

**Brandeis University**

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

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# **Tourists, Travelers, and Citizens:** Jewish Engagement of Young Adults in Four Centers of North American Jewish Life

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## Executive Summary

Contemporary North American Jewish young adults live in a society where Jews have achieved unprecedented social, educational, and economic success. However, with little Jewish education past their early teen years, and coming of age in an era of deferred marriage and family formation, most of these young adults go through long periods without a meaningful connection to the Jewish community. Communal concerns regarding whether the next generation of Jewish young adults would see themselves as Jews and connected to other Jews led to the creation of Taglit-Birthright Israel. Taglit's ten-day educational trips have a consistent and strong impact on participants' Jewish identities and feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people. The challenge now for the Jewish community is to enable alumni to translate their Taglit-inspired feelings of Jewish peoplehood and identity into meaningful engagement with Jewish life.

This study aims to understand how post-college-age Taglit alumni relate to the programs, activities, and organizations geared toward Jewish young adults and identify strategies for better meeting their needs and aspirations for Jewish involvement. Drawing on survey, focus group, and interview data, the report develops a portrait of post-college Jewish young adult life in four of the largest Jewish communities in North America: Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Toronto.

### Findings

Jewish young adults, relative to other Jews, are organizationally and institutionally underserved. Especially in the post-college years, Jewish young adults often do not find

appealing and accessible ways to connect to Jewish life. Prompted in part by Taglit and affiliated organizations, this situation is changing. In the four cities studied, there has been a recent upsurge in the number and range of programs designed for young adults. In particular, each of the four cities has a partnership with Birthright Israel NEXT, a Taglit alumni association. In addition, each features educational, recreational, religious, and social action programs sponsored by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Federations, campus Hillels, and other non-profit organizations.

Alumni respondents to our survey reported modest levels of involvement with these programs. Just over half reported participating in such programs, most attending one or two. Most respondents characterized their level of involvement with the programs they had attended as “a little” rather than “a lot.” But these young adults also made clear, both in their responses to our survey and in focus groups, that they would like to be more involved in Jewish life. Their Taglit experience showed them how intellectually stimulating and personally meaningful Jewish engagement can be and created a thirst for the types of Jewish involvement they currently seek:

#### *Meeting Places*

Young adults participate in Jewish programs less than they would like because they suspect that they do not resemble their more involved peers and/or have few Jewish friends willing to accompany them. At the same time, many alumni would like to further develop their circle of Jewish friends and pursue some of their interests in a Jewish framework. They describe their ideal setting as fun, small-scale,

and one that allows them to have ongoing contact with peers in the context of interest-based activities. What they do not want is what they colloquially refer to as “meat markets” where the explicit focus is on meeting potential mates.

#### *Intellectual and Cultural Experiences*

With limited knowledge of the rituals and choreography of Jewish observance, most Taglit alumni anticipate feeling like outsiders, uncomfortable and incompetent, in Jewish religious settings. Although many are wary of programs that explicitly focus on religious observance, they are open to programs that offer intellectual avenues for exploring their Jewish identity and heritage as well as high-quality cultural events that are specifically geared toward their age group.

#### *Immersive and Israel-related Experiences*

Most alumni have strongly positive memories of their Taglit experience and look for ways to expand their connections to the culture and people of Israel. Many alumni want opportunities to learn conversational Hebrew. Many also seek immersive experiences including, but not limited to, travel.

### **Policy Implications**

Our findings suggest that years later most alumni continue to view Taglit as a watershed experience. It catalyzed their personal connection to the Jewish people, Israel, and their own Jewish identity. However, as post-

college-age young adults, they remain “tourists” in the Jewish communal world, sightseeing at a few programs but, overall, struggling to find ways to connect. Moreover, given their developmental stage of life, modest Jewish experiential background, and limited knowledge, most alumni are not yet ready to become full-fledged “citizens” of their Jewish communities. Accordingly, we propose an alternative model to tourism and citizenship for engaging Taglit alumni and their peers. Jewish communal strategy should encourage young adults to become “travelers” who take an active role exploring what it means for them to be Jewish in a self-directed process of discovery.

Relating to Taglit alumni and their peers as travelers will entail policies that equip young adults with the information, skills, motivation, and support needed to become active explorers of Jewish community and Jewish life. It will also entail further development of young adult programs and activities so that centers of Jewish life become rewarding sites for young adult exploration. Meaningful exploration during the young adult years is the best way to foster future citizenship. Toward this end, we offer the following suggestions:

*Travelers experience more when they share the trip.* Young adults need a network of friends with whom they can share their journey of Jewish discovery. Efforts should be made to foster the social network component of the Taglit experience by increasing the number of community-based trips for older participants and establishing more venues and

opportunities in home communities where alumni can get to know peers in an informal manner.

*Travelers need “maps” to know where they might go.*  
Many young adults complain that they simply do not know what is available in their local Jewish communities. An information-rich environment can be fostered through improved communication between programs, especially between Birthright Israel NEXT entities and other local venues for Jewish life. Improved communication between programs and the young adults they wish to reach is necessary as are navigation tools that provide up-to-date programming information.

*Travelers need choices in destination.*  
Programs and venues should serve as diverse entry points, emphasizing interest-based activities; small, intimate groups; and stimulating, challenging, and enriching content. Big parties and programs that encourage religious observance attract a few but also alienate many more and should not be the only or predominant forms of experience offered.

*Not every traveler is ready for the same trip.*  
Many young adults with comparatively weaker Jewish educational backgrounds seek and benefit from programs, activities, and learning opportunities provided by Jewish professionals and outreach workers. Programs should be established to provide occupational

frameworks and career opportunities for high-level educators, rabbis, and community builders, especially within the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements which are underrepresented relative to the Orthodox in the field of young adult outreach.

*Travelers can be guides to each other.*  
Taglit alumni want to develop their own young adult Jewish communities. Programs that empower young adults to “do-it-yourself” should be promoted. Even programs that are not peer initiated or led should include young adults in an advisory capacity. These are the very experiences and skills that will foster a deeper sense of ownership.

The vitality of Jewish life in the United States derives in no small measure from the willingness of Jewish communities to reinvent organizations and practices to adapt to changing circumstances. Today, during the critical years for identity formation and establishment of careers and families, Jewish young adults remain largely outside of the community’s institutions. Perhaps paradoxically, our best hope for one day bringing them back inside is to shift our paradigm of young adult engagement from developing established citizens to empowering young adults to embark on their own explorations of Jewish identity, life, and community.

The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and the development of religious and cultural identity.

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