



**ONWARD  
ISRAEL**

START UP YOUR FUTURE

# ONWARD ISRAEL ALUMNI BACK HOME: From Engagement to Empowerment

September 2016

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## OVERVIEW

**Onward Israel** provides young adults between the ages of 19-27—mostly North American college students—with immersive resume-building experiences in Israel for approximately eight weeks during the summer. These experiences include internships, fellowships, academic coursework, and service learning. Since its launch in 2012, Onward Israel has engaged Rosov Consulting in an evaluation of the program’s impact on participants’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to Jewish peoplehood, Israel, and personal/professional development. This report presents findings pertaining to behavioral outcomes nearly one year after participants in Cohort II (Summer 2013) and Cohort III (Summer 2014) returned from Israel, based on data collected from surveys fielded two weeks prior to the start of their Onward Israel program and ten months after the program’s end, as well as a total of six focus groups conducted with participants from both cohorts ten months following the program.

### ***Onward Israel strongly contributes to growth in participants’ knowledge and attitudes related to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish peoplehood***

As described in previous reports, in serving as a “next level” Israel experience, Onward Israel strongly contributes to growth in participants’ knowledge and attitudes related to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish peoplehood, not only when assessed shortly after the program but also, and sometimes even more so, one year later.<sup>1</sup> This report probes the longer-term behavioral impact of the experience, exploring areas of change as well as areas of stability.

## DESCRIBING THE SAMPLE

This analysis involved 359 participants, 130 from Cohort II and 229 from Cohort 3. Nearly 90% of the respondents were students in their first three years of university when they applied to Onward Israel, and 60% of respondents defined their gender as female. Most respondents either identified as Conservative (35%), Reform (29%), or “Just Jewish” (22%). Almost all the respondents had visited Israel prior to Onward Israel, with three-quarters (73%) of respondents having spent less than three months in Israel. Approximately 60% of respondents had previously attended a Jewish overnight camp or youth group, close to 70% had attended a Jewish supplementary school, and nearly 40% attended a Jewish day school at some point during their education, most typically during elementary school.

## CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Recent studies about religious observance and practices of Jewish college students and emerging adults provide a backdrop against which to understand the outcomes of the Onward Israel experience. In Keysar's and Kosmin's study of Conservative Jewish college students, participants' conception of "being Jewish" was much more cognitively- and emotionally-oriented than behaviorally-oriented. For example, more than three quarters of respondents considered *remembering the Holocaust* or *caring about Israel* as core elements of being Jewish, while less than a quarter of respondents viewed activities such as *attending synagogue*, *reading Jewish books*, or *donating money to Jewish causes* as fundamental aspects of being Jewish.<sup>2</sup> This finding suggests that along the spectrum of ways in which Jewish identity is expressed, Jewish activities resonate less strongly with college students. Moreover, even among those students who are engaged in such activities, such participation erodes during the college years, according to another study of the religious lives of students, using the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS).<sup>3</sup>

Sales and Saxe explain that this erosion likely results from the new setting in which college students find themselves, away from their families and home communities. In this context, peers replace family members as the primary circle of influence, and as a consequence, Jewish activities may no longer be prioritized as much.<sup>4</sup>

**Additionally, regarding Jewish behaviors, students are almost twice as likely to decrease their observance level as they are to increase it, over the course of the college years.**

These data are consistent with findings from a longitudinal qualitative study of young Canadian Jews, by Pomson and Schnoor, in which college students explained that they stopped attending seder night or Friday night meals while at university since they were no longer with the family and friends who gave them meaning.<sup>5</sup> These findings are particularly relevant to understanding the behavioral outcomes associated with participating in Onward Israel, given that most program participants are in the early stages of their college careers.

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<sup>2</sup> Keysar, A. & Kosmin, B. A. (2004). *Eight Up: The college years—The Jewish engagement of young adults raised in conservative synagogues, 1995-2003*. AVI CHAI Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Kosmin, B.A. & Keysar, A. (2013). *Religious, spiritual, and secular: The emergence of three distinct worldviews among American college students*. American Religious Identification Survey.

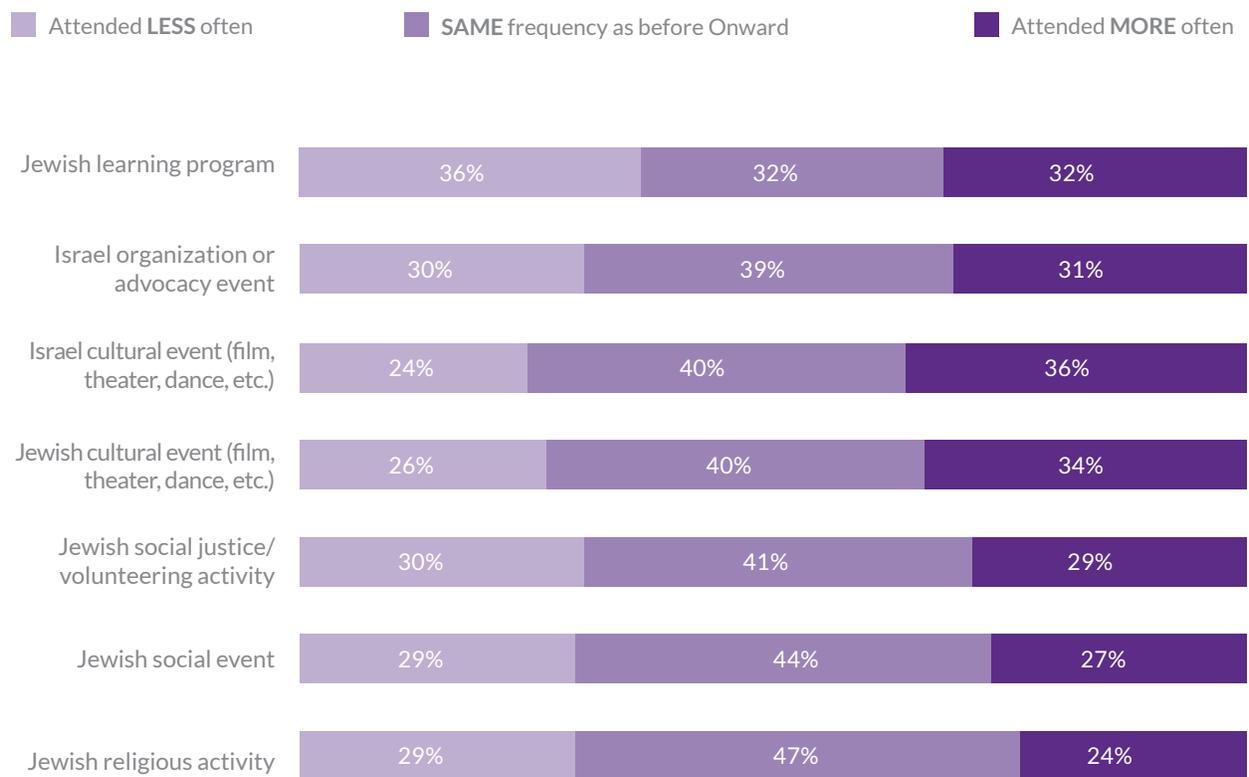
<sup>4</sup> Sales, A. L. & Saxe, L. (2006). *Particularism in the university: Realities and opportunities for Jewish life on campus*. Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University.

<sup>5</sup> Pomson, A. & Schnoor, R. (in press) *Home work: A new approach to the Jewish family and Jewish self-formation*.

# FINDINGS

When considering the types of Jewish and Israel-related activities that Onward Israel participants are involved in, as well as the extent to which participants’ behaviors have changed nearly a year following the program, the story is one of stability for the great majority, and of emerging leadership for a sizeable minority. Against the backdrop of extant learnings about Jewish college students’ engagement in such activities, which illustrate the commonness of slippage in engagement and communal involvement, the patterns of behavior and leadership reported by Onward Israel participants emerged as a distinct contrast.

## Frequency of Attending Events and Activities, 10 Months after Onward



## ATTENDING ACTIVITIES: “SHOWING UP”

Almost all Onward Israel participants have been in college for at least one year. Both prior to and ten months following Onward Israel, participants were asked whether they had attended certain types of activities over the course of the previous academic year. Only a minority of respondents (typically less than a third) report attending Jewish and Israel-related cultural events (films, theater, dance, etc.) less often than before the program.

**On the contrary, a higher proportion (40%) actually report attending these kinds of efforts more often than before, with the remainder continuing to attend them with the same degree of frequency.**

It is important to note that prior to their Onward Israel program, participants were already attending some of these activities, indicating a baseline level of engagement in Jewish and Israel-related behaviors. This relatively high baseline actually makes it all the more noteworthy that a year later, the great majority of respondents report attending these events at least as frequently, if not more so than before, whether the event had an Israel or Jewish focus. These are not the behavior patterns predicted by the broader literature on Jewish student engagement.

*“I went to more Hillel religious events, not because of the religious elements but because of the community elements. I wouldn’t say it was the Onward experience [itself], but the simple fact of being in Israel and becoming a part of a culture and a community that I wasn’t part of before.”*

*“We have a fair amount of Jewish people [on campus]. I like sharing cultural events so they can understand Judaism as both a religion and a culture...to have a better picture of it. Having a positive presence as Jewish people at my campus can have a real impact [on campus life].”*

## FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES

In addition to indicating whether they attended certain types of activities, participants were asked how often they enacted particular behaviors, such as following news about Israel and Jewish communities around the world, celebrating Shabbat, speaking about Israel, studying Jewish texts, participating in Jewish life at home or at school, etc. Respondents participated in almost all of these activities just as frequently ten months after the program as they did before the program, with the exception of two activities: (1) participating in conversations about Israel and (2) following news about Jews and Jewish communities around the world. In these two domains, respondents exhibited a greater level of engagement nearly a year after returning from Onward Israel compared to before the program.

**Again, stability was exhibited in the rest of the areas, contrary to the general trend of declining engagement among college students.**

In explaining the frequency with which they took part in activities, participants shared the value of being part of a community as an influence for their increased involvement. As we have seen, that feeling of community is something that a great many students typically miss while on campus.

*"I think there was a small change in my involvement. I was active in the Reform movement before and still am now. But I think from my time on Onward I have come to understand the importance of a strong sense of community, especially during hard times like when we were in the bomb shelter [during Operation Protective Edge]. I have found myself going to services more frequently because I enjoyed the sense of community I had in Israel."*

## TAKING A LEADERSHIP ROLE

While data regarding participation in activities highlight the stability of participation rates, when we shift our focus to leadership, the story that emerges is of a significant and positive shift in involvement. Both prior to and ten months following Onward Israel, participants were asked whether they initiated, organized, or led certain types of activities over the year that had elapsed. The table below shows the percentage of respondents who led events in the year following their participation in Onward Israel, as well as the percentage of “new leaders,” the proportion of those who led activities for the *first time*, among the sample of those who led activities. The findings are striking. More than half of the respondents who led an Israel organization or advocacy event nearly a year after Onward Israel had not done so prior to their Onward Israel program.

It is possible that after an additional year into their college experience, these students have become more senior members of the college community as part of the normal “life cycle” of college life, thus taking on greater leadership roles. And yet, it also seems that these individuals have gained intellectual resources, social networks and self-confidence (what sociologists call cultural, social and human capital) that result in them acting in these ways.

*“I led an internal education session on the meaning of Israel as a Jewish democracy at Tufts Friends of Israel and organized various Israel events, including a Yom Ha’Atzmaut barbeque.”*

*“I led a Jewish service-learning trip to Morocco over spring break through my Hillel. I am also the new president of our Jewish service-learning organization on campus.”*

### Areas of Leadership Among Onward Israel Alumni

	% of respondents who led events in the year following Onward	% of “leaders” who led events for the first time
Jewish cultural event (film, theater, dance, etc.)	20%	72%
Israel cultural event (film, theater, dance, etc.)	22%	61%
Jewish social justice or volunteering	28%	56%
Israel organization or advocacy event	32%	56%
Jewish learning program	34%	51%
Jewish religious activity	44%	44%
Jewish social event	46%	39%

## POST-PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

Ten months following their return from Israel, participants were asked whether they had been in touch with people they had encountered during Onward Israel, and whether they had had meaningful interactions with Jewish campus life professionals since the program. Nearly half (46%) of the respondents reported that they had a meaningful interaction with a Hillel staff member, while more than a third (39%) of respondents indicated that they had a meaningful interaction with a campus rabbi in the year since their program.

Additionally, nearly half (46%) of the respondents reported that they had been in touch “a lot” with peers from their Onward Israel program. More than 90% of respondents had recommended Onward Israel to at least one friend.

## RETURNING TO ISRAEL

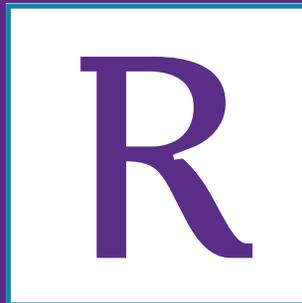
In the ten-month post-program survey, nearly one fifth (19%) of respondents returned to Israel since returning from their Onward Israel program. Of those who had not returned to Israel since completing their program, nearly all respondents reported that they planned to visit Israel, with nearly a third (31%) indicating that they plan to visit in the coming year. In other words, ten months after returning from the program, half of Onward alumni have either already returned to Israel or are planning to do so in the near future. Some of the ways in which respondents spent their time while back in Israel included volunteering, visiting with family or friends, and participating in organized programs.

*“My campus rabbi and I talk about issues relating to Judaism, but more often about life in general. He’s a great mentor and someone I consider a friend.”*

*“I have been back twice since [Onward]. If it wasn’t for Onward, I would not have felt the need to come to Israel so much; it has made me love this country. I now want to be a Birthright trip leader...I would not have wanted to do that before.”*

## SUMMARY

In the context of what is known about Jewish college students and their engagement patterns, including the types of activities they are involved in and their trajectory of involvement over time, the stability exhibited by Onward Israel participants in terms of their Jewish and Israel-related activities is significant. Even more striking, the emergence of Onward alumni as “new leaders” on campus is certainly different from what might be expected from published research on the patterns of leadership among Jewish college students. Having provided students with valuable Jewish knowledge, insights, and understandings during their time in Israel, having contributed to the development of social networks on their return, and having set in motion an interest in getting back to Israel again, time on Onward Israel seems to have equipped participants with assets that enable many of them to emerge as leaders on campus.



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