

**YEARNING FOR A VOLUNTARY DIASPORA:  
THE PLACE OF ISRAEL IN AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY AS  
REFLECTED IN *BIRTHRIGHT* AND THE WEXNER FELLOWSHIPS**



by

**Dylan Tatz**

**American Jewish Committee**

Over the past 2600 years, Jewish identity has been profoundly shaped by the fact that more Jews have lived in the Diaspora than in the broadly-conceived land of Israel. Reactions have been diverse – from Jehuda Halevy’s poetic yearning for Zion to Heinrich Heine’s idealization of Halevy’s 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain in an expression of layered Diasporas<sup>1</sup> – but the tension of a people residing in an exile of varying comforts has prevailed. For some, the Diaspora itself has become “a term encompassing the moral and cultural substance of two thousand years of Jewish life”<sup>2</sup>, but for others, it has remained an unsettling existence marred by the assimilationist hybridity of the subversive force that Stuart Hall has dubbed the “Diaspora aesthetic”<sup>3</sup>.

Within the next 20-25 years, demographers project that for the first time since King Nebuchadnezzar marched into Jerusalem and destroyed King Solomon’s glorious temple in 586 BCE, more Jews will reside in Israel than in the Diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Aside from the messianic implications of this shift, it is apparent that American Jewry’s conception of Israel will be necessarily altered as the rhetoric of *sblilat bagolab* becomes increasingly compelling. Ever since the emergence of the modern State of Israel in 1948 (when less than 10% of world Jewry resided there), a certain ideological opposition to this Zionist “negation of the Diaspora” has characterized American Jewry’s conflicted support for Israel,<sup>5</sup> and so we can only expect the increasing percentage of world Jewry residing in Israel to exacerbate the divide.

Even during Israel’s tumultuous and vulnerable first two decades, when differences were minimized in the interest of a common goal – securing Israel so as to prevent a genocidal massacre at the hands of its neighbors – an underlying split simmered between the Zionist mandate of *aliyah*, as exemplified by the patriotism of David Ben Gurion, and the equally fierce faith in America exhibited by Jacob Blaustein, President of the American Jewish Committee.<sup>6</sup> However, as the relevance of securing Israel deteriorated with Israel’s increasing military prowess, the underlying ideological conflict resurfaced, and American Jewry drifted further away. Israel’s objectives moved beyond sheer survival and entered the inherently controversial realm of diplomacy and peace

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Heine, “Hebrew Melodies,” from The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: Volume III: Romanzero. Translated by Hal Draper. (New York and Frankfurt: Suhrkamp and Insel Publishers, 1982)

<sup>2</sup> Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers. (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Press, 1976), p. 629

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” article in Jonathan Rutherford, editor. Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. (London: Lawrence & Wishart Press, 1998), p. 31

<sup>4</sup> Steven Bayme, editor, Israel On My Mind: Israel’s Role in World Jewish Identity. Report by The Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, The American Jewish Committee. (New York, N.Y.: The American Jewish Committee, 2006).

<[http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/IsraelOnMyMind\\_2005.pdf](http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/IsraelOnMyMind_2005.pdf)>, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Rose Halprin of Hadassah, Qtd. in Gideon Shimoni, introduction to Carol Diamant, editor, Zionism: The Sequel. (New York, N.Y.: Hadassah, The Women’s Zionist Organization of America Press, 1998), p. 9

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Sarna, American Judaism: A History. (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 334-335 and : Zvi Ganin, An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish leadership and Israel, 1948-1957. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005). As early as 1955, Mordecai Kaplan, the revolutionary rabbi, philosopher, and founder of the Reconstructionist movement, attempted to bridge the gap between the polemics of David Ben Gurion and the rhetoric of the American Zionists unwilling to relinquish their loyalty to the United States. Kaplan contemplated how Zionist ideology might be revised to acknowledge the value of the Diaspora in an attempt, writing in *A New Zionism*, “Zionism has to be redefined so as to assure a permanent place for Diaspora Judaism. Such a redefinition, while affirming the indispensability of *Eretz Yisrael* as the home of Judaism for Jews throughout the world, would have to stress the peoplehood, or the oneness and indivisibility, of world Jewry (Mordecai Kaplan, A New Zionism. (New York, N.Y.: Herzl Press, 1959), p. 41).” The similarly prolific Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg expanded upon Kaplan’s thesis in 1979, pointing out how *sblilat bagolab* had backfired: “Zionism is supposed to make Jews realize how uncomfortable they are in the Diaspora and how such living has too little dignity. In the United States, Zionism has acted to the contrary – to make Jews more comfortable in the Diaspora and a greater force within the society at large (Arthur Hertzberg, “Zionism in America,” in Being Jewish in America: The Modern Experience. (New York, N.Y.: Schocken Press, 1979), p. 220).”

negotiations, in which any decision was likely to meet harsh criticism from some segment of American Jewry.<sup>7</sup>

Armed with a new sense of entitlement following their crucial role in support of Israel during the 1967 War, many American Jews found their American values, and, indeed, their Jewish values, coming into conflict with the policies of the previously heroic Israeli government.<sup>8</sup> For some, the absence of a perilous situation in the Middle East engendered a sense of confidence and complacency, which, in turn, evolved into apathy.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the relationship between American Jewry and Israel has evolved from a discourse between those guarding the Jewish state and those sitting on the rivers of Babylon, crying as they remembered Zion, to a fraternal feud between two parties with problems of their own.<sup>10</sup>

With this retreating affection accorded Israel, American Jewry simultaneously grew apart from Jewish affiliation as a whole, a correlative fact which became apparent with the publication of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and its now-infamous statistic of a 52% intermarriage rate. Handicapped by their intertwined conceptions of Jewishness and American national loyalty<sup>11</sup>, which, one might argue, eliminate the use of Israel as a stand-alone purveyor of Jewish identity, the institutionalized Jewish community struggled to ensure its perpetuity.<sup>12</sup> From this struggle, a new breed of individualized philanthropy characterized by big ideas and even bigger wallets emerged to tackle the issue – dubbed “Jewish continuity” – head-on.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Many events, including the election of Menachem Begin and his Likud government, the 1982 Lebanon conflict, the Jonathan Pollard case, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, together negatively transformed Israel in the eyes of various American Jewish constituencies and provided the political sparks which forced this deep-rooted ideological divide to take practical form. See Steven Rosenthal, Irreconcilable Differences?: The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel. (Hanover, New Hampshire; London: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2001)

<sup>8</sup> J.J. Goldberg, Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment. (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Press, 1996), p. 345. Although one could argue that no citizens of any country have been as committed to the success of another as American Jews have been to Israel, it is equally arguable that Israel has had little effect on the religious and cultural life of American Jews. Even when American Jewry supported Israel without question in its infancy, American Jews related to Israel primarily through their identity as Americans, relishing and accentuating Israel's virtues as a secular, progressive, democratic state. Jerold Auerbach, Professor of History at Wellesley College, has contended that these “liberal pro-choice values” are to blame for “the continued dilution of Judaism.” In Auerbach's view, the secular Zionism of American Jewry (and mainstream Israeli Jewry as well) as led it to demise via assimilation. The only solution, he says, evoking a religious rationale for *shililat hagolab*, is to emulate the passionate West Bank settlers, and work toward a greater Israel, both in terms of territory and population (Are We One?: Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel. (New Brunswick, N.J.; London, UK: Rutgers University Press, 2001)).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Yossi Beilin, His Brother's Keeper: Israel and Diaspora Jewry in the Twenty-first Century. (New York, N.Y.: Schocken Books, 2000), p. 22

<sup>10</sup> Although the vast majority of scholars acknowledge this growing divide, quibbling only over the precise date that it began and which events exacerbated it, Steven M. Cohen has argued quite compellingly that the relationship is best characterized as stable, not changing (“Did American Jews Really Grow More Distant from Israel, 1983-1993? – A Reconsideration,” article in Allon Gal, editor. Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews. (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1996), p. 372).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, as Deborah Dash Moore has contended, the comparatively hostile view of Israel prevalent in many European countries has fostered a closer connection to Israel among members of the Jewish community (Article in Bayme, editor, Israel On My Mind: Israel's Role in World Jewish Identity, p. 34).

<sup>12</sup> Drawing on my previous research concerning non-American Diaspora Jewish communities, I would contend that the uniquely American replacement of civic morality with ethnic specificity in the public sector has rendered any allegiance to an alternate homeland un-American.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, American Jews have been forecasting their own demise for almost as long as they have lived there: in 1818, Attorney General William Wirt predicted that in a hundred years, American Jews would have entirely lost their identity, and in 1872, W.M. Rosenblatt wrote that “within 50 years” Jews would abandon circumcision and commence intermarrying. “The grandchildren, at the latest,” Rosenblatt prophesized, “will be undistinguishable from the mass

In December 1999, *Taglit-Birthright Israel*<sup>14</sup> sent its first group of American Jewish youth on an all-expenses-paid 10-day trip to Israel, hoping to use the exotic and inspirational locale to incubate a rich and vibrant Jewish identity among the participants, and strengthen the connection between American Jewry and Israel in the process.<sup>15</sup> After six years of *Birthright* adventures and more than 100,000 participants, the program has been declared a success by its founders, its facilitators, and even some of those who criticized it initially.<sup>16</sup> *Birthright* has been reorganized into a separate foundation apart from the auspices of the various sources that fund it, and more than 30,000 young American Jews are expected to participate in 2006 alone.<sup>17</sup> Its cultural impact has been significant as well: in the words of Jeffrey Solomon, President of Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, one of *Birthright's* primary supporters, “we are reaching the tipping point where *Birthright* will be like the Bar Mitzvah: a rite of passage.”<sup>18</sup>

Whereas the *Birthright* program uses Israel as a “hook” to draw in the most unaffiliated of American Jewish youth<sup>19</sup> and expose them to new Jewish experiences<sup>20</sup>, the Wexner Fellowships depict Israel in conjunction with other singular elements of Jewish identity to achieve its dual objectives: enhancing the Jewish education and collaborative Jewish experience of the future leaders of the American Jewish community.<sup>21</sup> For both, Israel plays a crucial role, and indeed, both programs cite as a secondary aspiration a stronger connection between American Jewry and Israel.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, all three Wexner Fellowships – the Graduate Fellowship, the Heritage Fellowship, and the Israel Fellowship – possess objectives which are far removed from the issue of Jewish continuity

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of humanity which surrounds them” (Qtd. in Jonathan Sarna, “The Secret of Jewish Continuity.” *Commentary Magazine*, Vol. 98, Issue 4 (October 1994), p. 55).

<sup>14</sup> Although *Birthright Israel* uses a lower-case “b” in all official documents to avoid confusion with the Canadian pro-life organization of the same name, I will capitalize the “b” to make it easier to recognize a proper, institutional name.

<sup>15</sup> “Taglit-birthright Israel: About Us Main Page,” *Taglit-birthright Israel website*.

<<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/bin/en.jsp?enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=Zone&enZone=AboutUs>>

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Isi Leibler (Qtd. in Allan C. Brownfeld, “Birthright Program to Tie Young American Jews to Israel Is a Dead End in the Quest for Continuity.” *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (June 2000), p. 67-69); Bruce Ramer (Personal interview. August 23, 2005); and Jonathan Sarna (Personal interview. December 26, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Saxe. Personal interview. December 26, 2005 (in-person). In comparison, only 4,000 Jewish youth visited Israel in 1992, and those who did tended to have “higher rates of synagogue affiliation [than typical American Jewish youth]” (Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture*. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2000), p. 84-85).

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Solomon. Personal interview. March 23, 2006 (in-person). As Jeffrey Solomon has also noted, the two primary philanthropists involved in the creation of the *Birthright* program, Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman, approach the issue of Jewish continuity from slightly different angles: whereas Steinhardt is more concerned with saving American Jewry from extinction, Bronfman does not see American Jewry as dying, but rather changing, and thus sees himself as attempting to guide this inevitable change in a certain direction. Tragically, Charles Schusterman passed away in 2000, just as *Birthright* was sending its first groups to Israel, so his perspective has not been persuasive as those of Steinhardt and Bronfman.

<sup>19</sup> The demographic breakdown of *Birthright* trips has shown that the majority of participants have some sort of Jewish background, and identify as Reform or Conservative (32% were raised in what they described as a Conservative household, 23%, were raised in a Reform household, 10% Orthodox, and 23% Just Jewish). However, this demographic profile closely parallels that of members of the previous generation who were raised in similar environments but were most likely to intermarry and fail to transmit a sense of Jewish identity to their children.

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Hazan, “Charles Bronfman – Man On A Mission.” *Lifestyles Magazine*, December 2003

<sup>21</sup> “Wexner Heritage Program History,” *Wexner Heritage Foundation website*.

<<http://www.wexnerheritage.org/area/history.html>>

<sup>22</sup> Elli Wohlgelemerter, “Specializing in Jewish Philanthropy.” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 11, 1999, reproduced on *Wexner Foundation website*. <<http://www.wexnerheritage.org/asp/articles.asp?x=m&op1=10>>

that sparked *Birthright*.<sup>23</sup> While the founders of *Birthright* created a program that seeks to serve as a *transformative* experience, one which reaches into one's most private allegiances and awakens a renewed sense of Jewish peoplehood, the Wexner Foundation's Fellowships seek to serve as a *formative* experience, preparing the next generation of emerging Jewish leaders to publicly direct their respective Jewish communities.

I aim to examine the future of Zionism in America and the role that Israel plays in American Jewish identity by comparing and contrasting the strategies employed by and the results achieved by both *Birthright* and the Wexner Fellowships. In essence, I will evaluate the extent to which a connection with Israel *should* define American Jewish identity, given the common goal of these initiatives: the continued and sustained survival of the Jewish people.<sup>24</sup> I hope that this paper will prompt further reflection upon the use and presentation of Israel in both *Birthright* and the Wexner Fellowships.

As I will show, inasmuch as *Birthright* uses Israel to construct a sense of Jewish peoplehood in those participants for whom this does not already exist, the endeavor might not entirely achieve its objectives. However, in many cases, Israel itself has little to do with the increased affiliation that does indeed result from *Birthright*. As the series of reports on *Birthright* conducted by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University have demonstrated, the *Birthright* experience does indeed create the substantive results that its founders seek.<sup>25</sup> However, when Israel is viewed in conjunction with more easily replicable aspects of Jewish identity, even more substantive results tend to emerge.<sup>26</sup>

Assuming for the moment that the Brandeis reports are correct and *Birthright* does in fact encourage substantive, long-lasting Jewish connections among its participants, one might still question how much these increased affiliations have to do with Israel. John Ruskay, President and CEO of the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York (UJA), conceives of *Birthright* as one giant Jewish educational program which offers Jewish experiences, such as a traditional Shabbat or extended interactions with Jews from different backgrounds, which might not be otherwise available for its participants, many of whom do not attend schools with any Jewish community to speak of. For Ruskay, these experiences constitute the galvanizing factor in and of themselves, meaning that *Birthright's* setting in Israel is a mere coincidence.<sup>27</sup>

In this way, one might look at Jewish summer camps as an imperfect control group for *Birthright*: they constitute a similar experience which allows us to separate the variable role of Israel

<sup>23</sup> Although the three fellowships are technically split between the Wexner Foundation (Graduate and Israel Fellowships) and the Wexner Heritage Foundation (Heritage Fellowship), they can be seen as one foundation, as the administrative duties overlap and Larry Moses is the President of both.

<sup>24</sup> One might argue that *Birthright* may also benefit the Israeli tourism industry, and possess other intrinsic value to the Jewish community at large, but for the purposes of this paper, I will look only at its primary objectives, those of strengthening Jewish peoplehood in its participants and their connection to Israel.

<sup>25</sup> Incidentally, these studies represent the only scholarly work that has been conducted on *Birthright* since its inception. As an undergraduate, I am not in a position to conduct a statistically significant number of interviews or purport to make sense of the raw data myself. Additionally, much information regarding the Wexner Fellowships is understandably confidential in nature. Consequently, in many places, this paper will subtly gloss over the "hard evidence" needed to prove a point in favor "softer", or more philosophical evidence. I am confident that the "hard evidence" would substantiate my claims, but, alas, that falls beyond the scope of this paper. Despite, or perhaps because of the notable absence of primary and secondary sources, the aforementioned claims are not uncontroversial.

<sup>26</sup> Leonard Saxe, et. al., [Evaluating Birthright Israel: Long-Term Impact and Recent Findings](http://www.cmjs.org/files/evaluatingbri.04.pdf). Report by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University, November 2004). <<http://www.cmjs.org/files/evaluatingbri.04.pdf>>. Even *Birthright's* most enthusiastic advocates admit that given the absence of a truly longitudinal perspective on *Birthright*, no one can definitively say what the long-term results might be, especially when alumni encounter the joyous obstacles of marriage and children, Judaism's ultimate determinants of assimilation.

<sup>27</sup> John Ruskay. Personal interview. October 14, 2005 (in-person)

from the common role of fellow participants and activities. This parallel becomes more appropriate when one considers the recent work done by the very same researchers at Brandeis which documents the enormously powerful effect that attending a Jewish summer camp can have on a child's Jewish identity.<sup>28</sup> Like the *Birbright* program, the summer camp experience combines the exotic and altogether sexual nature of a foreign experience<sup>29</sup> with a wide range of Jewish-oriented programs that define the content of the experience. Aside from their common appropriation of many elements of Jewish identity, including spirituality and camaraderie, the *Birbright* program and Jewish summer camps share one other important aspect: isolation. Both transport their participants to a different place, and, in the process, create a “cultural island”, or “bubble” in which participants can immerse themselves in Jewishness.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the programmatic similarities, this analogy can only be taken so far: children in summer camps oftentimes do not actively choose to attend them, whereas *Birbright* participants, who range from 18 to 26 years old, presumably attend willingly. Additionally, one must also consider the inherently formative nature of childhood experiences which necessarily diminishes by the age of 18, as well as the fact that summer camps range from one to three months, while *Birbright* encapsulates the experience in ten days. Finally, as Richard Joel, former President of Hillel International and current President of Yeshiva University, has pointed out, it is impossible recapture the magic of one's childhood summer camp as one ages, whereas returning to Israel is one of the main aims of *Birbright*, and one of the main sources for solidifying the identity potentially unveiled during the trip.<sup>31</sup>

Let us take as an example a “non-affiliated” *Birbright* participant who has his first spiritual Shabbat experience on *Birbright*, which subsequently spurs him to become more involved in Jewish life on his campus. This experience achieves the results that *Birbright's* founders anticipate and treasure – increasing the participant's Jewish awareness and identification – yet this experience could have happened anywhere. The same sort of trajectory could occur for a participant who hails from a town or a college without a significant Jewish community. Just being on the same bus as forty other Jews his age, let alone attending the “Mega-event”, the big final concert/party at the end of the *Birbright* trip which combines 10-20 groups of 40 participants each, could be enough to enhance this participant's Jewish affiliation. The realization that being Jewish is something that he shares with so many of his peers, and the tribal camaraderie that results, could stimulate his Jewish identity by itself regardless of Israel. In this sense, being in Israel reaffirms aspects of this participant's identity that might not otherwise come to light, but Israel itself may not be the direct cause. Of course, even considering the “control group” of summer camps, it is impossible to separate exactly how much is the setting (Israel itself), how much are the new opportunities, and how much is due to being away from home,<sup>32</sup> but John Ruskay's point regarding the marginal role of Israel in the *Birbright* experience is certainly well-founded.

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<sup>28</sup> Amy L. Sales & Leonard Saxe, How Goodly Are Thy Tents. Report by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University, December 2003). <<http://www.cmjs.org/index.cfm?page=229&IDResearch=97>>

<sup>29</sup> With a series of night-club parties in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem included in the standard itinerary for most non-Orthodox providers (including all Hillel trips), it is obvious that an inebriated, sexually-charged atmosphere is seen by the majority of providers as a positive addition to the *Birbright* experience. In fact, Michael Steinhardt has pledged that any couple who met on *Birbright* has permission to use his personal residence in the Caribbean for their honeymoon should they get married. The aspect of sexual exploration inherent in the summer camp experience is taken for granted.

<sup>30</sup> Saxe interview, December 26, 2005

<sup>31</sup> Richard Joel. Personal interview. January 30, 2006 (in-person)

<sup>32</sup> Home is, of course, a relative and problematic term when one is discussing the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. For additional reading on the urge to return home as an essential element of the Diaspora see Gershon Cohen, “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History (1966),” from Jewish History and Jewish Destiny (New York,

The Wexner Fellows, who already possess a strong sense of Jewish peoplehood, are presented a very different conception of Israel: rather than stressing Israel itself as a gateway to identity, Israel is depicted exclusively with respect to other aspects of Jewish identity, from social justice to spirituality, thus enabling something necessarily far removed from one's life to be readily accessible. Not surprisingly, as I will examine in detail later on, surveys show that Wexner Fellows' conceptions of Israel are so intertwined with other aspects of their Jewish identity that the two are inseparable.<sup>33</sup> Even though its target audience is radically different, *Birthright* might be best served by adopting the Wexner Fellowship program's contextual representation of Israel. This would help address the biggest challenge that has emerged thus far with the Birthright program: the inherently difficult and even paradoxical task of follow-up.

*Birthright* has struggled from the beginning with the problem of how to replicate back home that which is specific to Israel, while rationalizing the necessity of sending the participants there in the first place. If, taking a page from the Wexner Fellowships' book, the Israel that *Birthright* participants are shown contains aspects of Jewish peoplehood that can also be found back in America, then the problem of follow-up is somewhat ameliorated. These aspects may range from the transcendence of Shabbat services to the camaraderie of friends with a shared experience, but all of them represent gateways to Jewish identity that are readily transferable from Israel to the college campus.<sup>34</sup>

The prevalence of these experiences is sometimes a function of the trip provider: within seven broad guidelines mandated by *Birthright*, the 22 providers for North American groups – from the secular pluralism of Hillel to the religious Zionism of Oranim to the scenic environmentalism of T'lalim – can and do present Israel through drastically different lenses. Much to the chagrin of Avraham Infeld, the outgoing President of Hillel International, several Israeli-based providers attempt to create an Israel-centered identity for the participants, either because they erroneously believe that this sort of identity will be the most substantive, or because they have ulterior objectives, such as persuading participants to make *aliyah*.<sup>35</sup>

One revealing case study is that of Canada Israel Experience (CIE), a secular, “one-size-fits-all” trip organizer: according to their website, CIE “is committed to the development of Jewish identity based on the centrality of Israel through the building of relationships between and among the Jewish people of Israel and Canada.”<sup>36</sup> Whereas Hillel, *Birthright's* most popular provider, intentionally provides participants with experiences which can easily be replicated after they return home, CIE engages in activities that are specific to Israel, thereby encouraging a Jewish identity built exclusively around Israel, and thus unsustainable.

The Brandeis studies have shown that one way in which *Birthright* participants might connect to being Jewish is through a spiritual Shabbat experience. Although one of *Birthright's* seven broad guidelines stipulates that all *Birthright* groups must visit the Western Wall, Hillel mandates that the visit not be on Shabbat, and instead holds Shabbat services in regular synagogues. In contrast, CIE takes all of their participants to the Western Wall on Shabbat, thereby making any connection achieved in the process almost impossible to replicate after the trip due to the unique nature of the

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N.Y.: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), p. 515 and Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment.” *Diaspora 5*: 1996, p. 3-36

<sup>33</sup> Allen Selis, Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program Summer Institute 2003: Pre-Institute Materials: Part II: Pre-Institute Survey Results. Report for the Wexner Foundation. (Columbus, Ohio: The Wexner Foundation, August 1, 2003)

<sup>34</sup> Although *Birthright* participants range in age from 18 to 26 and represent a variety of backgrounds, the vast majority are enrolled as full-time undergraduate or graduate students when they participate, so I use “the college campus” to describe the most likely return environment.

<sup>35</sup> Avraham Infeld. Personal interview. February 2, 2006 (in-person)

<sup>36</sup> “Canada Israel Experience Trip Organizer Description,” *Taglit-birthright Israel website*.

<<http://register.birthrightisrael.com/DescriptionsByTO.cfm?id=3&ShowMe=1&Round=14>>

Western Wall and therefore useless visa vis *Birbright's* primary objective of cultivating Jewish identity.<sup>37</sup>

Not to single out CIE, many providers present Jewish identity in an Israel-hued monochromatic light, a practice which results in a superficial connection to Jewish peoplehood.<sup>38</sup> Of course, it is much simpler to transfer an experience than to replicate it, and, accordingly, the benefit is proportional. Therefore, one might say that there are gradients of *Birbright* experiences, from *unique* at one end of the spectrum, to *transferable* in the middle, to *replicable* at the other end. No *Birbright* follow-up program can perfectly recapture the magic of an experience from the trip – that much is lost in the moment – but, as I have shown, it is much easier to tap into some aspect of the experience if its magic does not depend entirely upon its setting in Israel.

For instance, getting back to our case study, celebrating Shabbat at the Western Wall (a mostly *unique* experience) represents a much less transferable experience than celebrating Shabbat in a synagogue (a mostly *transferable* experience). If a participant's Jewish identity suddenly comes alive at the Western Wall, then this newfound affiliation will revolve around a place which cannot be recaptured back home, thus making follow-up much more difficult. Even if the experience had nothing to do with the wall – maybe the melodies of the prayers were the spark – the experience as a whole is inherently intertwined with the unique setting. Similarly, a *Birbright* event that highlights elements of Jewish identity which can easily be transposed to a follow-up program – such as services in a synagogue – will be more replicable than one which is unique to the time and place, even if the identity is sparked by something that is unique to that particular synagogue.

Even if *Birbright* providers do succeed in shaping the trip along these comparatively replicable lines, and do make sure that their participants' Jewish identity is not limited to untransferable elements such as Israel, follow-up remains a daunting task. As every Jewish educator

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<sup>37</sup> Keith Krivitzky. Personal interview. February 2, 2005 (in-person)

<sup>38</sup> One might characterize American Jewry's connection to Israel through five dichotomies that underline the inherently problematic nature of centering one's Jewish identity around Israel (Inspired by Steven M. Cohen, "Israel in the Jewish Identity of American Jews: A Study in Dualities and Contrasts," p. 119): 1. Symbolic, not substantive; 2. Political, not cultural or spiritual; 3. Public, not private; 4. Circumstantial, not continuous and constant; 5. Motivated by fear and associations with Arab hostility and anti-Semitism, not, ironically, by *Hatikvah* ("the hope", the title of the Israeli Anthem). This final dichotomy is perhaps the most disturbing: as Steven M. Cohen, Professor of Sociology at Hebrew University, has noted, this vision of "nightmares, not dreams" results in an American Jewish community for whom Israel is merely a way of relating to the Gentiles, not to other Jews (Ibid. p. 126-128). In his recent book *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, co-authored with Arnold Eisen, Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford University, Cohen writes of the growing popularity of *private Judaism*. Unlike *public Judaism*, *private Judaism* emphasizes spirituality and family, and, Cohen and Eisen argue, is linked to the trend of "increased alienation" regarding Israel (Cohen & Eisen, p. 189, etc. In fact, these distinctions are rooted in the *Haskalah* (the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Enlightenment), but they are also particular and therefore relevant to our American context). For many American Jews, reading in the newspaper about suicide bombings and peace negotiations constitutes their sole connection to Israel. These moderately affiliated Jews know little about the richness of Israeli culture, and might never have met an Israeli in person. Their symbolic, exclusively political connection to Israel rests upon the guilty assertion that, as Jews in a non-Jewish world, they are expected to publicly defend the Jewish State, while in private, this connection could not matter less (In a different context, Arnold Eisen has referred to Israel as "the principal symbol and prop of Jewish identity" (Qtd. in Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry*. (New York, N.Y.; London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 162). In this way, their connection is highly variable and situational, flaring up around instances of terrorist activities, and almost disappearing from view in calmer times. By connecting to Israel in this highly disengaged fashion, these moderately affiliated American Jews associate Israel with the most victimized aspects of Jewish identity, a connection which resonates with atonal dissonance with the many Israelis, such as former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, who fiercely reject this fear-driven support of Israel. At least, notes Steven Bayme, Director of the Contemporary Jewish Life Department and the Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations at the American Jewish Committee, there exists some sort of connection, given that indifference represents "the worst sin of all (Bayme interview, May 7, 2005)."<sup>38</sup> However, one might argue that as long as this connection remains an externalized, fearful entity, what separates it from indifference?

and communal professional knows, outside of the bubble-like environment of *Birthright*, where Judaism is intense and there are few distractions, making Judaism appear attractive in the real world is a challenge indeed. In addition, Hillel leadership faces another problem: how to balance the specific needs and culture of each particular college campus with the necessity of an overall plan for *Birthright* follow-up legislated by national headquarters. According to Yigal Schleifer, at first “there was no unified follow-up plan in place once the students returned from Israel, and few programming initiatives were offered by Hillel’s headquarters. Although Hillel’s central office made grants available for follow-up programming, campus Hillels were left to their own devices.”<sup>39</sup> Since then, Hillel International has implemented several initiatives aimed at “reattach[ing] *Birthright* alumni to normative Jewish living,”<sup>40</sup> and has published multiple memos of guidelines, but these efforts have been constrained by the particularity of individual college campuses.<sup>41</sup>

One such initiative involved collaborating with the Avi Chai Foundation to enhance *Birthright* by presenting all alumni with any three Jewish books from a long list.<sup>42</sup> Reading about Jewish issues, they posited, would sustain the spark of Jewish identity hopefully kindled on *Birthright*. In addition, the *Birthright Alumni Association* sponsors a plethora of activities in various venues – everything from happy hours to rock concerts to movie screenings to panel discussions to bus reunions – but the scope of these efforts is limited by the association’s resources.<sup>43</sup>

*Birthright* follow-up has also been complicated by the Jewish establishment’s concern regarding the portrayal of Israel on college campuses. Viewing *Birthright* alumni as ideal spokespeople to “counteract” the spread of what they see as anti-Israel rhetoric, Hillel staff have increasingly used Israel advocacy as a primary method of *Birthright* follow-up. As Leonard Saxe, Professor of Social Policy at Brandeis University and primary author of the Brandeis Reports, writes, “Rising anti-Semitism and the volatile political situation in Israel have led some stakeholders to identify an additional goal for *Birthright Israel* – to enable young Diaspora Jews to speak intelligently about the situation in the Middle East from a perspective sympathetic to Israel. The trip appears to be meeting this goal, insofar as the data indicate that it preserves existing positive feelings about Israel and increases participants’ confidence in explaining the situation there.”<sup>44</sup>

Although one cannot entirely ignore Israel in *Birthright* follow-up, this practice of using Israel advocacy as *Birthright* follow-up is problematic for two reasons. First, *Birthright* alumni do not necessarily make good spokespeople for Israel; and second, emphasizing a connection to Israel as a means of Jewish affiliation might result in an inherently superficial Jewish identity. According to the most recent Brandeis report, 38% of 2002 *Birthright* alumni reported after the trip that they were “very confident” in explaining the current situation in Israel, as opposed to 27% of non-participants. In 2001, the difference was almost double – 25% as opposed to 13% for non-participants – and in 2000, 20% of alumni indicated that they were “very confident” as compared to 22% of non-participants.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Yigal Schleifer, “Birthrights and Wrongs.” *The Jerusalem Report*. July 3, 2000, p. 32

<sup>40</sup> Infeld interview, February 2, 2006

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see the appropriately-titled, Particularism in the University: Realities And Opportunities For Jewish Life On Campus, by Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe. (Report by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University and the Avi Chai Foundation. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University, January 2006.

<[http://cmjs.org/files/JewishLifeonCampusB%20\(4\).pdf](http://cmjs.org/files/JewishLifeonCampusB%20(4).pdf)>

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Wisse. Personal interview. December 25, 2005 (in-person)

<sup>43</sup> “Taglit-birthright Israel Alumni Association (BRIAA).” *Taglit-birthright Israel website*.

<<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/bin/en.jsp?enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enDispWho=WinnerPhoto%5El24&enZone=WinnerPhoto&enVersion=0&&channel=TheTrip>>

<sup>44</sup> Saxe et. al. p. 7

<sup>45</sup> Saxe cites the political situation at the time as one possible explanation for the discrepancy between the significant changes in 2002 and 2001 and the lack of a change in 2000. The second Palestinian Intifada began in September 2000, and American Jewish perceptions of Israel as a dangerous place to travel became commonplace in mid-2001

Not only do *Birbright* alumni not necessarily make ideal advocates for Israel, there is reason to believe that their efforts may actually be counter-productive. After 10 days in Israel, many *Birbright* alumni feel as though they are experts on the region. Their friends may follow the Israeli-Arab conflict more astutely in the media, but their trip gives them a certain unsupported authority that someone who has not been to Israel – no matter his familiarity with the issues – cannot claim. In addition, statistics show that prior to the trip, many *Birbright* alumni were completely unaffiliated and knew virtually nothing about Israel, so they are even less likely than their affiliated peers to be strong advocates for Israel on their respective campuses.

This problem of *Birbright* alumni making poor advocates for Israel boils down to what Avraham Infeld refers to as the distinction between “like” and “love”: when one *loves* something, one is sometimes blinded and may not be able to articulate its attractive features, whereas when one *likes* something, it is easier to make a persuasive argument for why others should feel the same way. Put simply, *Birbright* alumni *love* Israel, but “don’t have a clue how to answer the questions”, and to make matters worse, they think they know it all.<sup>46</sup> The best advocates for Israel, according to Infeld, are those who *like* Israel, but can objectify it enough to make a rational, compelling argument in its defense. Lisa Eisen, National Program Director of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, one of *Birbright*’s most generous supporters having given \$5 million over the first 5 years, claims that “unless you have a visceral connection, you can’t be a good advocate [for Israel]”, but, as one can see, this visceral connection can easily border on a loss of rationality, especially in the mind of an individual who might not know the facts to begin with.<sup>47</sup> As the cliché goes, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

The second problematic aspect of Israel advocacy as a tool for *Birbright* follow-up is the nature of the Jewish identity that it espouses. A Jewish identity that has a connection to Israel at its core might be quite difficult to maintain over a long period of time because of the nature of American Jewry’s place in a voluntary Diaspora. The seed for establishing such an ill-conceived identity lies in the participant’s selection of their trip provider: whereas some providers, such as Hillel, view Israel as a means to a complex Jewish end, others, such as Oranim, treat Israel as an end in and of itself. If, however, Israel is seen merely as a vehicle through which *Birbright* alumni can connect to other, more substantive aspects of Jewish identity, then it can be an effective tool for *Birbright* follow-up. Accomplishing this entails relating to Israel not through a political lens – as in Israel advocacy – but rather in a variety of other, more personal fashions, from cultural to spiritual to even conservationist or archaeological passions, as with more specialized *Birbright* trips. In this way, the connection to Israel can transcend what most American Jews possess – a political, circumstantial, public bond motivated by a fear of the violent “other”, rather than any idea of Israel itself – and truly contribute to a stronger Jewish identity.<sup>48</sup>

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(especially after the threat of terrorism hit home on September 11, 2001). As a result, enrollment in *Birbright Israel* dropped dramatically in 2001 and 2002, and average pre-trip levels of religious observance and affiliation among *Birbright* participants skyrocketed, resulting in a higher percentage of participants who were already positively inclined to support Israel (otherwise they wouldn’t be going under such circumstances). In addition to their higher levels of affiliation, the increase in media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may have contributed to participants’ overall knowledge of the issues (Ibid. p. 16).

<sup>46</sup> Infeld interview, February 2, 2006

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Eisen. Personal interview. February 2, 2006 (in-person)

<sup>48</sup> According to January 2006 study authored by the Cohen Center at Brandeis University entitled, “Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus,” polarizing, political representations of Israel oftentimes serve to divide rather than unify Jewish campus communities, essentially “scaring away” the 43% of Jewish college students who don’t know or care much about Israel and are just looking for a safe place to be Jewish (Sue Fishkoff, “Study note to Jewish campus groups: Embrace universalism to be effective.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 8, 2006).

In conjunction with *Birthright*, several other campus initiatives with various objectives have sought to establish such a connection with Israel among college students. For example, Israel 21c, whose scope extends beyond the college campus, seeks to “inform Americans about 21<sup>st</sup> century Israel, its people, its institutions and its contributions to global society”, glorifying Israel’s scientific and cultural accomplishments so as to look beyond the Israeli-Arab conflict.<sup>49</sup> Other existing campus organizations, such as the ostensibly Jewish fraternity AEPi, sponsor Israel-themed activities that similarly look beyond Israel as a superficial, political force, thereby enhancing Israel’s ability to stimulate true Jewish identity.<sup>50</sup>

The Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC), a joint project of the Schusterman Foundation and Hillel International, adds an additional dimension to Israel’s portrayal on college campus and further complicates the place of Israel advocacy in *Birthright* follow-up. Like Israel 21c, the ICC sponsors pro-Israel programming which highlights Israel’s contributions to science, culture, and the arts, but unlike Israel 21c, its core mission is overtly political. Founded at the height of the Intifada in 2002 to “cultivate an Israel-friendly university environment, and reduce anti-Israel intimidation and harassment on campus”, the ICC seeks to “address campus issues and intelligently impact a pro-active pro-Israel agenda on campus.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Wayne Firestone, founding director of the ICC and incoming President of Hillel International, the ICC’s “three pillars” of advocacy, education, and travel may indirectly strengthen Jewish identity among college students, but that is not its purpose. Firestone concedes that “Israel advocacy is the most difficult [means of affiliation] to capture”, but, recalling Leonard Saxe, Firestone cites the parallel necessity of promoting pro-Israel rhetoric on college campuses, considering an increase in Jewish identity as a welcome side effect.<sup>52</sup> In fact, far from viewing the Israel advocacy that the ICC promotes and the substantive follow-up that *Birthright* seeks as mutually exclusive pursuits, Firestone has gone so far as to declare, “*Birthright* is currently under-utilized in terms of its ability to support Israel advocacy on campus.”<sup>53</sup> Approaching this statement from the opposite angle in the context of my evaluation of Israel advocacy’s possible benefit to *Birthright*, one can see that as *Birthright* follow-up, Israel advocacy represents an attempt to engage with an aspect of Israel that is necessarily superficial and elusive, and which will ultimately not result in a strengthened Jewish affiliation among participants.<sup>54</sup>

The problematic nature of Israel advocacy as *Birthright* follow-up is exacerbated when *Birthright* alumni graduate college. Of all the possible ways of connecting to one’s Jewish heritage, Israel advocacy appears most likely to disappear when young adults move beyond the Jewishly-nurturing framework of their campus Hillel. If a *Birthright* alumnus’ affiliation is based in spirituality, for instance, then he can easily join a synagogue and continue to indulge his Jewish identity post-graduation, but if his affiliation is based in Israel advocacy and a political connection to Israel, there is little that he can do to sustain this connection.<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, he could participate in the occasional

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<sup>49</sup> “Israel21c: A Focus Beyond the Conflict: About Israel 21c,” *Israel 21c website*.

<<http://www.israel21c.com/bin/en.jsp?enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=Zone&enZone=OurMission&>>

<sup>50</sup> Krivitzky interview, February 2, 2005

<sup>51</sup> “Israel on Campus Coalition: About Us: Mission,” *Israel on Campus Coalition website*.

<<http://israeloncampuscoalition.org/aboutus/mission>>

<sup>52</sup> Wayne Firestone. Personal interview. February 2, 2006 (in-person)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> There are some notable exceptions to this rule, that is, Jews who became strongly attached to their Judaism exclusively through Israel. Some examples include: Louis D. Brandeis, Theodore Herzl in the romanticized version of his “conversion” during the Dreyfus affair, and an Egyptian named Moses (although he didn’t have much religious law as an alternative during his formative age).

<sup>55</sup> Another project of The Schusterman Foundation – the Synaplex initiative – seeks to do precisely this: promote Jewish identity through the revitalization of synagogues. Other initiatives which similarly promote Jewish identity regardless

pro-Israel march or public demonstration, or become involved with an organization like Dor Chadash which seeks to build bridges between Israelis and American Jews. However, to quote Richard Joel, “Israel is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Jewish peoplehood,” and so these infrequent activities will not be enough to sustain a substantive Jewish identity.<sup>56</sup> One might contend that the only way to truly embrace one’s Jewish identity through Israel advocacy would be to work full-time for AIPAC or make *aliyah*, but not even Wayne Firestone would suggest these extreme reactions as realistic expectations for *Birbright* alumni.

Although some reference to Israel is an integral part of any *Birbright* follow-up program, Israel advocacy is far from an effective means of *Birbright* follow-up. Using Israel advocacy to reaffirm the connection made on the *Birbright* trip will inevitably promote an unsustainable Jewish identity, and besides, *Birbright* alumni tend not to make very good advocates for Israel anyway. That said, given that Israel was undoubtedly the context which framed many of the substantive Jewish connections that *Birbright* participants experienced on the trip (although not the subject itself), all parties agree that Israel must play some role in follow-up. Determining the precise part that Israel should play in *Birbright* follow-up is a delicate balancing act indeed: in designing follow-up programming, one must be careful to present Israel prominently enough so that the participants’ attraction which defined their affiliation remains, but inconspicuously enough that it does not constitute the centrality of the affiliation.

One model which might serve well in this endeavor is that of the Wexner Fellowships’ seminars and institutes. Although they are aimed at a very different audience – the strongly affiliated – and thus pursue a very different objective, these programs do represent the ideal in terms of a depiction of Israel. *Birbright* follow-up efforts would be well-served to use these seminars and institutes as an exemplar, emulating the way in which the Wexner Fellowships portray Israel as a complex, nuanced element of Jewish identity inseparably intertwined with other means of affiliation.<sup>57</sup>

Although the large checks which support the Graduate Fellows (\$20,000 per year) and the prestige of the Heritage Fellowship might be more important to some participants, the social half of fellowships’ dual objectives – to bring together Jews from diverse backgrounds so that they may learn together and attain “a collaborative view of Jewish organizational life”<sup>58</sup> – is accomplished through its seminars and institutes. Graduate Fellows must attend two annual “institutes”, one in late summer and one in January, each with a selected theme. At these institutes, fellows have the opportunity to interact with noted scholars of Judaic Studies, Jewish communal leaders, and, most importantly, each other. At the 2003 Summer Institute, the theme was Israel, which was chosen, says Wexner Foundation President Larry Moses, who oversees all three programs, not to bolster the Jewish identity of the fellows, but rather “to start debates and highlight differences that participants can overcome.”<sup>59</sup>

As expected, the theme of Israel played a crucial role in many of the group sessions at the 2003 Summer Institute, including “Decision-Making in the IDF” with Michael Bergman; “Contemporary Israeli Literature” with Andrea Siegal; “Understanding Israel’s Paradoxes” with Yossi Klein Halevi; “Israeli Fiction and the Holocaust” with Professor Deborah Lipstadt; “Israeli Society through Film” with Amy Kronish; and a session on comparative historical narratives with Professor Benny Morris and Dr. Khaleel Mohammed. In addition to these mandatory special events

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of Israel include the UJC’s Blue Knot Program and Bikkurim initiatives, the Jewish Agency’s MASA project, and the Bronfman Summer Fellowships.

<sup>56</sup> Joel interview, January 30, 2006

<sup>57</sup> Of course, *Birbright* would have to make due with a much smaller budget than that of the Wexner Fellowships’ seminars and institutes.

<sup>58</sup> Larry Moses. Personal interview. December 23, 2005 (in-person)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

led by visiting experts, Wexner “faculty members”, the academics and communal leaders who regularly staff the fellowships’ institutes and seminars, led electives on the following subjects: “Beyond Checks: How Can American Jews Build a Meaningful Relationship with Israel?” with Rabbi David Gordis; “Israel and the US: Imagining a New Relationship” with Professor Arnold Eisen; and “Pre-Zionist and Zionist Imageries of the Jewish Past” with Professor Robert Chazan.

As one can see, Israel is presented in many lights but never alone. Whether coupled with literature, political activism, or history, Israel is never depicted as something that should be loved simply because of its place in Judaism, or because of what it represents by itself. Rather, it is only in conjunction with many of the varied elements of Jewish identity – a love for film or literature, for example – that the fellows may grasp onto Israel as a means of expressing their Jewishness and furthering their Jewish education.

In relation to this theme, the Wexner Foundation surveyed the Graduate Fellows before the Summer 2003 institute to determine their feelings toward Israel. The results, the only quantitative evaluation of Israel as a component of the Jewish identity of Wexner Fellows, are much as one would expect: the Graduate Fellows are quite young (83% are 30 or younger, with a mean age of 28), and, as compared to the rest of the American Jewish community, are atypically familiar with Israel (98% have visited at least once, and 50% have spent at least 18 months there).<sup>60</sup> A high percentage indicated a deep investment in Israel either by locating Israel as central to their identities (85%) or by defining duty to Israel as central component of their professional concerns (69%).<sup>61</sup> 68% responded in the affirmative when asked if there is a tension in being a Jew and living the Diaspora, but, strangely, when asked if all Jews should live in Israel, 58% said “definitely no”. 83% identified themselves as a Zionist. With a response rate of 76% (54 out of 71 Graduate Fellows in the class of 2004), one may assume that these results are reasonably representative.<sup>62</sup>

Graduate Fellows seem to care deeply about Israel, yet also feel strongly about the importance of the Diaspora. Their connection to Israel, while present, appears rather paradoxical due to its complexity. As Larry Moses commented with regard to this survey: “the Israel aspect is critical and integrated into the Graduate Fellows’ identity.”<sup>63</sup> Although a majority recognize the tension inherent in living in a voluntary Diaspora, a necessarily overlapping majority also think that Jews should remain in the Diaspora. From this, one might conclude that by virtue of their projected life-long commitment to working as Jewish professionals, the place of Israel in their individual conceptions of Jewish peoplehood is so intertwined with other aspects of their Jewish identity that it cannot be separated in any way.

In their seminars and institutes, the Wexner Foundation generally presents Israel to its fellows in this nuanced fashion, but, in order to best use Israel as a tool to reflect other aspects of the Jewish experience, the Wexner Fellowships might also consider increased flexibility for Graduate Fellow travel to Israel, better integration of Israel Fellows into Boston Jewish life, and additional scheduled “summit meetings” between current fellows and alumni of all three programs, such as the November 2003 meeting in Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup> These changes, in addition to strengthening the bond between American Jewry and Israel, would add an extra dimension to the fellows’ Jewish education by presenting Israel in yet another contextual framework, thereby enhancing their ability to interact with each other and view Jewish learning as a relevant, persistent enterprise, two of the three main of goals of the Wexner Fellowships.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Selis p. 2

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>63</sup> Moses interview, December 23, 2005

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> When asked how he might measure the success of the three fellowship programs, Larry Moses pointed to three primary indicators: first, the “extent to which alumni are consistently interactive in their work,” nourishing each other

Ironically, the Wexner Fellowships de-emphasize establishing a connection to Israel despite the fact that it would enhance the fellows' commitment, whereas *Birthright* follow-up emphasizes it extraordinarily, sometimes at the expense of other elements of Jewish identity which might also have been kindled on the trip. Each program might be better served by refining its portrayal of Israel to better emulate the other: the *Birthright* program could take steps to present Israel in an exclusively contextual light, emphasizing its indistinguishable place in the spectrum of Jewish peoplehood, while the Wexner Fellowships could better highlight Israel's crucial place as a singular, interdependent aspect of Jewish leadership.

In essence, these recommendations blur the line between what has until now been considered two completely unrelated pursuits in the Jewish community: reaching out to the unaffiliated and cultivating the highly affiliated. I have concluded that the *Birthright* program and the Wexner Fellowships would be most effective if more indistinguishable. In light of these conclusions, one is forced to call into question and seriously rethink the very nature of Jewish engagement and empowerment: I would argue that the overlapping complexity of Jewish identity means that identical strategies could be used to achieve drastically different objectives along the entire spectrum of affiliation.

These findings point to a new approach to the problem of Jewish continuity in America, an approach which moves beyond the singular "hook" of Israel as a means of attracting the disinterested. By virtue of American Jewry's historically significant place in a *voluntary* Diaspora and the compartmentalized nature of Jewish identity in contemporary American society, a connection to one's Jewish peoplehood that revolves exclusively around Israel will be inherently superficial and temporary, while a connection that draws from a diverse set of inspirations, interconnecting them in a web of affiliation, will better ensure the Jewish prosperity that these philanthropists crave.

Efforts to enhance Jewish peoplehood that do not recognize the nuanced and complex nature of Jewish identity and Jewish community are doomed to fail; only those efforts that simultaneously embrace many, if not all aspects of Jewish peoplehood at once will achieve the substantive results they seek.

Some critics of *Birthright* have promoted a more insular response to the challenge of American Jewish continuity, an approach which Jeffrey Solomon has referred to disparagingly as "reshtetlization".<sup>66</sup> I would not go so far as to say that full-time day schools are the only way to "rescue" American Jewry as some more traditional critics have, but I do agree that a significantly less patronizing approach to outreach, one which is more confident that young American Jews can handle multiple aspects of Jewish identity concurrently, is in order.

As many scholars, most notably Kenneth Prewitt, the Director of the 2000 US Census (the first to allow for multiracial self-identification), have demonstrated in recent years, the assorted affiliations of many Americans can be increasingly referred to as a "multi-cultural identity". A model which provides a pragmatic "salad bowl" alternative to the "melting pot" approach to immigration, multiculturalism aims to preserve the distinctiveness of each ethnic group's culture within the context of a coherent society.<sup>67</sup> In the past decade, Jewish groups have come to terms with the multi-cultural reality that membership in other affiliative groups does not inherently marginalize an individual's Jewish identity. Just as young adults can "multi-task" and juggle a dozen windows on a

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through the connections that they have established at the institutes and seminars; second, the "extent to which alumni view Jewish learning as a life-long proposition"; and third, "their impact on their communities to rebuild the fabric of Jewish peoplehood (Ibid.)."

<sup>66</sup> Jeffrey Solomon, *Reinventing North American Jewish Communal Structures: The Crisis of Normality*. (Arnulf M. Pins Memorial Lecture, Paul Baerwald School of Social Work, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, March 5, 2000), p. 27

<sup>67</sup> Of course, many multi-culturalists do not see a coherent society and many also deny that culture can be based upon anything except race. See, for example, John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and other Immigrants in Urban America*. (New York, N.Y.: Atheneum Press, 1975).

computer screen, ever since the “ethnic revolution” of the 1960s, American Jews have become increasingly able to simultaneously embrace their Jewish identity along with several others.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, if one’s objective is to enhance Jewish identity, then, ignoring Ayn Rand’s compelling counter-argument, it might be most effective not to promote this identity to the exclusion of other diverse elements of identity, but rather by building upon them.

If identity is indeed best internalized in this highly integrated fashion, then programs like *Birthright* might consider presenting Israel in this way as well. Because of the necessarily tenuous connection of American Jewry to Israel, Israel will contribute to a substantive Jewish affiliation only when depicted in relation to other aspects of Jewish identity, and even non-Jewish identity in this multi-cultural framework. In a nationalistic sense, American Jewish identity remains similarly conflicted. Jacob Blaustein’s concern that the establishment of the State of Israel would fuel widespread accusations of dual loyalty on the part of American Jews has luckily remained unfounded, but many American Jews still struggle with this division internally, as shown by American Jewry’s patriotic reaction to Jonathan Pollard’s 1985 arrest on charges of spying for Israel.<sup>69</sup>

Remaining cognizant of *Birthright*’s secondary objective – to bridge the growing divide between American Jewry and Israel – Deborah Dash Moore, Professor of History at the University of Michigan, has contended that a helpful model toward such a reconciliation might be one of transnationalism.<sup>70</sup> By allowing American Jews to embrace a variety of affiliative roles, from participation in Israeli society to rooting for the Boston Red Sox, transnationalism enables an immigrant population to express successfully the multiple social relationships (familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political) that link together societies of origin and settlement.<sup>71</sup> In this way, writes Moore, American Jews could “fulfill their responsibilities to Israel, not only to the state and its policies, but also to the people and their concerns. Cultural exchange, mutual support, political engagement, religious dialogue, social interchange, economic cooperation, educational fellowship – all these make up elements of transnational Jewish citizenship. The transnational model possesses the potential to transcend the accepted binary poles of Jewish thinking, Israel vs. Diaspora, with multiple relationships. It lets us move beyond the tensions and traumas of the present moment toward a new, invigorated future.”<sup>72</sup>

This sort of policy would be especially helpful for those American Jews who find it difficult to make up their minds, a growing trend in their consumer-driven society. One of the more

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton Press, 1998)

<sup>69</sup> With Pollard’s arrest, American Jews suddenly became defensive and insecure in their Diasporic home, and many sought to distance themselves from Israel and reaffirm their primary loyalty to the United States. Indeed, many American Jews took the lead in demanding that those Israelis responsible for the incident be brought to justice, further antagonizing Israelis (Rosenthal p. 76-92)

<sup>70</sup> Defined in terms of international relations, see Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Transnational Relations and World Politics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1972)

<sup>71</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, article in Bayme, editor, *Israel On My Mind: Israel’s Role in World Jewish Identity*, p. 37-38. As compelling as this argument might be, I still find it inconceivable that anyone in his right mind would root for the Red Sox.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 38. Decades before the terminology of “multiculturalism” and “transnationalism” came into use, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan realized that the uniqueness of American society – particularly the notable absence of the exclusionary nationalism present in Europe – encouraged Jewish religious expression. In a 1939 article criticizing the legendary Zionist Ahad Ha’Am for not comprehending the special conditions of democracy, Kaplan wrote, “Secular culture in itself is not capable of sustaining our people in a democratic environment, much as abstract religion could not do so. Only religious culture, which unites the positive qualities of both, can do so (Qtd. in Shimoni p. 14).” Kaplan then illustrated how American society, from its social practices to its very constitution, perfectly accommodates just such a religious culture. American Jews, wrote Kaplan, should strive to emulate American Catholics as a religious denomination that is also internationally-linked, especially in the then-hypothetical scenario of the establishment of a Jewish State (Ibid.).

imaginative titles in recent sociological research – “Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices” – astutely demonstrates both the complexity of modern Jewish identity and the institutional Jewish community’s conception of identity as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the marketplace.<sup>73</sup> This March 2006 study, commissioned by Reboot, a New York-based network of Jewish creative initiatives sponsored by Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, found that young American Jews have “multiple, overlapping identities, of which ‘being Jewish’ is just one, and not always the primary one.”<sup>74</sup>

In his article “The Dialectics of Assimilation”, Amos Funkenstein quotes the 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetian Rabbi Simone (Simcha) Luzzato comparing the Jews to a river: “its waters may change their colors according to the various soils through which the river runs, but they always remain in the same water.”<sup>75</sup> This analogy agrees with Moses Mendelssohn’s famous concept of a fluid identity which has the ability to assimilate (in a positive sense of the word) into the present non-Jewish culture, but still retains its Jewish essence (though Luzzato does place more emphasis on the Jewish side of this dual identity than Mendelssohn did).<sup>76</sup> Although accommodating, Mendelssohn’s ideal identity stops short of completely giving in to the universalist pleas for homogeneity, thereby ensuring a persistent Jewish community through its balance of allegiances.

In two societies as divergent as Mendelssohn’s late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany and our 21<sup>st</sup> century America, Luzzato’s river certainly did take very different colors, but, by simultaneously resisting and accepting surrounding cultures, it continued to flow, perpetuating the existence of the Jewish community. Just as this multifaceted method of existing in non-Jewish society enabled the survival of Diasporic Judaism, a nuanced connection to Israel may prove constructive in accentuating the Jewish aspect of the cosmopolitan Diasporic experience. If American Jewry can embrace and remember Israel as one contributing color in the variegated palette of their Judaism, they might finally be able to resolve their seemingly contradictory quiddity as citizens of a voluntary Diaspora.

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<sup>73</sup> Sue Fishkoff, “Say it loud, I’m Jewish and proud: Study finds identity, but less affiliation.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 26, 2006. Ironically, the fewer Jews there are in America, the more sects and subcategories they appear to establish. Indeed, not since Hellenistic times, when the rabbinic authorities struggled to unify and control a wild array of Jewish gnostics, Jewish Christians, and Jewish pagans, has there existed such a diverse plethora of only slightly overlapping Jewish identities.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. To the surprise of many in the institutional Jewish community, the Reboot study also found that the number one thing that young Jews say “matters a lot” to being Jewish is “remembering the Holocaust”. I doubt these findings, however: following Jean-Paul Sartre in his work, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, I am inclined to believe that any Jewish affiliation that is primarily motivated by fear, and only views Jewishness *visa vis* “the other” is necessarily superficial and unsustainable. However, my views on this subject are rather controversial: I think that what Sartre referred to as “devious forms of Jewish identity” not only pervade Holocaust-centered identity, but also, to some extent, Israel-centered identity.

<sup>75</sup> Amos Funkenstein, “The Dialectics of Assimilation.” *Jewish Social Studies* 1995, p. 7

<sup>76</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism*. Translated by Allan Arkush. (Hanover, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 1983), p. 134