

Home Away From Home: How Birthright Shapes the Thought and Discourse About Israel Among American Jewish Young Adults

Roi Bachmutsky

Anthropology

Mentor: Laura Nader, Anthropology

August 23, 2011

“This was the most amazing experience I have ever had...if it’s like this every week then maybe I want to live here.” “If the [Israeli] army had a 6-month program, I would join without hesitation.” “This was one of the only times in my life I regretted not being a man.” As we walked away from one of the holiest sites in the Jewish tradition, I heard these exclamations from three informants whom I’ll call Brian, Aharon, and Danielle respectively as the whole group cheerfully chanted prayers in unison all the way back to our beds.

Ladies and gentlemen, students and professors, my name is Roi Bachmutsky; I am an undergraduate in the Anthropology Department here at the University of California, Berkeley and the title of my broader research project is “Children of the Jewish Establishment: Thought and Discourse About Israel Among American Jewish Young Adults.” My mentor is Professor of Anthropology Laura Nader and I will be using her work as a theoretical model for my analysis. My research project focuses on developing a deeper understanding of the current system of thought and discourse about Israel among the new generation of American Jewish young adults, seen communally as the stakeholders for the future of the American Jewish civilization. My intent is to better understand how these young adults are socialized into the American Jewish community, how they understand their own identity as it relates to Judaism and Israel, and how the controlling processes that these young adults struggle with over thought and discourse about Israel operate. Today I will focus on just a few controlling processes apparent in my ethnographic study of the free trip to the Promised Land: Taglit-Birthright Israel. In this talk I will argue that there are processes of cultural control operating on the thought and discourse about Israel among American Jewish young adults during the Birthright trip: (1) by conceptualizing Israel as a “second home” both in conversation and experience to socialize young adults with little to no previous connection to Judaism and Israel into

forming a collective identity related to the modern Israeli state as a home and protector of the ancient Jewish people, and (2) by discussing Palestinian Arabs nearly entirely through the lens of violent enemies of Jews and of the group's endangered new home of Israel.

To understand the relevance of my broader study and place it in the proper socio-historical context we must briefly zoom out and rewind. After the Holocaust, as Zionism spiked in popularity, a unique strain of Zionism was created among diaspora Jewry in the United States, one in which Jews "rarely immigrated but rather focused on giving substantial financial and political support to Zionist institutions both before and after the establishment of the state" [6, p. 1]. It was Israel's Six-Day War of 1967, or more accurately the anxiety leading up to it, that became a "watershed" for the American Jewish relationship with Israel. Milton Himmelfarb, research director at the American Jewish Committee, wrote a commentary in October of 1967 describing "a sudden realization that genocide, anti-Semitism, a desire to murder Jews—all those things were not merely what one had been taught about a bad, stupid past... those things were real and present" [4, p. 134–137]. Regardless of the fact that Israel was able to quickly crush its Arab opponents, the war re-energized the American Jewish community. The United Jewish Appeal's "emergency campaign" raised double the previous year's total in merely six months, 150,000 people gathered in New York at the largest rally of American Jews in history, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) initiated its expansion from a "three-man lobbying operation to a multi-million-dollar powerhouse as influential in Washington as the tobacco and gun lobbies" to ensure that American Jews "spoke with a single voice in unquestioning advocacy for Israel" [3, p. 164]. It is a myth that the war transformed the thinking of most American Jews to accomplish these feats; on the contrary, only a minority of Jews were sufficiently moved to think as Himmelfarb did, yet this minority would later come to define the American Jewish Establishment both because they believed they spoke for the entire Jewish community and, as Goldberg points out, they had an "edge" [4, p. 146–147]. Since then, Israel has become "the symbolic center for the civil Jewish universe," and Woocher points out that it has been said that American Jewry recognizes only one heresy: "denial of support for the state of Israel" [9, p. 76–77]. It is evident that the year of 1967, due to the reaction to the Six-Day War and its aftershocks, marks the emergence of Pro-Israel hegemony.

However, just as 1967 served as a watershed for American Jewish history, the past 25 to 30 years have also marked significant change in the American Jewish relationship with Israel. As a historically and politically liberal American Jewish community was confronted with an era of Israeli conservatism with the rise of Menachem Begin and the Likud party, escalating movements to settle the newly occupied—in other eyes liberated or disputed—territories, the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila associated with Israel's invasion of Lebanon, two independent Palestinian *intifadas* or uprisings, unsuccessful attempts at peace negotiations at Oslo, Camp David, as well as Taba, and a controversial disengagement and subsequent invasion of Gaza in the winter of 2008–2009, a "crisis of allegiance" was incepted for American Jewry [3, p. 167–

168]. Although many institutions of the American Jewish establishment have fought to suppress dissent, the past few decades have sparked major shifts toward more acceptable, mainstream critical Jewish engagement with Israel. Two recent examples, on different scales, are the founding and growth of JStreet as a powerful national lobby group and public affairs committee as well as the Year of Civil Discourse initiative undertaken by the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin, Sonoma, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties (JCRC). JStreet, which boasts convening the third-largest gathering of American Jews in North America in 2011, describes its mission on its website as two-fold: “(1) to advocate for urgent American diplomatic leadership to achieve a two-state solution and a broader regional, comprehensive peace and (2) to ensure a broad debate on Israel and the Middle East in national politics and the American Jewish community.” In parallel with JStreet’s national attempt to influence American Jewish discourse about Israel, the JCRC’s website describes the Year of Civil Discourse initiative’s effort “to elevate the level of discourse in the Jewish community when discussing Israel. . . envision[ing] an inclusive Jewish community where people from across the political spectrum can come together, discuss challenging topics, inspire and empower one another, leading to a stronger and more vital Jewish community.”

As the “struggle for the soul of American Jewry” continues, the anxiety of the older generation falls upon the youth of the community. Steven Cohen, Ari Kelman, and other prominent social scientists have recently begun finding that while most young Jews feel some attachment towards Israel, they are considerably less attached than the older generations. Cohen and Kelman attribute this phenomenon—commonly referred to as the “distancing hypothesis” postulating “a weak to moderate direct relationship between age and Israel attachment”—to intermarriage and its role in causing a purported “ethnic decline” of the American Jewish people [2, p. 137, 20–21]. This has sparked tremendous debate in the academic community [8, 5], along with a more public debate when an American journalist named Peter Beinart wrote a very controversial and publically circulated article in the New York Review of Books titled “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.” Beinart built upon the foundation Cohen and Kelman develop in their research, along with the work of Republican pollster Frank Luntz, but rather than attributing American Jewish youth’s declining interest in Israel to intermarriage, Beinart argues that it is a result of the establishment’s consistent insistence that “American Jews. . . check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead” [1, p. 2]. Unfortunately, however, this is where the trail ends.

My study picks up where the debate leaves off by attempting to unravel this conflict within American Jewry through an introductory ethnographic study of American Jewish young adults’ relationship to Israel involving hundreds of hours of public observation, more than one hundred survey responses, and more than 20 interviews of American Jewish young adults and the professionals, administrators, and staff that work with them in three settings: (1) the college campus of the University of California, Berkeley (2) a fledgling trip for both Jews and

Palestinians aimed at comparative conflict analysis and conflict transformation as organized by Abraham's Vision (3) and the coming of age trip for hundreds of thousands of American Jewish young adults—Taglit-Birthright Israel—which will be the topic of my talk today.

The concept of controlling processes is the lynchpin for my study and the foundation for the theoretical model I wish to use to analyze my ethnographic data. Professor Laura Nader defines controlling processes as the “mechanisms by which ideas take hold and become institutional in relation to power,” which functions in concert with other core concepts including ideology, hegemony, and multiple forms of control (social, cultural, overt, and covert) to create a theoretical methodology for studying power [7, p. 33]. In this talk, then, I wish to trace a few dynamic flows of power on the Birthright trip by borrowing the conceptualization of controlling processes as transformative central ideas emanating from institutions that define their dynamics. Controlling processes are everywhere we look—a common example may be your drive here today. You may have decided to stop safely at a stop sign, you may have decided to slyly roll through it, or you may have decided to do something else altogether. Regardless, processes of cultural control dominate your decision-making—the sign itself does not physically slow your car down but the surprisingly complex system of ideas within you about it does. It is important to note that the term controlling processes, just as in this example, is not meant to connote judgment: I do not take up whether this control is “good” or “bad” but merely am allowing the reader to become aware of its existence. Also, I am not suggesting that control is inescapably oppressive; power must be analyzed reflexively as well and is “double-edged” in the sense that agents can enact control so as to contribute to or resist their own hegemonic domination. I will begin by giving an ethnographic description of the institution of interest for me: the Birthright trip.

Taglit-Birthright Israel is an organization that coordinates and sponsors free introductory 10-day heritage trips to Israel for Jews from all over world. Hundreds of thousands of young adults have gone on the trip since its inception in 1999, most originating in the United States. As described on Birthright's website, young adults in North America begin registration online by choosing between over a dozen independent trip organizers that implement and staff the trip to bring together a group of those young adults with an Israeli tour guide, security guard, and trip organizer staff to follow a skeleton itinerary mandated by Birthright which includes trips to important sites of Jewish significance. These sites often include Independence Hall and Rabin Square in Tel-Aviv, a visit to both the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and the Jewish Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem, a stay on a *kibbutz* or agricultural collective in the Galilee, a swim in the Dead Sea along with a Bedouin experience in the southern Negev desert, and lastly a *mifgash* or encounter with Israeli young adults serving in the Israeli Defense Forces as they join the tour for a number of days. This summer, I conducted an ethnographic study of a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip between the dates of June 5–15 with 39 other Jewish young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 from all over the United States organized by Sachlav: Israel on the House, one of the larger—and as the staff told me “more generic”—Birthright

Trip Organizers.

Let us move right into the ethnography and review the quotes I started this talk with: (1) “this was the most amazing experience I have ever had... if its like this every week then maybe I want to live here,” (2) “if the [Israeli] army had a 6-month program, I would join without hesitation,” and (3) “this was one of the only times in my life I regretted not being a man.” Our group was holding a Friday evening prayer service to bring in the Sabbath at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, one of the most sacred Jewish sites in the world. The holy site was separated by gender and the events on the men’s side were the origin for the prior quotes. After embracing each other in a large circle as we were led in the Sabbath prayers, we were led closer to the wall past a group of more than a hundred Israeli soldiers dancing and singing together. As we walked past them, a few soldiers on the outside of the group looked at a few of us, opened up their circle, and pushed us into the center. The rest of us joined soon after, and in moments, the soldiers embraced us all as we danced, jumped, and sang together in perfect unison. As we walked away from the intensity of the scene, my fellow participants couldn’t hold in their excitement and out came the quotes I began this talk with as we made our way home—electrified.

This moment was the turning point, the pinnacle of the trip for many of the participants—but it would not have been nearly as magical had the foundational elements not been in place. Remember, we began this trip with Jewish young adults almost all of whom had never traveled to Israel or knew much about it, most of whom were only distantly connected to their organized Jewish communities back in the United States, and who generally felt little to no connection to Jewish history or peoplehood prior to the trip. In contrast to this, an informant I call Alex told me just a few days into the trip how the experience has made him want to take another look at those Jewish books he stuffed deep in his closet years ago. He told me how Birthright was already allowing him to connect with Judaism and understand it better. That same day, Aaron announced that he was now going to publicly be addressed as Aharon (a biblical name common in Israel and origin of the English name Aaron). These feelings of deep connection to our ancient biblical roots were brought to the forefront as we connected with the global suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust on our tour in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. There was not a soul that was not deeply moved by our experience that day in the museum: most looked pale and distressed and some had their character for the rest of the trip completely changed after the visit. For example, one participant I call Darrell—the self-proclaimed trouble-maker prior to our trip to the museum—left it in tears and was one of the most well-behaved of us all for the rest of the trip. He even openly apologized for his rowdiness to the group a couple days later.

At the end of the day, all of these experiences were deeply connected to the country we had been brought to as our staff member, whom I call David, told us in Yad Vashem, “even if the United States turns on its Jews one day in the future, Israel will be there to protect us and stop another Holocaust from happening.” This message of Israel being the sole protector and safeguard of world Jewry, which the group had by now become strongly identified with,

was repeated over and over by the staff. As we clearly heard during our tour guide's speech on top of Mt. Herzl, "this is not just any country. This is your country. This is your home." He didn't have to tell the men because we already knew, we had felt it as the Israeli soldiers at the Western Wall accepted us. We were part of their family, they were protecting us, this was our home. This conglomeration of deeply novel and meaningful experiences made us feel as if part of us was always here, something we had thought we lost but had found once more, and served as an intense process of socialization into collectively identifying with the Jewish people and their home and protector, Israel.

Israel, however, is not solely a home for the Jewish people. One out of every four citizens of the country is not of Jewish origin and one out of every five is an Israeli Palestinian; this does not count the 3-4 million Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem who have been in a violent conflict with Israel for generations—and escalating as we speak. This begs the question: is Israel a home for these citizens also—or more pertinently to my research—do Jewish young adults see Israel as a home for non-Jewish, especially Palestinian, citizens and what controlling processes are in play revolving this issue in the Taglit-Birthright Israel trip? To answer this question, we must connect some dots just as before. The first dot involves the participants learning that their new home is a place of conflict, of violent conflict even, and that there are people out there that might jeopardize their, and their state's safety. Before we even boarded our plane, our staff explained explicitly that "Israel is a safe place but there are people that want to hurt Jews there so we have to be very careful." Right as we got off the plane, we were greeted by our tour bus, our tour guide, and a security guard armed with a rifle. When I asked the guard whether he had ever gotten into a situation where he might have had to use the gun he said, "no, but its better to be safe than sorry, right?" When we were in Jerusalem, as another example, we were asked not to go into the Muslim Quarter under any circumstances—"it is very dangerous," we were told.

This understanding of potential for violence against the group, particularly by Arabs and/or Muslims, is connected to another dot: the historical lessons given by our tour guide about past violence against Israel. We learned about how "Israel might have been destroyed by the Arab armies" in the battles of the Golan Heights in 1973, the Lebanese ruthlessness in making trades of thousands of Palestinian prisoners for a few Israeli soldiers who ended up being merely carcasses, and the many stories of the deaths of Israeli soldiers at the hands of terrorists at the Mt. Herzl military cemetery. This history is an essential educational feature of the trip, but I began to notice that Palestinians and Arabs were depicted as violent enemies of the state nearly every time they were mentioned. Often, our tour guide referred to the violence as being committed by a collective—by "the Palestinians" or "the Arabs." This understanding of our Birthright group, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel as being in violent danger at the hands of Arabs and Palestinians was enflamed when the group began hearing the staff speak about them as greedy, vengeful, and even lacking value for life. As we climbed down Mt. Arbel on our first full day in Israel, we heard a call to prayer from an Arab village at the bottom of the trail. As we got

onto the bus, one of the staff members told a few participants sitting next to her how the call “sent chills down her spine,” and as they got into a conversation about suicide bombings she asked those around her rhetorically, “what can you expect from a culture that doesn’t have respect for their own lives?” As our tour guide told us about the Syrian-Israeli conflict he talked about what he called the uncompromising Arab mentality: “what you have to understand is that the Arab mentality has great propensity for revenge and holding grudges over long periods of time.” This sort of discourse continued even away from the trip as the staff posted links that the group received as updates now that we were connected. One link tagged to the facebook profile of “Sachlav Staff” on July 6th was a short clip from Family Guy, a popular animated television series, involving an explosive “Palestinian alarm clock” to which “Sachlav Staff” giddily replied, “hahahahaha awesome.”

It is evident that these dots, when connected, created a space that was open to inducing at best a stereotypically negative view of Palestinians and Arabs as violent and at worst hateful discourse. As a minimum, participants assumed that acts of violence against Jews were committed by Palestinians. For example, when we visited Yitzhak Rabin’s grave on the top of Mt. Herzl, our tour guide told us about how there are still cameras surveilling the area because it gets vandalized from time to time. A participant I call Christina chimed in and began to ask who vandalized the grave, only to stop herself mid-sentence in understanding, “oh, the Palestinians!” But no, it was not the Palestinians who vandalized Rabin’s grave but the same group whom his assassin identified with—right-wing religious Jewish radicals. The results, though, could be far more ominous than merely submitting to stereotypes of violence. Hateful discourse on the trip ranged from cursing obscenities directed at the Syrian border to referring to horse excrement on the side of the hiking trail as “Palestinian,” all of which was never publically challenged by either the participants or the staff, although a few participants expressed their discomfort to me privately. As we were coming back from the Syrian border, David wanted to make a point to the group about the difference between Jews and Arabs: “where I live if we had an Israeli flag on our car window it would get broken in by the end of the day. Who here would break the window of a car with a Palestinian flag on it?” He was obviously expecting silence to make his point, but two male participants raised their hands. He pressed them, hoping they were joking, “really now, guys?” “Yep!” they replied in unison. These occurrences, these thoughts, and these expressions do not come out of thin air—they are not happenstance. Rather, they represent an internalization of the cultural control that we have now illuminated, culminating, on our trip, in a breeding ground for public, accepted, and sometimes even hateful expressions of discrimination, symbolic violence, and negative generalizations against Palestinian Arabs.

Although my Sachlav Birthright trip maintained that their trips are merely intended to influence a participant’s Jewish identity so that they “make the right decisions” about their Jewish life back home, it turns out that as a byproduct on the trip I studied, they also influence and control the way a participant thinks and has conversations about Israel. I want to be clear that I am not

suggesting that this analysis can be immediately applied to all Birthright trips, but after conversations with many informants coupled with the fact that this was a “generic” trip I imagine it highly unlikely that these findings are unique. The question of whether and how we can create an analysis of the “general birthright trip” is one for a future comparative study. Birthright is not a trip maintaining overt control over the participants’ actions or conversations: not all participants regarded it as a “life-changing experience” and I have not yet been able to undertake sufficient follow-up to see if the trip substantially changed the participants’ lives after they came home. However, regardless of intent, there exist controlling processes that implicitly and culturally influence the participants by (1) socializing participants into collective identification with world Jewry, the Jewish State of Israel, and the Israeli military as a second family and a second home, and (2) depicting that second family and second home as in peril, in fear of being wiped off the map while simultaneously depicting Palestinian Arabs as the violent threats to that sanctity. These are only two of the many controlling processes involved in the birthright trip and in the thought and discourse surrounding Israel in the American Jewish community. Hopefully, through a thorough introductory ethnographic research project on the subject, I can inspire further ground-level research to work in tandem with broader, survey-focused sociological studies to form a more comprehensive, adequately scientific body of knowledge on a topic that remains contested to this day.

References

- [1] Beinart, Peter. 2010. “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.” *New York Review of Books*, June 10.
- [2] Cohen, Steven M. Kelman, Ari. 2007. “Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel.” Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.
- [3] Freedman, Samuel. 2000. *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- [4] Goldberg, J.J. 1996. *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- [5] Heilman, Samuel. 2010. “Editor’s Introduction to the Distancing Hypothesis Issue.” *Contemporary Jewry* 30: 141–143. DOI: 10.1007/s12397-010-9057-0.
- [6] Minkin, Sarah Anne. 2010. “Fear, Fantasy, and Family: Israel’s Significance to American Jews.” Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley.
- [7] Nader, Laura. 1995. “Controlling Processes: Tracing the Dynamic Components of Power.” *Current Anthropology* 38.5: 33–59.

- [8] Sasson, Theodore, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe. 2010. "Trends in American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the 'Distancing' Hypothesis." *Contemporary Jewry* 30: 297–319.
- [9] Woocher, Jonathan. 1986. *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.