

Birthright Israel Now Arriving - or Do we have to go on Vacation to be Jewish?

By Daniel Brenner

Vacations have a weird way of making the typical Jew feel extra Jewish. Take the following story (an extreme case I admit) as an example.

A good friend of mine took a luxury liner cruise with his family and decided to become a rabbi. The story goes something like this: It was Friday night, and he wanted to do some type of Shabbat thing, maybe light the candles or say kiddush at his table, so he decided to make an announcement inviting all the Jews on board to join him. Next thing you know, he's leading about fifty folks in singing and it occurs to him that he'd like to be a rabbi.

Another case in point:

My aunt, who probably hasn't stepped foot in a synagogue on American soil in forty years, has been in more synagogues in Asia and Europe than Chabad. But at home? Forget-about-it!

This is part of a much larger phenomenon of moments when our identities reveal themselves only when we take ourselves out of the context we are used to. Another way to say this is that Americans realize that they are American when they set foot in Paris. No moment in film has captured this better than a scene from a Chevy Chase comedy that was once daily fare on HBO. Chase is Clark Griswold in National Lampoon's European Vacation, and he is visiting Paris, where he purchases a beret with his name written across the brim.

The action is a great metaphor-on the one hand, he is trying to fit in, hence the beret. He identifies with French culture, sees it as beautiful and compelling, etc. But when he appropriates it, he pulls a Disney World move on it, placing his name on his beret as only an American would do.

Reading the glowing reports from the college students that have recently come back from the Birthright Israel program, I sense the Griswold factor plays a major role. Those who write that they have connected for the first time to Judaism are, in an indirect way, putting on the beret. They are taking on something that is, for so many of them, a new cultural context. They slip on a pair of Naot, or crack open a daf of Talmud, and it feels good.

Michael Steinhardt, one of the driving forces behind the program, has insisted that "it is not the first trip to Israel that matters, it is the second - but you can't have a second without the first!" He is dead-on. But we must ask another question: How do you help someone to see that Judaism is something more than what you do on vacation?

This is where I want to suggest a second step to the process. There are places in America where Judaism is alive and vibrant and in full bloom. I've seen this in New York, and I know from others that there are synagogues, JCCs, theaters, and places of learning elsewhere that are on the cutting-edge of Jewish life. What if we could expose Generation Y to American Judaism? What would such a program look like? How could it be done on a major scale?

My continued bracha is extended for Birthright Israel. But I'm waiting for something to happen stateside.