



Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life)

Leonard Saxe, Barry Chazan

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Since 2000, nearly one hundred fifty thousand young adult Jews have participated in Birthright Israel, conceived to curb assimilation by shifting an entire generation of Diaspora Jews from a trajectory of noninvolvement with the Jewish community to one of identity and engagement. Birthright Israel is a free ten-day educational experience available to any young adult Jew between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six. Most of those who have received the “gift” to reconnect with their heritage have been from North America and demand for the program has far exceeded available slots. Dozens of organizations served as trip sponsors, from campus-based Hillels, to youth movements, to private educational tour companies. Each group implemented a carefully planned model of experiential education that involved exposure to ancient and modern history, as well as to the people of Israel. Key to the program is participation of Israeli peers who spend half or more of the trip with their Diaspora counterparts.

Although Birthright Israel’s focus is parochial, with an emphasis on Jewish identity, the program provides a fascinating social laboratory in which to understand young adults’ religious/ethnic identity and the impact of educational experiences. As a study of ethnic identity formation in postmodern society, it illuminates important lessons about how intensive exposure to one’s heritage can be a catalyst for identity formation, as well as how educational programs can be made more engaging and effective.

With Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan serving as tour guides and interpreters, this story and analysis of Birthright Israel unfolds in ten chapters that parallel the ten days of the trip. This structure showcases the experiences of the participants, bringing them vividly to life, and shows how the program’s effects may well last far beyond the time they spend together in Israel.

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