

Questioning birthright Israel: Issues of Jewish identity

by [Alain Epp Weaver](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

This summer thousands of high school and college-age Jewish youth have been descending on Israel. These students are participating in the Birthright Israel program, established by philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt. Inaugurated during the past winter vacation, Birthright Israel was set up to combat assimilationist trends within Western Judaism, represented most poignantly by intermarriage. Birthright's Web site declares that the program's mission is "to strengthen the Jewish identity of our youth and further bond Jewish people worldwide to the country of Israel." The means to these ends? Providing Jewish high school and college students with a free trip to Israel. While Birthright Israel doesn't operate its own tours, its "gift" covers the participants' airfare and their first ten days with an approved peer-group program.

Like most religious programming directed at youth, Birthright Israel pitches its tours as hip and edgy. Jagged graphics on its Web site describe Israel as "vibrant" and "contemporary," with the addition of an exotic touch lent by millennia of history. Tour providers underscore Birthright's antiassimilationist agenda by emphasizing Israel's Jewish character. Hillel, the campus Jewish organization, has boasted on its Web site that participants in the Birthright tours have gotten "a taste of 100-percent concentrated, undiluted, full-strength, high-octane Jewishness." "In Israel," Hillel explained, "these students could 'do Jewish' 24-7." Furthermore, they "didn't have to worry about appearing 'too Jewish.'" In Israel "they weren't the minority," and therefore "felt at home."

Alexis, a participant in last winter's program, stated on the Birthright Web site that "in America, especially if you don't live in a predominantly Jewish community, you have to think twice as hard about being Jewish. For Israelis, it's a given." Since intermarriage is one of the major factors contributing to the assimilation of American Judaism, it's not surprising that the issue of finding a Jewish mate surfaced in Hillel's summary of the Birthright tour: Hillel's Web site trumpeted that "the cute soldier

buying sunflowers seeds was definitely dateable—and no one on either side of the family would object.”

Anyone with more than a passing familiarity with Israeli society will quickly recognize the problematic nature of the assumption that only in Israel can one find “undiluted” Judaism. The population of Israel is by no means 100 percent Jewish. Not only is there a sizable Israeli Palestinian population, but thousands of the recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union are non-Jewish. The “cute soldier” might turn out to be Druze or Christian. And even if one feels “at home” as a Jew within Israel’s Jewish majority, there is no undiluted, homogenous character to its Judaism. The debates within Israeli society over such issues as the validity of non-Orthodox conversions, road closures on Shabbat, kosher certifications and civil marriage indicate that the question of what constitutes Jewish identity is far from settled.

However, those who recognize the difficulty of “doing Christian 24-7” in an essentially post-Christian culture which nevertheless maintains the trappings of Christendom should sympathize with the challenges facing American Judaism. The danger of assimilation to an individualistic, materialist society also faces American Christians, though our status as the majority religion keeps many of us from feeling the danger as acutely as our Jewish compatriots do.

But even if one sympathizes with the concerns about weakened religious identity which led to Birthright Israel’s establishment, one still is left with several critical questions about the program. First, its very name raises a host of questions about who does and does not have a “birthright” to the land of Israel/Palestine. Under the Israeli Law of Return, every Jew (at least every Jew recognized as such by the Orthodox establishment) has the right to “return” to Israel and settle anywhere in the land, including in the occupied territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

At the same time, millions of native-born Palestinians and their descendants are denied the right to return to their homes. Whereas Birthright Israel participants can freely travel not only throughout Israel but also the occupied West Bank, the average Palestinian’s movements are severely restricted, with a tightly controlled permit system regulating who can travel where within and between the occupied territories.

“Apartheid” would not be too strong a word to characterize the political reality engendered by the Oslo Accords. Palestinians are systematically cut off from Jerusalem, and West Bankers and Gazans are separated from each other; even the much vaunted “safe passage” between the West Bank and Gaza which opened last October is not a “free passage,” since many Palestinians still are denied permits. Any Jew who qualifies under the Law of Return may come to Israel and build a home, but the nation denies Palestinians permits to build houses on their own land, and demolishes “illegal” homes once they are built.

One also wonders about what Birthright Israel implies about the meaning of life in the diaspora. Can two-week immersions in Israeli culture renew those who live in the diaspora? Doesn't such a premise inevitably, if unwittingly, reinforce the traditional Zionist claim that life in the diaspora has become abnormal since 1948? If one can find the “undiluted elixir” of Jewish life only in Israel, then why shouldn't every Jew make *aliyah*? Is there no religious significance to life in the diaspora?

What, in short, becomes of Jeremiah's call to the exiles to seek the peace of the city to which God has sent them (29:7)? American Christians, of course, have become too at home in the United States, and are bereft of an active sense of what it would mean to live as “resident aliens,” as missionary communities in exile. We have much to learn from the history of diaspora Judaism as we seek to articulate and embody new ways of being the church in a post-Christian culture. It would be a sad irony if, in the process of trying to strengthen Jewish identity, programs like Birthright Israel ended up undermining the diaspora's theological and spiritual dignity.