

# THE BENEFITS OF LONG TERM TRIPS TO ISRAEL

By

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Capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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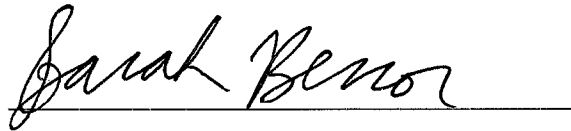
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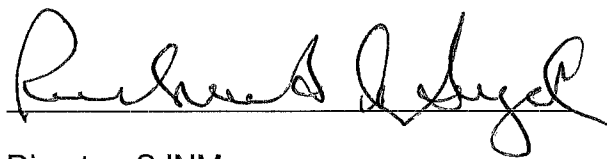
THE BENEFITS OF LONG TERM TRIPS TO ISRAEL

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah Benor", written over a horizontal line.

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Director, SJNM

I would like to dedicate this project to my zeide and bobe, Morris and Eva Salsberg, who taught me how to be a mentch, and to the rest of my family and friends who encouraged me to pursue my dreams no matter how farfetched they seemed. Without their help and support I would have never applied to grad school in the first place.

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## Abstract

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This thesis explores the experiences of participants in long term (4 or more months) programs in Israel, based on in-depth interviews with 15 Jews from New York and Los Angeles. Interviewees were all in their 20s and had participated in one of the many Israel programs available to American Jews, including Gap year, semester abroad, Sofer International MBA at Tel Aviv University, Israel Service Core, Carrier Israel, World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS) and an Ulpan/Kibbutz Program.

I found that the vast majority of the participants who decided to engage in a long term trip had visited Israel at least once beforehand. A combination of having a previous relationship to Israel, wanting to explore Judaism and a successful first visit are the ideal ingredients for people to apply for long term programs.

Participants identified a number of obstacles they faced while in Israel, including the language barrier, living inside the American bubble, the lack of interaction with Israelis, the location of the program and the differences between America and Israel. Nevertheless, after an adaptation period of about 6 weeks, participants were able to conquer most challenges. Interviewees also identified a number of positive experiences during their stay in Israel, including volunteering, participating in tiyulim and traveling around the country, getting to know new people and celebrating Shabbat. The overarching benefit participants discussed was getting to know Israel in a more intimate and in-depth way.

Through my interviews I found that long term Israel experiences had a positive impact on participants' Jewish involvements. Several interviewees decided as a result of their time in Israel to pursue careers as Jewish professionals or to increase their involvement as lay leaders in Jewish communal organizations. My thesis concludes with recommendations for participants, trip

providers and funders to encourage long term trip participation as a way to foster future leadership for the Jewish Community.

## Introduction

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In 2010, I moved to Jerusalem for four months to work as a fellow for an organization committed to improving the image of Israel in the international media. My extended stay in Jerusalem was a fascinating experience; I was living in an apartment with two Israeli roommates who had very strong opinions about Israel, politics and life in general. Living with Israelis and hearing their life stories challenged my conception of Israel.

At my fellowship, I worked with Jewish and Arab Israelis and socialized with journalists from Al-Jazeera, Reuters and other news agencies that worked at the same building. Seeing these journalists and hearing their personal narrative in regards to Israel (very different from what you see or read in the media) was incredible, and travelling with them in Israel and the West Bank as they worked professionally was enlightening.

In Israel, I had great conversations with people from all sides of the political spectrum who shared a mosaic of visions and ideas about the country, Judaism and the role of the Diaspora. All of these experiences changed me as a person; they gave me a new understanding about where we come from and the important role that peoplehood plays in our collective past, present and future.

After this transformative experience, I returned to America with a different understanding and passion about Israel and the essential role that this country plays in the survival of the Jewish people. I also came back with many questions about how to proceed in integrating this new found knowledge. Luckily, my boss at the time suggested that I apply to graduate school to become a Jewish professional and make a difference in the world.

When selecting my thesis topic, I immediately recognized that I wanted to research the experiences other young adults have had while spending 4 or more months in Israel on an

organized purposeful trip, with the intention of discovering the long term impact of the travel.

This thesis explores the experiences that 15 Jews from Los Angeles and New York had while living in Israel, concentrating on certain events that were important during their time there, how these events shaped their journeys and the subsequent impact of their travel experience.

My hope is that this thesis can be utilized by trip participants, donors and program providers to enhance the content and quality of organized Israel trips for young adults and thereby to encourage the growth of Jewish leadership in our community.



## Literature review

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Organized trips to Israel began in the 1950's when Young Judaea decided to establish its first summer Israel program (Kelner, 2010, p. 31). Since then, many organizations have made a great effort to encourage their members to travel to Israel regardless of their religious background, previous knowledge of the land or political affiliation. The idea behind these trips is to bring people to Israel to experience the country, explore their roots, get introduced to the concept of Jewish peoplehood and return to America with a sense of collective responsibility, knowing that "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*," "all Jews are responsible for one another."

In this sense, the idea of a group of young Jewish adults traveling to Israel for the first time has a very different meaning than the same group traveling to a different part of the world. Although, trips to other parts of the world can have a very positive effect on participants, trips to Israel have a different effect because they are based on the concept of *homeland tourism*.

As Jews, we believe that before the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948 we were living in the Diaspora, and despite being physically separated from the land, Jews maintained a memory of and a vision referring to the homeland (Powers, 2001). Today we have the opportunity to travel to our collective homeland and be presented with a land that has a special relationship to our heritage, a land that belonged to our forefathers and mothers and now belongs to us.

Homeland tourism in general permits the organizer to "narrate collective identities that allow participants to remain American yet accept and incorporate their ethnic heritage through consuming brief homeland encounters" (Powers, 2001, p.3). In other words, it presents participants who do not know much about their destination with an opportunity to travel, explore and connect with the land of their ancestors. Homeland tourism as a concept also applies to any

other culture, where travelers explore their roots. The most common examples of other such cultures, aside from the Jews, include the Italian-American community (Italy), the African American community (Africa), the Chinese-American community (China) and the Mexican-American community (Mexico).

For young Jews, homeland tourism means traveling to Israel with the intention to create a relationship with the land that has a deeper meaning than just casual travel. "Traveling to Israel is about seeing, feeling, and touching the Jewish past, present, and future" (Chazan, 2003). It means feeling that the ground on which you are walking is the same ground where the prophets walked; it means identifying with the culture, the language and the people with the hopes of creating a connection to Israel that lasts forever. In other words, the first trip to Israel serves as visceral introduction to the country, a way to plant a seed that if successful, it will grow bigger and bigger after the participant has returned home (Kelner, 2010, p. 105).

In 1986, The Jewish Education Committee of the Jewish Agency commissioned a report called *The Israel Experience Project* that wanted to explore "How can policymakers encourage more North American Jews- and particularly younger Jews- to visit Israel, and take part in educationally intensive programs?" (Cohen, 1986). The study, conducted via survey, found that there is a potential market for young Jews (18-24) that want to visit Israel with four or more friends (Cohen, 1986). The study also found that for most people in this age group, traveling to Israel proved very difficult financially and incentives might be necessary to alleviate this situation. In the survey, Cohen found that \$1,000.00 was the average amount that potential participants would be willing to pay for an educational trip to Israel.

Following the Cohen findings and the concerning trends of assimilation and high intermarriage rates (43%) showcased in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Goldstein,

1991), the Government of Israel and a group of private donors decided to launch “the largest-ever attempt to alter Jewish identity for the next generation of Jews” (Brotsky, et al, 2001) by bringing them on an educational 10 day trip to Israel for free, with no strings attached, known as *Birthright Israel*. Birthright was born with the intention to attract 100,000 young Diaspora Jews in the first five years of its existence.

Since its inception, Birthright has allowed hundreds of thousands of participants from around the world who identify themselves as Jews to travel to Israel for a 10 day experience to connect them with their Jewish roots. Birthright was conceived as an experiment with the hope that the engagement of these young Jews with Israel “would strengthen participants’ Jewish identities and counter the threat to Jewish continuity posed by assimilation and intermarriage” (Kadushin, et al, 2002). By 2010, 300,000 young Jewish adults from all sorts of Jewish backgrounds, from Orthodox to secular, had participated in a trip (Hecht, et al, 2011).

Birthright has been one of the most significant experiments with the intention to understand the mentality of young Jews in North America. It has been studied in detail to validate its purpose since its inception (Taglit Birthright Israel, n.d.). The results of these studies have left a body of evidence that shows that the program has been successful as a way to connect young people with the Jewish world and Israel (Saxe & Solomon, 2009; Hecht, et al, 2008, Saxe, et al, 2011).

In a 2010 survey with participants who applied to the program from 2001-2004 that intended to study the long term effects Birthright has on young Jews, researchers found that after 5 or more years, participants who attended a Birthright program felt 46% more connected to Israel than those who decided to apply to a Birthright program but did not attend. The survey also found that the effect was more significant for those who came from weaker Jewish

backgrounds. Young Jews who participated in the program reported that they felt 28% more likely to talk about Israel to their peers and 51% more likely to marry a Jewish person, especially if they participated on the trip at a younger age (18-21) (Hecht, et al, 2011).

Although the evidence regarding Birthright is encouraging, attending a Birthright trip has not translated into community engagement. In essence, Birthright has not been successful at influencing the ethical and religious behavior of the participants or their involvement in organized Jewish life (Saxe et al, 2004) unless they were involved in the community before they went on the trip.

Post Birthright participation in the Jewish community has been linked to peer networks. Most people who went on Birthright only got involved in activities if their trip friends were engaged in those same activities (Hecht, et al, 2007). Without the social participation, many alumni are reluctant to engage in Jewish life beyond the trip. It has been reported that the Birthright alumni living in Jewish communities participated in activities in that community at the same rate as those who applied to go on Birthright but did not go (Hecht, et al, 2007). In 2006, the estimate was that half of the alumni who participated in the program could be characterized as Birthright only participants (Saxe, et al, 2006), meaning that they do not get involved in any community activities after they come back from the trip. Birthright participants were also not more likely to belong to a Jewish congregation than non-participants, and there have not been any significant increases in synagogue participation since the inception of Birthright (Hecht, et al, 2011).

Birthright Israel NEXT, an initiative created to follow up with participants after they have come back from their trip has been struggling to succeed in its mission to engage participants in

their communities after they have returned. In fact, less than 5% of those who attended Birthright have participated in more than one NEXT program (Nathan-Kazis, 2011).

Unlike Birthright, long term programs in Israel allow people to connect to Israel and strengthen their commitment in all “areas of Israel related and Jewish engagement” (Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010). The research shows that a combination of a short term program, such as Birthright, with a long term program, such as Masa, increases Israel attachment, Jewish involvement and Jewish leadership (Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010). Masa is an umbrella organization created by the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency for Israel with large contributions from the Jewish Federations of North America and Keren Hayesod-UIA that helps young Jewish adults from the Diaspora, ages 18 to 30, participate in various long term travel, study and volunteer opportunities in Israel. Established in 2004, Masa engages 10,000 participants annually by helping them find a program that suits their interests and needs (Masa, n.d.).

Participants who have attended a short program in combination with a long term program feel far more attached to Israel than those who only attended one or two short term programs. In a 2010 survey, 33% of short term program participants reported feelings of attachment to Israel compared to 77% of those who attended a short term program and then went on a long term program (Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010). The research also found that Jews with a low level of socialization, meaning that they did not attend Sunday school, or they never went to synagogue or Jewish camp, but went on a short trip and returned to Israel for a long trip, showcased high levels of Israel involvement, very similar to those who had a strong Jewish upbringing (Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010). The research seems to point out that long term

programs (5 to 12 months) have a stronger impact on Jewish participation after the participants return from their experiences.

These programs are solidifying the work that Birthright might have started and creating a solid connection between the participants, the Land of Israel and their communities. As Steven M. Cohen, the Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner, said: “The evidence indicates a single trip to Israel is a gateway to further involvement, and if there isn’t a repeat trip to Israel or other Jewish activities that follow, then we don’t see much long-range impact.” (Nathan & Kazis, 2011).

Birthright seems to pave the way for participation, and a long term trip seems to solidify the work. On a 2010 survey, when asked about volunteer work with a Jewish group, only 28% of participants on a short term program had volunteered with a Jewish group, while 64% of those who participated on a short term and a long term program had volunteered in a program. Moreover, participants on short + long term programs are four times more likely to “give serious thought” to work as a Jewish professional, and 34% of those who participated on a long term program reported that is very important for them to take on a Jewish leadership role (Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010).

In my own experience, two years after my Birthright trip, I decided to go back to Israel for a four month Media Fellowship in Jerusalem. The fellowship gave me enough resources to travel to Israel and live comfortably there. My fellowship allowed me to see a very different side of Israel from what I saw during my Birthright trip. It was during my time there that I understood that in order to see the real Israel it takes a lot more than 10 days. During my four months in Israel I was able to visit the West Bank, I spoke to Jewish and Arab Israelis, I worked alongside reporters from all over the world and I walked in the Israeli LGBT parade in Jerusalem. These

experiences left me with a much better understanding of Israel and its importance for Jews around the world and convinced me to continue to pursue a career as a Jewish Professional to ensure the continuation of Israel as a democratic nation for all Jews. It is because of my second trip to Israel that I am furthering my education, pursuing a Masters in Jewish Nonprofit management and getting involved in my Jewish community.

The importance of long term programs in Israel cannot be understated. As young Jews continue to show interest in social justice and their pursuit for the greater good (Chertok, et al, 2009), long term programs in Israel can provide an opportunity to connect their passions, allow them to pursue their interests and at the same time engage them with Israel, their traditions and their communities back home. If these experiences are successful, we will not have to worry about the future of our communities because these young Jews will be on their way to becoming the next generation of leaders.

## Methodology

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My thesis seeks to understand the impact of long term programs to Israel on the participants. In order to do so, I conducted individual interviews that centered on the participants' experiences and their decision making process prior to the trip (why they decided to participate on a long term trip), what happened while they were in Israel and what they missed, and what changes, if any, the trip had on their lives once they got back. My intent was to learn from their experiences, search for patterns and see if those patterns can help inform future participants and the organizations that create, run and sponsor those trips.

The decision to engage in individual interviews was based on the need for qualitative research in this particular field. Although there is a body of work in relationship to Israel programs, most of the research is based on Birthright participants. Moreover, the research is primarily based on questionnaires and there is very little research based on in-depth interviews.

For my research, I interviewed 15 people who participated in long term trips to Israel- 11 women and 4 men. I also interviewed a Masa professional, who helped me understand the role that the organization plays on long term trips and how they try to keep participants active after they return. All of the participants in my research were American, ages 21 to 30; they are all college students or graduates and spent at least 6 months in Israel in the past few years. 14 out of the 15 participants had visited Israel at least once before they decided to engage in a long term trip to Israel; 6 of the participants live in California and 9 live in New York.

Interviewees for my thesis participated in the following programs (certain programs were attended by more than one participant):

- Gap year
- Semester abroad
- Sofer International MBA at Tel Aviv University



- Israel Service Core
- Carrier Israel
- WUJS
- Ulpan/Kibbutz Program

The average interview lasted 23 minutes, with the shortest one lasting 17 minutes and the longest one lasting 46 minutes. Five of the six interviews that took place in California were conducted face to face, and the rest of the interviews were conducted over the phone. All of the interviews, including the in-person interviews, were recorded on an HTC EVO 4g cellphone or a 4th generation iPod Touch. Before every interview started, every single participant verbally agreed to be recorded. The vast majority of the participants gave me authorization to use their names, however, not everyone was comfortable with the idea of their name appearing in the research; therefore names have been removed and participants are only referred to in my research by gender. Before every interview, I explained to every participant that my research seeks to understand the experiences that they had while in Israel. I explained that the research was part of my Master's program and asked them to be as honest as possible. I tried to remain as neutral as possible and allowed participants to speak for as much time as they wanted.

The questionnaire that I used for the interviews consisted of 23 questions with room for additional questions and clarifications. All interviews started by asking participants, "When was the first time that you went to Israel?" and ended by asking them to give some recommendations for future participants. In order to get enough participants for my research, I began by asking a group of friends that I knew had participated in a long term trip to Israel. I was able to reach more people by asking those friends for help. I also received contact information from the Masa alumni network. All interviews took place between November 2012 and January 2013.

One of the most challenging tasks in my research was to try to diversify my population. I successfully avoided interviewing people who went on the same program at the same time or

who grew up together. In retrospect, it might have been a good idea to hear from more than one person at the individual programs to compare their experiences and create a bigger picture of what the program was about.

To get a bigger picture of the experiences that people have in Israel, I decided to interview people from Los Angeles and New York. My intention was to see if I could learn about different experiences that could be explained by geography. It is worth noting that the only one person that I interviewed in Los Angeles was a native to the city. In comparison, everyone in New York was a New Yorker. In that sense, I was not able to create a full image of the East vs. West perspective in regards to Israel, and I am not entirely sure that that perspective even exists.

One major setback from conducting the majority of the interviews over the phone is that I was not able to observe the participants' body language; I recognize that this is a problem, and I wish that I could have conducted more in-person interviews. Another obstacle that I faced while doing interviews over the phone was that I was always nervous that people might want to get off the phone, something that I did not experience while doing in person interviews.

Lastly, I am very aware that by asking a Masa representative for a list of contacts for my research I was opening the possibility of getting people who had a great long term trip experience and that is why they got involved in the Alumni Network. Although I was nervous about this possibility, the responses and the honesty that I got from the people that I interviewed erased my doubts immediately. I never felt that I got any responses that were tailored to make the organization look better. In this sense, I am comfortable using the data that I obtained from them, and I have no need to censure or discard any of the interviews that came from that database. Even so, I recognize that some participants in long term Israel trips have had negative experiences; these participants are not represented in this study.

## The first trip

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Birthright was the appetizer and going back to study in Israel was the main course.

Young Jews today have a variety of opportunities to go to Israel for the first time. Jews who feel connected to their synagogues can sometimes travel with their congregations. Young Judea and other youth organizations also offer a great variety of trips. Nevertheless, the biggest, most successful organization that has brought thousands of young Jews to Israel every year since its inception is Birthright, which offers a 10-day free trip to Israel for all Jews ages 18 to 26.

Going to Israel at least once is not a necessary step to commit to a long term trip, but it makes an enormous difference, especially if it is an organized trip. Based on my research, the vast majority of the participants who decided to engage in a long term trip visited Israel at least once before committing to a long term trip. Moreover, their first trip was one of the biggest reasons why they wanted to go on the long trip to Israel.

The first trip I would call it the emotional experience that you think you are going to have, but it wasn't enough for me. My passion for Judaism and my love for Israel were just innate, being there did not further my love; it furthers my desire to spend more time in there.

This participant had a previous connection to her Judaism and her culture. The brief time that she spent in Israel with her synagogue encouraged her to spend a semester abroad in Israel and perhaps influenced her decision to apply for rabbinical school. Traveling to Israel and seeing, smelling and touching the land planted the seed and left her with the desire to go back and learn more.

Another participant who applied for WUJS after her first visit saw her trip with Birthright as a way to connect the things that she learned in Hebrew school with the vibrancy of the modern State of Israel:

Birthright did what Birthright does... people completely, I wouldn't say fall in love with the country, but it is an eye opening experience. I grew up going to Hebrew school and went to temple for high holidays... and going to Israel was a great experience. To walk out on the streets and read like I would do in Hebrew school where they [only] teach you Hebrew to recite prayers and not for actual conversation... it was amazing. To see this language and this world that existed and you feel such a connection to that you could never comprehend before.

For this participant, who went back to Israel after college, the connection that she got from her Jewish education mixed with vibrancy of Israeli life left her with a desire to explore more in the future after she came back from Israel, and she never questioned the idea that she needed to go back to Israel. Moreover, while looking for a program, she tried to find a yearlong program in Israel and decided to go on WUJS because it was the longest program that she could find.

For one participant who had visited Israel several times to see her family, going on an organized trip such as Birthright allowed her to see a side of Israel that she had not seen before:

It was the first time that I was being exposed to Israelis that were not my family... I think Birthright does what it is intended to do bringing people and making them fall in love with Israel.

Even for this woman who had been in Israel several times before, for long periods of time, going with a group of peers on an organized trip allowed her to see a different side of Israel, one that was very distinct and personal. Eventually, this participant decided to apply for an MBA in Israel and lived there for an entire year.

Although, traveling to Israel for the first time plays an essential role in deciding to engage in a long term program, based on the information that I got from my interviews, the vast majority of participants who went to Israel for the first time and decided to go back on a long term trip already had a connection to Israel or their Judaism before they visited for the first time. One participant, reflecting on her Birthright experience touched on this precise point:

I knew I wanted at that point to work in the Jewish world to some extent, I knew Hebrew and I actually spent time studying Israel when most people did not know

about Israel at that point.

Although she was able to experience a certain transformation in Israel, her trip to Israel was just the push that she needed to continue on her journey to become a Jewish professional. Birthright was not the reason for her to pursue her path in life; it was just another influencing factor that encouraged her to continue. In reference to this idea, another person who participated in a Young Judea Birthright trip mentioned that she found interesting that she was the only person who went back on a long term trip because during Birthright her trip provider was very explicit about the opportunities to apply for a long term program with the organization. During the trip, she felt that everyone seemed interested, and she expected that she was going to be the only one not applying for the long term program. To her surprise, she ended up being the only one applying.

In essence, I think that having a previous relationship to Israel and/or wanting to explore Judaism, combined with a successful first visit, creates the ideal ingredients for people to apply for a long term program. If any organization is looking for an ideal candidate to apply for a long term program, recognizing people who possess these qualities would make the search much easier.

## **The semester abroad**

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After Birthright I immediately began looking for another program so that I could be back in Israel.

Studying abroad is becoming an essential tool for any college student who wants to get some international experience for their resume. Israeli universities and colleges offer a unique opportunity to engage students who are returning from Birthright and are looking for an opportunity to go back to Israel. I think that people returning from Birthright who are still “high” on their experiences are prime candidates for a semester abroad in Israel, but they need to be engaged before they lose their Birthright momentum and move on with their lives.

A semester abroad in Israel could serve as an equalizer for those who were not affiliated with a youth group or synagogue but enjoyed their time on Birthright. The idea of engaging students on a semester abroad is unique because applicants know that the experience in Israel is finite (as they have to go back to the United States to finish their degree). Universities are also presented with a unique opportunity because former students will become advocates and recruiters if they have a good experience in Israel.

During my research, I was very surprised to find that those who applied for a semester abroad saw Israel as their only choice. Choosing to only apply to an Israeli university might be a good signal that participants had a very positive first experience in Israel, a close bond with Israel, or that they missed something during their first time around that they wanted to explore further.

For one participant, going to Israel was a way to reinforce what she wanted to do with her life; she saw her semester abroad as an opportunity to further her knowledge and help her decide her future:

I didn't want to just go to a random place just to experience the culture and party; I wanted to study more, and I was interested in going to rabbinical school at that time. It was never a question in my mind to where else to go.

Another person mentioned that traveling was an important element for her decision, but she knew that she would have the opportunity to travel from Israel. In her case, her first trip to Israel left her wanting to come back and explore Israeli society, and while in Israel she visited some other places that she was interested in:

For studying abroad it was always Israel. I knew that when I was studying abroad there would be some travel and there were a lot of places, most of the places that I wanted to go had to do with Europe and its rich Jewish history... but Israel was definitely the place I wanted to be.

A participant who came to Israel for the first time with NFTY explained that for him going back to Israel was very significant. In fact, he was thinking about joining the Israeli army at 18, but he eventually decided to go to school in the US and searched for a semester abroad program in Israel:

For me, it was most important to go back to Israel over anywhere else because when I went when I was 16 it just had a very strong impact, I wanted to go and get more of an understanding of the country and the culture and the history and the language and the people; it was always Israel and it still is.

The connection that this participant had with Israel was so significant that he wanted to apply for several programs in Israel from the moment that he got back from NFTY. Fortunately, after a few failed attempts he saw his semester abroad as the ideal opportunity to go back.

For those who do not have a chance to travel on a semester abroad during college, pursuing a Masters in Israel is another viable option. One person spoke about her desire to live in Israel and how she was able to do so by applying to an MBA there:

I always wanted to study abroad and I didn't get a chance to do it in undergrad, and I was always looking for a reason to go to Israel and live there; since I was a child it was my dream to live in Israel... I looked at the program; I was already going for my MBA, and it was a good program and accredited, so I was like let's

do it!

Regardless of the reason to apply for a semester abroad, Israeli universities have a unique opportunity to attract people to Israel. If they are successful, they will not only benefit by having people visit their programs every semester, they will also have people who after they have left become advocates for other people to attend their programs and perhaps even become future donors to Israel based causes. With the right scholarships, and an attractive extracurricular program, studying abroad in Israel could become a very popular program for people returning from their first experience.



## **Finding the right program**

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One of the most important factors in order to have a successful experience during a long term program in Israel is to find the right program, because, as one participant expressed to me, “Not every program is for every person, and you have to find the right one for you.” Finding the right program depends on what one wants to get out of the experience. If a participant is looking to improve their Hebrew, then they need to apply for a program that does exactly that. If on the other hand, the person is looking to socialize, applying for a program that requires attendance at ulpan four times a week might not be the right fit.

For people thinking about applying, it is essential to research a variety of programs before deciding. Talking to some former participants and learning about their experiences can be very helpful. To choose based on the organization’s advertisements is not always ideal, as one participant shared after discovering that the program was not right for her, once she was already in Israel:

The description of the program was completely different than what I found the program to be. Had I heard the proper description, I would have absolutely not signed on for it.

This particular person, wanting to improve her Hebrew, applied for a program that advertised a combination of living on a kibbutz and learning Hebrew. When she got there she realized that their ulpan was not great and she found herself working at a hotel that belonged to the kibbutz. Reflecting back on why she applied to that program, she said, very frustrated, “I wish things were advertised for the qualities that they have instead of the qualities they wish they had.” After two very frustrating weeks at that particular program, she decided to quit and found a program that was much more in line to what she had in mind when she applied.

There are several organizations such as synagogues, Jewish Federations, Hillels and Masa that can help people find the right program. These organizations usually have at least one

person that can direct applicants to the right program or connect them with former participants to hear their opinions. Speaking to alumni networks or participants who are currently in Israel is also helpful for those who are still undecided.

Masa, in particular, is an important organization because its objective is to encourage as many young Jews as possible to apply for long term programs. Masa serves as an umbrella organization that hosts over 200 programs that range from study abroad programs to long term volunteer opportunities. Most importantly, Masa has financial resources to cover a significant portion of the participant's trip as a way to encourage participation. As one person who applied for a program with Masa told me:

Masa made it so easy to get people back in Israel, anyone wanting international experience could go... There are so many resources that make travel to Israel feasible, that the trip becomes quite tempting. Now, once in Israel, life is not easy, but having financial support for your decision reinforces how meaningful and important it is to be there, giving you a deeper connection to that place.

The most important thing to keep in mind while applying to a long term program in Israel is that it might not be exactly what you expect, but as most people told me, "you get out of the program what you put in."

## Adjusting to Israel

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Every time I go back to Israel.... I get an overwhelming feeling the moment when I land; there is something special knowing you are there.

Looking back at their experiences, people often made reference to the feeling that they felt once they returned to Israel, especially once they realized that they were going to be there for an extended period of time. A few participants shared with me that landing at Ben Gurion and realizing that their program was about to start was a bit intimidating. However, as time went by, people started feeling much more comfortable and they began embracing their experiences:

It was a bit scary and intimidating at first... but it was all worth it to me because I started meeting people at the program. I really got along with a lot of them... It was very exciting to meet new people being in Tel Aviv... it was a bit daunting at first but once you got the hang of it was great... It was amazing, the first six weeks I would say were transition, but probably after a good six weeks, I finally started to think, OK I can do this. A little later, I started feeling more at home and I fell in love with it. I loved being there, and I loved the place I worked and just being on my own in this amazing city.

Another participant, comparing how she initially felt when she first arrived in Israel, to how she felt now, said:

It was great, I was so excited with only a little bit of home sickness. Mostly I was very excited. Basically, I didn't know anybody that was going on the program, but I ended up meeting someone from New York who became one of my best friends. It was great; it was exciting.

Like other interviewees, she explained that meeting someone from her home town made her feel more comfortable and helped her adjust to Israel.

In general, long term programs do a good job of making the participants feel at home as much as possible. They also help participants find a place to live in Israel, which can be very challenging, especially if the program starts during the high season (summer). A few programs owned buildings, which made it very easy for participants, but at the same time it isolated them from the rest of the country. Some interviewees spoke about the support system they had once

they got to Israel and how much of a difference that made. For the first few weeks, a few participants had someone from the program walking with them, showing them around the city, helping them with their transportation and taking them grocery shopping for the first time.

There are a lot of things that one might not consider when moving to a different country – things that seem evident once you are there, especially being in a place that speaks a different language. Having a support system in Israel available for people who are participating in long term programs is essential to make them feel at home while they find their own comfort zone.

Although, the program itself might be an important part of a long term experience in Israel, the living situation and the friendships that are created during the program are also essential. Having a safe environment, surrounded by people who care made people's experiences in Israel much more enjoyable for everyone involved.

## Challenges

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That was the point; I wanted to go there and be challenged...

Starting a new life event is often accompanied with challenges. For participants on long term programs, there was a series of common challenges for the majority of the interviewees. These included language learning, location, living situation and some other unique challenges.

### Hebrew

Among those challenges, the one that came across almost every single time was the language. Not knowing how to speak Hebrew was something that most participants had to overcome:

The language barrier was very difficult, and the transportation was very difficult, taking a Sheirut is difficult when you don't speak Hebrew or being at the shuk when no one speaks English.

In order to overcome this barrier, a lot of programs had an ulpan (Hebrew intensive school) to help participants learn Hebrew. However, most people felt that their ulpan was not sufficient and wished that their programs would offer different opportunities to learn Hebrew. Learning Hebrew once or twice a week was just not enough for the majority of them. Other people referenced the fact that some participants did not take their ulpan as seriously as they did, and that made it difficult for them to learn:

I tried to pay attention at ulpan as much as I could, I tried to get as much out of the ulpan as it was possible ... I took it very seriously, [but] some of my peers just blew it off and did not care so much. I definitely tried to maximize my time in there... I was definitely pro ulpan, for sure.

For those participants who took Hebrew seriously, learning a little bit of Hebrew gave them a sense of pride and identity. It was one of the ways in which they saw that their program was helping them out, providing them the tools that they needed to live in the country:

I didn't speak Hebrew at all when I came to the program. Most of the students had more education in learning Hebrew than I did. It was difficult, but it wasn't impossible. That was the point, I wanted to go there and be challenged by the language. Eventually, I got better at it and I could speak Hebrew at a very basic level. I could also read it and write it, and I am glad there was a [language] barrier.

The participants who came to Israel knowing Hebrew referenced the pride that they felt when they could speak to their friends or to people on the street. Without a doubt, knowing Hebrew was a big advantage for them:

When I would be out and Israeli locals would hear me speak English I would make it clear that I was living there, and I would speak to them in Hebrew instead of English. It was a very prideful thing for me that I could say I am one of you and I am living here.

It is no surprise that Hebrew was such a challenge for participants. A big part of doing a long term program in Israel is gaining the necessary knowledge to connect with people outside of your program, and the best way to do so is to try and learn some Hebrew. Being able to have a basic conversation in Hebrew was a huge deal for a lot of participants who found this to be an exciting development in their long term program.

## **The American bubble**

Being in Israel was great; I was very comfortable in my American bubble.

Another big challenge for participants was the fact that at some points during their program they found themselves living in a bubble. This has something to do with the fact that their program provided them with a place to live alongside other English speaking participants. A large number of the people that I interviewed made reference to the fact that the majority of the participants in their program were English speaking, mostly from the US and Canada. However, for some participants this was not necessarily a problem; in fact, living in the American bubble with other English speakers was a huge advantage for them because their Hebrew was poor. The commonality of English created a bond that allowed them to make new friendships, which continued once they returned home.

Some participants spoke about how, while being in the bubble, they had the opportunity to explore and share their religious practices with others. People in the apartments usually got together with their entire group to celebrate Shabbat and other holidays, something that they would not have the chance to do if they did not have other people in their same situation. In this sense living in a bubble was beneficial for them.

The people who had family and friends in Israel were far more open about how they broke away from that bubble during the weekends:

The makeup of our group was such that it was very international, American, British and Europeans. I did not feel like I was completely in a bubble, although I do admit there was a bubble, because I had friends living in Israel so I would go for Shabbat dinners with them and I would hang out with them... personally, I had freedom to leave the bubble because I had local friends.

One of the problems of living inside the American bubble is that the majority of participants did not have enough interactions with Israelis. Although, some people who had

internships got to work with Israelis, the majority of people did not get an opportunity to spend time outside of work with them because of the language barrier.

The fact that a lot of long term trip participants did not spend time with Israelis is very problematic and it is something that long term programs need to work on. Opening avenues for participants to spend more time with Israelis is useful and should be taken very seriously. One of the most important factors that keep people connected to Israel after they have visited is the fact that they have family members or friends in Israel. The more friends you have, the more connected you stay to Israel and the more you want to get involved in the issues facing Israel.

If I was in charge of a program in Israel, I would try to look for partnerships with Israeli Universities or other organizations to form alliances and have participants on long term programs engaging with Israelis frequently. Developing friendships and relationships can have a huge impact on their program and can keep participants engaged with Israel for life.



## **Dual citizenship**

I very much felt like an Israeli, I very much felt like I was a citizen.

One of the most fascinating things about my research was learning how people felt while in Israel. One of the questions on my interview guide asked whether participants felt like an American or an Israeli while living in Israel. Despite the fact that some people did not have a lot of interactions with Israelis, they still felt Israeli to varying extents:

I wouldn't say 100% Israeli, but I definitely did not feel like an American living in Israel. I used Hebrew as much as I could, I went into work trips and I spoke Hebrew; it definitely came home to me, and I did not feel like an American. I definitely felt like I was an Israeli.

Other people reflected on this sentiment, particularly on their subsequent trips when they came back for a visit and suddenly they had a feeling of familiarity with the place and could follow a conversation:

I felt like an Israeli for the year. I have a lot of friends and family in Israel and I have spent a lot of time in Israel wandering around different places on my free time... I kept myself very much in the loop of what was going on. I remember that on a subsequent trip, I was in a bar with a bunch of friends and they were debating about the issue of religion and homosexuality all in Hebrew and in the middle of all that I just thought, I do not feel like an American right now.

Some participants felt like an Israeli when they were in their home city, but as a tourist when they visited another city. This situation was very interesting, particularly for those who learned a bit of Hebrew and were able to give directions to tourists who were lost: "People would ask me for directions in Hebrew and I could answer. Sometimes I did not need English at all; it would definitely make me feel Israeli."

Feeling Israeli while in Israel is a very positive signal of one of the benefits of long term programs. The idea that a person who was not born in Israel, did not go to school there, and is only spending a few months in the country but can still completely identify with the culture is

something remarkable. I do not believe that the same lasting feeling can be achieved with a short term visit because the feeling develops over time.

Other people were the complete opposite and could not have felt more American than while living in Israel. For some participants, living in a foreign land made them appreciate some of the things that they had back home. Israel was a great experience, but they never got to identify with the country in the same way that other people did:

I felt like an American living in Israel. I never felt Israeli the whole way through. It is just not the same as where I am from; everything looks funny, like the streets and the buildings. Even the food seemed unfamiliar, and I never got used to it. I was unable to get fluent in Hebrew, although I tried really hard. I felt like I was an American and I was visiting... It was very meaningful, but I just did not feel Israeli.

The lack of identification with Israel was more evident with those who were not able to master Hebrew. I think being able to speak a bit of Hebrew makes a huge difference in the way people feel. The people who did not break the American bubble had a harder time identifying with the culture.

I definitely felt like an American living abroad... I just think that my attitude, my behavior, my fashion, my language skills were with me all the time. There was no point in trying to hide it, there was no way around it. I definitely lived with English speakers and I dressed like an American, whatever that means... I just definitely never felt like a native at all.

For some people, it took six weeks to develop the sense of Israeliness necessary to identify with the country, for other people, it never developed. The fact is that those who felt like Israelis while living in Israel for six months will continue to identify with the country after they leave and will bring that feeling back to their communities. Some of those people are now guiding Birthright trips, and they can share the feeling that they have every time that they walk through their old neighborhoods, or the feeling that they have when they remember their old

grocery store. These stories make a very powerful case for long term trips, and are only possible when people are able to spend a sufficient amount of time Israel.

## Location

Waking up every morning and having the view of the Old City was incredible.

For a lot of participants, the city in which the program took place was a deciding factor in the selection of their program. A lot of people looking to make friends and wanting to live in a city that spoke more English decided that Tel Aviv was the place to go. For other participants, living in Jerusalem was something that they always wanted to do and it was important for them to find a program in that city. All of the participants who lived in Tel Aviv made reference to the fact that being able to communicate with everyone in English was a huge advantage, especially when people are just learning how to move around in a new city where they can get lost.

Regardless of the city in which the participant decided to live, another challenge that came into play during their time in Israel was mobility, the ability to travel within and outside of the city. This is a problem not because participants complained about taking the bus, but because some participants came to Israel during difficult times when terrorists were blowing themselves up on public buses. Although, none of the participants suffered from the consequences of terrorism, or felt unsafe while in Israel, it was the fear that their parents had, which made them take more precautions, at least for the first few weeks:

In the beginning, I was friends with some people whose parents were not comfortable with them taking buses so we'd spend a lot of money on cabs, and then one day we got on a bus and it was so much cheaper to buy a ticket and take the buses... in time you get comfortable and you know your way.

For those who came during better times, I was expecting to hear a lot more complaints about the traffic in Tel Aviv or how difficult it was to find the right bus line into Jerusalem, but I only heard one person complain about transportation. The problem for this particular participant was that her ulpan and her internship were too far apart and she had a hard time attending her

Hebrew classes, but once her program changed the location of the classes the problem was solved.

Besides that particular problem, everyone else embraced public transportation. One participant told me, not as a criticism, but as an observation, that in New York everyone is used to taking the train and subway to work, compared to Los Angeles where no one uses public transportation. That might explain why I found it so surprising that the majority of participants did not complain about having to take the bus to work every day, because the majority of people who I interviewed have been taking public transportation for a long time.

For people living in smaller cities, the one issue that came up in regards to transportation was that during Shabbat they had very little choices for travel. One participant in particular spoke about how difficult it was for her to get out of her city before Shabbat and to get back after Shabbat ended.

You work 5 or 6 days a week but you are required to be there 6 days and the 7<sup>th</sup> day is Shabbat, and if you take a bus anywhere on Friday the buses end service so early that you had to take the day off and then you could only work 5 days.

This is the same participant who had issues with her program at the kibutz and after two weeks of living in a small kibutz, decided to move to Tel Aviv. Once in Tel Aviv she had a much better experience.

Something that really captured my attention was the fact that more than one participant who expressed that they felt like an Israeli citizen only felt as such in the city in which they were living. Once they got a chance to visit another city their entire perspective changed and they saw themselves as tourists. This phenomenon is not unique to Israel; most people feel like a tourist when they visit a new place, even in their own country. Even so, this feeling reflects a sense of

belonging and identification to the cities in which those participants live, a feeling that echoes how important is to choose a location in which you could feel comfortable for 6 months.

Selecting the right location is an essential part of every long term program since no one wants to be miserable for a long period of time, a time when you are separated from your family and friends. In contrast to America, Israel has the additional issue of religious differences: participants should choose to live in a city in which they will feel comfortable religiously. Also, the ability to travel with public transportation and the activities available during Shabbat are issues that people should consider while planning their trips.

## **Shabbat**

You don't really experience Shabbat until you are jumping and singing.

For anyone who has been in Israel for at least 7 days, it comes as no surprise that Shabbat presented a challenge for every participant. However, challenging does not mean that participants saw Shabbat in a negative light, it means that every person had to find a balance between what they were used to doing during Shabbat at home and the new reality of Shabbat in Israel.

A few participants reflected on the difficulties that they had while adapting to their first few Shabbats, particularly because we live in a society that is very fast paced, and things in Israel slow down significantly during Shabbat. Once people got used to these differences, they enjoyed the quietness and the change of pace that Shabbat brought to their week:

Sometimes I think it is kind of nice to have one day to relax and not go anywhere, but sometimes it was very frustrating... We tried to learn how to celebrate Shabbat, learn how to unwind, learn how to walk to a synagogue, something that I never did before. It was kind of nice. I tried to embrace it as best I could.

Other people spoke about how celebrating Shabbat during their program changed them.

I also gained a new appreciation for Shabbat as I think that Shabbat is treated completely different than in the States. So often times I would have Shabbat dinner with my roommates, other times with my coworkers; regardless, every Friday night I would stop for two hours, eat good food and that was it.

I do not think that many participants expected how important Shabbat would be for them. This is certainly one of the benefits that long term programs have: people get to experience something new, something they do not expect but that has a very positive effect on them.

A few participants took Shabbat as an opportunity to meet other people in their program and have dinner together, talk about their experiences and just relax. In this sense, Shabbat did not have a religious connotation:

Pretty much every Friday our group would have a Sabbath potluck in our apartment. We would light candles and do Havdallah and blessing over the wine and Kidush. That was the most religious we would get there; I am very secular, and I became even more secular there.

Most of the participants spoke about how much they missed Shabbat once they got back to America, and some of them really tried to keep that one day or at least a few hours during Friday to slow their workload and just relax. Unfortunately, it seems like once they got back, some of them could not do it for very long. One interviewee said, "For that year and two years after I was shomer Shabbat. Now I am still observant in certain ways."

Regardless of the level of spirituality or religiosity, experiencing Shabbat in Israel is one of those unique experiences that stayed with participants once they got back. Now, every time they celebrate Shabbat they get to reflect on their experiences and the time in Israel when time slowed down for them and they could just relax.



## Unique challenges

The year before my program, my school canceled all trips to Israel. I didn't know if I was going to be approved to go.

During the long term programs, certain individual challenges arose that are hard to categorize but are important to mention because they can happen to future long term participants. These positive and negative challenges are unique to Israel.

One participant living in Jerusalem spoke about an incident where she was harassed by some religious people while she was shopping before Passover:

I had one experience at the shuk when it was Pesach and I was in charge of purchasing something for the first Seder, getting olive oil that did not have kitniyot in it. It was a really hot day and I was wearing a tank top, so I went to the shuk to ask for olive oil without kitniyot and I got screamed out by the guy behind the stand, saying, "How can you be dressed like that asking for olive oil without kitniyot?" – like doing one religious activity and one anti-religious activity.

Although, this participant recognized that this was an isolated incident, and spoke about other great Orthodox friends that she made during her trip, it does signify a unique phenomenon that could happen to other long term participants who might not have that understanding about the uniqueness of the Orthodox community. In fact, another participant who interned with Haredim got to see a different side of the community that she would have never seen if it was not for her long term trip. Dealing with people from different religious backgrounds and different levels of religiosity is something that people do not necessarily have to think about in America, but the fact is that while in Israel, most people will have to find a way to deal with these issues.

Another unique phenomenon that I learned from my internship is the uncertainty that some participants experienced while applying for a long term program, especially while applying to the semester abroad because of the political circumstances in Israel at that particular time. It is no secret that school officials are going to be very careful as to when it is OK and when it is not OK to send their students to any part of the world, especially if there is a military conflict taking

place there. Unfortunately, sometimes the situation in Israel becomes such that schools cancel or delay their programs.

For a couple of participants applying for their semester abroad this became a problem because of the uncertainty of the situation in Israel. There is not a lot that people can do when this is happening. Fortunately in their case, the situation was resolved before the program was cancelled, but there is always the possibility that some people will not be able to attend because their school decided to cancel their trip.

It is worth noting that not one person I interviewed reported feeling insecure while in Israel. Some people did mention that it took them a few weeks to adapt to the circumstances because they were not used to seeing armed soldiers on the streets or to having people check their bags and purses while entering public places, but aside from that, no one experienced any danger. What people did experience was the need to learn where rocket shelters were located. This is something that the average Israeli is used to seeing, but for the participants it was a bit shocking at first.

Another unique challenge that came to light for participants on long term programs is the realization that people in Israel work differently than in America, especially when it comes to customer service. Although for most people this was not a problem, other people did mention a few occasions in which they had to deal with customer service and it was very challenging. This is not to say that America has great customer service, but that the Israeli ways of doing things are different. Dealing with people who do not speak English while trying to explain your unique problem can be difficult; sometimes the best way to resolve it was to ask someone who was fluent in Hebrew and English to help them solve their particular issue by translating for them.

Israel presents unique challenges for every single participant. Some challenges are experienced by more than one person and other challenges are more personal. In any case, part of the experience of a long term program is the fact that there are some challenges that every participant needs to overcome. For some people it was finding a new internship, for others it was about making their trip more meaningful for them, especially when other participants did not put in as much effort. Regardless of the challenge, participants always felt very proud when they overcame roadblocks.

Based on what I heard, the more challenges that people got to overcome during their trip, the more meaningful the experience became for them. When people overcome challenges it stays with them for a long time as a memory. As people look back and remember how they tackled their problems in Israel, it makes them remember how enjoyable their experience was in general.

## **Making aliyah**

I hope I can make aliyah someday; it is something that has been on my mind since I went there when I was 16.... It is something that is always on my mind and my heart.

Almost every single person that I spoke with thought about making aliyah after their program ended. For some people the thought was very serious, and a few participants are still thinking about making aliyah; for others it was more of a fleeting idea. The majority of people had a very similar reason why they decided not to make aliyah: family. Some participants shared with me how close they are with their families and how unimaginable it is for them to live permanently on the other side of the world without having anyone with them:

First and foremost, I did not have any family in Israel, and growing up I was very close to my family, so that being far away I did not want to live the rest of my life without them.

For those who did not consider making aliyah, family was also mentioned as the main reason. In general, most participants could not conceive the idea of being separated from their families.

Another reason that a lot of participants gave for not making aliyah came after the realization that life in Israel is not easy, especially when it comes to making a decent living. People on long term programs who got to work and earn some money realized that in order to achieve some sort of professional advancement in their careers they had to go back to America. This reason was given especially by women who felt that they could achieve much more professionally if they moved back the U.S.:

When thinking about my career and how far I want to get in my career it is something that does not happen in Israel. I would not have that opportunity to climb high in a company unless I was working in high tech or something like that. I think I would have better opportunities for advancement in the States.

Other people who considered making aliyah after coming back from Israel realized that the life that they want is just simply not achievable in Israel. For one participant, this became

even more evident after she went back to Israel for a visit and found that many people were leaving for economic reasons.

I expected to hear that the organizations that sponsor long term programs in Israel were encouraging aliyah, but this was not the case among the people I interviewed. Only one participant felt like the issue of aliyah was being pushed:

I did think about making Aliyah, and I actually applied for a graduate program in Israel. The cost of education in Israel is lower, and they really try to woo you. I felt a big push for Aliyah during the program. It was a turn off. It did not feel genuine; it felt like propaganda.

One of the phrases that really stuck with me during the interviews was the rationalization by one of the participants who had a great time in Israel but did not want to make aliyah. Her love for the country and her experience was great but it was after she got back that she realized something that I think a lot of other people have realized after they get back from Israel. She realized that perhaps living in Israel is not for everyone, but that in order for the State of Israel to survive, it needs people who are passionate about Israel working on the Diaspora: "I think that Israel needs people like me not in Israel. If everyone that loved Israel so much would make aliyah, there would be a problem in the rest of the world."

I think that it is very significant that the majority of the participants actually considered moving to Israel during and after their long term trip. It really speaks about how beneficial these trips are and how much people commit to their experiences while in Israel. It is very rare that one can seriously consider moving to a different country after one visit, even a long term one. Although some people have decided to make aliyah after their Birthright experience or after participating in a long term program, I think that the seriousness and the thought process that some of the participants went through while considering staying in Israel kept them connected to the land even after an extended period of time. It was not uncommon to hear from them how they

felt every time that they go back to Israel, especially when they walk by their old neighborhoods, and how that love and care for the country is renewed after every visit. This is a connection that will stay with them forever, and it is only achievable after spending a significant amount of time there.

## **Benefits of long term programs**

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### **Changing perspectives**

One of the things that I noticed while interviewing people was the number of changes that they experienced while in Israel. For some, their long term trip helped them ratify the notion that Israel was a special place for them. For others, it really changed the way in which they see the world, especially if it was the first time that they spent a long period of time outside of the United States.

Some participants spoke about the duality of views that they experienced while in Israel. On the one hand, before coming to Israel, they had an idea that Israel was based on what they read in the newspapers, saw on the news or heard from their families and friends. On the other hand, there was the “real Israel” created by what they experienced during their long term trip:

I think that definitely living there changed my perspective of the way that Israel is portrayed in the media. I think that everyone at home is much more concerned about safety than necessary. I never felt unsafe, ever; even when my parents told me to be careful, I never felt in jeopardy.

Once participants live in Israel they begin to realize that perhaps the image that they had of Israel for many years was not necessarily the Israel that they got to experience. This notion became especially true in terms of the security situation, and the violence on the streets. Part of this change was aided by the exploration of additional media sources, especially local media sources, that allowed participants to form a more educated view of the situation and complemented what they read in the US media:

Before I went on the trip, I got information about Israel from American sources, but while I was in Israel I started reading YNet news, Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post and other Jewish sources which I continue to use while back in the States.

This is a very significant development because the more people read directly from the source the more they are informed about other issues that surround Israeli society. Just by

reading the headlines in the Israeli media, people can be informed of things that are happening in the country that are not reflected on other media sources.

Staying informed and continuing to read what is happening in Israel is another way in which participants kept their connection to the country after they got back. In fact, more than one participant spoke about how they now try to keep up with Israeli news as much as they can: “I always check the news every day to see what is going on, and I always keep tabs on Israel to see what is going on in there.”

Aside from the changes in people’s perspectives about Israel based on what they saw on the media, every participant spoke about how the trip changed their lives. For some, the trip made them realize that they wanted to pursue another career related to their experiences in Israel:

It changed my life. I wanted to visit each year and stay connected to Israel. I found that I deeply cared about everything that had to do with the country, and of course my education and work are all a reflection of this trip.

Others spoke about the diversity that they found in Israel, not only the religious diversity, but also other types of diversity. A couple of participants expressed their surprise when they got to their semester abroad program and saw that non-Jews were also participating in these programs. This was a real eye opener for them, because up to that point it did not make sense to them that non-Jews would chose to travel to Israel to study.

I believe that the realization that non-Jews want to travel to Israel and are spending time in the country creates a very positive image of Israel. A large number of people see Israel as a country that only accepts Jews, and they cannot understand why anyone who is not Jewish would go to Israel to study. Talking about the presence of non-Jews in these programs is a powerful tool, but even more powerful is when these non-Jewish students speak about their experiences in Israel, because they are seen as non-biased elements in the discourse.



Moreover, during their long term experience, participants had the opportunity to meet other Jews who were not from North America. For some participants, this broke their American-centric notion of Israel, based on the idea that they were the only ones visiting and helping Israel. Seeing Birthright trips and speaking to people from around the world allowed them to experience the diversity and multicultural notion of the country.

Spending a lot of time in Israel, experiencing the culture, speaking to people and just going to buy groceries and following the daily rhythm gave participants a better understanding of the situation, but it also gave them the opportunity of being more critical about what happens in Israel. By critical, I do not mean being negative about the situation in Israel; on the contrary, I mean a positive criticism based on their knowledge of the situation and their experiences while living in there:

I became more Israeli in the sense that I could now give an honest opinion which became more convoluted and confusing, like the more that you know of a country in the Middle East, the more you realize how much you still have to learn.

The same knowledge that led to participants' ability to criticize Israel also made them much more protective of Israel when they heard criticism based on misconceptions:

The studying abroad made me realize how important it is to love Israel and how we can love Israel just like we can love our friends and family. But in the same way, how we can criticize Israel and still love it. Coming back from the trip I tried to very much put my foot down and dispute stereotypes.

Coming back from a long term experience in Israel transforms participants into advocates. The majority of the interviewees made reference to the fact that once there was an issue or a situation happening in Israel, their family and friends always saw them as a way to understand the conflict. Moreover, the facts that some participants have friends or family living in Israel makes them want to advocate even more.

## Getting to know the country

A very significant part of every long term trip in Israel was the ability to travel around the country and experience what Israel is like outside of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The majority of participants expressed the importance of traveling as a way of creating a larger understanding of Israel as a whole. When I asked interviewees what recommendations they would give other people planning a long term trip to Israel, almost everyone mentioned this:

Travel all over the country, go to Jerusalem, go to Tel Aviv go to the Golan, travel, talk to as many people as you can, not only Israelis, but speak to some Arab Israelis. Travel to see all of Israel. Israel has a very diverse landscape, see it, meet people, and understand the culture. Don't be a tourist; be a traveler.

Others spoke about visiting family or friends outside of their city and seeing with their own eyes certain situations that were beyond their understanding. For one participant, this situation happened when he got to visit a friend in Sderot after a number of rockets fell on the city:

I actually visited the city of Sderot which is right next to Gaza, because my friend from the United States, with whom I worked, was having Shabbat and invited me there. It was a very nice and very peaceful Shabbat with his family, and even in Sderot, I never felt any threat, but he showed me around and I remember this having a very big impact on me. Showing me all the potholes where the rockets fell, and the spot where a guy was killed.... and I saw all of the closed down businesses due to the danger, and he also showed me a lot of the cities built with extra protection.

A few participants, as part of their program, got to go on a day excursion every week that explored different sides of Israel. Those who got to go on these small tiyulim, spoke about how those visits really shaped their understanding of Israel and gave them a different perspective on many issues, including the conflict.

In *Tours that Bind*, Kelner speaks about the importance of tiyulim as a means of creating a nationalist subject (Kelner, 2010, p. 28): while experiencing the homeland one can create a special relationship with the land. The tiyulim that some participants got to experience not only

allowed them to hear about the different sides of Israel, it allowed them to learn from those issues first hand. Going to places like Sderot where people saw the damage that the rockets have on the community (not only physically but also emotionally), visiting museums, or walking around the Old City and hearing about the issues that the city is facing really helped participants identify with the land. Once these experiences are processed, it is something that will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

Based on the effect that the tiyulim had on participants, I would recommend that every long term program engage in a similar model where participants take one day a week to travel the country, visit museums, go on hikes, speak to people and live the land. The sense of identification that these participants felt while speaking about the tiyulim is what strengthened their connection to Israel once they came back to America and, for some, is what made them want to volunteer in their Jewish communities once they got back.

## **Volunteering**

One of the advantages of spending a long period of time in Israel is that it gave some participants the opportunity to volunteer. Although not everyone had the chance to do so, either because they had an internship or because they could not find the right fit, those who had the chance to do so referred to it as one of the highlights of their trip. For one participant, volunteering in Israel is what made him feel like he belonged there; it was the experience that allowed him to transcend from a participant to a member of Israeli society:

I think that what solidified everything for me was when I volunteered; this was one of the most profound things that I did in Israel. I went to volunteer with this organization that reached out to refugees from Sudan, and I taught them English once a week. I would take a bus to the city of Arad where the refugee community lived, and I would teach these immigrants who had fled warfare and genocide in Africa and had come through Egypt seeking asylum in Israel. Teaching them English made me feel very connected to the country and what I loved about the country. Working as a volunteer was what connected me to the country the most.

For another participant, because she wanted to do a service oriented program, volunteering was actually a big part of her program. In her case, she worked at a soup kitchen and a local garden once a week. These two volunteering opportunities added meaning to a lackluster experience.

Another participant got the chance to volunteer for an organization that helped people with special needs. Reflecting on her internship, she remembered fondly how she went to the Biblical Zoo, out for dinner and other places with her organization.

For these participants, volunteering connected them to a sector of Israeli society that a lot of people do not get a chance to see, or they do not always realize exists. The less fortunate in Israel, or those who have different capacities, can be ignored or just not represented when a group is only in Israel for a few days.

Long term programs give participants much more time to find a volunteering opportunity that might be a good fit for them, and they give them time to make a difference. This is not to say that all participants had great volunteering opportunities. One participant shared her frustration with the opportunities that she was given: “I tried really hard to find the right volunteering position, but it did not happen for me. I volunteered for an organization and I only got to stuff envelopes, so I only went one or two times.”

Volunteering in Israel is just one more activity that can connect participants to the land and leave a long lasting connection once they return home. It is not uncommon while in America to find organizations that are referred to as “Friends of” X or Y organization in Israel, organizations that are set up to fundraise and help particular organizations in Israel. I cannot imagine how powerful and beneficial it would be for these organizations to recruit participants from long term programs who volunteered at these organizations in Israel once they got back, either as staff or as lay leaders. The power of the participants’ stories could be invaluable for these organizations.

## **Where are they now**

The main objective for my thesis was to learn from the participants' long term programs and to understand if their experiences got them involved with their communities after they returned. Although the sample is small, the interviews give us important qualitative data that would be difficult to obtain in a large-scale quantitative study. Out of the 15 participants that I got a chance to interview, I found a pattern of community engagement that can be related to their experiences in Israel.

Two of the participants are working full time for Jewish organizations. Although one of them knew that she wanted to work in this field even before she went to Israel, the other participant had a very strong transformation after she came back from Israel: "Now the Jewish world is my life... I never imagined, not in a million years, but to be honest, I don't know if I would have worked in a Jewish organization if it was not the organization where I am now working." This participant told me that the only reason that she is working in the Jewish world is because she is in a very particular organization that fits what she believes in and that is the only reason why she decided to apply for the job. The way in which she got her job points to the impact of her long term program and its follow-up activities. After she got back from Israel, she received an email from Masa asking about her trip and looking for feedback. After a few emails, she was invited to take part in an alumni committee, and without even realizing it she was volunteering: "Now I am on the Masa alumni committee. I don't really know how it happened – I was just going to different events." After spending some time at these events, she started hearing about a particular organization that she got very interested in. Based on what she heard from other people and the fact that one of her family members started working in that same organization, she decided to apply and got a job there.

It is very remarkable to see how things happened for her, because this was a person who was not looking to get involved in the Jewish community. In fact, she only responded to the Masa emails because she was looking for a way to network. Now, looking back at her long term trip and where she is working now, she realizes that that organization is exactly where she belongs.

Another participant who had a very transformative experience in Israel decided to apply to rabbinical school after she got back. In her case, she was not thinking about rabbinical school before Israel, but after she got back, she realized that this was the path to follow. Her experience doing a semester abroad in Israel and the time she spent traveling abroad guided her decision to apply to rabbinical school.

Two more participants changed their career paths and went back to school to become Jewish professionals. One of them reflected on this change after she got back from Israel:

I decided to learn more about Judaism and understood life in a different meaningful way. I felt I had a purpose and that life was much more than my regular day to day goals and activities. I can honestly say that my experiences in Israel changed me for the better.

These two participants, who are on their way to become Jewish professionals, had a transformation in Israel. For one of them, the transformation came after she volunteered in Israel. For the other one, it came when she realized how much she loved the country and how she wanted to be a part of the Jewish world after she came back.

One of the participants, who had a hard time finding a job after she got back from her long term program, decided to become a lay leader as a way to stay involved with the community:

What I decided to do instead was throw myself into being a lay leader for nonprofits, especially Masa. I am now the chair for the alumni board, but I started anyway I could. I went to the GA, and I tried to get involved with any

organization that needed work. I finally got a job and I love it, but I definitely came home with a very different sense of self and a very different sense of Israel and my faith and the Jewish community.

This participant, while reflecting about her time in Israel, was very honest about the time that it took her to adapt back to her life in the US and the significant effect that living in Israel had on how she sees her life now. Although, she is not involved in the Jewish world professionally, she is very involved as a lay leader.

Two of the male participants are also very involved lay leaders. One of them got to sit on two different boards at the UJA, which gave him the opportunity to learn how to be a lay leader. He is now using his experience to get people involved in Masa, especially in the alumni committee. The other participant is now involved with the Jewish Federation Emerging Leaders & Philanthropists, he is on the Masa alumni committee and he is involved with ADL's Glass Institute. For him, being a lay leader is a way of making a difference since he never got a chance to serve in the Israeli army, something that he feels he missed out on.

Two of the participants are now staffing Birthright trips regularly. This is their way of staying connected to Israel and of spending a few days a year sharing their experiences in Israel with others. The last three participants are not involved as volunteers in the Jewish community, but they still feel very connected to Israel.

Based on these results, I feel comfortable saying that the positive experiences that these participants had during their long term programs in Israel encouraged them to volunteer in their communities once they returned to the United States.



## **Conclusion**

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Long term trips to Israel give participants the opportunity to connect with their Jewish roots. This is not to say that participants become more religious while in Israel; in fact, based on what I found, the trips have the opposite effect on some. What these trips do achieve is to create a connection with Israel that is based on the land, their experiences, the people that they meet and the language. This connection, built during a long term program in Israel, reaches its peak once participants return to the United States and reflect on their experiences. Jewish organizations, including Federations and other volunteer agencies, should attract these participants once they return. These are the Jewish community leaders of the future who sacrificed time away from their families and their friends to pursue something deeper that can transform our communities in the future.

Based on my findings, I have created a list of recommendations for participants, trip providers and institutions to enhance long term trip experiences:

### **Recommendations for participants**

- 1) Find the right program: Not every program is ideal for every participant. Do your research, speak to the trip representative and ask him or her to provide you with contact information from former participants, talk to them directly and address all your concerns. It is much easier to change your mind before you go on the trip than once you are in Israel.
- 2) You get what you put into the program: Most programs in Israel require that you push for what you want. If you feel like you are not getting enough work or that you need

more ulpan, you need to speak out. Most interviewees made reference to this point: do not be afraid to talk, and make sure that the programmatic staff listens.

- 3) Take advantage of all opportunities: Volunteer and participate in every single activity and event that it is offered to you while in Israel, even when it is outside of your comfort zone. Your time in Israel is the time to try new things, and who knows, you might find out that something you were not willing to try before is actually not so bad.
- 4) Look for opportunities when you get back: Most participants feel that once they got back from Israel, they did not have someone to talk to and debrief them on their experiences. Some participants did not know where to look in order to find the necessary support to continue contributing to the Jewish community. It is important to know that there are alumni networks available once participants get back. Search for those opportunities and get involved.
- 5) Speak out once you get back: Become an advocate, share your experiences and keep the trips going. Long term programs to Israel are essential for leadership creation, and as a participant you are the ideal advocate for recruitment. Tell everyone you know about your experience and encourage them to find a long term program that is right for them.

### **Recommendations for trip providers**

- 1) Tiyulim: Most participants made reference to the importance that the tiyulim had in their overall experience. Tiyulim bring a different side of Israel to the participants, connecting them to the land and the people and giving them a different understanding of the country. I would recommend that all long term Israel programs implement a weekly tiyul to complement the rest of the activities.

- 2) Listen to the participants: Participants have great suggestions to improve the programs. Listen to what they have to say and keep an open mind. Some suggestions might not be feasible, or might just come out of anger, but some suggestions will definitely create positive change.
- 3) Create opportunities for participants to engage with Israelis: What better way to create a connection that will last a lifetime than by connecting Israelis with people in the Diaspora. That way, once they get back they might remain in touch with their new friends and their connection to Israel will be even stronger.
- 4) Create volunteer opportunities: Volunteering in Israel can be difficult. Some participants made reference to the fact that they wanted to volunteer but they could not find an adequate place. I believe that long term trip providers should create a database with volunteer opportunities in different sectors, which participants can access and decide whether they want to take advantage of it.
- 5) Keep in touch: Once participants return from their trip, they can be the strongest advocates for the program. Stay in touch with them, always be available if they have questions and, most importantly, encourage them to share their experiences with their family and friends.

### **Recommendations for Masa and other Jewish institutions**

- 1) Identify the true leaders: Not every single participant in long term trips to Israel is the next Jewish communal leader. However, there are a significant number of participants who can become a leader as long as the right organization keeps them engaged after they return. My recommendation in this case is to encourage the Masa Alumni and other Jewish organizations to keep an eye out for those participants who show interest in

Jewish leadership, encourage them to get more involved and make sure that once they return to the United States, there is someone ready to follow up with them immediately. Identifying these prospects and bringing them to organizations as lay leaders and professionals is a win-win situation.

- 2) Alumni programs: People sometimes return from great experiences in Israel and they do not know what to do and how to talk about their experiences. Although some people might understand what they went through, only those who have been through a similar experience can relate to them. Keeping young leaders involved in the alumni program gives them a chance to talk and express their feelings; it also gives organizations the opportunity to engage young leaders who can work together and bring new ideas to revolutionize the trips. The more alumni in an organization, the more real feedback the organization gets.
- 3) Mentorship: There is nothing more important for a young leader than being mentored by a current leader in the community. People that are identified as leaders need to be connected to mentors that guide them along the way. Mentors who have access to the community can bring their mentees to board meetings, fundraisers and other events that would otherwise be impossible for them to attend. By creating a strong relationship between young people and established leaders of the community, an organization will have a positive impact on their future leadership.
- 4) Stewardship: There is no better way to keep the alumni involved than by creating opportunities to give back to their program, even when the amount of money that they donate is not significant. I realize that a large number of participants come back from these programs with very little money, but giving 5 dollars a month for the first few years

will create a culture of giving. Besides, as times goes by the capacity of the alumni to contribute will grow.

- 5) Showcase the results: As these programs depend on the generosity of Federation and institutions in order to thrive, individual long term Israel program providers and Masa should showcase the participant's experiences to donors to ensure the continuation of these programs in the future.

This study explored the impact that long term trips in Israel have on participants. Based on the results, I strongly believe that future leaders of the Jewish community can emerge from this group, so long as they are supported by the community at large once they get back.

In my research, I found that most participants go through an incredible transformation, some by experiencing the country for the first time, others by reaffirming what they already know about Israel and learning about new aspects of the country. As more and more current professionals begin their final stages in their positions, what better way to find a replacement than from a pool of people who have already demonstrated enough commitment to the Jewish people by spending a long period of time in Israel, putting their lives aside for some time and creating connections that can last a lifetime.

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