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# Encountering the Other: Birthright Israel, Jewish Peoplehood, and the Opportunities and Dangers of Religious Journeys

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### **Fellow Travelers—or Itineraries to Different Destinations?**

What is the impact of Orthodox participation in transdenominational Jewish activities? The Synagogue Council of Massachusetts has for many years run a Unity Mission, bringing Boston-area Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform young leaders to New York to visit Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbinical seminaries. The journeys have been a great success. Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theological

Seminary, and Hebrew Union College each provides prestigious, empathetic, and effective speakers. Boston participants have the opportunity to discover everything they always wanted to know but never had a chance to ask about other wings of Judaism (and sometimes about their own).

But the most successful aspects of the SCM Unity Missions were the friendships and respect that developed among Jews across denominational lines. Participants said they discovered that Orthodox Jews were not narrow-minded bigots, that Conservative Jews had standards, and that Reform Jews cared deeply about Jewishness, Israel, and *klal Yisrael*, Jewish peoplehood.

One Reform woman remarked to me in wonderment when she came back from a SCM Unity Mission: “There were two Orthodox men on my mission. I had never really spoken to Orthodox men before, and I was blown away. They were the most gentle, interesting, and non-sexist men of *any* religious persuasion I had ever met.” As it happened, I knew both of the men she was talking about, and her description was more or less accurate. I uttered a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn’t encountered some of the other, less politically sensitive Orthodox men I know!

That conversation taught me the importance of interaction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews can have a profound impact on the Jewish community—but only if they don’t sequester themselves. The SCM Unity Mission experience suggests that when Orthodox Jews are unknown to the majority of the non-Orthodox community, negative images will undercut any positive religious impact they might have. The potential for negativity may be even more potent when people’s idea of Orthodox Jews are gained exclusively from media images, such as those surrounding the Rubashkin kosher meat scandal, and are not balanced by positive images of Orthodox Jews encountered in daily life.

However, influence can go in two directions. Many in the Orthodox community have worried that rather than Orthodox Jews influencing the non-Orthodox in a positive Jewish direction, during transdenominational activities the non-Orthodox may undermine Orthodox commitments. That side of the story was articulated viv-

idly in 2003 when Gil Perl and Yaakov Weinstein, doctoral students in Harvard University's Near Eastern Languages and Cultures program (NELC, Jewish studies) published "A Parent's Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses." The ten-page pamphlet argued that interactions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox students on college campuses constituted an "alarming trend" which too often results in a "religious transformation"—the abandoning of Orthodox standards of behavior and belief by young men and women who heretofore have lived entirely within the fold, including day school attendance and Israel yeshiva study. The authors concluded that parents should gauge for themselves "whether your children are prepared to face these challenges." If parents decide that nonsectarian liberal arts institutions pose too great a spiritual threat, the authors urged, "have the courage to say so."<sup>1</sup>

The publication caused a windstorm of discussion in the United States and Israel, with the result that many Orthodox institutions and individuals actively discouraged young Orthodox Jews from interacting with non-Orthodox Jews, lest their religious commitments be weakened. Most of these discussions were based upon fear rather than on factual evidence about the impact of universities among young American Jews. Moreover, the impact on non-Orthodox young Jews of having no interaction with Orthodox Jews was not a matter of any concern in most of these discussions. A new wave of similar discussions discouraging Orthodox/non-Orthodox interactions have now surged in response to the Birthingright Israel program. Arguments about the wisdom of interacting with—and encouraging one's children to encounter—non-Orthodox peers at work, at school, and in social activities still divide segments of the Orthodox community.

This chapter explores the ramifications of Orthodox/non-Orthodox encounters from a sociological standpoint, drawing upon recent studies of Birthingright Israel and its impact, and upon other research on the relationship of American Jews to Israel and to the concept of Jewish peoplehood.<sup>2</sup> Several years ago I traveled on one of the *Taglit* buses in Israel as an evaluator for Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), which has conducted most of the Birthingright Israel studies. Part of the evaluation process involved ob-

serving the participants experience the trip and interact with each other and the way the various leaders implementing the trip fulfilled the goals of the program—ranging from nonsectarian organizations like Hillel to Orthodox outreach organizations such as Aish HaTorah.<sup>3</sup> The bus I observed was facilitated by “Mayanot,” leadership from Chabad-Lubavitch. In this chapter I draw upon my field notes from that trip and place my observations into the context of data from sociological studies of Jewish education, Jewish and Israel connections, and several recent reports conducted by the CMJS research team and Israeli counterparts, as well as American Jewish Committee Annual Public Opinion Polls, to discuss Orthodox participation in *Taglit*-Birthright Israel and other transdenominational activities. Among other subjects, I look at the proportion of Orthodox to non-Orthodox participants, interactions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox trip staff and participants, observance and attitudinal levels of participants and non-participants before the trip, and the relative impact of the trip on Orthodox and non-Orthodox participants.

### **Birthright Israel Encounters**

The *mifgash*—an encounter between young Israeli army personnel and American college and post-college youth—is one of the primary educational strategies of *Taglit*-Birthright Israel, a free ten-day trip, which has brought close to 200,000 North American young Jews to Israel over the past nine years in a program called *Taglit* in its Israeli context and Birthright Israel in the United States. Its goals cluster around strengthening connections to Jews and Judaism in the hearts and minds of young Diaspora Jews by strengthening their ties to Israel. Among other activities, *Taglit* brings Israeli and Diaspora young Jews together for a few days in a *mifgash*, with the creation of bonding and understanding between Jews who have many different experiences and assumptions about life and who in many ways inhabit different planets.

However, another type of *mifgash*—much less remarked upon or studied—is also taking place: encounters between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Birthright Israel participants. Orthodox participation in Birthright Israel has varied year by year, and it was generally

higher early in the program than it has been in recent years but has averaged about 20 percent of participants over the lifetime of the program. Obviously, four out of five participants are not Orthodox. On the other hand, since Orthodox Jews comprise fewer than 10 percent of the American Jewish population, one could say that an Orthodox participation of 20 percent is disproportionately high. The strength of Orthodox participation, especially in past years, is especially striking since attending one of the many schools/*yeshivot* catering to Diaspora Jews during the “gap” year between high school and college has become normative in the American Orthodox community. Birthright Israel mandates that students who have already made an educational Israel trip cannot participate—so Orthodox participants typically have deviated from the norm and will not have had the Israeli *yeshiva* experience.

Orthodox participants may probably be drawn disproportionately from (1) Orthodox families with lower discretionary income; or (2) non-Orthodox families of *ba’ale teshuva* (newly Orthodox Jews), who are less willing to fund an extended stay in Israel for their children. In recent years the proportion of Orthodox participants from the United States has declined considerably, while “the growth in the size of the program appears to have disproportionately expanded *Taglit*-Birthright Israel’s reach into the ‘Just Jewish’ population, which, collectively, is less connected to its Jewish identity on most measures.”<sup>4</sup>

As we might expect, the religious profiles of Orthodox and non-Orthodox participants look dramatically different. Daniel Parmer and I compared the behaviors, backgrounds, and attitudes of Orthodox and non-Orthodox young men and women before the trip. Some of our results are illustrated in Figures 1 through 6, adapted from Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Bridging the Gender Gap: American Young Adults’ Jewish Identity and Birthright Israel.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Birthright Israel Participants Span a Broad Continuum of Jewishness**

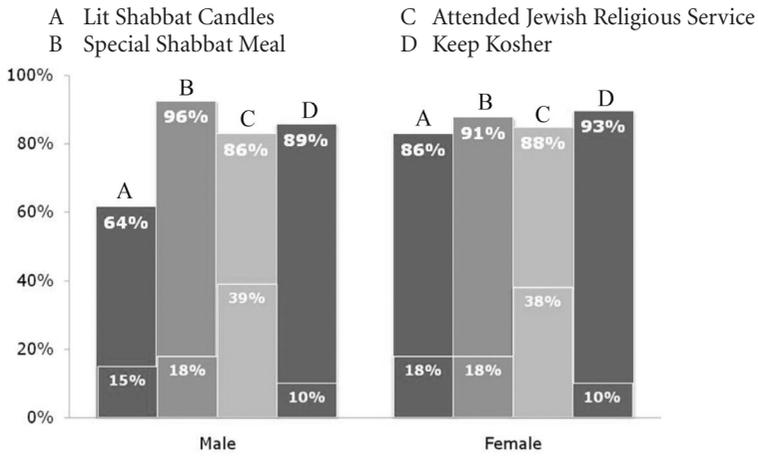
These figures show young people who applied to participate in Birthright Israel trips, divided by gender, by wing of Judaism, and by whether or not they did in fact participate in a trip. As these tables il-

lustrate, participants and non-participant applicants to the program start out almost identical to each other. When CMJS evaluations are compared with other sources of information about the population that sociologists now call “emergent adults,” such as the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey,<sup>6</sup> it becomes apparent that young Jews who apply for Birthright Israel trips—whether or not they go—are slightly more Jewishly identified than the general population. Nevertheless, the Birthright Israel applicants represent a dramatically broad range of backgrounds. At one end of the spectrum, about one in five attended Jewish day school for some period of time. Figure 2 shows us that more than three out of four Orthodox participants have attended day school, compared with one in seven non-Orthodox participants. At the other end of the spectrum, about one-quarter don’t know *aleph-bet*—they are utterly unschooled Jewishly. The largest group—more than 40 percent—have attended Jewish supplementary schools (two or more sessions per week), and predictably they help make up the half of participants who say they can read Hebrew but don’t understand it. Seventy percent of participants have grown up in homes with two Jewish parents; 20 percent have one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent; and 10 percent have a parent who converted to Judaism.

The Jewish involvement of participants both before and after the Birthright Israel trip can be measured by looking at behaviors—such as ritual observances or attending religious services—and by attitudes. Figure 1 shows that Orthodox Jewish young men and women are overwhelmingly likely to attend Jewish religious services, eat special Shabbat meals, and keep kosher, while their non-Orthodox peers are overwhelmingly not likely to participate in most of these activities. The most frequent Jewish activity for non-Orthodox participants before the trip is that about four in ten attend a Jewish religious service each week—an important fact, because it underscores the greater importance of the synagogue in American Jewish society, compared with Israeli Jewry.

Figure 3 looks at how highly participants rank themselves in attitudes such as caring about Israel, the importance of being Jewish, the importance of celebrating Jewish holidays, and the importance

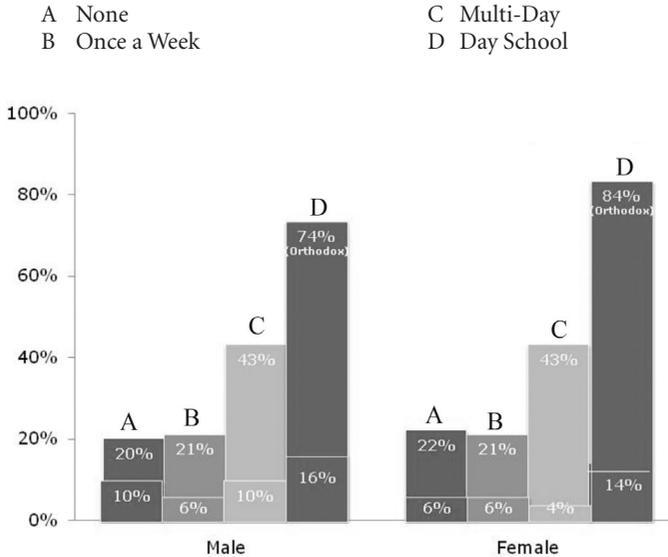
Figure 1: Pre-Trip Participants' Ritual Behavior\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman presented in "Bridging the Gender Gap: American Young Adults' Jewish Identity and "Birthright Israel" 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Research in Jewish Education, Jerusalem, January 8, 2009, for further information contact CMJS Adapted here for "Encountering the Other."

\*Top section: Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Non-Orthodox Participants

Figure 2: Pre-Trip Participants' Jewish Education (Grades 1-8)\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Encountering the Other."

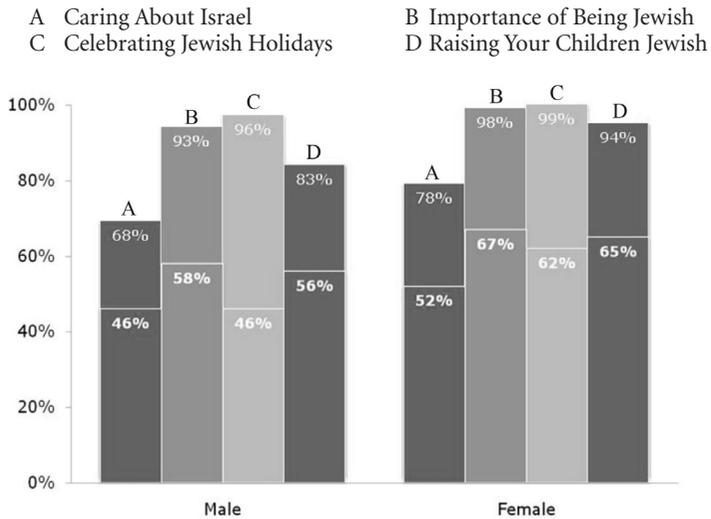
\*Top section: Non-Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Orthodox Participants

of raising one's children as Jews. Figure 3 shows that Orthodox Jews rank each of these attitudes more highly than non-Orthodox Jews, but it reveals some gendered differences as well. In general, women have higher scores in positive Jewish attitudes than men do, even among Orthodox participants. When all the wings of Judaism are looked at separately, Orthodox women have the most positive attitudes, and Reform men have the least positive or most ambivalent attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. Overall, the most significance of all, for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Birthright Israel participants, is connected to raising Jewish children. When we look at the fourth column on Figure 3—"Raising Your Children Jewish"—we see that even before the trip two-thirds of non-Orthodox participants and more than nine out of ten Orthodox participants say it is "very important" to them to raise Jewish children.

Interestingly enough, the Birthright Israel trip has the greatest positive behavioral and attitudinal effect on participants who are already high-functioning before the trip. It is the Orthodox, the ritually observant, the day school population who end up being more involved and having even more positive attitudes across the board after completing the Birthright Israel trip. At the other end of the spectrum, those participants who come to the trip with the least Jewish education and the fewest Jewish connections emerge after the trip with many of their attitudes and behaviors unchanged—with the critical exception of a dramatically increased sense of Jewish peoplehood. This is not a trivial consideration—far from it. This chapter argues that increasing a sense of Jewish peoplehood may be the single most important challenge facing contemporary American Judaism.

Across the board, from the most to the least Jewishly connected, Birthright Israel has a powerful effect on feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people. For example, Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan demonstrated that *Ten Days of Birthright Israel* is indeed a *journey in young adult identity* with persistent positive impact: Saxe and Chazan found that three years after they completed the trip more than 60 percent of participants said they feel "very much" connected to Israel, compared with 45 percent of non-participants. Similarly, three years after they completed the trip 83 percent of participants said it is very

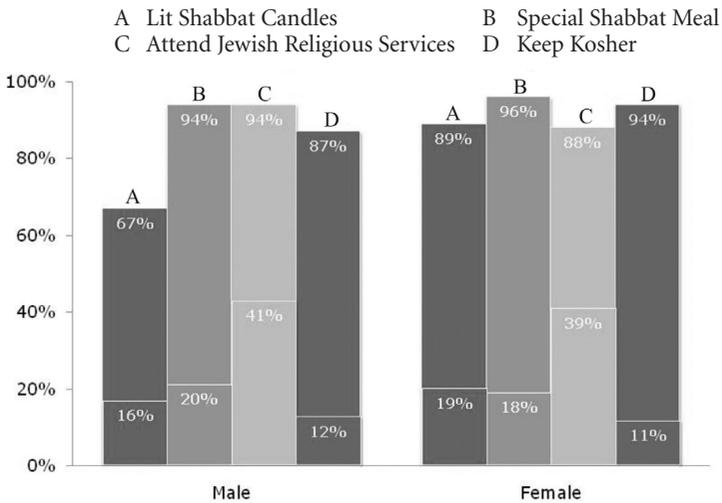
Figure 3: Pre-Trip Participants' Attitudes\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Encountering the Other."

\*Top section: Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Non-Orthodox Participants

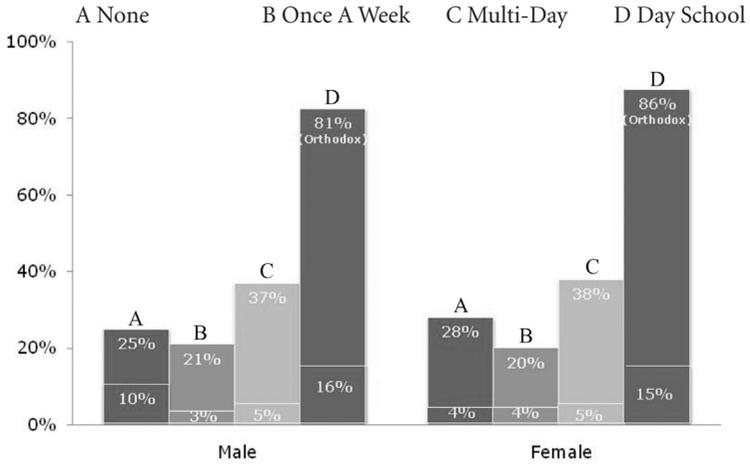
Figure 4: Pre-Trip Non-Participants' Ritual Behavior\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Encountering the Other."

\*Top section: Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Non-Orthodox Participants

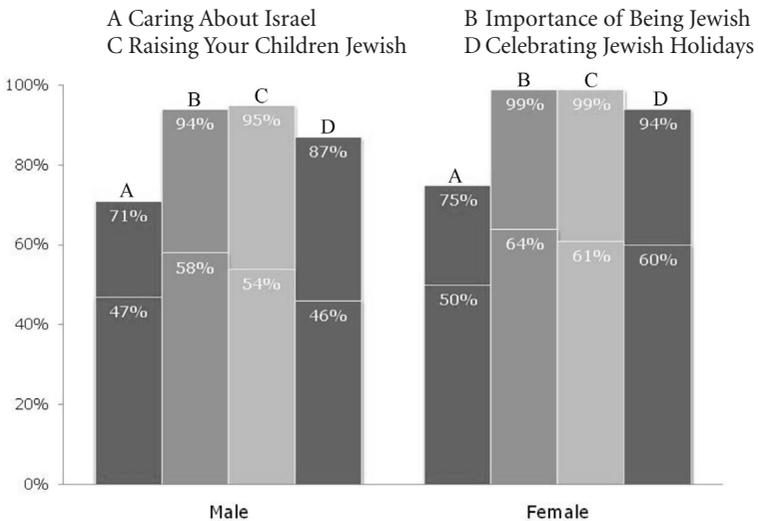
Figure 5: Pre-Trip Non-Participants' Jewish Education (Grades 1-8)\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Encountering the Other."

\*Top section: Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Non-Orthodox Participants

Figure 6: Pre-Trip Non-Participants' Attitudes\*



Source: Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Encountering the Other."

\*Top section: Orthodox Participants  
Lower Section: Non-Orthodox Participants

important to them to raise Jewish children, compared with 74 percent of non-participants. Sixty-two percent of participants said they think of Israel as a “source of pride,” compared with 50 percent of non-participants.<sup>7</sup>

### **Birthright Israel Provides Jewish Experiences for a Broad Range of Jews**

These figures statistically indicate the power of Birthright Israel trips to create emotional bonds to Jewishness. But statistics don't tell everything. Anyone who has witnessed the process of these connections being forged will corroborate their transformative effect. For example, on the Mayanot bus in which I served as evaluator, two young men were the children of intermarriage, “persons of Jewish background” who had not been raised as Jews. One was a thin, pale, yellow-haired young man with a Jewish mother and an Irish father, whose name and looks strongly represented his father's side of the family. In the ruins of a little synagogue atop Masada, this young man decided to take advantage of a quiet opportunity to put on *tefillin* for the first time in his life. The second was a tall, robust African-American young man whose mother had a Jewish mother. The rest of his ethnic heritage derived from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. He grew up in Harlem and came on the Birthright Israel trip to “explore my Jewish heritage.” I have never seen anyone read every single posting at the Yad VaShem Holocaust Memorial with greater sustained concentration than that young man. He was still reading when the rest of the group had long since concluded their serious business at the Memorial, and the born-Jewish girls were flirting with the Israeli soldiers.

On the Mayanot trip, another example of the broad range of persons affected by Birthright Israel was a serious, cerebral young woman who had emigrated to America from the Former Soviet Union; she was anxious and distressed at the idea that the Mayanot participants would be celebrating Shabbat. “I've never celebrated Shabbat before,” she worried. “I've never been to the Western Wall. I'm a secular person. What will I do there while everyone else is praying?” Her fears subsided when she saw that others beside herself at the *kotel* were secular, or at least Jewishly illiterate. American modern Orthodox young women

standing near her explained the highlights of the service without pushing her to do more than she wanted. She took in the singing and the socializing and relaxed into the atmosphere and the new experiences.

### **Orthodox Rabbis, Teachers, and Peers Influence Non-Orthodox Youth**

The impact of Orthodox rabbis, teachers, and peers on non-Orthodox youth was clearly visible to me over my two-week Mayanot evaluation experience. Among the Birthright Israel participants on the tour bus was a non-Orthodox young man who frequently voiced anti-religious, overtly skeptical sentiments, sometimes in a disruptive fashion, “acting out” his resistance. One evening the senior Chabad tour leader, Rav (rabbi) Aaron Slonim from Binghamton, New York, scheduled an open discussion session. The young man attended and peppered Rav Slonim with hostile questions about the role of religion in a moral and productive life. Rav Slonim engaged him patiently and thoughtfully, and, after some time, said to him gently: “All people with deep faith are tormented by doubt from time to time. They struggle to make sense out of what they see and experience. For you to be so obsessed and concerned about faith and religion shows you have deep feelings. You must be a very religious person.” After this discussion, the “acting out” behavior vanished, and the young man participated in activities without trying to disrupt them.

Studies of Birthright Israel show that the transformative moments I observed occur with some frequency and that rabbis and tour leaders play powerful roles. For example, 27-year-old Shmuly Yankelowitz, a rabbinical candidate at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (interviewed in another context),<sup>8</sup> openly says that his life was transformed by Birthright Israel. Yankelowitz is one of the founders of both the Orthodox ethical kosher certification *hashgakhah* movement, *Tav haYosher* (the Ethical Seal), and the Orthodox international program modeled on Ruth Messenger’s American Jewish World Service (AJWS), *Uri Letzedek*. Yankelowitz grew up as “Shawn” in a home with a Protestant mother and a Jewish father. Yankelowitz remembers: “My father emphasized his Jewishness in moral ways. My mother emphasized her Protestantism in faith ways. And that was a constant tension for me in my early years.”

At his own request, Yankelowitz underwent a Reform conversion into Judaism when he was eleven years old. He enjoyed his bar mitzvah and continued on for confirmation at his Reform temple, where he developed a close relationship with his rabbi.

Yankelowitz attended the University of Texas at Austin and became the head of the Reform minyan there. He remembers ruefully, “We had four thousand Jewish students there, and twenty-five came to the Friday night Reform service, and some Shabbat mornings at minyan there were only three of us.” Yankelowitz discovered a new Jewish lifeline when he was appointed to the International Board of Hillel, then led by Rabbi Richard Joel. His feelings for Jewishness were profoundly intensified when he attended Birthright Israel. After he returned, he participated in “Partners in Torah,” a telephone learning program which assigned him to a telephone *havrutah* (study partner) from Monsey, an Orthodox businessman. Yankelowitz enjoyed the learning but wasn’t quite sure where he fit in. He agonized over whether to wear a kippah on the Texas campus, where he felt increasingly marginalized, and also over his level of Jewish learning and observance. It took some time and some experimentation with different types of Orthodoxy for him to find his way.

Yankelowitz was particularly disturbed by the tension between his desire to do good in a tormented world—a goal he had lived intensely by participating in the AJWS, and the tendency of the *haredi* yeshivot he studied in to try to shut the world out, rather than to try to heal it. Yankelowitz eventually found his niche in the religious approach of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. His Orthodox conversion to a compatible shade of Orthodoxy feels complete to him. Today he is widely regarded as one of the most creative and gifted young Orthodox leaders—and it is worth noting that he became Orthodox because Orthodox Jews interacted with him regardless of his official status, before his *halakhic* transformation.

### **Studies of Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Jewish “Peoplehood”**

Aware that the impact of Birthright Israel could be greatly increased with the development of follow-up programming, a number of organizations and educational institutions have created initiatives,

called NEXT Birthright Israel, including some that are run under Orthodox auspices. Some of these include, in the greater New York area, Jump, the House, Hazon, Dor Chadash, and the Manhattan Jewish experience. As Fern Chertok, Ted Sasson, Leonard Saxe, et al. comment in discussing these initiatives, “Orthodox respondents were more likely to be involved than non-Orthodox respondents,” and “Conservative respondents were more likely to be involved than Reform or unaffiliated respondents.” In New York, “one-quarter or more of respondents who attended the activities of these [the groups listed above] groups reported their denominational affiliation as Orthodox.” The authors go on to comment about Birthright Israel and the NEXT Birthright Israel as precipitators of greater religious commitments, noting: “a small portion of alumni made dramatic changes in their Jewish lives.... Most notably, some were launched into an exploration of religious identity and went on to adopt substantially more observant lifestyles.”<sup>9</sup>

As the Birthright evaluation statistics demonstrate, sociologically, the more observant that American Jews are, the more likely they are to take personally the tribal concept in general and Israel’s situation in particular.<sup>10</sup> Caring about Israel is tied in complicated ways to Jewish identification. In a recent study of the intersection between gender and religious identity, Daniel Parmer and I looked at parents of children under 18, because for many people that is when religious issues start to feel pressing. Looking at inmarried Jewish parents—men and women who are married to Jews and who have a child under 18 living at home—in the NJPS 2000-2001, when respondents were asked, “How important is being Jewish to you?” those who answered “Very important” included virtually all Orthodox men and women (92% / 100%), two-thirds of Conservative men and women (69% / 71%), and 42% of Reform men and 53% of Reform women. In this, as in other peoplehood—rather than religious—questions, the most highly identified American Jews may be Orthodox women, and the least identified may be Reform Jewish men. Gender as well as denomination can make a difference in Jewish identification.<sup>11</sup>

This is especially true with regard to connections to Israel. In the 2007 American Jewish Committee Public Opinion Poll (Synovate, Inc.), when Jews were asked “How close do you feel to Israel?”—six

out of ten Orthodox respondents answered that they feel “Very close” to Israel, as did four out of ten Conservative Jews and two out of ten Reform Jews (64% / 39% /22%). Looking at the other end of the spectrum of feelings about Israel, 16% of Conservative Jews responded that they feel “Fairly distant” or “Very distant” from Israel, as did 30% of Reform Jews but only 5% of Orthodox Jews. Thus, Orthodox Jews today are much more likely than non-Orthodox Jews to feel that what goes on in Israel has immediate salience to their lives—one could say they “take it personally.”

The reasons for these differences are tied to another pattern: The wing of Judaism with which one affiliates makes a big difference in whether or not a Jew has visited Israel. Among inmarried Jews with children under 18, visits to Israel are reported by 81% of Orthodox men and 91% of Orthodox women, 55% of Conservative men and 61% of Conservative women, and 32% of Reform men and 34% of Reform women (NJPS 2000-2001).<sup>12</sup>

Another way to look at attitudes toward Israel is to see where respondents rank “Care about Israel” compared with other “Very important Jewish values.” When asked to rank values they thought were “very important Jewish values” in NJPS 2000-2001, those who thought “Care about Israel” was “Very important” included 55% of Orthodox men and 78% of Orthodox women, 50% of Conservative men and 54% of Conservative women, 42% of Reform men and 38% of Reform women. In other words, the group of American Jews most likely to have visited Israel and to rank caring about Israel as a very important Jewish value were Orthodox women. Orthodox men were at the same level as Conservative Jewish men and women, and Reform men and women were lowest of all.

It is not a surprise, of course, that there are differences between more ritually observant and less ritually observant Jews when it comes to areas of Jewish life that people define as “religious.” When it comes to activities such as attending synagogue services and lighting Shabbat candles, most would expect that the Orthodox profile is much higher than that of Conservative and Reform affiliated Jews. Less expected are results, such as data from the 2007 AJC Public Opinion Poll, which is similar to data from the NJPS 2000-2001 and other studies, showing

that in areas of non-religious, ethnic, peoplehood—or tribal—identification, there are large denominational gaps as well.

Not only connections to Israel but social networks—how many Jewish friends do you have and do your children have, for example, are an important measure of Jewish identification. How many Jewish friends one has correlates closely with how much one identifies as a member of the Jewish people. The NJPS 2000-2001 data showed inmarried Jewish parents having “Mostly Jewish friends” among nine out of ten Orthodox Jews (87% / 93%), slightly over half of Conservative Jews (57% / 55%), and about a third of Reform Jews, ranging from 31% of Reform men to 42% of Reform women.

Thus, connections to Israel among Conservative and Reform Jews are almost identical with the likelihood of their having visited Israel and also with their connections to other Jews in their American neighborhoods. To put it very simply, for younger American Jews, statistical attachment to Israel matches whether or not they have visited Israel and how many Jewish friends they have currently. Feeling part of the Jewish people at home and feeling part of the Jewish people overseas are closely connected.

The wings of American Judaism also differ in terms of what one might call “family styles.” Orthodox Jews are far more likely to marry in their twenties rather than their thirties and forties. Young Orthodox men and women are far more likely to have three or four children, on average, while young non-Orthodox American Jews are having children at well below replacement level, typically fewer than two children per family. Observant Jews are connected to the Jewish peoplehood on a micro level as well as on a macro level. They have more children, they give those children Jewish educations, and their children are more likely to create Jewish homes of their own. They are more likely to transmit Jewish culture to the next generation. These Jews with high levels of religious and ethnic Jewish capital are reproducing Jews and reproducing Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

### **Denominational Labels and Fluidity among the Wings of Judaism**

As we have noted, Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish experiences are often different, and assumptions about life, and the role of

Jewishness in their lives, are different. But this statement is not quite “the truth,” because it simplifies, and in this case simplifications can distort. The temptation, which many Orthodox Jews succumb to, is to be triumphalist, to create a scenario of “good” and “bad” American Jews, with Orthodox Jews, who are the most measurably highly identified and most regularly involved in Jewish activities, as being the “best” Jews, Reform Jews as being the “worst” Jews, and Conservative Jews falling, as they often do, somewhere in between. Among non-affiliating Jews, of course, connections are even fewer and thinner, and in some cases non-existent, at least in terms of factors that can be measured.

But the reality is more complicated and more fluid in several important ways. The relationship between the wings of American Judaism is fluid. American Jews who call themselves Reform Jews or Orthodox Jews today often grew up in another Jewish movement. About one-quarter of married Jews with children under 18 who call themselves Orthodox, for example, say they grew up as Conservative, Reform, or secular Jews. So who gets “credit” for their current behavior—the Conservative, Reform, or secular communities they grew up in or the Orthodox community with which they affiliate today? And well over one-third of current Reform Jewish parents of children under 18 grew up as Orthodox, Conservative, or secular Jews. So if their attachments to Judaism are weaker, who gets blamed for their weak attachments, the Orthodox communities they grew up in or the communities with which they affiliate today?

There is nothing magical about denominational labels. Calling oneself an Orthodox or Conservative or Reconstructionist or Reform Jew doesn’t suddenly make one highly identified and engaged—or weakly identified and engaged—with Jewishness. Within each wing of Judaism there are significant numbers of people who have a lot of religious and ethnic social capital—Orthodox Jews have more of them, but they don’t own the concept.

### **Creating Jewish Social Capital**

Jews can build religious and ethnic social capital by learning Jewish languages, getting involved with Jewish organizations, including temples and synagogues, performing Jewish rituals and ceremonies,

studying Jewish sacred texts, participating in Jewish culture by reading Jewish books, listening to Jewish music, and viewing Jewish films. That social capital can then be spent in transmitting Jewish religious culture to the next generation. The reasons there are many more Jews with religious and ethnic social capital within Orthodox Jewish communities than within non-Orthodox Jewish communities are that Orthodox Jewish communities invest more of their human resources as well as their financial resources into the creation of that religious and ethnic social capital. Indeed, it is in these *human resources* that we can locate the major differences between wings of American Judaism. American Orthodox Judaism has managed to create *committed and highly engaged laity*, people who are willing to sacrifice a great deal, when they need to, to participate fully in Jewish life.

The liberal wings of American Judaism today face the great challenge of creating a similarly committed and highly engaged laity and sense of peoplehood within their congregations. This is a difficult task, but it would be a mistake to regard it as impossible across the board. American religious fluidity, seen in Jewish population surveys and in the Pew study, shows that religious identification changes. While that fluidity often moves in the direction of fewer Jewish connections, sometimes it moves in the direction of more Jewish connections. The Pew study and other studies have shown that when young people get a little older, when they marry and have children, they are much less likely to describe themselves as “secular.” The American Jewish Committee Public Opinion Poll of 2007 shows higher levels of Israel attachment among Conservative and Reform Jews than the AJC Poll showed in 1997.

It’s also very important to note that current attachments to Israel among young Jews are substantial, if we look just at American Jews with two Jewish parents. Although the Jewish press publicized diminishing attachments to Israel among young American Jews, in Steven M. Cohen’s misleadingly titled article: *Young American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*,<sup>14</sup> Cohen says, “On a variety of measures, approximately 60% of non-Orthodox Jews under the age of 35 express a measure of interest in, caring for, and attachment to Israel.” He continues by explaining that the decline in attachment to Israel is

primarily a factor of intermarriage, which is more prevalent among young American Jews. “Among the unmarried and the non-married, the number with high attachment to Israel surpasses the number with low attachment. . . . Intermarriage is a major factor in driving down the Israel attachment scores in younger adults.”<sup>15</sup>

### **On *Kiruv* and Cliquishness**

In the movement toward more identification with Israel and with the Jewish people, interventions have now and can in the future make a big difference. The evaluations which have been conducted over and over again looking at birthright Israel data show that *Taglit*-Birthright Israel, has powerful and persistent effects on attachments to Israel. One of the reasons young American Jews today, including Conservative and Reform Jews, feel somewhat more connected to Israel than they did a decade ago is that they or their children went on Birthright Israel, which has been shown to measurably influence Israel connections and Jewish identification long after the trip has been completed.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that Birthright Israel also serves as a forum for positive interactions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox young Jews, the groundwork is also laid for future cooperative Jewish ventures, as well as greater attachment of Jewishness among participating non-Orthodox Jews. In that sense, it is appropriate to say that Birthright Israel is a twenty-first century *kiruv* experience.

It is important to recognize, however, that when Orthodox Jews of any age behave in an inconsiderate, arrogant, or cliquish manner, they not only alienate non-Orthodox Jews against themselves but they also alienate them against Jewish observance. The Birthright Israel research data is replete with hurt and angry tales of Orthodox callousness, unfriendliness, or overt unkindness to non-Orthodox Jewish youth. When these interactions take place, their impact is the opposite of *kiruv*. Rather than drawing non-Orthodox Jews close, it pushes them away. Perhaps most upsetting, it is possible that some young Orthodox Jews behave this way because they have been encouraged by their parents, rabbis, and teachers to protect themselves from possible “pollution” through interactions with non-Orthodox peers by maintaining social isolation.

It is also important to acknowledge that the wings of American Judaism influence each other, whether or not they always admit it. Reform Judaism has learned from Orthodoxy much about the importance of ritual, text study, and joy and spontaneity during worship services. Many of the most positive initiatives in the transdenominational renaissance that is occurring within a limited but important segment of American Jewish life are being led by young people who received their training under Orthodox auspices, such as Orthodox artistic business entrepreneur Aaron Bisman, and Storahtelling's "nonprofit musical and dramatic company" founded by Amichai Lau-Lavie, "Israeli-born former yeshiva student and member of one of Israel's most prominent rabbinic families."<sup>17</sup> Even the *haredi* world is part of this fluidity. As Adam Ferziger has demonstrated, teachers and *shlichim* in the new "Community Kollels" run by right-wing Orthodox *yeshivot* are now involved in education and outreach in places far away—in every way—from the insular worlds in which they have trained. In the law of unintended consequences, they are affected by the people they teach, even as the people they teach are affected by them.<sup>18</sup>

This is far from the first time in Jewish history that Jews have faced the challenge of trying to figure out how much they can or should empathize with people whose lifestyles are very different from theirs. Indeed, while this struggle is certainly not limited to the Diaspora, it is one of the results of and one of the definitions of the Diaspora experience—the isolation of the individual Jew in an often sophisticated environment that has the effect of distancing that Jew from his or her brothers and sisters. A powerful tool for creating feelings of connection between Jews in the United States and Israel and Jews who affiliate differently, as research repeatedly demonstrates, can be found in participation across cultural lines in the *Taglit*-Birthright Israel program. The *mifgash* is extremely effective and has a profound, positive influence on both Israeli and American participants.

Other types of Orthodox/non-Orthodox *mifgashim* are also critical, I would argue, for the collective health of the American Jewish community. Given that Orthodox Jews tend in certain ways to live in a different America than non-Orthodox Jews, some in the Orthodox world have wondered whether peoplehood is a concept that has out-

grown its usefulness, and that Orthodox Jews should seal the boundaries and leave the non-Orthodox world to its fate. Some leaders, sadly, have suggested that Orthodox Jews will soon be “saying kaddish” for non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. It is interesting, by the way, that the extent such statements parallel those of post-Zionist Israeli radicals who similarly assert that Jewish peoplehood has nothing to do with Israeli identity, that the Jewish law of return should be abolished, and that the Jews of the Diaspora, with all their idiosyncrasies and delusions, should be left to their own fate.

It could be argued, to the contrary, that triumphalism and isolationism are unhelpful—and actually un-Jewish ideas, and that from sociological, cultural, and religious standpoints it is much more useful to think in terms of strengthening connections and interactions between Jews with diverse understandings of Jewishness. From sociological standpoints, several related facts suggest that interaction, rather than fragmentation and isolation, is the more useful strategy. As was noted earlier, the relationship between the streams of Judaism is already more fluid than many realize. Even a simple consideration of enlightened self-interest dictates the importance of—at the very least—creating working alliances between Orthodox and non-Orthodox brothers and sisters. Orthodox Jews comprise fewer than 10 percent of America’s Jews, and they need their non-Orthodox co-religionists for a plethora of socio-political enterprises.

Not least, non-Orthodox Jews need Orthodox Jews to help them create more vibrant connections to their own Jewishness. Non-Orthodox communities are actually drawing closer to Jewish peoplehood and identification with Israel, particularly if we look at the children of two Jewish parents. Interventions make a measurable difference in improving the Jewish peoplehood identification of younger, non-Orthodox Jews. Culturally Orthodox Jews are in a particular position of power, leadership, and responsibility toward their fellow Jews. In historical Jewish communities, where densely Jewish lives were surrounded by significant boundaries—usually not of Jewish making—Jewish ethnic capital was created coincidentally. In America today, however, ties to Jewish values, causes, and behaviors—the production of ethnic capital—is a countercultural activity that requires conscious

interventions. Orthodox Jews can help by providing a peer group to non-Orthodox Jews, making it easier for them to explore their own forms of counterculturalism and distinctiveness, through modeling, through friendship, through *mifgashim*.

## NOTES

1. Gil Perl and Yaakov Weinstein, "A Parent's Guide to Orthodox Assimilation," <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~perl/pgindex.html>.
2. Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2008) gives the most comprehensive data, but this paper draws upon other research publications as well.
3. Fern Chertok, Ted Sasson, Leonard Saxe, et al. *Tourists, Travelers, and Citizens: The Impact of Birthright Israel* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, forthcoming, 2009), lists the organizations running Birthright Israel programs.
4. Leonard Saxe, Benjamin Phillips, Graham Wright, Mathew Boxer, Shahar Hecht, and Theodore Sasson, *Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation: 2007-2008 North American Cohorts* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2008).
5. Daniel Parmer and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Bridging the Gender Gap: American Young Adults' Jewish Identity and Birthright Israel," presentation for the Fifth International Conference on Research in Jewish Education, Oranim and the Mandel Institute, Jerusalem, January 8, 2009.
6. United Jewish Communities, National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000-2001.
7. Saxe and Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel*, pp. 142-147.
8. Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Creating and Countering Culture: Young American Jewish Leaders," in *Avi Chai Study of American Jewish Young Leadership*, ed. Jack Wertheimer, forthcoming 2010.
9. Chertok, Sasson, Saxe, et al., *Tourists, Travelers and Citizens*, pp. 11-13.
10. Materials from this section are presented in another context in Sylvia Barack Fishman, "For This Very Time: On Tribes and Tribalism Among Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Jews in 21st Century America," in Rafael Medoff, ed., *Rav Chesed: Festschrift in Honor of Haskel Lookstein* (2009).
11. Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, *Matrilineal Ascent/ Patrilineal Descent: The Gender Imbalance in American Jewish Life* (Waltham, Mass.: Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2008).
12. Fishman and Parmer, *Matrilineal Ascent/ Patrilineal Descent*.
13. Fishman and Parmer, *ibid*.

14. Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, with Lauren Blitzer, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel* (Davis, Cal.: HUC-JIR Research Center, 2007), p. 11.
15. Cohen and Kelman, *Beyond Distancing*, p. 14.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 17. Cohen's data also show that the positive impact of strengthening feelings of being close to Israel is "more pronounced among those under age 35 than those 35-64." The two most important factors in whether young American Jews feel attached to Israel are: (1) did they ever visit Israel? and (2) do they have two Jewish parents? (As for American Jews 65 and older, they tend to feel attached to Israel whether or not they have ever visited.)
17. Steven M. Cohen, "The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating, and Organizing Their Jewish Lives," [www.acbp.net](http://www.acbp.net), 21/64.
18. Adam Ferziger, *The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for Addressing Assimilation* (Bar Ilan University: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality Research & Position Papers, 2006). Ferziger is expanding his analysis of these materials into a book-length study.