

Op-Ed: Birthright needs communal cash

Charles R. Bronfman

Birthright Israel is a proven success for engaging young Jews, so why aren't Jewish organizations allocating more funds, philanthropist Charles Bronfman asks.

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NEW YORK (JTA) -- Although the High Holidays have always been a period of introspection, the Jewish community -- at least those in it who care deeply about its future -- could stand to do some especially vigorous soul searching this year.

The results of a new study -- "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel" -- on young American Jews' attitudes toward Israel were released last week, and the news is disheartening. These Jews, who represent American Judaism's prospects in the next generation, are growing increasingly alienated from Israel, the study finds. They are less concerned with its welfare than previous generations and, unbelievably, less comfortable with the very idea of a Jewish state.

Fewer than half of American Jews under the age of 35 feel that Israel's destruction would be a "personal tragedy." Fewer than half!

The results of the study, which was commissioned by our foundation, are shocking, if not entirely surprising. We've known for some time that young Jews seemed less engaged with the Zionist project than their forebears. And yet, coming face to face now with these data and assimilating the depth of the problem which they portray, is unsettling, to say the least.

What's worse, we already know the answer to this quandary, but for some reason the organized Jewish community continues to pay it too little attention.

The answer I refer to is Taglit-Birthright Israel, the most successful identity-building program in the history of the Jewish community.

Since 2000, the program has brought 145,000 18- to 26-year-old Jews to Israel on free, 10-day trips and has demonstrated time and again its profound impact on the lives and identities of participants.

Indeed, the experience is often transformational: Many participants were unaffiliated and uninvolved Jewishly before leaving, yet research shows that an overwhelming number return home to take on greater roles in their campus Hillels, enroll in Jewish studies courses and sign up for subsequent Israel trips and semesters abroad.

Others come back and decide to pursue careers in the Jewish community or to engage in Jewish life in traditional and non-traditional ways. Several thousand have even moved to Israel from countries around the world.

At a moment when Jews are intermarrying at an alarming rate and joining synagogues and other Jewish communal organizations at an alarmingly low rate, I don't think I exaggerate when I say that Taglit-Birthright Israel could prove to be the best salve with regard to one of the pressing communal issues of our day: Jewish continuity.

We in the Jewish philanthropic community have taken this message to heart. In less than eight short years since

launching Taglit-birthright israel, private philanthropists have willingly funded the program to the tune of nearly \$150 million. But because of the ever-growing popularity of the program, we can't go it alone. Many hundreds of parents and other concerned members of the Jewish community have recently followed suit by making contributions to sustain the program.

But the American Jewish community as a whole must be a full partner and reach deep into its pockets and match our financial commitment to stemming the stampede of our children away from a Jewish connection.

The past four prime ministers of Israel understood this and provided the unprecedented leadership of full partnership. However, organizations like the Jewish Agency for Israel remain unwilling to lay out sufficient funds to accommodate all of the young Jews who wish to participate. As our youth disengage from Israel before our eyes, it is shameful that the Jewish Agency, for which encouraging aliyah is a *raison d'etre*, would fund a paltry 6 percent of Taglit-birthright israel's annual budget while the waiting list numbers in the thousands.

In the context of the honesty required by this season, what of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella of the American federation system? UJC also can only find enough cash in its coffers to fund just over 6 percent of the program's budget. That figure represents less than 1 percent of UJC's entire budget for a program that has proved a consistent success, changing thousands upon thousands of Jewish lives and, thereby, potentially altering the course of the American Jewish future.

I ask this as a loving believer and supporter of this system, having been the first UJC chair.

Recently, our foundation made grants to nine federations in the desire to bring federations and birthright closer. The grant is to hire additional staff to help local federations raise money for birthright. However, as the study demonstrates, time is not on our side.

And not only do these groups, and others like them, fail to give sufficiently to Taglit-birthright israel, but they fall short when it comes to creating opportunities for program participants when they return. The Israel trip is an unparalleled catalyst, to be sure. But in order to spark lifetime commitments to Israel and to Jewish peoplehood among young participants, it is equally important that there be ample follow-up options when they return home: meetings, lectures, social events of whatever kind. The trip is the gateway to Jewish identity, but without reinforcement at home, we cannot ensure that the gate remains open.

With his typical combination of vision and practicality, Michael Steinhardt -- my partner in co-founding birthright israel -- recently announced that he would be allocating millions of dollars for boosting alumni programs. This is truly wonderful news. Yet I'm left wondering why follow-up should remain strictly in the domain of the philanthropists. Should we be left alone to both follow through and follow up?

Why shouldn't Jewish organizations that are funded and supported by members of the U.S. Jewish community, and which aim to buoy, strengthen and perpetuate that community, be supporting these post-program efforts, which are opportunities to raise, educate and promote the young and future leadership of our community? Do these essential ends not justify the allocation of sufficient means?

As we gather in synagogues across this country and around the world for this most auspicious moment in the Jewish calendar, I hope and pray that the leaders of American Jewish organizations, and some of their Israeli counterparts, take a deep look within themselves and, like the philanthropists who fund Taglit-birthright israel in all of its aspects, put their money where their mouths are.

Israeli military commanders are known for leading their troops into battle with the selfless cry "Acharai!" -- "After me!" At this important juncture I say to the leaders in the American Jewish organizational world, the time has come. "Acharai!"

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