

**Serving a Complex Israel:
A report on Israel-based Immersive
Jewish Service-learning**

Submitted by Rosov Consulting
to Repair the World and The Jewish Agency for Israel
January 2013

WITH THANKS

Repair the World gratefully acknowledges the Jim Joseph Foundation and The Morningstar Foundation for helping make this report possible and for their generous support of Repair the World's efforts to build the field of Israel-based Jewish service-learning for North American young adults.

The Jewish Agency for Israel's support for this project is made possible by The Jewish Federations of North America, Keren Hayesod, major Jewish communities and federations, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, and foundations and donors from Israel and around the world.

Repair the World and The Jewish Agency for Israel both gratefully acknowledge:

Our colleagues at Rosov Consulting whose tireless efforts in research, analysis and guidance brought this project to fruition, including: Dr. Wendy Rosov, Dr. Alex Pomson, Luba Yusim, and Matthew Fitzgerald.

The staff at both organizations who worked on this report: Ilana Aisen, Maital Friedman, Anya Manning, and Mordy Walfish from Repair the World, and Dyonna Ginsburg, Jeffrey Jablansky, Jason Shelowitz and Dr. Aviva Zeltzer-Zubida from The Jewish Agency for Israel.

Masa Israel Journey for its role in the creation of this report.

The program providers that supported the development and implementation of the study, including those from:

Counterpoint Israel - Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

Galilee Fellowship – Livnot U'Lehibanot

Habonim Dror Workshop in Israel – Kaveret Portion

ITF – Israel Experience

ITF – Israel Pathways

ITF – Israel Way Oranim

ITF – Ma'ase Olam

ITF – OTZMA

Ma'ase Olam – New Israel Fund

OTZMA – The Jewish Federations of North America

Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

Yahel Social Change

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper reports on an exploratory study of 332 North American alumni of 12 different Israel-based immersive Jewish service-learning (IJSL) programs who participated in programs from August 2009 to June 2012. All those who took part in programs during this period were invited to complete the survey. The final response rate was 62.5%.

This study was designed to address the following primary research questions:

1. Who participates in Israel-based IJSL programs?
2. Why do they choose to participate? (i.e., what are participants' primary motivations for choosing (a) to do service; (b) to do so abroad; and (c) to do so in Israel?)
3. What happens for participants as a result of the programs? (An open-ended inquiry looking at what participants perceive to have been the consequences – for them – of having participated in programs).
4. What are the implications of these learnings for funders and providers of Israel-based IJSL programs?

1. WHO PARTICIPATES IN ISRAEL-BASED IJSL PROGRAMS?

At the time of application one-quarter of the study participants were pre-college, high school graduates, while just over one-third were enrolled in college programs. **Although the majority of respondents had previously been to Israel, for the great majority their IJSL program was a first experience of immersive service-learning of any sort and of living in Israel over an extended length of time.**

This was the first time that most respondents had spent time in Israel while not just getting on and off a tour bus. This finding – supported by additional data – suggests that programs were less an initial gateway to Israel for participants than they were a portal to an experience of service. This experience provided participants the opportunity to deepen their relationship to Israel and engage with it in new and meaningful ways.

2. MOTIVATIONS: WHY DO THEY CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE?

A multitude of motivations drew respondents to apply to and then participate in their respective IJSL programs. These include the desire to pursue service work, express Jewish identities, and spend a significant amount of time in Israel – all while learning new skills and having fun.

Respondents indicated that **Israel-based IJSL programs allow participants to “have it all:” they can fulfill a set of expansive goals while satisfying their own personal needs**, such as mastering new skills or learning a foreign language.

At the same time, **participants did seem to have a special interest in the Israel-aspect of these programs.** They did not choose to pursue one of the many other opportunities to engage in similar kinds

of experiences elsewhere in the world; they chose to be in Israel. This pre-program motivation appears to impact program outcomes.

3. OUTCOMES: WHAT HAPPENS AS A RESULT OF THE PROGRAM?

The analysis of program outcomes was structured around three core constructs developed by Repair the World. These constructs are: what being a “service person” means to participants, what being Jewish means to them, and developing as a “Jewish Service Person.” Changes in respondents’ attitudes and behaviors related to all three of these constructs were examined. In addition, the analysis examined the extent to which particular items within these constructs were strongly affected and whether, in turn, sub-populations of participants were especially affected by their time in their respective programs.

Overall, regardless of profile, participants generally **reported positive changes in attitudes and behaviors related to service**. They also reported that their Jewish attitudes were positively impacted, although this was less evident among those who came to the programs focused primarily on doing service rather than on spending time in Israel.

Regardless of the length of time since they completed the program, it seems that the respondents’ ritual- or community-focused Jewish behaviors were moderately impacted. The respondents who reported **the most frequent, positive change in Jewish behaviors were those who came to the program with fewer prior Jewish experiences**: an outcome that may reflect a kind of ceiling effect among those who came into programs with already high levels of prior engagement. Just 2% of the ‘least engaged’ reported no change in behaviors related to being Jewish.

Among the sub-population of those who were most impacted, the Jewish behaviors that were most often changed were those that were more readily realized, such as involvement in Jewish organizations in North America, rather than those that called for greater personal change, such as attending a synagogue or independent minyan.

Across the whole sample, the greatest and most consistent reports of change occurred with respect to Israel-related attitudes and behaviors, which can be called nationally-focused Jewish attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, the high level of reported impact in this respect suggests that **exposure to Israel’s challenges and problems in the context of service work did not weaken participants’ commitment to and interest in the country. On the contrary, connection to the country and its people seems to have been consistently intensified by exposure to some of its most challenging realities.**

Finally, there is evidence across all sub-populations of modest increases in respondents' ability to articulate the connections among Jewish values, social justice and volunteerism.

Although this study's examination of program outcomes depends entirely on participant self-report, strong and important patterns do surface. These echo both the particular context and content of Israel-based IJSL programs.

The **attitudes and behaviors that have been most consistently and most strongly impacted across all sub-samples of participants are those tied up with Israel-related concerns**, such as feeling a connection to Israel and following news about the society. This is a finding that reflects both the special context and content of these programs, and the opportunity they provide for a deep and authentic encounter with challenging issues in contemporary Israeli life.

Although fewer survey items were available to examine programmatic impact on the service person construct, there is evidence here, too, of consistent and positive impact on attitudes and behaviors. This finding reflects the experiential content of all the programs examined. The *raison d'être* of all of these programs was to engage their participants in service, unlike many other programs in Israel aimed at this age-cohort.

Where outcomes seem to have been less consistent and relatively less powerful is in relation to particular ritual- and community-focused Jewish attitudes and behaviors. It seems that the participants most impacted were those who came to the programs from the lowest threshold of Jewish engagement. **For individuals systematically experiencing Jewish rituals and rhythms for the first time in their lives, Israel-based IJSL proved to be a significant Jewish experience.**

4. PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE, VOLUNTEERING, AND JEWISH VALUES

As part of this study, respondents were surveyed about their current attitudes and perspectives on service, volunteering, and Jewish values, as well as about their perspective on doing service in Israel specifically. On the whole, **respondents reported identifying more strongly with universalistic reasons for volunteering** (such as “working to make the world a better place is my responsibility as a human being”) **than they did with particularistic reasons rooted in Jewish values or ideology** (such as “I consider working to make the world a better place to be a Jewish act”).

After participating in an Israel-based IJSL program, most respondents conceived of service in strongly universalistic terms. When they reflected on the relationships between service and Jewish values, it is only Orthodox respondents who strongly associated their understanding of service with Jewish sources and applications. Absent pre-intervention data with which to compare these responses, such a conclusion cannot be stated with complete certainty.

At the same time, **respondents expressed an enlarged sense of the meaningfulness and possibilities of service in Israel.** This sense is narrowed only when translated into particularistic Jewish terms, such as the idea that Ancient Israel gave birth to social justice values.

5. IMPLICATIONS

Israel-based IJSL programs offer an instructive case of the power of context and content. Based in Israel, they draw individuals back to the country who have had at least some experience of the place and want now to develop or give stronger expression to their connection.

These programs are a **second or third ‘rung’ along a continuum of Israel experiences**, and provide respondents with the opportunity to deepen their relationship to Israel and engage with it in new and meaningful ways. These programs bring a particular market segment back to Israel and **their special appeal comes from being at the confluence of a service and an Israel experience.**

The context of the programs in Israel surely accounts for the strong and consistently positive impact on Israel-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that participants report, whatever their motivations or profile when they came to the program. In this respect, **this study allays concerns that exposure to Israel’s social problems and difficulties will alienate emergent North American Jewish adults.** On the contrary, exposure to Israel’s challenges within the framework of service seems to have intensified participants’ connection to the society and their appetite to learn more. Of course, a full appreciation of this effect will only be possible through further comparison with other Israel-based, non-IJSL programs that serve similar populations, and through conducting pre and post-program analysis in order to assess impact through means other than respondent (alumni) self-reporting.

Content is highly important, too, when it comes to Israel-based IJSL programs. These programs provide a deep and authentic encounter with challenging issues in contemporary Israeli life, and, of course, they provide a gateway to an intensive experience of service that – as far as our data enable us to know – only a minority of participants have previously tasted. **The programs’ location in Israel is a decisive draw in attracting participants. At the same time, their geographic location – involving service work with an almost exclusively Jewish population - does not seem to have diminished the expansive humanistic values with which participants conceive of service and its applications.** Since alumni continue to think of service in strongly universalistic terms after having been in programs, it suggests that new recruits might be persuaded to enroll by a marketing approach that employs similar language.

Evidently, these programs provide a transformational and meaningful experience of service. But, again, a full sense of their impact will only be possible through comparison with other programs– in this instance with other IJSL programs around the world.

While the programs seem to have been quite successful in cultivating positive Jewish attitudes, they are less effective in cultivating Jewish behaviors, especially those that take participants outside the norms within which they usually act. This might be because most participants have limited interest in developing such outcomes, or because some participants actually come into programs having reached a ceiling of engagement.

This research hints at the challenges involved in cultivating the “Jewish Service Person” identity. An individual who embodies such an identity – someone who conceives of service in Jewish terms and engages in service because they see it as a Jewish value – does not directly emerge from the experience of a Jewish service program in the Jewish state, especially when service is a value so readily appreciated in universalistic and humanistic terms by Jewish young adults.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study provides a great deal of insight into the appeal and the outcomes associated with participation in Israel-based IJSL programs. In terms of appeal, the data demonstrate how these programs offer participants the opportunity to “have it all.” They can fulfill a set of expansive goals while satisfying their own personal needs.

In terms of outcomes, participation has proved greatly to impact the quality of respondents’ connection to and understanding of Israel, and their connection to other Jews. It has impacted the development of their identities as Jewish individuals, and particularly as young Jews committed to service and volunteerism.

While this study reveals that Israel-based IJSL holds great potential for building the constructs of being a “service person,” being Jewish, and developing as a “Jewish Service Person,” it demonstrates the challenges in fulfilling all of the elements of that mission. The results of this study unequivocally point to the potential of Israel-based IJSL serving as a core strategy for Israel engagement, demonstrating significant positive gains in connection to Israel and an enhanced sense of connection to other Jews.