

# GETTING THERE: Challenges, Opportunities, and Outcomes

RootOne 2022 Evaluation Report

April 2023



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## Background

RootOne was launched in 2020 with the goal of maximizing the number of Jewish teens who participate in an Israel experience and maximizing the impact of those experiences. In its first two years, RootOne<sup>1</sup> has approached these goals by means of three primary strategies: providing eligible teens with vouchers that make programs financially more accessible and incentivize participation; building up a continuum of newly-created educational and social experiences before and after the program in Israel; and investing in the professional development of the educators who staff the programs.

Since its inception, RootOne has committed itself to developing a robust program of research and evaluation. For 2022, the scope of this endeavor has included: surveys of participants shortly before and after their time in Israel, as well as a year after their return home; a post-trip survey of trip leaders; real-time observation of Early Experiences (pre-trip programming) and on-the-ground, in-person observations during participants' time in Israel; observations of staff training; content analysis of program itineraries; and interviews with program staff and organizers, North American participants and their parents, and some of the Israeli teens who joined programs.<sup>2</sup> These efforts have been designed not only to document the immediate and longer-term outcomes produced by programs, but to identify what impedes or enhances those outcomes, with the goal of enabling the RootOne team to continually improve its efforts.

This report synthesizes the data collected during the 2022 calendar year. It provides a sense of who the teens are that RootOne currently reaches. It describes how recent changes in the social-emotional needs of teens both challenge and provide opportunities for RootOne and their partners. This document unpacks the narratives conveyed about Israel by immersive summer experiences, and some of the logistical and educational logjams associated with those narratives. And, against this backdrop—one that depicts the challenges RootOne seeks to overcome—it charts the positive Jewish, Israel-related, and personal outcomes being created by programs supported by RootOne. The report concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for those partnering and planning to partner with RootOne as RootOne seeks to turn its aspirations into reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Learn more at [RootOne.org](https://RootOne.org).

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for details about data sources.



## Participants' Profiles

The teen Israel experience is perhaps the most venerable framework for bringing visitors to the modern State of Israel. In the decades following the creation of the State, the majority of short-term programs in Israel served high school students or recent high school graduates.<sup>4</sup> Typically, the participants were highly committed young people who were members of ideologically oriented youth movements. In recent decades, with the creation of Birthright and the effort to draw a larger and more diverse population of young adults, teen programs have continued to serve populations of relatively engaged Jewish teens. This is a pattern that RootOne is attempting to shift.<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, in its first year of activity, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still making international travel highly unpredictable, the first cohort of RootOne participants was made up in large part of young people who had been at least moderately involved in Jewish programming and were somewhat diverse demographically: 78% of participants who received a RootOne voucher and also responded to a survey had attended a Jewish overnight camp for at least two summers, 59% had visited Israel previously, and 48% attended a Jewish day school for at least one year. In addition, 17% came from interfaith homes, 5% identified as a person of color, and 21% as non-heterosexual.

In 2022, RootOne succeeded in recruiting a slightly less engaged and slightly more diverse population of Jewish-identifying teens. Of the 4,768 young people who received a RootOne voucher and who also responded to a survey, 71% had attended a Jewish overnight camp for at least two summers; 51% had visited Israel previously; and 46% had attended a Jewish day school for at least one year. In addition, 19% came from interfaith homes, 10% identified as a person of color, and 22% as non-heteronormative.

Despite the overall movement toward recruiting a less engaged and more diverse cohort of participants, a sense of how far RootOne still has to go is provided when comparing the 18–29-year-old respondents to the Pew Center's 2020 study of US Jews (albeit, noting that twenty percent of RootOne participants were Canadian). This is the youngest age group sampled by Pew, which is the most proximate national sample of young Jews absent a national survey of Jewish-identifying teens (see Table 1). Currently, compared to other young Jews in America, RootOne participants are substantially less diverse demographically and economically, they are much more networked to other young Jews, and also much more likely to have participated in immersive Jewish experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Profile data about RootOne participants are based on responses to a survey distributed a couple of weeks before the start of program. The response rates were 69% in 2021 and 79% in 2022. We feel confident that with such high response rates, the survey respondents represent the entire pool of participants quite well, and for stylistic purposes the text refers to RootOne participants rather than survey respondents.

<sup>4</sup> B. Chazan, "The World of the Israel Experience," in *The Israel Experience: Studies in Jewish Identity and Youth Culture*, ed. B. Chazan (Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2002).

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF 2022 ROOTONE PARTICIPANTS COMPARED TO 18-29-YEAR-OLDS IN PEW 2020

	RootOne 2022 Participants	Pew 2020 18-29-Year-Old Respondents
Person of Color	10%	11%
LGBTQ+	22%	30%
Comfortable financially	74% (now)	52% (when growing up)
Raised in interfaith home	19%	48%
Most or all of closest friends are Jewish	43%	18%
Attended a Jewish day school for at least one year	46%	22%
Previously visited Israel	51%	33%

In 2022, RootOne partnered with 39 trip providers who developed 84 distinct itineraries. These providers are characterized by diverse educational and organizational goals and operate within three specific organizational sectors: **ideologically-oriented movements**, such as URJ, USY, NCSY, and CTeen (Chabad); **summer camps**, such as Yavneh, Eden Village, and Wise; and **community organizations**, such as the Dallas Israel Teen Tour and the Baltimore BZD Teens. As seen in Table 2, the numbers of participants each sector is bringing to Israel at this time reflect where the teen Israel experience market has been historically located, with ideologically-oriented movements bringing 50% more participants than the other two sectors combined. Participants in movement programs are among the most traditional and Jewishly engaged teens to receive RootOne vouchers while, surprisingly perhaps, those coming with summer camps have been least engaged with Jewish organizations previously.

TABLE 2: PROFILE OF ROOTONE 2022 PARTICIPANTS ACROSS THREE MAIN PROVIDERS

	Movement	Camp	Community
Number of participants	2,903	787	1,187
Raised in interfaith home	17%	20%	22%
Attended a Jewish day school for at least one year	47%	33%	51%
Previously visited Israel	52%	38%	58%
Most or all of closest friends are Jewish	45%	34%	46%

## Reflections

*The strategic question RootOne faces as it expands the numbers of teens who participate in Israel experience programs is how to support the organizations with the most extensive experience in this field and help them reach more diverse and less engaged Jewish populations than they did in the past. Can these organizations design and deliver program content that would appeal to such populations? Can RootOne also build relationships with summer camps (especially those that reach relatively less engaged populations) such that an Israel experience becomes a normative component of campers' Jewish trajectory in their high school years? Can RootOne grow the Community sector where there are fewer legacy programs on which to build but where, for the same reason, there may be greater opportunities for program innovation and market expansion? More than a decade ago, Community teen programs constituted a vital part of the Israel experience market; can they recover their previous vigor?*



## The Needs of Teens are Evolving: Challenges, Rewards, and Opportunities

### Challenges

Expanding the number of teens who participate in programs is not just a recruitment challenge. Providers must also respond to the profound and well-documented changes in the social-emotional development of teens, exacerbated by their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Both in 2021 and 2022, about a fifth of RootOne survey respondents reported a long-term mental health condition (in line with American national averages), and one-third reported some kind of disability. Program observations frequently noticed examples of these issues. Observers noted that participants experienced high levels of social anxiety, heightened in the intense social atmosphere of the Israel trip; they witnessed participants struggling to fit in socially or feeling challenged by being surrounded by peers for several weeks.

Participants were often overwhelmed, tired, and lacked the energy or drive to maintain engagement through long, heavily-programmed days. They struggled with the demanding schedule, and frequently asked for more breaks or downtime; they seemed exhausted throughout various days of observation, regardless of what day it was in the trip. Participants seemed equally tired on the first day of observation as on the last day.

Tour guides and trip leaders made several on-the-ground decisions to cancel programs, sites, or experiences at the end of the day, when they determined that the participants would not be able to cope with their demands. Similarly, some programs allowed participants to opt out of experiences if they felt too tired to participate that day. Staff members often decided to provide the participants with what one described as *"a lot of choice. Our approach [this year has been] very flexible, 'you do what you want.' We don't force the kids to do anything. We allow them to volunteer and choose their experience."*

For the most part, the parents we interviewed did not report particular concerns about their teens' readiness for Israel travel; in fact, they were as likely to express concern about the security situation in Israel as about their child's capacity to handle social challenges. However, observations as well as interviews with the teens themselves and with trip providers suggest that many of the teens found it hard to manage without ready parental support; they were used to their parents intervening on their behalf and constantly communicating with them. When parents were asked about communications with their teen during the trip, a few reported trying to limit their own outreach and letting their child initiate any contact. Even so, many parents reported hearing from their child on a close to daily basis. The availability of cell phones and the ubiquity of social media has certainly impacted the communication habits of teens, so perhaps this is less surprising than it appears. We also

<sup>5</sup> <https://adolescentwellnessacademy.com/what-percentage-of-teens-have-mental-health-issues/>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html>

heard parents mention how their child complained to them of things like sore feet after hikes, and even one example of a parent who made several phone calls during the trip to improve conditions for their teen. Based on interviews with trip providers, this last incident does not seem to have been exceptional.

Trip leaders and trip providers inevitably bore the brunt of these issues, in all of their social-emotional or physical expressions. In interviews, staff and providers confirmed many of the phenomena noted in observations: a significant decline in the capacity of participants to manage challenging or even moderately-difficult experiences during the trip; how participants had lower endurance thresholds and became exhausted quite quickly; and how participants also exhibited much shorter attention spans and became bored much more easily.



The Negev trek was too much for many of the participants. It made them tired and exhausted the rest of the trip. They had sat for many days at home on screens during COVID, and they are no longer capable of doing Negev treks. There is a huge impact on the participants' experiences because of COVID factors.

— Tour operator



They get emotionally exhausted, socially burnt out. [At school] they go home at the end of the day and have weekends to decompress and process. On a trip that is harder to arrange. That is something we need more of.

— Tour educator

They also described dealing with mental health challenges of an intensity and scale unlike anything they had experienced in the past.



We deal with a lot more anxiety issues than we have in the past, we have more kids on meds, and more anxiety attacks during the program.

— Tour operator

It's clear that the work involved in bringing young people to Israel has changed. As trip providers and organizers plan for the coming summer, they see they must modify itineraries to take account of diminished teen resilience (fewer sites per day, more opportunities for downtime, shorter tiyulim) and must build the capacities of their staff to respond to these challenges. Some providers have been experimenting with limiting access to phones and social media to encourage higher levels of participant engagement and interaction. Others mentioned that they plan to increase staff ratios so there will be enough adults on hand at any given moment, specifically to deal with any mental health challenges that may arise during the summer. They also mentioned additional training for staff in mental health issues, and more thorough and intensive screening of participants to identify possible issues prior to the summer for which they need to be prepared.

A few providers are thinking seriously about significantly re-designing their programs to respond to these trends. These are developments which will be worth studying in a field that has employed more or less the same powerful program components for so long.



Post-COVID, things are different.... In 2023, we are building ... intentional downtime in the middle of the week, so that teens can find themselves. Teens can't keep up with the rigor; we've never encountered this before. We are now building a structure to accommodate all kinds of teens and energy levels. Trip providers want teens to land and run into the trip, but the kids are exhausted. We want to ease them in now, with something gentle, like some fun teen bonding workshop that day, instead of an intense hike.

— Trip provider partner

## Rewards

While these issues are challenging for participants, trip leaders, and providers, they also have potential to be transformed into rich rewards, as indicated by interviews with teens and their parents. In interviews conducted after the trips, teens and parents repeatedly reflected on the ways participants had grown thanks to being physically and emotionally stretched during their weeks in Israel.

For example, the relative independence participants had on the trip compared to being at home was revelatory for many of them; the experience of taking responsibility for themselves and making independent decisions that had an impact on their own well-being seemed to propel them to a new level of maturity. Many participants experienced these changes in a very self-conscious fashion. Their awareness of encountering challenges helped make them feel prepared for college, which is one of the more tangible outcomes related to self-development.



I didn't think I could handle being away from home and not having someone to look after me. I thought I had wanted to go to college close to home but having time away, I realized it's so great to be away even if I love it at home. I need to find some time to do my own thing.

— Trip participant

The increased confidence teens reported often had a social component too; their experience of becoming friends with strangers helped many feel much more confident about their ability to navigate new social environments in college and beyond.



Being thrown into a group of strangers. I don't experience that all that often so not [having known] a lot of them [before] will help me later in life because it will happen more often as I get older.

— Trip participant

And their experience of facing, and then overcoming, numerous challenges on the trip gave them an increased sense of their own self-efficacy, including their ability to grapple with adversity of different kinds. These challenges were social, emotional, physical, and occasionally logistical.



When we were in Gadna [Israel Army Service], I know I can't run for my life, and I don't do that kind of stuff, but I realized I can do it. It was easy. I found out things about myself I didn't know I could do before, and I did them for myself and for everyone else. I was there for me. I can do things.

— Trip participant



Parents also celebrated the same kinds of accomplishments. They observed and appreciated the extent to which their children, by overcoming certain fears or by having to be more independent, gained valuable life skills.



Many times, during the daytime they would have to group themselves and ... would go to the market to buy their own food. [They'd have a] certain amount of freedom and independence within a controlled setting. She feels as if she is ready to [be] more independent. She is there.

— Parent



[He's developed] flexibility on figuring out issues on his own, not being able to reach out to us because of time change and either standing up for himself or working out tricky situations [including] with a roommate. Running into other teens from other programs and other countries, he became a better social problem solver.

— Parent

## A Jewish Dimension and an Opportunity

These reflections of teens and parents open a window on an important phenomenon that could easily be overlooked. Oftentimes, these personal accomplishments had a Jewish or Israel-related dimension. It wasn't just that these young people overcame social fears to make a new group of friends or to find their voice; they were making Jewish friends, and they were learning to speak out on Jewish topics. They didn't just complete a hike they had expected to be too challenging; they accomplished this in a location of Jewish historical significance, and that contributed to their sense of having a stake in that place, of this place becoming a part of who they are. Personal accomplishments were rarely just about the person; they were often inflected with Jewish significance. And, in turn, the Jewish and Israel-related outcomes created by these experiences seem to have been intensified as a result of being interwoven with personal outcomes of great significance.

### Reflections

*Those who design and deliver the programs, and RootOne leadership in turn, must identify what are the limits at which stretching young people yields growth rather than failure (what Vygotsky called their Zone of Proximal Development).<sup>6</sup> Teens are evidently coming to Israel with different (and probably more challenging) social and personal needs than in the past. Providers and trip leaders must be ready to meet those needs. And, yet, if they make too many accommodations, and reduce the intensity of these experiences, teens will also have fewer opportunities to taste the rich social and physical accomplishments that those experiences can produce. The changing needs of trip participants provide an opportunity to reinvent aspects of these experiences that, in any case, are due for a refresh, as described below. Those needs also provide an opportunity for RootOne to exercise field leadership with so many providers looking for support that will help them better meet the needs of their participants.*

<sup>6</sup> Seth Chaiklin, "The Zone of Proximal Development in Vygotsky's Analysis of Learning and Instruction," *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context* 1, no. 2 (2003): 39-64.



# Program Design Bottlenecks: Further Challenges and Opportunities

## Traditional Common Denominators

The fact that RootOne provider partners developed 84 distinct itineraries for the hundreds of buses they operated this past summer speaks to the wide variety of educational and organizational goals that activate the work of those who partner with RootOne at the provider level. Program observations, itinerary analysis, and interviews with trip providers (those who organize programs) and operators (those who implement them on the ground) make clear how varied these goals can be. Religiously-traditional programs, such as NCSY and CTeen, tend to emphasize goals of Jewish learning and religious practice for their participants, aiming to cultivate a relationship to Israel grounded in a stance of awe and a sense of the miracle of Israel's rebirth. Secular and Israeli organizations, such as Kimama and Chetz v'Keshet, prioritize forming relationships with Israelis and with the country, based on love, fun, and adventure. Summer camps and many of the movements, for example, Yavneh, Wise, and Ramah, prioritize opportunities for personal growth and reflection, structuring their programs as a part of a broader trajectory of leadership development for their organizations. Organizations that lean left politically (whether camps or movements), including Eden Village, Havaya and URJ, aim to foster critical affection for Israel by means of digging into its complexity, encouraging participants to continue learning about Israel, and not shying away from its more challenging elements.

Oriented to different goals, the religious and social cultures on these trips differ, as do the messages communicated by their staff and how participants spend their time. For example, while almost all groups spent at least one Shabbat in Jerusalem, how they spent their time over Shabbat varied dramatically, whether in prayer, at the pool, or in facilitated sessions. Their Shabbat practices varied almost as much as where they spent a second Shabbat in Israel, whether in another "religious" town such as Tzfat, close to the beach in Tel Aviv, on a kibbutz, or as part of a "free" weekend where participants had the opportunity to spend time with family or friends.

## Logistical and Narrative Bottlenecks

Paradoxically, as diverse as program goals are, the programs themselves tend to be constructed from many of the same building blocks: their buses tend to visit many of the same sites, and the great majority draw from a common pool of staff. These phenomena result in a logistical and narrative bottleneck.

Analysis of program itineraries shows that, overall, the sites most frequently visited by programs included the Old City of Jerusalem, the Kotel, Yad Vashem, Masada, the City of David, and the Dead Sea—places focused on Israel's ancient past, its religious significance, Jewish suffering, and the survival of the Jewish People. Of course, what participants did in these places could vary, as might the stories they heard, depending on whether the tour guide was an employee of the site or a member

of the program's own staff. A visit, for example, to Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem with an Orthodox group was quite different from a visit to the same place with a religiously and politically progressive group; one program emphasized the opportunity for prayer at a holy Jewish site, the other used the opportunity to unpack the complex issues at a historic Jewish site located inside a Palestinian town.

Generally, a consequence of this kind of itinerary overlap is that participants tend to hear a limited set of narratives about Israel. And because most programs are visiting the same limited number of locations, their tour buses tend to get snarled up in a never-ending series of traffic jams. There are only so many groups that can be admitted to the same menu of sites over the course of the summer season.

Because of competition for slots at the most visited sites like Yad Vashem and the City of David, programs are booking visiting times a year in advance. Due to a post-COVID contraction in the number of hotels prepared to accommodate teen groups, trip operators are also booking rooms ahead of time. Their programming choices are therefore constrained by when they have to spend the night at certain places. In turn, these logistical constraints limit the flexibility providers have in reimagining the narrative arc of their schedules, an arc which typically starts in Israel's ancient past and concludes in the present day.

Additionally—and constituting a different kind of bottleneck—we know from interviews with tour providers and operators that most of them continue to be compelled by a great sense of responsibility to connect their participants to the Land and State of Israel. Many programs also encourage young people to advocate on Israel's behalf, especially once they make it to college. Providers and operators are deeply motivated by the desire to tell what they call "Israel's side of the story," and to prepare participants to tell it as well.

This story rarely departs from the master narrative that underpins much of civic life in Israel today; it celebrates a trajectory from destruction to rebirth that is at the heart of Israel's identity. This narrative also aligns with a years-long consensus within North American Jewish communities about what Israel is and what it signifies in a post-Holocaust world, whatever one's political orientation. However, this master narrative is easily simplified, even caricatured, when distilled into bite-sized portions by speakers with little time to get their message across, and in packed program itineraries. This story is also just one out of many narratives about Israel, and it is certainly not the only one that teens want to hear or are accustomed to hearing at home.

## Ripple Effects

Interviews with summer 2022 participants as well as with 2021 alumni one year after the end of the program are consistent with what was noticed during onsite observations: participants appreciate exposure to greater nuance in the narratives they hear than many typically encounter during the course of their programs. In the moment, when they hear just one point of view, they start to become skeptical about what they're being told, especially when it does not align with their general awareness of the complicated elements in Israel's social, economic, or geopolitical reality which they bring from prior educational experiences or discourse on social media. Once they return home, the gaps between simplified program narratives and what they hear about Israel become still more of a problem.

As will be seen below, survey data indicate that teens return from Israel feeling they have a better sense of day-to-day life in Israel. Interviews reveal that many come home with a deep empathy for Israeli experiences of the conflict. Hearing accounts of hiding in bomb shelters, witnessing destruction or rocket remnants, or hearing about IDF service gives teens a visceral picture of what it means to live in Israel as an Israeli. These experiences both augment their sense of Jews being under attack and highlight the bravery of Israelis. For teens, this feels like a level of understanding they were not privy to before. And yet, once they're home, many 2021 alumni express the disconnect between what they experience in Israel and the narratives they hear about Israel in social and news media at home. This creates an uncomfortable level of cognitive dissonance for them; many seem to have a sense that they are subjected to a great deal of misinformation about Israel. They deal with this sense in different ways (possibly driven by their own backgrounds): some simply dismiss anything critical of Israel as antisemitic

hate, others take a more nuanced position by acknowledging their uncertainty about what to believe and express a desire to learn more, while others do their best to avoid comments and conversations critical of Israel altogether. This array of tactics, and the problematic nature of some of them, suggest two things: that teens need more assistance once they return home with processing the dissonance they experience (something RootOne is developing programs to address), and, second, and perhaps more fundamentally, participants should have opportunities in Israel to hear more nuanced accounts of Israel's reality than has typically been the case until now.

## Alternative Models

Against this backdrop, there is evidence that some of the narratives that participants hear are shifting. Analysis of the sites least frequently visited by programs attests to the specific priorities of different providers, and to organizational agendas outside the consensus. Locations that appeared in just two or three itineraries included the Belz Yeshiva in Jerusalem and the LGBT Open House in Tel Aviv; sites in the West Bank such as Palestinian Bethlehem and the settlement of Shiloh; specific movement- or denomination-oriented sites, such as Kfar Chabad and Kibbutz Hannaton (Conservative); and a handful of Christian, Muslim, and Druze sites. As these examples indicate, some providers are engaged in constructing alternative narratives around alternative building blocks.

Interviews with trip providers also revealed a different influence on the diversification of itineraries. There is growing appreciation of how increasingly common it is for young North American Jews (especially those within the populations currently served by programs) to participate in multiple Israel experiences during their young adult years. This trend means that providers don't necessarily need to squeeze a full Israel experience into a single program. They can be more selective about the themes they explore, and construct less intensive itineraries, thereby also addressing participants' preference and need for more downtime. They can also avoid traffic jams.



Most summer teen Israel trips are still designed under the misconception that coming to Israel is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. They try to cram so many classic things into a 28-day trip, and into a specific day; they are dragging participants from place to place. There is no way to take it all in effectively. We have tried to shift away from this model. You can fly to Israel very cheaply now, and people come much more often than they used to. We switched down to 2-3 major things a day, to end the day with opportunities to process.

— Trip provider partner

### Reflections

*As a program form, the Israel experience in all its diverse expressions has long been constructed from a consistent set of building blocks. Historically, these elements yielded compelling narratives which continue to be central to RootOne's mission. With teen participants seeking and needing to hear greater nuance than these narratives typically incorporate, and to find ways to reconcile what they learn about Israel in Israel with what they hear about Israel at home, RootOne has an opportunity to facilitate the kinds of programmatic creativity that addresses these needs. Could logistical needs to avoid overcrowding lead to greater diversity in the narratives that participants encounter? Can the efforts of providers already experimenting with conveying different narratives, or with alternative ways to convey traditional narratives, provide models for the sector as a whole?*



## Powerful Outcomes

The earlier sections of this report highlight some of the challenges RootOne must overcome if it is to fully realize its aspirations as well as the opportunities those challenges create. In the remaining sections, we highlight the outcomes that RootOne’s partner programs are already producing, as indicated by data from surveys fielded to participants before and after their time in Israel, and by interview data collected after participants returned home.

The outcomes that RootOne seeks to produce were determined before RootOne’s first summer in 2021 by means of an outcomes-clarification process which distinguished between 18 “educational outcomes,” which themselves occur within three domains: (i) participants’ relationship to, understanding of, and involvement with Israel; (ii) their relationship to, understanding of, and involvement with Jewish life; and (iii) their personal self-development and awareness. The 18 outcomes were assessed by means of 57 survey items, with between two and six items being classified, as part of the survey development process, as “indicators” of each outcome. (See Appendix B for a listing of the 18 outcomes and their associated indicators.)

A comparison of pre-program and post-program survey data indicates that, as was the case during RootOne’s first year of activity, the teens who traveled to Israel with RootOne’s program partners in 2022 returned home positively impacted by the experience. Data from participants substantiate with great consistency what was reported a year ago: the young people in these programs have gained a new understanding of Israel, its historic past, and its often contested present. They have acquired a better understanding of the Jewish people and their own place in that collective; many want to be more deeply connected and involved with other Jews. They are also thrilled at their personal accomplishments and social gains during what can be a fraught developmental moment in their lives. Participating in these programs as adolescents seems to have resulted in a potent mix of outcomes that have potential to change the course of their lives, especially as they head to college.

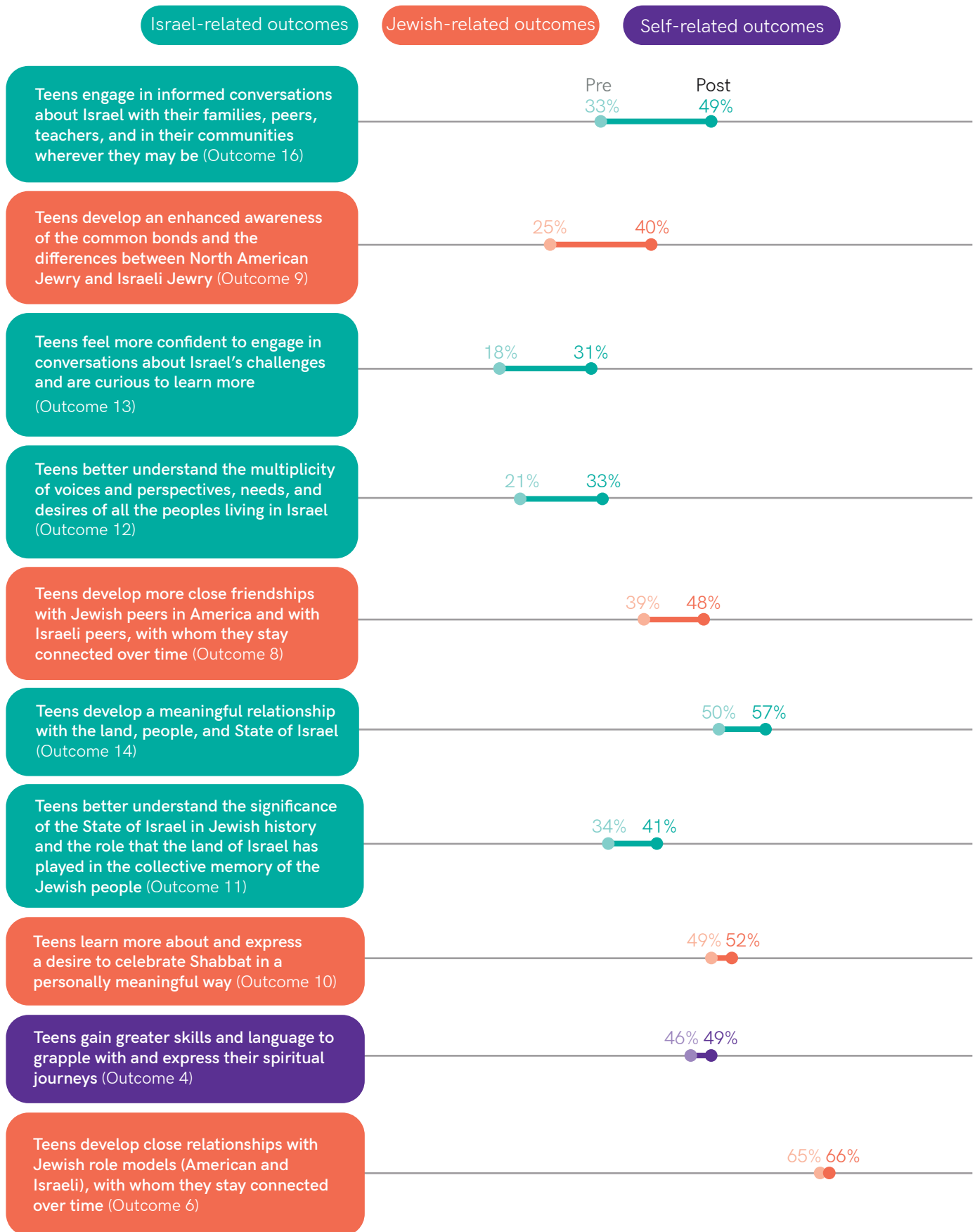
### Distinct Program Outcomes

Figure 1 shows 10 of the 18 outcomes having significantly changed in a positive direction when comparing pre-program and post-program survey responses. The broad sweep of these changes underlines the extent to which experiencing Israel alongside similar-age fellow travelers, without one’s parents, and with the care and guidance of well-intentioned educators and counselors yields a powerful combination of Israel-related, Jewish, and self-development outcomes. As can be seen, those outcomes incorporate cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions.

<sup>7</sup> The statistical test for impact was based on the difference of the mean scores of the outcomes at each time interval, not the difference in the share of participants scoring high (as shown in Figure 1). Thus, while the share of high scores in Outcome 6, for example, changes only from 65% to 66%, the mean changed significantly. This is because most of the movement on the scale was in the lower or middle categories, resulting in significant change in the mean but a very small difference in the “high” proportion.

**FIGURE 1: OUTCOMES WHERE PARTICIPANTS EXHIBIT STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROWTH POST-TRIP ( $p < .05$ )**

Note: The percentages displayed are those of “high” scoring participants pre- and post-trip, classified as having outcome scores above 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 7. Outcomes are ordered from largest to smallest pre-post percentage difference.



At first glance, it might seem that the programs had almost as much impact on Jewish outcomes as on Israel-related outcomes. A closer look at the subcomponents (the indicators) of these outcomes, where the effect size (i.e., magnitude) of the change observed was noteworthy (Cohen’s  $d \geq 0.2$ ), shows that many more of the Israel-related indicators changed to a large degree; 12 in total. The percentage of those participants who scored “high” on these measures, that is, above 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 7, is shown in table 3.

**TABLE 3: ISRAEL-RELATED INDICATORS WHERE PARTICIPANTS EXHIBIT STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROWTH POST-TRIP ( $p < .05$ )**

Note: Percentages in pre and post columns are those of “high” scoring participants, classified as having outcome scores above 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 7. Items are ordered by the change from pre to post percentage.

	Pre	Post	Change
I know about day-to-day life in Israel	34%	63%	29%
I am able to give others a sense of what Israel is like	37%	65%	28%
I know about issues that are most important to different types of people living in Israel today	43%	62%	19%
I know about the role that Israel’s geography (borders, land, etc.) plays in Israeli current events	58%	74%	16%
I know about the basic histories of many different types of people living in Israel today	43%	59%	16%
I frequently speak about Israel with my friends	31%	46%	15%
I feel a strong sense of connection to Israel	57%	71%	14%
I understand the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and languages represented in Israel today	58%	71%	13%
I know about the importance of Israel in the Tanakh (the Jewish Bible)	54%	65%	11%
I frequently speak about Israel with my family	43%	54%	11%
I am able to engage in conversations about Israel’s challenges	48%	57%	9%
I am active about Israel on social media	19%	24%	5%

At the aggregate level (that is, combining responses from all programs), none of the self-development indicators changed to such an extent, and just the following four Jewish indicators did, with the percentage of those participants who scored “high” again shown in table 4.

**TABLE 4: JEWISH-RELATED INDICATORS WHERE PARTICIPANTS EXHIBIT STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROWTH POST-TRIP ( $p < .05$ )**

Note: Percentages in pre and post columns are those of “high” scoring participants, classified as having outcome scores above 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 7. Items are ordered by the change from pre to post percentage.

	Pre	Post	Change
I know about similarities in Jewish life between North America and Israel	46%	67%	21%
I know about differences in Jewish life between North America and Israel	49%	69%	20%
I know about different ways of being Jewish (including different expressions or practices of Judaism)	64%	75%	11%
I have close friendships with Israeli teens, with whom I’m regularly in touch	28%	33%	5%

The disparity between the extent of changes in Israel-related and the other indicators suggests two conclusions: first, that, overall, participants came to the programs with much more room for growth with respect to Israel-related indicators than to Jewish and self-development indicators. They started out much less familiar with aspects of life in Israel than with Jewish life more generally. That is why a sizeable part of their growth was concentrated in the cognitive realm, getting to know about and understand Israel’s past and present. Second, the disparity between Israel-related and other indicators confirms the primary foci of programs: almost all of the programs prioritized cultivating understanding of and connection with Israel; they did not all focus to the same degree on encouraging Jewish or personal growth. Individual programs did diverge from this pattern, but overall, the programs’ most powerful outcomes were associated with various Israel-related dimensions.

## Interconnected Program Outcomes

While survey data demonstrate the divergent impact of the programs on Israel-related, Jewish, and self-development outcomes, interview data nevertheless make plain the extent to which these outcomes were interrelated, and often fed off one another. (This reflects a methodological commonplace, in which quantitative data analysis deconstructs phenomena with the goal of analyzing their component parts, while interview data tend to be more holistic, constructing narratives out of the component parts.)

Take the following comment from a participant a couple of months after she returned home. In these few sentences it is next to impossible to determine where the Israel-related outcomes end (especially her connection to Israel), and where both Jewish and self-development outcomes begin (her Jewish identity and her happiness).



Before I went, I did not feel much of a connection. It's more than just Jewish identity, it's about community. It makes me feel like I have more of a purpose there than at home. That I could maybe be a happier person there. That I could be comfortable in Israel. [I live in a] small town at home so there's some discomfort [here].

— Trip participant

Many interviewees expressed how Israel feels “like home.” As seen here, they don’t mean that Israel feels like their home feels to them, but rather that they feel comfortable and at home in Israel, despite the many differences. Ironically, exposure to so many ways to be Jewish—whether inside their bus, within the confines of their own tour group, but also beyond it, in their encounter with Israeli society—gives them a deeper sense of comfort in their own skins than they may have felt in narrower local cultural circumstances, particularly where there may only be one or two models of engaged Jewish living. This feeling of comfort and even freedom is not only about being Jewish. It is also about exposure to a different way of living, and a slightly different set of values (collectivist rather than competitive; conservative rather than liberal) than they experience in the United States. These are powerful dynamics of personal growth, and they are interwoven with different understandings of and comfort with what it means to be Jewish, fueled in turn by an encounter with the inescapable differences between life in Israel, as a Jewish majority culture, and life in America. While survey data have teased these things apart, interview data show how the whole is often greater than the sum of the parts, and the extent to which Israel-related outcomes drive others: a deeper understanding of Israel can prompt, for example, different ways of thinking about what it means to be Jewish, which in turn feeds adolescent self-differentiation.

## Greater Impact on Those with Nominal and Moderate Backgrounds

In broad terms, survey data help address the question of which participants are most powerfully impacted by these experiences. The answer to this question, it seems, is strongly tied to the personal profiles of participants and less so to the specific content and effectiveness of the programs in which they participate.

Participant interviews conducted at the conclusion of RootOne’s Early Experience programs—before teens arrived in Israel—made plain the range of motivations that inspire young people to participate in programs. Some seek what anthropologist Eric Cohen calls an “experiential” or even “existential” experience, one that will transform them in personal or Jewish terms; others are less concerned with being changed in a meaningful way, and seek more “recreational” or “diversionary” kinds of experiences.<sup>8</sup> Participants don’t just differ in their motivations, as we saw above, they exhibit sizeable differences in their Jewish backgrounds, for example, in relation to the extent of their Jewish social networks, their family composition, and their exposure to prior Jewish educational experiences.

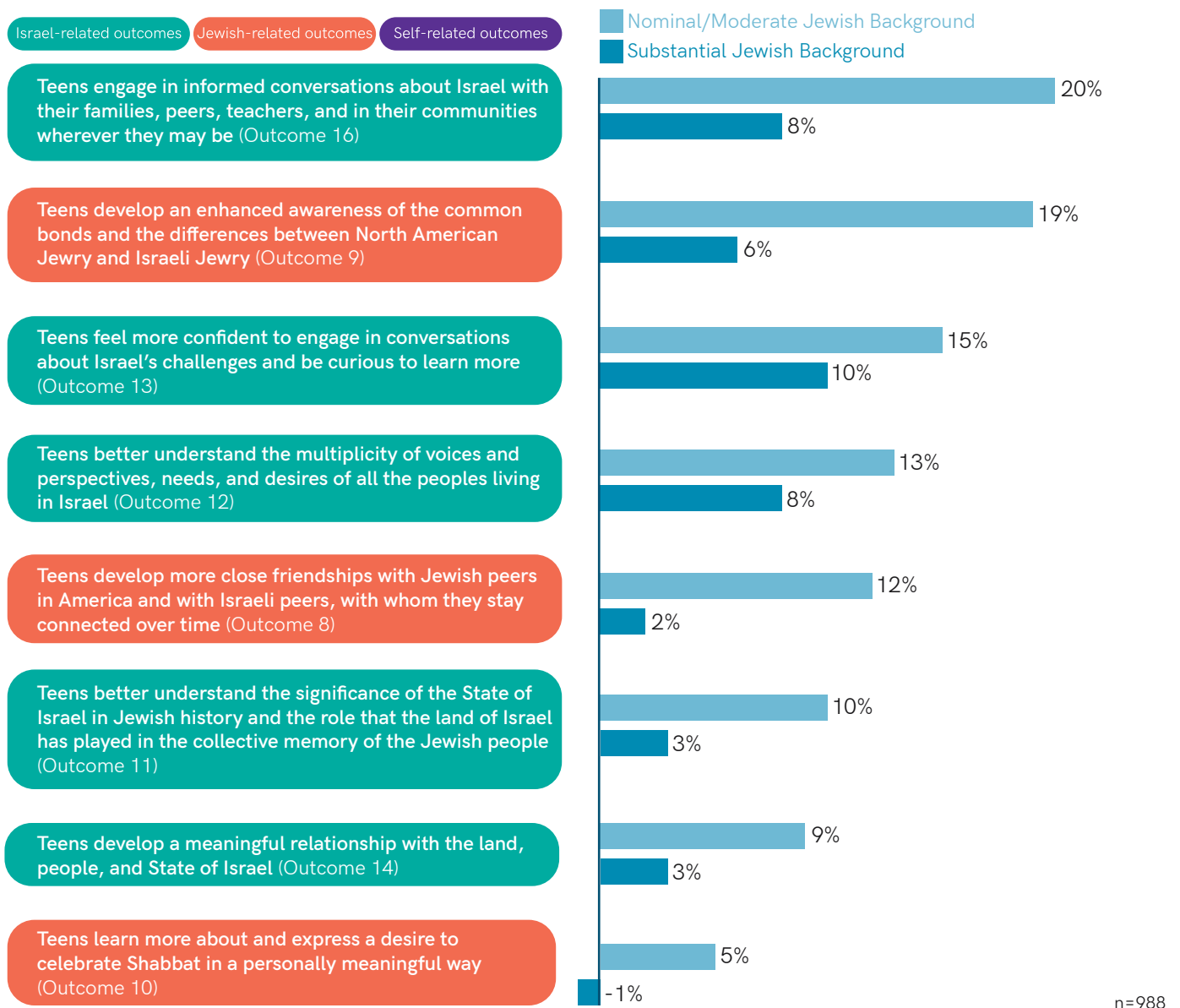
<sup>8</sup> E. H. Cohen, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experience,” *Sociology* 13 (1979): 179-201.



Survey data indicate that these demographic/background differences are correlated with the size of many of the changes identified between pre-program and post-program survey responses. Figure 2 compares changes in program outcomes across the 69% of respondents identified as coming from a nominal or moderate Jewish background, and the 31% identified as having substantial Jewish background. (The classification of nominal, moderate, and substantial backgrounds is adopted from a framework employed by the Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Funder Collaborative.)<sup>9</sup> Figure 2 displays the eight program outcomes where differences between these two populations are both significant and especially marked (Cohen's  $d \geq 0.2$ ).<sup>10</sup> These outcomes are related to both Israel and Jewish matters, and they underline how an Israel experience with one of RootOne's provider partners can help young people with less substantial Jewish backgrounds become much more familiar with central aspects of Jewish life and enable them to significantly expand their Jewish friendship networks. As for more engaged participants, these experiences can also help them gain a moderate understanding of life in Israel and change their relationship to the country too. If RootOne can reach more members of these less engaged populations, it can expect to have an especially powerful impact.

**FIGURE 2: OUTCOMES WHERE THE IMPACT OF THE TRIP IS GREATER AMONG PARTICIPANTS FROM NOMINAL OR MODERATE JEWISH BACKGROUNDS, COMPARED TO PARTICIPANTS FROM SUBSTANTIAL JEWISH BACKGROUNDS**

Note: Bars represent the post-trip increase (or decrease) in the percentage of "high" scoring participants, classified as having outcome scores above 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 7. Outcomes are ordered from largest to smallest post-trip increases for participants with nominal/moderate Jewish background.



<sup>9</sup> <https://www.teenfundercollaborative.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CCE-2019-Aggregate-Report-Final-20200724RC.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 6.

## Examining the Impact Produced by Specific Types of Programs

An analysis of impacts observed among participants in programs operated by RootOne partners in the camp, movement, and community sectors reveals modest but potentially important differences.<sup>11</sup> The trip had a greater impact on participants in camp programs than in other programs with regard to feeling inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the various communities and world in which they lived (Outcome 3). However, the trip had less of an impact on participants in camp programs than other programs when it came to learning more about and expressing a desire to celebrate Shabbat in a personally meaningful way (Outcome 10). The impact experienced by camp and other program participants did not differ on any other outcomes.

A similarly designed analysis examining participants in movement programs shows they experienced greater impact from the trip than participants in other programs on five outcomes, as follows:

- Teens seek out more opportunities for Jewish involvement and Israel engagement in their communities, including their college campus (Outcome 5)
- Teens define their own personal Jewish paths and connections to the Jewish people (Outcome 7)
- Teens learn more about and express a desire to celebrate Shabbat in a personally meaningful way (Outcome 10)
- Teens continue to ask questions, learn about, and travel to Israel again (Outcome 15)
- Teens develop an enhanced appreciation of modern Hebrew, its contribution to Israeli culture, and its potential as a gateway to personal Jewish meaning (Outcome 18)

With both Jewish background and the type of program showing evidence that they are associated with program outcomes, multivariate regression analyses were conducted to determine whether one was more important than the other. The results were clear. Differences in impact by Jewish background were much more consistent and usually stronger than differences in impact by type of trip. This suggests that as RootOne seeks to increase its impact on an expanded participant pool, Jewish background is a more important factor to consider in participant recruitment and selection than type of program.

## Longer-Lasting Outcomes

Shortly after the conclusion of RootOne's first season of activity in summer 2021, the research team recruited 100 of the participants to take part in hour-long, in-depth interviews. Between May and June 2022, 58 of these RootOne alumni participated in a second conversation. These interviews have helped document the ways in which the outcomes created by programs had been translated into the day-to-day lives of teens after they returned home, and what has supported or impeded the processes of translation.

*Formative relationships.* The relationships participants formed during their programs have been important vehicles for multidimensional growth. These relationships have been developmentally valuable for these young people at a time of their lives when they are beginning to separate from the people and structures that have defined who they are, and these relationships have also served as fertile ground for Jewish exploration. Teens have experimented with new Jewish practices, inspired by their time in Israel, or they have simply continued to be exposed to different ways of being Jewish. These new relationships have helped teens appreciate the importance of being connected to a Jewish community as a means of continued engagement with their own Jewish identity. Many interviewees emphasized, for example, how their program experiences illuminated the importance of ensuring they have a Jewish community at college.

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<sup>11</sup> For purposes of the analysis, the camps classification included RootOne partners that are camps (e.g., Camp Yavneh) and the movement classification included RootOne partners that are part of national and international youth movements (e.g., NCSY and BBYO). In a few cases where a movement also operates a camp (e.g., Ramah and URJ), participants were placed in the movement category. Organizing partners in this way helped the RootOne team to maximize its ability to support programs housed within different types of organizations for the 2022 trips.



[The trip] influenced who I still talk to today. Some of my friends from the trip have helped me develop and become a different person and express myself. More after I came back ... the people I've stayed in touch with the most, have made the impact on me.

—Alum



[My future plans were] 100% [shaped by the trip]. I needed a Chabad or Hillel and large Jewish community and if I didn't go to Israel, I wouldn't have thought about it. The trip played a huge role in helping me want this and having a Jewish roommate. It definitely ties into it.

—Alum

*Role models.* Some programs provided participants with strong role models who have continued to serve as exemplars, mentors, and friends even after programs have ended. These individuals, typically near-peers, have provided an intimation of the paths that the participants are just beginning to contemplate. When, during the past year, former participants saw and heard from advisors whom they liked and admired (and who were often not very much older than them), it gave them a close and almost visceral example of what their near-future lives might look like. When alumni have not had such role models, they have found it harder to maintain the enthusiasms and interests that had been sparked on the trip.



I had two madrichim that live in Jerusalem, I've been in touch with them the whole time. I wrote my college application essay about one of them. They all left such a big impact on me and influenced me.

—Alum



An advisor I met on the trip, we stayed in touch a lot. She helped me choose my gap year. The director of the program has a chat on WhatsApp, so every week she sends something about the parsha. It's nice to get that, even if we don't talk that much.

—Alum

*Aftershocks.* Almost all alumni have engaged, sometimes frequently, in conversations about Israel since their return, with family and friends, at home, at school, and beyond. Invariably, as was described above, they have had to reconcile the sometimes-challenging ways in which Israel is depicted and discussed at home with their own experiences of Israel and the narratives they heard about it on their programs.



The topic of Israel was coming up a lot during the Palestine/Israel conflict (last spring) and everyone was trying to pick a side. And the Jewish teens I know found it hard to understand what was happening because the social media things you see are pro-Palestine, but you also have this kinship with Israel and a lot of what is said isn't true after being there.

—Alum

Most of the alumni from RootOne's first cohort who were interviewed a second time come from families with ties to and positive attitudes toward Israel; their families have provided fertile ground for their newfound empathy and understanding of Israeli perspectives. This has reduced the cognitive dissonance alumni might have experienced. But that has not always been the case, as in the example below. And as RootOne broadens its reach to young people from families where members may not have visited Israel themselves or who are not broadly supportive of the Jewish state, there is potential for rupture and discomfort at home. It is likely that alumni will increasingly need support with navigating these situations in the form of post-programming opportunities.



My family was eager, but not as educated on the topic of the conflict, they wanted to hear more fun experiences. I got mixed reactions. Some of my family are not anti-Zionist but [ask questions like,] 'how can we claim land?' It's interesting to have those debates after being in Israel. Being in Israel is like a fever trip, I feel my experience was kind of biased. I'm very comfortable and confident where I stand, but it's weird having disagreements with family.

—Alum

## Reflections

*The programs that RootOne supports have generally produced the kinds of outcomes expected of teen Israel experiences; they have contributed in an expansive fashion to changes in participants' understanding of and relationship to Israel, and less expansively to changes in their Jewish lives. As RootOne weighs how to focus its efforts, it is worth considering how much effort to invest in expanding the number of programs that also seek to produce broader Jewish outcomes among participants. How central is this to RootOne's mission? RootOne should reflect, too, on why self-development outcomes do not seem to have been influenced as much as other outcomes. Given the vividness of the personal growth described by interviews, the gap between the study's quantitative and qualitative data deserves further investigation going forward.*



## Conclusion: Thinking Forward about RootOne's Work

RootOne's work is rich with potential. The programs RootOne supports powerfully influence the ways in which teens, whatever their backgrounds, understand and relate to Israel. And the more these programs can reach people who have not previously participated in immersive forms of Jewish education and engagement, the greater their impact will be on their Jewish lives too.

RootOne's work is complicated by the evolving social-emotional needs of teens, and, yet, as we have seen, if programs adapt to meet those needs, ultimately, their contribution to the personal development of young people may also amplify the Jewish and Israel-related outcomes they produce. Self-development and the nurture of meaningful relationships among participants are the platforms on which other forms of growth occur.

Helping programs adapt in these ways will be complex work. It will involve modifying long-established models of program design, implementing ways of narrating new and compelling master narratives about Israel, and constructing broad-based and sophisticated professional development for staff so that they are better attuned to their educational and pastoral roles.

The work is great; the potential rewards are greater still.

# Appendix A

## Data Sources



### Surveys

3,162 Teens completed pre-trip and post-trip surveys (65% response rate) 2022

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199 Trip leaders completed post-trip survey (38% response rate) 2022

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371 Alumni completed one-year post-trip survey (17% response rate) 2021

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### Interviews

45 Participants; +14 after Early Experiences 2022

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40 Parents 2022

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44 Program staff and organizers 2022

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12 Participating Israeli teens 2022

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58 Alumni 2021

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### Observations

24 Hours of Staff trainings

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> 300 Hours of Programming in Israel

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### Content Analysis

84 Trip itineraries

# Appendix B

## Teen Outcomes and Indicators for RootOne Grantees

ULTIMATE GOAL: PROUD JEWS CONNECTED TO ISRAEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

LEGEND: A = Attitude | B = Behavior | K = Knowledge | S = Skill | ST = Short Term | LT = Long Term

By virtue of their involvement with RootOne, teens will...

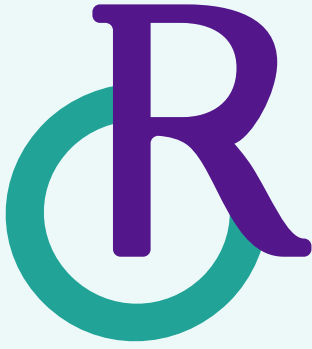
	Outcomes	Indicators
Self	1 Feel a greater sense of pride in being Jewish [A, ST]	a I am comfortable wearing Jewish stuff in public (e.g., Star of David necklace, clothing with Hebrew writing, etc.) b If it comes up in conversation, I never hesitate to say that I am Jewish c Being Jewish is a very important part of my identity
	2 Develop a stronger sense of self and independence [A, ST]	a I know who I am and what is important to me b I generally feel confident about making my way through the world on my own c I feel equipped to make important decisions about my life on my own d I have a good sense of when to seek advice from adults when making important decisions
	3 Feel more inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the various communities and world in which they live [A, ST/LT]	a I see community service as part of my Jewish life b Doing volunteer work is important to me c Jewish concepts of contributing to the world (for example, Tikkun Olam) inspire me to make the world a better place
	4 Gain greater skills and language to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys [S, ST]	a I often reflect on what being Jewish means to me b I feel comfortable talking about my spiritual life with my peers

	Outcomes	Indicators
Jewish	5 Seek out more opportunities for Jewish involvement and Israel engagement in their communities, including their college campus [B, ST/LT - focus on LT]	a I am interested in participating in Jewish activities b Thinking ahead to college, it is important for me to be involved in Jewish life on campus c I am interested in participating in Israel-related activities d Thinking ahead to college, it is important for me to be involved with Israel on campus e I want to have a leadership role in Jewish and/or Israel-related activities
	6 Develop close relationships with Jewish role models (American and Israeli), with whom they stay connected over time [B, ST/LT]	a There are Jewish adults (American or Israeli) in my life - other than family members - whom I am regularly in touch with b There are Jewish adults (American or Israeli) in my life - other than family members - whom I turn to for advice and support c It is important to me that I have Jewish adults (American or Israeli) in my life whom I look up to
	7 Define their own personal Jewish paths and connections to the Jewish people [S, ST/LT]	a Jewish ideas and values help shape important decisions I make b I am interested in learning more about Judaism and my Jewish heritage c I can explain to others what being Jewish means to me
	8 Develop more close friendships with Jewish peers in America and with Israeli peers, with whom they stay connected over time [B, ST/LT]	a I have close friendships with other Jewish teens, whom I am regularly in touch with b I have close friendships with Israeli teens, whom I am regularly in touch with
	9 Develop an enhanced awareness of the common bonds and the differences between North American Jewry and Israeli Jewry [K, ST]	a I know about similarities in Jewish life between North America and Israel b I know about differences in Jewish life between North America and Israel c I know about different ways of being Jewish (including different expressions or practices of Judaism)
	10 Learn more about and express a desire to celebrate Shabbat in a personally meaningful way [K, A, B, ST]	a It is important to me to make Shabbat feel different than the rest of the week b I know about what makes Shabbat different from the rest of the week

By virtue of their involvement with RootOne, teens will...

	Outcomes	Indicators
Israel	11 Better understand the significance of the State of Israel in Jewish history and the role that the land of Israel has played in the collective memory of the Jewish people [K, ST]	a I know about the place of Israel in Jewish history ..... b I know about the importance of Israel in the Tanakh ..... c I understand the role that Israel's geography (borders, land, etc.) plays in Israeli current events
	12 Better understand the multiplicity of voices and perspectives, needs, and desires of all the peoples living in Israel [K, ST]	a I know about the basic histories of many different types of people living in Israel today ..... b I know about some of the issues that are most important to different types of people living in Israel today ..... c I understand that Israel is a diverse society with many different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and languages represented
	13 Feel more confident to engage in conversations about Israel's challenges and be curious to learn more [A, ST/LT]	a I know about day-to-day life in Israel ..... b I am active about Israel on social media ..... c I am able to engage in conversations about Israel's challenges
	14 Develop a meaningful relationship with the land, people, and State of Israel [A, B, ST/LT]	a I feel a strong sense of connection to Israel ..... b I feel a sense of responsibility to Israel and Israelis ..... c It is important to me to have close relationships with Israelis living in Israel ..... d Caring about Israel is a very important part of who I am as a Jew
	15 Continue to ask questions, learn about, and travel to Israel again [B, ST/LT]	a I am interested in learning more about Israel ..... b I have a good sense of what I know, and what I don't know, about Israel ..... c I am interested in visiting Israel in the future
	16 Engage in informed conversations about Israel with their families, peers, teachers, and in their communities wherever they may be [B, ST/LT - focus on LT]	a I frequently speak about Israel with my family ..... b I frequently speak about Israel with my friends ..... c I am comfortable engaging in conversations about Israel with peers whose opinions about Israel differ from mine ..... d I am able to give others a flavor of what Israel is like
	17 Develop an enhanced understanding and empathy for the "Others," Jewish and non-Jewish, whom they encounter [K, A, S, ST/LT]	a I am comfortable engaging in conversation with people from different cultures ..... b I am comfortable interacting with people who have different religious expressions than me ..... c I respect all of the different peoples living in Israel / I recognize the humanity of those living in Israel whose views are different from my own ..... d I feel a sense of compassion towards all of the different peoples living in Israel
	18 Develop an enhanced appreciation of modern Hebrew, its contribution to Israeli culture, and its potential as a gateway to personal Jewish meaning [A, ST]	a I am interested in learning more Hebrew than I know now ..... b I feel that speaking and/or understanding Hebrew is an important part of my life as a Jew ..... c I feel that Hebrew connects me to Israel and Israelis





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