

SPECIAL SECTION: ENGAGING WITH ISRAEL

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

By Leonard Saxe, Brandeis University

Earlier this summer in a Tel Aviv park, Taglit-Birthright Israel – which takes Jews ages 18-26 on free 10-day trips to Israel – celebrated its 500,000th participant. Among the half million alumni of the program since its launch 15 years ago, nearly 300,000 were U.S. Jewish college students and recent graduates. In light of increased concern about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), and Jewish young adults' attitudes to Israel, the question of whether Taglit can meaningfully engage young Jews, both with their Jewish identities and Israel, takes on increased importance.

Over the last year, and in particular just prior, during, and after *Tzuk Eitan* (Operation Protective Edge), Israel's response to missile attacks from Gaza, my colleagues and I assessed the attitudes of those who applied to and participated in Taglit. In light of the conflict and controversy over Israel's actions, a particular focus was their sense of connection to and support for Israel. We found that young adult Jews, in general, are highly supportive of Israel and furthermore, that those who participate in Taglit return home even more supportive.

Most notable were our findings about political attitudes. Young adult Jews overwhelmingly describe themselves as liberal and, at least compared to less liberal peers, are not as highly connected to Israel. Nevertheless, their views toward Israel are positive and supportive, much more so than their non-Jewish young adults in the general population. Participation in Taglit

has the greatest impact on these liberal Jews and, by the end of last summer, the attitudes of those who participated in Taglit looked closer to those of the Israeli public than non-Jewish young adult Americans.

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

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

The increasingly vitriolic debate about Israel on some

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

Taglit was designed to enhance Jewish identity along with promoting *ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel). Perhaps the most important lesson from the initiative is that it is possible, through education, to affect these fundamental perspectives and ways of engaging with the world. For more than 20% of the participants who come to the program without any prior exposure to formal Jewish education—and for others who have had substantial Jewish education – the experience of being part of a Jewish group in Israel helps them shape an adult Jewish identity and influences the ways in which they engage with Jewish life.

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

likely to marry other Jews and become involved in their Jewish communities.

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



Leonard Saxe

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



Photos by Taglit participants: (clockwise from top left) Laurel Dunay, Betty Komisarchik, Rachel Alexander, Federico Kremenchuzky



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