

For Jews in Boston area, a trip to Israel is common



HANDOUT

Stephanie Roch visited the ancient city Gamla, on the Golan Heights, during a trip to Israel. Roch, a Somerville resident who is from New Hampshire, was on a 10-day trip last year.

By [Lisa Wangsness](#) | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 23, 2016

When Yehuda Yaakov, Israel's consul general to New England, visited a Wellesley temple on Rosh Hashana, the rabbi invited everyone who had been to Israel in the last year to come up to the Torah for a blessing.

Dozens of people made their way to the front of the sanctuary.

“A man behind me quipped that only a minority remained sitting,” Yaakov recalled.

A newly released study found that two-thirds of Jewish adults in Boston — and about three-quarters of those ages 18 to 34 — have been to Israel at least once. That is a dramatic increase in the last 10 years, and far outstrips the rest of the country.

Jewish leaders, in interviews, pointed to an array of factors explaining the high rate of local travel to Israel, including a program that has sent some 23,000 local Jews to the nation, the attraction of Israel’s burgeoning high-tech sector, and increased study opportunities.

Relationships between organizations in Boston and Israel, including day schools and congregations, have matured over the years, fueling the interest in travel, said Rabbi Eric Gurvis of Temple Shalom in Newton. Rabbis, who study extensively in Israel as part of their rabbinical training and so tend to have strong ties to and knowledge of the country, are finding synagogue trips to be powerful community-builders within congregations, he added.

“There are bridges being built,” said Gurvis, who is leading a trip to Israel with a group from his synagogue next month. “None of that ignores the spectrum of diverse feelings about Israeli politics and governmental policies.”

Participants in the upcoming trip recently wrote down questions they hoped to answer in Israel. Among them: How do Israelis interact with their neighbors? How does it feel to be Jewish in turbulent times in a turbulent place? How is daily life different from life in the United States?

“It’s not just a places trip, it’s a people trip,” Gurvis said.

In June 2015, El Al Airlines added direct flights between Logan and Tel Aviv for the first time in 30 years, Yaakov said.

“The flights are full,” he said. “Wherever I go when I’m out in the community, pretty much all I have to do is mention the direct flights, and I get applause.”

Vacation and visiting friends and family are among the most popular reasons cited for trips to Israel, according to the study; more than half of Boston-area Jews said they have close friends or relations living there.

The study of Greater Boston’s Jewish community, conducted by Brandeis University researchers and commissioned by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, found that the robust level of travel to Israel came even as local synagogue membership declined in the last decade. And even though Boston-area Jews travel to Israel at much higher rates than their counterparts nationally, just 63 percent of those surveyed in Greater Boston said they felt somewhat or very attached to Israel, compared with 69 percent of American Jews overall.

The researchers plan further analysis, but Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, thought this difference could be attributable in part to the relatively low proportion of Orthodox Jews in Boston (4 percent, compared with about 10 percent nationally), who tend to be more supportive of the Israeli government — or even that national and local studies, conducted three years apart, captured different snapshots.

Perhaps the biggest factor in the uptick in travel from Greater Boston is Birthright Israel, an international organization that organizes free trips to Israel for Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26, with the hope of strengthening Jewish identity and solidarity with Israel and its people. The program —

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whose largest single donor is Sheldon Adelson, the Dorchester-born casino magnate — has sent some 500,000 Jews from across the world to Israel since 2000, including nearly 23,000 from the Boston area.

“Over time, that’s going to make a huge difference,” Shrage said.

Birthright transformed Stephanie Roch’s sense of what it meant to be Jewish. Roch, 27, of Somerville, grew up in an interfaith family in New Hampshire, celebrating both Christian and Jewish holidays at home but rarely participating in formal religious events. Her 10-day trip last year offered a “very easy and welcoming” introduction to Israel’s people and history, she said, and a springboard into the Jewish community back in Boston.

She now counts several of her fellow travelers as among her closest friends, and although she said she isn’t sure how religious she’ll be, she has started spending some Jewish holidays with them and attending community events.

“It’s definitely changed my life,” she said.

Other young Bostonians are staying longer.

When a representative of an international high school in Israel came to Temple Israel in

Boston offering students the opportunity to spend four months in Israel on a scholarship, Jack Pierce, a 15-year-old Brookline High School student, leapt at the chance to have an adventure.

Now, with all of his expenses covered by the recently established Massachusetts Impact Fellowship Program — created with seed money from a philanthropic family’s bequest — Pierce is studying at the Alexander Muss High School in Hod HaSharon, supplementing regular academics with courses in Israeli history and extensive travel.



HANDOUT

Jack Pierce, 15, paused at Mount Megiddo during a four-day hike from the Mediterranean Sea to the Sea of Galilee, a coming-of-age ritual for Israeli teens.

“I definitely feel more supportive of Israel,” he said in a phone interview after class last week. “I feel like an extended citizen. Maybe in the distant future I’d move here.”

The experience can be exhilarating — and fraught.

Eytan Deener-Agus, a 19-year-old University of Pennsylvania student who grew up attending Jewish day schools, first traveled to Israel at age 12, when his parents took him and his two brothers to Israel for a monthlong vacation. They rented a house in Jerusalem for a week and, on a trip with an adventure tour company called Israel Extreme, hiked through caves and canyons, and jumped off a 30-foot cliff into the Zavitan Stream in the Golan Heights.

Deener-Agus returned to Israel multiple times, and eventually for a gap year at a yeshiva, where he spent most days studying Jewish texts from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., entirely in Hebrew.

During his time there, he spent a night with a Palestinian family in Bethlehem, an experience he called “a hugely enlightening experience.” But it was marred by news that, about 15 minutes away, an old bunkmate from camp, Ezra Schwartz, had just been murdered by a Palestinian gunman.

“I am still very, very confused” about the conflict and how to settle it, he said, but “always open to learning and listening.”

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