

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN JEWISH YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

Some Implications for Birthright Israel

BARRY CHAZAN, PH.D.

Professor, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

and

STEVEN M. COHEN, PH.D.

Professor, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

The effort to bring many more American Jewish young people to Israel demands sensitivity to the new realities of contemporary American Jewish youth. Visiting Israel is the exception and not the rule for the majority of American Jewry, and it is not reinforced by adolescent peer or adult Jewish society.

As we enter the twenty-first century, there are clear indications of a dramatic change in youth travel to Israel, as manifested in the establishment of Birthright Israel, a combined effort of the State of Israel, Jewish communities throughout the world, and a group of Jewish philanthropists. The goal of this program is to make a visit to Israel a part of the life experience of the majority of today's and tomorrow's young Jews.

To reach this goal, this new venture is developing a systematic, long-term, and strategic approach to its work. We were asked to contribute to this effort by presenting a clear and accurate understanding of the social, demographic, and Jewish identity characteristics of today's young Jews and how they affect the decision to travel to Israel. Our task was to answer this question: Who are Jewish young people in the United States between the ages 14–26?

In this article, we focus on the young Jews of the United States. Although the United States is home to the vast majority of Jews living outside the Land of Israel, American Jews exhibit the lowest rates of travel to Israel. The American Jewish community is crucial to the success of any effort to significantly increase the participation of Jewish youth worldwide in the Israel experience while also presenting the greatest challenge to the vision of birthright israel.

OUR APPROACH

To address this question, we undertook the following steps:

- We reviewed the social scientific literature on American teenagers and American Jewish teenagers
- We held extended discussions with academicians, researchers, and educational practitioners in Israel and the United States
- We reanalyzed the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), focusing on young adult respondents, aged 19–26, and the parents of teenagers aged 14–18. In addition, we utilized a national survey of American Jewish teenagers and their parents conducted in 1993 to provide supplemental data.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The Changing Size of the Jewish Youth Population of the United States

Demographically, the number of Jewish teens, college-aged students, and young adults in the United States is not static and, in fact, shows dramatic changes every few years.

The 1990 NJPS is a helpful resource for our concerns, since it contains accurate, precise, and detailed information about the number of Jews born in each year. One finding of this study that we rely upon definitely is the actual

and predicted age structure of the population (knowing the number of 0–9 year olds today is a quite precise indicator of the number of 10–19 years old in ten years!).

The data indicate a significant increase in the Jewish teen population over the past ten years: from 232,000 in 1990 to 354,000 in the year 2000. In the year 2000 there were approximately 71,000 Jewish teens in each age cohort between the ages 14 and 18, as compared with 46,000 Jewish teens in each age cohort in 1990.

At the same time, the college-age group is in decline. In 1990 there were 267,000 young people between the ages 19–22, in contrast to 209,000 youngsters in 2000.

The prospective shrinkage is even more severe among Jewish young adults (age 23–26). There were 313,000 such individuals in 1990 and a projected 191,000 by the year 2000.

During the coming ten-year period, changes in Israel travel will occur not only because of birthright or better marketing or recruitment, but because of changes in population size.

Young American Jews Must Be Seen First and Foremost as Young People Living in American Society

Jewish teens are American teens. They are influenced and shaped by all of the psychological and sociological factors that affect contemporary American youth in general. The organized Jewish community's uniquely Jewish concerns sometimes leads it to see these young people through Jewish eyes only. This approach is misleading. Any intervention must take into account the prominent characteristics of these young people—as adolescents and as consumers.

Consequently, utilizing large-scale surveys of American teens and college students that include Jewish youngsters (e.g., the UCLA freshman survey of 30 years of entering UCLA freshman and the University of Michigan "Monitoring the Future" survey of school-aged youth) is critical for our effort.

These and other studies point to several salient general characteristics that American Jewish youth share with their counterparts:

- The majority of American Jewish youth are socioeconomically of the middle class.
- They are consumers of quality secondary education, both private and public.
- Most are on an educational track leading to attendance at a university.
- They have growing independent power as consumers and as purchasers of goods and services, particularly in the area of clothing, music, and travel.
- They are susceptible to all of the psychological dynamics and processes of adolescence and youth, which include sexuality and parental issues and dynamics.
- The present generation of 25-year-olds and under has grown up in one of the most individualistic cultures that has ever existed.
- At the same time, these teens are developing in a culture in which adults play an increasingly distant role and identity and behavior are shaped significantly by peer groups and social networks.

American Jewish Youth Consist of Three Distinct Subgroups: Adolescents (14–18), Youth (19–22), and Young Adults (23–26)

Young Americans and American Jews between 14–26 are not one homogeneous group. They need to be treated as three unique age groups, each of which has distinctive sociological, psychological, and demographical features.

Adolescents: Ages 14 to 18

Adolescents are characterized by the powerful role of peer group and adolescent social networks. They are deeply influenced by in-groups, out-groups, hanging out with friends, and being popular or not.

As adolescence unfolds, young people go through sequential stages of detachment from parents, a search for a mature identity, and eventually, the coalescence of the adult self. Though all teenagers may go through these three developmental stages, not all undergo them at the same ages and certainly not in the same way.

High-school youngsters of all ages are preoccupied with issues of physicality, sexuality, and the opposite sex. Products and thinking related to skin, hair, body, and clothing play central roles in their psyche.

This age group markedly resists organizational and ideological affiliations and membership. Adolescents like to hang out with other teens, but, in contrast to youth in other countries, they are not predisposed to joining youth movements or other ideological frameworks. They may see such affiliations as representative of the adult world and value system at a time when they are wrestling with diverse identity possibilities. Consequently, both existing organized youth networks and independent non-organized outreach programs must be used to market Israel travel.

For reasons about which we can only speculate, more girls than boys have an interest in joining youth movements and related activities (such as Israel experience trips). This phenomenon is not particularly related to being Jewish, and the gender variation seems to apply to all sorts of organized youth activities.

Adolescents exercise increasingly independent consumer power. While the group is not completely economically independent, it does have its own financial resources, spending money on clothes, music, cars, and entertainment. The increased economic independence of this age group is related to the increased preoccupation with working during summer and vacation periods in order to make money. These issues affect attitudes toward the duration and cost of Israel trips.

Music plays a central role in the life of this age group. These youngsters buy CDs and musical equipment, watch MTV, and go to rock concerts and performances—spending an average of 30 hours a week watching TV, listening to radio, and listening to CDs as compared to 2 hours a week spent going to religious functions. They intimately connect with the culture and personalities of the contemporary musical scene. The interest in music and teenage culture suggests creative new ways for presenting Israel as a contemporary Jewish society.

This group (and their older counterparts) is literate in the world of computers and cyberspace. Almost all use personal computers and e-mail and access the Internet regularly, and many make purchases on the Internet. Teens spend over 4 hours a week on average on the home computer. Clearly the Internet will be an increasingly central resource for a host of activities (marketing, pre-trip preparation, post-trip programs, communications between Israeli and North American teens) related to the Israel experience, and it will play an important role in the work of birthright israel.

While youngsters at this age are still part of the core family group, this is a period of increased independence from (and sometimes friction with) family and increased gravitation toward the peer group and friends. At the same time, teens emphasize the central role of their parents in the development of their self-perceptions. More than 52 percent value the opinion of one or both parents as opposed to only 18 percent for a friend. This data clearly suggest that when it comes to social-marketing issues related to the Israel experience, a "parent-strategy" (in addition to a teen focus) is essential.

The years between 14–18 are a time of intense preoccupation with examinations, grades, and preparing for college. The pressures of successfully completing high school and being accepted at a desirable college are primary forces in the daily lives of young people. Youngsters at this age, especially those on the academic fast track, speak of "resume-building," by which they mean accumulating experiences that will make them more attractive applicants to highly selective institutions of higher learning. Marketing Israel travel as an experience that may contribute to one's college application process may increase its appeal.

Mobility and travel are accepted norms for this age group. They have drivers' licenses, fly regularly, and are comfortable in airports, train stations, and money-exchanging agencies. These young people have grown up in homes with multiple cars and in which families travel

regularly on vacations inside and outside the United States.

Many experts stress the dramatic leaps forward in maturity that occur within the high-school years, even going so far as to suggest that one or two grade levels constitute distinctive market segments. Indeed, there is much to be said for this view, as the changes that young people undergo during these years are more rapid and dramatic than those that take place among the two older age segments.

Youth: Ages 19 to 22

Members of the college-aged group make a dramatic break from the home as base. A great number shift their place of residence for at least several months each year to apartments and dormitories. The campus now assumes many functions of the home. The people they live with are no longer family members, and the family's Jewish or general calendar no longer shapes their daily and weekly schedule. Therefore, outreach to this group cannot only rely on home.

This age group focuses very directly on career choice and preparation. Young people at this age are now thinking about what they will become professionally and how to get there. A no less serious preoccupation related to the future is finding one's significant other. At this age, the preoccupation with the opposite sex begins to encompass issues of finding a future husband or wife.

These preoccupations are also accompanied by an increased focus on financial issues. Members feel an increased responsibility for supporting themselves. Summers are no longer automatically vacation time; they are now a time to work and make money or to invest in pre-professional preparation.

At the same time, for some of these young people the college period is very much the last chance for the classic "moratorium" period. It is the last time in life when one is free to think, read books, discuss philosophy and love, and not be tied down by a full bag of day-to-day responsibilities.

This age group, as its younger siblings, is totally at home with planes, trains, busses, cars, backpacks, and all of the paraphernalia of modern travel. Moreover, young people of this age attend universities in which overseas travel for study purposes is accepted or even encouraged.

This age group is also computer literate and active. They use the Internet for information and communication even more than their younger counterparts.

All of these characteristics have immediate implications for marketing Israel travel in the college years:

- It should take into account career interests.
- Traveling to Israel at this age with other Jews could mean spending time with potential spouses.
- Israel travel has to take into account the economics of the college years.
- Israel travel in the college years must reflect topics and subjects that preoccupy the post-adolescent mind.
- Israel travel during college must learn from general travel patterns at this age and cannot simply be replicating teen trips.

Young Adults

The 23- to 26-year-olds are fully preoccupied with issues of career, economic independence, marriage, and becoming established in life. Some are involved with advanced professional training, others are beginning to go out into the larger world, and some are seeking to extend the moratorium a few more years. They are generally very individually focused and much less preoccupied with the peer group or with group travel. The focus now is on myself, a small group of friends, and where I am going. This is the age when individuals enter their adult lifestyle. There is much new knowledge in the world of education about methods and approaches to adult learning. Israel travel at this age must utilize the best knowledge we have about adult learning and education.

**THE CATEGORIES THAT ARE
GENERALLY USED TO DESCRIBE
ADULT JEWISH IDENTITY ARE NOT
DIRECTLY APPLICABLE TO
ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS**

In thinking about Jewish teens and their identities as Jews, many sophisticated observers apply conceptions and categories appropriate to the adult world. They may divide the population by denomination. They may speak of the affiliated and the unaffiliated. They may focus on a variety of ritual practices and attendance at synagogue services. These distinctions may make some sense, but they mean different things for adults as opposed to younger populations.

Adolescence and youth are the classic ages of the search for identity, defined by alternatives, diversity, and experimentation rather than by definitive and conclusive identification patterns. As fluid as are adult Jewish identities, those of youngsters are even more fluid and dynamic.

The application of adult-oriented measures of Jewish involvement may also lead to an underestimation of the depth of Jewish interest and concern among younger people. For example, as we have noted, the years 14 to 26 are not an age characterized by joining organizations or by paying membership fees. Hence, membership rates in formal Jewish organizations in these younger years are by nature much lower.

It is also important to note that, ironically, the Jewish educational infrastructure for the youth population is less elaborate than that available for their parents. The Jewish community deploys far fewer Jewish educators, rabbis, and communal workers per capita for the ages 14–26 than it does for almost any other discrete age range in the course of the life cycle.

As a result of these and other factors, relatively few 14 to 26-year-olds are found in institutional frameworks, be they youth movements for adolescents, campus-based youth organizations, or JCCs and synagogues for the young adults. However, this pattern of “not-joining” is not definitive, and with mar-

riage and the arrival of school-aged children, many Jews return to the institutional infrastructure that they abandoned during the 14–26-age period.

Similarly, many of the key Jewish rituals that are used to measure Jewish identification are connected to having a home or a family. It is much more likely that Jews will light Shabbat candles if they are married and have young children than if they are single university students. A dormitory room is less conducive to lighting candles or to building a Sukkah. The majority of young people at this age have not yet begun to own their own homes or to have young families. They are at a stage of life and development that does not yet reflect the rituals of Jewish family life. Again, the absence of performance on these indicators should not be taken as definitive proof of total lack of interest in things Jewish.

These considerations mean that many of the current generalizations about adolescent and youth Jewish identity may be far from accurate. The truth is that we actually have very little sophisticated knowledge about young people’s Jewish beliefs, emotions, knowledge, skills, and behavior. Indeed, it would be more useful to view young people’s Jewish identities as arrayed on a spectrum rather than as polarized between affiliated and unaffiliated, or involved and uninvolved. A careful look at the study of American Jewish teens points to numerous variations and gradations.

There probably are at least three main groups in terms of Israel travel.

1. About 20 percent are *highly engaged* young Jews with high rates of Israel travel. This group includes most day school graduates, most Orthodox youngsters, and significant minorities of active Conservative and Reform teens and young adults.
2. At the other extreme (about 30%) are *minimally engaged* young Jews with low rates of travel to Israel. This group has little or no Jewish schooling, a low degree of organizational affiliation, and low levels of Jewish observance.

3. Between these two groups there is the vast Jewish "middle" that comprises about half the Jewish youth population. This group is *moderately engaged*, has had some Jewish schooling, may or may not be members of a Jewish youth organization, and may perform some Jewish observances. This is the group where great gains in Israel travel can be realized. It is a group that is generally identifiable and reachable.

This more delineated and differentiated notion of youth Jewish identity patterns will yield a much more niche-oriented, youth-tailored, and teen-focused approach to presenting and programming Israel travel.

ONLY ABOUT ONE-QUARTER OF AMERICAN YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE VISITED ISRAEL BY THE AGE OF 26

There has been much confusion over the past decades as to the exact number and percentage of young people (and adults) who have visited Israel. One source of confusion is that different categories of numbers and figures have been used in reporting on this subject. Some research has reported the percentage of youngsters who have gone to Israel out of the total possible age cohort in any one year. For many years it was reported that only 2 percent of youngsters from the United States went to Israel in any one year. Sometimes only youngsters who have participated in programs sponsored by certain agencies have been included in the reporting, thereby excluding youngsters who have gone to Israel with other groups or with their families. Frequently, different age categories have been used in reporting participation in Israel travel; sometimes the reporting covers ages 13–18, at other times, 14–18, and at other times 14–26!

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) provides reasonably reliable information about this question. We looked at data on Jewish respondents who were between the ages of 19 and 26 at the time of the interview to see how many had been to Israel. This analysis suggests that in 1990 about a

quarter of American Jews have visited Israel. This figure is consistent with the 1993 National Study of American Jewish Teenagers, which indicates that 21 percent of high-school students (by age 18) had visited Israel. It is also consistent with several local Jewish population studies that report that one third or more of American Jewish adults have been to Israel. All of these studies suggest a pattern in which by age 18 about 21 percent of American Jews have visited Israel; by age 26 approximately 26 percent have visited; and about one-third of all American Jewish adults over 21 have visited Israel.

The overall implication is clear: about three-quarters of American Jewish young people up to the age of 26 have not visited Israel. In that sense the task being confronted is not merely to increase numbers, but to significantly change a dominant pattern that has characterized over fifty years of American Jewish life.

TODAY'S YOUNG JEWS ARE EXPERIENCING A NEW ISRAEL

Adult Jews grew up with an Israel that was a young, pioneering country fighting an historic battle for survival. This fledgling Israel was beleaguered, heroic, democratic, socially progressive, and central to collective Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

The Israel of today's Jewish youth is a different place. It is modern, high-tech, a military power, and a place of major importance in the international arena. It remains important in the collective Jewish identity of North American Jews, but its diminished role in the personal identity of young Jews has been affected by events of the past two decades.

The sociological research indicates that American Jews are less invested in politics, philanthropy, organizations, and collective Jewish endeavors of all sorts and Israel no longer stands as the exclusive item of the public Jewish agenda.

The American Jewish public has become more moderately dovish, and attitudes toward the Israel-Arab conflict have become more

complex. Hard-line Israeli leaders and governments have been alienating to much of the American Jewish public outside of Orthodoxy.

The conflicts over conversion and religious pluralism in Israel have projected a (mistaken) image of Israel as rejecting the validity of Conservatism and Reform, the major definitions of Jewish identity in the United States.

Today's youth are likely to view Israel in very contemporary as well as Jewish terms. Ongoing research on American Jewish attitudes toward Israel shows continued overall support and commitment, along with greater potential reservations and distancing from Israel among younger generations.

In marketing and educating for the Israel experience, birthright Israel must begin with an understanding of the new sense of Israel among young people in the 21st century.

**TRAVEL TO ISRAEL HAS NEVER
BECOME A NORM FOR MOST
AMERICAN JEWS; ISRAEL TRIPS ARE
UNDERTAKEN BY A SMALL NUMBER OF
THE MOSTLY COMMITTED AND
RELIGIOUS SECTORS OF
AMERICAN JEWRY**

About two-thirds of American Jews have never visited Israel. This means that most young Jews today have not grown up in a culture in which their parents or other role models typically go to Israel. Most contemporary Jewish parents of the past three decades have traveled to other countries, but not to Israel.

Young people whose parents have been to Israel are ten times more likely to visit Israel than those whose parents have never visited Israel.

The young people and adults who have traveled to Israel have largely come from the most committed population—the Orthodox world, day schools, and very active members

of Jewish youth movements.

The Israel trip has not succeeded in reaching out to the majority of the mainstream Jewish youth of the United States. In an age when social networks and peers exert much influence, there is little positive peer influence toward traveling to Israel.

CONCLUSION

The effort to bring many more American Jewish youngsters to Israel demands sensitivity to the new realities of contemporary American Jewish youth:

- We need to be aware of the ever-changing demography of the 14- to 26-year-old age group.
- We need to distinguish among teenagers, college students, and young adults in promoting the Israel experience.
- We need to approach our young Jews as American consumers and American young people.
- We need to think of their Jewish identities in terms of a broad spectrum of expressions, rather than as either affiliated or unaffiliated.
- We need to take into account the new Israel that 21st-century Jewish youth will experience.
- We need to recognize that visiting Israel is the exception and not the rule for the bulk of American Jewry, and it is not reinforced by either peer or adult Jewish society.

These realities are challenges that invite responses and not pitfalls that spell failure. Any strategy seeking to substantially increase the number of youngsters visiting Israel will need to address all these issues simultaneously and to develop a creative and innovative 21st-century strategy.