“Who Is A Jew?”

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Jewish identity is complex and multifaceted, and there are multiple views of what it means to be Jewish. Although Jewish life has always been characterized by a diversity of perspectives, the rapid pace of social change exacerbates this state of affairs, particularly for young adults. The focus of this chapter is on the nature of Jewish identity for contemporary American young adults and how, for many, it has been altered by an educational experience in Israel.

To frame this discussion, we would like to situate Jewish identity theoretically. Following the dictum of Kurt Lewin, one of founders of the discipline of social psychology, that “nothing is so practical as a good theory,” it is important to understand how and why Jews develop their identity. One framework, devised by Hebert C. Kelman, explains the development of identity as a process that moves from compliance, to identification, to internalization. There are other ways to describe identity formation, but Kelman’s model is a useful heuristic. We use it in this chapter as a means of explaining how the Taglit-Birthright Israel program has affected the Jewish identity of a generation of Jewish young adults.

KELMAN’S STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT
Just as there are many theoretical frames that can be used to explain identity formation, there are also many explanations for Taglit’s impact. However, Kelman’s three processes by which attitude and identity change can occur are particularly helpful. Kelman referred to the first of these processes as “compliance.” A compliant person is one who accepts the influence of another person who is important to him or her out of a desire to please that person. This adoption takes place under circumstances in which the important other person is observing the compliant individual; otherwise there is no motivation for the individual to act. Thus, for example, a Jewish young adult who is influenced via compliance may attend services on the High Holy Days with his or her parents or friends not out of any deeply held conviction but simply because doing so will make these important others happy.

The second process is called “identification.” A person who is affected by identification accepts the influence of others who are important to him or
her in order to maintain a satisfying relationship with them. The content of
the influence may not be important to the person being influenced; the key
feature is that the content is important to the significant others. Therefore, one
accepts their influence because of the satisfaction derived from being classified
as similar to them in some particularly salient way. Although the influencers
do not necessarily need to be watching for the person affected by identifica-
tion to accept their influence, the conditions must be salient to the individual’s
relationship with the influential party or parties. Thus, a Jewish young adult
who is influenced via identification may attend services on the high holy days
in order to be with or near other people who are important to him or her and
for whom attendance is significant.

The third process is called “internalization.” A person who is affected by
internalization accepts the influence of others primarily because the content
of the influence is congruent with the individual’s deeply held values, regard-
less of whether he or she is being observed by important others or whether
accepting the influence will solidify group ties. Thus, a Jewish young adult
who is influenced via internalization may attend High Holy Day services, not
because doing so will please others or to solidify ties to his or her community,
but rather he or she truly feels that doing so is an authentic expression of his
or her innermost self.

JEWISHNESS AS AN ACHIEVED OR ASCRIBED ROLE
Kelman’s model evolves from an analysis of roles, the expected behaviors or
sets of behaviors associated with a given status or social position.3 Being Jew-
ish, or the role of being a Jew, used to be considered an ascribed role. An
ascribed role is assigned to an individual as a result of traits he or she possesses
that are beyond his or her control, regardless of merit. Race and gender are
classic examples of ascribed roles—we are born with them, we live our entire
lives being classified by them, and we cannot easily drop the labels once they
have been attached to us. For much of modern Jewish history, this is exactly
how it was to be a Jew—you were born a Jew, you lived as a Jew, and even if
you wanted to divest yourself of your Jewish identity, it was not easy to do so.

This is no longer the case. Our world is one in which Jews can be as
assimilated or acculturated as they want to be. In the United States, as in
many Diaspora communities, Jews blend in with everyone else so well that
they cannot be easily identified as members of their own separate and distinct
ethnic group. In the parlance of contemporary American ethno-racial classifi-
cation, American Jews, particularly third- or fourth-generation American Jews,
have become generic “white folks.” As a result, being a Jew is increasingly an achieved role, one that individuals must choose for themselves.

One of the fundamental goals of Jewish educational programming, particularly for children and young adults, is to strengthen participants’ Jewish identities. In the context of role theory, it encourages them to “achieve Jewishness”—to choose to identify more strongly as Jews and seek closer personal connections with the Jewish community by progressing through Kelman’s stages of development, from compliance to identification to internalization. The organized Jewish community’s concern with continuity has resulted in many new programs over the past twenty years that seek to encourage young adults to choose to identify more strongly as Jews. Such programs provide natural grounds in which to evaluate the content of Jewish identity; indeed, following the words of Lewin, “if you want truly to understand something, try to change it.”

TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL: A LARGE-SCALE EXPERIMENT IN JEWISH IDENTITY

One such program is Taglit-Birthright Israel. Taglit was established out of concern about the assimilation of Jewish young adults. It provides free, ten-day, informal, educational trips to Israel for Jewish young adults aged 18–26 who have not already had a peer-group experience in Israel. Since its inception in December 1999, approximately 350,000 Jewish young adults from over fifty countries have participated, with about 240,000 of them from North America (mostly the United States). Taglit’s large scale makes it an ideal setting in which to study the processes by which Jewish education can affect individual Jewish identity across a diverse young adult population and, further, how such an intervention can affect the entire Jewish community.

Taglit dramatically changed the scope and character of educational tourism to Israel in three key ways. First, instead of focusing on adolescents, as most prior programs did, Taglit brought young adults to Israel. This was a critical programmatic decision; the ages of 18–26, sometimes referred to as “emerging adulthood,” are a period of personal development in which individuals explore their life options and make decisions about personal values that typically influence the rest of their lives. Accordingly, this age range was ideal for affecting participants’ Jewish identities in lasting ways.

Second, where previous educational tours of Israel were predominantly run by sectarian groups and attracted primarily participants who were already highly engaged in Jewish life, Taglit’s tour organizers were predominantly nonsectarian,
including tour companies and not limited to not-for-profit organizations. They recruited large numbers of secular participants, the population about which the organized Jewish community was most concerned and the one for which there were few attractive options for peer-group educational tours of Israel.

Third, whereas previous programs were paid for by participants or their families, Taglit was made available as a gift. Given the expense of flights to and from Israel, accommodations and transportation, food, and admission to sites, the cost of an educational tour of Israel could be prohibitive to some families and many young adults. The willingness of philanthropists, supported by the government of Israel and communal organizations, to make the trip free for participants removed a significant obstacle to participation for applicants who otherwise could not afford to participate in such a program.

THE JEWISH FUTURES STUDY: LONG-TERM IMPACT OF TAGLIT PARTICIPATION

Since Taglit’s launch, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University has been collecting data about both participants in the program and people who applied but ultimately were not able to go on a Taglit trip. We have extensive documentation on the impact of the trip in the short-, medium-, and long-term. In this chapter, we present data from the third wave of the Jewish Futures Study, our long-term follow-up study of Taglit participants and applicants.

From the database of Taglit applicants, we selected a stratified random sample of 3,503 people, 2,119 of whom went on a Taglit winter trip between the winter of 2000–2001 and the winter of 2005–2006 and 1,384 of whom applied for a trip but ultimately did not go. Between December 2011 and April 2012, six to eleven years after the participants went on their Taglit trips, our research team sent invitations to these individuals to complete a survey that included questions about Jewish educational and family background; attitudes toward Israel, Judaism, and the Jewish community; involvement with Jewish organizations and associated activities; and dating, marriage, and children. An in-depth module on travel to Israel was also included. The survey was conducted via telephone and over the Internet. Ultimately, 1,990 respondents completed the survey for a response rate of 57 percent (approximately 64 percent among Taglit participants and 46 percent among nonparticipants). Because there were no statistically significant differences at the time of application to Taglit between eventual participants and nonparticipants, any observed differences between participants and nonparticipants can be attributed to Taglit participation.
Below, we focus on the kind of data that can be collected from a long-term panel such as this one, tracking respondents as they form families, join communities, and become adult members of the Jewish community; in doing so, we can gauge the long-term impact of the Taglit-Birthright Israel program.

CONNECTION TO ISRAEL

One element of the current discussion of Jewish identity is debate over Jewish young adults’ connection to Israel. The role of Israel in Jewish young adults’ lives has been at the forefront of recent scholarly and communal discourse. Some have promoted the “distancing hypothesis,” which posits that young adult American Jews are losing their connection to Israel as a result of a confluence of factors, one of the most important of which is the mismatch between the predominantly liberal politics of young American Jews and the policies of an increasingly right-wing Israeli government, particularly in regard to the conflict with the Palestinians and matters of religion and state.

This phenomenon is described as a “birth cohort effect,” that is, the degree of attachment survey respondents feel toward Israel is a function of when they were born in that successive generations of American Jews have developed progressively weaker ties to Israel. Other scholars, including ourselves, have argued that examination of multiple data sets collected over time reveals that young adults have always reported lesser connection to Israel than their elders on surveys and that connection to Israel appears to be subject to a “life-cycle effect”; that is, connection to Israel strengthens over time as a function of life experiences.

Regardless of how one views the attachment debate, one of the goals of Taglit is to promote greater affinity for Israel among participants. And, indeed, the program has a profound effect on participants’ connection to Israel. As figure 1 illustrates, Taglit participants are 42 percent more likely than nonparticipants to report feeling “very much” connected to Israel and about half as likely to report feeling “not at all” connected. Participants are also 22 percent more likely to feel “somewhat” or “very confident” in explaining the situation in Israel. Their greater connection to Israel and understanding of contemporary circumstances appear to be associated with having developed a greater personal connection to the Land of Israel and to Israeli people, as well as to the resultant development of greater interest in following current events that affect Israel.
INMARRIAGE

Along with attitudes to Israel, the Jewish community has also been centrally concerned with the intermarriage rate. Some scholars have argued that intermarriage is a threat to the cohesiveness of the Jewish community, if not its very survival.\textsuperscript{14} Although we believe the focus on intermarriage is misplaced and that, instead, the concern should be on Jewish education,\textsuperscript{15} marriage to a Jew is a leading indicator of one’s commitment to remain part of the Jewish community as an adult. Previous findings indicated that Taglit participation had a significant effect on participants’ attitudes toward inmarriage and raising Jewish children,\textsuperscript{16} but the third wave of the Jewish Futures Study provided sufficient data for a more in-depth examination.

Taglit participants were less likely to be married than nonparticipants (35 percent vs. 43 percent), a finding that we can report preliminarily has been
replicated in the fourth wave of the study. This finding seems to be related to seeking a Jewish partner and the greater importance Taglit participants place on being part of a Jewish family. And among those respondents who were married and were not raised Orthodox, Taglit participants were 45 percent more likely than nonparticipants to be married to another Jew.

![Fig. 2. Inmarriage by Taglit participation (predicted probabilities). Note: Respondents not raised Orthodox and married after Taglit application. Predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model controlling for Taglit participation and parental inmarriage. Odds ratio = 2.52, t(742) = 4.02, p < .001.]

The impact of Taglit participation appears at all levels of experience in formal Jewish educational settings. Figure 3 shows the rates of inmarriage for both participants and nonparticipants at different levels of Jewish education, as measured by hours of formal Jewish education in grades 1–12. The bars at the bottom of the chart represent the proportion of (non-Orthodox raised) respondents in the sample with a given amount of formal Jewish educational exposure. Thus, 22 percent had no formal Jewish education, 18 percent had some formal Jewish education but no more than 500 hours, and so on. Very few had more than 2,000 hours. The dashed lines represent likelihood of inmarriage for Taglit
participants and nonparticipants. Although the gap between participants and nonparticipants appears to narrow slightly at higher levels of formal Jewish education, the difference is not significant. Indeed, at all levels of formal Jewish education, Taglit participation made respondents more likely to be married to a Jew. This represents a significant Taglit effect on choice of spouse.

Fig. 3. Inmarriage by hours of Jewish education and Taglit participation (predicted probabilities). Note: Respondents not raised Orthodox and married after Taglit application. Predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model controlling for Taglit participation, parental inmarriage, and hours of formal Jewish education in grades 1-12. Odds ratio = 2.51, t(738) = -3.98, p < .001.

IMPORTANCE OF RAISING JEWISH CHILDREN

The impact of Taglit participation on family formation is not limited to inmarriage. Study respondents are beginning to form their families, and we now have enough data to begin to describe the impact of Taglit participation on parenting choices. As more time passes and additional Taglit participants and nonparticipants begin raising children, we expect these findings to become more robust.

Of the respondents who were not raised Orthodox, Taglit participants were less likely than nonparticipants to have at least one child (17 percent vs. 31
percent). This difference is explained primarily by three factors: first, nonparticipants are slightly older than participants; second, among married respondents, nonparticipants had been married slightly longer than participants (about 4 years compared with about 3.6 years); and third, as was previously mentioned, participants were less likely to be married. About 40 percent of parents had more than one child. Of all parents, 82 percent reported at the time they completed their surveys that their oldest child was younger than five years old.

Virtually all endogamous respondents reported that they were raising their oldest child Jewish. Intermarried Taglit participants and nonparticipants were about equally likely to be raising their oldest child Jewish; however, because Taglit participants were far less likely to be intermarried, overall Taglit participants were more likely to be raising their oldest child Jewish. And among respondents who did not have children at the time of the survey, Taglit participants were 23 percent more likely than nonparticipants to view raising their children Jewish as “very important.”

![Fig. 4. Importance of raising children Jewish by Taglit participation (predicted probabilities). Note: “Thinking about the future, how important is it to you to raise your children Jewish?” Respondents not raised Orthodox and with no children. Predicted probabilities from an ordinal logistic regression model controlling for Taglit participation and parental inmarriage. Odds ratio = 1.57, \(t(193) = 2.83, p < .01\).](image-url)
SYNAGOGUE MEMBERSHIP

Membership in a synagogue, temple, minyan, chavurah, or other Jewish congregation has long been used as a measure of Jewish identity. Whether or not one has children is strongly predictive of joining a synagogue; accordingly, because Taglit participants are less likely to have children thus far, our analysis controls for having a child. As illustrated by figure 5, for both parents and childless respondents, Taglit participation predicted membership in a synagogue, temple, minyan, chavurah, or other Jewish congregation. Among parents, 52 percent of Taglit participants had joined a congregation, compared with 41 percent of nonparticipants. For nonparents, 22 percent of Taglit participants and 16 percent of nonparticipants had joined. Although the difference was small, Taglit participation was also predictive of increased frequency of attending Jewish religious services. However, Taglit did not have a statistically significant effect on participants’ confidence in their ability to follow along in services.

Fig. 5. Jewish congregational membership by Taglit participation and having children (predicted probabilities). Note: Respondents not raised Orthodox. Predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model controlling for Taglit participation, parental inmarriage, and having children. Odd ratio = 1.56, t(1, 720) = 2.62, p < .01.
JEWSH HOLIDAY CELEBRATION

Finally, we examined whether Taglit participation resulted in differences in celebration of Jewish holidays and Shabbat. Overall, participants are more likely than non-participants to observe Jewish holidays in some way, as well as to have a special meal on Shabbat. It is interesting, however, that celebration of Hanukkah and Passover are nearly universal among both Taglit participants and nonparticipants, and the vast majority of both participants and nonparticipants also celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

Fig. 6. Jewish holiday celebration by Taglit participation (predicted probabilities).
Note: Respondents not raised Orthodox. Mokken scale cumulative percentages. Predicted probabilities from an ordinal logistic regression controlling for Taglit participation and parental inmarriage. Odd ratio = 1.48, t(1, 730) = 3.14, p < .01.

KELMAN’S PROCESSES OF INFLUENCE EXPLAIN WHY TAGLIT WORKS

Following Lewin’s maxim that a phenomenon can be truly understood only by trying to change it, it is apparent that Taglit, which profoundly affects the Jewish identities of its participants, provides an excellent window to understanding the content and character of Jewish identity.
Taglit affects participants’ Jewish identities by punctuated equilibrium, by fundamentally changing the way they think about Jewish life and their connection to Israel over the course of a ten-day trip. In Kelman’s terms, Taglit tends to alter the way participants identify as Jews, taking them from “compliance” or “identification” with Judaism and shifting them into “internalization.” As a result, Judaism becomes more salient to participants in nearly every aspect of their lives.

The literature on emerging adulthood makes it clear that the time from the late teens through the mid- to late 20s is critical for solidifying young Jews’ sense of themselves as members of the Jewish collective and their attachment to it. That Taglit participants tend to feel more connected to Israel, are more likely to marry Jews and be concerned with raising Jewish children, join synagogues, and celebrate Jewish holidays than nonparticipants, even years down the road, confirms that their participation in Taglit made their Jewish identities more salient to them and that the effects are likely to be lasting.

For Judaism to flourish in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to educate Jews—especially young adults—about their heritage and the ways in which engagement in Jewish life as part of a community can give their lives meaning. As the data suggest, the question of assimilation and intermarriage leading to the inevitable decline of Jewish civilization should be turned on its head—how can the Jewish community engage all Jews, including the highly assimilated and the children of intermarriage, in authentic ways that drive interest in Jewish life and can revitalize the Jewish community? What are the educational and lived experiences that lead people to internalize their Jewish identities and accept themselves as citizens of the Jewish world? By looking to Taglit, perhaps the largest experiment ever attempted to influence Jewish identity, the Jewish community can find some answers to these questions that will enable it to continue to help its members explore the boundaries of Jewish life and internalize their Jewish identities.

NOTES

4 Several scholars have written on this subject. See, for example, Karen Brodkin, How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).


6 For full details about the program’s inception and impact, see Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, Ten Days of Birthright Israel (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2008), or the Taglit Publications page on the website of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchareas/taglit-publications.html.

7 Taglit is the Hebrew name of the organization, meaning “discovery.” In the United States, the program is generally known as “Birthright Israel.”


9 At the time this is being written, we are closing in on the end of data collection for the fourth wave of the study. Although we have preliminary data from the fourth wave, we will not report specific findings from it in this chapter.

10 For full details on the methodology of the survey, see Leonard Saxe, et al., Jewish Futures Project: The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2012 Update (Waltham: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2012).

11 The October 2010 issue of Contemporary Jewry was devoted to debating the “distancing hypothesis.”


18 Nearly all respondents who are married and were raised Orthodox are married to another Jew, regardless of Taglit participation.

19 Respondents indicated for how many years they had attended Jewish day schools and Hebrew schools. Day schools were equated to 600 hours of Jewish instruction, while Hebrew schools were equated to 100 hours. These figures are modifications of Harold Himmelfarb’s formula, which has been used by dozens of researchers in statistical models assessing the impact of various aspects of Jewish background on Jewish identity. See Harold Himmelfarb, “The Non-Linear Impact of Schooling: Comparing Different Types and Amounts of Jewish Education,” *Sociology of Education* 50 (1977): 114–32.
