

INSIDE



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PRIMAL URGES

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HOME FIELD DISADVANTAGE

The race goes on to find effective ways to build on young adults' post-Israel trip connections to Judaism.

By Bryan Schwartzman

Kirill Vaks, a 25-year-old with longish, light brown hair, a deep tan and a muscular build, looks as if he is ready for a day of surfing. Instead, the strength and conditioning trainer — with years of experience in competitive ice hockey, boxing and muay Thai fighting — is on his way to an Orthodox synagogue in Northeast Philadelphia. He is about to spend five hours of a summer weekend sitting through classes about Judaism.

Vaks, who was born in Zhitomer, Ukraine and grew up in Philadelphia and Cherry Hill, N.J., doesn't come across as the kind of guy who likes to sit very long for anything. He recalled being so bored and lost during his own Bar Mitzvah service that he swore he'd never set foot in a synagogue again.

But the graduate of Rutgers University-Camden is now studying texts with a rabbi once a week and driving from Voorhees, N.J., to Northeast Philadelphia to attend seminars at the Beth Solomon Community Center run by RAJE (The Russian Jewish Experience.) He's still not so sure about the whole God thing — during a class on the purpose of existence, he seemed more interested in what the rabbi had to say about interpersonal relationships than theology — yet he's driven to learn as much as he can about the Jewish tradition.

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KIRILL VAKS (CENTER) DOING SUPERMAN PUSHUPS ON MT. NATALIA.

"I always had Jewish pride, but I had no clue what that meant," said Vaks. "I want to know where I am from. Where is it going to take me? I don't know. Am I going to become religious? I don't know."

What happened to him? One word: Israel.

On June 2, he got back from a two-week trip run by RAJE — his third visit to the Jewish state since 2011, when he participated on a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip.

It's no secret that a visit to the Jewish state can be a powerful, paradigm-shifting experience. That can be especially true for those who, like Vaks, have had little or no Jewish background. (He never attended religious school and read transliterated Hebrew at his Bar Mitzvah.)

The Challenges of Re-entry

But what happens to that energy, that spark of inspiration, when young adults return to their everyday lives? How can that hard-to-define connection with the Jewish people, maybe even with Judaism itself, be acted upon once folks have returned to school or their jobs? It's one thing to feel a Jewish vibe at the Kotel or overlooking Mount Meron from the mystical city of Tzfat, but it's a lot harder for many to have the same sorts of feelings at a suburban synagogue or campus Hillel house.

How individuals like Vaks decide to follow up on their Israel experience might help determine the future for a generation of American Jews. By all accounts, affiliation in synagogues and Jewish organizations is down. Fewer teens are continuing with their Jewish education past their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, if they even went that far. For many young adults, a trip to Israel might be the last, best shot at forming a deep attachment to their Jewish identity.

For decades, Israel has served as a source of inspiration, a destination where American Jews can grow and explore their connections. In many ways, Israel is fulfilling the role prescribed it by the Zionist thinker Asher

Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg (also known as Ahad Ha'am). Many of his contemporaries understood Zionism as a political movement that would ultimately bring about the end of the Diaspora. But Ginsberg, who died in 1927, never thought all of the world's Jews would immigrate to Israel. He imagined the Jewish homeland as a place that would provide spiritual sustenance to Diaspora communities that would surely endure.

Through the years, the Israel experience in its myriad forms — a college semester, a year on a kibbutz, a two-week bus tour — has led countless young adults to ask serious questions about their lives: Become more religious? Make aliyah? Chalk up the whole thing as a nice memory and move on? And of course, some become consumed over questions about politics, security and the clash of narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are relevant, important questions, but asked in a vacuum — in the absence of mentors or real community — the process can seem paralyzing for a young adult making all kinds of decisions about the course of his or her career and life.

"For some people, it might be overwhelming," said Leon Vinokur, director of development and COO for the Chevra, a Philadelphia-based organization that runs two-week-long Israel trips specifically geared for 20- and 30-something graduate students and young professionals. "Some are lacking resources or information on how to channel that burning excitement, that burning enthusiasm. What to do with it? It can just fade away, unless there is something to channel that enthusiasm for Israel."

Is Birthright Right?

The last two decades have seen an explosion in the number of available Israel travel options for young adults, driven by the emergence of Taglit-Birthright Israel, which has over 300,000 alumni in North America. With more young Jewish adults than ever visiting Israel, there's been a growing awareness on the part of organizations like Birthright, as well as donors, communal leaders and even synagogues, of the need for meaningful follow-up efforts. Groups like the Chevra and RAJE now plan post-trip Shabbatons and classes as an extension of the trip. At the same time, technology has made it easier for participants to keep in touch with peers and mentors from their Israel experience. Taken together, it is less difficult for people like Vaks to build on their Israel experiences and tap into local resources than it was for travelers 10 or 20 years ago.

Leonard Saxe, who directs the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., has released a slew of studies showing that, on the whole, Birthright has a lasting impact on the majority of its participants, influencing them to lead more Jewish lives.

His latest study, released in October 2012, found that among Taglit-Birthright Israel alums, six to 11 years after their trip, 42 percent are more likely to feel very much connected to Israel compared to individuals who did not go on the program. And participants were 45 percent more likely than non-participants to be married to a Jew — numbers that Saxe claimed indicate that the program provides an effective springboard for

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PHOTO YAFFA PHILLIPS/MANIPULATION JA KEMP

those looking to re-engage with their Judaism over the long term.

“We wouldn’t expect that the day they step off the plane, they would be more involved with the Jewish community,” Saxe said, adding that, as a general rule, the process of building a sense of self, for many people, is rarely a straight and simple line. For Birthright organizers, the point is really to spark some sort of deeper Jewish connection, whatever form it may take.

“It’s not a program about *eretz Yisrael*,” he said, using the Biblical name for the land of Israel. “It is about *am Yisrael*,” the people of Israel.

Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

For three years, Rabbi Daniel Brenner ran NEXT, a division of the Ta-glit-Birthright Israel Foundation dedicated to connecting the program’s alumni to follow-up experiences. (Since Brenner left in 2010, NEXT has undergone a major reshuffling, changing its emphasis from planning programs to connecting young adult alumni with existing programs and organizations.) Now chief of education and programming with Moving Traditions, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit, Brenner thinks that the process of incorporating an Israel experience into one’s life is an example of

a basic human problem: How do people return from their extraordinary experiences to their ordinary lives? (Things become a little different, he said, when someone has stayed in Israel long enough to imagine that living in the Jewish state could, in fact, be their life.)

In a Jewish context, the graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote said that an Israel trip is very similar to Jewish overnight camp and to being part of a vibrant Jewish community on campus in that all three experiences put participants in a setting with their peers. Brenner said that rabbis and other Jewish leaders should be asking: Which of these experiences are replicable in a mainstream Judaic setting, and which aren’t?

“All of those experiences are taking place outside of regular or ordinary time,” he said. “The transition is between special places and ordinary Jewish time. We really have to identify what are those things that are transferable to the ordinary.”

The best way forward may be to encourage “micro-communities,” such as those made up of camp or Israel trip alumni, and to hope that those groups tap the power of Shabbat to produce compelling experiences, he said.

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"I think of those immersive experiences as similar to the Jewish concept of Shabbat," he added. "Everything is heightened. The whole point is to be with friends, to be learning together, to be joyous together. How do you take a little bit of this special experience with you? This is a metaphor for this spiritual challenge."

This year, NEXT made its biggest push ever for Birthright alumni to participate in the High Holidays. It introduced an interactive map (www.birthrightisraelnext.org/highholidays), which lists services and events around the country. It also featured resources, including kits, for alumni to host their own Rosh Hashanah dinners and break the fast meals. According to Morlie Levin, CEO of NEXT, "Now is the time to build on those feelings and help make Jewish opportunities and communities more accessible. Birthrighters and their friends are inspired to deepen their Jewish living and learning through things they do together with their peers and educator-led experiences."

Rabbi Howard Alpert is executive director of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia, which, over the course of the year, will send nearly 300 students on Taglit-Birthright Israel programs. He looks at Birthright not as a 10-day trip, but as a year-long experience complete with orientation and follow-up.

Following a trip, Alpert said, each participant usually sits down for coffee with a Hillel staff member so they can discuss how to build on the experience. This process, he said, revealed that about 70 percent of local college participants on Birthright find some connection with the Jewish community after the trip. Hillel also helps organize gatherings for specific Birthright buses, where participants often form close friendships.

"The power of the Birthright experience isn't the climbing of Masada or the visiting of the Wall — those are the contexts," said Alpert. "The experience is being part of a Jewish community and learning, and for the first time perhaps finding out how fulfilling and wonderful the Jewish experience can be."

"We can't recreate Masada, we can't recreate the experience at the Western Wall, but we can recreate opportunities for people who understand what it means to be a Jew with other Jews," he said. Whether or not it is a group of friends going out to a Jewish-themed movie and talking about it later, or having a meal together on Friday evening, the important thing is Jews doing something together in a Jewish context.

Rabbi Michael Uram, who directs Penn Hillel, said most students who return are anxious to go back to Israel, and a dream of his is to have enough funding to subsidize return trips for students. But few, he said, decide to get involved in Israel advocacy on campus, join pro-Israel organizations or head out to hear speakers address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, many Birthright alumni on campus choose to build on their experience by learning more about Jewish prayer or texts.

"The experience they have in Israel — in some ways it is very personal,"



JENNIFER ROSEN FINDS HERSELF MOUNTAIN-HIGH AT MASADA

he said. "It is about their relationship with Israel, but a lot of them just want another fix of that intense, meaningful Jewish experience."

The Gradual Approach

Synagogues seeking to replenish their numbers and guarantee their futures have great incentive to reach out to recent participants on Israel trips, but replicating the *ruach* of those experiences can be tricky, according to Rabbi Eric Yanoff of Adath Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Merion Station. With High Holidays falling so early this year, synagogue leaders were hopeful that many Israel-trip alumni in college or graduate school would be home with their families for services and would participate in the synagogue's program geared toward them.

"I would only expect that Israel would be a pinnacle moment in one's Jewish life experience," said Yanoff, who has led numerous teen trips to the Jewish homeland. "But synagogue needs to be the constant, ongoing source of connection and feeling and belonging in a people and history that is worth sustaining. There can be pinnacle moments within synagogue life, too, but it is true of every experience. For example, a wedding or a special anniversary is a high point in a marriage, but the real magic of the relationship is the fact that it sustains, through highs and lows, over the course of the entire marriage."

For Jennifer Rosen, a 20-year-old student at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, that relationship with the synagogue didn't last when she was younger. She and her family, for a variety of reasons, left Adath Israel after her Bat Mitzvah. Her teenage years were not filled with much Jewish involvement. When she arrived at college, the triple major in sociology, women's studies and religion found Hillel activities cold and unwelcoming. She would go to High Holiday services on campus, but that was about it.

But she had always been interested in visiting Israel, and in December

2012, she went on a Birthright Israel excursion with students from around the country as the only student from her school. She was deeply moved by what she saw and has formed deep friendships with the other participants, emailing back and forth with some of them daily.

"I love the people. They were definitely what made it as special as it was," Rosen said, adding that half a year later, she's still processing the 10 days she spent there. "It never quite feels like you were actually there. I climbed to the top of Masada and had this massive asthma attack. Like in the books, you kind of can't believe where you have been. 'I was up *there*? What did we just *do*?' "

Going back is already on her mind. "I would love to take my dad before he gets too old to see all those mountains," she said.

She spent this summer interning at the National Museum of American Jewish History, where she earned credit toward her religion major. But during the spring semester following her Birthright trip, she didn't immediately start going to Shabbat dinners every week or signing up for a class in Jewish history. She acknowledged that deepening her Jewish connection may take time. This academic year, she's going to have a Jewish suitemate and she hopes that, together, they may feel more comfortable attending Hillel programs.

The Immersive Approach

On the other hand, Adam Rosen (no relation), a 26-year lawyer who lives in Cherry Hill, N.J., has never had much trouble feeling Jewish. He grew up attending Temple Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue in Cherry Hill he calls "a second home." After his Bar Mitzvah, he went to a regional Hebrew high school run by the Conservative movement. He went on Taglit-Birthright Israel while an undergraduate at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. And this past June, he went on a trip run by the Chevra, where he exhibited some of the religious observances that led other participants to give him the nickname, "Mr. Shabbas." Since coming back, he's attended classes and Shabbatons run by the Chevra. He also started sending weekly emails to his fellow participants containing thoughts on the weekly Torah portion.

"It hard to believe a week ago we were in Jerusalem," he recalled, beginning his first email. "What a bummer, we are back here in Philadelphia. Look, Jon Erlbaum [the Chevra's founder] taught us, what happens in Israel doesn't stay in Israel. Although I am not physically in Israel, I am spiritually still there. We got to bring it back here to Philly, spread it amongst our fellow Jews in Philly. And I am going to return to Israel soon. I look forward to my next trip. Until then, I will have that spirit from the Kotel that will be living on inside of me."

He's interested in exploring traditional Judaism, but doubts that all of it is for him. "What is the point of prayer? What am I doing here?" he said he's

ADAM ROSEN WAS SO AFFECTED BY HIS TRIP THAT HE IS CONTEMPLATING MAKING ALIYAH.



often asked himself in synagogue. "Prayer is a very hard thing to achieve. It is not easy. There are many times I have questioned it. But I feel a lot more assured right now, a lot more inspired."

He also said that making aliyah is not out of the question. Since coming back, he has clicked more than once on the website of Nefesh B'Nefesh (www.nbn.org.il), a group that helps North Americans move to Israel.

"It is something that I have been contemplating," he said. "Israel is home. It is our home. I could walk around in Israel with a kippah on my head and not feel out of place."

Vaks, the trainer who has worked out members of the Philadelphia Flyers and trained professional mixed martial artists, isn't talking about moving to Israel at this point. But on each of his three trips there, he said, he's forged a deeper bond to the country, the land and the Jewish people. This December, he'll do something for the very first time: He will be going to the Jewish state on his own dime and navigating the country without the help of a tour guide.

He's planning to attend a cousin's wedding, and will also be looking into studying in a yeshiva while there. Just don't tell him he's becoming religious.

"I am along for the ride," he said. "I want to just keep learning and taking it all in. At some point, if I do start doing the full Shabbas, awesome. If I don't, awesome. I don't want to force myself into anything. I want to take it all and make my own decisions."

Bryan Schwartzman is senior writer for the Jewish Exponent. In 1999, he spent six months in Israel; his head and heart stayed there much longer.