



The Jewish Book Council co-sponsors, with the Mayanot Institute, a Taglit-birthright israel program designed to enhance the field of Jewish literature for the next generation. This free ten-day Taglit-birthright israel is provided for Jewish 18-26 year-olds with an interest in Jewish literature or journalism who have never been to Israel on a peer trip. The trip gives participants the opportunity to see Israel through the eyes of its

most successful authors and journalists. The 2007 summer trip met with a variety of journalists and authors, including New Yorker correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg and Uri Drami, a senior news editor from Kol Israel radio. Three of the 2007 Summer participants share some of their thoughts with Jewish Book World accompanied by photographs taken by trip participant, Nik Layman (www.nalphoto.com).

Ed. Note: Accompanying the American participants on the trip were ten Israelis, including members of the IDF spokespersons unit and students of media and communication.



AVIV SHARON

If you want a group of Jewish Americans and Israelis to bond and discover what they have in common, you should probably have them go through experiences that all of them can identify with. And then some which none of them can.

Floating in the Dead Sea was just as much a novelty for me as it was for my Jewish-American friends from Taglit—and I've lived in Israel for fourteen years. Dancing on a ship to the upbeat hip-hop "Hadag Nachash" was a boon for Israelis and Americans alike. I've been to Mount Herzl, the Israeli equivalent of Arlington National Cemetery, in my preliminary military training, but only on Taglit did we feel comfortable enough to weep on the graves of the fallen soldiers of the Second Lebanon War. The group, the war, the whole Taglit experience all rendered it a different Mount Herzl for me.

But funnily enough, I learned on Taglit that defining one's Jewishness by exclusion is a rather, um, efficient way to figure out what I have in common with a bunch of strangers with spray-on sunscreen. On day two, we heard an in-depth historical overview of Lebanese politics vis-à-vis Israel from a resident of a kibbutz on the Israel-Lebanon border. Pretty good so far, right? But here's the catch: The speaker concluded with the most abhorrent rhetoric of Jewish jingoism and Zionist zealotry I've heard in a while. The whole group got riled up. The notion that to get back its abducted soldiers, Israel should threaten to



EMILY FREIFELD

When we first got off the plane, the Israeli Taglit leaders handed us laminated cards. On one side were the phone numbers of our group leaders. On the other side, a cartoon picture of a goofy looking man with a yarmulke, waving an Israeli flag. Above his head in block letters were the words "Welcome Home." My first thought—what home?

For the first few days I thought about some key words that I associated with home and Israel—homeland, holy land, right of return, and the fact that everyone is Jewish. But it didn't click. I didn't feel an immediate connection. I was raised to support this place my entire life. By being there I hoped to crystallize and clarify my support for Israel.

execute its Palestinian prisoners one by one—that was decidedly un-Jewish for all of us. And I had the opportunity to explain why Israeli military law stipulates that an IDF soldier should never follow such an order. A few Kabbalah lectures thrown in the mix, plus some orchestrated ritualistic dancing at a Kabbalat Shabbat at the Kotel, and you got yourself a bus full of Jews quite acutely made aware of their secular and humanistic tendencies.

Taglit, for me, also represents how Jews can teach each other a whole lot, and have tons of fun in the making. My interpretation of George Michael's "Faith" at a Jerusalem Karaoke club will forever go down in the annals of history as "that night when Aviv burst into song." I learned to freestyle rap ("Sittin' around and having fun in Tiberias/Gettin' the party on with some rounds of beer-ias") and I was introduced to the fascinating world of graphic novels. On my end, I taught interested American parties how the Israeli governmental system works and I had the pleasure to inform my friend Ben that his name, Benjamin Isaac, meant "son of my right hand" and "he will laugh," respectively.

I have met some of the most intelligent, curious people in my life. I have discovered anew what it means to be Jewish and Israeli. I will never look at my uniform the same way. But I swear, if I am subject to one more Kabbalah lecture, I will go postal. *Aviv (20) was born in the US to Israeli-American parents, and moved with them back to Israel when he was six. He's been living in Israel ever since. Aviv has been serving his country for the last two years, "his country" being Israel, of course. He also thinks it's pretty awkward to write about himself in the third person.*

After four amazing days exploring the north of the country—hiking, jeeping, dancing, and getting to know the other twenty-five students, including eight Israeli soldiers and three Israeli students—our bus headed south.

As we neared Jerusalem, an energy and excitement permeated the bus. Even the Israelis, who all had been there numerous times, became giddy. Our bus driver, Benny, turned on the song “Jerusalem of Gold” to really set the mood. Yes, the music was corny, but there it was—the holiest city.

Suddenly it clicked. I felt as if I had arrived home. We arrived on a Friday afternoon as the city was settling in for Shabbat. As we all prepared for Shabbat and then danced and sang at the Western Wall, I felt a spontaneous and genuine connection to the people, the city, the modern and ancient aspects of Judaism and Israel. I felt my Jewish iden-

tity deepen and my Israeli identity begin to emerge.

Did I come back Orthodox? No. Did I become an unapologetic right-winger? No. But I did come back with an idea of why Israel is my home. This home is not just a shelter for me to run to when I need it, but a functioning, marvelous place filled with diversity, hope, and energy. Yes, it has its flaws and failures. But that doesn’t stop me from believing in Israel’s future and its importance in the world.

Emily Freifeld is a senior at the American University in Washington DC. She is majoring in broadcast journalism and art history. Emily currently works at WTOP, the top commercial news radio station in the DC area, as a web editor and writer. She is graduating early in December 2007 and hopes to stay in the DC area for a little while before trying to find a way to get back to Israel.



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The tensions between Palestinians (Hamas or Fatah) and Israelis are really no laughing matter, and, as the conflict is as old as time, there appears to be little hope for a resolution any time soon. Laughter, however, was really a wonderful medicine for alleviating some of the tension on my recent trip to the Holy Land with Taglit birthright israel, Mayanot, and the Jewish Book Council; producing laughter and jokes which would make Adam Sandler or Jerry Seinfeld proud.

I don’t mean to ignore the problem by emphasizing the laughter on the trip, but rather aim to take into account some of the lighter elements of humanity, and recognize the constant duality felt within Israeli culture; the reality of the terror and the reality of still living a “normal” daily existence. And just as the experiences of the Israelis fluctuate daily, the range of emotions I felt throughout the trip also fluctuated from one extreme to the next.

Our birthright trip was lucky enough to go scuba diving, mini-jeeping, and swimming in the Dead Sea, among other things, while also keep-

ing in mind the reality of another facet of Israeli culture with visits to Mt. Herzl and Yad VaShem, where countless lives are remembered for defending Zionism, Israel, or Judaism. Through both tears and laughter, the birthright experience altered much of my thinking about Israel and Judaism as a whole. If I had to compare a before and after I would not necessarily say that I feel more Jewish, but rather I’m more aware of my Jewishness. In addition, Israeli politics are now more at the forefront of my thinking. When I see an article about the Middle East or Israel in particular, I pay closer attention because I understand the situation better and realize that this is daily life. Fortunately, citizens of the United States live in a bubble for the most part, so when an attack or disaster occurs on our home soil, it is much more shocking. If bombings and violence were a part of my daily life, I would be more accustomed to it and acutely aware of it. Birthright did a fantastic job of showing a large number of aspects of daily life in a limited amount of time. Being immersed in such a wonderful culture and region, it is hard not to take notice of your surroundings. Overall, the birthright experience left me with a wonderful taste and a hunger to go back again and again for more.

Ethan Zimman is a young freelance writer from Reston, VA now living in Los Angeles. He enjoys golf, singing while driving, red wine, live music, and figuring out creative ways to use his BAs in English Literature and Music from Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA.



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If you are interested in participating in the Taglit-birthright Israel: Mayanot/Jewish Book Council Israel In Print Trip next summer please contact jbc@jewishbooks.org or visit www.jewishbookcouncil.org.