

‘I Wish They Had Birthright for Adults!’: The Effect of Birthright Israel on Jewish Parents’ Interest in Visiting Israel

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Abstract This study assesses the impact of the Taglit-Birthright Israel travel program on parents of participants—in particular, on the ways in which parents’ indirect exposure to their adult children’s experiences in the program affect those parents’ connections to Israel. Birthright Israel is a large-scale, successful, educational travel program that provides a gift of 10-day trips to Israel to Jewish young adults. A substantial body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of Birthright Israel in strengthening the Jewish identity of young diaspora Jews. Anecdotal evidence suggests that participants whose interest in Israel is enhanced by their Birthright Israel experience share what they have learned with their parents, and that this results in an increase in Israel interest for the parents. This study is the first to systematically analyze the program’s impact on such parents. Based on semi-structured interviews of Birthright Israel parents and on pre-trip and post-trip surveys of more than 1,500 parents, this paper shows that, for Jewish parents, the primary impact of Birthright Israel is an increased interest in visiting Israel and a reduced concern about the safety of Israel travel. The effect of the program was most pronounced for parents who had never been to Israel. Parental interest in trips like Birthright Israel presents an opportunity to reach the generation of American Jews during midlife in ways not previously considered.

Keywords Birthright Israel · Parents · Adult children · Israel travel · Baby boomers · Midlife · Emerging adults

The continued popularity of Taglit-Birthright Israel prompts questions about its full impact on diaspora Jewish communities. Birthright Israel, a free gift of a 10-day trip

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to Israel for Jewish young adults, has engaged more than 500,000 young adults from around the world in its programs (Taglit-Birthright Israel 2016), and there is clear evidence that the Birthright Israel experience can be life-changing for those who participate in it (Saxe and Chazan 2008; Saxe et al. 2011, 2012, 2014). Moreover, through the diffusion of information through the social networks of participants (Burt 1987; Christakis and Fowler 2009; Kadushin 2012), the program may have broader, indirect effects on other individuals who are closely connected to participants. Family members and friends may increase their feeling of connection to Israel or become more interested in Israel travel themselves after indirect exposure to the experience. If that is the case, then the communal impact of Birthright Israel is greater than has previously been estimated through prior evaluations of the program that have considered only the direct impact on Jewish young adults.

In order to provide what will be the first systematic evidence of the indirect impact of Birthright Israel, this study considers what can be called its “ripple effects” on parents of participants. With most Birthright Israel participants having two parents, and with the close relationships that young adults typically have with their parents (Fingerman et al. 2012; Lye 1996; Swartz et al. 2011), the Birthright Israel program can be understood as having touched the lives of close to 1 million adults in addition to the 500,000 participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Birthright Israel participants share what they have learned with their parents and that parents are extremely supportive of the program. Some parents have expressed interest in Birthright Israel-style trips for themselves; others are brought to Israel by their children. Despite this evidence, neither parents’ views of the program nor the extent to which Birthright Israel affects parents’ Jewish engagement and attitudes toward Israel have been studied systematically. This study assesses the effects of young adults’ participation in Birthright Israel on their parents’ attitudes about Israel. Analysis of these research questions will provide the first systematic evidence of the influence of Birthright Israel on the families of participants. Such evidence of impact would suggest that the influence of the Birthright Israel program reaches far beyond its original design and that it can have broad implications for the Jewish community as a whole.

Background

Birthright Israel has been shown to impact participants both in their short-term and long-term engagement with Israel and Judaism (Saxe and Chazan 2008; Saxe et al. 2011, 2012, 2014), including an increase in their attachment to the Jewish community and to Israel. An ongoing evaluation effort conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University compared program participants with those who registered but did not participate. Because the demand exceeded the trip’s capacity, participants were chosen essentially by lottery, creating a quasi-experiment and natural comparison group through which program effects could be evaluated. Short-term and long-term longitudinal studies (Saxe et al. 2011, 2012) demonstrate that participants report a stronger connection to Judaism

and the Jewish people. In addition, participants are more likely to marry someone Jewish and to raise their children as Jewish. Overall, Birthright Israel participants have been shown to feel more connected to Israel than non-participants (Saxe et al. 2013).

In general, Israel travel experiences are associated with stronger connections to Israel (Chazan 1997; Mittelberg 1992), but it is also evident that attachment to Israel is not contingent upon prior Israel visits. Among all American Jewish adults, 69% feel somewhat or very attached to Israel and 43% have been to Israel (Pew Research Center 2013). Among Jews of the Birthright Israel generation, ages 18 to 29, 44% have been to Israel and 60% are very or somewhat attached to Israel. In contrast, among Jews ages 50 to 64 (roughly the ages of the parents of the Birthright Israel generation), 41% have been to Israel and 74% are very or somewhat attached to Israel.

The younger generation has had fewer years to travel to Israel, but more of them have done so than their parents. This fact can be attributed, at least in part, to Birthright Israel; among Jewish adults ages 18 to 29 who have gone to Israel, almost half (48%) traveled to Israel with Birthright Israel (Pew Research Center 2013).

Impact of Jewish Social Networks

Social networks have been shown to be effective pathways for disseminating information, providing emotional support, and influencing attitudes and behavior (Burt 1987; Christakis and Fowler 2009; Granovetter 1973; Kadushin 2012). For example, the spread of a range of characteristics, behaviors, and emotions, such as obesity, smoking, happiness, and loneliness, has been explained as evidence of social contagion through social networks (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 2012). Kinship networks, including family relationships, constitute the closest and most basic social networks and, consequently, can be expected to serve to transmit information and attitudes (Dunbar and Spors 1995). In the case of parents and adult children who frequently live apart and have different peer and social groups, the relationship can serve as an important bridge connecting members of different networks who would otherwise have little contact with one another.

Within the Jewish community, social networks provide a framework for understanding the structure of the community and connections between its members (Cohen and Veinstein 2011; Geffen 2002; Kadushin 2011; Kadushin and Kotler-Berkowitz 2006). Among Jews, embeddedness in social networks is associated with increased Jewish engagement, including religious observance, philanthropic giving, and emotional attachment to Israel (Kadushin and Kotler-Berkowitz 2006). Having Jewish friends in childhood is a strong predictor of adult Jewish identity (Cohen and Veinstein 2011). Friendship and neighborhood networks serve both to share information and to reinforce communal participation (Geffen 2002). One explanation for this effect is homophily, the tendency to associate with like-minded individuals (McPherson et al. 2001), which can draw highly engaged Jews together. Alternatively, Jewish social networks can be considered the means for transmitting Jewish "ethnic capital" (Phillips and Fishman 2006), defined as "knowledge of and skill at the cultural practices of a given ethnicity" (488). As an example of such

transmission, Geffen (2002) discusses the spread of information about adult education programs through a community via word-of-mouth “bandwagon effects”—that is, the transmission of information to otherwise unaffiliated Jews through social networks.

However, surprisingly little research has been conducted on ways to harness this mechanism in order to maximize the effect of social programs (Winett et al. 1995). Market researchers utilize social network theory in their efforts to generate “buzz” and to develop “viral” marketing through word-of-mouth (Aral and Walker 2011); yet, by and large, educational and public health programs that aim to enhance well-being are designed to target specific populations without accounting for the possibility that the program’s effects will be shared through the social networks of program participants. Social-network effects of program outcomes can leverage a targeted program intervention to generate large-scale social change across an organization, a community, or a society as a whole. Awareness of social-network effects can affect program design in two ways: First, programs can be designed explicitly to encourage social network diffusion; and, second, a broader range of outcomes can be considered for program evaluation. In the case of Birthright Israel, this study examines the potential of the program to diffuse Jewish ethnic capital through social networks.

Jewish Adults at Midlife

Connection to Israel is one aspect of Jewish identity, and it is highly correlated with other markers of Jewish engagement, such as Jewish education and religious denomination. Although childhood Jewish education and experiences are strong predictors of adult Jewish identity (Cohen and Kotler-Berkowitz 2004; Dashefsky and Lebson 2002; Mittelberg 1992), adult Jewish identity is not solely a product of childhood experiences. The Pew Research Center’s 2013 study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Pew Research Center 2013), reported high rates of denominational switching from childhood to adulthood. For example, among adult Jews ages 50 to 64 who were raised Orthodox, only 22% remained Orthodox as adults. The American Jewish Identity Survey 2001 (Mayer et al. 2001) reported that 44% of Jewish adults became “more of a believer in God” during their lifetime compared to the 18% who said that their beliefs became weaker.

Roof (1993) refers to baby boomers as “a generation of seekers” and reports that spiritual development continues throughout the life course, particularly after middle age (Roof 1993; Wink and Dillon 2002). This pattern has been identified within the Jewish world, as well; Horowitz (2003) and Cohen and Eisen (2000) have shown that Jewish identity evolves and fluctuates throughout the adult life course as part of an ongoing search for meaning. In 2000, one quarter (24%) of Jewish adults participated in some form of adult Jewish education (United Jewish Communities 2003). It is likely that those individuals include “spiritual seekers who have turned or returned to Judaism at times of life transition or personal soul searching” (Grant and Schuster 2011, 672).

There are several reasons why the midlife period is associated with spiritual seeking. From a developmental perspective, the midlife period is the life stage that

Erikson (1950) described as a period of “generativity.” It entails a search for meaning and the desire to make one’s mark on the world. Thus, rather than being a period of stagnation and fixed attitudes, midlife can be viewed as a turning point with a particular openness to learning and changing. During midlife, some adults undertake a spiritual exploration during which previously held ideologies may be examined and questioned—an exploration often prompted by a crisis or a life transition (Kiesling et al. 2006). For parents, this search for identity and meaning is prompted, at least in part, by their children’s transition to emerging adulthood (Pruchno et al. 1996). Parents can begin a period of reevaluation and self-exploration as they examine their own lives, values, successes, and failures in light of their children’s successes and failures. As the parental role becomes less salient, “parents strain to redefine their basic assumptions about the self, to find new outlets, and to alter ways of relating to their children. Thus, it is the search for new roles that causes parents to reevaluate their sense of themselves” (Pruchno et al. 1996, 564).

The parents of the present generation of young adults, many of whom are baby boomers, are part of an active, healthy, and wealthy generation (Lipschultz et al. 2007) and, like their adult children, they may be a receptive and interested target for programs that enhance Jewish identity and engagement. Despite occasional calls for programming targeted to Jewish baby boomers, the needs of this growing segment of the population have not been fully addressed. According to David Elcott, co-director of a project targeted toward Jewish boomers, “boomers should be cultivated not only for their financial support in sustaining Jewish causes, but because, as role models for their children and grandchildren, their affiliation with the community is vital” (Rosenblatt 2014). Indeed, a study of the children of intermarriage (Sasson et al. 2015) found that a close relationship with Jewish grandparents had a positive impact on Jewish identity and behavior during young adulthood. A study of Jewish empty nesters conducted by the UJA-Federation of New York (Elcott and Himmelfarb 2016) sought to examine ways to retain this group as active participants within synagogue life.

Despite research indicating that the Jewish identity of adults can change, it is rare for adults to be the target of educational interventions. This study is one of the few to consider the Jewish engagement of midlife Jewish adults. Jewish parents, like their adult children, are likely to be receptive to an evolving engagement with Judaism and Israel. The indirect effects of Birthright Israel serve as one previously unexplored mechanism through which Jewish adults in midlife can be reached by the Jewish community. To the extent that parents are unengaged with Jewish life, reaching parents through their children may prove to be effective.

Reverse Socialization: Transmission of Jewish Identity from Children to Parents

Jewish identity is typically thought of as being transmitted from parents to children through a process of socialization, which includes modeling and education. In some cases, however, the direction of influence is reversed in a process called “reverse socialization,” and the Jewish educational experiences of children influence their parents (Bar-Tal and Saxe 2006; Fishman 2007; Leviton 2007; Pinkenson 1987;

Pomson and Schnorr 2008). These studies, however, have been conducted on children and adolescents who reside with their parents. In such cases, the behavior of parents is visible to their children, and vice versa. Frequently, parents are obligated to provide instrumental support (such as providing transportation to religious school or preparing special foods for holidays) in order to enable children to participate in Jewish life or to enable parents to participate in adult learning in order to support and serve as a role model for their children (Kress 2011). The current study advances this question by examining this effect between young adult children and their parents.

Because of the close relationship between parents and young adult children, the activities in which adult children engage have the potential to influence parents through indirect exposure to new ideas and experiences. The relationship between parents and young adult children has changed dramatically during the past decades (Swartz 2009). The ubiquity of cell phones has enabled frequent contact by phone, email, video chats, and social media. The present generation of millennial young adults, having grown up with high levels of contact with their parents, continue to be in frequent communication during college and beyond (Arnett and Schwab 2012). With the delayed age of marriage for many young adults, relationships with parents provide closeness and stability through their 20s and 30s. Compared to relationships during adolescence, relationships with parents appear to improve during young adulthood (referred to as “emerging adulthood”) (Arnett and Schwab 2012; Swartz 2009). During this life transition from adolescence to full adulthood, most children and parents report close relations, frequent contact, mutual understanding, and greater respect for one another (Doherty and Feeney 2004; Thornton et al. 1995). Emerging adults become more capable of appreciating their parents and understanding their perspective. Parents and adult children begin to relate to one another as “adults, as friends, as equals, or at least as near-equals” (Arnett 2004).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the Impact of Birthright Israel on Connection to Israel Among Parents of the Participants?

The overarching goal of this study is to measure the impact of Birthright Israel on parents of participants. Just as one of the stated goals of Birthright Israel is to “strengthen ... connection with Israel and its people” (Taglit-Birthright Israel 2016), so too, the network effects of Birthright Israel would be expected to increase parents’ knowledge and attitudes about Israel, connection to Israel, and interest in visiting Israel. Despite a variety of definitions of Jewish identity that have been formulated by scholars, attachment toward Israel represents a common theme in most definitions (Himmelfarb 1980; Rebhun 2004). Connections to Israel and Zionism are components of both religious and ethnic Jewish identity (Wertheimer 2008), and the personal experience of Israel travel has been one of the primary means for strengthening such attachments (Ament 2005; Chazan 1997; Mittelberg

1994, 2007). Consequently, the primary outcomes that are considered in the present study focus on this aspect of Jewish identity.

Research Question 2: Under What Conditions is the Impact of the Trip on Parents Maximized?

The study also seeks to understand the background factors that are associated with impact on parents. I considered two types of factors. First, who are least and most affected by each of these outcome measures? One possibility is that parents who are least connected with Israel will be most affected by the trip because they have the most room for growth. If their child's experience is their first close encounter with someone who has been to Israel, they are likely to learn more from that experience than if they are already familiar with Israel travel. On the other hand, parents who have never been to Israel might simply be uninterested and resistant to influence. If that is the case, these parents would be least likely to change their attitudes simply through exposure to their child's experience.

Second, the study seeks to ascertain the mechanism that leads to attitude change. It could be that parents indirectly become more aware of Israel travel as a result of their child's Birthright Israel trip, and this awareness induces interest. Conversely, the change could be the result of active influence on the part of the children, particularly through the children's encouragement of parental Israel travel.

Answers to the questions presented here are important, both in understanding the full impact of Birthright Israel and for developing recommendations to enhance that effect. More generally, this study can be used as a model to fully evaluate educational interventions and the ways in which those impacts are disseminated throughout a community.

Data

The data for this study were collected from pre-trip and post-trip surveys of parents of Birthright Israel registrants for the winter 2013–14 trip. Survey topics included parents' expectations of and satisfaction with the Birthright Israel experience, parents' own Jewish background and current Jewish behavior and attitudes, and parents' own relationships with their adult children. In addition, the survey focused on parents' prior trips to Israel and plans for future Israel travel.

To recruit survey participants, I sent email invitations to all mothers for whom email addresses were provided at the time of registration ($n = 15,621$), with up to three email reminders. Survey invitations were addressed to mothers and used the mothers' email addresses when both parents' emails were listed. Only one parent within each household was selected, because having multiple respondents within a single household would have required specialized analytical techniques. Out of concern that the response would be insufficient to account for differences by gender, mothers were selected as the focus of the study. Mothers typically have closer relationships and more contact with their children (Lawton et al. 1994). Furthermore, women generally have stronger Jewish identities than do men

(Hartman and Hartman 2009), although, notably for this study, their attachment to Israel tends to be weaker than that of men. A small number of fathers completed the survey and their responses were included.

In the period between November of 2013 and January of 2014, 4,924 parents completed pre-trip surveys, yielding a response rate of 33% (response rate 2 as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research 2016). In May of 2014,¹ 2,748 parents completed post-trip surveys, yielding a response rate of 19%. A total of 1,899 parents completed both pre-trip and post-trip surveys.

After data collection, responses were weighted using post-stratification weights to adjust the sample to reflect known characteristics of the entire registration database, including parental religion (Jewish or non-Jewish), parental denomination, whether participants had traveled to Israel prior to Birthright Israel registration, and whether or not the children went on a Birthright Israel trip after registration. Design weights (i.e., weights based on probability of selection and probability of response) were not used, since all participants in the sample had equal probabilities for both. After cleaning the data, I excluded a small number of cases from analysis, either because the pre-trip survey was completed after the start of the trip or the pre-trip and post-trip surveys appeared to have been completed by different adults.

In order to identify the impact of participating in the trip, the analysis in this paper is limited to Jewish parents who completed both the pre-trip and post-trip surveys ($n = 1,516$). Demographic data about survey respondents is shown in Table 1 and compares parents of trip participants with parents of those who registered but did not participate. Demographic characteristics of the two groups are similar.

In order to assess the degree to which the results of this study can be generalized to the American Jewish community at large, I conducted a set of comparisons on the weighted sample and the relevant attributes that were measured in the Pew study (Pew Research Center 2013) for the most comparable age group, women ages 50 to 64. As shown in the last column of Table 3.1, women in the sample are more likely to be married, to have a Jewish spouse, and to have been to Israel than is the case for the American Jewish population as a whole. The denominational breakdown is similar, except that the sample has a slightly higher proportion of respondents who have no specific denomination.

Survey respondents were more likely to have been to Israel than is the case among the comparable Jewish population. Parents who are more connected to Israel may be more motivated than others to complete the survey. Most analyses in this paper, therefore, include past trips to Israel as a predictive factor. Since past trips to Israel are highly correlated with denomination, the inclusion of this variable in analysis controls for slight differences in the denominational composition of each group.

¹ Data collection was completed prior to the start of Operation Protective Edge, the Israel-Gaza conflict that began in June of 2014.

Table 1 Description of sample and comparison to national demographics

	Participant parents		Non-participant parents		Female, ages 50-64 (Pew)
	Weighted %	n	Weighted %	n	%
Total		1,277		239	
Female	95	1,226	96	231	100
Married	87	1,107	82	199	67
Jewish spouse	80	842	76	148	49
Been to Israel	56	703	54	129	39
<i>Denomination</i>					
Reform	40	547	44	97	43
Conservative	22	299	23	60	21
Orthodox	7	43	2	4	7
Just Jewish	28	357	30	77	24
Other	2	28	0	1	5

Method

Research question 1, the assessment of the impact on parents, utilizes two methods of analysis. First, for parents of trip participants, I present the parents' self-reported perception of impact. Qualitative comments, provided in response to open-ended survey questions, supplement the descriptive statistics.

For a more rigorous analysis of research question 1, I utilize parents of non-participants as a control group to assess changes in interest in Israel travel and Israel attachment among parents of participants from the same pre-trip to post-trip period. This analysis utilizes a difference-in-differences approach implemented through a logistic regression. Difference-in-difference analysis compares the magnitude of changes in measures of interest from the time of pre-treatment to the time of post-treatment in both a treatment and a control group. In this case, the treatment is the child's Birthright Israel experience. This analysis technique estimates the difference or change over time for each group, and then evaluates the difference between those two differences for statistical significance. Because this method analyzes the magnitude of the change over time (by subtracting the level at time two from the level at time one), it accounts for non-equivalent starting values in the two groups. In other words, even if pre-trip values are different between the two groups, the change over time in the two groups would be expected to be the same if there is no treatment effect. If there is a treatment effect, the difference in differences is expected to be significant. Because differential impacts are expected based on past travel to Israel, the models used to analyze the difference in differences control for this characteristic.

Research question 2 utilizes multivariate models to determine the background factors that predict attitude change. In this analysis, the self-reported outcomes that were found to be significant in research question 1 are modeled as a result of a

potential causal mechanism for the change—that is, the degree to which parents report that their children discussed the trip with them and encouraged them to visit Israel after the trip. This analysis tests the hypothesis that the more trip participants discuss the trip with their parents and encourage their parents to visit Israel, the greater the impact will be on the parents. In addition, higher trip satisfaction is expected to result in more impact. A second goal of this analysis is to determine which characteristics of parents will increase the likelihood of a trip effect. For this analysis, background characteristics of parents are incorporated into the models of trip effects.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the Impact of Birthright Israel on Connection to Israel Among the Parents of Participants?

Descriptive Statistics

Parents whose children went on a Birthright Israel trip responded to questions about their perceptions of its impact on their own attitudes about Israel and interest in visiting Israel (Table 2). The key outcome measures the degree to which the trip affected the parents' own knowledge or attitudes about Israel and their interest in visiting Israel. In addition, parents indicated their likelihood of participating in a Birthright Israel-style trip.²

Overall, well over half of Jewish parents (61%) became more interested in visiting Israel after their child's visit and about one third (34%) of parents felt that Birthright Israel affected their knowledge or attitudes about Israel somewhat or greatly. Note that this question does not include the content or direction of that change; it simply indicates that a change occurred. Higher proportions of parents who had never been to Israel were affected by the trip, with more than three quarters (78%) more interested in a visit and almost half (48%) reporting changes in knowledge and attitudes about Israel.

In open-ended questions, parents had the opportunity to explain what they had learned about Israel through exposure to their children's experiences:

"I think having someone so close to me that had been on the ground there to give me firsthand insight was the best thing for me. [I have] a deeper understanding into some of the issues."

"It seemed much safer than I first thought. Religion was incorporated in [an] easy way without force."

Parents explained why new information they had gained from their children led to an increased interest in their own trip:

² Exact question wording is provided in the [Appendix](#).

Table 2 Self-reported impact by past Israel travel

Impact measure	% of overall	Past trip to Israel	
		% of never been	% of been to Israel
<i>Change in interest in visit (n = 1,207)***</i>			
Greatly decreased	1	1	1
Somewhat decreased	1	1	1
No change	37	20	51
Somewhat increased	39	45	33
Greatly increased	22	33	14
<i>Affect your knowledge or attitudes (n = 1,226)***</i>			
Not at all	43	27	55
A little	23	24	22
Somewhat	24	33	17
Very much	10	15	6
<i>Likely to go on Birthright Israel-style trip (n = 1,231)***</i>			
Very unlikely	9	5	11
Unlikely	10	6	13
Undecided	24	24	25
Likely	24	28	21
Very likely	33	37	30

*** Differences between groups are significant, $p < 0.001$

“I have never been to Israel, but both my kids and my husband have been. I was afraid to go due to safety concerns, but have decided that if they can do it, then I should be able to do it also!”

“It made us more comfortable about and interested in potentially visiting ourselves. We got a good introduction to the wide range of things and people there.”

“I thought the politics in modern Israel is very interesting. I have never been to Israel so I enjoyed all of the things he told me and now am eager to take a trip myself.”

Interest among parents in a Birthright Israel-style trip to Israel is widespread; more than half (57%) of parents indicated that they would be likely or very likely to participate in a Birthright Israel-style trip, including 65% of Jewish parents who had never been to Israel. Based on parental comments, it appears that both the cost and the structure of the trips were components of what they expected from a Birthright Israel-style trip:

“I’d love to go, would feel more comfortable with experienced, organized support. It would also be great if there were a way to do it that wasn’t as expensive.”

“It made me much more open to visiting myself. I wish there was a trip for parents who have never been. Both my husband and I are over 50, and neither of us has been to Israel.”

“Great trip for her. I wish they had Birthright for adults 'cause I have never been to Israel!”

Control Group Comparison Using Difference-in-Differences

This section compares changes in interest in visiting Israel among Jewish parents whose children went on Birthright Israel and Jewish parents whose children registered but did not go on the trip. Comparison to this control group provides validation that any changes observed in parents were likely because of participation in Birthright Israel rather than other external factors that might have affected all parents of Jewish young adults during that time period.

The measures used to assess change include several items: the likelihood of visiting Israel ever or in the coming three years, a connection to Israel, believing that all Jews should visit Israel, concern about safety and security in Israel, and a preference for visiting countries other than Israel.³ Pre-trip and post-trip values are shown in Table 3.

The bivariate data shown in Table 3, however, is insufficient to determine whether the change from before the trip to after the trip is different for parents of participants and non-participants. The starting values of the group differ, as does the magnitude of change. For those reasons, an analytical approach called “difference-in-differences” is implemented.

The analytical approach utilized ordered logistic regressions in order to compare the change in outcomes for the participant and non-participant parents (Table 4). Ordered logistic regressions are used to implement the difference-in-differences analysis as outlined in the method section. In these models, the variable “BRI” (Birthright Israel) is set to 1 if the child went on Birthright Israel (the treatment group) and 0 otherwise (the control group). Included in this analysis is a control for whether the parents had been to Israel in the past or not, because past Israel travel was the main determinant of impact (as illustrated in Table 2).

To interpret the models in Table 4, the coefficients of the BRI variable should be understood as the Birthright Israel impact, controlling for pre-trip values and the parents’ past Israel travel. When the coefficients are statistically significant, it means that there is a difference between the change over time in attitudes among the participant parents in comparison to the non-participant parents. Coefficients are reported as odds ratios, so values greater than 1 indicate a more positive outcome and values less than 1 indicate a negative outcome. Because pre-trip values are included in these models, model outcomes should be interpreted as the magnitude and direction of change from the pre-trip to the post-trip period, not the actual post-trip value.

³ Exact wording of questions appears in the [Appendix](#). The negatively worded questions (concern about safety and security, preference for visiting other countries) are reverse coded for analysis, so that higher numbers always denote more favorable views of Israel.

Table 3 Pre-trip and post-trip outcome measures, descriptive statistics

	Parents of non-participants		Parents of participants	
	Pre-trip %	Post-trip %	Pre-trip %	Post-trip %
<i>Likely to visit Israel ever</i>				
Very unlikely	5	5	5	4
Unlikely	8	6	6	4
Possible	41	35	32	27
Likely	25	27	30	30
Very likely	14	17	20	23
Planned	8	10	7	12
<i>Likely to visit next 3 years</i>				
Very unlikely	20	15	16	13
Unlikely	27	27	23	21
Possible	33	31	39	37
Likely	9	11	10	10
Very likely	4	4	6	7
Planned	8	11	7	13
<i>Would rather visit other country (REVERSED)</i>				
Strongly agree	5	7	3	3
Agree	36	35	28	25
Disagree	47	46	53	55
Strongly disagree	13	12	16	17
<i>Safety/ security are problems in Israel (REVERSED)</i>				
Strongly agree	8	7	4	4
Agree	42	39	41	34
Disagree	42	44	44	46
Strongly disagree	7	10	11	17
<i>Feel connected to Israel</i>				
Not at all	12	5	5	3
A little	11	20	18	17
Somewhat	47	38	35	35
Very much	31	36	42	45
<i>All Jews should visit Israel</i>				
Strongly disagree	3	3	2	1
Disagree	14	13	13	10
Agree	50	48	45	45
Strongly agree	33	36	41	44

Results of this analysis indicate that Birthright Israel parents became more interested in visiting Israel and less concerned about safety and security following their children’s Birthright Israel experience. After the trip, parents of participants were *less* likely to agree with the statements, “I would rather visit other countries

Table 4 Impact of Birthright Israel (BRI) on changes in Israel attitudes (ordered logistic regression, odds ratios)

Variable	Visit likely ever	Visit next 3 years	Other country (REVERSED)	Safety/ security (REVERSED)	Feel connected	All Jews should visit
BRI	1.543**	1.267	1.686**	1.458*	1.107	1.314
Been to Israel	1.217	1.341*	0.969	1.891***	1.948***	1.516**
<i>Statistics</i>						
N	1277	1277	1368	1416	1435	1420
Pseudo R ²	0.179	0.227	0.211	0.191	0.314	0.248

Pre-trip values and constants are not shown in the table

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

than visit Israel” and “Safety and security are problems.” In contrast, there was no measurable Birthright Israel impact on short-term plans to travel to Israel.

There was also no significant Birthright Israel impact on abstract attitudes toward Israel, including the level of parents’ connection to Israel and their agreement with the statement, “Ideally, all Jews should visit Israel.” As shown in Table 3, these abstract measures of Israel attachment were very high at the pre-trip period, so there was little room for growth in these measures for either group.

Contrary to expectations, those parents who had been to Israel before showed a greater increase in their connection to Israel, their short-term plans to visit, and the strength of their agreement that all Jews should visit Israel, along with a decreased concern about security. This was the case regardless of whether their child went on a Birthright Israel trip or not, suggesting that those changes were influenced by events in Israel at the time rather than a result of their child’s experience there.

One limitation of this method arises from the 4- or 6-point measurement scale. Small gradations cannot be measured, and ceiling effects prevent any gains at all among those who start at the highest level. Including the pre-trip value in these models controls for the fact that the magnitude and direction of change on each scale depends upon the starting point. That is, for example, someone who starts at the highest point (4 or 6) can only stay the same or decline; someone at the lowest point (1) can only stay the same or increase.

Research Question 2: Under What Conditions is the Trip Impact on Parents Maximized?

The analysis next addresses the question of which parents are more or less affected by their children’s Birthright Israel experience and how those effects were transmitted from children to parents. The first set of survey measures relate to exposure to Birthright Israel. Two measures indicated how the trip participants influenced their parents directly: the extent to which parents discussed the trip with their children, and the extent to which the children encouraged their parents to visit

Table 5 Parental reports of post-trip discussions (n = 1,237) and encouragement (n = 1,152)

Response	Weighted %
<i>DISCUSSION: discussed trip</i>	
None	<1%
A little	4%
Somewhat	28%
Very much	68%
<i>ENCOURAGEMENT: children encouraged parents</i>	
None	29%
A little	13%
Somewhat	22%
Very much	36%

Israel after the program (Table 5).⁴ Nearly all parents discussed the trip with their children, and 71% were encouraged by their children to visit Israel themselves.

Parents would be expected to be more influenced by better trips, so parental satisfaction was included in the model. If parents had another child who had already gone on the trip, parents would be expected to be less influenced by the current trip; therefore, the model included an indicator of whether another child had gone on Birthright Israel.

A set of parental characteristics was used to assess the differential impact of parents’ Jewish background on the impact of the trip. Parents with a strong Jewish identity and connection to Israel would be expected to experience less change as a result of their child’s trip, because they have less to learn from their children. The parental characteristics included a scale (ranging from 3 to 12) of the importance of Judaism, past travel to Israel, marital status, religion of spouse, and Jewish denomination.

The results of the analysis are shown in Table 6. The first three columns of Table 6 show models of the three pre/post measures that were found to have significant Birthright Israel effects in Table 4. The last three columns in Table 6 are models of the changes that parents reported.

The most important mechanism for increasing parents’ interest in visiting Israel was through their children’s direct encouragement of them after the trip. In the pre/post measure, parents whose children “very much” encouraged them to visit Israel were more than three times as likely to become more interested in visiting Israel than those who had received no such encouragement. Similarly, for parents’ self-reported change in interest, parents whose children very much encouraged them were more than seven times as likely to become more interested in visiting Israel than those whose children did not encourage them.

General post-trip discussions had little separate effect on changes in parental attitudes except for the pre/post change in trip likelihood. The anomalous finding that trip discussions and trip satisfaction *decrease* the likelihood of travel to Israel may be due to the strong effect of trip encouragement that is also included in the model. Taken together, this model shows that trip discussions and trip satisfaction in the absence of trip

⁴ Exact question wording is provided in the [Appendix](#).

Table 6 Models of attitude change on parents and trip characteristics (ordered logistic regression, odds ratios)

Variable	Pre/post change		Self-report			
	Visit likely ever	Rather visit other country (REV)	Safety/ security (REV)	ChgInterest in visiting	Affect Knowledge/ attitudes	Interest in BRI for adults
<i>Parent Exposure to Birthright Israel</i>						
Discussed trip (Not at all/little omitted)						
Somewhat	0.463**	1.068	1.565	1.694	1.062	0.9
Very much	0.526*	1.086	1.604	1.561	1.581	0.965
Encouraged (Not at all omitted)						
A little	1.397	1.084	0.643*	1.988***	1.763**	1.128
Somewhat	2.130***	1.433	1.129	2.242***	3.501***	1.458*
Very much	3.170***	2.600***	0.948	7.170***	4.484***	2.849***
<i>Trip satisfaction (dissatisfied omitted)</i>						
Somewhat satisfied	0.729	0.877	0.861	0.672	0.599	0.876
Extremely satisfied	0.661*	1.426	1.33	1.502	1.03	1.207
Another child on Birthright Israel	1.061	1.173	1.454*	0.905	0.652**	1.16
<i>Parent characteristics</i>						
Jewish importance scale	1.069	1.189***	1.067	1.043	0.971	1.069*
<i>Past travel to Israel (none omitted)</i>						
One trip	1.216	0.649*	1.457*	0.486***	0.640**	0.85
Two or more trips	1.926***	1.051	2.512***	0.348***	0.373***	0.543***
<i>Marital status (married to J spouse omitted)</i>						
Single	1.04	1.512	1.840**	1.583	0.993	1.700**
Non-Jewish spouse	0.802	1.308	0.861	1.990***	1.133	1.148
<i>Denomination (none/just Jewish omitted)</i>						
Just Jewish/other	0.953	0.826	1.076	1.031	1.053	1.201
Conservative	1.071	1.342	1.415	1.435	1.061	1.12

Table 6 continued

Variable	Pre/post change			Self-report		
	Visit likely ever	Rather visit other country (REV)	Safety/ security (REV)	ChgInterest in visiting	Affect Knowledge/ attitudes	Interest in BRI for adults
Orthodox	1.349	2.258*	0.854	1.902	1.254	1.962
N	963	1049	1075	1078	1101	1098
Pseudo R ²	0.205	0.257	0.2	0.137	0.094	0.038

Pre-trip values and constants have been omitted from the table

* p<0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

encouragement had a negative effect. Another possible explanation might result from ceiling effects. Parents who discussed the trip the most or who were most satisfied with the trip changed their attitudes little as a result, because they were already most likely to visit Israel — a stance that could not grow any stronger.

The only measure that was minimally affected by the encouragement of the children was the safety and security item. A possible explanation is that changes in concern about security came through other means than post-trip conversations with the children—for example, through following the news during the trip or discussing Israel travel with peers.

Regarding parental characteristics, parents who scored high on the Jewish importance scale grew stronger in their preference for visiting Israel and in their interest in a Birthright Israel-style trip. Intermarried parents were almost twice as likely to self-report a greater interest in visiting Israel after the trip. There were inconsistent findings, however, regarding the impact of previous Israel travel on the pre/post measures and the self-reported measures. In the pre/post measure, parents who had been to Israel two or more times increased their interest in future travel *more* than parents who had never been to Israel. In contrast, in the self-reported measure, parents who had been to Israel before reported *less* of a change than parents who had never been to Israel. Inconsistencies between pre/post and self-reported impacts could be a result of the interaction with the trip discussions and encouragement. Trip participants whose parents had never been to Israel were more likely to encourage their parents to go than those with parents who had already been to Israel (analysis not shown).

Understanding the Impact of Child Encouragement

Because of the complexity of the models in Table 6, the results are better understood through exemplar cases. To illustrate the impact of child encouragement on parental attitudes, Figures 1 and 2 show, for two exemplar cases, the change in

Fig. 1 Post-trip likelihood of visiting Israel after child encouragement: Parent who is intermarried, has no denomination, never visited Israel and was unlikely to visit

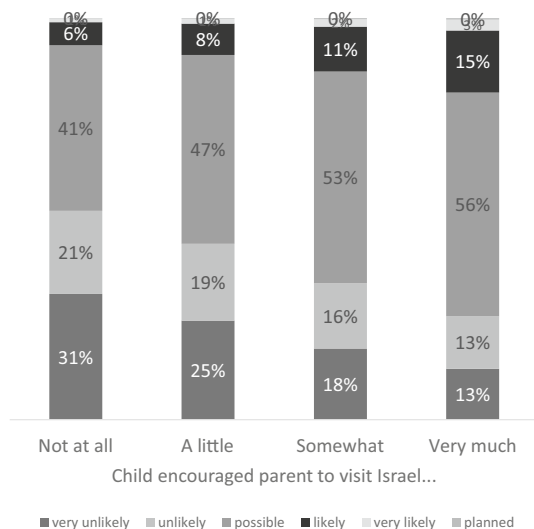
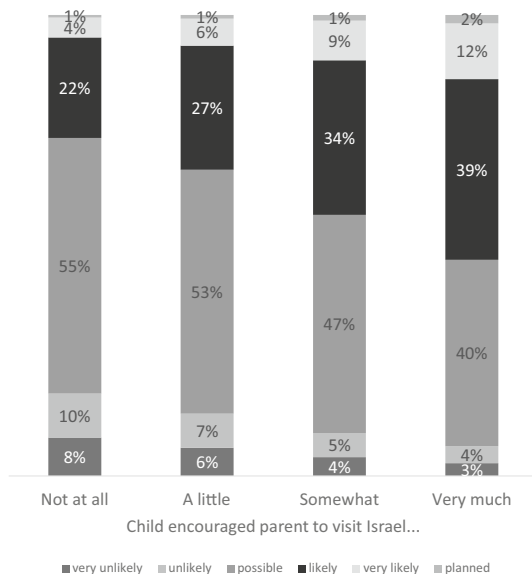


Fig. 2 Post-trip likelihood of visiting Israel after child encouragement: Parent who is inmarried, Reform, who visited Israel once and said that a future trip is possible



the predicted likelihood of parental interest in visiting Israel, based on the degree to which their children encouraged them to visit Israel after the trip. Figure 1 is based on the case of an intermarried parent with no denomination who has never been to Israel. If her pre-trip response was “unlikely,” her post-trip response is predicted to be “possible,” “likely,” “very likely,” or “planned” in 74% of cases if her child very much encourages her; if her child does not encourage her at all, her post-trip response is expected to increase in 48% of cases. Figure 2 uses the case of an in married Reform parent who has been to Israel once before. If her pre-trip response was “possible,” her post-trip response is predicted to increase to “likely,” “very likely,” or “planned” in 53% of cases if her child very much encourages her; if the child does not encourage her at all, her post-trip response is expected to increase in 27% of cases.

Discussion

Birthright Israel is one of the most far-reaching recent innovations in Jewish engagement, having served more than five hundred thousand Jewish young adults in the course of its 15-year existence (Taglit-Birthright Israel 2016). To the extent that it has become a “normative” experience in the life of the present generation of Jewish young adults, questions emerge about the broader impact of the program on the community at large. The present study sought to address one component of this broader impact by considering the indirect effects of the program on a group that is closely connected to participants, but that is ineligible to participate: their parents. In general, parents are closely connected to their adult children (Fingerman et al. 2012; Lye 1996; Swartz 2009) making parents subject to direct influence by their

children as well as indirect exposure to their children's experiences. Evidence of indirect impact on parents has important implications for the Birthright Israel program and for the American Jewish community as Jewish community leaders consider how to engage Jews of all ages and, in particular, how to enhance support for and connection to Israel.

A previously unmeasured component of Birthright Israel's impact is its success in activating or increasing parental interest in visiting Israel. Although travel decisions are complex and interest in a trip is by no means a guarantee that the trip will take place (Gnoth 1997; McCabe 2000), increased interest at least suggests that parents would be receptive to considering a trip if the right opportunity were available. Looking at parents' self-reported change in interest in Israel visits (Table 2), it is apparent that exposure to Birthright Israel prompted a substantial proportion of all parents, non-travelers as well as repeat travelers, to want to visit Israel. More than half (61%) of parents became somewhat or greatly more interested in a trip to Israel as a result of their children's participation in Birthright Israel.

Long-term interest in Israel travel increased after their children went on Birthright Israel. Based on changes from the pre-trip to post-trip survey in comparison to a control group, parents became more likely to *disagree* with this statement: "I would rather visit other countries than visit Israel." On the other hand, there was no corresponding change in the short-term likelihood of visiting Israel. Prior to the trip, parents who had never been to Israel indicated that cost and security concerns were their primary reason for not visiting. After their children participated in Birthright Israel, parents were less concerned about the safety and security of Israel travel, perhaps reducing that barrier to some extent. There was no change regarding parents' perceptions of trip expense (analysis not shown), which is unsurprising, because the Birthright Israel trip is fully subsidized and therefore did not yield any new information for parents about actual costs.

These findings were supported by parents' self-reported assessment of the impact of their children's participation in Birthright Israel. More than three-quarters of parents who had never been to Israel became more interested in a visit. Interest in a Birthright Israel-style trip is strong among these parents; 65% of those non-travelers indicated that they would be likely or very likely to participate in a Birthright Israel-style trip. Many parents expressed interest in the educational content of the trip, suggesting that they did not see themselves merely as tourists, but wanted an intensive "heritage travel" experience. If appropriate opportunities were available, it is possible that at least some of these parents would take a trip to Israel with their children's encouragement.

Although evidence of enhanced trip interest is clear, this study did not demonstrate changes in the parents' emotional connection to Israel. Utilizing the pre/post measures with the comparison group, there was no significant Birthright Israel impact on parents' emotional connection to Israel or their level of agreement with this statement: "Ideally, all Jews should visit Israel." One explanation for the lack of effect is that, prior to the trip, the parents' emotional connection to Israel was high. Of all Jewish parents, more than three-quarters felt somewhat or very connected to Israel at the start of the study. This was the case for more than two-thirds of those who had never been to Israel, and this was nearly universal among

repeat travelers. When the starting level is as high as this, growth will not be observable using only a single four-point measure. Alternatively, it may be that the indirect impact of the program on parents is limited to increased interest in visits; it may activate curiosity and openness about travel, but not a greater emotional connection to Israel.

Although the evidence for change is clear, to fully understand the change, it is necessary to explore the mechanisms behind the change and the ways in which the Birthright Israel participants appear to influence their parents. One of the most significant predictors of change in parental interest in visiting Israel was active encouragement by trip participants directed toward their parents. The more these children encouraged their parents to visit Israel, the greater the increase in parental interest. This impact is most notable for parents who have never been to Israel and for intermarried parents. Thus, this study demonstrates a process of “reverse socialization” in which children are actively involved in influencing their parents’ attitudes.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, parents who were most affected by Birthright Israel may have been more inclined to complete the post-trip survey, resulting in an overestimate of its impact. To the extent possible, survey weights corrected for this by adjusting the data using information about all trip respondents from the trip registration data. Because this survey was presented to parents as being about their children’s experiences and not their own, survey participation could have been correlated with parental closeness to their children rather than with the parents’ own feelings about the Birthright Israel experience.

Second, it is impossible to determine without follow-up whether any of these changes will be long-lasting. They might be a transitory effect of exposure to their children’s experiences. If attitudes are not reinforced, they are likely to fade with time as their children move on to other activities and experiences.

Finally, increased interest among parents in Israel travel does not guarantee that trips will actually take place. Decision-making about travel is a complex process (Gnoth 1997; Patterson and Pegg 2009) and interest in a particular destination is only one factor in the ultimate decision. Still, greater interest, coupled with encouragement by adult children, could lead to an overall increase in Israel travel among this previously unreached population if the right opportunities are made available to them.

Conclusion

This study focuses attention on the potential for Jewish social networks (Cohen and Veinstein 2011; Geffen 2002; Kadushin 2011; Kadushin and Kotler-Berkowitz 2006) to disseminate information, values, and cultural norms. Specifically, it considers the “reverse socialization” of parents through the influence of their adult

children—passively, through their indirect exposure to Israel travel, and actively, through their children’s efforts to encourage them to visit Israel. This study provides the first evidence that Birthright Israel has altered the attitudes of the parents of participants. Changes in parental attitudes occurred primarily because Birthright Israel participants shared their own experiences and encouraged their parents to visit Israel.

Following their children’s trips, parents of Birthright Israel participants became more interested in visiting Israel, less concerned about safety and security, and less likely to prefer visits to other countries over visits to Israel. Two-thirds of Jewish parents who had never been to Israel indicated that they would be likely to participate in a Birthright Israel-style trip if it were available to them. Birthright Israel, therefore, has been successful at reaching, albeit indirectly, a segment of the Jewish community that is often overlooked in the American Jewish community—adult Jews at midlife.

However, there was no impact on parents’ feelings of emotional connection to Israel or on the belief that all Jews should visit Israel. In this sample of parents, emotional connection was high to begin with, so it would be difficult to capture a strengthening of that connection. Although Birthright Israel activated parents’ interest in visiting Israel, this interest, in itself, did not change their emotional connection to Israel, and it did not spark a deeper process of spiritual exploration. However, it may be that such attitudinal changes cannot come about through the children’s persuasion alone, but rather, might develop if such parents participated in a trip to Israel.

This study attests to the high level of interest in Israel travel among American Jewish adults who have never been to Israel. It has been shown that Jewish adults at midlife may be amenable to changes in their Jewish identity, and nascent efforts in communal organizations indicate that this is becoming an area of interest. Findings from this study can help to shape the Jewish community’s efforts to reach Jewish adults at midlife. Based on these findings about adult children’s influence on their parents, this mechanism is worthy of further exploration. Information about Israel travel, specifically, and Jewish life, in general, may be more effective if it is delivered by adult children to their parents instead of, or in addition to, outreach from the organized Jewish community.

According to the Pew study (Pew Research Center 2013), 60% of Jewish adults ages 50 to 64 have never been to Israel. If the indirect effects of Birthright Israel begin to shift this group toward considering a visit to Israel and appropriate opportunities are available, the shift in engagement with Israel that has been already observed within the “Birthright Israel generation” may begin to spread even further through the American Jewish community. One way to do this would be to develop Birthright Israel-like programs for adults, particularly for those who have never been to Israel. On occasion, Israel trips for parents, such as the Mayanot Legacy program, are promoted as “Birthright Israel for Adults,” but, currently, no well-publicized programs are offered on a regular basis. Parents would likely be attracted by more affordable travel programs, but, more importantly, parents appear to be interested in programs that offer more than the traditional tourism experiences. Like their adult children, they are looking for educational, authentic encounters with Israel in a safe and structured setting. To increase awareness of such trips, Birthright

Israel participants could come home from their trips with information about special travel opportunities to share with their parents. Empowering participants to serve as ambassadors to their parents would increase the likelihood that parents will participate and reinforce the Birthright Israel participant's own experience by sharing it with others. Further research should explore interest in and barriers to participation in trips to Israel for adults, as well as the impact of the trips that do exist. Although the focus of this study has been on mothers, the impact on fathers should be explored as well.

The implications of this study are not limited to the Birthright Israel program. Other Jewish educational interventions could strengthen their impact by considering the social networks in which their program participants are embedded, not only within families, but within groups of friends and communities. Programs that affect one person can have an unexpected impact on those in their networks. This study, therefore, illustrates the strength of Jewish social network ties (Cohen and Veinstein 2011; Geffen 2002; Kadushin 2011; Kadushin and Kotler-Berkowitz 2006) as programs are spread from person to person. Awareness of the social network context in which programs operate, therefore, can aid in maximizing the effectiveness, reach, and impact of programs that enhance Jewish life.

Appendix: Question Wording

The following is the actual wording of the questions used to create the measures reported in this paper.

To what degree did your child's trip affect your own knowledge or attitudes about Israel? (*Not at all, a little, somewhat, very much*)

As a result of your child's involvement in Birthright Israel, has your interest in visiting Israel...(*Greatly decreased, somewhat decreased, not changed, somewhat increased, greatly increased*)?

If a trip like Birthright Israel were offered to adults, how likely would you be to participate? (*Very unlikely, unlikely, undecided, likely, very likely*)

How likely are you to visit Israel ever? (*Highly unlikely, unlikely, possible, likely, highly likely, trip planned*)

How likely are you to visit Israel in the next three years? (*Highly unlikely, unlikely, possible, likely, highly likely, trip planned*)

The previous two questions are constructed from the following individual questions:

- Do you currently have any specific plans to visit Israel? (*Yes, no*)
- Have you visited Israel since November of 2013? (*Yes, no*) (post-trip survey only)
- How likely are you to visit Israel within the next one to three years? (*Very unlikely, unlikely, possible, likely, very likely*)
- How likely are you to visit Israel at some point in the future? (*Very unlikely, unlikely, possible, likely, very likely*)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about Israel travel:

Safety and security are problems (*Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree*) (Reverse coded)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about Israel travel: I would rather visit other countries than visit Israel (*Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree*)(Reverse coded)

To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel (*Not at all, a little, somewhat, very much*)

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Ideally, all Jews should travel to Israel?(*Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree*)

After the trip, how much did you discuss it with your child?(*Not at all, a little, somewhat, very much*)

Following the trip, has your child encouraged you to visit Israel?(*Not at all, a little, somewhat, very much*)

Overall, how satisfied are you with your child's experience on Taglit-Birthright Israel? (*Extremely dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, somewhat satisfied, extremely satisfied*)

Did any of your OTHER children go on a Taglit trip BEFORE November of 2013? (*No; Yes, one; yes, two or more; don't know*)

An additive index (range 3-12) of how important Judaism is to the parent was constructed from three items, each scored 1-4:

- How important is Judaism to you? (*Not at all important, a little important, somewhat important, very important*)
- How important is it to you that your child/children marry someone who is Jewish? (*Not at all important, a little important, somewhat important, very important*)
- How important is it to you that your child/children raise their children Jewish?
- (*Not at all important, a little important, somewhat important, very important*)

Have you ever been to Israel? (*Yes, no*)

How many times have you been to Israel? (*1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more*)

What is your marital status? (*Married or in a permanent relationship, divorced or separated, widowed, never married*)

Is your spouse or partner... (*Jewish, Jewish and something else, Protestant, Catholic, no religion, other*)

Are you... (*Secular/culturally Jewish, "just Jewish," Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, no religion, other*)

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