

THE NEWBORN GIFT: *Extending birthright israel and Renewing Community*

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birthright israel was conceived as an opportunity to change the basic infrastructure of the American Jewish community. Now that the bulk of American Jewry has chosen full integration into American culture, it is clear that we need to enrich the inner life of American Jews so that they will choose Jewishness as the anchor of their identity in a polyphonous society. The key is to provide a chain of Jewish experiences that are so vital in impact and nurturing in identity that the recipient makes a full-hearted decision to live as a Jew for life. Ideally this chain should consist of day school education, Jewish camping, youth movements, college programs, Israel experience, and young adult activities.

The founders of birthright israel chose this project because there were enough private philanthropists who loved Israel to initiate the needed alliance of private philanthropy with community institutions and the Government of Israel. Day schools were still too foreign to major givers, camping too marginal, youth movements too modest, intense learning too much of a stretch. We started with the Israel trips in the belief

that successful partnering in one area would help strengthen the other links.

For this reason, we concluded that the birthright israel trip must be a free and full-hearted gift. Detractors argue that it is not right for the community to pay for those participants who can afford to visit Israel. But this line of reasoning fails to appreciate the purpose of the gift. It is not merely financial. birthright israel is targeted at less affiliated Jews, because those who are most integrated into American life are far less likely to travel to Israel on their own. Such people typically see the Jewish community as self-centered, external to their lives and interested in approaching them only when raising funds. The free gift, by contrast, is a noble concept that touches souls. The gift communicates to families that we are one people; we care about you because you are Jewish; we have a cultural and historical memory to share with you. Surveys of birthright israel participants indicate that the gift — the love and caring implicit in the generosity — excites them and deepens the impact of the trip.

The ultimate vision of birthright israel is that the entire cohort of young Jews, in every



age bracket, will be offered the trip. But how can we bring the less connected families closer so they anticipate and even plan their children's future involvement in birthright israel trips? A crucial answer lies in the birthright israel newborn gift, which can also provide financial support for a permanent birthright israel program. It is proposed that the Jewish communities (the logical agency would be the Federation) identify all newly born Jews. The community could then reach out, by letter or preferably by personal visit, to the parents of the newborn. This is a moment when new parents are extraordinarily aware of being part of the chain of life and of history; at this time, new parents are open to others sharing and deepening their joy.

The community representatives would wish the parents Mazel Tov and say that their newborn child has a birthright israel gift of a trip to Israel when they grow up. They would inform the parents: As we meet, the community is giving your baby a present. The sum of \$180 is being deposited in a special account in the name of your newborn child. The gift will bear interest; while it will be available only to pay for this future trip, the family can add gifts or other funds along the way to enable the child to extend or deepen the trip. This trip is an expression of the bonds between our people, one people worldwide, with no expectation in return and no condition except taking the trip itself.

Think of the fundamental change we will have accomplished if instead of seeking only returns from our fellow Jews, we promote the view that being Jewish has its own intrinsic reward. The gift is thus more than a mere \$180. It signifies the appreciation and sensitivity we will show young Jews as they enter the unknown territory of parenthood. Parents won't consider their Jewishness to be merely an accident of birth. Instead, they will gain the necessary sense of a peoplehood bound by a common destiny and an emotional commitment to one another. They will recognize that just as the birth of their child represents a cosmic connection between the past and the future, so, too, the Jewish people have a profound connection to their collective history and common future. In this way a material thing will be invested with the loftiest spiritual implications. The gift becomes a very real symbol of our love for *clal yisrael*, our joy in being Jewish, and our concern that all our brothers and sisters experience the soaring power of their heritage. Suddenly, new parents will be intrigued by what the community has to offer, including nursery schools and summer camps. Never underestimate the capacity of Jews to respond to an act of nobility and compassion.

There are a number of administrative issues to be solved for the newborn gift to work. In order to identify newborn Jewish children, not easy at present, the

entire community will have to upgrade its outreach efforts tremendously. Federations will have the opportunity to revitalize themselves as they appeal to the next generation of Jews. The very networking that birthright israel demands will reinforce the concept of a chain of Jewish destiny, of *am echad* as our community reorients itself towards service and mutual welfare. How do we learn when a new Jewish baby is born? Can we organize effectively to reach out and even make a personal visit to each of these families? How do we avoid over-marketing in soliciting the families? How can we keep in touch over the years as families move, change priorities, careers, etc? What new resources are needed to pay for this gift? To realize the full scope of the newborn gift, we need increased cooperation from partners on an individual and organizational level.

The Jewish community must weigh its understanding of birthright israel. Is this a burdensome success whose financial cost outweighs its benefits? Or is this the opportunity of a lifetime for new community organizations and the embrace of whole new cohorts of Jews on a staggering scale? The decision is in our hands. A strong effort now can pave the way for a demographic flowering over the next decades. 🌸

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