

It's My Birthright Too!

The only disability-friendly birthright tour helps Jews with disabilities experience a dream come true in Israel

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

Excited about her first visit to the Kotel, Maya Eldar, of Skokie, Illinois, anxiously pressed her note between a tight clump of papers, happy in the knowledge that the Creator of the world understands all languages—those meant to be spoken with the lips and those with the fingers. Unlike the thousands of other notes found in the Wall's crevices, Maya's note was written in Braille.

Maya, whose premature birth left her blind and deaf and afflicted with mild cerebral palsy, dreamt about coming to Israel since childhood and never gave up hope that one day she would. In the winter of her twenty-fourth year, Yachad birthright, a program of the Orthodox Union's National Jewish Council for Disabilities (NJCD), under the patronage of the Taglit-birthright project, gave her that chance.

Founded in 1999 by several people including Charles and Andrea Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, philanthropists who were concerned over

the growing assimilation of North American Jewish youth, Taglit-birthright offers eighteen-to-twenty-six-year-olds who have never visited Israel as part of an organized tour an all-expenses-paid trip to the Holy Land. Thus far, Taglit-birthright has introduced 100,000 young men and women to their Jewish homeland, and to the Jew within.

"We learned about the birthright program a number of years ago," says Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman, national director of Yachad/NJCD. "We felt: 'Why shouldn't we participate?' We have eighteen-to-twenty-six-year-olds who haven't yet experienced Israel. This is what our population needs." Dr. Lichtman promptly made arrangements for birthright to accommodate a group of thirty to forty individuals with varying disabilities from across the country and across the Jewish spectrum. The group required a staff of at least fifteen; birthright agreed to pay for eight, Yachad/NJCD subsidized the rest. According to Dr. Lichtman, every other birthright trip organizer actually makes money on the tour, while Yachad loses approximately \$13,000 to \$17,000 per

trip. Now in its fourth year, Yachad birthright, which offers twelve-day tours during the winter and the summer, apparently believes the trips are worth the expense.

"We are willing to spend as much as \$17,000 each trip because we are taking a group of people [with disabilities] to Israel, most of whom would not otherwise be able to go," says Dr. Lichtman.

As word spread that Yachad birthright offered the sole disability-friendly birthright tour, participants from around the country signed up. Yachad had to turn away a total of twenty-five people its past two seasons.

When Andrea Weitzenfeld, from Chicago, heard about birthright last year, she went online to learn more about it. While scrolling down the list of the trip organizers, she stopped short at Yachad. "I thought this would be [perfect] for Laura," says Weitzenfeld. "I never did a lot for her religiously because of her disabilities. I'm sorry I didn't; it's always been very important to her."

Laura, twenty-four, who is developmentally delayed and currently lives

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in a group home, loved the idea. Yet, Weitzenfeld harbored concerns. “[Laura’s] upbeat and enthusiastic,” her mother says, “[but] she likes to do her own thing” and can be quite insistent about it. Yachad staff members reassured her that they could handle it.

Yachad birthright counselors are assigned three to four participants and work around the clock making sure each member of their *“mishpachah”* has all of his or her fundamental needs met. The Yachad birthright staff is mostly comprised of students from Yeshiva University and Stern College for Women who serve as Yachad advisors throughout the year. However, Masha Posen, an occupational therapist from Toronto, learned about the trip when she noticed a discarded leaflet. Because of her work, she knew a number of individuals who would benefit from such an experience. She promptly made some phone calls. A total of nine participants signed up for the summer 2006 trip as a result of her efforts. The Yachad birthright coordinators asked Posen if she would come along as a counselor on the trip. “We felt it would be beneficial to have someone with her skills who already knew many of the participants,” says Naftali Herrmann, a program coordinator. “Masha understood them from a deeper place. She was amazing.”

The Yachad birthright tour, led by a seasoned tour guide, follows the basic birthright itinerary, which includes a visit to Masada, Meah Shearim, Yad Vashem as well as the Kotel, the Dead Sea and the Golan Heights. Tour members even participate in an archeological dig. An Israeli medic/soldier accompanies the group throughout the tour. As the tour progresses, everyone involved—the participants, the counselors and the people the group encounters along the way—realizes that it is a lot more than their unique needs that makes these birthright trekkers special.

“Treat Me Like Anyone Else”

According to Daniela Lichtman, a program coordinator, one of Yachad

birthright’s primary aims is to encourage participants to take responsibility for one another during the trips. “Two participants who are articulate and relatively independent became our wheelchair techies,” she says. “After the first few days, we taught them how to take the chairs apart, how to put them back together and how to take them on and off the bus. They were an integral part of the group and felt good about it.”

“The world thinks that they are doing a *chesed* for a disabled person when they do something for them which they could potentially do for themselves,” says Posen. “The most empowering thing is enabling them, giving them the opportunity to accomplish.”

The tour offered participants the opportunity for the most meaningful of accomplishments—reaching out to help another despite one’s own *seeming* limitations. Daniel,* eighteen, from New York, has autism and cannot walk or speak. Shani,* twenty-two, from Long Island, New York, struggles with a condition that causes an uneven and

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painful tightening of the tendons. Her fingers, hands, elbows, head, back and knees curve dramatically downward, making walking an agonizing venture. It was Shani who insisted on pushing Daniel’s wheelchair up the difficult hills. She also fed him and tenderly applied sunscreen to his face and arms each day.

As the group traveled throughout the land, they created a memorable



Yachad birthright participants, including Maya Eldar (whose premature birth left her blind and deaf and afflicted with mild cerebral palsy), went horseback riding in Netanya with a program called The Israel National Therapeutic Riding Association, a group that uses horseback riding in planned recreational activities for people with disabilities.

sight for tourists and Israelis alike as they demonstrated the redemptive power of perseverance.

At Shabbat services, beneath the bright lights of the Kotel, as the men linked hands in song and dance, one of them lifted Daniel from his wheelchair onto his shoulders. “He became so animated and excited,” says Posen. “We don’t know how his *neshamah* was affected, but I saw how it affected everybody else in the vicinity.”

Right alongside the participants’ exhilaration over their connection to Israel was the delight of developing new friendships with their tour mates. Throughout the tour Maya conveyed her desires by spelling them into the hand of her professional interpreter, Stephen Frank of Baltimore, Maryland. One of Maya’s requests was to meet her travel mates. “It became a routine from day one, when it was a good time to sit and visit with the others, she would want to do that,” says Frank. “I would

*Name has been changed.

ask the person's name and where he was from, and the first thing Maya would do is give each person a sign name—a way for us to identify him or her later on, without having to spell out the full name. I would say 'So and so is sitting across from you.'" Some of the participants watched Maya signing and enthusiastically informed Frank that they knew sign language and wanted to talk to her. "Maya kept saying she wanted to come back [to Israel]," says Frank. "She asked me what I was doing in January 2007."

Freida,* twenty-two, is a selective-elective mute from Los Angeles who has the capacity to speak but because the emotional barriers are so great she won't risk communicating with others. "There was such pain in this girl," says Posen. "She walked around with a blank face listening to music and kept herself socially isolated. By the end of the trip, she was sitting on the bus next to people. During our last Shabbos day *seudah* we were singing "*Shabbos Kodesh*" and she stood up and sang it. During Havdalah, she put her arms around the people beside her."

Other reticent participants, who found it difficult to reach out to peers, also gained from the experience. "That kind of socialization for Sam was as important as where he was," says Rollie Troup, mother of a twenty-one-year-old participant from Minneapolis who is developmentally delayed. "It was like an awakening for Sam. When he came back from Israel, he said he was ready to go to Courage Center, a transitional training center that offers instruction on living more independently. The trip made him feel more grown up, even a little wiser. It's huge."

Israel Changes You

The *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael, being far from the familiar and the power of group bonding brought out spiritual strengths the participants never knew they had.

"I definitely love being Jewish," says Laura. "When I got back I said, 'Mom, when can I go back?'" Laura,



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who participated in the Yachad birthright tour of summer 2006, became known as the girl who didn't miss Shacharit, Minchah or Maariv for the entire trip. Although raised in a Conservative home with limited exposure to Jewish education, Laura always felt drawn to *tefillah*. "When her brother was bar mitzvahed, she went up and recited a prayer that she learned by herself," says Weitzenfeld. "She's definitely motivated."

"Laura kept saying, 'This is my home; this is my history,'" says Posen. "Laura felt so connected and felt a need to talk to God. She realized here [in Israel] He was available for her. She made a *mezuzah* case that she took home with her so she can remember that Hashem [is] everywhere, even in her group home."

Frank, who is not Orthodox, had never been to Israel before and says he probably would never have gone. "I had very little knowledge about Judaism and in particular Orthodox Judaism," he says. "Shabbos atop the Ariel Hotel was a real eye-opener. I had to ask questions about what was going to happen next. I was in awe over how [these Orthodox Jews with disabilities] were dedicated to their religion. I could see what it meant for them to *daven* at various places throughout Israel. The tour allowed them to break through certain limitations of travel and communication. It leveled the playing field so that they too can now be up there on a hotel roof

looking over Jerusalem."

Every morning, the Yachad tour arranged a traditional minyan for those versed in Hebrew prayer and an alternative service for those with limited Jewish knowledge. The staff conducted the alternative service on a rotating basis, creating a forum for participants to freely share their thoughts. "There were great discussions about God and Judaism," says Lichtman. "Participants spoke about what it's like being a Jew with a disability and how it actually helps them to understand things and also how it makes life a little difficult. I walked in to check on the group to see how things were going. And they were speaking about *tefillah* being appreciation for what one has. The participants talked about what they were thankful for. Some were saying, 'I'm appreciative of my family and friends and all the abilities that I have.'"

For Maya, as well as for the others, the Yachad birthright tour gave them the opportunity to touch and be touched by their Jewish homeland, to feel the ancient stones as well as a camel's back, to experience the exhilarating movement of the cable car up Masada and the radiant Jerusalem sun.

The birthright originators probably never imagined that their ambitious, groundbreaking project would also benefit young Jewish men and women with disabilities. Before Yachad birthright, the thought of a trip to Israel was a financial and logistic impossibility for Maya.

"She went to the Kotel and knew.... She said: 'This was the original Temple building, and I'm touching it!' She talks about the experience every day," says her mother. "She started working on Hebrew sign language and Hebrew Braille and expressed a desire for more Jewish social and learning activities." Maya's greatest desire these days is to be able to study at a seminary in Israel. Until then, she remains grateful for the opportunity to have experienced Yachad birthright, which she calls "the best trip of my life." **IA**