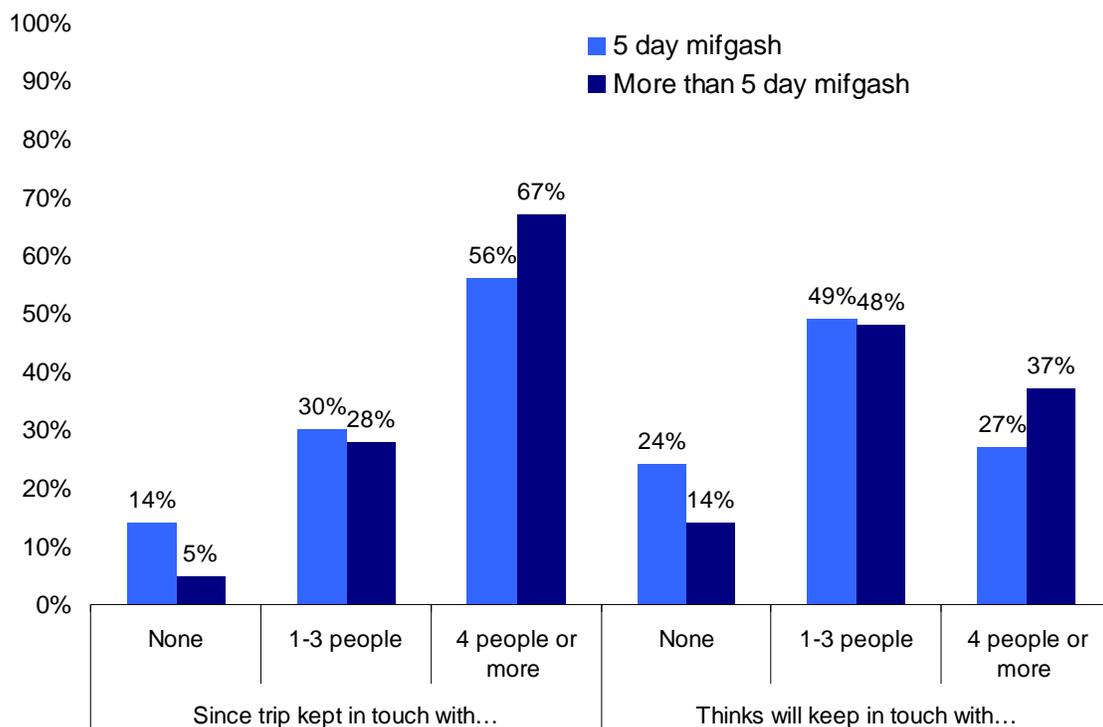
Figure 19. Exploring Jewish identity and opportunities to connect with Diaspora Jews, by length of mifgash



The impact of duration of the mifgash can also be discerned with respect to the creation of global Jewish friendships and networks. Israeli participants in trips with longer mifgashim stayed in touch with more North American peers than those who were on trips with shorter mifgashim. Similarly, they anticipate maintaining contact with a higher number of North Americans in the future (see Figure 20). In addition, 82% of Israelis in longer mifgashim (compared to 65% of those on shorter mifgashim) indicated that they will “definitely” host their North American peers if they visit Israel in the future.

The strong support among the Israeli participants for a longer mifgash, coupled with the modest evidence described above, provide a rationale for extending the mifgashim to the duration of the program, as resources permit.

Figure 20. Keeping in touch with Americans/ Canadians: After the trip and future plans, by length of mifgash



CONCLUSION

This study examines the formal and informal dimensions of the cross-cultural encounters between North American and Israeli participants in Taglit-Birthright Israel. The study explains how *mifgashim* contribute to the broader success of the program by bursting the “bubble” of the typical bus tour experience. For Diaspora visitors, the encounters with Israeli peers provide a direct connection to Israel, one far more profound, personal, and meaningful than traditional tourism allows. It is the Israelis’ gestures of welcome that make many of the North American participants feel that they truly have a second home in Israel.

As a comprehensive examination of the Israelis’ experiences with the program, the report breaks new ground. Although the Israelis initially join the program in order to engage in emissary work on behalf of the IDF and state of Israel, many Israelis discover in the process that their own identities, as Jews, Israelis, and (in most cases) soldiers, are strengthened. Viewing Israel and, on occasion, Jewish ritual practices through the eyes of visitors, prompts Israelis to develop a new or renewed sense of pride in the accomplishments of the Jewish state.

Although the *mifgash* is defined as a formal and informal structured encounter between individuals, it is also an encounter between Jewish worlds. The *mifgash* challenges the cultural identities of all its participants and enhances their sense of collective belonging to the global Jewish people. Both groups recognize commonalities in Jewish background

and practice and this acknowledgement serves as a basis of their sense of common belonging to the Jewish people. Through the encounters, participants examine their taken-for-granted assumptions regarding religion, nationality, and peoplehood. They are able to reject the antagonistic dualisms of either/or religious or non-religious, Israeli Jew and Diaspora Jew. By creating a common framework of identification, participants come to better understand not only their counterparts but themselves as well.

NOTES

¹ All quotes originally in Hebrew appear here in the authors' English translation. A Hebrew version of this report is available at the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies website, www.brandeis.edu/cmjs.

² The survey indicated that 55%-88% felt "very much" free to express their personal opinions about their military service, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Judaism in Israel and Israeli lifestyle (see Figure 10).

³ Data regarding facilitation by guides was collected in a survey administered to a sample of all buses at the end of the trip by *Moach 10*, as part of their program quality evaluation.

⁴ All participant names appearing in quotes are pseudonyms.

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

This section describes the data and analytical methods employed in the current study.

Sample

Three characteristics important in shaping the mifgash experience determined inclusion in the sample:

Trip organizer – Trip organizers differ in the type of experience they offer to North American participants. Trip organizers convene their own orientation sessions for Israeli participants as part of the general Taglit orientation. This study focused on the tours organized by the eight largest trip organizers: Oranim, Tlalim, Hillel Da’at, Hillel IGT, Shorashim, CIE, Mayanot, and Israel Experts (IEEI).

Age composition of the bus – Taglit attempts to match the characteristics of the North American participants with those of the Israelis in the mifgash. Using information gathered through the registration system, buses were classified as “Young,” “Mixed,” or “Old.”

Length of mifgash – In the summer 2007 session most of the mifgashim were the mandatory five-day experience. Some trip organizers had mifgashim of seven or ten days on a small fraction of their buses. Shorashim includes a ten-day mifgash on all of its buses.

The sample selected for the study was representative of the trip organizers and the

age composition of buses within each organizer. Longer mifgashim were slightly over-sampled to allow enough cases for analysis.

Data Collection

Observations – A sub-sample of 20 buses was selected for intensive observation.

Observations included orientation sessions and wrap up discussions for each of the 20 buses. Observers took notes describing the content of the activities and the participants’ reactions.

Diaries – One Israeli diarist was recruited from each bus to record the formal and informal activities during the mifgash as well as their impressions of the program. A total of 12 diaries were collected and analyzed.

Focus group interviews – Focus group interviews were conducted with the Israeli participants on six of the twenty buses in the sub-sample. Three to five Israelis participated in each group discussion. Focus groups took place two to four weeks after the trip.

Survey of Israeli participants – A telephone survey was conducted among Israeli participants in the summer 2007 session. Eighty-five buses (including the 20 buses in the intensive observation sub-sample) with 660 Israeli participants were included in the sample. 441 Israelis responded to the survey. Overall response rate was 67%. Survey frequencies can be downloaded from www.brandeis.edu/cmjs.

Telephone interviews were conducted in October-December 2007, approximately three months after the trip. The interviews were conducted by the Jerusalem-based firm, Research Success, under the supervision of Ezra Kopelowitz.

Follow-up survey of North American participants – North American applicants in the summer 2007 cohort were surveyed before and after the trip. Shortly after registration applicants were asked to complete an online survey focusing on their Jewish background and attitudes towards Israel and Judaism. Data were collected in March-April 2007, approximately three months prior to the trip. 17,750 applicants completed the survey and the overall response rate was 67%. Participants' demographic data were collected through Birthright Israel's registration system. Only data pertaining to those who went on the trip are included in this report. A follow-up survey of North Americans that participated in the summer 2007 session was conducted in October-November 2007, approximately three months after the trip. The survey was administered online to 16,557 participants. The overall response rate for participants was 38%.

Other data

Focus group interviews with North American participants, conducted as part of the 2007 "After Birthright Israel" community study, were also examined (see Sasson, Saxe, Rosen, Selinger-Abutbul & Hecht, 2007).

Qualitative data analysis

Observation data collected at the orientation sessions were recorded in Hebrew. Most diary

entries and all focus group discussions among Israelis were recorded in Hebrew. The wrap-up discussions during the trips were conducted in English but were recorded contemporaneously in Hebrew. The translations in the English document are of the contemporaneous Hebrew summary. The supplemental North American focus group discussions were conducted in English.

All field notes, diaries, and interviews recorded in Hebrew were transcribed in Hebrew. The transcripts were subsequently coded and analyzed using Qualrus qualitative research software. Translations occurred following coding and analysis.

Quantitative data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software package.

The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and the development of religious and cultural identity.

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