

Young, American Jews and the Birthright Trip:  
An Analysis of Rising Anti-Occupation Campaigns in the United States

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It had been an idyllic first week: hiking to beautiful views of Lebanon and Syria in the Golan Heights, rafting in the warm, clear water of the Jordan river, shopping with friends for jewelry and snacks in the historic, white-stoned Tzfat. I'd even partied in Jerusalem late into the night with cute Israeli soldiers who bought me shots. It couldn't have been a better time. And yet, as I found myself disoriented, right in the middle of an outdoor concert stadium in Jerusalem filled with thousands of screaming Jews all in a white t-shirt uniform, all applauding Netanyahu's 'us vs. them' rhetoric, all I could think was "How am I here?"

The answer, of course, is that I was on a Birthright trip. And our trip happened to overlap with that summer's Mega Event: an event hosted by Birthright featuring speakers, montage videos praising Jews from around the world who moved to Israel, and a rock concert finale.

If you can't tell by now, this isn't an orthodox thesis paper. My aim is not to perform an objective, academic analysis of rising anti-occupation<sup>1</sup> campaigns amongst young, Jewish Americans. As I've tried to get more perspectives and tap into the existing conversations surrounding Birthright, trying to remove myself further away, attempting an eagle-eye view, I've succeeded at the opposite. I'm in it. Deep, in the midst of the debate about Birthright. Although I first intended to stay as removed and unbiased as possible, I quickly learned how subjective and personal this subject matter is; I found it impossible to separate myself from it entirely.

I have also learned that there are many others with a story similar to mine. So, as much as this project is for myself, it's also folks like me who find themselves struggling to keep up in a

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<sup>1</sup> "The Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory (the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) is in its fifth decade and the undercurrent of violence and inherent abuses of fundamental human rights and disregard for international law inherent in any long-standing military occupation is presented by both sides. Both Israeli and Palestinian civilians continue to bear the brunt of the violence in the region" (*Amnesty International*).

quickly dividing and intensifying issue. My goal for this project is to shed light on the ways in which Birthright's participation in the Israel-Palestine conflict is defining young, American Jews and to encourage my peers to do their own research about the Birthright controversy.

I can't name the number of times someone has said to me "I'll talk politics all day, but I don't talk about Israel-Palestine." The conflict hits home in this way for nearly all American Jews for many reasons including family in Israel, existing trauma from the Holocaust, ongoing anti-Semitism. It is for these reasons that I have determined the impracticality of approaching this issue without bias, especially with the goal of engaging other Jews in conversation. It's a subjective issue, and trying to abstract it in the context of talking with other Jewish people is—as my experiences have proven—unproductive. Therefore, my own biases on this issue are strewn throughout this project.

One such bias can be found in my *mode* of research. While there is a lot of existing scholarly work analyzing Birthright's founding, mission, and success, little has been written in an academic setting about the several rising anti-occupation organizations which engage Birthright in conversation. Therefore, I decided to lean into the subjectivity of the topic and I found that the best mode of research for my task was often interpersonal.

As I've spoken with friends and family about my endeavor here, I've noticed a trending series of questions: "Do you regret going on Birthright? Would you recommend others not go on Birthright? How can you question Birthright without being anti-Semitic?" I don't have easy answers to all of these questions, but in being asked them, I noticed a stark pattern of offensiveness and defensiveness, and always from people who feel some connection to Israel. Part of my research has been learning to sympathize with this response and understand where it comes from and why it happens.

While I aim to answer these questions, part of my mission is also to explain *why* I've chosen to think about this topic, why it's important not only for me to do this research and this thinking, but for all young Jewish people. One of my primary sources in answering this question is my friend, Sam Frolichstein-Appel.

Sam and I are both from Evanston, IL where our families pay membership to the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation (JRC). There, we grew up with Rabbi Brant Rosen who was a teacher through Hebrew School, a friendly face in times of grief or celebration, and a guide towards becoming Bat Mitzvah.<sup>2</sup> However, Rabbi Brant is no longer with JRC. The summer Sam and I left for college, Rabbi Brant left the congregation due to pressure from many members who disagreed with his activism for Palestinian rights and asked for his resignation. At the time, Sam and I were devastated and we both note this event as the first time we noticed a repeating theme of *divisiveness* within Jewish communities.

Though Sam and I have always been similarly progressive in our practice of Judaism, our experiences started to differ when he left for Brown University and I went to DePaul University. Brown has a large Jewish population, large enough for a divided Hillel (divided in that they often have conversations about Israel-Palestine with conflicting viewpoints). And, though Sam opts to be a part of the Hillel and have these conversations, he has some friends who do not identify with the campus organization and who make up an informal group of their own. Additionally, Sam is a volunteer and trained member of the main two anti-occupation organizations I will be highlighting and comparing in this project. In total, Sam finds himself drawn to four distinct Jewish communities, many of which overlap, and all of which contain divided and conflicting beliefs about Israel-Palestine and Birthright.

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<sup>2</sup> A bar or bat mitzvah—b'nai mitzvah is the general-neutral term—is the celebration of a young member of a congregation becoming an adult by leading a Shabbat service. (This definition is similarly my own for the same reason as above).

I, however, struggled to find a Jewish community at DePaul. DePaul's Hillel is openly pro-Israel and not receptive to criticism. DePaul also has a Students for Justice in Palestine organization (SJP), but when I showed up to an event and explained that I'd been on the Birthright trip and was retrospectively questioning my choice to go, I was met with disapproval. I wanted a space to talk through my ideas with other people who weren't sure how they felt, but those spaces didn't seem to exist. Everywhere I turned, people felt starkly one way or the other about Israel and Birthright, and it was keeping those who would otherwise be friends at odds with one another.

Sam believes, like I do, in discourse's ability to bring people together. As he explained his experience to me, it became clear that so much of the conflict he's dealt with the past four years at college, within his several Jewish communities, has been between Jews calling each other anti-Semitic. The most well-known example of this is amongst right-leaning Jews who argue that the Boycott, Divest, Sanction Movement (BDS),<sup>3</sup> and Jews who promote it, are anti-Israel (or anti-Zionist) and therefore anti-Semitic. And then, on the other hand, when Sam mentioned to me his sometimes-tumultuous relationship with Hillel staff and board, who have at one point called him a poor representation of Judaism, I asked "well isn't that's anti-Semitic?" to which Sam replied "see how easily this issue divides us?" It is so easy to find division within the small, but impassioned Jewish world, but much harder to facilitate commonality.

The issue of divisiveness within the Jewish community comes from all sides: different, competing campaigns against birthright, Jews in Birthright feeling at odds with those that oppose it, and Jews from both sides calling each other anti-Semitic or immoral. Talking about Birthright is vital to ensure that the future of Jewish Americans isn't defined by conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> BDS takes the stance that "Israel is occupying and colonizing Palestinian land" and calls for "action to pressure Israel to comply with international law" and urges others to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel as a persuasive method (BDS).

Before jumping into controversy surrounding Birthright, I needed to resolve some questions for myself. Why does the controversy about Birthright within the Jewish community matter? What is Birthright? Why does Birthright exist? Why is Birthright especially concerned with young people and how they identify within the Jewish community? Does Birthright effectively accomplish its mission? Why are people opposed to Birthright?

## **Birthright**

Most young American Jews have heard of the Birthright trip: a *free*, 10-day trip to Israel. Who wouldn't be interested? I definitely was.

Before signing up for the trip, I did no research. I subconsciously decided not to look into what I was signing up for, for fear of deciding to opt out and miss out.

I might have considered different kinds of Birthright trips (i.e. a themed trip like one which focused on cuisine or was catered for queer-identifying folk) or even considered going to Israel through DePaul University or a neighboring Chicago school, but ultimately I chose one of the most common trips: an adventure trip filled with hiking, rafting, and more. I remember choosing this trip because I wanted to avoid any themed trip which I suspected would be more filled with deep conversation; I wanted to enjoy myself and not feel obligated to bring up any politics or controversy.

Birthright's mission statement—likely the only thing I read before my trip—reads:

“To ensure the vibrant future of the Jewish people by strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and connection with Israel” (Birthright).

Having taken a closer look at Birthright's website since my trip, I have discovered some noteworthy facts necessary to understand the foundation from which this complex issue is built.

Birthright was founded in 1999 and is funded in many ways, but most importantly by the State of Israel, itself. The Birthright organization (also known as Taglit-Birthright Israel) boasts hosting young Jews from 67 countries including all 50 states (and including nearly 1,000 north American colleges and universities). Based on their calculations over 650,000 people have gone on the trip so far (Birthright).

The website explains that Birthright was “Born out of a concern that assimilation was leading Diaspora Jewry away from engagement with Jewish life and the State of Israel, the program that began as an experiment has been extraordinarily successful...” (Birthright).

Yehonatan Abramson addresses this effort to connect the Jewish Diaspora with the State of Israel as a homeland in his article, “Making a Homeland, Constructing a Diaspora: The Case of Taglit-Birthright Israel.” Abramson’s aim is to use the Birthright trip as an example in his defense of “homeland tourism as an attempt to construct a diasporic identity” (Abramson 15). Abramson leans heavily into the scholarly utility of his work and consciously uses similar language to Birthright’s own. He allows glimpses of Birthright’s existing, stronger rhetoric when he points to other actors, such as Marlene Post, the chairperson of Birthright’s North America branch whose concern is for those Jews who are not associated with Jewish institutions and ““may therefore soon be lost to the Jewish people”” (Abramson 17). At this point in my research I had to wonder “Where exactly is this concern for the Jewish future coming from?”

In his study “Attachment of American Jews to Israel: Perspectives from Local Jewish Community Studies,” Ira M. Sheskin cites a national report released in 1990 about rising intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews and general assimilation into a large public and away from Jewish traditions (Sheskin 28). Abramson notes the same study, summarizing that “the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS)... reported the now-famous figure of 52%

intermarriage rates between the years 1985-1990 (Kosmin et al., 1991). The survey intensified discussions already underway about a crisis in Jewish continuity” (Abramson 17). Ab. also points to Peter Beinart’s book *The Crisis of Zionism* and paraphrases Beinart’s position when he writes “High rates of inter-marriage, processes of assimilation, a decline in the place of religion among young adults, and lack of knowledge about Judaism were framed as a threat to American Jewish survival” (Abramson 17).

I would not have believed that some Jews perceive intermarriage as a real “threat” had I not encountered this view myself several times in Israel. While Birthright as an organization was not offended by my non-Jewish mother in the application process,<sup>4</sup> one of the other girls on my trip was. Near the end of the trip, the guides and designated rabbi invited reflections from us about our past and present relationship with Judaism. The conversation shifted to a comparison of “Jewish-ness” and I tried making the argument that even though my mother wasn’t Jewish, I had still been raised religiously, still knew how to read and write the Hebrew prayers, and felt deeply connected with the culture. Nonetheless, I later overheard this young woman speaking in hushed tones about me with one of the guides, pleading “she shouldn’t be on the trip, she’s not even really Jewish.”

Intermarriage is scary to some Jews because of a fear of losing the faith through assimilation with other cultures. However, for this young woman—like so many other young people I’ve met—the fear melts into a dangerous ideology of a “pure” Jew. This ideology, of course, has racial implications which insist that Judaism is a race and ethnicity as well as a religious and cultural practice (which I do not believe), but it also begs the question: What does it mean to be Jewish? This question is where I believe the fear turns into threat and the risk of the

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<sup>4</sup> The application process includes a questionnaire and over-the-phone confirmation about the religious orientation of the applicants’ parents, grandparents, whether the applicant has been raised religiously Jewish, and in what way.

future of the Jewish race turns into a “crisis.” Birthright is especially concerned with young people and how they identify within the Jewish community precisely because of this fear for the preservation and purity of the Jewish future.

Dov Waxman takes up this conversation in his article “Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS.” The title alone adds a lot of new ideas. Waxman sets the Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) movement at one end of the spectrum, and Birthright at the other (as I do). I will also refer to these ends of the spectrum as conservative/progressive and right/left.

Waxman’s thesis reads:

rather than distancing themselves from Israel, as many have claimed, young American Jews are actually engaging with Israel in ways that their parents or grandparents seldom did. Moreover, their attitudes towards Israel are often more nuanced than those of their older counterparts—generally, feeling emotionally attached to the country, but critical of its government’s policies, especially concerning Palestinians (Waxman 178).<sup>5</sup>

Waxman’s aim is to persuade the more conservative right to sympathize with the progressive left and to not feel so worried about the future of Judaism.

He also complicates the left/progressive and right/conservative spectrum by adding age into the discussion. He sympathizes with the “popular claim”—that is, the political conservative right’s position—when he offers their perspective of the “so-called ‘millennial’ generation... [known] for its allegedly shallow Jewish identity, weak commitment to Israel, disinterest in organized Jewish life, and indifference to specifically Jewish concerns” (177).<sup>6</sup> Here, Waxman

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<sup>5</sup> Waxman eloquently restates his thesis when he writes “Critical engagement with Israel is a manifestation of attachment, not alienation. It is generally because they care about Israel, or at least feel somehow connected to it, that many young American Jews question and challenge those aspects of Israel that they find problematic or objectionable” (Waxman 181).

<sup>6</sup> While his research defends this general shift, I argue that the effect of someone’s age within the conservative/progressive spectrum is not a generalization which can always be assumed. If it

seems to be adding to the binary of Jews by suggesting that older Jews generally fall into the conservative right whereas younger Jews are becoming increasingly progressive and left.<sup>7</sup>

Waxman argues that Millennials—and now, some Gen Z—are leaning more left due to four components:

(1) [they] are more liberal than their older counterparts; (2) they are more oriented toward universalism and more concerned with social justice as central to their Jewish identities and Judaism (partly because they are more likely to be the offspring of intermarriage); (3) the Holocaust and anti-Semitism has had less of an impact on them; and (4) they have significantly different ‘generational memories’ of Israel than older generations (Waxman 178-179).

As Waxman defends, young people are more liberal, more globally and socially concerned, and less impacted by the history of anti-Semitism. These four components suggest why age is one of the most important factors to consider in my discussion, and therefore why my argument specifically addresses younger Jewish Americans.<sup>8</sup> They serve to answer why Birthright specifically targets those aged 18-26.

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was, there wouldn’t be so many American Jews still participating in Birthright and becoming increasingly attached to Israel.

<sup>7</sup> Ira Sheskin in his research titled “Attachment of American Jews to Israel: Perspectives from Local Jewish Community Studies” gets at this question and my critique (above footnote) of Waxman’s argument when he claims “Two different, yet highly interrelated relationships have been examined under the rubric of the distancing hypothesis. The first hypothesis is that younger Jews are less attached to Israel than are older Jews... The second hypothesis is that the overall attachment of American Jews to Israel has been decreasing over time” (28).

<sup>8</sup> When Sheskin wrote his study in 2012, he also pointed out the importance of age in terms of a historical context: “Jews age 35–49 were raised during the time of the Lebanon War and the First Intifada. Jews age 18–34 were raised during the hope of Oslo but also during Intifada II, the Second Lebanon War, and the Gaza War. Jews under age 50 have been exposed for most of their lives to media that often view Israel critically” (30).

Birthright's effect is undeniable. In fact, although Waxman generally points to the left-leaning young Jewish Americans who criticize Israel, he acknowledges that "substantial research demonstrates a much stronger attachment to Israel among Jews who have been to Israel, including among alumni of Birthright trips." (Waxman 180).

The article, "Does Taglit-Birthright Israel Foster Long-Distance Nationalism," published in a *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* journal by Theodore Sasson and others from Middlebury College and Brandeis University is likely one of the studies Waxman was pointing to. The research group conducted social scientific research of those who had gone on the Birthright trip in the form of surveys questioning their changed perception of Israel with regard to its high-tech innovation, as a part of "God's plan for the Jewish people," relating to Palestine, and much more. The conclusions of the paper determine that participants positively perceived "a generally favorable evaluation of the Israeli state and society," but also that the trip "increased the tendency to view Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews... and under constant threat from hostile neighbors" (T. Sasson et al. 449).

Based on this research, young people who might otherwise be neutral on the issue not only consistently have a newfound connection and appreciation for Israel because of their Birthright trip, but also have taken on a similar paranoia and fear to that which prompted Birthright in the first place. This paranoia is the cause of the conservative Jewish identity being driven by fear and defensiveness and it adds to the heightened divisiveness amongst Jewish communities.

## **Birthright Controversy**

At this point in my project, I suspect that anyone not familiar with the Israel-Palestine conflict might be asking themselves: Why is this a problem? What's wrong with learning to love Israel as a homeland and protector for Jewish people through the Birthright trip?

Well, another large part of my research has been learning about the State of Israel's oppression and occupation of Palestinian people and their land. This past sentence, however, is not even a statement everyone can agree upon; there are those that argue that the land originally belonged to Jewish people all along, or that the Jewish people were simply defending themselves as the West Bank and Gaza territories formed over the course of decades of fighting.<sup>9</sup>

My Birthright trip was unusual in that it included mention of Palestinian people and territories (although it did so only once). We were about halfway through our trip and we were staying at a hotel with a conference room not quite large enough to seat all 45 of us, so although no one really wanted to be there, it was standing room only. Other than the mega event, this was the only time planned in our itinerary that I didn't love; it felt obligatory, or like they were doing it to prevent some kind of law suit.<sup>10</sup> Someone came in—a man who was born in America and made Aliyah (the religious move to Israel)—and shared a power point presentation with a brief

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<sup>9</sup> The American-Israel Cooperative Enterprise is a non-profit 501 U.S.-based organization established in 1993 which defends the Jewish claim to Israel in Mitchell Bard's article "Pre-State Israel." Bard argues that Jews base their claim of the land on four ideas: "1) God promised the land to the patriarch Abraham; 2) the Jewish people settled and developed the land; 3) the international community granted political sovereignty in Palestine to the Jewish people and 4) the territory was captured in defensive wars" (Bard). This is a common thread of argumentation in the Jewish community.

<sup>10</sup> Birthright's website is careful to mention "The Birthright Israel journey is committed to a culture of open discussion and dialogue about all issues: identity, geopolitics, religion, and Jewish life" (Birthright). It's hard to know whether this is meant to allude to Palestine or invite participants of all identities, but it stuck out to me as another example of the Birthright organization feeling obligated to do or say something.

history of the Oslo Accords<sup>11</sup> and wars of the past few decades since Israel's recent founding as a Jewish State.

I actually remember thinking something like “okay, here's my chance to see how they handle this issue.” I soon realized that only someone like myself, looking for bias and inconsistencies, would find any. The presenter was careful, practiced, and professional; for the most part, he kept things brief and stuck to a timeline. However, he did use rhetoric in his ‘factual’ presentation which framed the Palestinians as violent, unwilling to compromise or discuss, and overall a threat and problem Israel had to deal with. These small moments almost flew by without my catching them, but they were there. And I can't help but wonder how much of that rhetoric slipped through the cracks and confirmed my peers' preexisting prejudices.

So far, I have established that 1) young Jewish people are more likely to have changing and differing opinions about Israel, 2) Birthright is doing an undeniably effective job of taking advantage of this fact with Millennials and Gen Z, and 3) Birthright's approach to discussing Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territories is neglectful. These three points show *why* there exist rising campaigns questioning and criticizing Birthright among young, Jewish Americans.

Now understanding why there is controversy surrounding Birthright, certain questions follow: What are the existing anti-occupation movements in the United States? What are their stances on Birthright? Why are there competing voices within this issue? And, are they effectively counteracting Birthright's mission and making social and political change?

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<sup>11</sup>“In 1993, The Declaration of Principles (also known as the Oslo Accords) was signed agreed to set up Palestinian self-government over five years' time in exchange for Palestinian partnership in matters of Israeli security. The most contentious issues (including Jerusalem, final borders and Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the return of Palestinian refugees) were set to be discussed after that five-year period” (Britannica).

After I returned from my Birthright trip, I took some time to reflect and to learn.

In one way, learning about the many perspectives of the conflict, especially those left-leaning perspectives, was not difficult. Waxman notes how our generation's awareness of global concerns is more possible than our parents or grandparents because of the advent of readily-accessible resources like social media. Thus, he argues (and I concur), that "exposure to the Palestinian narrative might be one reason why [young people] tend to be more dovish in their opinions about the Israel-Palestine conflict" (Waxman 185).

Unconsciously, I had already begun this research even before my birthright trip.

On Monday, February 29 2016 (at 2:38pm CST), more than a year before my trip to Israel, I received my first email from Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). It thanked me for joining the subscriber list, but more importantly "joining a community of more than 200,000 people across the U.S. and around the world who are committed to an end to Israel's human rights abuses and a just peace in Israel and Palestine" (*Jewish Voice for Peace*). Although it has some international followers, Jewish Voice for Peace is a U.S.-based activist organization which was started in 1996 in the Bay Area in California by volunteer UC Berkeley undergraduates. It expanded in 2002 when its members decided they wanted to effect change in US policies regarding Israel-Palestine. Their current mission statement (adapted in 2009) reads:

Jewish Voice for Peace opposes anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab bigotry and oppression. JVP seeks an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians; a just solution for Palestinian refugees based on principles established in international law; an end to violence against civilians; and peace and justice for all peoples of the Middle East (*Jewish Voice for Peace*).

I learned about JVP because Rabbi Brant, my childhood rabbi, is now on their rabbinical council. (I often see pictures on social media of him being arrested in a tallit).<sup>12</sup> One of the things I have always admired about him was his reconstructionist<sup>13</sup> approach to Judaism which, for him, means not separating the religious and political aspects of being Jewish.

Rabbi Brant is now the resident rabbi at a new synagogue: Tzedek Chicago.<sup>14</sup> In the sermon for his first celebration of Rosh Hashana,<sup>15</sup> which was posted on his public blog *Shalom Rav*, Rabbi Brant notes that most congregations “won’t mix religion with politics – the notable exception being, naturally, support and advocacy for the state of Israel.” However, he helped found Tzedek Chicago in line with his own views, that

a Jewish congregation should be more than simply a fee for service institution... should not merely comfort the afflicted, but also afflict the comfortable... should not only be about personal transformation, but socio-political transformation as well.

I was nervous to approach Rabbi Brant before my Birthright trip with the fear that he would sway or convince me not to go. As I’ve mentioned before, when I decided to apply for the trip, I

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<sup>12</sup> A Jewish prayer shawl worn during some services, and always worn by the rabbi or leader of a given congregation. (This definition was not taken from any official dictionary source, like Britannica, because most established dictionary services claim that tallits are exclusively worn by men, and exclusively during particular prayer services, which is not a progressive or accurate definition).

<sup>13</sup> Reconstructionism is one branch of Judaism (like Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform). “Reconstructionists approach Judaism — and life — with deep reverence for the past and a passion to relate it to the present. In a rapidly changing world, Reconstructionist communities share and create new ways of being Jewish to connect us to the divine and ensure our lives are filled with purpose” (“Reconstructionism”).

<sup>14</sup> Tzedek Chicago is “an intentional congregational community based on core values of justice, equity and solidarity with the oppressed” (*Tzedek Chicago*).

<sup>15</sup> Rosh Hashana, “also called Day of Judgment or Day of Remembrance, a major Jewish observance now accepted as inaugurating the religious New Year” (Britannica).

knew that it might not align with my political views, but I wanted to see for myself, and I couldn't imagine what harm it would be.

The first moment I felt regret for participating in Birthright was when I received another email from JVP in September 2017, just two short months after returning from Israel. This email, like most emails I receive from JVP, was a combination of an ask for monetary donation and a promotion of their campaigns. They introduced both ideas in the first line of the email: "What you give determines what we can do—like the new Return the Birthright Campaign our Student Network just launched" (JVP). Needless to say, I was interested, and so I followed the link in the email to their website.

My feelings of guilt swelled when I found the homepage of JVP's newest campaign: #ReturnTheBirthright. Other than general advocacy against Birthright, this campaign encourages people to sign this pledge:

We are Birthright-eligible Jews between the ages of 18 and 32. We pledge that we will not go on a Birthright trip because it is fundamentally unjust that we are given a free trip to Israel, while Palestinian refugees are barred from returning to their homes.

We refuse to be complicit in a propaganda trip that whitewashes the systemic racism, and the daily violence faced by Palestinians living under endless occupation.

Our Judaism is grounded in values of solidarity and liberation, not occupation and apartheid. On these grounds we return the Birthright, and call on other young Jews to do the same (*Jewish Voice for Peace*).

The pledge was specifically for young, Jewish people (which I am), but can only be signed by those that "will not go on a Birthright trip." It excluded those who had gone on Birthright, and the language was so left-leaning and progressive that anyone remotely neutral—like myself—

would likely be turned away. The diction used was strong, unwavering, and divisive (i.e. “it is fundamentally unjust... propaganda trip that whitewashes the systemic racism...”). I struggled to understand its purpose. I always thought a pledge ought to be a platform which people can join so that awareness and advocacy about any given issue can grow; this pledge left no room for growth or discussion. Without intending to, I started the first real step in my thesis; I began criticizing the rhetoric and tactics of anti-occupation movements, specifically regarding Birthright.

When I reached out to my friend Sam about this pledge, he agreed and told me “I would describe my politics as more in line with Jewish Voice for Peace... due to their strong solidarity with the Palestinian people, mostly via support of BDS. [However,] I’m sometimes critical of JVP’s tactics and messaging in that I think it can be unnecessarily antagonistic and inflammatory.”

This realization is what led me to question what other conversations—specifically about Birthright—were taking place. It’s what led me to IfNotNow (INN). INN, founded in 2014, has three demands: “Stop the War on Gaza, End the Occupation, and Freedom and Dignity for All” (*IfNotNow*). Their website notes that they welcome anyone who wants to help the American Jewish public end their support of the Occupation. Their name derives from Hillel the Elder, 1<sup>st</sup> Century, BCE who asked “*If I am not for myself who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?*” INN has created its ideological foundation on these questions. It answers the first by calling for a celebration of Jewishness, in its many forms; the language calls back to the victimization of Jewish people throughout history, and claims that Jewish unification is key to its survival. It answers the second by reviewing the oppression that Jewish people have faced, that a part of our history has been opposing oppression “in all the places it lives,” and that

the occupation is one such oppression. And finally, it answers the third by claiming the urgency of the situation and arguing that all Jewish people have a choice to make. INN makes its choice by “building a Jewish community that recognizes [it] cannot be free absent the freedom of Palestinians.”

Although INN does have places to donate on their website, asking for money isn't a huge part of their call to action. On INN's “Take Action” webpage, they first invite you to connect with other INN members in your local community, additionally it offers orientation training programs in most large cities. (I have yet to attend a training, although I have signed up to be alerted whenever there is one near me). Several friends of mine have gone through the training and sing its praises, claiming that it not only introduces the Israel-Palestine issue and INN's mission to help spread awareness about the occupation, but also offers an inside look into INN's upcoming plans, inner-workings, and opportunities to continue activism with INN.

There are several clear differences between JVP and INN's approach to the occupation. Generally, INN is much more neutral and leans more heavily into language commonly used by American Jewish communities at large, seemingly to sway or convince folks to join the cause. JVP, on the other hand, starkly advertises their progressive beliefs and offers little balance to the issue.

The easiest way to compare the two organizations is in their respective campaigns challenging Birthright. Founded almost a year after JVP's #ReturnTheBirthright, INN launched their campaign #NotJustAFreeTrip on June 27, 2018. While the organizations vary to a certain degree, their campaigns having to do with Birthright could not be more different, and the names say it all; “Not Just a Free Trip” implies that there's more to know about Birthright, more to learn, whereas “Return the Birthright” calls for a complete removal of the trip, and plays on the

foundational idea that all Jewish people have a right of birth to Israeli citizenship. Starkly different from JVP's opposition to Birthright, INN's aims to "transform the way our generation is taught about Israel" and "give our generation... a chance to see the full picture by providing them the resources to understand what the Occupation really means for Palestinians, Israelis, and our Jewish community" (*IfNotNow*).

After reading this email, I turned to their website and found a well-designed webpage dedicated to their new campaign with ample materials and invitations to more information; there were resources for people considering Birthright, questions for people already signed up as soon-to-be participants, and there was even a place for me to add my name as someone that has been on Birthright who now questions it. Overall, I was impressed with INN and their clear mission to help spread the word about Birthright. But at the same time, I was wary about the strength of their message and whether it was strong enough to persuade the progressive Jews.

When I asked Sam how he felt about INN, especially given his involvement with the organization, he told me "I've been most active with IfNotNow... mostly because I see the most hope there. INN has a specific strategy that allows it to act dynamically but also in a unified way, and I've seen it create much more change than other groups with similar goals." And yet, while he's put more of his time and energy behind INN's mission to reach wider audiences—by participating in protests, helping to train new INN members through their regional orientations, and helping the INN team plan for future events—Sam still says that his personal views are more in line with the stronger stance JVP takes.

Since I started conducting research for this project, INN's message has changed drastically, and exactly in the way I anticipated: they have strengthened and intensified their stance. Starting in late July 2018, the same summer they launched #NotJustAFreeTrip, INN

reported on Birthright participants who were walking off of their trip in protest of Birthright not acknowledging or answering their questions about the occupation. In fact, they did more than cover the news, they praised the IfNotNow members who “boldly walked off their Birthright trips,” sent links to videos of tense moments in Israel between the INN members and their trip guides, and eventually emailed me about the screening of a documentary titled *They Walked Off*. When three American Jews were actually kicked off their trip in December at the end of that year, INN quickly became involved and reported every detail.

In early April 2019, INN started changing its rhetoric again, pointing out “we’re switching tactics.” These emails outlined the inner-workings of the INN team and all it was doing behind the scenes: sending emails to Birthright’s CEO Gidi Mark, expanding to college campuses all around the country, and planning a protest in New York City on April 5<sup>th</sup> to demand that Birthright “confront the crisis of the Occupation and stop serving as a tool of right-wing donors” (*IfNotNow*). More and more, the emails indicated to me that April 5<sup>th</sup> would be a turning point for INN, and it was.

The email I received on April 5<sup>th</sup> began “It was historic.” The short diction, dramatization of the recent-past, and isolation of this line at the top of the email felt over-the-top to me. Armed with photos, the email highlighted the day’s accomplishments and announced, “It’s time to take it up a notch. Birthright is out of touch and morally compromised. We won’t let them bribe us and erase Palestinian suffering” (*IfNotNow*). The heightened language in this email indicated to me that INN clearly was, as they said “taking it up a notch.” It seemed like they were leaving their balanced, central stance on Birthright and Israel-Palestine behind.

Then, on April 23<sup>rd</sup> INN called for Hillels across the country to *break up with Birthright*. By April 26<sup>th</sup> INN had created a new hashtag—#BreakUpWithBirthright—and offered a new

pledge: “I refuse to go on Birthright, and I will discourage my friends from going on Birthright. Our generation believes in freedom and dignity for all—Birthright does not” (*IfNotNow*). While INN had initially wooed me with neutral language and a conscious effort not to shame those who, like myself, had gone on Birthright, it now fell short.<sup>16</sup>

I asked Sam why he thought these anti-occupation organizations were choosing Birthright as the target of their energy and if he believed it was an effective mode of activism. He feels

On one hand, Birthright is so deeply entrenched in the American Jewish imagination that it's a perfect way to disrupt the status quo as it relates to our relationship with Israel. In other words, if we can expose what's wrong with Birthright, we get a whole lot of people on our side. On the other hand, there are a couple of drawbacks to focusing so heavily on Birthright.

According to Sam, these drawbacks have less to do with the audience these organizations are trying to reach and more to do with the difficulties of working within the organizations. He argues that it's difficult to openly question Birthright because it's easy for the conservative right to “paint [anti-occupation] campaigns as ‘no fun’ since Birthright is objectively a lot of fun, and that makes it hard for us to gain momentum.” He's also noted that many groups “get too caught

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<sup>16</sup> While this paper is focused on JVP's #ReturnTheBirthright and INN's #NotJustAFreeTrip, it is important to note that exist many other, more progressive Jewish organizations with their own stances on Birthright. A key example is J Street, another well-known progressive Jewish organization—which has its own campaign titled “Let Our People Know.” The campaign not only offers its own pledge (very similar to JVP and INN's), but has recently established a free trip to Israel *and* Palestine, meant to be competitive with Birthright.

Their pledge reads: “I pledge to only participate in organized trips to Israel that include meaningful engagement with key questions related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the occupation, and the status of minority groups in Israel. I will only participate in trips that include meetings with both Israelis and Palestinians and that show participants how the occupation impacts the daily lives of Palestinians living beyond the Green Line” (*J Street*).

up in their Birthright organizing that when other things happen (i.e., Israeli elections, current escalation in Gaza, Trump's 'peace plan') and then are not prepared to respond accordingly.

As Sam and I began comparing the organizations in their approach to Birthright, Sam pretty much agreed with what I found (or maybe it was the other way around and he convinced me of my position); he told me he felt

JVP's campaign is effective for those of us who weren't already going on Birthright, but I don't see it convincing a lot of people who were going to go that they shouldn't...

IfNotNow is really good at social media and engaging new people in our campaigns, and I've seen that mostly be successful with the Birthright campaign.

He also noted that due to INN's recent push to heighten the stakes and the language they're using (i.e. the addition of #BreakUpWithBirthright to their original #NotJustAFreeTrip), he's seen a lot of positive change in the conversation about Birthright. I can't help but wonder, however, if the tactic to only reach out to those already left-leaning or neutral is sustainable. Won't it just create more divide for those still going on Birthright?

Having had some distance from the Birthright trip, I don't really feel the shame I once felt at not being able to sign the pledge. And—though I opened this project suggesting I would stay as neutral as possible on the issue—I'm leaning towards trying to become more involved in these communities in the coming years. That being said, I am still critical of the work they're doing and the trajectory they're heading in.

At the beginning of my intensified research into this discussion, I hypothesized that I would determine INN's tactics and rhetoric more effective for their mission; six months ago, I may have found that to be true. However, I don't think INN's move to be more starkly anti-Birthright is in their best interest. Because INN is supporting two campaigns questioning

Birthright at the same time, it feels like they are leaning in two different directions, with two very different goals. And in my opinion, their #BreakUpWithBirthright campaign is no different than JVP's #ReturnTheBirthright, and therefore only exists to pull resources and create further divisions amongst like-minded Jews. JVP and INN both are too polarizing to foster productive discourse from both sides of the issue.

Based on my experiences talking with friends, keeping in touch with people I traveled to Israel with, presenting my paper and being approached by people who didn't know what Birthright was, I think we need better platforms which welcome and open discussion. Sam does this on a personal and day-to-day level with his peers and rabbis from Brown's Hillel, friends from his time studying Israel, and even friends from home (like me).

I don't think an established organization can accomplish the openness and centrality that Sam is able to offer when he engages in these conversations. Interpersonal learning has been the most valuable mode of research for me when thinking Israel-Palestine and Birthright because it allows for and acknowledges subjectivity. This realization is why I chose to write about my own experience exploring these topics. Not everyone has a Sam or a Rabbi Brant in their life, but I hope to inspire every young, Jewish American to lean on their own set of communities and the people in their life to open discourse, to learn, and to come together across difference. And every young, Jewish American has a responsibility to learn about Birthright and Israel-Palestine because it is the issue that will define our generation.

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