

BEYOND THE BUS:
EMERGING STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING BIRTHRIGHTERS
IN JEWISH COMMUNAL LIFE

By

Rachel Barton

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Jewish Nonprofit Management in cooperation with the School of Social Work at the University
of Southern California

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

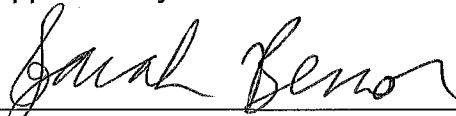
Spring 2014

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

SCHOOL OF JEWISH NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

BEYOND THE BUS:
EMERGING STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING BIRTHRIGHTERS
IN JEWISH COMMUNAL LIFE

Approved By:



Sarah Benor, Advisor



Richard Siegel, Director, SJNM

Table of Contents

Abstract	5
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	7
Terminology	8
Research Methodology	10
Background	12
Goals of Birthright-centered Engagement	20
Engagement Strategies	26
Programmatic and “Concierge” Approaches	26
The Jewish Communal “Concierge”	31
Who Creates the Programs?	34
The Relational Approach	36
Relationships as a Means or and End?	43
The Leadership Development Approach	44
Elements of Leadership Development	46
Unique Leadership Experiences	49
The Fellowship Appeal	51
Identifying Leaders	55
Combining Strategies	57
Best Practices and Common Challenges	60
Defining the Population	60
Building Sustainable Connections	61
Facilitating Transitions	65
Challenges of Communication	68
Access to Information	70
Challenges of Size and Scale	72
Funding and Sustainability	75
Tracking and Evaluation	78
The Role of Engagement Professionals	79

Developing Professional Networks	81
Partnerships and Consultation	84
Developing Common Language	88
Recommendations and Conclusion	91
References	97

Abstract

Taglit-Birthright Israel was created in 1999 to be an impactful experience that would awaken a sense of Jewish heritage and identity in young Jewish adults over the course of a ten-day trip to Israel. Birthright has been shown to have significant long-term impact on the identity of those who go on the trips but “only a modest and inconsistent impact on [participants'] Jewish behaviors” (Sasson et al., 2007, p. 5). In the past ten years, there has been increasing recognition of the need for engagement efforts that harness the impact of Birthright and extend it into the lives of young Jewish adults after they return from their trips. These engagement initiatives exist in a variety of Jewish communal settings and are led by professionals that have developed unique approaches to bringing the meaning of Birthright into their local Jewish communities.

In this thesis, I use existing literature combined with my original research to illustrate the strategies that are in current use for engaging Birthrighters in Jewish communal life in eight North American communities. These strategies include programmatic approaches, relationship building, and leadership development activities and feature innovative programs such as Jewish communal “concierge” services and engagement fellowships. I also examine how engagement professionals are working to develop formal practices through these initiatives and are facing challenges such as sharing information, securing funding, evaluating progress, and developing professional networks. Through interviews with engagement professionals in a variety of positions of leadership with these engagement initiatives, my research also shows how such engagement work is gaining momentum and informing the Jewish professional field. The examination of current strategic approaches to engagement and the growing infrastructure of Birthright-centered engagement initiatives offers a useful case study of trends in Jewish communal work and brings up larger questions of communal interaction and ownership for “the Birthright Generation.”

Acknowledgements

As someone who has experienced the challenges involved with engagement work, I would like to thank and commend the professionals who gave their time to be interviewed for this project and who shared their insights and enthusiasm for their work with me. I would also like to thank the family, friends, and colleagues who supported me over the past year as this project came to fruition. Your questions and genuine interest in this topic helped me to process my thoughts and encouraged me to push forward and write something that I am proud of. Allie and Jessica, thank you for your help with processing my interview transcripts; it was the support I needed at the point when this project felt most overwhelming.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my thesis advisor Sarah Benor, who was both firm and flexible, and always pushed me to go further while reassuring me that it was all within my grasp. I feel satisfied and proud knowing that I ended up with a useful and relevant product, and that this process was also one of personal growth for me.

Introduction

In the winter of 2011, I had the opportunity to staff a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip (henceforth referred to as “Taglit” or “Birthright”) through the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles. I had never been on a Birthright trip myself but had visited Israel many times and had spent six months living there as a participant of a MASA internship program. Because I had not qualified for Birthright myself and had heard so many friends describe the wonderful experiences they had on Birthright, I was excited to go as a staff member and share my knowledge and love for Israel with a new group of people.

The trip itself was as magical an experience for me as it was for the participants; I found myself seeing Israel anew through their eyes and was thrilled to see how deeply some of them connected to Israel in so short a time. Many chose to postpone their flights and stay in Israel longer after the trip was over; several returned within weeks or months for long-term stays through MASA programs or simply by taking the plunge and deciding to live there for a while. Those of us who returned to Los Angeles stayed in touch through a Facebook group, and one participant organized and hosted a Shabbat dinner reunion with my help. Now nearly three years later, some participants are still living in Israel, and the occasional post is still shared through our Facebook group, alerting the group to updates and achievements in the participants' lives.

The Federation staff member who organized the trips stayed in touch with me in the weeks and months after the trip to see how the group was doing and to monitor any follow-up that was happening. He had made it clear to me that if I saw the potential for continued learning or more programming that my bus participants would be interested in, the Federation would be more than happy to partner and fund those efforts. At the time I worked in informal Israel education and was motivated and inspired by the momentum that my group seemed to have to keep exploring Israel and their Judaism after the trip. With the Federation staff member's help, I organized a screening in Santa Monica of a film about Israel

and spread the news through Facebook and word of mouth. When the day came, however, I was extremely disappointed when only a small handful of my own participants came and the overall turnout was very low. I was embarrassed by the failure of the event and could not explain to the Federation staff member why it had not been a success. Some of my own participants had conflicts that day or cited the inconvenient location as their reason for not coming, but others simply seemed to have disappeared back into their regular lives.

Through this experience I came to comprehend the immense challenge of engaging unaffiliated young Jewish adults in Jewish life, even in the wake of an inspiring and potentially transformational Jewish experience such as Birthright. Jewish professionals across North America have similarly struggled with this challenge and have established programs or even dedicated their careers to finding ways to help Birthrighters build lasting connections to their Judaism and to Jewish life in their local communities. Such work involves not only finding ways to connect with the population and sustain their interest, but providing meaningful experiences in comfortable settings that allow Birthrighters to both make sense of and take ownership of their Jewish identity. This thesis seeks to explain the ways that this work is currently being done, and how Jewish professionals are building a professional discipline around the concept of Birthright-centered engagement.

Terminology

A major theme that commonly emerged in my conversations with engagement professionals is a desire to formalize engagement work as a professional discipline within the field of Jewish Communal Service, complete with its own professional language specific to the field. Out of respect for these efforts and the professionals who are working towards their vision of a formalized discipline, I use several of these terms throughout the body of this thesis and will explain the meaning of them here.

The first term, over which there is a fair amount of controversy, is *Birthrighter*, which refers to

anyone who is going or has been on a Birthright trip and is therefore a candidate for participation in a Birthright-related engagement program. Such individuals are alternatively referred to as *Birthright alumni*, to which there is increasing resistance among engagement professionals who feel that this is a misnomer for several reasons. The most practical reason is that the use of the word “alumni” excludes those who have not yet been or are currently on a trip, and engagement initiatives are not exclusive to those groups. On a more ideological level, the use of “alumni” is controversial because it connotes an isolated experience that one has had in the past, or prior belonging to a community of which the individual is no longer fully a part.

Many engagement professionals believe the use of *Birthright alumni* sends the wrong message and is counterproductive to the goals of their work. Some say it overestimates the connection that Birthrighters build to their bus-mates or to the experience itself by likening it to the affinity someone might have for a school they attended for four or more years. Others believe that it sends a message of finality: that the Jewish experience that Birthrighters connected to as a result of the trip is isolated to those ten days in Israel and cannot continue once they return home. Others still feel that it assigns a certain uniformity to this group and makes assumptions about their experience and the way they relate to it. Whatever the reason, there is often a quick and visceral reaction to the use of the term, followed by the suggestion of alternatives, usually *Birthrighter* or the slightly more cumbersome *past participants*. *Birthright alumni* is still used by some and is even built into the names of many engagement initiatives. Where this is the case, I still make use of the term, but for the most part I use the more flexible and less controversial *Birthrighters*.

The second term worth introducing at the outset is *engager*, which refers to a professional, fellow or volunteer who works to engage Birthrighters or other young Jewish adults in Jewish communal life. This term was created and put into use by the professionals at NEXT and is part of an

effort to build a professional community for those who are committed to engagement work. I use *engager* to refer to people in both professional and volunteer roles, and I use *engagement professional* when referring specifically to professionals.

Finally, because of the wide variety of entities that are involved with engagement work—some are entire organizations or programs within an organization, while others are unofficial, grassroots efforts that have grown out of individual communities—I use the blanket term *engagement initiatives*, or simply *initiatives*. For the most part I specify the type when describing an initiative in depth and give context of the umbrella organization and location.

Research Methodology

My research for this project consisted primarily of interviews, website reviews, and document reviews pertaining to engagement initiatives in eight cities across North America. The majority of interviewees were engagement professionals who lead engagement initiatives in their local communities, as well as some higher management professionals from associated organizations such as NEXT and Moishe House. I also interviewed several Birthrighters who have become volunteer leaders in their communities to gain their perspective on how they have experienced some of the programs described here. While my original intention was to focus on engagement initiatives in my immediate community of Los Angeles, I quickly found that an examination of engagement strategies in other communities would be useful for comparative purposes. I began by reaching out to professionals in Los Angeles and other communities with whom I already had relationships and asked them to suggest others they knew of in the field who could contribute to this project. As a result of the enthusiasm of each of the professionals I interviewed and their willingness to connect me with their colleagues in other communities, I was ultimately able to speak with at least one professional from eight North American communities: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, St. Louis, New York, Toronto, Boston,

and Washington, D.C. These locations were chosen for their diversity in size and culture, but all share a commitment to addressing the needs of Birthrighters and development of successful engagement initiatives.

Except for a small minority of interviewees who I was able to meet with face-to-face in Los Angeles, all interviews were conducted by phone. All interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and were guided by questions that were based on a common interview guide but customized to the interviewee. A total of sixteen interviews were completed with a total of eighteen individuals; two of those interviews were conversations with two individuals.

My research also consisted of extensive review of existing literature relevant to the topic, including books and articles related to Jewish affiliation, communal identification and involvement, relationship building, and young Jewish adults, focusing on Millennials. I was also careful to closely monitor Jewish news outlets and professional forums such as the Jewish Journal and eJewish Philanthropy, which kept me updated with current news pertaining to my topic. eJewish Philanthropy, an online resource for Jewish professionals, was especially helpful in that the frequency of articles posted that related to this topic indicated to me the importance of the topic to the current Jewish professional community and the timeliness of this research.

This study is intended to present current trends in the Birthright-centered engagement field primarily from the perspectives of the professionals that populate it. While I included several Birthrighters as interviewees to gain insight on some newer engagement models, their perspectives are not intended to represent the larger population of Birthrighters, nor does this study evaluate the success of specific engagement strategies from the perspectives of the participants. Considerable research on the experiences of Birthrighters has already been published, and that existing literature was used to support the understanding of their needs for this project. As the field continues to develop, a greater

understanding of the impact of these models from the perspectives of participants will become necessary, and the research presented here will hopefully be useful for informing that further research.

Background

The Impact of Birthright

Although Birthright has been around for only fourteen years, there is already a significant amount of research and literature about the success of the Taglit-Birthright Israel program and its long-term impact on participants' connections to Israel and understanding of their Jewish identity. A 2008 ethnography of the “Ten Days of Birthright Israel” provided a glimpse into how the trip engages participants through education and “how its effects seem to last far beyond the time that participants spend together in Israel” (Saxe & Chazan, 2008, p. 3). A second ethnographic study by Shaul Kelner in 2010 examined the way that Birthright uses “diaspora Jewish homeland tourism” to create a lasting sense of transnational Jewish belonging and connection in trip participants (p. xvi).

A number of quantitative studies support the long-term effects of Birthright on Jewish identity and connectivity as well. A survey of Jewish young adults in the United States who had applied for Taglit trips found that participants were significantly more connected to Israel, had a stronger sense of Jewish identity and peoplehood, and were more likely to belong to a synagogue than applicants who had not participated in a trip (Saxe et al., 2012). The 2013 Pew Research Center study of American Jews found that nearly half of American Jews ages 18 to 29 had been to Israel, and a vast majority of the same age group felt that caring about Israel is an important part of being Jewish (Pew Research Center, 2013).

But in spite of the positive data about connections to Israel and Birthright's long-term impact on Jewish identity, a 2007 study by The Steinhardt Social Research Institute consisting of focus groups with Birthrighters in five major cities found that the trips have “only a modest and inconsistent impact

on [participants'] Jewish behaviors” (Sasson et al., 2007, p. 5). Participants expressed a broad range of interests and a general feeling that the Jewish organizations in their communities did not meet their Jewish needs (Sasson et al., 2007). The conclusion that Birthright “produces a desire to be part of the Jewish community” (Saxe, as quoted in Sharon, 2013, p. 1), coupled with the fact that few Birthrighters are acting on those desires, led to investments in initiatives that would continue reaching Birthrighters and make the connection between Jewish identity and Jewish life beyond the trips. Birthright Israel NEXT was launched in 2007 by the Birthright Israel Foundation as a programmatic initiative to provide alumni with Jewish communal connections with their peers in their home communities (Golan, Petersen & Wechsler, 2010). At the same time local organizations were becoming increasingly focused on Birthrighters as a target population for outreach and began to develop their own engagement programs as well (Sasson et al., 2007).

A 2010 program evaluation of Birthright Israel NEXT, conducted by SRI International for the Jim Joseph Foundation, found that NEXT participants in five metropolitan areas were overwhelmingly satisfied with events they had attended, which included interest-based events, Shabbat meals, holiday celebrations, and Birthright trip reunions (Golan, Petersen & Wechsler, 2010). Another study, however, found that among a sample of Birthright alumni in four major metropolitan areas, of which only one overlapped with the SRI International study, a majority expressed a desire to be more involved in organized Jewish life, yet 44 percent had still not attended a single Jewish program after their return from Israel. The study also indicated that respondents were fairly well aware of programs available to them in their cities and were able to pinpoint obstacles to their participation such as accessibility and feeling that events for Jewish young adults tended to be overt “meat markets” (Chertok, Sasson & Saxe, 2009, p. 20).

In addition to, or perhaps as a result of, these conflicting results about its effectiveness, the expensive and labor-intensive Birthright Israel NEXT initiative faced trouble gaining support from private donors and has suffered significant funding cuts by the Birthright Israel Foundation. Funds have been diverted from follow-up programming to support the continuation and growth of the trips themselves, for which there is much greater interest (Berkman, 2012). NEXT has gone through several structural incarnations in recent years and is currently pursuing a model that includes acting as a “concierge” to connect Birthrighters to local engagement initiatives and Jewish activities hosted by other outlets rather than providing its own original programming (Berkman, 2012, p.1).

According to CEO Morlie Levin of NEXT (now officially called NEXT: A Division of Birthright Israel Foundation), the organization's new model uses “choice and ownership” as a guiding philosophy to offer “a do-it-yourself approach...that enables young Jews to create authentic Jewish experiences on their own terms” (Levin, 2012, p. 46). The new model also includes a greater focus on professional development for community-based engagement professionals and consultation services to help local initiatives grow their programs and refine their approaches.

Millennials and Affiliation

Since Birthright serves Jews ages 18 to 26, and has been doing so since 1999, the majority of Birthrighters are currently in their 20s and 30s and are considered part of the generation referred to as “Millennials.” Millennials are a large and widely diverse group and have been written about extensively both in Jewish and non-Jewish contexts. Some of the most common characteristics associated with the generation are a propensity for digital communication (often in place of face-to-face), associations with multiple or “hyphenated” ethnic and sociocultural identities, and a tendency to

settle into careers, marriage, and children later in life than previous generations (Caldwell, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Winograd & Hais, 2011).

Another phenomenon that is associated with American society in general today, but especially with younger generations, is a turn away from traditional communal affiliation and the tight social connectedness that once defined our social interactions. Membership and participation in political, religious, civic, and social groups has declined steadily in recent decades, and Jewish organizations have not been immune as evidenced by the recent Pew study. The study showed that the number of U.S. adults who identify as “Jews by religion” has declined by half since the 1950s, and Millennials are the least likely of the living generations to identify as such. Thirty two percent of Jewish Millennials say they have “no religion” and are “much less connected to Jewish organizations and much less likely to be raising their children Jewish” (Pew Research Center, 2013, pp. 7-8). Within the Jewish community there is widespread concern about declining Jewish literacy and observance, which was one of the reasons for the creation of Birthright (Solomon & Saxe, 2011).

As Jewish communal institutions have come to grapple with these issues, they have focused particularly on how to engage young Jewish adults to ensure that they will make the choice to lead a Jewish life as they move into different life stages. Many have realized, however, that the unique needs and interests of Millennials mean that they will not necessarily turn to traditional institutions like synagogues and JCCs, and new approaches are required to engage them. “In the past decade there has been an explosion of effort to engage young Jewish adults (YJAs), from Birthright Israel (a free ten-day educational trip for those eighteen to twenty-six who have never been) to Moishe House (self-directed hangouts),” wrote Ron Wolfson in his book *Relational Judaism* (2013, p. 115).

Engagement initiatives have emerged in various forms and have gained traction on college campuses through Hillel and among slightly older cohorts through Moishe House and other young

adult-centered programs. Birthright itself is viewed by many as an engagement tool, but as evidenced by the research described in the previous section, there is a recognized need for engagement efforts that harness the impact of Birthright and extend it into the lives of young Jewish adults after they return from their trips. Now as Birthright-centered engagement initiatives gain momentum, they turn to these other areas of Jewish engagement for strategies and partners to accomplish their goals as a related niche of this growing field (Wolfson, 2013).

Relational Judaism and Social Capital

Rabbis and communal professionals are discussing the rise of and the need for “Empowered” or “Relational” Judaism, particularly among young Jews in the United States (Kaunfer, 2010; Wolfson, 2013). Both of these recent works focus on addressing the trend of declining membership of institutional organizations and the difficulty of engaging young Jewish adults in the communal model that remains from the 20th century. They make the suggestion, as have a vast array of authors both within the Jewish community and without, that community is no longer a one-size-fits-all prescription but needs to be based in quality relationships and mutual interests (Kaunfer, 2010; Wolfson, 2013). Relational Judaism is about a “people before programs” approach, where the focus is on building individual relationships from which the connection to Judaism follows (Wolfson, 2013, p. 22). In many cases, the environments where those connections are best made are not in institutions or through traditional programs, but in informal settings where participants create the experiences for themselves.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam asserts that while both formal and informal group membership has generally declined in the United States, it has the potential for overwhelming comeback if we embrace the value of social capital as we ride out the trends that are causing the decline (2000). In many ways, Birthrighters are doing just that; they are engaging with their Jewish identities through informal cultural

and social activities, as individuals and with one another (Saxe et al., 2012), but they are doing it on their own terms rather than through the formal institutions that have been the traditional yardsticks for Jewish communal involvement. In this sense, “relational Judaism” has taken root and the “do-it-yourself approach” championed by NEXT and other engagement initiatives is right on target with providing Birthrighters the tools to engage with one another and strengthen their networks.

There are, however, two types of social capital; “bonding” capital and “bridging” capital, both of which play a role in engagement (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). “Bonding” capital reinforces ties among homogeneous groups of people who choose to interact with one another; “bridging” on the other hand is the result of turning outwards to build connections among diverse groups for a more interconnected society. The empowerment of Birthrighters to engage informally with one another is doing much to strengthen their “bonding” social capital, but the greater challenge is to build bridging capital towards a broader sense of Jewish communal identification. Engagers have identified strategies that allow them to make use of both types of social capital to build connections with Birthrighters, and they are simultaneously working to build individual relationships as well as relationships toward a broader sense of Jewish communal identification.

In *Taking Hold of Torah*, Arnold M. Eisen describes three levels of community that can engage unaffiliated Jews: local, face-to-face community; global community, also known as the idea of Jewish peoplehood; and a middle-range that lies somewhere in between and has to do with commitment to a shared cause (Eisen, 1997). Through the focus on Birthright “community trips,” where all participants are from the same home community or campus and can therefore engage locally with one another after the trip, engagement initiatives are automatically exposing Birthrighters to the first level of community; through building an understanding of Israel as a central place for all Jews on Birthright, they are connected to the second. The third is more elusive and specific to the individual, and engagement

initiatives are focusing on exposing Birthrighters to the many aspects of Jewish life to give them the opportunity to find the third aspect of community that speaks to them in their own ways.

Engagement as a Professional Discipline

As engagement initiatives have developed and gained traction within the landscape of Jewish communal organizations in the past decade, they have begun to form certain professional standards and practices. According to Suddaby and Viale, there is a direct causal connection between advancements made by specific professionals in an area of work and the development of that work into a recognized professional field. Professional projects carry a power for institutional reform that is accomplished through the use of expertise, social capital, introduction of new rules and boundaries, and reestablishment of social order (Suddaby & Viale, 2011). Engagement professionals in many ways are both consciously and unconsciously using these skills to establish the field of Jewish engagement and influence the existing structure of Jewish organizations to include engagement as an important element of their work.

A vital necessity for operating as such a field is employing social capital, bridging social capital in particular, to “link the silos” and build connections between the communal initiatives that seek to engage Birthrighters (Wertheimer, 2005, p. 2). This goal has already been identified by some and has begun to take shape through local partnerships, professional development networks, and most notably NEXT, which organizes virtual and in-person opportunities for engagement professionals to share best practices and establish a professional community (Levin, 2012). In a similar approach, Moishe House has invested significantly in building such a professional development community for its residents and serves as both a model and partner for NEXT to develop a Birthright-centered network (Horwitz, 2013).

The field of engagement, much like the field of experiential Jewish education, has in some ways been characterized by a lack of uniformity in goals and practices that results in a field that is difficult to assess and evaluate. As Shuki Taylor explained of experiential Jewish education, the lack of uniformity of initiatives stems not from a lack of direction, but from a hesitancy to standardize programs that create experiences of personal meaning making, which by definition are specific to the individual (2014). Taylor explains that a study of experiential Jewish education conducted by Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future found that programs are run by what he dubs “bakers” and “cooks.” The “bakers” run their programs according to very specific, recipe-like formulas, ensuring consistent results, whereas the “cooks” approach their work as an art and are influenced by the nature of the ingredients that produce unique results every time. The same is true of those working to engage Birthrighters; some programs have been deeply planned and perfected over time, while others vary depending on the participants and their desires. What they have in common, however, is that their work is intentional and has taken on defining characteristics that may not be uniform, but have been deeply thought-out and are closely tied to their underlying goals which in turn contribute to the advancement of the field.

In this thesis, I use existing literature combined with my original research to illustrate the strategies that are in current use for engaging Birthrighters in Jewish communal life in eight North American communities and how such engagement work is informing the Jewish professional field. The examination of current strategic approaches to engagement and the growing infrastructure of Birthright-centered engagement initiatives offer a useful case study for examining trends in Jewish communal work that bring up larger questions of communal interaction and ownership for “the Birthright Generation.”

Goals of Birthright-Centered Engagement

Specific objectives vary by program, but engagement initiatives share a common goal of prolonging and deepening the connection made to Jewish life by Birthrighters while on the trip. The idea is to expand the Birthright experience from a ten-day trip into something sustainable and much more impactful as a journey over time.

Birthright as an entry point

While Birthright was created to be an impactful experience that would awaken a sense of Jewish heritage and identity in young people over the course of ten days (Solomon & Saxe, 2011), engagement professionals agree that it serves better as an entry point to a journey that occurs over a longer period of time. “It’s unfair to the trip to peg the future of the Jewish world on a ten-day Jewish experience. I think often what I hear and what I see...is that expectation,” said Ezra Shanken, Director of Emerging Leaders and Philanthropists at the UJA Federation of New York. “I think that it’s the organized Jewish community’s job to ensure future vibrancy of Jewish life, not a ten-day experience in Israel. It’s our job to support the ten-day experience as a tool to be used in conjunction with many tools to create a journey.”

Adam Pollack, Western Regional Director of NEXT, describes the trip as something that disrupts the pattern of a Birthrighter’s regular routine, like a car suddenly swerving into your lane on the highway.

Many folks go on the trip expecting a trip to Israel, and they have an experience that’s meaningful to them, and they start to look around in a different way. So when they’re looking around during their zero to 6 months post-trip, we want to make sure there are opportunities for them to connect Jewishly and to continue that exploration. We know that it opens a door, but

there needs to be something on the other end after the trip to continue that journey and to continue making meaning out of Judaism, and a relationship with Israel.

The role that engagers aim to serve is to be available as a resource when Birthrighters return from Israel, to “give [them] the desire and the tools to engage themselves over the course of their lifetimes,” Adam explained. Liz Fisher, Managing Director of NEXT, explained that Birthrighters are often changed by their experience in Israel, but not necessarily transformed into engaged, committed Jews. The ultimate goal is not to serve up Jewish life on a platter, but to give young Jewish adults a taste for it that will motivate them over the course of their lives. “It’s about capturing that spark that we believe is triggered for many people on Birthright, and using that spark to help people understand that the community can have meaning for them. If you can make that shift, then people will continue to look for it themselves throughout their lifetime.”

While some professionals see involvement with their initiatives as an end in itself, many see their initiatives as a “bridge” or “pipeline” from Birthright into broader communal involvement. Their goal is not to gain membership or retain participants, but to guide them through to something else that will provide that meaningful long-term experience. “We’re not a membership organization, we’re not trying to build lists and keep growing, we’re always trying to pass people through to other opportunities, events, and programs,” said Rebecca Sugar, Director of The Alumni Community in New York.

Building a comprehensive experience around the trip

There is common agreement among engagement professionals far and wide that the key to a lasting experience is to build infrastructure around the trip itself, where every element contributes to a holistic experience that is intrinsically connected to the Birthright participant's home community from

the start. Follow-up is seen by many as inextricable from the trip itself: Josh Furman, Director of JConnect Seattle, is quoted in Ron Wolfson's *Relational Judaism* as saying, "I only do Birthright trips where I can follow up on relationships I've created throughout the trip" (Wolfson, 2013, p. 118). Ezra Shanken echoed that sentiment, saying "We don't need to be doing birthright trips through UJA Federation New York unless we're going to do great follow-up." In the best scenarios, engagement professionals are able to be involved even before the trip begins through orientations or individual contact with the Birthrighters who will be traveling with them.

A number of elements are identified throughout this thesis that contribute to the building of these holistic experiences, the most important of which is the foundation of a community-based trip. Research has shown that community trips, sponsored by a local organization that takes participants who are all from the same community, are a key element of a comprehensive and impactful Birthright experience (Sasson et al., 2007). Engagement professionals, organizers, and participants agree that community trips are "where the magic happens." Birthrighter and community leader Jeff Finkelstein of Washington D.C. described how his community trip through NEXT DC at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington impacted his experience, and led to "exponential growth" of his involvement with the Jewish community:

Having gone through this extraordinary experience together...we had an opportunity to not just build bridges and connections with people while we were in Israel, but we realized that this is our community. So when we came back to the states, we had already developed a foundation for the community that would become ours. I would liken Birthright to an on-ramp to the Jewish community, and when you get on it together...I think there's something to be said for doing that together.

One element that makes community trips so successful is that local organizations are able to use their

own engagement staff as trip leaders (“madrachim”) and begin to engage Birthrighters during or even before the trip. Ezra Shanken explained:

When you're actually running the bus you have the opportunity to create a message of what is available when people come back, versus when they're just on a general Birthright trip and they're getting that Israel shot-in-the-arm feeling, but coming back and really having to navigate on their own the possible opportunities for engagement within the organized Jewish world. We can actually fast-track that by being on the trip with them, and we have two staff members that are with the individuals on the trip as they're having this transformational experience, so that we're able to really route them.

Jeff Finkelstein explained how that aspect of his trip made a difference in his experience and motivated him to continue to be involved: “The madrichim are more than just staff members on the trip, they're really there to help you navigate and kind of find your place and what you want to do. Birthright meant a lot to me, so I wanted to be involved in the kind of capacity where it has some sort of impact on Birthrighters.”

Jewish ownership

A key objective expressed by many interviewees was that participants feel an increased sense of ownership of their Jewish identity, and become comfortable not just with experiencing Jewish life, but being an active participant and creator of it as well. Liz Fisher explained that NEXT's work focuses not just on showing Birthrighters the possibilities for involvement in the Jewish community, which often still feels foreign to them, but to show that “there's a Jewish lens through which they can look at their everyday experiences.” Shauna Waltman, Director of Toronto's Community Connect, echoed her: “We see ourselves as educating young adults as to how our community functions, and they can actually be

active participants and actually build community with and for their peers.”

“People of this age, of which I’m also of this age, they want to generate their own activities, their own programs. They want to do it themselves, that’s the culture. That’s a fact. So we’re just figuring out how to provide programming like that within the confines of being a large institution,” said Margalit Rosenthal of the Los Angeles Federation. Part of that exploration involves listening directly to what Birthrighters are looking for, and understanding that while they may lack some of the tools, they do have enormous capacity for creating meaningful Jewish experiences of their own.

“There’s always this misconception that this generation is a bunch of slackers and that they don’t care about the world,” said Joelle Berman, Communications Manager of NEXT. “There’s actually more evidence than ever that this is one of the most driven and most creative generations, that has access to more information and know-how, and frankly, more access to getting things done than any other generation before because of the internet. So the idea is that all these young people have everything they need at their fingertips, to be able to find what they’re looking for and be able to execute on what their dreams are.” The role of engagement initiatives then becomes providing a context for that execution and providing guidance along the way for Birthrighters to channel their interests and realize their visions for their community.

Managing expectations

It should be acknowledged that such initiatives are designed to be available to those who find an interest in a more extensive journey, and engagement professionals are realistic about the fact that not all Birthrighters will feel this way. One interviewee expressed that a major mistake that she has seen made is assuming that Birthrighters are interested in Jewish communal life and are just “waiting for an invitation.”

...And even after their Birthright trip, they're still not waiting for that invitation. And even if they get the invitation, if they don't know people who are going to be there, they're not going to go. They've never been in that building before. So the assumption that a lot of people around the Jewish community make about Birthright, that the kids are just sort of raring to go after they get back, we've just not found that to be true. We have found that once you get them past that first moment, then you really have an opportunity and there's enormous potential. But you can't underestimate that initial challenge.

This understanding was put most succinctly by Joelle Berman of NEXT:

We know that not every single Birthright Israel alumni is going to take advantage of all these [post-trip initiatives]. There are plenty of people who go on a Birthright Israel trip and that's it. That's all they want out of it, and that's fine. But our job is to be here in case they get back and they're like, "Wow! I have all this great energy from the trip, all these questions, I want to look into this more... maybe the trip was yet another chapter in this ongoing connection I have with the Jewish community, or to Israel, or to my heritage, or to whatever it is, and I want to continue building on that." We want to be here to make sure you know exactly how to do that. In whatever way makes sense for you and in whatever way is comfortable for you, and regardless of where you live.

Engagement Strategies

From my conversations with engagement professionals there emerged three distinct strategic approaches to engagement, which I describe with examples below. Engagement professionals employ these strategies in different ways depending on the specific population and community, and most engagement initiatives involve more than one or a hybrid of these strategies. In developing these strategies, engagement professionals have discovered best practices or found innovative ways to engage young Jewish adults, and by sharing them they are contributing to the advancement of their field.

Programmatic and “Concierge” Approaches

The engagement approach that is most familiar to a Jewish communal institution, and was the backbone of the earliest initiatives through Birthright Israel NEXT, is the programmatic approach. Programmatic initiatives are most successful when they speak to and engage the specific interests of a group, which is made easier when that group carries a particular affinity or identity (Wertheimer, 2011). Since Birthright is, among other things, a Jewish program in itself that builds a sense of identity around a common experience, the logical progression comes that a way to extend the Jewish journey that started with this experience is to provide more programs for Birthrighters to attend with one another after they have returned home. These programs cater to a wide variety of interests and take many shapes and forms, but a key element they provide is bringing Birthrighters back together with their peers that they experienced the trip with, as well as introducing them to new Jewish peers with whom they can then continue the experience of exploring Jewish life.

Engagement professionals emphasize strongly that the programs they put on are not simply for the sake of programming, nor do they fall into the trap of putting on events where the appeal is purely

social and often aided by the presence of alcohol. This is something that young adult engagement initiatives have been criticized for far and wide (Wertheimer, 2011), and engagers are working consciously to move away from that stereotype. Many stated that if the program does not have an identifiable purpose that will lead to further engagement, they will simply not endorse it. They also try not to replicate programming that may exist elsewhere through another outlet, and instead focus on targeted programming that fills gaps they identify in their particular communities. One director of an engagement initiative shared that all their programs are required to have three elements: they must be content-driven; they must be driven in part by members of the community; and they must connect participants to some other aspect of the local Jewish community.

Some of the most successful organizations may put on as many as 160 events per year that reach thousands of participants, through a combination of their own efforts and partnerships with other organizations. UJA's Community Connect in Toronto, for example, organizes events that provide professional networking opportunities, arts and culture, holiday and Shabbat celebrations, Holocaust education, and Israel advocacy. Many initiatives provide educational events on "big topics" such as environmental issues, teach a Hebrew language series, or organize charity or fundraising events for a Jewish or Israel-related cause. Most try to provide a range from within each of these areas of interest, and they often draw from the motivation of participants for inspiration to create new and exciting programs.

Charity events in particular often arise from the passion of a particular individual or group of people, and because of this they tend to become major motivators of engagement for those that feel especially inspired or connected to the cause. "We don't do fundraising as a means of fundraising... our fundraising is purely a means of engagement," Toronto's UJA Community Connect Director Shauna Waltman stated. Fundraisers are often ways for young people to be involved with something that

speaks to them and are a powerful vehicle for engagement through empowerment. Birthrighters in Toronto initiated a charity basketball tournament called Hoops for Israel, which has turned into a major annual event over the past seven years and has raised over \$550,000 to support Ethiopian families in Israel (www.hoopstoronto.com). A group of Birthrighters involved with the Kahn Fellowship through the Los Angeles Federation came up with the idea of a casino night fundraiser during a brainstorming workshop, which became one of the first events they put on with the program. The group chose to donate proceeds to Cafe Europa Tel Aviv, a social community for Holocaust survivors living in Tel Aviv. The event drew a considerable crowd that then became engaged with other events put on by the fellows and by the local Moishe House, which served as a partner for the event.

Some organizations exist simply to provide a certain type of programming; for example, E-3 in Denver was created by three individuals (all with the first initial 'E') who wanted to provide Jewish "cultural gatherings in 'safe and nonthreatening' settings" (Shanken, as cited in Wertheimer, 2011). The organization was created in 2008 in the wake of severe budget cuts as a result of the economic downturn, which meant a major reduction of young adult programming at the Colorado Federation. The three founders saw an opportunity to create something unique and independent that would fill this newly created gap and continue "the flow of young [people] into the organized Jewish community." The unique factor they identified as missing from Jewish life was a focus on cultural events that incorporated Jewish themes: art, music, film, and more became the vehicles for Jewish identification and connection. The goal was to build events around content that was intrinsically interesting to young people in Colorado, that had the added appeal of "turning out to be Jewish."

There was always a goal, however, of building a connection to organized Jewish life, which was achieved by having organizations such as the Federation co-sponsor events and becoming involved wherever possible. "We created single opportunities, single moments in time for people to feel a sense

of connectedness, with the goal of having the organized Jewish community being the backbone of all life,” Ezra Shanken, one of the three “E’s” and now the Director of Emerging Leaders and Philanthropists at the UJA Federation of New York, explained. Even as the economy has recovered and young adult programs have been re-established, E-3 continues to provide cultural events with a Jewish connection that bring young Jewish adults into communal life in unexpected ways.

As the above examples illustrate, different types of events appeal to different individuals. Initiatives that take a programmatic engagement approach recognize this and provide events in a range of styles in addition to a variety of topics. One such variation involves the level of “barrier” of the program, or the extent to which someone feels that the program is accessible and enjoyable with a relatively low level of knowledge or expectation (Putnam, 2000). It is important for the barrier to be lowest in a program that may be engaging someone for the first time, and especially when it is immediately following a Birthright trip.

This can be challenging when it comes to Birthrighters who may not be as inclined to attend Jewish events, but an important tool for bringing people in are the buses themselves. Most Birthrighters are attracted first to the “reunion factor” and are more eager to be involved with their own bus at first than anything else. So for many programming models, the first step involves bringing a Birthright bus together and introducing them to the idea that the connections they made can continue, and expand, with their Jewish community at home.

Sara Weiner, Young Leadership Associate at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, explained that with their post-Birthright engagement initiative, called NEXT DC, there are “different levels to our programming, and the Birthright alumni programming is sort of like freshman year...the only obligation of being involved in a NEXT DC program is that you show up for a volunteer program [or] a Shabbat program [for example]...everything is very inexpensive, everything is educational and

fun. We try to keep it very low-barrier.” From that point, Birthrighters can feel free to explore and seek out what piques their interest or allows them to continue their Jewish exploration.

Others, however, disagree with the idea that initial programming should be low-barrier in the sense that it keeps the experience on a surface level and doesn't acknowledge the deep emotional and intellectual curiosity that some Birthrighters feel motivated to explore. Rebecca Sugar, Director of The Alumni Community in New York, feels that programming for young Jewish adults should not hesitate to delve deep from the start and may in fact fail to capture the interest of many Birthrighters if it does not do so. The Alumni Community provides “high-level educational events” for Jews in their twenties, partially because this was identified as a gap in available programming but also because it helps people “feel like insiders, not outsiders” of Jewish life. “We stress that these are people who are very intelligent and sophisticated in their regular lives; they’re educated and they’re in important professions and they’re smart people. And they don’t want to hear it stripped down; they want to get information at the level they’re accustomed to getting,” Rebecca explained.

Other variations include the scale of the event, which can be just as important as the topic or activity to Birthrighters. In many cases, organizations assume that large-scale, “sexy” programs tend to attract young people best, and they assume they need to be able to produce such events themselves in order to gain the interest of young Jewish adults. Some engagers have realized, however, that smaller scale programs that are targeted to more specific audiences also have significant appeal, particularly for Birthrighters who may be seeking answers to questions about Jewish identity that have arisen from their experiences in Israel, or simply for those who prefer that type of atmosphere. It also tends to be more conducive to relationship-building and leads to more meaningful engagement, and it is often reminiscent of the group engagement style of a Birthright bus, which makes the experience familiar and enjoyable.

Shauna Waltman explained how Community Connect came to this conclusion: “As we were talking to a lot of different people, we realized that it was much better to go after small, targeted, very focused events, than having these huge social events that were sexy and looked good, but not necessarily...having an engagement component.” Many other engagement initiatives, most notably NEXT, have similarly concluded that these large, “sexy” events are already being produced by other partners who may be better suited to do this type of work, and they should focus their efforts on building the connections in the spaces between these large events. The more sophisticated approach that has developed is to include these partner events as one of the many offerings of a networked community, but not for every organization attempting to do outreach to reproduce the same thing, which can be expensive and difficult to sustain.

The Jewish Communal “Concierge”

Beyond this initial point of entry where participants may find an interest through a more general type of program lies the complex arena of guiding a Birthrighter through his or her interests and affinities to a more specialized path of Jewish involvement. This approach has often been described as a “concierge” style, where individuals are guided in various directions based on their needs or interests by someone who holds substantial knowledge of the surrounding area or community (Levin, as cited in Berkman, 2012; Wolfson, 2013).

The concierge approach is most useful for guiding those whose interest in Jewish involvement has already been piqued and they have become motivated to explore the ways in which it can become meaningful for them. While the goal is to connect individuals to specific programs or activities that satisfy their needs and interests, there is often a bit of exploration that needs to be done, both in terms of the engager learning what makes someone tick and the individual being able to identify what they

are looking for. In this way, the communal concierge approach is intimately connected with the relational approach, which will be discussed later as its own section.

Sara Weiner explained how NEXT DC acts as a community concierge: “One of the things that DC does so well is offer so many different wide and varying opportunities for people; whether it's with us, whether it's with [a synagogue] or a different organization, there's just so much out there. I think the biggest challenge is to not get overwhelmed by it and to help people find their niche and what works for them in terms of engagement. It's a lot about meeting people where they are and appropriate follow-up. We definitely see ourselves in that way as a concierge to the community, and I think we're doing a pretty decent job of it.”

For organizations that are also in the business of providing Birthright trips for their community, the concierge approach, and engagement in general, is enhanced when it is integrated with sending engagers as madrichim on the buses to begin making those connections while on the trip (Sasson et al., 2007). It is also key in terms of infrastructure for reaching a large and ever-increasing number of Birthrighters returning from community trips, where they are already learning of the many forms in which Jewish communal life is available to them before they come home.

In the context of NEXT, for example, this approach became more relevant, and even necessary, for scaling its in-house programming model to serve a larger population with diverse interests and needs it could not meet alone. Now NEXT has grown to a point where it trains locally-based engagement professionals to use the concierge model with their own initiatives, using the more specific knowledge they have of the Jewish landscape in their home communities. Other initiatives have similarly found it a useful and effective way to reach a larger audience while simultaneously meeting the diverse and complex needs of the population. E-3, for example, maintains a quasi-independent status (it is now formally a subset of the JCC Meisel Arts and Culture Center) but closely partners with

many other Jewish organizations in the community, and it views itself as a concierge or portal into other Jewish opportunities in Denver. For E-3, the neutral space in which it defines itself lowers barriers for young Jewish adults but provides the entree into a host of other opportunities should that be what they are looking for.

The concierge model tends to involve thinking not just locally, but also outside of the individual community and looks at the broader possibilities of experience that Birthrighters seek. The concept is used by some initiatives as a direct link to Israel and provides services for individuals who want to spend more time there and need help navigating their experience while on the ground. The Alumni Community in New York employs an engagement professional who is based in Israel and spends time with New York-based Birthright groups while they are there. Her job is both to introduce what The Alumni Community has to offer back home and to serve as the “Israel concierge,” connecting people with an ulpan program, a kibbutz experience, or even the universities in Israel.

Others, like Joel Frankel at the Federation of St. Louis, have discovered that they can help Birthrighters who are in a transitional period of life connect to Jewish life in surrounding communities as well as their own. Joel explained that many of the Birthrighters he comes into contact with have graduated from college and are contemplating a job in a larger community like Chicago or New York, and he can help them make those connections through a larger engagement referral network. One Birthrighter who went on a St. Louis community Birthright trip and subsequently moved to Chicago now sits on the Birthright alumni committee there, which to Joel is part of the success of his work. “It’s really about long-term strategies and long-term thinking that is, let’s build a community that’s engaging and welcoming and as inclusive as possible, and [Birthrighters] will have a touch point with the Federation in St. Louis for the rest of their lives, and they’ll connect it with their trip. So while the emotional attachment is to Israel, they’ll understand we’re here for them as well.”

Who Creates the Programs?

Engagement professionals agree that a programmatic approach is only successful when it involves deep attention to the interests and ideas of Birthrighters themselves and a commitment to building the ideas of participants from the ground up into new programs when they don't already exist. This understanding ties the programmatic approach into both the relational and leadership approaches some initiatives have taken, which will be reviewed in greater depth in later sections.

As with the previously discussed examples of charity events, when a Birthrighter is inspired by a particular topic and has a vision for an event, engagement professionals will usually go out of their way to help make their idea a reality. In New York, a Birthrighter who went on a trip to Europe returned with an interest in a town in France that came together to save its population of Jews during the Holocaust. He researched the town, found a documentary about the subject, and proposed an event to share the story, which the Alumni Community happily sponsored. Rebecca Sugar explained that they found this to be a worthwhile endeavor because it provided a learning opportunity for the community that was realized by the inspiration and motivation of one individual who wanted not just to create an event, but to share something he felt was important. Such events are often put together with the guidance and oversight of engagement professionals to ensure that the experience aligns with the goals of the initiative.

Another popular concept is “do-it-yourself” programming, where an organization, often a larger entity like NEXT, provides funds, materials, and informational resources to allow Birthrighters to produce programs for themselves and their peers. The most successful and well-known example of this is NEXT Shabbat, where a Birthrighter can sign up to receive a “Shabbox” full of the essentials to put on a Shabbat dinner for a group of friends, and then submit receipts to have the cost of the dinner fully

subsidized by NEXT. This concept has increased in popularity because it is cost-effective and enables Jewish life to flourish in places where engagers may not be able to reach young Jewish adults. More importantly, it aligns with the idea of empowering young Jewish adults to create Jewish experiences on their own terms and encourages building of micro-communities, or small, informal communities that emerge out of social networks and provide organic, comfortable environments in which Jewish life can take place.

What some try to avoid, however, is overemphasizing the do-it-yourself approach for the sake of having participant-driven events, when Birthrighters are often unsure of what they seek from Jewish life in the first place. Rebecca Sugar likened it to someone with no knowledge of cars walking into an auto show and having someone say, “You decide, which car is the best for you?” “I don’t know anything about cars. Just because I’ve driven in one doesn’t mean I’m qualified to speak to the issue. So we didn’t find in New York that it was the best approach,” she explained.

What Birthrighters often want or need in the early stages of post-trip engagement is education, not only about Judaism but about the landscape of Jewish life in their community. While the concierge approach helps Birthrighters find what they may specifically be looking for, some organizations, Federations in particular, find it important to provide education about their organization, the impact their work makes, and their context within the larger Jewish community. The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, for example, has created a series called the NeXus program for young adults to learn about Jewish life in the greater D.C. area and find inspiration, both communally and philanthropically.

Participation in this type of course often appeals to those who may be looking for a leadership role and thus links people to those opportunities. Education is also a vital piece of leadership development programs and gives young Jewish adults the tools to navigate their community and create

their own Jewish experiences for their peers. This topic will be discussed in greater depth in the sections that follow.

The Relational Approach

While a programmatic approach is often successful for engaging individuals by appealing to their interests, cultivation of a deep personal relationship to Jewish life requires connections to be made on more of an individual level. Ron Wolfson makes the case in his book *Relational Judaism* that it is not in institutions, synagogue services, or events alone that Jews form a sense of community or of their own Jewish identity, but rather through relationships that make the connection personal. Wolfson argues for a “people before programs” approach, wherein Jewish institutions should focus on helping Jews build relationships to other Jews and to Judaism, and programming should follow from this rather than the other way around (2013, p. 22).

In regards to Millennials in particular, the generation from which the majority of Birthrighters come, Wolfson dismisses the idea that individualism and independence are major motivating forces. Rather he posits that this young generation that is the topic of so much conversation, both within and outside the Jewish world, seeks meaning through connections to others in Jewish life as previous generations have done, but in different ways. Because traditional institutional affiliation is no longer the norm, engagers should focus on helping individuals find meaningful experiences on their own terms and establish a sense of Jewish ownership where the rituals, values, and feelings of Judaism become integrated with life in general. Engagement of Millennials should not be an invitation to participate in an organization they feel doesn't speak to their needs, but an initiation of a journey towards Jewish connection (Wolfson, 2013).

One organization has been recognized as the premier model for relational engagement of young Jewish adults today: Moishe House. Through a simple, cost-effective model built on the values of peer

leadership and relationship building and welcoming, non-denominational environments, Moishe House has exploded in popularity and is looked to as the ideal of relational engagement (Wolfson, 2013). In many ways, the direction that many engagement initiatives are headed is inspired by Moishe House, which also makes them ideal partners because of the common ground they are establishing. “Many Moishe House participants aren't eligible anymore for Birthright, but many of them have been [on Birthright]...they're looking for a home base, a peer-driven platform that's very much in line with what the Birthright experience offered to them, only in their home community,” said Michael Gropper, Western Regional Director of Moishe House and former Birthright engagement professional at the Los Angeles Federation. Liz Fisher, Managing Director of NEXT, described Moishe House and NEXT as “cousins” and “thought partners” that share ideas on how to accomplish their similar goals.

Some engagement initiatives have begun to emulate aspects of the Moishe House approach, while others use Moishe Houses in their communities as key partners for accomplishing their work. On a national level, NEXT and Moishe House have partnered around the success of NEXT Shabbat, combining their assets to provide a peer-led, do-it-yourself Shabbat experience in the warm and inviting atmosphere of the local Moishe House (Udasin, 2010). Partnerships also take place around particular community events, especially things that contribute to a sense of building intentional and inclusive micro-communities for young Jewish adults. “Birthright alumni are helping to build those communities and are able to use Moishe House as a venue for their Jewish communal desires,” Michael explained. He sees both initiatives growing together in the future as they continue to build their work around these common relational values.

Wolfson argues that whatever specific product the organization may offer, the focus should always be on relationship building for true engagement to take place. For Jewish engagement professionals seeking to reach out to Birthrighters, this means that their work must be accomplished

through the difficult tasks of discovering the right ways to make those connections and investing time and resources in the strategies that will allow as many Birthrighters to make those connections as possible.

Wolfson and others, such as the Hillel Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative (CEI) model, have identified specific engagement strategies that create a relational foundation on which to build. Relational work often starts with a meeting or conversation where an individual connection is built, often referred to as “one on ones” or “coffee dates.” These may take place between friends or acquaintances, or between complete strangers, and vary in nature accordingly. But the essence of a “one on one” is to ignite a relationship based around a conversation that leads to Jewish meaning and connection.

For Sara Weiner, engager at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, this is where engagement begins. After a group of Birthrighters return from a trip, Sara sends an email introducing herself and inviting each Birthrighter to have coffee with her, to talk about their trip and to learn more about what is available for them in the D.C. area. The group that responds positively to these emails is “pretty self-selecting,” Sara notes, and some prefer to simply show up to an event where they know they will see friends and feel comfortable in that sense. But for those who take her up on the offer, it can signify the beginning of a journey, a search for meaning and a place within a community. Sara shared a story of one such individual who found his place with an a capella group at a local synagogue:

I had a Birthright participant on one of my trips last summer; he came back and was like, “I really really want to get involved.” He is really very shy—he doesn't want to be involved in planning and stuff, but we would get together probably once every two months for coffee and I'd ask him what he was interested in, I'd talk to him about some different options, and nothing was clicking for him. So finally I said to him, “If it had nothing to do with being involved with

the Jewish community, what would you do?” And he said he would sing. He's also a Conservative Jew, he was involved in one of the synagogues...so he ended up getting very involved with Adas Israel's a capella music group. And for him, that has nothing to do with NEXT, but it's a success because he found a home somewhere in the community.

Here we see the overlap of several engagement strategies in one; what Sara accomplished might be seen as being part of the concierge strategy. However, in this case the building of a more substantial connection was key: Sara was able to get to know the young man to the point where she could help decide what might be the right fit for him, and through their conversations he was given the opportunity to explore his own identity and have that validated by someone from within the community.

“It's not about creating a program you think young adults will like; it's about inviting young adults to talk to you and to tell you what they would like...and what they would like to organize, and how they want to be involved. It's about making them feel heard, and it's about utilizing all of their skill sets, and all of their networks, and all of their connections, and helping to build that world,” said Joelle Berman. Others agreed that the relational approach is less about offering a “menu” of options but rather attending to individual needs, which may fall outside the box of what one might consider traditional engagement. Engagers help Birthrighters with a variety of things outside the scope of their programming, from job connections to finding a rabbi to perform a Jewish wedding to understanding Jewish mourning rituals when a loved one passes away.

Relational work is also about simply being out in the community and creating opportunities for connections to be made. Many engagers spend time going to events and having conversations with whoever they come across, both as a professional and as a community member, as this can have unexpected results of sharing information or building new partnerships. Margalit Rosenthal of the Los Angeles Federation described an instance where this was the case for her: “I met some people at a

Shabbat dinner I went to a couple months ago, and from that interaction, a couple of them applied to staff some of our trips this winter. So they probably wouldn't have known that we had applications or known to apply if I hadn't been at that dinner and met them and told them what I do."

A major challenge with engagement through relationship building is the high engager-to-participant ratio needed to do such work. With thousands of Birthrighters in any given community, and with Birthright Israel sending more participants on trips than ever before, it becomes nearly impossible to reach every Birthrighter on an individual basis, even with the growing number of engagers employed by Jewish organizations. At NEXT DC, each of the four engagement professionals has a list of Birthrighters for whom they are the "relationship manager," meaning that they are the point person for those individuals to reach out to with questions, or for a more substantive relationship if that is what they are looking for. The "relationship managers" reach out to their lists to have meetings around every six months, knowing that they will not likely be able to reach every individual every time, but they are accomplishing something in that those Birthrighters know not only an organization, but a name and a face that is available to them if they choose to reach out.

Because of the challenge of needing to reach such sizable groups of people, larger communities do this relationship-building work strategically, focusing on outreach to key people who they identify as having a particular presence and the capacity to reach a large number of individuals themselves. Similar to Malcolm Gladwell's idea that the "tipping point" of a social epidemic relies on the actions of "Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen" (Gladwell, 2002, p. 34), Shauna Waltman describes the relational strategy of Community Connect as focusing on "influencers," people with high levels of social capital who can help them grow the influence of their engagement work exponentially. "Influencers can be rock star participants on a Birthright bus, they can be people with large social networks, they can be people with a certain area of expertise, but essentially it's that ripple effect kind of theory where we go

after the people in the center; we engage them so they can go out and bring in their networks into communities.” With this type of strategy, engagers are harnessing the power of both types of social capital; they are relying on “influencers” to use their bonding social capital through building peer relationships and then harnessing that influence with their own “bridging” social capital to link those networks to a larger sense of community (Putnam, 2000).

In this sense engagement initiatives are also encouraging the building of micro-communities where relational connections are built organically and then ideally become part of a network of a larger “community of communities” within their area (Wolfson, 2013, p. 3). This helps to create spaces where genuine relationships are built and contributes to the feeling of being part of a naturally occurring, “non-establishment” community that young Jewish adults identify with more readily (Wertheimer, 2011, p. 13).

In this context, the physical space in which events take place can have a significant impact on the ways that connections are built for Birthrighters and others. Often times the physical space, the building that houses an establishment Jewish organization, is representative of the disconnection and alienation young people feel from such institutions. As one interviewee stated, “Maybe the JCC reminds them of their childhood and they think it's weird to show up there. Or like a synagogue reminds them of a horrible Hebrew school experience that they had when they were younger...so why all of a sudden when they're 25 would they actually show up there for an event?”

At the same time, the Moishe House model has shown that a home or other space that has been designated for the purpose of building community facilitates participation, ownership, and a sense of belonging (Wertheimer, 2011). While engagement initiatives have not ventured into creating residential spaces a la Moishe House, some have embraced the idea and have created spaces for programming where relationships and community are also built.

The Alumni Community in New York has a space in the West Village of Manhattan, a former tae kwon do studio with a trendy Village loft aesthetic, that serves as a combination office and communal space for classes, programs, and Shabbat dinners. “I think having a place – for some people who come to our Shabbat dinners two or three times a month or who come to an eight-week study course, having the same location to come back to and feel like that's their space is community-building and helpful,” Rebecca Sugar explained. The staff that work there sit in the open space at cafe tables to avoid an overly office-like feel and to make sure there is someone there to interact with anyone who might be coming through. “You could have the nicest space in the world, but it's the people that are in the space that matters. A few of my employees are alumni themselves; they look like the cohorts they're working with. They speak like them, they have the same experiences, it's sort of about making the whole experience relatable,” she continued.

For E-3 events in Colorado, it was similarly important to provide events with a Jewish connection “for people who we were seeking out that wouldn't walk in our doors any other way,” Ezra Shanken said. While E-3 was created in the absence of young adult programming through the Federation, they found that introducing the content first, and then introducing the connection to organized Jewish life, attracted more people and provided an entry point for those that otherwise would not have been interested or may have hesitated to get involved. Both Ezra and Rebecca agree that it makes a difference when Birthrighters are not walking into the “big, scary building of a major Jewish organization,” a sentiment often expressed by non-establishment Jewish organizations, some of which also take relational approaches to their work (Wertheimer, 2011).

A further challenge with this approach where individual connections are key is that “establishment” organizations, especially Federations, must overcome the reputations that they are not relatable and are unappealing to young Jews, and that they represent the antithesis of the grassroots,

community-building approach. Lots of Millennials have shied away from these institutions that seem to represent the values of the generations before them, and they are not always able to see themselves in the work of such an organization. Even the idea of being part of an organization can be off-putting to young people, which makes the challenge for establishment organizations considerable (Wertheimer, 2011).

However, from the perspective of some young Federation engagement professionals, doing this type of work actually helps to deconstruct some of those notions and allows Birthrighters and other young Jewish adults to see themselves as a part of the Federation community, just perhaps not in the traditional way. They are learning that they can engage differently, that they can have a say in what their Jewish life looks like, and that there is relevance for them in this type of community. Of UJA's Community Connect in Toronto, Shauna Waltman said:

We're the grassroots movement within the institution. Because that's how it feels. Anyone who's on a committee or who are chairing or driving any one of these events or initiatives, they certainly don't feel that institutional pull [to become involved in a traditional way]. But I think it's a great way to educate people about the Federation and to show them that there is a place for them and they can be community builders on their own terms, and make Federation... that world, relevant to them. And that it's not just a thing that their parents or grandparents contributed or belonged to. Whatever baggage they bring concerning institutionalism or whatnot, that they have a responsibility to make that meaningful and relevant to them and their peers.

Relationships as a means or an end?

In thinking about an engagement model that is based around the work of building relationships,

it can be difficult to determine when program objectives have been achieved, or even to define objectives when relationships are by definition so specific to the individual and lead to such a wide variety of results. Most often, relationship building is seen as an essential piece of engagement work that deepens and sustains the connections young Jewish adults make through other means. Some initiatives focus on relationship building that will lead an individual to something concrete: joining a group or organization, becoming a volunteer leader, or even traveling back to Israel. However, in an era where Jewish association and identification are less and less associated with organizational affiliation or participation in a program, the building of a relationship between young Jewish adults that allows for Jewishness to be explored is sometimes an end in itself.

In the latter cases, non-traditional Jewish identification that grows from the building of Jewish relationships usually finds a natural link with the world of Jewish micro-communities. As discussed previously, engagement initiatives are encouraging the growth of micro-communities, particularly when they can help guide those communities in their exploration of Judaism and connect them to a larger network of Jewish experience. Most importantly, and most often expressed by the engagers interviewed for this project, is a sense that young Jews are encouraged to engage in Jewish community on their own terms, and that they are empowered to discover their own connections rather than participating in Jewish life that is prescribed and not meaningful for them. This often means that the “end” of relational Jewish engagement is yet to be determined, because the individuals in question are given the freedom to determine it for themselves.

The Leadership Development Approach

As often as the argument arises for better engagement of young people in Jewish communal life, nearly as often do we hear a call for development of new leadership for the next generation. Adam

Bronfman of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation stated that “we have powerful models of leadership in our tradition, to which we can turn to inspire a new generation of leadership” (2008, p. 4). Some engagement initiatives have begun to do just that and are seeing that in the context of Birthright-related initiatives, leadership and engagement are deeply intertwined, to the point where they are often one and the same.

According to Dr. Erica Brown, educator and former director of the Jewish Leadership Institute, the Jewish community of today is experiencing an inspiration crisis in its leadership, partially because of an increasing focus for Jewish leaders to gain technical skills like fundraising and management skills rather than emotional connections to Jewish life (2005). With Birthright, however, young Jewish adults often find themselves overwhelmed with inspiration after a trip and lacking for a constructive outlet for their motivation. Furthermore, “Next Gen Jews” are generally impatient with the hierarchical, bureaucratic nature of Jewish communal organizations; they don't want to “‘wait their turn’ or ‘pay their dues’...without decision-making power in our Jewish community, they will lose interest” (Weisman & Myers Allen, 2008, p. 11).

Leadership development programs for Birthrighters are thus ideally positioned to harness that inspiration and guide potential leaders in doing something meaningful immediately after their Birthright trip that helps to build community and connections to Israel. Several of the models described here, while very new, are beginning to show signs of success and are receiving attention within the world of engagement as models worth growing and replicating. Programs range from opportunities to participate in planning a special program, such as the Reverse Mifgash program through NEXT DC, to formal fellowship programs that require a commitment of a year or more of training and education, such as the Kahn and BRIdge Fellowships through the L.A. Federation. Some engagers are finding that leadership development programs are an effective way to engage donors around the idea of Birthright-

related engagement, because the programs really show the impact potential of engagement work and allow donors to see what motivated and empowered young Jewish adults are capable of.

Margalit Rosenthal, Senior Director of the Birthright Israel Experience at the Los Angeles Federation, explained that their leadership development programs enhance her ability to do engagement work successfully because despite being a young Jewish adult herself, she needs the involvement of participants to determine how to shape the programs available to them. “It’s much more efficient and effective to tap specific people from the trip who we see potential in as leaders, as community organizers, as people who can draw out their peers through conversation and tap them to figure out what their peers want, and then I can help them provide that. Instead of keeping them in a silo, to bring them into a community. That’s the approach.”

Elements of Leadership Development

Leadership development is not just about having people who are involved and motivated to make things happen for other people; it is about creating a sense of ownership of the Jewish community for younger generations. Joelle Berman of NEXT explained that the leadership approach is about “bringing actual Birthrighters and leaders into the process of creating their communities and creating what’s available to people who live there.” Jeff Finkelstein, a Birthrighter-turned-volunteer leader with NEXT DC, described how this process worked for him and his peers that have become young leaders:

Everything you do leads to something else, and it means that people are trusting you to lead, and at the same time you get a responsibility to people in your community, so if people are believing in you then you have to live up to the expectation. I think that when you challenge people, like in the business world, often times they rise to the task, and I think it works the same in the Jewish community. You find the right people, give them the right challenges, and more

often than not they step up to the task.

This should come as a comfort for those who fear that young Jewish adults are not invested in the Jewish community as their own and that we face a dearth of communal leadership among younger generations (Wertheimer, 2010). This can also be seen as an argument for giving young people a sense of communal responsibility sooner rather than later. Jeff explained how he sees the Federation doing just that. He continued: “The torch will ultimately be passed, right? And so the people who are leading the community now at some point will have to pass that along. And at least the DC Federation, to my mind, recognizes this and is developing its young leadership well before the torch is ever passed. And if you do that, you have a strong foundation on which to build.”

Leadership programs also usually carry an element of prestige or exclusivity to enhance the appeal to participants who feel ready to enter Jewish life at a level other than the low-barrier, beginner level that Birthright-related initiatives tend towards. The UJA-Federation of New York has even created a specific Birthright trip for emerging leaders, called the Zankel Leadership Bus, which provides “access to unique experiences, learning opportunities, and special speakers” and emphasizes “build[ing] relationships and stay[ing] connected to other young professionals in Manhattan and the crucial work of UJA-Federation after [participants] return home” (www.ujafedny.org). This trip starts the leadership development process from the point of trip recruitment and often results in participants continuing on to other leadership opportunities with UJA after they return.

Research on leadership development suggests that such programs serve two distinct purposes: to provide potential leaders with concrete knowledge and skills to enable them to perform certain tasks effectively, and to bolster leaders' abilities to engage in relationships, solve problems and enact change that will lead to greater capacity of the organization (Day, 2001). Accordingly, there are several key elements that contribute to the success of a leadership development program in this context.

As mentioned previously, education plays an important role in leadership development initiatives, both for bringing new leaders to a certain level of Jewish knowledge and literacy and for giving them the tools to navigate their own Jewish community. All of the leadership initiatives included in this research project feature some sort of training or education component, at the very least to provide a framing of the experience for participants. In many cases, education is ongoing and occurs in phases or as bookends to an experience such as with NEXT DC's Alumni Leadership Mission. Through participation in these leadership programs or fellowships, participants become more confident in their knowledge of the community and often become further invested because of the knowledge they gain. Some communities have realized this and offer educational programs as stand-alone elements of their leadership programs, with the idea that education and training will serve as a bridge to deeper and more meaningful involvement.

There is also a sense of belonging to a cohort, a model which has been found in the context of other Jewish leadership programs to “deepen the understanding and practice of personal leadership,” which “benefits the individual's relationship with his or her own community and sphere of influence” (Bronznick & Goldenhar, 2003, p. 4). Engagement professionals agree that placing individuals with high amounts of potential in a group together enhances their collective capacity, particularly when those individuals carry large amounts of social capital. “When you put like-minded individuals and like-experienced individuals together, there is a camaraderie to it, and there is an enhancing effect to it,” one interviewee stated.

Mentorship is also a key component, where participants have the opportunity to develop a learning relationship with someone whose experience will deepen their understanding and connection. The L.A. Federation's Kahn and BRIdge Fellowships, for example, together are a leadership program for Birthrighters and madrichim to work together to put on events for their community. The fellowships

are arranged so that a Kahn Fellow, who is a recent Birthrighter and identified leader, works in tandem with a BRIDGE Fellow, usually the Kahn fellow's madrich/a, to plan events for their community. Both Kahn and BRIDGE Fellows benefit from the mentorship relationship in their individual roles in that they are able to share ideas, learn from one another's experiences, and discover their own leadership skills throughout the process. This system also creates a continuum of involvement and leadership, in that Kahn Fellows may be inspired by the BRIDGE Fellows' experience and decide to become a BRIDGE Fellow as well, enabling them to staff an L.A. community trip where they are then able to identify and build relationships with other potential leaders who can possibly become Kahn Fellows themselves down the road.

Unique Leadership Experiences

Becoming a leader opens opportunities for Birthrighters to participate in special experiences or programs, such as organizing an exciting program for their own community or even traveling back to Israel. The Federation of Greater Washington's NEXT DC offers an Alumni Leadership Mission, where alumni can participate in a week-long trip that takes the Birthright experience further and focuses on leadership development. A participant described the experience as “an in-depth opportunity with unparalleled access” that builds on the “all-you-can-eat buffet” introduction to Israel that Birthright provides.

The Alumni Leadership Mission program requires participants to attend pre- and post-trip sessions as a cohort, as well as create and implement a community impact project in the D.C. area inspired by their experience. Participants must also be chosen through an application process, adding an element of prestige and sense of responsibility to fulfill the mission of the program. And as with any mission-style trip, participants are asked to make a contribution to the Federation upon return, making

them not only engaged young leaders but donor-participants as well.

Sara Weiner explained how such an opportunity not only engages mission participants as committed members of the community, but helps to perpetuate the process of young leadership development:

[The Alumni Leadership Mission] really helps to pull people into those relationships—they meet with Federation leaders, Israeli leaders across different sectors...that really solidifies them as members of the community and ambassadors who then help bring up the next group. It has this organic sense where the more people get involved in the Alumni Leadership Mission and through some of the different fellowships and courses that we offer, those personal relationships connect right into new ones, which becomes a chain.

NEXT DC has also piloted other innovative programs that serve a dual purpose of engagement and leadership development. The “Reverse Mifgash,” for example, is a program where D.C. Birthrighters come together to bring the Israeli soldiers who participated in the “mifgash” (Hebrew for “encounter”) program on their own Birthright trips to D.C. for an encounter experience in the United States. The idea came from a Birthrighter who went on a Federation community trip and wanted the Israelis who had joined them to have a similar experience of understanding Jewish communal life in the Diaspora. The program became a reality when the Federation committed to matching any funds Birthrighters could raise to bring “their Israelis” to Washington. Reverse Mifgash has become immensely successful since the first one in 2008; it has been done four more times since then, generating a group of 40 Israeli alumni who have created their own network in Israel to keep in touch with one another and to sustain their connection to the D.C. community.

Sara Weiner explained how this has been successful not only as a program, but as an engagement endeavor for several reasons. A key element is having Birthrighters take charge of the

whole planning process, from generating funds through “friend-raising,” or utilizing social networking to raise awareness and money (Hart, Greenfield, MacLaughlin, & Geier, 2010), to putting together a committee to plan the content for the experience itself. This element gives participants a strong sense of ownership, and they quickly become invested because they have an interest in bringing the Israelis they met through the mifgash to visit them in their own city. It also creates a variety of ways to get involved, from planning programs to home-hosting an Israeli, to simply showing up and being a part of the celebration that takes place when the Israelis arrive. For many D.C. Birthrighters, Reverse Mifgash is often the first thing they get involved with after their trip, and it leads to a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and investment in the community that leads to further engagement and leadership down the road. Due to its success on these multiple levels, Reverse Mifgash has received some attention from other organizations nationwide and has already been replicated by the Atlanta Federation (www.jewishatlanta.org). Other Federations including Los Angeles are looking into creating a Reverse Mifgash of their own, and it is likely that others will follow suit over the next several years.

The Fellowship Appeal

Fellowships are being investigated nationwide as successful models that provide a large return on investment, in that the leaders who participate go on to perpetuate the engagement of Birthrighters through leadership in Jewish life and building of micro-communities. A particular brand of leadership development programs, fellowships have several defining characteristics. Fellows are selected for their leadership skills to help further the mission of the program that hosts them, and they are usually brought on as independent contractors with the organization. Because they have a greater level of responsibility, fellows are given more targeted training, focusing on things like strategies for meaningful engagement and using funds efficiently to create Jewish experiences. They are usually

given a programming budget, in addition to a stipend, for putting on a certain number of programs or connecting with a certain number of participants. Such programs are usually even more selective than other leadership development programs, requiring participants to be identified and nominated rather than going through an application process.

The closest model to this type of fellowship that exists in the Jewish community for engagement purposes is the Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative (CEI) through Hillel, which several of these fellowships cite as the inspiration for their own programs. CEI interns are college students who are given the training and tools necessary to engage their peers in Jewish life on campus. This initiative popularized the idea of the “one-on-one” or “coffee date” as a means of engagement, as well as the concept of peers as quasi-professionals serving as “connectors”, personal concierges who link individual students [or Birthrighters] to relevant Jewish opportunities, based on the stories heard during the one-on-one conversation” (Wolfson, 2013, p. 102).

Fellowship models have been utilized by a few Birthright-related engagement initiatives, including NEXT before they shifted away from direct programmatic work. Fellowships have been created in the past several years in Toronto with Community Connect and at the Los Angeles Federation. Similar models are in development in several other communities, including Atlanta, which is developing something called the “concierge committee.” There is also a project underway in the Bay Area of Northern California to train “Jewish journey guides” to provide ongoing peer engagement.

The Community Connect fellowship is an extension of the initiative's professional relational engagement network and is heavily influenced by the CEI model. Fellows are especially motivated young adults who are involved with the Toronto Jewish community and build relationships with their friends and individuals who are identified as leaders through Birthright trips or through the community in general. Community Connect fellows are “basically personal mentors or guides to engaging...in

Jewish life,” and they step in to help strengthen Community Connect’s relational network by maintaining relationships with Birthrighters and other young Jewish adults.

The Los Angeles Federation has created a pair of fellowships, funded by two Los Angeles private donors, that are specifically designed to strengthen the Birthright experience from several angles. The Kahn Fellowship is a leadership development program where emerging leaders are identified from among L.A. community Birthright participants and nominated to organize events for their peers, both from their own Birthright buses and others. Events vary in scale, purpose, and interest area, just as with any programmatic initiative, but are decidedly communal and accessible in that they are created by Birthrighters for Birthrighters. There is also a relational component, where fellows are required to have one-on-ones with peers to have meaningful Jewish conversations and to learn what they should be providing with their programming. Kahn fellows receive training and guidance from engagement professionals and volunteer leaders, including their madrichim, many of whom have been trained as mentors through the BRIDGE Fellowship.

The primary purpose of the BRIDGE Fellowship (the “BRI” stands for Birthright Israel) is to train community members as Birthright madrichim to be effective educators and engagers and to begin connecting Birthrighters to the Los Angeles community while they are on the trip. BRIDGE fellows are selected for their experience and knowledge of the Los Angeles community and their ability to serve as mentors to their Jewish peers. While the Los Angeles Federation already had a fairly dedicated group of individuals willing to staff trips and lend their expertise, the fellowship serves as “a formalization of that commitment and that connection.” The BRIDGE fellows’ training focuses around empowering them to serve as guides to the Kahn Fellows, including steering them towards meaningful engagement with Jewish content in their programs. The presence of capable madrichim as BRIDGE fellows to serve as peer leaders helps maintain a sense of do-it-yourself community building within the fellowships that

organizations like Moishe House have championed.

Fellows are expected not only to create programs and build relationships, but to enhance their own Jewish journeys as well. There is a requirement that they attend events put on by other organizations in the community, which facilitates both the development of program ideas and potential partnerships, as well as a broader experience of the diversity of programs available in the Jewish community. Funds have also been made available so that fellows can participate in an immersive Jewish experience, such as an international travel opportunity with a Jewish organization, or a conference like TribeFest or Limmud. In certain cases, other unexpected opportunities have also become available to fellows through their participation and increased involvement in Jewish communal life.

Charlie Jasper was one of the first Kahn fellows, and he describes his experience with both Birthright and the fellowship as “life-changing.” After a trying experience in the U.S. Army where he was the target of anti-Semitism and treated like an outsider despite his own arms-length relationship with Judaism, Charlie rediscovered a sense of belonging and acceptance on a Birthright trip through the L.A. Federation. He was somewhat surprised to be acknowledged as a leader by his bus-mates, and he was even more surprised when a Birthright engagement professional from the Federation asked him to participate in the piloting of the Kahn Fellowship. He quickly became motivated to organize events for his bus-mates and other L.A.-based Birthrighters, and he enjoyed the experience so much he stayed on as a fellow for two terms.

Through the exposure that came from being an enthusiastic young leader with the Federation, community members began to show interest in Charlie, and he was invited to tell his story at several Federation and other community events. One opportunity has led to another, including being offered a job on the spot by a high-level community member after a speaking engagement at a Federation event.

Though Charlie is no longer a Kahn fellow, he remains deeply involved with the Jewish community through the Federation and Moishe House, and he continues to receive invitations to speak at a wide variety of community events. Charlie says that the experience has allowed him to find a home once again, and he hopes to inspire others to seek the “kesher,” or connection, that is meaningful for them.

The two fellowships have existed as a joint engagement venture for two years now, and for much of that time director Margalit Rosenthal has been experimenting with the model and determining which direction to take them. Since the Kahn Fellowship began, the length of time has been changed from nine months to twelve, and more guidance and structure has been put in place for the fellows, at their request. There is also a greater sense of developing the Kahn and BRIDGE Fellows as a cohort together and a focus on more general engagement rather than a focus specifically on programming for one's own Birthright bus. “The spirit of the program is that the people in it really help us determine what works best, and what works best for each season is not necessarily what's going to work best for next season. But we can always learn and try to improve,” Margalit said.

As the program develops further, it is receiving more attention as a model that may be replicated elsewhere. Margalit has been contacted by several engagement professionals in other communities interested in creating fellowship programs of their own. At the time of submission of this thesis no other fellowship programs have been announced, but it is likely that this is a model that will expand and gain popularity in the coming years.

Identifying Leaders

While sometimes the identification of potential leaders happens through self-identification on the part of an individual who has the natural skills and inclination towards such a role, there is also a significant amount of leadership development work that engagers do when they recognize potential in

someone, even if the person does not see him or herself as a leader. In those cases, the recognition of leadership potential becomes a mutual process where someone shows the interest in being involved, and an engager encourages him or her to take a more significant role within the organization. Sara Weiner described the process of one Birthrighter's journey from being a participant to a committee member, leader, and even Birthright madrich through NEXT DC.

Jeff went on a DC community Birthright trip in January 2012, which was his first involvement with the Federation. After a fantastic experience with an energetic bus and two motivated madrichim who are volunteer leaders in the community, Jeff began to engage with NEXT DC and helped organize Shabbat dinners and other events for his bus mates. Early on, Jeff was recognized as a leader for his enthusiasm and sense of commitment, and he was asked to become one of three co-chairs of the Reverse Mifgash that year. "He would help prepare the meetings, and [he led] one of the sub-committees, and during the week of his Reverse Mifgash he was there all the time and was making announcements...he was really one of the people who led the charge," Sara recalled.

After that experience Jeff was encouraged to take the NeXus education course to get a more complete sense of the Federation's work, which then led to more leadership opportunities. The engagement staff decided to reconvene the then-defunct NEXT DC Advisory Committee and invited former Reverse Mifgash chairs to contribute the perspective of recent Birthright alumni. Jeff sat on that committee and was able to contribute not only as a Birthrighter, but as an invested and knowledgeable member of the Federation's young adult community.

Jeff then became eligible for even more opportunities through his role as a committee member, including becoming a madrich on a D.C. community Birthright trip. He co-staffed a trip with Sara in August 2013 and at the same time applied and was accepted to participate in the Alumni Leadership Mission in November 2013. In the span of around two years, Jeff went from being an unengaged

Birthright participant to a committee member and leader, and he was able to travel back to Israel twice more through his affiliation with the Federation. While Sara acknowledged that this is “sort of an over-the-top, on-steroids example,” Jeff’s story illustrates how the leadership opportunities at the D.C. Federation feed into one another and enable participants to develop deep connections to the community. Jeff also realized through his experience that while he has always considered himself a “take charge kind of guy” and a leader, it took a combination of his own motivation and recognition with encouragement from staff to lead him along this course.

Margalit Rosenthal similarly described the identification of potential leaders for the Kahn and BRIDGE Fellowships and finds that they are able to enhance the cohorts by identifying and choosing leaders for qualities that they may not always see in themselves. The fellowships are not advertised broadly to participants, because “we don’t want people coming on the trips gunning to get chosen and acting a different way [than they normally would],” Margalit explained. Keeping the selection process quiet also allows them to select fellows for diverse qualities. “We don’t necessarily want everyone who’s really extroverted and really amazing at planning parties, because that’s not what it’s about. We also want the people who maybe are quieter or can draw people out on an individual level, and who people feel comfortable talking to. That’s who we want because it’s not about planning events; it’s about building relationships.” As a result, fellows like Charlie get chosen when they do not necessarily see themselves as leaders, and those fellows are often the ones who benefit most from the experience and contribute to the group in unique and unexpected ways.

Combining Strategies

While some communities focus specifically on one strategy as their main approach, many have come to realize that engagement is not one-size-fits-all but needs to be about “choice and ownership.”

Therefore they approach their work with a combination of the above strategies, keeping in mind that young Jewish adults need to be able to explore their identity freely in an environment “where they aren't asked to check their complexity at the door” (Levin, 2012).

In some ways, one engagement approach cannot exist on its own without some influence from the others. For example, a programmatic approach that caters to a variety of interests must engage in relationship building with its participants in order to understand what they are looking for in their programming and recruit new ideas. In many cases, engagers with myriad responsibilities on their plates cannot build all of the content themselves and therefore must rely on volunteer leaders, whom they themselves have identified as leaders through their relationship building activities, to create appealing programs for their peers.

Relational strategies in particular tend to be interwoven with whatever else an initiative is offering, whether it is programming, education, or leadership development. These elements, in fact, are often the vehicles for relationship building; engagers build in outreach before and after a program to ensure that the program is coupled with contact from a particular individual. They also see events and programs themselves as important times to build relationships with the participants that show up, to ensure they feel a part of a community and will be inclined to come back, or reach out for guidance towards something else.

Several of the organizations included in this study describe their approach as consisting of multiple “pillars,” which may include programs, individual relationship building, leadership development, building community partnerships, and various other components such as digital outreach. NEXT DC incorporates all three of the above approaches in its engagement work, providing opportunities for connection through the work of its engagers while simultaneously working towards the strengthening of a network of alumni programming in the D.C. area, with NEXT DC leaders at the

center. Community Connect similarly sees itself as using all of these approaches, with peer leadership and community partnerships creating the links between all the facets of their work. NEXT, as the only nationwide network organization focused on the Birthright population, helps local initiatives develop their approaches in all of these areas and defines its own work with Birthrighters as “connecting Birthrighters to local opportunities in their communities, to local engagement professionals in their communities, and to each other.”

Sometimes combining different approaches can create challenges; for example, leadership development programs require that participants/fellows are given a sense of independence and are trusted to accomplish their goals themselves, but as a program with relational values it is also crucial that engagers develop relationships and provide support throughout the experience. Margalit Rosenthal explained,

I think that it's a fine line, because I don't want them to think that I as a staff person and representative of the Federation am checking on them and looking over their shoulder. But at the same time I want them to see that I support them in our work and that it's not just—yes, they're independent contractors, but I don't want them to think that they're just doing work for us and that's it. I want them to know that they're doing work on our behalf that we are totally invested in and totally a part of.

In this sense, the challenge of engagement work is just as much about finding ways to be hands-off as it is about discovering strategies to draw people in.

A dynamic, multifaceted approach to engagement is quickly becoming the norm, with engagers leading the charge in experimenting and developing new ways to do their work. Several interviewees talked about engagement work at Jewish organizations as “R&D” (Research and Development), because much of their work is about evaluating the effectiveness of their strategies as they implement

them and constantly exploring new ways to improve. Even as engagement initiatives become more established and there are clearly emerging patterns as to what works, there is still a sense that exploration of different avenues, or combinations of avenues, is the norm and the road to a tailored engagement program that is integrated with the culture of the community.

Best Practices and Common Challenges

As engagement professionals continue to hone their programs and strategies, they have identified some common challenges and developed best practices for addressing some of those difficulties. The following section presents the challenges and the successes together, because as in any developing field they are deeply intertwined and reveal the nature of the work in the ways that they are addressed. Many of the issues described below have emerged as larger systematic challenges that engagers and their colleagues must work together to address as they move forward in developing their work as a discipline.

Defining the Population

One of the largest and most persisting yet most basic issues that these initiatives face, despite seemingly clear delineations of what makes someone a Birthrighter, is defining the population they serve. While it is common to have an eye on Birthrighters as a key population to engage, particularly following a trip, most do not solely serve Birthrighters but define the population as "...and their friends," or simply aim to serve young Jewish adults as a whole and do not single out Birthright in their language. "We know that obviously the trip is a great leverage point and a great opportunity, and those Birthright Israel alumni probably come home and probably have lots of other Jewish friends, and they are a great way in, for all those people to start accessing Jewish life," one interviewee stated.

There is some disagreement about whether Birthrighters should be singled out for targeted programming. Some say that this is an important bond they share that should be capitalized upon with specific programs that hearken back to their experience in Israel, while others claim that treating Birthrighters as a unique population, and acknowledging them as at all different from the rest of their peers, is contrary to the objective of integrating them into the community. One interviewee described her distaste for the term “alumni” in this context, stating that Birthright is the only Jewish experience where we assign alumni status to participants immediately afterwards, creating a sense of finality where there should be an opening and a beginning. “For me, saying 'Birthright alumni' is like saying 'Bar Mitzvah alumni.' It's not an affiliation; it's an experience that at this point so much of the population has had, and it shouldn't be their one and only affiliation. It should be the beginning of a journey. And now that population, when looking for something to do next, they'll only look for something that says 'Birthright alumni,' and that removes them from the entire community.”

The answer to this conundrum lies somewhere in the balance between building post-Birthright programming on the momentum of the trips and treating Birthrighters as if there has always been a place for them in the community, and that they (and their friends) should feel that way regardless of whether they have recently been on a Birthright trip. Engagers focus their energy on Birthrighters because of the opportunity the trips create for building a conversation about meaningful Jewish involvement, but they are equally focused on and willing to have that conversation with whoever chooses to seek it out.

Building Sustainable Connections

Engagement professionals focused on working with “the Birthright Generation” find themselves at the epicenter of the debate about the long-term impact of Birthright on the American Jewish

community. They must focus simultaneously on making small advances with individual Birthrighters as well as the large questions of how a ten-day experience shapes the way a generation understands and experiences the meaning of Judaism. They think about the immediate challenges of building programs and creating partnerships, as well as ensuring that individual experiences and interactions transition into lasting connections to Jewish identity and community.

One interviewee explained how she sees the impact of what she calls the “Birthright Syndrome” in engagement work:

As a colleague and friend says, “Birthright is one of the best programs to have come out of this Jewish world in the last 20 years, with probably the worst name.” Because you're basically telling people that Israel is their birthright, whereas generations before felt a sense of pride and ownership over the state of Israel and loyalty to the state of Israel, where now you're basically saying, “Come! Israel's free! Enjoy!” So I think there are ramifications for the greater Jewish world...people not willing to pay for programs and not willing to come to things unless they're really cheap or free is a misdeed for the entire community, because the reality is being a Jew is expensive if you're going to be connected. So I think there's a really big challenge coming up.

Engagers face the challenge of communicating the importance of becoming an invested member of the community, not just a consumer or a passive participant. This concern has been voiced by many in regards to young Jewish adults and is a broader challenge that the Jewish community faces in response to programs that are created to attract the interest of the population but not necessarily sustain it.

In light of the tenuous connections to Israel and Jewish life that the “Birthright Syndrome” creates, engagers face the challenge of finding the right timing to reach Birthrighters before they lose interest. Many spoke of a commonplace trend of a “Birthright cliff,” where Birthrighters' interest in becoming involved in local Jewish life tends to drop off sharply around 3 months after they return from

their trip. This generates a sense of urgency around immediate post-trip engagement, which can be a turn-off if it comes on too strong. The goal for engagers is to find the right timing to reach out, giving enough time for Birthrighters to return home and settle a bit after their trip (accounting for the fact that many extend their trips), but not waiting so long as to miss riding the wave of post-trip euphoria.

Rebecca Sugar described how this strategy works for the Alumni Community: “Within the first few weeks they have to hear from you when they're back. Their energy is still up, they remember fondly what they experienced, they're not quite recovered, they're still in that phase. If you wait 2, 3, 4 months, they've already moved on with their lives...by and large, people tell us that they're in contact with other people from their bus for six to eight weeks maybe after they return in a consistent way.”

Many find that even with the initiation of contact within that window, participation still tends to drop off incrementally over time. Shauna Waltman explained the phenomenon as she has seen it through a three-part post-Birthright programming series implemented by Community Connect: “Generally you get 98-100% participation in the reunion. Then you get down to the Shabbat dinner, you get between 50-75% participation, we've seen. And the last one, the Tikkun Olam, is between 20-30. And there are a lot of interesting reasons why I think there's such a drop off. One is because the further away you get from an experience, the more real life kind of sinks in and people have other commitments.” She also explained that while such a programming series is designed to build upon its own momentum and include a variety of experiences, sometimes it simply does not capture the specific interests of Birthrighters at the right time, and “the reunion factor” alone is not enough to keep bringing them back. Whether this is due to competition with other commitments, a lack of connection, or larger issues like the “Birthright Syndrome” is unclear, but engagers consistently find that there is a correlation between the amount of time that passes after a trip and declining interest in active participation in Jewish life.

Such issues are why it is crucial to build engagement strategies into every phase of the Birthright experience—to truly reach Birthrighters, engagement needs to be a process that begins before the trip, gains momentum during the trip itself, and then is sustained in the weeks and months after. But engagers often face limitations with staff size and resources, and it can be a major challenge to reach everyone at every phase. A strategy that has taken hold in many communities to address this is leveraging the role of the North American staff members (“madrichim”). These madrichim, who are often engagers themselves, serve as an extension of the professional engagement team and are vehicles for involvement and education of Birthrighters, laying the foundation for a sustained Jewish connection before the plane touches down.

Sara Weiner explained that it has become a policy for all NEXT DC Birthright buses to be staffed by their own engagers, professionals from partner organizations, or volunteer leaders who have a deep commitment to the work they do. For those volunteer leaders, it has become an increasingly common practice in all communities to put training programs and requirements in place to ensure that they are prepared for the task of being more than just a trip leader, but an ongoing mentor and a guide. These training programs can involve a commitment for several months prior to a trip and include a set of significant requirements that serve to engage emerging leaders in Jewish life. They communicate the philosophy that the role of madrich/a is not simply a free chance to travel back to Israel or a simple supervising job, but an opportunity and obligation to play a significant role in the impact of Birthright, both during the trip and afterward.

Community Connect in Toronto has developed a training program that director Shauna Waltman calls the “cornerstone” of their leadership development strategy. The 8-month program begins with a 4-day retreat and continues with monthly trainings that focus on topics ranging from understanding the trip itinerary to Holocaust education and Israel advocacy. These sessions are led by twelve mentors

who are “superstar veteran madrichim” and teach from their own experiences as well as a core curriculum that is guided by the Community Connect staff. In addition to attending monthly trainings, potential madrichim are required to attend at least one community event per month and organize an event with a group of fellow trainees and mentors to ensure that they are active participants in the community before going on the trip. According to Shauna, the program is designed to ensure that madrichim see the opportunity as a “community leadership experience, rather than a Birthright leadership experience,” and understand the long-term goals Community Connect has for engaging Birthrighters.

Madrichim are often the vehicles of the relational engagement strategy, creating bonds with participants on the trips and becoming the familiar face that Birthrighters will turn to when they want to continue exploring their Jewish identity back home. The relationships they build make post-trip engagement feel natural and comfortable and provide the link to post-trip engagement, which in other cases can be so easily lost. When madrichim are the ones to convene a group to attend an event or to identify a Birthrighter with leadership potential for a fellowship program, the familiarity with that person creates a sense of continuity from the trip to the experience at home and helps Birthrighters to feel connected to an otherwise unfamiliar world.

Facilitating Transitions

In the business of building Jewish journeys, it is important to focus not only on the experiences Jewish life provides, but the transitional spaces between those experiences (Horowitz, 2000). In many ways, Birthright has become another rite of passage in a young person's Jewish journey, and with that comes the addition of a transitional space that Jewish organizations are still figuring out how to address. It is an especially challenging question because Birthright is still relatively new and stands in

such stark contrast to other Jewish experiences with its high intensity in such a short period of time and the general contrast it creates from the experience of everyday life. The mere existence of post-Birthright engagement initiatives is a testament to the effort to fill this gap, as are the strategies described earlier in this thesis.

While most engagement initiatives are designed to fill the transitional gap between the trip and connection to the local Jewish community, some are also thinking about addressing transitional gaps in other life stages—for example, from college to general communal life—with the goal of contributing to the continuity of the Jewish journey and to a sense that there is a reason to remain engaged even if there is not an immediate motivation to do so. As part of their leadership development portfolio, Toronto's Community Connect is working on creating transitional experiences for young people coming out of summer camps into the broader community and college students coming out of Hillel who move back to Toronto and no longer have the association with an organization dedicated to their peer group. Community Connect works with the camps and Hillels to identify leaders from among these groups *before* they make the transition and reaches out to identified leaders to educate them about what is available and get them involved in Toronto Jewish life. NEXT is also piloting a national program, called “NEXT Bridge,” to achieve this same objective. NEXT has developed partnerships with seven Hillels and will tap into their resources in those communities to find peer leaders like Moishe House residents and Birthrighters who have become leaders to facilitate the outreach and connection.

Because of the attention paid to the transitions young Jewish adults make in their lives, some organizations are finding that they are able to focus on one specific phase, while designing the experiences with the transitions to other phases in mind. The Los Angeles Federation, for example, has recognized that the local college campuses are doing excellent work in providing comprehensive Birthright experiences to their students, and thus the Federation is supporting the campuses to do that

work while focusing its own trips and engagement mainly on the 22-26 population, or those who are eligible for Birthright and are beyond college age. Other communities see the campuses as the most crucial place to focus Birthright-related engagement and have focused their efforts significantly around building that experience on the campus.

IACT, an initiative of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) in Boston, is focused entirely on engaging Birthrighters on college campuses in the Boston area. CJP funds twelve full-time engagement professionals, one at each of the selected campuses, who work directly with students before and after the trips to build a sustained Birthright experience. The program includes recruiting students to register for a campus-based trip to ensure that they will have the desired contact with the majority of students going on Birthright from their campus, and a “Bus Empowerment Program” where students can apply for small grants to implement programs on their campus.

Matt Lebovic, Senior Campus Associate at CJP, explained that they see a great need to engage Birthrighters and Birthright-eligibles before they become young adults who are unattached to anything Jewish and are much harder to reach. IACT (which stands for “inspired, active, committed, transformed”) works because the campus provides an ideal platform for Birthrighters to become deeply involved in Jewish life when they return, especially when there is someone there to guide them and funds that help them shape that experience on campus. Because college students have the opportunity to study abroad, they see higher numbers choosing to return to Israel on a long-term trip after Birthright than non-Birthrighters, and more students choose to enroll in Jewish Studies courses after they have been on a trip. Matt believes that many overlook the campus as a place to engage young Jewish adults because there are so many Jewish opportunities for them already available—Hillel, Chabad, and other student groups are seen as taking care of this demographic. However, the success of IACT has shown him and others at CJP that campus is an essential place to invest in Birthright engagement in order to

build a foundation and a culture for sustainable Jewish engagement.

Challenges of Communication

In an age where digital media with up-to-the-moment, easily digestible information rules, it can be a significant challenge to capture and sustain the attention of Birthrighters, even in the weeks and months after they return from their trips. As Beth Kanter, author of *The Networked Nonprofit*, explained as part of the #NetTalks Alumni Engagement Webinar Series, the goal of online engagement should be to build communication and investment among community members, rather than simply sharing information unilaterally with an unknown mass of constituents. Some engagement initiatives have gone beyond reliance on simple methods with e-mail lists and Facebook pages and have invested more in developing technology to serve their outreach needs.

Initiatives such as Gesher City and GrapeVine have been created as city-based social networking ventures that specifically foster Jewish engagement by connecting Jews online to what is happening in their local communities (Litman, 2012). Both are relatively new and have been piloted in several communities such as Boston, Denver, and Rhode Island. In cities where these Jewish social networking initiatives have not taken root, or in the case of NEXT, which is not based in any one local community and thus makes use of national platforms, engagers are using mainstream social networking tools with specific strategies to connect to Birthrighters and to connect Birthrighters to one another.

Joelle Berman is the Communications Manager of NEXT and handles everything from the organization's website to the strategic messaging shared with their partners. In recent years, NEXT has begun to look at the possibilities of digital media beyond simply communicating their messages, but for enabling Birthrighters to connect to one another in a way that comes naturally to them: online.

“Essentially our goal is to create digital media that helps this audience connect more deeply to their

Jewish communities, to the Jewish people, and enables them to explore their Jewish identities,” Joelle explained.

Tools like an interactive High Holidays map that allows young Jews to find meaningful ways to celebrate the holidays locally are proving to be effective and contribute the important element of allowing people to make connections in a way that feels natural and comfortable to them. Even the sharing of a Pinterest board filled with images, recipes, and stories related to a particular Jewish holiday can help young Jewish adults to feel that Jewish culture and Jewish life are relevant to them and can exist in the forums where they experience life on a daily basis. Such positive experiences can then lead them to explore things like an online city directory, which NEXT also provides, to discover local opportunities for involvement that will connect them more actively to their immediate community.

Even more important than making information accessible to Birthrighters and other young Jewish adults through social media is creating a space for interaction, where they can participate in the conversation about their community, and by nature of that engagement, become a part of it. Joelle stated that using social media for engagement is “about bringing people young people into the conversation, instead of trying to have the conversation for them.” Social media outlets provide platforms in which such conversations can be had, if individuals of interest can be engaged enough to share their thoughts. Some of the ideas Beth Kanter (2014) shared for doing just that included posing an open-ended question to a forum to facilitate participation, holding a contest (challenging group members to come up with the best caption for a photo, for example), or posting a “throwback” photo that will generate participation around a shared memory or experience. The central idea is not to stop at simply making the audience aware of the content or opportunities available to them, signified by a “like” on Facebook, but to facilitate a trajectory towards connection, which leads to action and

ultimately the championing of a cause as their own.

In the cases where one-sided communication such as email is used, NEXT and others put a considerable amount of work into looking at what makes those messages successful, and they have a number of strategies for doing so. The team at NEXT carefully monitors their digital feedback and looks at details such as whether an email is opened more frequently when the word “Israel” appears in the subject line. Such tidbits of information go into the crafting of their messages, ensuring both that they reach the largest audience possible and also that the content is relevant to those who care to be engaged by them.

Access to Information

To add further complication to the already challenging task of communication, simply gaining access to information about the population in question often proves difficult. When asked about access to information, many engagement professionals described ways in which Taglit-Birthright Israel's policies slow down or even hinder their ability to accomplish their goals. With only a few exceptions, most engagement initiatives do not work directly with Taglit-Birthright Israel as an organization, or with the many trip providers who are contracted to provide the infrastructure for the trips themselves. Because of the nature of these contracting relationships, Birthright does not encourage or discourage participants from registering for any particular trip, with the approach of giving each provider a fair shot at recruiting. This becomes a problem for engagement initiatives, because participants register online without understanding the process and the differences between the trips or providers, and they often miss out on signing up for a community trip if they are attracted to one provider's specialty over another.

When a participant signs up for a community trip, engagement professionals have access to

their information right away and can be in contact with them prior to the trip. When they sign up online and are placed randomly on a trip not associated with a local community, however, engagers are powerless to begin making the connection before and during the trip, which they have found to be so vital to lasting engagement. Taglit-Birthright Israel does share contact lists of all Birthrighters from a certain community with local organizations for follow-up purposes, but this process is often delayed and information is sometimes not shared for up to six months after the Birthright “season” is over.

There is some frustration with the degree to which Birthright “caters to the individual” and does not design the registration process to be more conducive to community-based engagement, or substantive post-engagement of any kind. Some initiatives have created strategies to respond to this—for example, IACT in Boston holds orientations and registration drives where someone is available to answer Birthrighters' questions and explain the advantage of signing up for a community trip. While this does make somewhat of a difference for local initiatives, they make the effort knowing that they are still missing opportunities to connect with and engage some percentage of Birthrighters in their community simply because of a lack of information.

Those engagers who do have access to information, because their community initiatives have a direct relationship with a sole trip provider that caters to their community, understand their advantage and see how the current situation negatively impacts their peers in other locations. Initiatives that are tied directly to Taglit-Birthright Israel, like Birthright Israel NEXT: a Division of the Birthright Israel Foundation, also have direct access and are sometimes able to communicate with Birthrighters in ways that independent initiatives cannot. “Since we are a part of the Birthright Israel enterprise, we have access to these alumni. We can communicate with them. We can reach them the day they come home from their trip and say, ‘Hey, how was it? Was it awesome? Tell us all about it! And make sure you

know about these great things now that you're home.' You know, we have that unique opportunity," one interviewee explained.

Despite the tension felt by some as a result of this situation, others do not see it as a problem because they do not believe that effective engagement strategies should rely on mass email communication. "The lists themselves...are not in our view a hugely effective tool. They're an important tool, a tool that we like having, but the majority of the people who come to the program don't seem to come from a random email sent spontaneously by our organization," one engager said. "The Birthright alumni list is not the golden ticket. Emailing people about events is not a guarantee that you'll fill your room. It takes more convincing than that...I think it's ultimately really important that people feel a part of something, that they feel that they belong in the room, first and foremost," said another.

A third interviewee explained that her organization does not keep a Birthright alumni listserv because they feel that this encourages a siloed approach to engagement when the goal should be to integrate Birthrighters into the larger picture. "We don't have a Birthright alumni listserv because we want to let them know that they're not Birthright alumni, they are members of the [local] Jewish community, and that they have access to and can connect to any of the resources here, whether or not they are specifically for people in their twenties or specifically for people that went on Birthright."

Challenges of Size and Scale

As discussed in previous sections, the size of a community can present difficulties for engagement-based programs focused on building connections to and between large numbers of Birthrighters, especially when the tasks fall to a small number of engagement professionals. Challenges with scaling efforts of community outreach can be addressed with some of the methods described

above, but engagers are identifying ways that the size, makeup, and nature of the communities they work with make their work significantly more nuanced.

Community size often dictates the frequency and scope of opportunities that are available for involvement in a certain area, but more does not always mean better. In Manhattan, for example, programming for young Jewish adults is plentiful, but so are social, cultural, and educational events of all kinds. The Alumni Community finds that the wealth of culture offered by a place like New York City can make the case for participating in Jewish life more challenging, especially when meeting other young Jews is not so much a challenge but a regular part of life.

On the other end of the spectrum from New York are smaller communities where participating in a gathering with other young Jewish adults might be a major source of community and meaning for Birthrighters, but such opportunities are few and far between. These are small, suburban communities where the Jewish organizations that serve them are scaled to the community, and they may not be large enough to employ dedicated engagement staff. But Birthright as a national phenomenon has reached the young adults who live there, and their needs are the same as their peers living in larger communities who do get served by engagement initiatives. In these places the challenge is not competition with other activities, but a dearth of interesting, relevant programming for young Jews that may make them feel as if participation in the Jewish community is for people in other stages of life, or only happens in larger cities with major Jewish populations.

Engagement initiatives must focus not only on the size of the demand they should be prepared to meet, but the distinct culture and “flavor” of the place as well. Adam Pollack, Western Regional Director of NEXT, experiences this more than others through his work with the diverse array of communities that make up the western part of the country. “I think about large and small communities, but I also think about culture,” he explained. “There are large and small communities that are very

willing to try new things and are willing to take a chance and run a pilot. Others are less open to that. The culture of the community is a big part of...understanding what the [engagement] trends are there.”

Adam finds that size does not dictate similarities in culture, nor does geographic proximity. Los Angeles and San Diego, for example, may not have any more similarities in terms of what works for engagement than do San Diego and Denver, Colorado. While communities across the board share common broad-stroke strategies, finding what works involves assessment by individual community and asking questions such as where young people are living and for how long. “Especially in the western region there's a lot of migration from outside the region, so there's a big flux of new young adults, maybe who went on Birthright in a different community but now are moving here post-college or maybe 3 or 4 years post-college. A place like Los Angeles is a magnet for young adults. A place like Portland is also a magnet, but they're two very different cities. The reason people move there are very different. So different strategies are needed in each.”

One of the main principles engagement initiatives are employing to respond to this challenge is simple and straightforward—allow the community to define itself. By putting the decision-making, and sometimes the programming itself, in the hands of participants along with some structure and guidance, the details come together in a way that feels natural, relevant, and effective. This was a major line of thinking in NEXT's decision to pull away from providing direct programming and instead focus on supporting local initiatives, or even less structured approaches such as providing do-it-yourself “kits” for NEXT Shabbat dinners. These resources reach Birthrighters in large numbers and appeal in large and small communities alike. For Birthrighters in communities without developed initiatives, a Shabbat or holiday kit provides a foundation on which to build a grassroots community that makes them feel supported by and connected to the larger Jewish world they experienced on Birthright. In large communities, it allows Birthrighters to create a niche where they build their Jewish experience on their

own terms, something young adults often do to feel a sense of belonging in the context of big city life. Most importantly, it engages Birthrighters not just as consumers but as creators of Jewish life, and it guarantees that they will view Judaism as customizable rather than “one size fits all.”

While the “do-it-yourself” (DIY) approach can be a blessing both in terms of empowering individuals to create Jewish experiences on their own terms and filling gaps where the engagement initiatives cannot reach them, it can also be a challenge to know what role the Jewish content is playing and whether it is enough of a foundation to build on for finding deeper meaning in Judaism. Ron Wolfson argues that the micro-community, DIY approach only works if it involves some sort of link to the larger community, or becomes part of a “community of communities” (2013, p. 3). Many might add to this that while a “Shabbox” is effective for Birthright to maintain a connection with its past participants, the link to the larger community needs to be more substantive than Jewish ritual items imprinted with an organization's logo. Ideally there is a Jewish educator or leader in some sense involved who can guide the formation of Jewish content in these experiences, as Hillel has done with their Senior Jewish Educators (SJE) who supervise the CEI interns in their model. While this remains an unsolved challenge in the context of a do-it-yourself, Jewish-experience-in-a-box model, NEXT has made some strides by providing content in the materials themselves as well as through their digital media outreach. This leaves the decision of how much content to include, if any, to the do-it-yourselfers, which may seem to some like a great risk but is the only way to truly trust young Jewish adults to make meaning out of their experiences on their own terms.

Funding and Sustainability

Many engagement initiatives started small and were given seed money or funds to hire more staff as they grew, either by the organizations that housed them or by private philanthropists, including Birthright co-founder Michael Steinhardt. The Kahn and BRIDGE Fellowships at the Los Angeles

Federation, now a cornerstone program of their Birthright-related programs, were established as a result of good fortune when several donors approached the Federation with a desire to fund an innovative program focused on engagement of young Jewish adults, but with no specific ideas or preference of how to go about it.

Now, as many initiatives have become more established, it is unclear where they should fall as a funding priority, or where the funds should come from. Many of these initiatives have spent the past 5-8 years proving their worth and effectiveness; now the next few years will be a time for determining how these initiatives fit into the long-term visions of the communities that support them, or even which organizations or departments they should be housed in. The organizations that support the work of engagement professionals are often faced with competing priorities and limited resources, and may seek to create models where their resources are distributed over multiple priority areas. But many of these professionals would argue that they need to be dedicated full-time to their tasks, and supported in doing so, to continue to produce the kind of quality results they have achieved thus far.

The Alumni Community in New York started fairly early into the Birthright enterprise as a self-generated programming series that would offer several types of programming on a regular basis—a Jewish book club, a Wall Street division, and a series on contemporary issues in Israeli society. Rebecca Sugar, then the sole person running the programs, quickly recognized the need to expand as participant numbers grew, partially due to her own relationship-building efforts and word of mouth. “So at that point, Michael Steinhardt...called me up and asked me to go to a meeting with him and a donor,” Rebecca recalled. The meeting resulted in a commitment of joint funding from Steinhardt and the other donor to hire additional staff and develop the Alumni Community further. Over the years, the Alumni Community has been part of reconfigurations that included becoming a part of and then separating from NEXT. Now the Alumni Community has an official partnership with the Birthright

Israel enterprise, securing its long-term status, but stands as its own programming initiative.

But others are not as secure in their status and feel unsure of their long-term fate. Toronto's Community Connect also received several investments from Michael Steinhardt to expand their model and hire additional engagement staff. The initiative was originally housed within the Young Leadership Division, connected to the campaign but separate from Community Engagement, which was connected to the Fundraising department. Now that the program has grown and has proven successful, it is time for the Toronto Federation to think about how to sustain this initiative and how their work fits in with the larger picture of the organization.

Shauna Waltman recalled that the initial intention was to keep the engagement work separate from fundraising, but as Community Connect has evolved it has aligned with aspects of the work in both departments. She and her colleagues have also realized that isolating themselves from the fundraising element of the organization does not serve the program, or those they are engaging, well in the long term. "So we have arrived at this interesting point of time where we realized these worlds have to collide—but how do they collide? And what's the framework? How do these two departments come together to work seamlessly, and how do we prevent overlap in what we're doing? Because really it's all engagement, whether you're fundraising or you're just getting people involved in the community. So how do these two worlds collide so we can maximize our efficiency and cost effectiveness?" Shauna and her colleagues continue to ponder these essential questions and perhaps pave the way for other organizations that must make similar decisions about sustaining and integrating their own engagement initiatives.

Tracking and Evaluation

As Jewish organizations work to determine the fate of engagement initiatives, a key issue that

many are just beginning to focus on is evaluation. Just as with any program that focuses on engagement and relationship building, deciding how to measure success is an extremely elusive and difficult task. Some are beginning to develop systematic evaluation processes, while others continue to measure success on a case-by-case basis.

Engagement professionals in other areas of Jewish life, for example through Hillel, have made use of databases to track the relationships they create and to evaluate the overall impact of their work. Hillel has received attention for developing its own data-tracking system, called REACH, which provides sophisticated information to Hillel professionals and goes beyond simply tracking participation to evaluate an individual student's Jewish growth over time (www.reachinfo.hillel.org). While most engagement initiatives are far from this level of sophistication with their tracking abilities, many have taken the concept to heart and are using similar systems to evaluate their work with Birthrighters. IACT campus professionals in the Boston area use spreadsheets that mimic the data collection capabilities of REACH and set quantitative and qualitative engagement goals for each student. They have also begun using "scorecards" that assign value to certain activities that are perceived as representing different levels of engagement—a coffee meeting, for example, is worth one point, whereas attending a multi-part Jewish learning series is worth more.

Matt Lebovic explained that part of the reason this system has meaning for them is because they are able to compare data across the many campuses engaged with IACT and see how certain strategies are working better than others through the data. For other initiatives that cater to one general community, such information would only be helpful to compare from one year to the next, taking several years to yield any valuable information. Matt and the IACT campus professionals have also found that while funders often desire quantitative results to evaluate the success of a program, the qualitative information they gather has much more meaning to them and goes farther in guiding the

engagers in their work. While quantitative data may paint a broad-stroke picture of the program's impact, qualitative information tells them specifically how their work is impacting individual Birthrighters, which aligns more with the way they approach their work—through individual relationship-building.

Community Connect also gathers information from Birthrighters, mostly qualitative, to guide their work. Their polls of Birthright participants yield information about what Birthrighters are interested in and what kinds of opportunities they are looking for from their Jewish community, and this information goes into what Shauna Waltman referred to as “a sort of preliminary alumni database” to guide their understanding of the population. Margalit Rosenthal is also developing metrics for measuring the impact of the Kahn and BRIDGE Fellowships in Los Angeles, focusing on gathering information through evaluation forms filled out by the fellows about their programs and interactions. She echoes the sentiment that while numbers are important, the true learning in this line of work comes from qualitative, not quantitative information. As engagement initiatives continue to face questions of long-term impact and how they are to be sustained financially, they will likely continue to explore evaluation methods that serve both their internal needs and the desire for more information coming from their partners and funders.

The Role of Engagement Professionals

Many organizations, mostly Federations who have invested in sending Birthright buses through their organization, have created positions or even whole departments to attend to the tasks of post-trip follow-up. In 2005, the Toronto Federation was one of the first to establish a full-time staff position dedicated solely to the task of post-Birthright engagement, filled by a young woman named Shauna

Waltman, who went on to establish Community Connect in Toronto. With the establishment of Birthright-centered engagement as a priority for Jewish organizations, and the programs they have created to address that priority, there has been a resulting movement of increased formalization and professionalization of this work. Many engagement professionals see their work as important not only for the populations they serve, but for the way it is shaping the field of Jewish communal service. According to Joelle Berman of NEXT, what is happening now for engagement work is what guided the formation of Jewish camping as a professional discipline:

Fifteen years ago, Jewish camping was not considered a profession. It was not considered a field. And now, it is both of those things in every regard. What [The Foundation for Jewish Camp] did was... they really professionalized that field, gave people incentives to stay, made it into a real viable force. And I think what we're looking at right now is that there are all these professionals out there doing similar work with young adults, and they don't even realize that they're a field yet, but we [at NEXT] do. And we not only want to train them because we have an interest in engaging young adults, but because we have an interest in them...we have a genuine interest in these engagers loving their jobs, not getting burned out, getting paid enough money, having the flexibility and the creativity and the room to be innovative that is required for their job.

NEXT is using the relational, networked approach that is so effective with young Jewish adults to facilitate connections between these groups of professionals and volunteers through trainings, conversations, and other professional exchanges. The development of professional engagement networks enables them to better understand their work, share ideas, and build better relationships with the Birthright participants they work with. This comparison positions NEXT as the organization that will accomplish for Birthright-centered engagement what the Foundation for Jewish Camp did for

Jewish camps, whereas others would argue that this is happening organically through professional relationships. Regardless of who is driving the movement, it is clear that there is a sense among engagement professionals that a networked approach will help them advance their work as a whole.

Developing Professional Networks

Through its evolution, NEXT has become a resource for engagement professionals nationwide to learn about the strategies, ideas, successes, and challenges that make up their field of work. Alongside organizations like Moishe House and Hillel, NEXT is leading the charge for making professionalized engagement strategies a central element of work with young Jewish adults. Being in this position allows NEXT to understand what practices are emerging among engagers in local communities and to connect them with one another to form “more holistic ecosystems in which to involve young adults,” said Communications Manager Joelle Berman.

Adam Pollack, Western Regional Director of NEXT, explained how their building of a professional network of engagers (aptly named the “NEXTwork”) is advancing engagement work to have an impact on the landscape of the Jewish communal field. “Even just going out and meeting with engagement professionals regularly already elevates the level at which they're seen. NEXT is paying attention to them, we're investing heavily in their training, we're available regularly for consultation calls around how to manage marketing, how to do a one-on-one conversation, recruitment, evaluation, data collection—all of those pieces that go into good engagement work.” Having previously worked as an engagement professional himself, Adam understands the challenges engagers face and regularly engages in conversations with colleagues about how professionals can be supported to succeed.

Part of ensuring that success is setting realistic expectations of the capacity that such professionals and their initiatives can reach. “Often times engagers wear multiple hats, so they might be the communications manager and also doing engagement work. So for us we're able to say...to do good

engagement work it's about x, y and z. We talk about best practices and also what is doable within the context of their actual organization," Adam said.

Those conversations occur regularly over the phone between engagers in local initiatives and their NEXT regional director, of which there are currently four. Many interviewees for this thesis mentioned these monthly calls as a helpful resource for checking in, sharing challenges and best practices, and getting updates on what is happening in other areas of the region. The NEXTwork is also helping to facilitate conversations about some of the big questions engagers face in their work, like how to engage in challenging conversations about Israel and how to connect Birthrighters to a larger sense of peoplehood and Jewish multiculturalism.

A key feature of the NEXTwork's development have been the periodic regional gatherings, called "convenings," of engagement professionals to participate in a 2- to 3-day professional development seminar with other key professionals in their field. NEXT uses this format to bring together engagers from a variety of settings to ensure the development of a broad and diverse group of professionals that can reach Birthrighters and other Jewish young adults through as many outlets as possible. Adam believes that the power of the convenings lies in the diversity of individuals they bring together and their ability to break down barriers within the Jewish community:

It's nice to know that in one day I can meet with a huge range of individuals, from Birthright alumni, to executives at a Federation, to a grassroots organization, to just some young folks who had an idea and now they're starting to do it and they need some coaching on how to get it off the ground. By gathering such a diverse group of individuals in a room for one or two days, and then engaging them in regular conversations over the course of the year, the understandings we think we have each of each other and who each other are, those start to fall away and we begin to see who we really are and how we can work together around the similarities rather than the

differences.

Large regional convenings typically happen twice annually, but smaller convenings have begun to pop up as well among more immediate local networks to do more focused training for those communities. In the Northeast, NEXT has put together convenings for engagement rabbis and their lay leaders to provide training for a more targeted audience. Overall, the convenings have been very successful and are an effective platform for building the infrastructure of professional networks that NEXT would like to see grow even further.

Adam also writes articles for Jewish publications to make what is happening in the NEXTwork more visible to the field in general. He makes a particular effort to put this presence in the public forum around major events and conferences, such as the Federations' General Assembly. "We want to make sure that others outside our immediate sphere are aware of the work that's being done in this area," he said.

"One of the things we're trying to do is connect the engagers to a sense of something bigger than themselves, so it's not just a professional in charge of programs and engagement in New Mexico, but he or she feels like she's part of a national movement of people who are doing this work. We think it will elevate the field, and we think it'll keep people in their jobs longer," said Liz Fisher, Managing Director of NEXT. Though subtly mentioned, the issue of high turnover in engagement jobs is something managers of engagement programs see commonly (Wolfson, 2013). "It's a tough job that people cut their teeth on," said Matt Lebovic of the campus engagement professionals that the IACT initiative employs. "A lot are staying two years, which is typical for people in their 20's. [But] if you really want to leave a mark on a campus and lead change, I think two years can be challenging," he said.

In some ways, the field itself faces some of the same challenges it seeks to address through its

work, most likely because the field is dominated by and large by young professionals. Young people tend to seek out engagement work because of its dynamic nature and fast pace, and because it involves working with their peer group. Engagement initiatives similarly seek young professionals because they are able to build connections easily and naturally when the population in question is of their own age. Young people, however, transition more quickly and more frequently in their careers (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009), and engagement positions often do not offer incentives such as opportunities for growth or a desirable salary. Some are making a conscious effort to address this by creating other incentives such as a cohort mentality to attract engagers to stay longer rather than treating engagement work as a stepping stone to bigger things, or they see the overall development of the field as a way to address some of the obstacles that they currently face.

Partnerships and Consultation

Using the connections made through these professional networks allows engagement initiatives to build programmatic and organizational partnerships that help them to collectively expand their capacity and increase their impact on the community. It is through community partnerships that engagement professionals and organizations are able to reach a wider audience, offer a broader range of interests to a diverse population, and provide as many entry points to the community as possible that will lead to meaningful involvement.

As in many other contexts, Jewish organizations are wise about using one another as resources when building programs that cover more than one area of Jewish life to present all content through a Jewish lens. For example, when NEXT has attempted to engage Birthrighters around Tu B'Shvat with a Tu B'Shvat Seder, a partnership with anti-hunger advocacy organization Mazon has allowed them to do what they have learned to do well with NEXT Shabbat while educating about hunger and the

environment, both pertinent issues to the holiday.

While it might be tempting for organizationally-based engagement initiatives to approach their work with a membership mentality and want to keep their participants within their own networks, many have realized that greater success comes when they acknowledge they are not the only ones in their communities who are able, or even best-equipped, to engage Birthrighters. They have also realized that many barriers within the Jewish community need to be broken down in order to form the best partnerships that will result in the greatest innovation and progress.

NEXT has made a conscious effort to bring organizations together in unexpected partnerships that do not adhere to traditional lines of affiliation, particularly since the population they work with spans the spectrum of Jewish identity and affiliation. Most engagement initiatives are non-denominational, which puts them in a unique position to educate about Judaism outside of a denominational conversation, as well as bring partners together from different spiritual perspectives to work together on the same goal of engaging young people. And since more and more Jewish adults of all ages are identifying with Judaism outside of denominational or even religious considerations, as evidenced by the Pew study (Pew Research Center, 2013), this shows young people that they can continue to understand and relate to Judaism on their own terms through their Birthright experience as an entry point. “Because of who we are and our position...we have tremendous opportunities to work with a diverse group of partners,” said Liz Fisher. “I very recently brought together folks from Aish HaTorah and from the Union for Reform Judaism on a partnership, and now they're working together...to me that's what the future of the Jewish community is about, us looking beyond our programmatic differences, and our denominational differences, and thinking about how we can provide opportunities for people on the ground.”

Most of the professionals interviewed for this thesis from major engagement initiatives

described extensive work with partners in their areas, including everything from co-sponsoring of events to professional development exchanges involving quarterly meetings to share ideas and challenges, thereby generating even more partnerships and collaborations.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington convenes the Young Jewish Professionals Network (YJPN), which brings together professionals from about 21 local organizations “who all have a stake in the young adult world.” The members of the YJPN come together on a quarterly basis for professional development, networking opportunities, and simply to talk about what they are all doing. Many partnerships have developed as a result of this network, either for one-off programs or for ongoing collaborations. “The Federation convenes the YJPN...not just for networking opportunities, but to figure out what is our common goal, what do we want to provide to the community, how do we collectively serve this young adult population without over-programming...or competing with each other,” Sara Weiner explained.

Another area where NEXT has expanded its role to provide support and infrastructure to the developing field of engagement work is through consultation. While the regional directors maintain contact with individual engagement professionals and provide general support, NEXT has also made its services available for more targeted consulting for organizations or communities that want to build their capacity for engagement. NEXT has consulted on several of the most cutting-edge engagement programs currently in place and is helping other communities to build entirely new ones.

Adam Pollack described his recent work with the Las Vegas Federation, which is seeking to innovate in the way they engage young Jewish adults. “The Federation there approached us because there are really only three organizations doing young adult engagement: the Federation, Hillel, and one synagogue. So there's not quite the infrastructure there to engage young adults, and we know there are Birthright alumni living there. So instead of us sitting in a room and trying to figure out what they

want, we decided to bring them in and brainstorm,” he said. As Las Vegas is working to establish itself as “the start-up city,” the solution was to bring professionals and Birthrighters together for a brainstorming session, where they generated over 100 ideas of how they want to connect Jewishly in Las Vegas.

“So now we're working to come up with the most concrete and promising of those ideas...some of them were really big, new ideas, and some of them were things that are happening elsewhere but just aren't happening yet in Las Vegas. So now our goal is to empower them to make those things happen,” Adam explained. This will be done through continued consultation to not simply build the ideas into reality, but to help with local staff support and NEXT consulting support to realize some of those biggest ideas.

But even as NEXT continues to develop their consulting services and their capacity to help emerging initiatives, some have questioned whether this role will need to be a permanent one. As Jewish organizations are professionalizing their engagement work in general, they are increasingly bringing that expertise in-house, and NEXT may see a decreasing need for their consulting services. Some are even barred by labor union restrictions from contracting out for certain of the services NEXT provides because they have professionals within the organization who can do the same work; or they feel that to be sustainable they need to be self-reliant and not turn to external resources for help in engaging their own populations. One interviewee who runs an engagement program at a Federation said, “We have a professional partnership, we share values, and we can share best practices, but I don't know if there's ever going to be a point or a need for us to pay them to do something for us. I don't know if their model is based on the assumption that that's what's going to be happening.”

Some initiatives have even grown to the point that they themselves are serving in a consulting role to partners within their own communities. Community Connect in Toronto consults with its

community partners to ensure that the programs and events available to Birthrighters share the objectives of building deeper connections to the community through relationships, education, and engaging activities that reflect the needs and interests of participants. It is possible that as the field continues to grow it will become more self-sufficient, which seems to be a common goal. As this happens, many of the initiatives focused on engagement work, including NEXT, will likely need to continue to evolve in response to the needs of the community and the organizations that work to fulfill those needs.

Developing Common Language

In the field of applied linguistics, professional communication is studied as an important element of the development of an emerging field as an official discipline. Common professional language is particularly essential in fields where communication is a key mode of getting work done, and Jewish communal engagement is one of those fields. Distinctions are made between professional language that is used internally among professionals and language that a professional uses when communicating with a client or person who is an outsider to the field (Schnurr, 2013). In the case of engagement, professional language for the most part remains internal and does not make its way into conversations with Birthrighters or other young Jewish adults. Engagers maintain a delicate balance in their work as they participate in professional conversations and develop their work in an increasingly acknowledged professional discipline, while simultaneously working to maintain an organic feel to the connections they build with Birthrighters and keeping barriers low so that those they interact with do not feel like outsiders.

The development of common language is not only important for practical communication purposes among professionals in a field, but use of such language becomes a marker of belonging to a community in which that language is used. It also becomes a marker to outsiders that a discipline can

be considered a developed field that is governed by common social norms and language (Schnurr, 2013). Many common terms have emerged in recent years as engagement work has come to be established as a professional discipline, some of which have been created by engagement professionals as a conscious effort to guide their field in a more formal direction. NEXT as a convener of engagement professionals nationwide has played a significant role in this movement. The staff at NEXT intentionally make use of the word “engager” to refer to engagement professionals to establish it in “the lexicon of American Jewish life.” NEXT staff originally called engagement professionals “informal educators”; the term “NEXT pros” was also used for a time to refer to those placed in community organizations that were specifically funded by NEXT.

While “engager” is not used universally and is interchangeable with “engagement professional” (as has been done throughout the text of this thesis), it was used by several professionals interviewed for this project, particularly those who acknowledged having a close working relationship with their NEXT regional office. It appears that currently the use of terms created within the field of engagement remains specific to the organizations that create them and perhaps circulate to a few others in close contact with the originator. As this field continues to develop and more literature is generated around it, it is likely that associated language will enter the consciousness of more individuals in the field and will continue to grow as a result.

The term “concierge” has also made its way into the vocabulary of engagement professionals in several communities, as evidenced by the analysis of “the concierge model” in this thesis. The concept underlying the term has been widely discussed as a need for change in Jewish communal work, namely that young Jewish adults do not affiliate broadly with Judaism and Jewish institutions in the way that their parents and grandparents did. The “iPod” analogy is often used to describe the way that young Jewish adults engage with Jewish life; rather than buying and listening to the whole album of a favorite

artist to hear a favorite song, young Jewish adults can now pick and choose their favorites from a wide range of albums and bypass the tracks that do not appeal to them (Bennett, Potts & Levin, 2005). The concierge concept attempts to emulate the iPod model, allowing young Jewish adults to seek out particular aspects of Jewish life that appeal to them without necessarily becoming a subscribing member of an institution or movement. Some resist using the term “concierge,” perhaps because of the association it creates with being a one-time customer of a service rather than a member of a community. Despite this ambivalence, the increasing use of the term, or the model it represents, signifies a certain acceptance of the changes to modes of Jewish affiliation and a response to create something new to address these changes.

Other terms used by engagement professionals, such as “relationship manager,” “influencer,” “Jewish journey guide,” and “engagement fellow/mentor,” all assign titles to roles that have previously been unofficial and informal, contributing to the development of engagement work as a professional field. These are all roles that involve direct interaction and relationship building with the population in question, something that Jewish institutions widely express concern about but have only recently begun to view in a formalized, professional capacity. The addition of these terms to the lexicon of engagement professionals, and the organizations that employ them, contributes to the sense that there is a methodology behind the work of engaging young Jewish adults and that the individuals who bear these titles, whether they are full-time professionals or committed volunteer leaders, can be trusted to move the needle and further their mission.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Over the past decade, Birthright follow-up efforts have evolved from isolated programmatic efforts into a professionalized field of Birthright-centered engagement. While some engagement strategies have been borrowed or adapted from other successful engagement models, they have been shaped to take on the unique challenge of building sustainable commitments to Jewish life from a ten-day experience in Israel. These initiatives therefore carry distinctive characteristics that speak to the influence of Birthright Israel on this generation. As a result of my examination of this field over the past year, I offer the following recommendations for the continued development of Birthright-centered engagement.

Recommendations for engagement

Don't separate Birthrighters from other young Jewish adults, and don't always separate young Jewish adults from everyone else. Birthrighters are unique in terms of their entry point to Jewish life—but that, for the most part, is where the uniqueness ends. Programs in the past have tended to treat Birthrighters as a distinct population, which if the ultimate goal is integration into Jewish communal life, is a roadblock in itself. Birthrighters need to be treated the same as any other young Jewish adult if we expect them to feel as if they can become a larger part of the communal fabric. By the same token, separating young Jewish adults as an age group is counterproductive to that sense of integration. The needs and interests of young Jewish adults do require some different approaches, and young adults often enjoy participating in programs with their own age cohort, so young adult-specific programming should not be done away with entirely. But the experiences offered by Jewish organizations to young Jewish adults should not be so unique that there is a sense of otherness that prevents continuity with Jewish life at other stages.

Put the power in the hands of the participants—but with guidance. Regardless of the specific engagement strategy, initiatives seem to be most successful when they focus on building relationships with Birthrighters and give them the power to shape their own Jewish experiences. Empowered grassroots Jewish communities are sprouting up everywhere and are especially appealing to Jewish young adults who do not necessarily see themselves as part of the existing communal structure, or who live in small communities where the infrastructure does not exist to meet their needs. If we want to see Jewish young adults become involved and engaged with their Jewish identities, they need to be doing it on their own terms—but not without some help.

To combat issues like the “Birthright Syndrome” where Birthrighters come to expect Jewish experiences to be free and accessible, it is important to communicate that they have both the power and the obligation to shape the environments where Jewish life happens for themselves and their peers. Not every participant can be a leader, and not everyone will want to be, but ownership only comes when Jewish experiences are not prescriptive but are specific and meaningful to the participants. At the same time, many Birthrighters come back from Israel with plenty of enthusiasm but little practical knowledge of what those Jewish experiences might look like. Engagement professionals must be available as listeners, facilitators and mentors to ensure that those who choose to be involved have a sense of control but are learning what meaningful Jewish experiences look like and how they lead to the overall enhancement of Jewish life. In small communities where Birthright-centered engagement initiatives do not exist, NEXT should focus on providing guidance in addition to the tools necessary for building Jewish experiences.

Recommendations for developing the field

Streamline recruitment, trip prep, and follow-up. As evidenced by the many challenges shared by engagement professionals related to this issue—from information sharing to communication to the “three month cliff”—there is a clear argument for the coordination of Birthright-related services at every stage of the process. While in some ways the division of responsibility in these stages makes the Birthright enterprise more manageable for professionals, it also makes engagement significantly more challenging and makes the process confusing for Birthrighters. There is sufficient evidence that a connection with an engagement professional that is present both pre- and post-trip, and sometimes during, enhances the experience for Birthrighters and makes them more likely to feel a sense of personal connection and belonging to their community.

For Taglit-Birthright Israel: The responsibility for this change falls primarily to Birthright Israel to amend the recruitment and registration processes to be more conducive to the involvement of engagement professionals and to share information more readily with those professionals. This argument has been made frequently in recent years (see Sasson et al., 2007; The Jewish Daily Forward, 2013) and has resulted in small changes, but for the most part the process remains the same. I add my voice to this argument, with the suggestion that Taglit-Birthright Israel evaluate whether its current policies facilitate or hinder progress towards their objective of seeing a generation that is engaged and passionate about their Jewish identity. There should also be an examination of whether they are leveraging their partnerships with the professionals who are continuing this work in local communities long after the trips are over, as well as how they can support one another.

For engagement initiatives: Engagement initiatives should use their growing influence in the field to establish relationships directly with trip providers that will allow them to bypass some of the issues they experience currently and be more involved with the overall process of Birthright. The initiatives that have been most successful in building a comprehensive approach are those that have those direct

relationships and can strategically shape the experience to be more holistic. Getting more involved with pre-trip preparation is also an effective way to shape the overall experience.

Focus on community-based trips. While streamlining pre-and post-Birthright services will make a difference in the Birthrighter's experience, the foundation of the engagement-based approach to Birthright is the community trip. Traveling with local Jewish peers enhances the Birthright experience and is crucial to the connection to Jewish life after the trip. Some Birthrighters continue to seek out non-community trips out of the desire to meet people from other areas of the country or people who share their niche interests, and they should be allowed to do so, but none should be precluded from making the local connection that a community trip provides.

For Taglit-Birthright Israel: Provide information and a registration process that is conducive to community trips. Giving trip organizers free reign to advertise their specialty does not preclude sharing the advantages of experiencing Israel with peers from one's own community, and there is no reason that Birthrighters who choose specialty trips should not be placed with others from their community when possible. Positive progress has been made with sharing information about community trips on the Birthright Israel website, and this can be further developed to showcase the benefits of a community trip.

For Engagement Initiatives: Local organizations should continue to invest in sending their own buses; for those that cannot fill a bus on their own, partnering with nearby communities to send regional trips can also be effective (Sasson et al., 2007). While Taglit-Birthright Israel can do more to showcase community trips as an option, it is up to the local organizations to advertise their specific trips and to communicate to potential Birthrighters why they should choose to travel with them. They should also continue to focus on sending engagement professionals as madrichim, or training volunteers to be

effective engagers for the local community and making the connection between the sense of peoplehood that Israel provides and the sense of community they can find at home.

Invest in engagement. Engagement is clearly growing as a discipline for many Jewish organizations, and it will likely become more common moving forward. Federations, JCCs, and other Jewish institutions should think about giving engagement initiatives a permanent place in their organizational structure and should hire full-time engagement professionals that are solely dedicated to those projects. Engagement work involves the development of skills that are transferrable to other roles in a nonprofit organization, such as community outreach and development. Hiring these individuals in long-term positions with opportunities for growth will strengthen the incentive for high-skilled professionals to pursue such work and will contribute to the overall strength of the organization. Those who pursue engagement work are often also former participants of such initiatives—many engagers working with Birthrighters have been on Birthright themselves—and therefore hiring them as professionals also ensures that such programs will have a permanent and critical influence on the shape of the Jewish communal field moving forward.

For NEXT: NEXT has served as the primary driver of the development of Birthright-centered engagement and can continue to do so through their direct support to engagement professionals and their initiatives. Suggestions for further development include providing support not just for professionals, but for the general sustainability of initiatives and their roles in the greater community, much as the Foundation for Jewish Camp has done for summer camps. Making the case for the importance and effectiveness of such initiatives is necessary for procuring funds to sustain them, and one area where these initiatives could improve is in their tracking and evaluation. As a convener of engagement professionals, NEXT is in a position to guide the development of industry standards of

evaluation, including identifying metrics for tracking engagement. Such standards would contribute to our understanding of the strength of these initiatives and help secure their position within Jewish communal institutions moving forward.

In light of the announcement by Birthright Israel in January 2014 of major changes to its eligibility criteria—one of which includes those who have previously traveled to Israel on an organized trip (Sokol, 2014)—we are likely to see more strategic changes to Birthright Israel itself in the coming years. As rapid and vast as Birthright's impact has been on the American Jewish community, it appears that more changes are to come and the impact of those changes is still unforeseen. Engagement professionals should be aware of and participating in the conversations surrounding these changes, and thinking about how they can respond to them with their own strategies and expertise. While the formalization of the field of engagement seems to be a positive shift, those driving this momentum must also think about maintaining the "research and development" nature of engagement initiatives that gives them such agility to respond to the needs of the community, so that they may remain at the forefront of the field as it continues to grow and change.

References

- Bennett, R., Potts, E., & Levin, R. (2005). OMG! How Generation Y is redefining faith in the iPod era. *Reboot*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=331>
- Berkman, S. (2012, November 6). Birthright reshuffles follow-up effort: After disappointing results, alumni shunted to other groups. *The Jewish Daily Forward*. Retrieved from <http://forward.com/articles/165277/birthright-reshuffles-follow-up-effort/?p=all>
- Bronfman, A. (2008). Accidental leadership. *Contact: The journal of the Steinhart Foundation for Jewish Life* 11(1), p. 4.
- Bronznick, S. & Goldenhar, D. (2003). *Cohorts: How they learn, lead and influence*. Bronznick & Co., LLC. Retrieved from <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=820>
- Brown, E. (2005). Making inspired leaders: New approaches to Jewish leadership development. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 81(1-2), 63-72.
- Caldwell, J.T. (2001). Introduction: Global conglomeration and the performance of local identity. *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media and Composite Cultures* 11(2), 189-198.
- Chertok, F., Sasson, T. & Saxe, L. (2009). Tourists, travelers, and citizens: Jewish engagement of young adults in four centers of North American Jewish life. Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Day, D.V. (2001). Leadership development: A review in context. *Leadership Quarterly* 11(4), 581-613.
- Eisen, A.M. (1997). *Taking hold of Torah: Jewish commitment and community in America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.
- Golan, S., Petersen, D. & Wechsler, M. (2010). Evaluation of the Birthright Israel NEXT community

initiatives. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from: http://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/BirthrightIsraelNEXT_Evaluation_6.30.2010.pdf

Hart, T., Greenfield, J.M., MacLaughlin, S. & Geier, P.H. (2010). *Internet management for nonprofits: Strategies, tools and trade secrets*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Horwitz, D.S. (2013, July 29). What we have learned about Jewish learning. *eJewishPhilanthropy*. Retrieved from: http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-we-have-learned-about-jewish-learning/?utm_source=Mon+Jul+29&utm_campaign=Mon+Jul+29&utm_medium=email

Horowitz, B. (2000). Connections and journeys: Assessing critical opportunities for enhancing Jewish identity. *UJA-Federation of New York*. Retrieved from: <http://databank.bjpa.org/Studies/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=2631>

Jewish Daily Forward (2013, November 4th). Share Birthright data with all [Editorial]. Retrieved from: <http://forward.com/articles/186689/share-birthright-data-with-all/>

Kanter, B. (2014, January 8). Leveraging social media to engage and inspire your alumni network [PowerPoint slides]. In *#NetTalks: Alumni Engagement Webinar Series: An Initiative of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://www.schusterman.org/wp-content/uploads/Beth-Kanter-ppt.pdf>.

Kaunfer, E. (2010). *Empowered Judaism: What independent Minyanim can teach us about building vibrant Jewish communities*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Kelner, S. (2010). *Tours that bind: Diaspora, pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright tourism*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Levin, M. (2012). They're shown it but can they own it: Peoplehood in the 21st century. In Ravid, S.

(Ed.), *The Peoplehood Papers 8: Nurturing Jewish peoplehood in the 21st century: What should we do differently?* (pp. 45-47). The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education.

Litman, S. (2012, April 25). Grapevine: Moving from program-centric to customer-centric.

eJewishPhilanthropy. Retrieved from <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/grapevine-moving-from-program-centric-to-customer-centric/>

Pew Research Center (2013). *A portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://databank.bjpa.org/Studies/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=3088>

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Sasson, T., Saxe, L., Rosen, M.I., Selinger-Abutbul, D. & Hecht, S. (2007). *After Birthright Israel: Finding and seeking young adult Jewish community*. Brandeis University: Steinhardt Social Research Institute.

Saxe, L. & Chazan, B. (2008). *Ten days of Birthright Israel: A journey in young adult identity*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.

Saxe, L., Shain, M., Wright, G., Hecht, S., Fishman, S. & Sasson, T. (2012). The impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2012 update. Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.

Schnurr, S. (2013). *Exploring professional communication: Language in action*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sharon, A.D. (2013, August 26). Following Birthright's Bar Mitzvah, examining its offspring. *JNS.org*. Retrieved from: <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2013/8/26/following-birthrights-bar-mitzvah-examining-its-offspring>

- Suddaby, R. & Viale, T. (2011). Professionals and field-level change: Institutional work and the professional project. *Current Sociology* 59(4), 423-442.
- Sujansky, J. & Ferri-Reed, J. (2009). *Keeping the Millennials: Why companies are losing billions in turnover to this generation-and what to do about it*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Taylor, S. (2014, January 27th). Formalizing the informal. *eJewishPhilanthropy*. Retrieved from:
<http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/formalizing-the-informal/>
- Udasin, S. (2010, August 25). At Moishe House Birthright moves in. *The New York Jewish Week*.
 Retrieved from:
http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/short_takes/moishe_house_birthright_moves
- Weisman, R. & Myers Allen, S. (2008). Gen Y and leadership. *Contact: The journal of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life* 11(1), p. 11.
- Wertheimer, J. (2011). Mapping the scene: How younger Jewish adults engage with Jewish community. In Wertheimer, J. (Ed.), *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- Wertheimer, J. (2010). Generation of change: How leaders in their twenties and thirties are reshaping American Jewish life. *The Avi Chai Foundation*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=6522>
- Wertheimer, J. (2005). Linking the silos: How to accelerate the momentum in Jewish education today. *The Avi Chai Foundation*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/10077.pdf>
- Winograd, M. & Hais, M.D. (2011). *Millennial momentum: How a new generation is remaking America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.