

Pre/Post Study of Eighth Grade Trips to Israel: The survey, by Rosov Consulting, examined eighth grade students at 13 day schools in the USA who participated in trips to Israel in spring 2013, both before (pre) and two to four weeks after (post) their school trips to Israel, and is the first ever study to examine the impact of trips to Israel through a pre and post trip evaluation. This study explores a question that until now has not been researched: if and how middle-school students' self-understanding and their connections to Israel are changed by participating in their school's short-term educational trip to Israel.

Within the overall perspective of the Israel Experience continuum, teen Israel programs play a critical role in strengthening Jewish identity and providing a direct and personal connection with Israel in the critical years before young people depart from their homes and transition to university and other institutions of higher education. Traditionally, these programs have been at the core of the Israel Experience, and it is estimated that more than 500,000 young people have participated in such programs over the last 35 years. In more recent years, participation rates have stagnated and in some cases retreated. Unlike other areas of the Israel Experience continuum in which umbrella and convening structures provide rationality, scale and efficiency to the market, the area of teen travel has no clear strategy or guiding operational principles. While individual programs may be successful in achieving educational goals, much work needs to be done on areas such as product development, price reduction, quality assurance, and expansion to new partners and clients, rationality of scale, research and evaluation. The Jewish Agency is working, in partnership with funders, communities and organizations throughout the Jewish world, and eventually with the government of Israel, to undertake a pilot approach to implementing such a holistic strategy. This approach will define pre-selected geographical or organizational arenas, and work with partners to generate successful demonstrative cases where more teens can come to Israel for programs that have educational quality, lower prices, and product suitability.

FINDINGS

Image of Israel – The ways in which students' views of Israel were most changed following the trip reflected their comfort in the country as a young people (thinking of it as a fun vacation destination, a place where teenagers have more freedom, etc.). Other than with regards to the theme of anti-Semitism, there is no obvious connection to Jewish or geopolitical issues among the images of Israel that significantly shifted (for example, thinking of it as the homeland of the Jewish people or as a country facing ingoing threats to existence).

The students whose image of Israel as a warm and friendly place was most changed was among those who had been less engaged with Israel and Jewish matters before they went on the trip. In general, the images of Israel that were least shifted (Israel as a spiritual center or as the birthplace of the Jewish people) are precisely those that dominate the view

Securing the Jewish Future for Generations

of Israel taught in day schools. This suggests a disconnect between the content of what students learn about Israel at school and what they learn about Israel during their trips.

Sense of Belonging – In response to a question that asked students about their degree of association with different groups of Jews, it was found that students came home more ready to identify with Jews in general and even more so with supporters of Israel. Notably, after their trip to Israel, greater numbers of students continued to feel more closely connected both to Jews around the world and America than they did to people who say that Israel is important in their life.

While a closer analysis reveals that many students expressed a greater sense of belonging following their time in Israel, there were also students who expressed a weaker sense of belonging. More than 50% of respondents who in the pre-test had located themselves at the margins, expressed a stronger sense of belonging in the post-test. An additional 25% expressed a weaker sense of belonging after the trip. Again, those who previously had been less connected to Israel seem to have been changed most positively by this experience, especially those who before the trip classified themselves as “outsiders.”

Expressions of the Students’ Identities – There is a positive shift in expressions concerned with Jewish peoplehood and connection to Israel, and with concerns associated with the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, while spiritual concerns are not significantly changed following a trip to Israel. Students’ tendency to conceive of Israel as intimately related to their conception of the Jewish people is reinforced by their experience.

Confidence in Talking about Various Topics – Upon these students’ return from Israel, they express significantly greater confidence in talking about all matters, other than those directly connected to spiritual concerns. This may reflect a general boost in self-confidence and belief in their understanding of the world following their time away from home, an experience they evidently appreciate.

With respect to these conceptual and intellectual matters, it was the students who previously were more engaged in Jewish matters who were most changed. It seems that when it comes to cognitive issues, the more engaged students are more receptive to the content of their experience in Israel. When it comes to emotional matters – and especially relationships with Israel and Israelis – it is the less Jewishly-engaged students who are most changed.

WHAT CAUSES CHANGE?

There was not enough variation in the sample to explore the extent to which outcomes might be related to the length of time spent in Israel or to different program experiences. However, it was possible to determine that actual changes in students’ thoughts and feeling were most often correlated with their sense of having found meaningful the opportunities to reflect on and discuss their experiences during the trip. This is an important finding exposed by the pre/post methodology, since, when students were asked about their own sense of what had been the most meaningful program components for them, they had

regarded those opportunities for reflection and discussion to have been the least meaningful aspect of the trip. It seems that participants may simply not appreciate the time spent in such discussions, especially compared to the programs' more dramatic components. Evidently, these elements are critical to the educational process.

CONCLUSIONS

This first ever study suggests that it is worth taking a closer look at these eighth grade day school trips to Israel and their potential to have an impact upon diverse educational goals.

Short, 10-day to three-week trips to Israel can induce important outcomes: changes in the *structure* of the participants' conceptions; changes in the *intensity* of their conceptions; and changes in the *coherence* of their conceptions. Generally, these trips to Israel crystalize the way in which young people – in the early stages of adolescence – think about Israel and the world.

These trips influence students' affective relationships to Israel especially among those who might not have previously been inclined to identify with Israel. The scale of the shifts observed is moderate, but surprisingly large given the relatively brief length of time that participants spend in Israel on their trips.

The trips also seem to have a smaller, although occasionally significant, impact on students' understanding of contemporary Israel and the Jewish past. Those elements of students' thinking about Israel that seem most strongly influenced by their time in Israel relate to themes and dimensions concerned with what it is like for people to live in the country. These personal themes are quite different from those, such as Israel's place in Jewish history and religious life, most heavily addressed by day schools during the regular course of the year.

Students who were interested in Jewish matters before the trip are more likely to be engaged by the intellectual and historical ideas they encounter during the trip; those less connected to Jewish life and Jewish concerns before the trip are more likely to return with a greater sense of Israel as a fun place to spend time and with a greater sense of association with those who live there. Some, however, return with a weaker sense of identification with others Jews and with supporters of Israel.

Program-time devoted to reflection and discussion is most closely correlated with the changes observed. The participants themselves may not be fully aware of these effects, and they may not appreciate the time spent in such discussions, especially when compared to the programs' more dramatic components.

QUESTIONS

In the best instances, eighth grade school trips provide a different view of Israel from that which is provided inside of school time and curricular structures. What happens if students continue on to high school, and the Israel about which they learn is once again an abstract or mythologized one that bears little relation to the one they have experienced and

appreciated? Will the impacts of these short programs quickly dissipate without reinforcement, or will students start to feel a dissonance between the contemporary Israel they encountered and the abstract Israel they learn about in school?

What is the impact of these programs on Israelis? Some of the strongest outcomes observed are a consequence of the time spent in the company of young Israelis; these encounters are a central part of the twinning relationships that schools sustain, and it is surely worth exploring what changes for the Israeli participants in these relationships, after they have spent time with young people from North America. These outcomes may be an important and untapped outcome of such investments.

Why do young people react in such different ways to their time in Israel? Why do some come home feeling more distant from Israel and from Israelis? Is it because of something they experience during their time in the program or is it because of a mismatch between their expectations ahead of the trip and their experiences in the country?