

Review of Cohen Center study, “Jewish Educational Interventions in an Era of Diversity: Birthright Israel’s Impact on Participants from Different Religious and Cultural Backgrounds”

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The Cohen Center’s new (publicized in January 2026) study, “[Jewish Educational Interventions in an Era of Diversity: Birthright Israel’s Impact on Participants from Different Religious and Cultural Backgrounds](#)” Contemporary Jewry (2026) 46:1, has important implications for the design and implementation of Jewish adult education programs.

The researchers, led by Graham Wright and including Len Saxe, start by acknowledging “the growing diversity of the US Jewish community” and the importance of “understanding the background characteristics of participants ... those with little, moderate, or a substantial amount of prior Jewish education and experiences.” (1) From survey data for participants and non-participants in Birthright Israel trips, they develop a “typology for classifying different religious and cultural childhood experiences of American Jewish young adults.”

They identify five types:

- “Jewish Immersed” (18%)
- “Jewish Involved” (44%)
- “Jewish Family Holidays” (18%), who likely only experienced holidays like Hanukkah and Passover and no other Jewish (or Christian) experiences
- “Christian Involved and Jewish Family Holidays” (13%), who likely celebrated both Christmas and Easter, were baptized and attended Christian religious services, were fairly likely to celebrate Hanukkah and to a lesser extent Passover, and were unlikely to have any other Jewish experiences growing up
- “Jewish Involved and Christian Family Holidays” (7%), who “look very similar to the Jewish Involved class in terms of their Jewish experiences,” were likely to celebrate Passover and Hanukkah, to celebrate a bar/bat mitzvah (most), to have attended a supplementary Jewish school, to have attended Jewish religious services regularly (some), to have also celebrated Christmas and Easter, but were unlikely to be baptized or attend Christian religious services frequently. (14)

Much of the study concerns measuring the impact of participating in a Birthright Israel trip on the different classes; on some measures all classes are impacted, on some the impact is greater among those with the least exposure to Jewish life. (1) “The increases in connection to Israel were largest for participants with Christian childhood experiences.... the percent that reported being ‘very much’ connected to Israel more than doubled from 11% or 14% to over 30%. (17) For those in the Jewish Involved and Christian Family Holidays class, the percent that reported feeling “very much” part of a worldwide Jewish community increased from 27% to 37%. (19)

The researchers say their analysis “demonstrates the importance of examining the inter-

play between Jewish and Christian experiences during childhood.” They compare the Jewish Family Holidays class, who were exclusively exposed to Jewish experiences, to the Jewish Involved and Christian Family Holidays class, who were exposed to both Jewish and Christian experiences during childhood. Remarkably, those exposed to Christian experiences “were more likely to have had a bar or bat mitzvah, to have attended Jewish supplementary school, and to have attended Jewish camp.” (21)

They continue:

“Other work [citing Fishman’s 2004 book] has suggested that Jewish families who celebrate Christian holidays, or use Christian holiday decorations such as Christmas trees, struggle to instill Jewish identity in their children – even if these families do not treat these holiday activities as religious.

However, the results presented here suggest that at least some of the families who celebrate Christmas expose their children to more Jewish experiences than other families that had no Christian experiences at all. Programs that target Jewish adults with diverse upbringings should thus be aware that exposure to some non-Jewish religious-cultural experiences during childhood does not necessarily preclude high levels of involvement in Jewish life. (22)