



# A GENERATION WITH A BIRTHRIGHT

After bringing over 220,000 young Jews to Israel in ten years, it is safe to say that Taglit-Birthright Israel has made a deep social change in the Jewish world - turning Israel into a place that every Jewish youth wants to visit / Nir Librach

Ten years ago, if you had asked a Jewish youth what he thinks about Israel, he would probably have shrugged and mentioned something about camels. If asked whether he wanted to visit Israel, he would most likely have answered “No, thank you. I have better things to do with my time.”

That was ten years ago. Today, young Jews around the world are fighting over the chance to come to Israel. They feel that visiting Israel is part of being Jewish, and they envy those who have already been here. How did such a tremendous change come to pass? A major part of the answer can be found within the Taglit-Birthright Israel project, which this year celebrates a decade since its foundation.

## Discovering Israel

In ten years, Taglit-Birthright Israel has brought over 220,000 young Jews to Israel to experience a life-changing trip of ten days. The project is actually an educational trip, in which the participants receive round-trip airfare to Israel, lodging, touring and ground costs, and enables its participants to see and experience Israel’s different facets - old and

new, pluralistic and Zionist - and most of all, to experience its people. ‘Taglit’ in Hebrew means discovery, and that is exactly what these young people are experiencing - finding out about their identities and their Jewish roots, about Israel and Israelis.

“Taglit is a social change project,” says Professor Ada Spitzer, Taglit-Birthright Israel’s Vice President for Marketing. “It is a project that connects young Jews to their Jewish identity, to the Israeli state and to the Jewish people.” The long-term impact is profound, especially considering the fact that Taglit is meant for young people who are very distant from the Jewish community and from Judaism. Many of these young men and women don’t even know what the Western Wall is, or what ‘Shabbat Shalom’ means.

Yuli Edelstein, Israel’s Minister of Public Diplomacy and the Diaspora, is convinced that the ten-day program “has a long-term influence on the participants, especially those who weren’t previously affiliated in their countries of origin. Today, when Israel is often being demonized in the mass media and on college campuses, many young Jews report feeling helpless. They don’t know enough

about Israel and don’t know how to respond.” He believes that Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni are far better prepared when confronted with lies about Israel and they are much better equipped to present Israel’s case after having experienced the program.

## A waiting list to participate

Taglit-Birthright Israel has managed to change the way the Jewish communities see Israel, and one of its greatest achievements is that today the young Diaspora Jews really want to come to Israel. How does such a change in the conception of so many people happen in the short span of a decade?

Gidi Mark, Taglit-Birthright Israel’s CEO, admits that the project had to surmount many difficulties before it reached the level of impact it has today. When the program was launched ten years ago, it was as a start-up with many question marks. “Our methods were considered very innovative; the concepts of a ten-day trip, of a free market and of outsourcing were in contrast to what was conventional back then,” says Mark. At the time, Jewish communities reserved considerable amounts of money to fund trips to Israel, but the young generation chose not to come - simply because they didn’t want to.

All of this has changed today. In fact, now there is a waiting list of Jews who want to come to Israel with Taglit-Birthright Israel. Minister Yuli Edelstein is determined to →



Participants on a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip learn about their heritage and Jewish identity

← help eliminate that waiting list - “something I can’t live with,” he says - by slowly and gradually acting to meet the goal of 51,000 participants a year.

Taglit-Birthright Israel is an exceptional project in the way it is funded. It is based on a partnership between the Jewish philanthropists who created the project, the Israeli government and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. A unique group of philanthropists contributes unprecedented sums of money to the project. Dr. Miriam and Sheldon Adelson, for example, have already contributed 90 million dollars to the project - a sum that brought over 40,000 participants to Israel. Donors include a long list of philanthropists from the Jewish communities, such as Charles Bronfman, Daniel Och, Lynn Schusterman, the Jim Joseph Foundation and Michael Steinhart. These people, in partnership with the Israeli government, and together with the Jewish communities and the Federations, have revolutionized how the Jewish world sees Israel.

“Taglit-Birthright Israel is among my most important and successful investments and I know it will reap rewards for generations to come,” says Lynn Schusterman, whose family foundation is one of Taglit-Birthright Israel’s most generous supporters. “When I think about what Birthright has accomplished over the years, I am just amazed. I have heard firsthand from alumni all over the world that the trip changed their lives, that the ten days they spent with their peers in Israel strengthened their Jewish identity and their connection to Israel. It provides a truly transformational experience for young Jews - many of whom might otherwise not have been engaged in Jewish life - and it encourages them to go home and help build vibrant Jewish communities that are welcoming, meaningful and supportive of Israel,” remarks Schusterman.

### Encounters with soldiers

The ultimate goal of Taglit-Birthright Israel is to make the trip to Israel something every young Jew in the world would want to ex-

“In the United States, if someone wants to know if someone else is Jewish, they ask ‘Have you been on Birthright yet?’”

perience - a birthright - and according to the numbers we already see, that goal is not so far-fetched.

The effects of the trip on the youths are not short lived; they preserve their connections to Israel and to Judaism throughout their lives. A large number of the leaders of the young generation among the Jewish communities around the world are Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni, and many of them wouldn’t even have been involved in their Jewish communities before their trip to Israel. Furthermore, many Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni continue on to other Israel-related projects, such as MASA, Hillel or the NEXT project in the United States.

The impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel doesn’t end with the Diaspora Jews. One of the project’s important innovations is ‘*Mifgashim*’ (“encounters”), where Israeli soldiers spend five days with the group. The impact is profound. According to a study initiated by the IDF, the soldiers are filled with a sense of pride in their country and its people, and are exposed to the importance of keeping traditions and a Jewish way of life. They see the country through the eyes of others, and they understand how important the country is to them. These soldiers have a stronger motivation to remain in the army and to become officers after their experience accompanying Taglit-Birthright Israel participants.

The program is a major success not only by the standards of the participants’ strengthened Jewish identity, or the numerous connections to Israel that the Diaspora Jews develop; it also has a big impact on Israel itself, being a project that injects hundreds of millions of dollars to

the country’s economy. The young participants utilize hotels, restaurants, transportation, security guards and entertainment sites. As a result, Taglit-Birthright Israel has become an important force in Israel’s tourism industry, especially recently, during the difficult periods when few tourists visited the country. It is a twofold return on the investment: an effective way of both educating young Diaspora Jews and helping the Israeli economy.

### An unforgettable experience

“I would like to start this letter by telling you that I am so lucky, and so happy because, after reading my words, you will know how Birthright definitely changed my life, made it so much better, gave me such unforgettable moments and sensations, and that the chance of being part of it fills me, changes me, raises me.”

This is the first paragraph of a letter written by Sol Abramzon, a 24-year old who came to Israel with Taglit-Birthright Israel both as a participant and later as a guide. Her 20 days in Israel were “the happiest 20 days of my life. I love Israel more than any other place in the world,” she declares. Sol’s heartfelt words are only one example of many other letters from participants who feel the same about Taglit-Birthright Israel and the way it forever changed their lives.

These sentiments are a solid testimony to the importance of the project. Tens of thousands of friendships were created among the participants and thousands of youths keep in touch after they get back from the trip. Despite the fact that many are unaffiliated, more than 15,000 alumni now live in Israel in different frameworks - some made aliyah, some study at universities and some joined the IDF. While this is not one of the project’s goals, it is definitely a successful by-product.

If Taglit-Birthright Israel has made such a change in only ten years, how will the Jewish world look in another ten years? Every year there are 100,000 Jewish kids who are born and Taglit-Birthright Israel’s goal is that 51 percent of these young Jews will visit Israel through its trips by the age of 26.

The supporters of Taglit-Birthright Israel hope that it will become a norm for all young Jews to come to Israel, and that in the future the trip to Israel will be a ‘must’, something like a bar mitzvah - a part of one’s development as a Jewish person in the world. “The Taglit-Birthright Israel trip to Israel will become a veritable right of passage, a part of the Jewish circle of life,” predicts Gidi Mark, CEO of Taglit-Birthright Israel. ■

For more information about Taglit-Birthright Israel, please go to [www.birthrightisrael.com](http://www.birthrightisrael.com).