

Q AND A

Birthright aims to be ‘an integral part of the process of becoming a Jewish adult’

As the initiative he co-founded marks its bar mitzva, Charles Bronfman reflects on the ‘most rewarding thing I’ve ever done’

By DAVID HOROVITZ | June 4, 2012, 1:08 am |

Taglit-Birthright, the program that gives young Diaspora Jews a free, 10-day educational trip to Israel, marks its bar mitzva this week with one of its trademark “Mega Event” get-togethers in Jerusalem. In those 13 years, says Charles Bronfman, the Canadian businessman and philanthropist who co-founded Birthright (together with Michael Steinhardt), the program has brought over 300,000 participants to Israel from some 50 countries. Crucially and largely unrealized, said Bronfman in an interview Sunday in Jerusalem, 50,000 young Israelis have participated too.

The Times of Israel: How exactly are so many young Israelis involved?

Charles Bronfman: We had a meeting 10 years ago with Elazar Stern, who was then the head of IDF manpower, and we decided that IDF personnel needed to be with the groups for five of the 10 days. The soldiers say hello in uniform, and for the rest of the time they are out of uniform, touring with the groups. That has become the number one most enjoyed aspect of Birthright. You explode all the myths of what Israelis think about the diaspora and vice versa. They have much more in common than they thought, and a great deal to learn from each other.

What were the goals when you started Birthright 13 years ago, and how far do you think they have been achieved?

We had three goals for the participants — that they should feel happy to be Jewish, that they should identify with the Jewish people, and that they should have an emotional relationship with Israel. Now, we’ve conducted honest research via Brandeis all through the years and those three goals are being fulfilled big time. Over 90% of participants are satisfied with the Birthright experience. You might say, big deal, it’s a free trip. But believe me, it’s not automatic. But of course Israel is a great sales tool. And when you get to know it, not just biblically, but also culturally, that puts another light on it.

Whom are you targeting?

The target was always people who were already turned off or never turned on. (Birthright is only open to those who have not been on a previous organized trip to Israel). And that’s over 70% of those who come.

Is it becoming a harder sell?

Absolutely not. We're massively over-subscribed. Across all religions in the United States, people 18-30 are more spiritual than before, but they don't like organized religion. What sets Birthright apart is that no one's hitting on you to be Jewish in any particular way and you can define Jewish any way you want. And what you do with the experience when you get home, that's your call.

Follow-up was always a big issue, wasn't it? How to retain the connection?

It's easy to run trips, to put people on buses. Once they're home, they can go in any direction — studying Talmud, partying nonstop and all points in between. We had some noble failures with follow-up programming. Two things we're doing now are: Next, which keeps Birthright alumni together when they get back, and having the Federation system now very much on board to invest in those young alumni to take a role in the community. In the past, if you'd contact the Federation and want a role, chances are they'd send you off to do fundraising. Now, there are all kinds of opportunities to join various agencies.

This makes a really big impact. In the US and Canada, 50% of the young leadership of all the organizations like AIPAC and Hillel are Birthright alumni. And also I should tell you, Birthright participants are 50% more likely to marry Jewish than non-participants. In terms of Jewish continuity, it's huge. I can modestly say it's the most successful Jewish educational program in the modern history of our people.

How many people are coming these days through Birthright?

The waiting list is huge. Despite huge philanthropic contributions from Sheldon Adelson, the money we raise and the money from the Israeli government, only 40% of those who apply can come. We're bringing 40,000 this year. That's a high figure. Normally, it's been 20-30,000.

How does the funding break down?

The Israeli government has put in \$100 million for three years and that has to be matched two and a half to one via federations, agencies, Jewish communities and philanthropists. The fundraising has to improve. By the way, if the Israeli government is putting in all this money, it's in its own interest, for many reasons. One of them is that 2 billion shekels has been spent in Israel by

Birthright so far, from buses, hotels and tour guides to falafel.

What have emerged as the key elements of a Birthright trip?

There are five pillars. The trip must include biblical sites, the Western Wall, a Holocaust remembrance site (usually Yad Vashem), something cultural and something of modern-day Israel. Obviously those last two are very similar. The point is to show that this is not just the land of the book.

Has Birthright contributed to a lot of aliya?

There's certainly been a lot from the former Soviet Union, but that was not the goal. And there have been a lot of marriages too. But what's our business? Saving Jews. That may sound ridiculous. It's not like saving Jews from civil war in Ethiopia. We're talking about Jews in very nice countries, where they are certainly acculturated and in many cases have assimilated. Jews came to the United States and became Americans. Many of them had to make a choice between their

to the United States and became Americans. Now we're trying to make Jews out of them.

Why does it matter to make them Jews?

The Jewish people can do a lot of good if we stay united and strong — Israel and the Diaspora working together. If we don't, I always worry about the continuation of the Jewish people in Israel and abroad. When you're under siege, you stick together. But can you live together in freedom and democracy?

What are your own thoughts on this Israel you're bringing all these young Jews to?

I think it's a wonderful country in a very difficult neighborhood. No one knows what's going to happen even in the near future, but at the end of the day Israel will be standing.

I'm sure you have more specific thoughts about Israel policy.

You can't live in isolation forever.

Want to elaborate?

I think that's pretty clear.

Why is it so important to preserve the Jewish people?

Our DNA is different! We seem to produce great musicians, scientists, lawyers, Nobel Prize winners. We're comfortable with each other. And then, of course, there are the traditions and the codes of behavior.

You're winding down some of your philanthropic projects. What about Birthright?

Various philanthropic projects are being taken over by other agencies, but we'll keep doing Birthright and we'll endow it in my will. It's the most rewarding thing I've ever done in my life.

I'm delighted the government of Israel has taken a very major role. I'm delighted younger people are now taking it on. We spend no money on recruitment and advertising. It's all word of mouth. It's *the* thing to do.

Our hope is that, like a bar and bat mitzva, Birthright will become an integral part of Jewish maturing into adulthood. After a bar mitzva, before Birthright, we didn't go near our youngsters. And they don't get married until their late 20s and 30s. That's a long gap. Birthright bridges it.

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