

An Israel-Engagement Dynamic: Exploring the Relationship Between Participating in Birthright and Onward Israel

November 2016

OVERVIEW

Within the heavily populated field of Israel experience programs, **Onward Israel** provides its participants with exposure to day-to-day and professional life in Israel, via resumé-building opportunities lasting approximately eight weeks during the summer. Onward is conceived as a “second-rung” program; it recruits individuals who have previously spent a short amount of time in Israel and are interested in building upon their prior experiences. As such, over the past two years, approximately 60% of Onward participants have been Birthright Israel alumni who have participated in a Birthright trip either during the previous winter or the previous summer. Additionally, there is a growing crop of participants who take part in both Birthright and Onward during the same summer, continuing directly onto Onward from their Birthright trip. Focused on these two phenomena, this report probes the relationship between participating in Birthright and participating in Onward. Specifically, the report explores Jewish and Israel engagement patterns exhibited by Onward Cohort V participants, comparing three populations: Birthright alumni; those who have never participated in Birthright; and those who opted for the “combined” Birthright and Onward experience this past summer.

DESCRIBING THE SAMPLE

This analysis involved 597 participants from Cohort V (Summer 2016) who completed both pre-program and post-program surveys: 300 Birthright alumni (50%), 86 “combined” participants (15%), and 204 individuals who have never gone on Birthright (35%).

- Demographically, “combined” participants were younger compared to the rest of the survey respondents, and they consisted of the largest proportion of respondents who identify as female.
- In terms of Jewish background, those who have never participated in Birthright were significantly more Jewishly-engaged than the rest of the respondents, as demonstrated by differences in denomination and prior Jewish educational experiences.
 - Regarding denomination, the “non-Birthright” group consisted of a greater proportion of individuals who identify as Orthodox and a smaller proportion of individuals who identify as “just Jewish,” compared to the rest of the sample.
 - Via a Cluster Analysis of the extent to which respondents previously attended or worked at a Jewish day school, overnight camp, supplementary school, or youth group, more than half of the “non-Birthright” group was identified as coming from a *higher engaged* background, while approximately three-quarters of the rest of the sample was identified as coming from a *lower engaged* background, having participated in these Jewish educational experiences much less, if at all.

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Demographic Characteristics					Jewish Background			
	Gender (p=0.005)		Age (p<0.001)			Denomination (p<0.001)		Prior Jewish Education (p<0.001)	
	Male	Female	18-20	21-24	25+	Orthodox	Just Jewish	Lower Engaged	Higher Engaged
Combined: Birthright and Onward	38%	62%	68%	30%	2%	6%	26%	74%	26%
Birthright Alumni	54%	46%	50%	45%	5%	9%	25%	75%	25%
Non-Birthright	41%	59%	39%	56%	5%	30%	15%	47%	53%

FINDINGS

MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE

Prior to the start of their Onward program, participants were given a list of five motivation statements and asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. All three groups of participants—the “non-Birthright” group, Birthright alumni, and “combined” participants—displayed a similar pattern in how they rated these motivations; “I wanted a valuable international work experience” resonated the most with the survey respondents, while “I wanted a summer internship; the fact that it happens to be in Israel is less important to me” resonated the least. However, when comparing Birthright alumni to the rest of the sample, Birthright alumni provided a statistically significant higher rating for the statement, “I wanted to be in Israel this summer, regardless of what I would be doing there.” Evidently, these individuals have a strong desire to return to Israel, and Onward provides an opportunity to do so.

Motivation Statements: Highest Rated to Lowest Rated

I wanted a valuable international work experience
I wanted to enhance my resume
I wanted to specifically experience the Israeli workforce by having an internship in Israel
I wanted to be in Israel this summer, regardless of what I would be doing there
I wanted a summer internship; the fact that it happens to be in Israel is less important to me

Voices of Participants

"I felt like an American in Israel on Birthright, and I think Onward Israel will allow me to feel more like a part of Israel. I went on Birthright last summer, it was amazing and too fast. I wanted to be there for a longer period of time. With Onward, I like that I will be really living there and working in a hospital."

— Birthright alum, pre-program interview

"Ever since Birthright, I have wanted to come back to Israel. I needed something to put on my resume, so this is best of all worlds: go to Israel and keep my parents happy and get a resume-builder. Birthright was definitely the reason why I applied to Onward. I wouldn't have done Onward without doing Birthright. Birthright made me want to go back to Israel."

— Birthright alum, pre-program interview

Participants who combined Birthright and Onward explained that they chose this option primarily for the sake of convenience and the opportunity of a free flight. Additionally, several individuals in this group shared, when interviewed, that they wanted to go on Birthright, but they wanted to explore Israel beyond the Birthright trip in a more comprehensive, immersive way. For these participants, Onward is an ideal fit.

Voices of Participants

"I really wanted to do Birthright and extend it, to do something not related to my field of study but still something that is interesting to me. Onward was the only internship I looked at; it fit the criteria. I heard from a lot of friends who've done Birthright that it isn't really so comprehensive or holistic, it is more 'surface,' so I knew I wanted to spend extra time here and learn about other issues in Israel that Birthright doesn't touch on. Birthright is more like dipping toes in water. I knew ahead of time that I would want more time."

— "Combined" participant, mid-program interview

"On Onward, I'm looking forward to having more time. On Birthright the days are long but the time is so short. I'm glad that I'll be able to see more things and experience more of Israel."

— "Combined" participant, pre-program interview

"Hopefully with Onward I will be in a more Hebrew environment. I love the land, I love traveling here, that's why it is so nice to combine Birthright with this trip. Birthright lets you see a general overview, and then [Onward] will let me key in more on specific places."

— "Combined" participant, pre-program interview

BASELINE ANALYSIS: COMPARING PARTICIPANTS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS PRIOR TO ONWARD ISRAEL

Prior to departing for Israel—whether directly to their Onward program or first to Birthright and then Onward—participants were asked to indicate to what extent they knew about certain elements of Jewish identity/peoplehood and Israel, how strongly they felt connected to these concepts, and what kinds of related activities they participated in during the past year. Areas where there were significant differences between the “non-Birthright” group, Birthright alumni, and “combined” participants are displayed in the table below.

Jewish and Israel-Related Knowledge Areas, Attitudes, and Behaviors Prior to Onward

Key, relative to one another: Lowest level Middle level Highest level

	Combined: Birthright and Onward	Birthright Alumni	Non-Birthright
KNOWLEDGE AREAS			
Day-to-day life in Israel			
Diversity in Israel			
Current situation in Israel			
Different ways of being Jewish			
Judaism and Jewish heritage			
Jewish communities around the world			
ATTITUDES			
I feel a connection to Judaism and my Jewish heritage			
Being Jewish is important to me			
I feel proud of Israel			
I can articulate to others what Israel means to me			
I feel at home in Israel			
I feel a strong connection to Israel and Israelis			
BEHAVIORS			
Participating in conversations about Israel			
Following news about Israel			
Participating in conversations about Judaism			
Studying traditional Jewish texts			
Following news about Jews and Jewish communities around the world			
Celebrating Shabbat with family or friends			
Having close friends who are Jewish			

In terms of Jewish and Israel-related knowledge areas, the “non-Birthright” group entered Onward with an already-established knowledge base relative to the rest of the participants. This finding is consistent with their more highly engaged Jewish educational background, as described earlier. The “combined” participants entered Onward perceiving themselves to have significantly lower levels of Jewish and Israel-related knowledge compared to the rest of the participants, having not yet had the formative Israel experience provided by Birthright or having had less exposure to other forms of immersive Jewish education.

This pattern is nearly identical in term of Jewish and Israel-related attitudes: the “combined” participants reported the lowest level of connection in each of the displayed dimensions. The “non-Birthright” group—having come from a more engaged Jewish background—reported the highest level of connection to Jewish heritage and identity, while the Birthright alumni reported feeling most at home in Israel and most strongly connected to Israel, relative to the rest of the sample.

In terms of Jewish and Israel-related behaviors, the “non-Birthright” group reported the highest frequency of participation in all of the listed activities during the year preceding Onward, Birthright alumni reported a medium frequency of participation in almost all of the activities, and the “combined” participants reported the lowest frequency of participation in almost all of the activities.

Overall, there is a mostly consistent pattern in terms of prior Jewish and Israel engagement: those from the “non-Birthright group” begin Onward with the highest level of prior engagement, the “combined” participants begin with the lowest level of engagement, and the Birthright alumni begin somewhere in the middle [although it does seem that as a result of their recent time in Israel, the Birthright alumni reported feeling most at home in the country].

ASSESSING IMPACT: PRE/POST ANALYSIS

A Factor Analysis of the Jewish and Israel-related measures included in the pre-program and post-program surveys reflect three over-arching outcomes (“factors”) related to participating in Onward Israel: (i) attachment to Jewish identity and community, (ii) relationship to Israel, and (iii) knowledge related to Israel and Judaism. These “factors” and the items that they respectively comprise are displayed in Appendix A. In comparing the three groups of participants – the “non-Birthright” group, Birthright alumni, and “combined” participants – there was no significant change for any of the groups in terms of the two attitudinal factors, “attachment to Jewish identity and community” and “relationship to Israel.” In fact, all three groups reported a relatively high level of connection in both of these dimensions prior to Onward, leaving little room to markedly grow. However, for “knowledge related to Israel and Judaism,” all three groups exhibited statistically significant growth at the end of Onward, compared to their perceived level of knowledge before the start of the program.

Mean Scores of Factors: Pre and Post (Scale of 1 to 7)

Key:  Lower
Less than 5  Medium level
Between 5 and 5.5  Higher level
Greater than 5.5

	Combined: Birthright and Onward		Birthright Alumni		Non- Birthright	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Attachment to Jewish identity and community	6.0	6.0	6.2	6.1	6.2	6.2
Relationship to Israel and Israelis	5.6	5.8	5.9	6.0	6.0	6.1
Knowledge related to Israel and Judaism	4.8	5.5	4.9	5.4	5.4	5.7

As previously observed, for each of the three factors, “combined” participants exhibited a lower starting point than the other two groups. Notably though, when we compare “combined” participants’ attitudinal and knowledge levels *following the program* to the rest of the sample, we see that they essentially ended in the same place; there was no statistically significant difference in their level of knowledge about and connection to Israel and Judaism following the trip. It seems that through the combination of the Birthright and Onward experiences, the “combined” participants “catch up” to their fellow Onward participants. This is especially the case with the factor “knowledge related to Israel and Judaism,” where the largest pre/post change (mean difference) occurs among the “combined” participants.¹

² It is important to note that this observed growth is essentially total growth – from before Birthright to after Onward. We do not have a mid-point measure of “combined” participants’ knowledge or attitudes following Birthright and prior to Onward, which would help assess when and where this growth occurs.

ISRAEL-FOCUSED CAPACITY BUILDING

Both prior to and after Onward Israel, participants were asked to what extent they feel willing and able to (i) educate others about Israel, (ii) give others a flavor of what Israel is like, (iii) advocate for Israel, and (iv) defend Israel on campus. An analysis of the overall sample showed that participants perceived their abilities in these areas to have increased following the program, demonstrating Onward's contribution to cultivating an Israel-oriented skillset and Israel-focused capacity-building.

Across these four dimensions, the “combined” participants once again began Onward with the lowest perception of their abilities compared to the rest of the sample. By comparison, the Birthright alumni began Onward with the highest perception of their abilities, likely a result of their previous—and in many cases, quite fresh—Birthright experience. In this respect, they even exceed the non-Birthright population who typically experienced more extensive Jewish education previously. However, following the program, the “combined” participants' perceived ability nearly matched that of the Birthright alumni (exhibiting no statistically significant differences), and all-together surpassed that of the “non-Birthright” group. As previously observed with the measure of knowledge related to Israel and Judaism, the “combined” participants experienced the greatest shift in their perception of their Israel-focused capabilities compared to the rest of the sample, thereby “catching up” with their fellow Onward participants.

It is important to note that while participants' perception of their Israel-focused abilities shifted following Onward, their reported willingness to take part in such actions did not change following the program. This finding points to an area of opportunity for Onward, that is, to specifically focus on promoting participants' willingness to involve themselves in Israel education and advocacy, as part of the program curriculum.

Voices of Participants

“I definitely have a much better working knowledge of Israel, the lay of the land, and a better sense of what the people are like because in previous experiences, like Birthright, all we met were soldiers; we didn't meet typical Israelis beyond that. But now I've met many people and I have a more general idea of cultural differences between Israel and the U.S. because of that.”

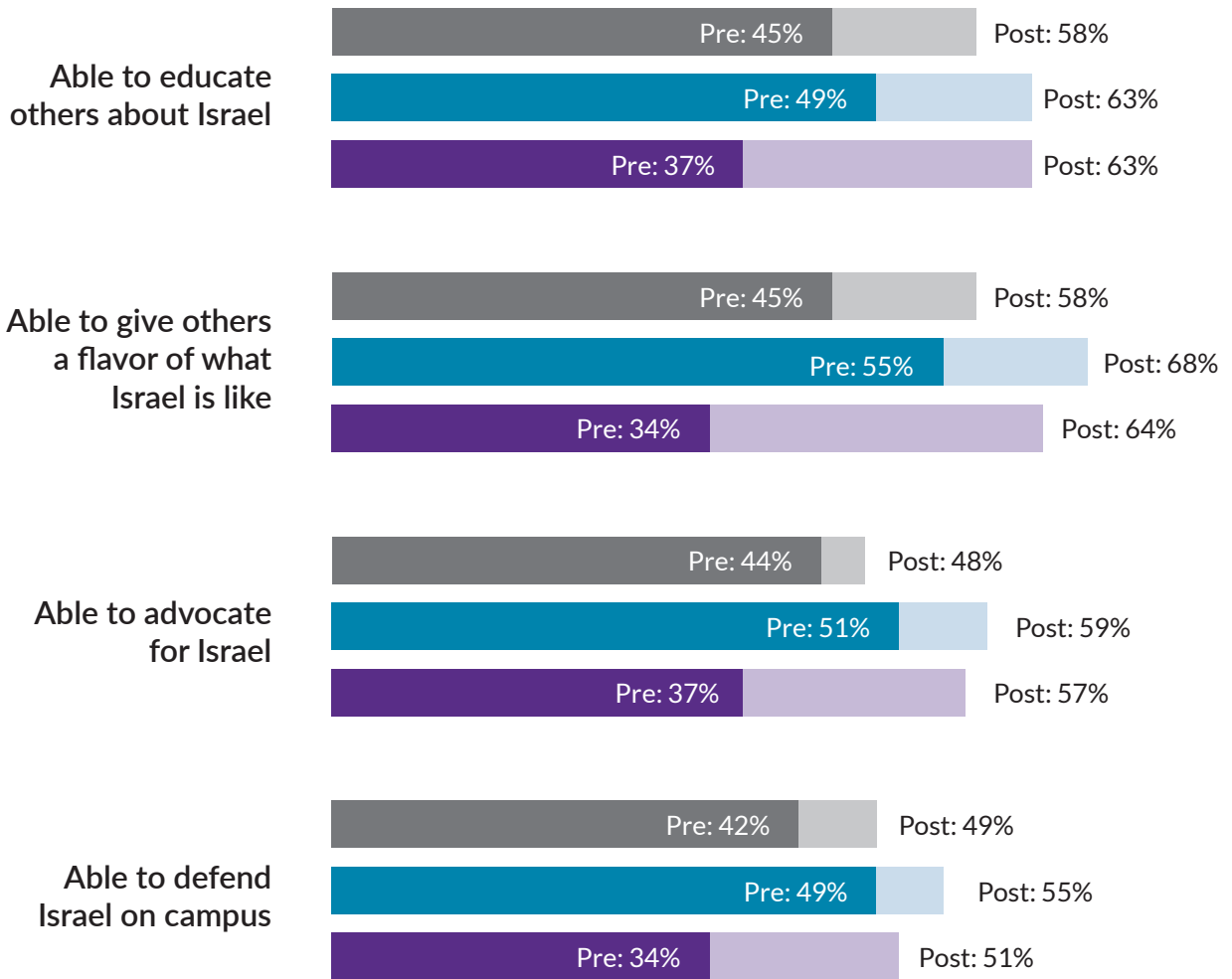
— “Combined” participant, post-program interview

“I now view Israel as a tangible place, more so than Birthright. It is less of a concept in my head...I can now picture every part of the country, which is cool.”

— Birthright alum, post-program interview

Growth in Israel-Oriented Capabilities

Key: Non-Birthright Birthright Alumni Combined: Onward and Birthright



CONCLUSION

SUMMARY

Prior to the start of the summer, Onward participants' level of Israel engagement—as indicated by their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors—differed, depending on if and when participants had previously been on a Birthright trip. Those who had never gone on Birthright, and were not planning to do so, tended to come from more highly engaged Jewish backgrounds, with the strongest knowledge base and connection to Israel relative to the rest of the participants. Individuals who had been on a Birthright program during the winter or previous summer started Onward with a slightly lower but still quite well-established level of knowledge and connection to Israel. These people were also the most motivated to find some way of getting back to Israel in whatever program framework. Individuals who planned to combine both Birthright and Onward in the same summer exhibited the lowest levels knowledge and connection at the start of the summer. However, following the completion of their Birthright and Onward programs, the “combined” participants displayed the greatest change in these areas, as well as in Israel education and advocacy capabilities. In these respects, this population “catches up” with its Onward peers.

CONCLUSIONS

There is an emerging trend of participants seeking to maximize the financial efficiencies achieved through a one-two punch that combines time on both Birthright Israel and Onward Israel during the same summer. Data from this summer's cohort of Onward participants suggest—counterintuitively—that there are not any educational disadvantages in going down this route.

One might have expected educational gains related to participating in Birthright, returning to one's campus to participate in Jewish student life or simply to gain additional life experience, and then returning to Israel within a year, thus maximizing the gains of a further Israel experience. While Birthright alumni do join Onward Israel with a heightened desire to get back to Israel, this does not seem to be related to superior educational outcomes. On the contrary, individuals who combine participation in Birthright with Onward Israel during the same summer catch-up with their peers along a series of outcomes measures. These findings suggest a promising synergy between the two programs that could be profitably explored further.

APPENDIX A

Factor Analysis of Outcomes

Factors	Items
Attachment to Jewish Identity and Community	I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people
	I feel connected to Jews around the world
	I feel connected to Jews at home or at school
	I feel a connection to Judaism and my Jewish heritage
	I am interested in learning more about Judaism and my Jewish heritage
	Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew
Relationship to Israel	I feel a sense of responsibility to Israel and Israelis
	I feel proud of Israel
	I can articulate to others what Israel means to me
	I feel a strong connection to Israel and Israelis
	I feel at home in Israel
Knowledge Related to Judaism and Israel	I know about Jewish communities around the world
	I know about different ways of being Jewish
	I know about Judaism and my Jewish heritage
	I know about day to day life in Israel
	I know about diversity in Israel



2095 Rose Street
Suite 101
Berkeley, CA 94709

Tel 510-848-2502
Fax 888-983-9825

Emek Refaim 43/a
Second Floor
Jerusalem 9314103
Israel

Tel 972-2-374-0193

info@rosovconsulting.com
www.rsoovconsulting.com