

Birthright Israel: As Political As Chopped Liver



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Does Taglit-Birthright Israel have a political agenda?

Questions about Taglit trip's content have come to the fore, perhaps a natural consequence of it becoming a rite of passage for diaspora young adults, magnified by the intensity of current debate about Israel. The questions are not new, and from the time the first planeload of participants landed in Israel, observers have been looking for the political agenda. But political agendas are more in the mind of the observers than the program.

Although for some, one cannot talk about Israel without being political, to regard Taglit trips as "political" is to misunderstand its goals and how it educates. Taglit is unabashed in its focus on promoting Jewish identity, Peoplehood and love of Israel. By regulation, and voluminous guidelines, its educators are required to offer apolitical "balanced messages." To identify with and love Israel does not mean support of a specific political position about Israel.

The Hebrew name of Birthright Israel, Taglit, literally means "discovery." What participants discover is not a political position on settlements or international negotiations; rather, they discover their personal relationship to the Jewish people and, in a process of forming their Jewish identity, connect to their heritage. It is, perhaps, political in that it has a particularistic focus to connect Jews with Judaism, and with other Jews, but this is no more subversive than an effort to deepen family relationships. It helps a generation of young Jews develop a self-confident connection to the Jewish people and to Israel.



The content of Taglit programs is fixed in terms of core themes, but the specifics of what is taught vary. Although this suggests that the door is open to politicization, in fact, it gives participants more influence in what and how they learn. In educational philosophy terms, Birthright Israel is John Dewey-inspired experiential education. The program teaches by allowing participants to experience Israel and to get to know the country and their heritage through interaction with others. It engages participants' "heart, mind and body" and the teachers are peers, as well as formal educators.

Operationally, Taglit-Birthright Israel works through trip organizers who develop specific curricula. Taglit sets standards, selects and certifies tour operators (TOs) and evaluates the process and outcome of the trips. Individual TOs handle the logistics and the details of educational programming. The TOs represent a diverse group of public and private educational organizations. Although the organizations differ in philosophy, by accepting Birthright Israel support, they accept the pluralistic educational goals of the program.

The Birthright Israel journey lasts for 10 days, enough time to stimulate participants' connection with other Jews and to get a sense of Israel. The trip is about engaging with other Jews in the context of Israel, not about teaching specific content. From a social psychological perspective, the trip serves as a cultural island that allows participants to unfreeze and reform their attitudes about being Jewish.

Although most trips are designed for everyone, regardless of background and interests, some trips have a focus. Thus, group itineraries might be tailored to individuals from a particular campus or community, to those who are athletic and interested in hiking or biking, or to those studying law or medicine. Political ideology is not a factor and, young adult Jews are eligible based on age, lack of prior educational experiences in Israel, and acceptance of program rules.

The formal educators who serve as trip leaders are central to Birthright Israel's success. The experienced guide knows when to talk and when to walk, when to let group dynamics evolve and when to intervene, and when to lecture and when to discuss. Wonderful guides live their love of Jews, Judaism and Israel and, in many cases, participants never discern their trip leader's political orientation.

At the core of every Birthright Israel journey is a *mifgash* (encounter) with Israeli peers. *Mifgashim* take place over five to 10 days of the trip and engage as co-participants up to eight young Israelis, most of whom are still doing their army service. The peer-to-peer learning made possible by engaging young Israelis is, perhaps, Birthright Israel's most potent educational tool. By creating personal connections, participants gain insight into the Israeli polity. The trip allows diaspora Jews to understand that there is a diversity of views among Israelis and, to the extent that the focus of discussion is political, it leads them to understand that the situation is far more complicated than they thought.

Of course, every guide and educator has a set of personal views, left, center and right, and some express them in spite of the regulations. These views are more than mitigated by the *mifgash* experience. Show us any group of young Israelis and we'll show you the spectrum of Israeli views. The late night conversations among these peers sort out many contemporary issues including those that are "political."

The claim that Taglit is *hasbara* (propaganda) and not *chinooch* (education) is at variance with how the program is organized and with what we have seen with thousands of participants. No doubt, each participant — and each observer — views Taglit through his or her own lens. Some of these lenses are political, but the program is about Jewish identity, not the political discourse of how to resolve conflicting Israeli and Palestinian claims. The three key elements of identity — knowledge, emotion and behavior — are all substantially impacted by the experience.

Taglit-Birthright Israel is counter-cultural. It is particularistic in a universalistic world and its programming tackles issues of identity and group commitment that many contemporary young adults seek to avoid. The program has created a new paradigm — a new way for diaspora Jews to relate to Israel — that emphasizes the connections among people, not mythology or ideology. In an era where political diversions are ever sharper and destructive, it is a breath of fresh air and sign of hope for the future.

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