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Charles Bronfman: Birthright has become more successful than we could have imagined in even our wildest dreams.

By Ruth Shuster

A free trip to Israel or moral support for those living in Zion? Regiments of wild youth or a potential regiment of additional IDF recruits? Charles Bronfman, one of the founders of Birthright, is not deterred by the flocks of kids who regard the program as an opportunity for a free holiday. The opposite is true; Bronfman prefers to see the glass half full. "I think it's great. This is our target audience. We are not looking to reach those who are committed; there is no need to invest public funds on people who already feel committed," he says happily. "We looked for those who are not committed, who will only come to Israel for the free trip. Then Israel works its magic on them, and suddenly they are transformed."

This is not only the gut feeling of a founder who is overly enthusiastic. Not only Americans, but -- to the organizers' surprise -- the Israeli graduates of birthright testify that astonishingly or not, after the 10-day experience, they became different people. "I wanted to find a way to come to Israel as much as possible, and I didn't have the money," admits Kim Verly from Ohio, who made *aliyah* at the age of 28 and joined the IDF. Captain S., an Israeli who married a woman he met through Birthright, feels that by accompanying a group of young Jews from the Diaspora he reconnected to his own Zionism.

Bronfman has substantial statistics, thanks to a study by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, which shows the change that Birthright causes among the participants: 92% of those surveyed said it had been the best trip of their lives, he notes. The study also found that before the trip, 38% of those surveyed felt connected "to a great extent" to the Jewish people. Three months after the trip, the number almost doubled to 64%, and remained almost the same a year later. No doubt that this is a significant change. "Their commitment to Israel and their sense of belonging to the Jewish people -- the two most important issues -- are amazing," says Bronfman in a conversation with Ha'aretz.

The Israeli participants gain more than the Americans, the French and the Russians: there are also benefits for Israeli soldiers. To prove this point, Bronfman says the IDF established a special unit to handle its relations with Birthright. Today, more than 50% of the program's funding comes from private philanthropists. In 2007, Sheldon Adelson, who is considered the richest Jew in the world, donated \$30 million to the project. This year the Edelson foundation is giving \$36 million, says Bronfman. The government of Israel still continues to pay a third of the costs, however an increase in contributions has allowed Birthright to double the number of trips it offers. In recognition, perhaps, of the value of these trips to Israel and not only to world Jewry, the Israeli business

community is increasingly supportive of the program. Last year alone, Israeli donors provided almost \$1 million to the Israeli side of the encounter, says Bronfman.

The Bronfman family made its money from the alcohol and media businesses. But the patriarch of this family, Charles, 77, is not involved in the business anymore and today devotes his energies to philanthropy, focusing on Israel and the Jewish community in general. Birthright, which he established together with his business partner Michael Steinhardt in 2000, is decidedly not a tool for promoting *aliyah*, even though that is not a rare outcome of these trips. This is mainly a program for connecting young Jews, who are assimilating more and more into their communities in the Diaspora, to Israel, and just as important, to the Jewish community in their homeland.

"Everything started when Yossi Beilin raised the idea to give each 17 year- old a coupon to travel to Israel," says Bronfman. "He spoke to me and Steinhardt about this. I asked Beilin where he plans to get the money. He said the Jewish Agency. I said that there was little chance of that. When Steinhardt and I spoke about it, I said to him, Michael, it won't happen that way. I said that sending people to Israel is a great idea, and let's see how we can make this happen. We started talking about it, and a year later we were ready to go to the government of Israel and philanthropists in other communities to try to get the funding."

To this day, all Israeli governments have supported the project, from Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was ready to allot financial support for the program, to Ehud Barak, who was the first Israeli prime minister to publicly support an educational program for Diaspora youth, to Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert, who see Birthright as the flagship project of all the Zionist educational projects in the Jewish world.

Does he feel that the primary goal was achieved? "And more, to an extent that you can't imagine," laughs Bronfman. "We said that our goal was to bring 50,00 youths over a very long period. We expect 42,000 this year alone. It has become more successful than we could have imagined in even our wildest dreams."

Based on the extraordinary success -- 165,000 participants from 53 countries, and many more on the way -- Bronfman and the founders want to expand the program even further to include more participants from all over the world, including Israel. "For me, in order to be a complete Jew, a person should feel an emotional and physical connection to Israel," says Bronfman "You have to visit Israel, meet Israelis, feel the brotherhood and you have to feel that Israel is part of your life. There is an 'emotional feeling' and a 'physical feeling.' I don't know if this is called Zionism or not. I am not interested in tags. If you are a Jew, Israel must play an important part in your life, whether you think about it everyday, once a week, or once a month."

And no, he doesn't think that virtual visits are any kind of substitute. With all due respect for the Internet era and mass communication and without going into the accumulated influence of the many flights on the climate, visits have to continue, according to Bronfman. "The Internet can't do it; you have to touch the soil," he says. "You have to feel the walls of Masada, the Galilee, and to experience the time spent with Israelis. The highlight of all Birthright trips to Israel today is the encounter between

Israelis, especially IDF soldiers in jeans and a t-shirt, and participants from the Diaspora, also in jeans and a t-shirt.”

The tangible encounter between Israelis and Jews from abroad is the key, explains Bronfman. Both groups spend at least half of the trip together: 5 out of the 10 days. “Some of the trip organizers plan the whole trip with Israelis. They really get to know each other and soon friendships are formed. Israelis and Jews from the Diaspora learn that the stereotypes are not completely true. They learn that Jews have so much in common on a one-to-one basis, and that lesson is priceless.”

Opinions differ on the situation of philanthropy in Israeli culture, he admits. He himself has no complaints. “During the last conference of the Jewish Funders Network in Jerusalem, in a panel on this specific topic, I said that contrary to what many think, Israeli philanthropy has achieved a lot. Israel was established as a socialist state, but now they give back to the community. I am very proud of my Israeli cousins, who do great work in philanthropy, and will do much more in the future.”

“I don’t discount Israeli philanthropists. I think that they are long past their initial steps in the field. We are all Jews and this is part of our culture, part of our DNA -- to give to those who have been less fortunate. It happens, and will happen even more,” Bronfman’s forecasts are optimistic.

Bronfman is very optimistic in nature, which is a refreshing stance these days in light of global warming and financial crises. This man does not encourage fear. He does not tell the young and talented young people of the world to make a trendy career of saving the planet. “There is no ‘magic solution,’” he says. “Young entrepreneurs should turn to whatever they are comfortable and confident doing. If you feel you have a talent for technology and information, go with it. If you have a knack for hi-tech, go with hi-tech. If you are good at selling chocolate, sell chocolate.”

“Yes, the world is a difficult place but I still don’t think that the glass is half empty. I think the glass is half full. I think that many people are taking care of the environment, of global warming and of world finances – we will solve those issues. Therefore I think people should pursue their own dreams.”