

**(RE)CREATING DIASPORA? THE IMPACT OF TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL  
ON HUNGARIAN PARTICIPANTS**

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Submitted to

Central European University

Nationalism Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2016

## Abstract

The present thesis aims to discover how Taglit, the Birthright program of Israel impacts its Hungarian Jewish participants. The Hungarian Jewry forms a special case for diaspora studies, as it can not even be considered as a diaspora; having a long tradition of assimilation, young Jews today lack any connection to Judaism and the State of Israel. Through a semi-structured interview research with Hungarian Taglit alumni, the thesis aims to discover how the trip impacts this Jewish identification and practices of participants, as well as their relation to Israel. Although Taglit is a well-researched program, impact assessments almost exclusively focus on North Americans; therefore this thesis also contributes to the understanding of the experiences of a so far neglected group. The findings of this research are that Taglit is successful in making participants' Jewish identity more significant, meaningful, and positive; it also fosters youths to adapt symbolic forms of ethnicity after their return, and generally brings Israel closer to them. The study concludes that by making their Jewish identity more meaningful and orienting them towards Israel, Taglit-Birthright has a diaspora-creating impact in case of the Hungarian Jewry.

**Key words:** Taglit-Birthright Israel, birthright tourism, Jewish diaspora, Hungarian Jewry, Jewish identity

## Acknowledgements

I am thankful for my supervisors, Szabolcs Pogonyi and András Kovács for supporting my work and giving me professional guidance during the whole process of thesis writing. I am also grateful for the help of Sanjay Kumar, my number one proofreader and academic writing advisor.

I am especially grateful for Gyuri Hámori who showed interest towards my work from the very beginning, and connected me to the right persons in my search for interviewees.

And last but not least, I am extremely grateful for my awesome interview participants. Your exciting stories and openness when sharing them with me were a constant source of inspiration. You are the ones who made this thesis writing process an exciting, motivating and – truly! – an enjoyable experience. Thank you for your trust.

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# 1. Introduction

The security guard of El-Al interrogated me for a good half an hour before he let me join my Taglit group and board the plane to Israel in 2011. I was asked a number of questions; among them a constantly recurring was: *Why* do I want to visit Israel? I did not understand. Is not it obvious that if I have the opportunity to visit a beautiful foreign land for free, I grab it? It was so self-explanatory why I wanted to go to Israel. This is what I thought when leaving Hungary on a hot summer day with forty other young Jewish peers. When we returned, however, Israel was somehow much more than a “beautiful, foreign land” that worth a visit. I felt that I had an experience of a lifetime there, and have now a lot of things to think about concerning my Jewishness. My case is not peculiar: when leaving, most Taglit participants feel that they are tourists who go on a fun holiday; upon return, however, they are pilgrims of their homeland, with a strengthened sense of their diasporic existence. What happens during the trip that leads to these changes? And what is the exact impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel on Hungarian participants? These are the questions this thesis aims to answer.

Birthright trips are responses to the massive growth of diaspora populations around the world; as more and more people live outside their country of origin, their affiliation and loyalty becomes a key concern for both the home and host countries. Are these diasporans going to assimilate into their new society, or choose to preserve their ethnic identification and relation to their homeland? Or else, are diasporans actually ‘transnationals’, building dynamic ties both in their country of residence and in their old country? Where is home in this transnational existence? Is it the old land that was left by the ancestors, or is it rather the ‘host country’, where diasporans’ real duties and obligations lie? These questions stand at the center of diaspora studies today. While earlier concepts of *diaspora* focused on the notion of an ancient homeland that was forcibly left, now the term covers various groups that dispersed

in space, and their relation to their homeland might not be so self-evident anymore. Tölölyan argues that in the era of ‘diasporic transnationalism’, the homeland is only one junction in the extensive networks of diasporans, who are also multiply rooted in their ‘hostland’ and in various other diaspora centers.<sup>1</sup> Home countries therefore need to compete and adapt strategic methods to (re-)engage their diasporas and gain their support. Birthright tourism is one of the successful techniques to achieve this goal; by allowing young diaspora members to visit their homeland for free, these trips aim to strengthen the ethnic identity of participants and reconnect them to their country of origin.

This thesis joins the debate of diasporic affiliation by focusing on the Taglit experience of Hungarian Jews, a group which managed to almost fully assimilate into the majority society in the last century. Due to several historical factors, Hungarian Jews gave up their unique religion and culture, and Jewishness today does not play a significant role in the life of young generations. If diasporas are groups that dispersed in space, have an orientation towards their homeland and maintain their group boundaries – as Brubaker defines it – I argue that the Hungarian Jewish diaspora can not be described by the term.<sup>2</sup> While most studies concerning diasporas focus on ‘salient’, transnational communities, the present thesis aims to discover the identification and practices of a group that has a long tradition of assimilation. By providing a detailed picture of the self-identity and background of participants, the research also acts as a snapshot of the young Hungarian Jewry.

The thesis also aims to contribute to the literature of Taglit, which is generally dominated by North American impact assessments. Although much has been written on how these participants react to Taglit-Birthright Israel, almost no attention has been paid to other nationals, whose Jewish background is significantly different and therefore they might

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<sup>1</sup> Khachig Tölölyan, “Beyond the Homeland: From Exilic Nationalism to Diasporic Transnationalism,” in *The Call of the Homeland; Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present*, ed. Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi, and Anthony D. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 27–45.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–19, doi:10.1080/0141987042000289997.

experience the trip in another way. Although several Hungarian Taglit groups visit Israel every year, so far it is unknown how they are impacted by the trip, and whether there is a change in their Jewish identification, everyday life, and connection to Israel after their return. Through reconnecting participants to their Jewish origins and ‘homeland’, the question also rises whether Taglit is capable to re-create the Hungarian diaspora. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with Hungarian Taglit alumni, my thesis aims to answer these questions.

## **1.1. Thesis structure**

After this introductory chapter, Chapter two outlines the theoretical framework and main concepts of this thesis, and reviews the most relevant sources of this research to understand why birthright trips and Taglit-Birthright Israel came into being. The thesis is situated into the broader field of diaspora studies that focus on diasporic affiliations and the contemporary transnational activities of diasporas. The main idea of the chapter is that as the Jewish diaspora became well-integrated in its host societies and started to loose its connection to Israel, new techniques needed to be applied by the Jewish elites to re-engage the Jewish people. Taglit-Birthright Israel is one of the most prominent educational endeavours established to reach this goal.

Chapter three continues by introducing the Hungarian Jewish diaspora, who stand in the focus of this research. The main argument of the chapter – confirmed by the most important social researches of the field – is that the Hungarian Jewry largely went through an assimilation process in the last century, therefore those youths who are now eligible to apply

to Taglit are generally secular and unaffiliated, who do not belong the Jewish diaspora as defined by the criteria of Brubaker.

As the ten days of Taglit Birthright-Israel are approached in this thesis as a transformation process for participants, Chapter four is an in-depth analysis of the journey itself - including the itinerary, core themes and narratives – to understand how it influences young Jews. The chapter also reviews the findings of the – mainly North American - impact assessments that focus on how Taglit affects the Jewish identification and practices of participants, as well as their relation to Israel and perceptions of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

In Chapter five, the methodology of this thesis is presented. I argue that by focusing on the experiences of Hungarian Taglit participants and adapting a qualitative research technique, the thesis fills multiple gaps in diaspora and birthright literature. Two sets of semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 18 Taglit alumni of the 2015 summer trips, allowing the analysis of both the short- and medium-term impact of the trip. By following the structure of Taglit objectives and focusing on the topics of former impact assessments, the research is well comparable to the North American findings.

The results of this research are presented in Chapter six, and later concluded in Chapter seven. Focusing on multiple issues, the study analyses the Jewish background of participants and their Jewish identification before, during, and after the trip; the changes in their Jewish practices and future plans after returning, as well as their relation to Israel and opinion about the Israeli-Arab conflict. The research revealed a number of issues. First, it found that Taglit makes a strong impact on the generally insignificant, rather negative Jewish identity of participants by making it more meaningful and positive. Second, it turned out that these changes in Jewish identity do not lead to the same amount of changes in Jewish practices, and participants tend to engage in effortless, symbolic forms of ethnicity instead of more expressive ones. Third, the trip changed participants' relation to Israel radically as it



brought the country much closer and made accept it as a certain ‘homeland’; however, young Jews remained critical towards Israel’s policies and armed conflicts. Therefore, it is a finding of this research that in some cases, Taglit failed to achieve its goals in case of Hungarian participants; however, in several respects it was highly successful. Overall, it seems that Hungarian – and generally Central- and Eastern European - Taglit participants worth the investigation as their reaction to the trip is significantly different from North Americans. By making their Jewish identity more meaningful and bringing Israel closer to the participants, this thesis founds that Taglit-Birthright has a diaspora-creating impact in case of the Hungarian Jewry.

## **2. Theoretical background and literature review**

### **2.1. The concept of diaspora**

In his influential book *Global diasporas*, Cohen writes that “*all scholars of diaspora recognize that the Jewish tradition is at the heart of any definition of the concept*”.<sup>3</sup> By this, Cohen means that for over 2500 years, the word ‘diaspora’ covered the traumatic experience of the Jews who forcibly had to leave their Sacred Land and disperse homelessly in the world. Only in the last decades did the concept take on new meanings to cover the experiences of various global immigrant groups; and today, the term diaspora is so widely used both within and outside the academia that it has almost lost its meaning.<sup>4</sup> Tölölyan points out that the evolution of the term ‘diaspora’ can be described as a shift from ‘exilic nationalism’ to

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas : An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ Diaspora.”

‘diasporic transnationalism’.<sup>5</sup> The earliest diaspora concepts, he argues, derived entirely from the Jewish experience and emphasized the role of the mythical homeland that was forcibly left, as well as the trauma of the exiled constantly longing for return. The ‘exilic nationalism’, as Tölölyan describes it, most saliently appears in the diaspora concept of Safran, who provided six characteristics of diasporas – all of them related to an ancient homeland.<sup>6</sup> According to his idea, diasporas are groups that dispersed from their original center, but keep retaining it in their memory, are committed to its maintenance, and dream of returning, while feel alienated in their host societies. Safran’s homeland-centric diaspora concept was later criticized by Cohen, who argued that there is a need to transcend the Jewish tradition, as people may have various reasons for leaving their homeland besides exile. He provided a typology based on the motives of migration with victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diaspora categories.<sup>7</sup> Although Cohen repeatedly argues that the interpretation of the Jewish case as a constant suffering is too narrow, he placed the Jewish diaspora into the victim category, justifying his choice by the trauma that followed the exile from the Holy Land; the homelessness, wandering, and constant fear of persecution that was the leitmotif of the Jewish community for centuries. Smith also emphasized that the Jewish case is an “*exemplary role model of homeland attachments and aspirations for restoration.*”<sup>8</sup> Classic diaspora nationalisms, such as the Greek, Armenian and Jewish nationalisms, he argues, are distinct from other diaspora nationalism as they are able to use a wide range of deep cultural resources to inspire and mobilize their members. In the Jewish case, this means the emphasis on the chosenness of the nation; on an ethnohistory and myth of Golden Ages; on Israel, the sacred Homeland.

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<sup>5</sup> Tölölyan, “Beyond the Homeland.”

<sup>6</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “Diasporas and Homelands in History: The Case of the Classic Diasporas,” in *The Call of the Homeland: Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present*, ed. Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi, and Anthony D. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the centrality of the Jewish case in the diaspora literature started to fade. Clifford argued that with changing global conditions – such as decolonization, immigration and mass communication – a range of new phenomena appeared that we are prepared to call diasporic.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, he argues, although the Jewish diaspora can be taken as a starting point for discourse, it should not be considered as an ‘ideal type’ to which all other cases must be compared. Also, he emphasized that in the transnational networks of diasporas the role of the ‘homeland’ is far less significant than Safran implied. Based on similar considerations, Esman argued that the diaspora typology used by Cohen is unfit to categorize contemporary diasporas and instead of focusing on the way migrants left their homeland, an attention should be paid to the roles diasporas play in their new societies.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the typology of Esman focuses on diasporas’ functions and distinguishes between settler, labor and entrepreneurial diasporas. Also, Esman argues that unlike earlier in history, new generations of migrants develop a transnational existence, rooted both in the host and the home country, developing a dual or hybrid, situational identity. The arguments of Clifford and Esman are similar to what Tölölyan called as a ‘shift’ from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism. Tölölyan points out that global migration created extensive transnational networks, in which the actual homeland is only one of the several centers. In the era of diasporic transnationalism, he claims, the homeland is not a ‘home’: it is a place to think of and care about, but not the place where migrants’ real duties and obligations lie. The ‘hostland’, the receiving country is becoming the real homeland.<sup>11</sup> This can be exemplified by the typology of Dahinden, who researched migrants’ transnational social formations as the effect of the combination of the ‘mobility’ and ‘locality’ dimensions.<sup>12</sup> By mobility, she

<sup>9</sup> James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–38.

<sup>10</sup> Milton J. Esman, *Diasporas in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Tölölyan, “Beyond the Homeland.”

<sup>12</sup> Janine Dahinden, “The Dynamics of Migrants’ Transnational Formations: Between Mobility and Locality,” in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 51–72.

meant the movements in the transnational space, while by locality the embeddedness of migrants in their new countries. The typology of Dahinden consists of four different categories: localized diasporic transnational formations (where physical mobility is low and the degree of local ties in the receiving country is high), localized mobile transnational formations (characterized by high mobility and high locality), transnational mobiles (with high mobility and low locality) and transnational outsiders (where the degree of both mobility and locality are low). The typology of Dahinden transcends the existing homeland disputes as it shows the diverse relations of diasporic groups with their homeland and ‘hostland’. In this typology, the Jewish diaspora is considered to be a localized diasporic transnational formation, as Jews have been anchored in their receiving country for generations, and are integrated both socially and economically. While the first diaspora concepts treated the land of Israel as something crucial for the Jewish diaspora, today the country lost its centrality for the world Jewry and many Jews do not consider it to be their actual homeland.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true for the Hungarian Jews who, as it will be seen, managed to almost fully assimilate into the larger society during the last century.<sup>14</sup>

The above mentioned examples show that the term ‘diaspora’ went through significant changes in the last decades. Also, with the intensification of global migration both academic and non-academic interest on diasporas has been growing. Brubaker points out that there has recently been a “diaspora explosion” in academic writing, which resulted in the usage of the term ‘diaspora’ in a number of – often contradictory – ways.<sup>15</sup> Today various different groups from transmigrants to religious, ethnocultural and other sorts of communities have been described as diasporas, and the extensive use of the term led to the dispersion of its meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, “A Nation and Its Diaspora : A Re-Examination of Israeli-Jewish Diaspora Relations,” *Diaspora* 11, no. 3 (2002): 331–358.

<sup>14</sup> András Kovács, “Zsidó Csoportok és Identitásstratégiák a Mai Magyarországon [Jewish Groups and Identity Strategies in Contemporary Hungary]” in *Zsidók a Mai Magyarországon* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2002), 9–40.

<sup>15</sup> Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ Diaspora.”

Brubaker points out that the “‘diaspora’ diaspora” now means everything and nothing at the same time – and therefore, it is completely useless. Still, Brubaker claims that three core elements - dispersion in space, orientation to a real or imagined homeland, and boundary-maintenance - remain widely understood as diaspora constituents. If we accept these core elements as crucial for a ‘diaspora’, I argue here that the Hungarian Jewry can not be described by the term. As it will be shown in detail in Chapter three, Hungarian Jews have a long history of assimilation into the larger society. The participants of my research come mainly from families where the Jewish traditions were not kept and where Judaism was not at all a discussion topic. These youths lack information about the Jewish religion and culture, and even if they show an interest towards discovering their roots, they do not have a special connection to Israel or to the Jewish people when embarking for the Taglit trip. I argue that although much has been written on diasporas and transnational groups, less attention has been paid to the identification of those communities who have a long tradition of assimilation. Young Hungarian Jews form an interesting case for diaspora studies: if not a diaspora, then what is this community? What is their relationship with their origins, heritage, or ‘homeland’? How does Taglit, a large social experiment impact this relationship? Is the Hungarian Jewish community responsive to the strategic initiatives of Israel? Is Taglit successful in ‘re-creating’ the Hungarian Jewish diaspora? My thesis aims to answer these questions.

## **2.2. The contemporary Jewish diaspora**

It is a popular and widely accepted claim that we live in the era of individualism, while collectivities are becoming more and more marginal in people’s lives. Guibernau, however, argues that these claims are misleading and far from reality, as belonging remained highly

significant for the people of today.<sup>16</sup> What is a distinctive feature of modern societies, she argues, that unlike earlier in history, people today can freely, although not unlimitedly, choose where they want to belong. The self-identity of the individual is thus constructed both by belonging – by personal choice – and exclusion – as imposed by others. This is something Gans discovered and described at the end of the seventies concerning third- or fourth generation Americans.<sup>17</sup> He argued that these youths continue to assimilate and acculturate into the larger society, and their ethnic identity is not as ‘given’ as their ancestors’: the correlation between ethnic group membership and social status started to disappear, just like traditional ‘ethnic’ occupations and suburbs. The younger generations, Gans claims, are not interested in ethnic cultures and organizations; therefore there is a strong decline in institutional activity and affiliation. However, this does not necessarily mean that the ethnic identity of young ‘ethnics’ weakened; on the contrary, these youths are concerned with maintaining their ethnic belonging and find new ways of feeling and expressing it. Given the degree to which the third generation has acculturated, most ethnics look for relatively effortless ways of expressing their identity, which are easy to adjust to their everyday life. Gans calls this new phenomenon *symbolic ethnicity*, as youths usually use symbols – such as food, films, festivals, or homeland visits – to connect to their roots. Through symbolic ethnicity, young ethnics find ways feel ethnic without practicing ethnic culture or participating in organizations.<sup>18</sup>

The ‘choice of belonging’, as well as adapting symbolic forms of ethnicity instead of more expressive ones also largely characterize the contemporary Jewry, especially young American Jews. Goldberg argues that these youths are ‘free’ from the givens of their family and community, are influenced by powerful global trends, and therefore there is a

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<sup>16</sup> M. Montserrat Guibernau, *Belonging : Solidarity and Division in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 1–20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

proliferation of what we can call ‘Jewish identities’.<sup>19</sup> There is a growing diversity of religious denominations, but also the simple ‘secular’ or ‘traditional’ categories are now failing to grasp the complexity of contemporary Jewish identifications. Recent researches among young American Jews discovered that institutional and denominational identification among this group is on the decline, but there is a renaissance of informal, alternative expressions of Jewishness, such as clubs, study circles, or occasional Shabbat meals with friends.<sup>20</sup> Bennett et al. write that young people in America put together their personal identity just as they put together their coffees in a coffee house; living in the era of unlimited possibilities, it is the ‘have it your way’ rule that dominates individual choices.<sup>21</sup> Shain et al. use the term ‘DIY Judaism’ to describe the same phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence of these trends, the term *assimilation* is regularly used to describe the Jewish diaspora today, although the meaning of the term is not self-explanatory. Brubaker argues that although we tend to “consign assimilation to the dustbin of history”, it remains a widely used and useful concept; however, its content has been transformed in the last decades.<sup>23</sup> Today, assimilation is increasingly seen as a process of becoming similar, instead of an end state of complete disappearance. Instead of taking heterogeneous units as granted, assimilation is seen as a shift from one mode of heterogeneity to the other; a process that requires the active participation of individuals instead of being ‘meltable objects’. Also, assimilation takes place in multi-general populations who enter into dynamic processes of

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<sup>19</sup> Harvey E. Goldberg, “Dynamic Jewish Identities : Insights from a Comparative View,” in *Dynamic Belonging; Contemporary Jewish Collective Identities*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg, Steven M. Cohen, and Ezra Kopelowitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1–27.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Bennett et al., “Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam...” *Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices* (Reboot, 2006), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=329>; Michelle Shain et al., “DIY Judaism: How Contemporary Jewish Young Adults Express Their Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 1 (October 4, 2013): 3–25, doi:10.5750/jjsoc.v55i1.70.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett et al., “Grande Soy Vanilla Latte.”

<sup>22</sup> Shain et al., “DIY Judaism.”

<sup>23</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 533, doi:10.1080/01419870120049770.

integration versus boundary maintenance in various different domains.<sup>24</sup> In the present thesis, I use this approach of assimilation. When arguing that the Jewish diaspora – and especially Hungarian Jews – went through robust and rapid assimilation, I mean a process through which the social distance gradually diminished between Jews and non-Jews, and the Jewish people ‘became similar’ to the majority society in various – economical, cultural, political – fields. In many cases, this required active participation and conscious decisions of individuals: the change in their name, language use, occupations, and religious practices. Also, similarly to what Brubaker argues, in the present thesis it will be pointed out that besides changes on the individual level, Jewish assimilation largely took place on the multi-generational level. When talking about assimilation, I refer to the process that led to the fact that today’s young Jews – the participants of Taglit – do not feel being significantly different from the non-Jewish majority, and think that they are full members of the society they live in.

Similarly to assimilation, the term *identity* is widely used both within and outside academia, taking on various – often contradictory – meanings.<sup>25</sup> Instead of regarding identity as a ‘substance’, in the present thesis I take identity as constructed, fluid, and situational; as the result of the active self-identification of the individual. When talking about identity, I aim to discover the relation participants have to their Jewish origins, the meanings they connect to it, and how their Jewishness appears in various situations: within the family, among Jews, and non-Jewish friends or acquaintances.

Those who care about the continuity of the Jewry look at the new assimilatory tendencies of the diaspora with alarm. Ezrachi anxiously points out that today’s Jews are largely acculturated into their countries, therefore Israel does not play a central role in their lives; they do not imagine themselves as being part of a global Jewish peoplehood; they also

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<sup>24</sup> Brubaker, “The Return of Assimilation?”

<sup>25</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.



lack images of displacement, or the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> Growing rates of intermarriage, increasing alienation from established Jewish communities and religious institutions, as well as dropping rates of affiliation may point to the direction of the disappearance of the Jewish diaspora. Therefore, both in Israel and in the diaspora there is a constant call for various interventions and educational initiatives that would lead to the ‘reproduction’ of Jewish identities and reconnection of young Jews to the global Jewish community.

### 2.3. Diaspora politics

As diasporic groups are expanding and develop roots in various locations worldwide, they become significant non-state actors in international affairs, and usually operate in a triangular relationship with their host- and home countries.<sup>27</sup> These groups represent a set of political, material and cultural sources, which homeland elites try to capture to serve their political or strategic purpose; therefore they use various techniques to reach out for diasporas and manipulate diaspora sentiments. According to Waterbury, there are three types of motives behind diaspora engagement: economic gain, maintenance of political legitimacy and defining the boundaries of the nation.<sup>28</sup> First, diasporas contribute greatly to the homeland economy by sending remittances, by direct investments or personal donations, and also by regular visits. They may also promote industrial, commercial or banking cooperation between their host and home countries. Diasporas also offer extra markets for homeland exports and act as a

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<sup>26</sup> Elan Ezrachi, “In Search of Roots and Routes : The Making and Remaking of the Diasporic Jewish Identity,” in *Dynamic Belonging; Contemporary Jewish Collective Identities*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg, Steven M. Cohen, and Ezra Kopelowitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 206–18.

<sup>27</sup> Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies.”

<sup>28</sup> Myra A. Waterbury, “Bridging the Divide: Towards a Comparative Framework for Understanding Kin State and Migrant-Sending State Diaspora Politics,” in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 131–48.

‘temporary labour pool’, providing technical assistance or in some cases high-level scientific skills and expertise.<sup>29</sup> Second, in times when the sovereignty of the state is threatened by external forces, homelands may reach out for diasporas to create a new basis of their legitimacy. During crises, diasporas may support their homeland morally or financially, or lobby in their host country or on the international level for assistance.<sup>30</sup> In case of a violent conflict, they may also supply weapons or military personnel.<sup>31</sup> Finally, homelands treat diasporas as a culturo-linguistic resource in order to define the boundaries of national identity. Populations abroad may be used in political discourse to maintain national myths and represent a certain ‘authenticity’. Especially if the diaspora resists assimilation, it is a source of national pride, and is utilized to symbolize the unity of the nation.<sup>32</sup>

Concerning Israel, it is especially the first two motives that stand behind diaspora engagement. The country’s case is special as in fact, it was created by its diaspora, and in the first years of establishment it relied greatly on external support. In its wars of independence, it were especially American Jewish organizations that supported Israel both financially and morally, and by investments they contributed greatly to the economic development of the country.<sup>33</sup> Sheffer argues that around the seventies the Israel-diaspora relations changed as Israel started to lose its centrality in the Jewish world.<sup>34</sup> Today, the majority of the world Jewish population resides outside Israel, mainly in the United States or other western democracies, where they are well integrated and enjoy freedom and economic prosperity. Relatively few of them show interest in moving to Israel, and they want to develop their Jewish communities rather in their country of residence. Also, the world Jewry is not an unconditional supporter of Israel; on the contrary, they tend to be critical towards the

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<sup>29</sup> Esman, *Diasporas in the Contemporary World*; Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies”; Waterbury, “Bridging the Divide.”

<sup>30</sup> Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies”; Waterbury, “Bridging the Divide.”

<sup>31</sup> Esman, *Diasporas in the Contemporary World*.

<sup>32</sup> Waterbury, “Bridging the Divide.”

<sup>33</sup> Sheffer, “A Nation and Its Diaspora.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics : At Home Abroad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

conservative policies and armed conflicts of the country. Consequently, around the 1990s the main concern of diaspora Jews turned from Israel towards their own communities: growing rates of intermarriage and dropping affiliation made Jewish leaders to consider the question of continuity as the most urgent issue to solve. As a consequence, Jewish diaspora communities today often refuse the manipulative demands of Israel and claim greater autonomy, directing their financial resources mainly towards themselves.<sup>35</sup> Israeli Birthright tourism, the topic of this research is also a social intervention that was initiated in the diaspora, but was later also supported by the State of Israel. For the diaspora, Taglit is a tool to ensure Jewish continuity; for Israel, however, it is also an initiative to gain supporters and investors.

## 2.4. Birthright tourism

Birthright tours are relatively new forms of diaspora engagement; established in the last fifteen years, they are responses to the massive growth of diaspora populations around the world. Lim points out that most birthright programs were initiated in states with security or dwindling-population concerns (such as Israel or Taiwan) or in communities with a strong experience of persecution (such as the African diaspora).<sup>36</sup> The aims of these journeys are to strengthen diasporic sentiments and attachments to the homeland, thus ensuring continuity and creating a community that is responsive to the state's strategic initiatives. Tourism as a tool of diaspora engagement is particularly effective as it is a special way of using space: through presenting ethnic symbols and narratives, homeland tours mobilize symbolic ties. Therefore tourism allows states to forge transnational linkages even in the absence of

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<sup>35</sup> Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics*; Sheffer, "A Nation and Its Diaspora."

<sup>36</sup> Audrea Lim, "Birthright Journeys: Connecting Dots for the Diaspora," *Dissent* 59, no. 3 (2012): 59–65, doi:10.1353/dss.2012.0067.

migration-based social networks, such as in the case of Jewish diaspora.<sup>37</sup> Today about a dozen birthright programs exist worldwide; most of them has a strong US lobby and an educated, stable middle class that supports and finances the program's goals.<sup>38</sup> In the framework of these journeys, members of diasporas – usually youths in their twenties – can visit their country of origin for free. The organized trips allow youths to discover the most important sights of the country, engage in its culture, and meet locals and peers. During the week-long (or in some cases even longer) trip, participants gain several experiences, many of them being highly emotional. The essence of the birthright programs is to create positive experiences attached to the home country, which later turn into a stronger engagement to the homeland.<sup>39</sup>

Birthright trips have several factors that make them successful. They target a specific age group – usually the 18-25 year-old – who are at a critical developmental point: they discover who they are, evolve their own worldviews, and make decisions about their adult lives.<sup>40</sup> Also, these youths travel in a group setting, which generally supports the trips' goals. As young diasporans go through the travel experiences together, a strong community is formed, friendships and love relationships evolve. Participants not only see their 'homeland' with their own eyes, but through eyes of their peers: experiences do not remain personal possessions, but are constantly shared. Peer pressure also legitimizes the trips' goals and contributes to the sustainability of experiences.<sup>41</sup> Also, birthright journeys are not simple tourist events, and trip participants are not mere tourists. Young diasporans have a certain idea that the country they visit is part of their personal heritage, and therefore they constantly

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<sup>37</sup> Shaul Kelner, *Tours That Bind : Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Lim, "Birthright Journeys."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard Saxe and Barry I. Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (London: University Press of New England, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Shaul Kelner, "The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel's Symbolic Meaning," *Contemporary Jewry* 24, no. 1 (2003): 124–55; Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 141–67.

connect meanings to the sites and to the people they encounter.<sup>42</sup> The places visited act as tangible manifestations of participants' ethnic origins and heritage, and therefore contribute to the construction of community.<sup>43</sup> Birthright trips are always carefully structured, providing specific narratives connected to each site, thus controlling meanings and experiences and influencing the impact of the trip.<sup>44</sup>

Among all the homeland tours, Taglit, the birthright trip of Israel is the most elaborate one: since its establishment in 1999, it allowed 500 000 young Jewish persons to visit Israel for free.<sup>45</sup> Participants come from every corner of the world, but the majority is North American. In Hungary, the program started in 2003, and until now, approximately 2000 young Jews could visit Israel in its frame. Taglit is a well-researched program: impact assessments are regularly published focusing on various issues such as changes in Jewish identity, participation in Jewish activities, and views on Israel after the trip (these researches are reviewed in detail in Chapter four).<sup>46</sup> The surveys consistently find that Taglit is a highly successful program as it makes a robust impact on participants' Jewish identity and attachment to Israel, but somewhat modest impact on Jewish practices, such as participating in Jewish events and celebrating holidays. A great limitation of the existing researches, however, is that they almost exclusively focus on the experiences of North Americans. Until today, almost no attention has been paid to those participants who come from other countries, although their Jewish background and thus their experiences may significantly differ from North American Taglit groups. My thesis aims to fill this gap by focusing on how Taglit-

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<sup>42</sup> Yaniv Poria, Richard Butler, and David Airey, "The Core of Heritage Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 1 (2003): 238–54, doi:10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00064-6; Shaul Kelner, "Authentic Sights and Authentic Narratives on Taglit" (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2001), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=18565>.

<sup>43</sup> Jillian L. Powers, "Reimagining the Imagined Community. Homeland Tourism and the Role of Place," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 10 (2011): 1362–78, doi:10.1177/0002764211409380.

<sup>44</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 83–107.

<sup>45</sup> Lim, "Birthright Journeys."

<sup>46</sup> The research reports of the surveys can be found at:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchprojects/taglit/publications.html>

Birthright Israel impacts the Hungarian Jewish participants, who are highly assimilated and unaffiliated prior to the trip.

### 3. Jews and Jewish identities in Hungary

Taglit-Birthright Israel is primarily a diaspora-building enterprise, initiated in the American Jewish diaspora as a reaction to phenomena such as growing rates of intermarriages and alienation from institutionalized forms of Judaism. Although it uses tourism as a tool, the main aim of the trip is not making Jews to move to Israel, but rather to have a stronger Jewish identification and engagement in their own countries. I argue that this enterprise of diaspora-building is especially interesting in the case of Hungarian Jews, who are largely assimilated to the Hungarian society, abandoned the Jewish traditions long ago, and have a rather ambiguous relationship to their Jewishness characterised by stigma and fear. I claim that if diaspora is defined by dispersion in space, orientation towards a homeland and boundary-maintenance, the Hungarian Jews can not be considered as diasporic; however, Taglit has a potential to ‘re-diasporize’ this group. To confirm this argument, in this chapter the short history of the Hungarian Jewry from the last century is presented, as well as the most prominent social researches that focused on the identification, Jewish practices, and stigma management of this community.

The Hungarian Jewry went through rapid and robust changes in the last century that have largely led to assimilation.<sup>47</sup> In Hungary, the Jews were not seen as part of the nation until the 1867 Law of Emancipation and the 1895 Law of Reception, when the ‘Israelite

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<sup>47</sup> András Kovács, “Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary,” in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. Jonathan Webber (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), 150–60.

denomination' became an officially recognized denomination of the country. As a condition for emancipation, however, the Hungarian nobility expected Jews to rapidly assimilate into the mainstream society, a requirement that the Jews were willing to comply with. Therefore, the 'social contract of assimilation' started: emancipated Jews were allowed to actively take part in the country's economic and social life, but in return, they had to assimilate as quickly as possible. While in 1881 only 59% regarded Hungarian to be their mother tongue, in 1891 already 75% of Jews reported so; also, the secularization of the Jewish religion started as Orthodox Judaism was replaced by the more dominant reform ('Neolog') movement. The number of mixed marriages also rapidly increased. By the end of the World War I., Jews were seen by others and by themselves as 'Jewish Hungarians' rather as 'Hungarian Jews', placing their Hungarian identity in front of their 'Jewishness'.<sup>48</sup> In spite of the assimilation, however, Jews were denied the presence in the political sphere consistent with their economic position. As political antisemitism became a prevalent ideology from the 1920s, Jews were seen as alien parasites on the nation's body, using their 'superficial assimilation' to serve their own interests exclusively. Assimilation, marrying out and converting to Christianity therefore no longer protected Jews from the discrimination that later led to the deportations and the Holocaust, where more than 400 thousand Jewish Hungarians died, but some estimate the number even to be more than 500 thousand.<sup>49</sup>

After the World War II., approximately 191 thousand Jews remained in Hungary who mostly resided in Budapest, already belonged to the most assimilated strata, and their assimilation continued. With the end of private economy, private employment and intellectual careers during the communist regime, Jews had to give up what remained from their Jewishness: their religious observance, lifestyle, and traditional occupations. However, also

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Tamás Stark, "Kísérlet a zsidó népesség számának behatárolására 1945 és 2000 között, [An attempt to estimate the number of the Jewish population between 1945 and 2000]" in *Zsidók a Mai Magyarországon*, ed. András Kovács (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2002), 101–27.

new opportunities, such as civil and army service were opened to them, which fostered their equalization with other social groups. Many of the Hungarian Jews embraced the new regime that granted them a safe life by giving up their Jewishness. For several families, the persecution during the war created a new, stigma-based group consciousness, which made them to decide to keep their Jewishness hidden and forgotten. Only after the change of regime appeared new efforts to establish a positive Jewish identity by the revival of religion, culture and traditions.<sup>50</sup>

To track the changes of the Hungarian Jewry in these historical periods, a comprehensive study was conducted in 1999 by the ELTE Institute for Minority Studies that examined the demographic, social and cultural characteristics of the Hungarian Jews, as well as the Jewish identity and practices of four generations. During this research, information was collected about those who were born before 1930 and were adults during the Holocaust; those who were born between 1930 and 1944, being adults during the years of communism; those who were born between 1945 and 1965, living their adult years during the soft communist regime of János Kádár; and those who were born after 1966, and became adults after the change of the regime. The survey provides a comprehensive picture on how the situation of Hungarian Jews changed during the last decades, and how Jewish identities transformed from generation to generation according to the various challenges of history.<sup>51</sup> Still today, this research is the most prominent one that was conducted on the contemporary Hungarian Jewry; therefore its results are crucial for my thesis in understanding the Jewish background of Taglit participants.

Due to definitional dilemmas and lack of reliable sources, it is a challenge to estimate the number of Jews in today's Hungary. According to the estimations of Stark, in 2000 there were at least 64 thousand, but maximum 118 686 thousand Jewish people in Hungary, based

<sup>50</sup> Kovács, "Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary."

<sup>51</sup> András Kovács, ed., *Zsidók a mai Magyarországon* [Jews in contemporary Hungary] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2002).



on maternal lineage.<sup>52</sup> After France, Russia and Ukraine, Hungary has the largest Jewish population in Europe, but the numbers are shrinking. According to the 1999 research, the Jewish population is mainly concentrated in Budapest, and Jews are more educated and have a higher status in the society than the average population of the capital. Also, concerning their worldview, Jews are much more liberal than the average Hungarians.<sup>53</sup> As the Hungarian Jewry is rather assimilated and secular, the majority of research participants reported a dual identity, saying that they are ‘Hungarians with Jewish origins’ or ‘both Jews and Hungarians’. 67% said that they have strong Jewish feelings that are important or very important for them, while 33% said that although they have Jewish origin, this is unimportant or totally insignificant in their lives. Considering the content of Jewish identity, the research showed that persecution and the Holocaust are very important elements, as well as the memories of ancestors, family history, culture and subjective attachment. Religious worship and affiliation, however, are not significant elements of the Hungarian Jewish identity. Considering the relationship to Israel, respondents generally agreed that the Jewish State provides safety and is a source of pride for them. 76% had some or strong attachment to the country, which is partly the result of the fact that every second responder had acquaintances living in Israel. Also, 15% considered aliyah at some point of their lives. During the survey, interviewees were also asked about their perceptions of antisemitism; according to 63%, prejudice towards the Jews increased recently, but only 20% said that they personally experienced discrimination.

This research pointed out that there are great differences between the generations of Hungarian Jews in their ethnic homogeneity, religious worship and relation to traditions and culture. During the last decades, the number of mixed marriages increased rapidly: while 89% of those who were more than 70 years old said that all four of their grandparents were Jewish, this proportion was only 39% in case of the 18-34 year old respondents. Also, there is an

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<sup>52</sup> Stark, “Kísérlet a zsidó népesség számának behatárolására.”

<sup>53</sup> Kovács, *Zsidók a mai Magyarországon*.

obvious ‘assimilation slope’, showing that children being born in mixed marriages are more likely to marry out themselves as well. Concerning Jewish practices, the research showed that religious and cultural traditions increasingly lost significance in the last fifty years. Only 4% of the respondents said that they keep 8-9 traditions out of the ten options that were asked by the researchers, while 45% said that they do not keep any of them. The majority of the respondents have a few symbolic ties to the Jewish culture and religion: for example, they celebrate the most important Jewish holidays, bury their dead in the Jewish cemetery, or have Jewish objects in their homes. Again, there are great generational differences in keeping the Jewish traditions: while the older generations reported that in their childhood they nurtured six kinds of traditions on the average, they said that today it is only three. In case of the middle-aged respondents the traditions were mostly absent already in their childhood, and they made attempts to fully give up the Jewish heritage and assimilate. Accordingly, in case of the younger generations, a great proportion keeps no traditions at all. However, there is also a new trend appearing: 20% of those respondents who were aged between 18 and 34 are returning to the traditions. Especially those youths who live in Budapest and have a diploma are likely to at least symbolically keep the traditions or make efforts to follow them more seriously. These adolescents, contrary to the generation of their parents and grandparents, start to discover and re-embrace their Jewish heritage. Young Jews try to reject the stigmatized identity that characterized their parent’s generation and fill their Jewishness with positive content.<sup>54</sup> This may be the result of the lack of assimilation pressure and the new trends of multiculturalism and search for individual identities.

Just like in the case of following traditions, respondents of the 1999 research were loosely connected to Jewish religious and cultural organizations. The quarter of the respondents said that they never participate in Jewish events, another quarter sometimes

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<sup>54</sup> Kovács, “Zsidó Csoportok.”

participates, less than half of the respondents have somewhat stronger connections, while 12% regularly attends Jewish events organized by religious or cultural organizations.<sup>55</sup> To conclude, the identity strategies of the Hungarian Jewry can be mapped on a scale: a small minority has chosen the strategy of full acceptance, living their lives based on the Jewish religion and traditions; another group is characterised by the strategy of rejection, seeing their Jewishness as a fact with no significance; while the majority of Hungarian Jews is between the two endpoints of the scale, adopting a dynamic strategy of acceptance and rejection. Members of this group may have various Jewish identities characterized by a certain attachment, maintaining symbolic ties with Jewish culture and religion.<sup>56</sup>

In the 1980s, a research further investigated the stigmatized nature of Jewish identity and stigma management of Jewish families.<sup>57</sup> In the survey, almost half of the respondents said that their Jewish identity is full of feelings of persecution, defencelessness, and fear, and learning to be Jewish was often a shock for them. To manage this stigma, Hungarian Jews adapt the technique of ‘passing’, concealing the material evidence of their stigmatizing feature, or try to pass themselves off as possessing a different identity. The natural way of stigma management is information control: several people reported that they do not want to tell their children that they are Jewish, or only in unavoidable circumstances. As often the family decides not to reveal the ‘secret’, children learn the truth about their origin accidentally, or by strangers. Also, even those who are aware of their Jewishness have limited knowledge about the actual family history. Due to the practices of stigma management, stigmatized behaviour is part of the socialization process, internalized from the early childhood. Therefore, the negative identity of the second and third generation is not necessarily a reaction to an actual

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<sup>55</sup> Róbert Angelusz, “Társas kötelékek és kulturális tradíciók a magyar zsidóság különböző nemzedékeiben, [Social networks and cultural traditions in the different generations of the Hungarian Jewry]” in *Zsidók a mai Magyarországon*, ed. András Kovács (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2002), 41–76.

<sup>56</sup> Kovács, “Zsidó Csoportok.”

<sup>57</sup> Kovács, “Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary.”

experience of discrimination; instead, it is an inherited form of identity, existing independently from personal experience.

Although open discrimination and violence against Jews in Hungary is rare, antisemitism is permanent in the society. Anti-Jewish prejudice in Hungary is regularly measured since the mid-1990s; according to the researches, around 30 percent of the society can be regarded as a stronger or weaker antisemite, although the content of antisemitism changes from time to time.<sup>58</sup> From the last decade, antisemitism appeared as part of a larger structure, coupled with ideological-political choices, and with the rise of the far-right Jobbik party, it became part of the political and public discourse. Holocaust denial and relativization is also present in Hungary, although it is not as widespread as in Western Europe.<sup>59</sup> According to recent surveys, the proportion of those who tend to deny or relativize the Holocaust grew significantly in the last years (in a 2014 research, for example, 12 percent of respondents agreed that there were no gas chambers in the concentration camps).<sup>60</sup> Antisemitism in Hungary is independent from the majority of socio-economic variables, such as age, level of education, social status or settlement type. Even if the proportion of those who share antisemitic prejudices did not change significantly in the last decades, antisemitism became more visible and more openly articulated in the political and public sphere. The participants of my research might be well aware of this political climate and negotiate their Jewish identification accordingly; similarly to their parents and grandparents, they might choose to keep their Jewishness as a secret to keep safe.

To conclude, Jews in contemporary Hungary vary greatly in their Jewish practices, identities and identity strategies, and there are great differences between generations. Those young Jews who are now eligible to participate in the Taglit trip belong to the third or fourth

<sup>58</sup> András Kovács, *The Stranger at Hand: Antisemitic Prejudices in Post-Communist Hungary*, Jewish Identities in a Changing World 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Medián, "Antiszemita előítéletesség a mai magyar társadalomban. Kutatási Jelentés [Antisemitic Prejudice in the Contemporary Hungarian Society. Research Report]," 2015.

generation, and are generally fully assimilated and secular. They do not know much about Jewish religion and culture and do not keep traditions at home, only symbolically or inconsistently; being Jewish is not a significant part of their identities. Nonetheless, being aware of the persecution that impacted their families, young Jews have a stigmatized identity which also determines their interactions with non-Jews. Following the examples they saw at home, young Jews may decide to keep their Jewishness as a secret and pass as non-Jews. The results of the 1999 survey, however, also imply that a group of young Jews appeared who do not follow the identity strategies of their ancestors at all. Motivated by the liberalism and multiculturalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these youths are ready to discover their roots and embrace Jewish culture and traditions as part of a new, positive Jewish identity. One step in this discovery process might be the Taglit trip.

## **4. A global diaspora-engaging experiment: Taglit-Birthright Israel**

### **4.1. Elements and main characteristics of Taglit-Birthright Israel**

Taglit-Birthright Israel is an outstanding program of its kind: it is the largest birthright journey in the world, involving hundreds of thousands of young Jews; it is very sophisticated in its educational methodology; and according to impact assessments, it is highly successful in achieving its aims. The journey, targeting young Jews, has been established even before the country itself came into being. The original program, *Tiyul*, was developed by the Zionist movement in the pre-state period, aiming to help Jews to strike roots in Israel. Shortly after the country declared its independence, organized Jewish diaspora tours began, with

systematic pedagogical grounding and evaluation.<sup>61</sup> Taglit itself was initiated and established in 1999 in the American Jewish diaspora, as a reaction to the concern that the community was on a decline. As it has been shown in Chapter two, growing rates of intermarriage and increasing alienation from established Jewish communities and religious institutions gave rise to concerns among Jewish leaders that the very existence of the community is under threat. As a reaction, significant resources were poured into a variety of educational endeavours to Jewish commitment; Taglit-Birthright Israel is the most prominent of these interventions.<sup>62</sup> Today, more than 14,000 individual donors, several foundations and the State of Israel make sure that the program operates and develops from year to year.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of its scale, Taglit-Birthright Israel is the largest birthright program in the world, and concerning the contemporary Jewish community, it is the largest educational experiment ever attempted.<sup>64</sup> Since its beginning, Taglit allowed 500 000 young Jewish persons from 66 countries to visit Israel for free. The program mainly focuses on North America: 80 percent of the participants come from this region. Taglit is rather straightforward in its aims: the webpage of Birthright clearly states that the purpose of the trip is “to ensure the future of the Jewish people by strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities and connection with Israel via an educational trip to Israel for the majority of Jewish young adults from around the world.”<sup>65</sup> Also, the hope of trip organizers is to “motivate young people to continue to explore their Jewish identity, support for Israel, and to maintain long-lasting connections with Israelis after their trip has ended” and “to take active roles in Jewish organizations and to participate in follow-up activities worldwide.”<sup>66</sup> The name *Taglit* means discovery, and refers to a process through which participants discover Israel and its people,

<sup>61</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 21–45.

<sup>62</sup> Shaul Kelner, “Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism : Self-Narration in Israel Experience Programs,” in *Dynamic Belonging; Contemporary Jewish Collective Identities*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg, Steven M. Cohen, and Ezra Kopelowitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 173–89.

<sup>63</sup> “Birthright Israel,” accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.birtherightisrael.com/visitingisrael/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>64</sup> Saxe and Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel*.

<sup>65</sup> “Birthright Israel.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Jewish values and traditions, and their own personal connection to the Jewish community.<sup>67</sup> To conclude, trip organizers openly articulate that Taglit is a diaspora-building enterprise, aiming to strengthen the Jewish identity of participants and reconnect them to Israel and to the Jewish community. What is rather less emphasized is *why* the program aims to achieve these goals. Partly, the trip is the enterprise of Jewish elites who want to ensure the continuity of the community they care about; in this term, Taglit is a nationalistic act. On the other hand, however, Taglit also aims to ‘produce’ ‘goodwill ambassadors’ all around the world, who support Israel in various ways from their countries. In this respect, Taglit-Birthright Israel is also a political act.

As the program aims to solve the ‘engagement problem’ in the Jewish diaspora, it targets especially (but not exclusively) the unaffiliated Jews worldwide. Participants must be aged between 18 and 26. In the US, applicants are eligible to participate if they have a Jewish birth parent or have converted, identify as Jews and are recognized as such by their local community. In Europe and in the territory of the Former Soviet Union, the circle of those who are eligible to apply is boarder: applicants only have to prove that they have one Jewish birth grandparent.<sup>68</sup> In this respect, eligibility requirements mirror the discriminative acts of the last century, as well as the Law of Return of Israel, which define ‘Jewishness’ based on the grandparents’ origin. Due to the relatively loose eligibility requirements, those who participate in Taglit are often unaffiliated; they might show some interest in their origins and Jewish heritage, but mostly apply because of the free trip and fun. Taglit participants therefore are a group of tourists, rather than pilgrims.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Kelner, “Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism.”

#### 4.1.1. Core themes and narratives of Taglit

Taglit is ten-day long, organized for several cohorts during the summer and winter school breaks. Participants travel everywhere together in a group of forty, under the lead of a local tour guide and two attendants from their country of origin. The schedule of the program is tight, aiming to show as much of the country as possible. The itinerary is very colourful: participants travel all across Israel, visit the most important cities and sights, go hiking, learn about religion and culture, meet Israelis and last but not least, have a lot of fun. According to the educational principles of Taglit, the trip has three required core themes: *Narratives of the Jewish People*; *Contemporary Israel*; and *Ideas and Values of the Jewish People*.<sup>70</sup> The *Narratives of the Jewish People* theme covers the visits in Jewish, Zionist, National, ‘Natural’ and Shoah heritage sites. Under the *Contemporary Israel* theme, participants visit places and participate in events that are connected to the Israeli culture, ecology, science, politics and society. Finally, the *Ideas and Values of the Jewish People* theme includes programs related to religion, the Hebrew language, or social responsibility. Besides the elements of the core themes, participants also take part in recreational, ‘fun’ activities that aim to create group cohesion, such as parties, rafting or a camel ride.

One of the basic educational principles of Taglit is the promotion of discussions instead of presenting fixed visions. Tour guides are required to ‘teach’ rather than ‘preach’, and encourage participants to exchange ideas and enter into dialogue with each other on the dilemmas of Jewish identity and the Israeli society. Taglit should serve as a safe environment for this dialogue and foster young Jews to think critically and reflectively.<sup>71</sup> These educational missions clearly stand against the claims that frame Taglit as an act of ‘brainwash’. In spite of

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<sup>70</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel, “The Educational Mission & Principles of Taglit Birthright-Israel” (The Educational Platform. Standards & Requirements, 2012), <http://www.birthrightisrael.com/TaglitBirthrightIsraelStory/Documents/Educational-Platform.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



that, however, Kelner emphasizes that program organizers take explicit efforts to represent Israel in particular ways.<sup>72</sup> The ten-day trip in Israel obviously can not show the country ‘as such’, but it presents it in a way that is carefully tailored to achieve the program’s identity-related goals. During Taglit, control is asserted over the meanings that are ascribed to the sites in order to influence how participants see the country. First of all, Taglit aims to present Israel as a ‘national homeland’ for participants, who, however, live elsewhere, and generally consider another country to be their ‘home’. Therefore the narratives presented in Taglit foster participants to project Jewish and Zionist meanings onto the sites and find connections between Israel and themselves.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, although participants visit several places during their journey, Palestinian and Christian sights are systematically left out from the itinerary. Also, the name of the program, “Birthright Israel” already indicates that participants have a *right* to visit Israel by virtue of their genealogy.<sup>74</sup> During the trip, participants are also told several times by their guide and by Israeli peers and locals that they have finally “come home”, and there will always be a place for them in Israel. As Taglit participants are at the age when people make decisions about their careers and future lives, the ‘welcome home’ message might make them consider spending their adulthood in Israel. Also, unlike North Americans, Hungarian participants might get the impression that the career opportunities and the standard of living are better in Israel than at home. Furthermore, contrary to Hungary, in Israel they could embrace their Jewishness without being afraid of facing antisemitism. Consequently, the promise of a better life and the ‘homeland’ narrative has the potential to motivate Taglit alumni to move to Israel.

The connection of Israel to the personal life of participants is further fostered by organized group discussions. During Taglit, at least three of such discussions are prepared, usually at the end of the day, when participants sit in a circle and share their emotions and

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<sup>72</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 83–107.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Kelner, “Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism.”

thoughts under the guide of their group leaders. The objectives of these events are to help participants “to understand and integrate the broader weave of their experiences”, and encourage “the personal reactions of participants to the meaning of these experiences and their impact on their lives as individuals and as group members.”<sup>75</sup> During the discussion circles, participants might be surprisingly open about their lives and emotions, and often recall elements of their past and (re)frame it according to Jewish narratives.<sup>76</sup> Group dynamics also contribute to the process: personal thoughts are echoed by the others, thus legitimizing the feelings that one is having.<sup>77</sup> If the program ‘worked’ as intended, participants not only look outward upon Israel, but also inward upon themselves, interpreting their own past, present and future in Jewish terms.<sup>78</sup> Israel becomes a symbol of an intense, positive Jewish experience of being part of a large Peoplehood.<sup>79</sup> By constantly interpreting and reinterpreting these experiences for themselves and for each other, trip participants themselves reproduce the narratives of Taglit.<sup>80</sup> I claim, however, that it shall not be taken for granted that Taglit participants uncritically accept the official narratives they encounter. When travelling to Israel, young tourists might have their own opinion and ideas that is confronting with the Taglit discourses. Also, participants have several informants during the trip: their group leaders, tour guide, and Israeli peers, who might also have different views on the same topic. Therefore, Taglit participants might be critical information consumers who enter into discussions with each other instead of immediately accepting the provided narratives.<sup>81</sup> It is also possible, however, that Hungarian Taglit participants are ‘blank slates’ when travelling to Israel: it is

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<sup>75</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel, “The Educational Mission & Principles of Taglit Birthright-Israel,” 5.

<sup>76</sup> Shaul Kelner et al., “Making Meaning: Participants’ Experience of Birthright Israel” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2000), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=18563>; Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 169–90.

<sup>77</sup> Kelner et al., “Making Meaning.”

<sup>78</sup> Kelner, “Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism.”

<sup>79</sup> Kelner et al., “Making Meaning.”

<sup>80</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*.

<sup>81</sup> On the acceptance of homeland tour narratives, see: Szilárd-István Pap, “Encountering the Nation beyond Borders: Hungarian High School Students, Tourism and the Micromanagement of Nation-Building” (Central European University, 2013).

maybe the first time for them to think about Judaism, Jewishness, and the state of Israel. If they do not have any prior experiences, they do not have anything to compare to the official narratives. As the discourses they hear come from people they trust – their guide and new Israeli friends –, they perceive it as authentic and accept it uncritically. To conclude, concerning the official narratives, I both expect to find participants who tend to accept them and others who are rather critical.

#### **4.1.2. The Taglit itinerary**

As mentioned earlier, the ten days of Taglit is full of events: hiking, travelling, lectures, sightseeing and encounters with Israelis. Among these, the trip involves visits to a couple of sites that are especially significant and are the mediators of powerful messages. The most important of them is probably the Western Wall of Jerusalem, a place that is a ‘must-see’ by everyone who visits Israel. The Wall is the last remaining tangible object of Biblical Judaism, symbolising the endurance of the Jewish faith; by visiting it, participants link themselves to the imagined community of the entire global Jewish Peoplehood that spans both time and space.<sup>82</sup> They experience that they are part of something large and ancient; they are part of history and religion. The Wall is generally perceived as the highlight of the Taglit trip, and participants have several preconceptions attached to it. After the visit, North American participants tend to frame the Wall in emotional and spiritual terms that made a strong impact on them.<sup>83</sup> Another significant site that is regularly visited by Taglit groups is Masada. Located by the Dead Sea, the fortress of Masada served as a shelter for Jews during the First

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<sup>82</sup> Powers, “Reimagining the Imagined Community.”

<sup>83</sup> Kelner et al., “Making Meaning.”

Jewish-Roman War in 73 CE. Later, when the Roman troops besieged the place, the Jews – almost a thousand people – committed mass suicide to avoid defeat and slavery. This story is presented to Taglit participants as a symbol for Jewish heroism and resistance, as a metaphor for Israel that never gives up fighting.<sup>84</sup> Taglit groups often climb the Masada at dawn and experience the sunrise on the top. The ancient ruins and their story, as well as the beauties of the rising sun contribute to a powerful collective experience, and participants often name Masada as one of the best things about the trip.<sup>85</sup> It needs to be mentioned, however, that the Hungarian groups usually have a pre-dawn hike elsewhere, and climb Masada during daytime, which is a rather strenuous hike due to the heat. During the summer of 2015, two Hungarian Taglit group even skipped visiting Masada due to the extreme high temperature. Therefore, it can be assumed that for the Hungarian and North American groups Masada is a different experience, and Hungarians are less likely to frame the hike as elated and emotional.

Another crucial element of Taglit is the day that is devoted to the memory of Jewish persecution. Participants start the morning in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum of Jerusalem. As nearly all Taglit participants have family members who were killed or persecuted during the Shoah, the visit in the museum is especially upsetting and depressing. After commemorating the biggest trauma of Jewish history, the Taglit group visits the military cemetery near the museum. In the cemetery, young soldiers are buried who lost their lives defending Israel. The soldiers who travel with the group also take their time to tell stories about the army, about friends and relatives who fought in wars and who were lost. The message of this “memory and renewal” day is clear: once the Jews were the victims of a horrific genocide, but today, they have their own nation, protected by brave soldiers who make sure that the Holocaust can never happen again. Now all Jews have a safe place to go to; they do not have to fear persecution anymore. This narrative further emphasises the

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<sup>84</sup> Kelner, “The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel’s Symbolic Meaning”; Powers, “Reimagining the Imagined Community.”

<sup>85</sup> Kelner, “The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel’s Symbolic Meaning.”

importance of Israel for every Jew in the world – including Taglit participants. Young Jews perceive that the military sacrifice is also for them – therefore they have a personal stake at the conflict's outcome.

Finally, a major event of Taglit is the Mega Event, which is organized occasionally in every Taglit season to celebrate the coming together of young Jews from all around the world. The Event is usually in a huge arena, where thousands of Taglit participants gather together, wear the same T-shirts and wave Israeli flags. Often prominent Israeli politicians are present to give speeches, and there are various music and dance performances followed by a huge party. For most participants, this is the largest gathering of Jews of which they have ever been part, symbolizing Jewish peoplehood and Israel's centrality to it.<sup>86</sup> In 2015, the Mega Event was organized in June to celebrate the arrival of the 500.000<sup>th</sup> Taglit participant in Israel. The group that was in the country at that time was the first Hungarian Taglit group that ever participated in the Mega Event, therefore their experiences will also appear in this thesis.

One of the corner stones of the trip is *mifgash*, the encounter with Israeli peers. Each Taglit group is joined for at least half of the trip by a couple of Israelis between 18-26 years, who are usually doing army service.<sup>87</sup> The aim of the mifgash is twofold: first, it is an educational tool for participants to learn about Israeli life and the army, but it also allows Israelis to learn about the Jewish diaspora and feel pride for their nation.<sup>88</sup> Both formal and informal activities help the two groups to get to know each other. Formal programs typically include ice breaking activities and discussions organized by the soldiers; also, Israelis have a special role in the military cemetery where they tell personal stories about Israel's wars. Additionally, however, relationships develop on the bus, over meals, and during the visits of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Those soldiers who would like to accompany a Taglit group first need to apply, then go through a complex selection process. Soldiers are selected based on their language skills, results in the army, as well as based on a personal interview about their feelings towards Israel and their army service.

<sup>88</sup> Theodore Sasson et al., "Guest-Host Encounters in Diaspora-Heritage Tourism: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash (Encounter)," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 5, no. 3 (2011): 178–97.

historical sites. As Kelner points out, the main aim of mifgash is “collapsing distance” between participants and Israel.<sup>89</sup> During their stay, visitors and Israelis discover what they have in common: this usually includes passion for music, films, and other aspects of youth culture. Also, as the soldiers are free to express their personal opinions and share their own experiences about Israel, they contribute to the perception of Taglit as something meaningful and authentic.<sup>90</sup> During the trip friendships are created and also love relationships flourish; therefore mifgash also fosters partnership and marriage within the ‘Jewish tribe’.<sup>91</sup> In case of European Taglit groups, some Israeli peers even have ancestors who emigrated from that country and therefore speak the native language of participants. Speaking each other’s language contributes even further to the erasure of boundaries between the two groups. Surveys on mifgash between Israelis and Americans discovered that the encounter helped greatly the mutual understanding of the two sides: it allowed visitors to understand life in Israel, the military service and the Israeli-Arab conflict, while local youth felt more pride after the encounter for being Israelis, Jews, and soldiers. Both sides reported that mifgash helped them to understand what they have in common.<sup>92</sup> However, differences were also discovered: Israelis are generally perceived as more mature and responsible due to their army service, and participants may feel a certain distance when learning about war stories and seeing the graves of soldiers of their age. Paradoxically, the romanticized aspects of the encounter and framing the other group as ‘exotic’ also contributes to distancing instead of taking Israelis closer to participants.<sup>93</sup> I argue that the impact and usefulness of mifgash should be critically examined. Taglit groups usually consist of forty people, who are joined by 2-5 soldiers: this means that Israelis have a rather limited opportunity to talk to everyone on the bus and build personal

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<sup>89</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 135–39.

<sup>90</sup> Sasson et al., “Guest-Host Encounters in Diaspora-Heritage Tourism.”

<sup>91</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 135–39.

<sup>92</sup> Sasson et al., “Guest-Host Encounters in Diaspora-Heritage Tourism”; Theodore Sasson et al., “Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2008), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/mifgash.english.01.05.09web1.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 135–39.

relationships with all the participants. What generally happens is that young soldiers soon find the friends whom they want to spend the whole trip with, while others have almost no opportunity to get to know them.

Although Taglit initially came to existence to solve the problems that emerged in the American Jewish diaspora, it took a new aspect with the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the time of war and ethnic tension, Israel needs people all around the world to support its causes, and Taglit alumni might be these supporters. The conflict is one of the primary lenses through which visitors see the country; hence, it is crucial how it is presented during the trip. Official Taglit program guidelines instruct tour guides to avoid taking any specific political stance and provide a balanced picture about Israel's political reality.<sup>94</sup> Also, trip participants are critical information consumers, who usually are aware of the fact that there is a 'Palestinian side' of the debate. Therefore, guides are usually rather honest about the conflict, explaining its complexity and representing both sides, speaking for the Palestinians as well. However, as Kelner points out, a great achievement of the program is that even after the 'correct' representation of the conflict, young Jews will identify with the Israeli side.<sup>95</sup> This happens due to the fact that through the ten-day program, visitors experience Israel to the fullest, talk to local Israelis and make friendships with soldiers, however, they never visit any Palestinian territories, and do not really have the chance to engage into conversation with people of Arab origins. Arabs can not speak for themselves; their narratives are articulated by the Israelis. The result is that even being aware of the complexities of the conflict, participants after the trip tend to support the Israeli side and feel that they have a personal stake in the conflict's outcome.<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, one of the tour guides who leads the Hungarian groups – Imre in his pseudonym – does not really confirm these educational principles, as he takes a clearly anti-Palestinian, nationalistic side. He is a patriot who emigrated from Hungary as a

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<sup>94</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel, "The Educational Mission & Principles of Taglit Birthright-Israel."

<sup>95</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 47–81.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

teenager, considers himself as hundred percent Israeli and refuses to be defined as a Hungarian. Although he is an excellent tour guide and a great storyteller, his extreme standpoints on certain cases might result in a counteraction and rather distance participants than convince them about official narratives. Therefore, it remains a question what kind of information participants get about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and what opinion they form about these issues.

#### **4.1.3. Group dynamics during the trip**

A key element of Taglit is the special group setting in which the journey takes place. Participants are extracted from their home country and from their normal routines, and are placed to an explicitly narrated environment with a group of young Jewish peers. Kelner argues that this liminal group setting fosters highly circumscribed self-understandings: although participants have different backgrounds and several identities, during the trip they are primarily ‘Taglit participants’, which becomes their most relevant self-definition for ten days.<sup>97</sup> Birthright fosters participants to imagine themselves first and foremost as Jews, and marginalizes other competing identities. During the trip, the social environment of participants encourages them to sense that they have a unitary core self that is Jewish; a core self that was ‘hidden’ from them, but Taglit allowed it finally to be ‘discovered’.<sup>98</sup> Group dynamics also generally supports the program’s goals. During the ten days, participants travel everywhere together; privacy and personal space is extremely limited. Young Jews not only see Israel with their own eyes, but through the eyes of their peers; experiences do not remain

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<sup>97</sup> Kelner, “Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism.”

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.



personal possessions, as they are always shared.<sup>99</sup> Due to peer pressure, outright dissent is rare; therefore participants generally reproduce the narratives of Taglit. The sense of community might be uncommonly intense during the trip. Kelner uses the ‘collective effervescence’ theory of Emile Durkheim to compare certain Taglit events to a ‘rite’: during the trip, there are powerful and uplifting ‘peak experiences’, such as climbing the Masada at dawn or the Mega Event that bring participants to emotional states that seem uncharacteristic even to themselves.<sup>100</sup> As people are unable to recognize the actual social dynamics that acts upon them, they ‘transfer’ their feelings to the surrounding objects: to the visited sites and to Israel as a whole. These moments are crucial for the goals of Taglit, as they generate strong feelings of connection to Israel even among the unaffiliated participants.<sup>101</sup> Taylor et al. argue that Taglit is emotionally demanding, and it rather heightens than resolves ambivalences of Jewish identity.<sup>102</sup> The tour is lived through as an “identity roller coaster”, when participants experience belonging, euphoria and glory, but also difference, rejection, and fear. As Jews, they belong to the ‘global Jewry’ and to Israel, but being diasporans, they are also different from those living in the ‘homeland’. To resolve this conflict, participants take up a collective identity which has a strong symbolic relationship to Israel but is also the affirmation of their diasporic Jewish identity; they find a role for themselves as community members who can provide support for Israel from afar.<sup>103</sup> It shall not be forgotten, that for unaffiliated Hungarian participants, Taglit might be the first situation in their lives when they are surrounded *exclusively* by Jews. As they do not belong to any Jewish community at home, they have a limited opportunity to spend time in such an inclusive circle. Also, as it is unusual in Hungary to talk about Jewishness in public, people could be surrounded by Jews even

<sup>99</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 150–51.

<sup>100</sup> Kelner, “The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel’s Symbolic Meaning.”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.; Shira Fishman, Michelle Shain, and Leonard Saxe, “What Happens on the Bus? How Community Impacts Jewish Engagement on Taglit-Birthright Israel,” *Sociological Papers*, Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Lessons and Challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora, 17, no. 1 (2013 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Judith Taylor, Ron Levi, and Ronit Dinovitzer, “Homeland Tourism, Emotion, and Identity Labor,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 9, no. 1 (2012): 67–85, doi:10.1017/S1742058X12000069.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

without recognizing it. For most of the participants, the ten days of Taglit is the first time in their life when something good happens to them *because they are Jews*, and being Jewish is *okay*. Therefore, I assume that the liminal group setting in case of Hungarians is extremely powerful.

To conclude, Taglit is a huge educational experiment, an effort of diasporic political socialization, the “deliberate sociocultural production of Jewish identity”.<sup>104</sup> Kelner argues that “diaspora homeland tours are political acts in the most mundane and most profound senses of the term”, aiming to mobilize support of foreign nationals for Israel’s strategic causes.<sup>105</sup> Taglit is also a ‘diaspora-building enterprise’, although the language of the trip is rather depoliticized, using “Jewish peoplehood” and “Jewish identity” instead of more straightforward terms. While earlier Israel experience tours tended to emphasize *aliyah*, the immigration to Israel, the main aims of the trip today is to create Jews who are affiliated to their community in their home countries. The program uses every possible tool to connect participants to Israel and Judaism; with uncommonly intense experiences, it targets the emotions, fostering youths to reimagine their Jewishness and think about themselves in Jewish terms. As it will be shown in the next chapter, program evaluations regularly confirm that Taglit is extraordinarily successful in achieving these aims.

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<sup>104</sup> Philip Wexler, “The Jewish Question Again : From Collective Identity to Social Vitality,” in *Dynamic Belonging; Contemporary Jewish Collective Identities*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg, Steven M. Cohen, and Ezra Kopelowitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 75.

<sup>105</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 193.

## 4.2. The impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel on its participants

Taglit is a frequently evaluated birthright program, and since its establishment, several dozen studies have been conducted to assess its impact on participants. A great deal of scientific research aimed to examine whether the motto of the Taglit program – *“The trip lasts 10 days – memories last a lifetime”* – is a reality, and whether the trip really has a long-lasting effect on its participants, turning back the processes that, according to Jewish leaders, would lead to the disappearance of the Jewish diaspora. The researches focus on various issues, such as the attitudes of Taglit alumni towards Israel and world Jewry, their Jewish practices and institutional affiliation, marriage plans, and opinion about the Israeli-Arab conflict. Most of the researches were supported through the Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish studies, and were conducted by the same group of researchers. The studies focus on multiple cohorts, assess the short-moderate- and long-term impact of the program, and typically employ quasi-experimental designs to compare participants with those who applied to the trip but could not go. The vast majority of the existing researches focuses on North Americans<sup>106</sup>, some surveys were conducted in Latin America<sup>107</sup> while only a few researches describe the experiences of European participants.<sup>108</sup>

Researches consistently find that Taglit has a robust impact on attitudes towards Israel and the Jewish community, even on the long run. Those who participated in the trip generally evaluate it very positively, consider it to be a “life-changing experience”, and are significantly

<sup>106</sup> The research reports can be found at: <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchprojects/taglit/publications.html>

<sup>107</sup> Michelle Shain, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, “A Study on Jewish Young Adults in Brazil: The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2012), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/BrazilBRIreport.pdf>; Michelle Shain, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, “A Study of Jewish Young Adults in Argentina: The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2012), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/ArgentinaBRIreportEnglish.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> Ben Kasstan, “Birthright: A Journey of Jewish Identity,” *Durham Anthropology Journal* 18, no. 1 (2012): 155–210; Anna Pokorná, “Is the Taglit Experience Something to Talk Of?” (Conference paper presented at Taglit Conference, 2013); András Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program. Hungarian Report” (Unpublished Manuscript, 2007).

more likely to feel “very much” connected to the world Jewry and to Israel than those who did not participate in the program.<sup>109</sup> In spite of this strong effect on Jewish identities, however, Taglit has a rather modest impact on Jewish behaviour, which is considered to be the “paradox of engagement.”<sup>110</sup> Although trip participants are more likely to celebrate Jewish holidays and visit synagogues than nonparticipants, the effect of the program on Jewish life is small and inconsistent. Similarly, Taglit alumni show some increase in their Jewish communal involvement, but these results are almost statistically insignificant.<sup>111</sup> The solution Kelner provides for the ‘paradox of engagement’ is that when participants enthusiastically claim that their Taglit experience was “life-changing”, they do not think about changes in their future life, but mean the reconstruction of their past according to Jewish terms. Their discourses point backward in time rather than forward.<sup>112</sup> It is a significant drawback of the existing quantitative researches that they are unable to measure changes in Jewish identity. By claiming that the Jewish identity of participants strengthened after the trip, surveys generally mean respondents’ closer connection to the worldwide Jewry, measured by the question “To what extent do you feel a connection to a worldwide Jewish community?” In my understanding, however, Jewish identity is far more complex and far beyond the subjective feeling of connectedness to the Jewish peoplehood. This thesis aims to investigate Jewish identity as participants’ relationship to their own Jewishness; the ways they express their

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<sup>109</sup> Leonard Saxe et al., “Jewish Futures Project. The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2012 Update” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2012), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/jewish%20futures/JFP2012Report.pdf>; Leonard Saxe et al., “Young Adults and Jewish Engagement: The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2013), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=21223>; Leonard Saxe et al., “Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2009), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/Taglit.GBI.10.22.09.final.pdf>; Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, and Shahar Hecht, “Taglit-Birthright Israel: Impact on Jewish Identity, Peoplehood, and Connection to Israel” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2006), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/bri2006.evaluationimpact.pdf>.

<sup>110</sup> Theodore Sasson et al., “After Birthright Israel: Finding and Seeking Young Adult Jewish Community” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2007), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=18081>.

<sup>111</sup> Saxe et al., “Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices.”

<sup>112</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 185–90.

Jewishness and the situations when they ‘feel Jewish’. I argue that the complexities of Jewish identification can only be discovered through qualitative techniques; therefore the large-scale American questionnaire surveys are unable to say anything about the impact of Taglit on actual Jewish identifications. Consequently, they are also unable to answer the question why and how Jewish identifications turn (and not turn) into actions, and what is behind the ‘paradox of engagement’. In this thesis, I aim to answer these questions concerning the Hungarian Taglit participants.

As the program grew out of the concern of intermarriages, researches also focused on whether Taglit has an impact on partner choice and future family plans. According to the results, participants after the trip are more likely to express that they want to marry a Jew and raise their children Jewish than those who did not participate in the program.<sup>113</sup> This impact was even larger on those participants who were born into intermarried families. Researches found that the desire to marry someone Jewish also became a reality for those who settled down after the program, as Taglit participants were more likely to choose a Jewish spouse than nonparticipants. Also, there was a significant difference between participants and nonparticipants about attitudes towards child raising. Taglit alumni considered much more important to raise their children Jewish, and notably, even those who expressed willingness to marry a non-Jew stressed the importance of leading a Jewish family life. This includes willingness to have ritual circumcision and naming ceremony for the newborns, as well as family celebration of holidays and sending children to formal or informal Jewish educational institutions. These results suggest that Taglit has a potential to alter the contours of the American Jewry and its future trajectory.<sup>114</sup> As shown in Chapter three, intermarriages are also frequent in Hungary, and older generations tend not to pass Jewish traditions to their

<sup>113</sup> Leonard Saxe et al., “Intermarriage: The Impact and Lessons of Taglit-Birthright Israel,” *Contemporary Jewry* 31, no. 2 (2010): 151–72, doi:10.1007/s12397-010-9058-z; Leonard Saxe et al., “Jewish Futures Project. The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: Marriage and Family” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2014), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/jewish%20futures/JewishFutures2014.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Saxe et al., “Jewish Futures Project. The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: Marriage and Family.”

children. Moreover, in several cases parents deliberately decide not to tell their children about their Jewishness in order to keep them safe. Considering these facts, I am rather sceptical about the impact of Taglit on the family plans of Hungarian participants. As they possess a weak Jewish identity and Jewishness practically does not appear in their lives, I assume that Hungarian Jews do not feel the need to marry ‘within the tribe’. Considering child raising, however, young Jews might adapt a different strategy than their parents. Motivated by the multiculturalist atmosphere of the contemporary society, they might be more open to their children about the Jewish heritage of the family.

The impact assessments of Taglit also focus on the political engagement of alumni. Researches found that young Jews were more likely to seek news about Israel, and also had a generally positive opinion of the Israeli state and society after the trip.<sup>115</sup> They were also more likely to believe that Israel does not violate the rights of Palestinians, treats all of its citizens as equal and is a refuge for the persecuted Jews of the world. In 2006 and 2014, when Israel engaged in armed conflict with Palestine, Taglit alumni were also more likely than nonparticipants to regularly seek news about the conflict and see Israeli actions as justified.<sup>116</sup> They were also more likely to feel connected to Israel and voice their support through social media, attend lectures about the conflict, or send donations. Besides that, however, Taglit alumni are rather insecure when asked about concrete aspects of the conflict and how certain situations should be solved. When asked about the possible division of Jerusalem or changes in the status of the West Bank, for example, both Taglit participants and nonparticipants were reluctant to give an answer. This means that even after the trip, diaspora Jews feel rather

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<sup>115</sup> Theodore Sasson et al., “Does Taglit-Birthright Israel Foster Long-Distance Nationalism?,” *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 20, no. 4 (2014): 438–54, doi:10.1080/13537113.2014.969149.

<sup>116</sup> Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, and Shahar Hecht, “Israel at War: The Impact of Peer-Oriented Israel Programs on Responses of American Jewish Young Adults” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2006), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/IsraelatWar.Apr13.pdf>; Michelle Shain, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, “U.S. Jewish Young Adults React to the Gaza Conflict: A Survey of Birthright Israel Applicants” (Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), 2014), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/birthright/BirthrightGazaReport082514.pdf>.

incompetent in providing solutions to the problems of Israel.<sup>117</sup> It is also possible, however, that Taglit alumni have their own opinion, but assume that it is different from the answer that the researchers expect; therefore they are reluctant to be honest. Therefore, the lack of answers and latency might also mean that Taglit is unsuccessful in its political agenda.

Surveys also regularly investigate the social and Jewish background of Taglit participants. According to a 2013 research, North American participants are generally college students.<sup>118</sup> The majority of respondents reported that they were raised Reform or Reconstructionist, one-quarter were raised Conservative, another quarter were secular “Just Jewish”, and only a small number were Orthodox. The majority of the participants had some formal Jewish education, such as full-time Jewish day schools, Hebrew schools or Sunday schools. Only one-fifth of the participants reported that they had no formal Jewish education at all. Also, family traditions are relevant as nearly half of the respondents reported that they celebrate Hanukkah and Passover at home, and one-fifth reported that they also regularly lit Shabbat candles. Only 3-6 percent of the respondents reported that they do not have any Jewish tradition in their families. Similarly, researches in Argentina and Brazil found that a large proportion of trip participants is involved in Jewish communal life, take part in Jewish formal education and have Jewish traditions at home.<sup>119</sup> Lev Ari and Mittelberg, however, found completely different patterns when comparing participants from North America and from the Former Soviet Union (FSU).<sup>120</sup> The majority of FSU students did not belong to any Jewish denomination and did not have Jewish education at all; they were also much less likely to have Jewish friends, and only a small fraction belonged to a synagogue. The authors found that both groups had a strengthened Jewish identity after the trip, but while in the North

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<sup>117</sup> Sasson et al., “Does Taglit-Birthright Israel Foster Long-Distance Nationalism?”

<sup>118</sup> Saxe et al., “Young Adults and Jewish Engagement.”

<sup>119</sup> Shain, Hecht, and Saxe, “A Study of Jewish Young Adults in Argentina”; Shain, Hecht, and Saxe, “A Study on Jewish Young Adults in Brazil.”

<sup>120</sup> Lilach Lev Ari and David Mittelberg, “Between Authenticity and Ethnicity: Heritage Tourism and Re-Ethnification Among Diaspora Jewish Youth,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 3, no. 2 (2008): 79–102, doi:10.1080/17438730802138097.

American case the background factors and pre-trip motivations played an important role in the outcome, in case of FSU participants it was mainly the trip experience that led to identity changes. As Hungarian participants are also unaffiliated before the trip, I expect to find similar results in this research.

The Taglit literature on Europe is rather limited. One research that is closest to the Hungarian example is the ethnographic work of Pokorná, who examined the Taglit experiences of Czech Jews.<sup>121</sup> Similarly to Hungary, the Holocaust and the decades of communism led to the assimilation of the Czech Jewish community, therefore Pokorná argues that Czech Taglit participants do not belong to the Jewish diaspora. Some Taglit participants even answered “No” to the question “Do you consider yourself Jewish?”, and were afraid that the trip will be a Zionist brainwash. In spite of that, however, the journey was a strong experience for most of the participants. Pokorná points out that some places, such as the Yad Vashem Museum and the Western Wall were often highlighted by participants as best experiences, while others, such as the Masada, were found less impressive. After the trip, Czech Jews had the intention to learn more about Judaism and participated in informal meetings, but were rather reluctant to take part in the institutional Jewish life. Also, many alumni sought opportunities to return to Israel for shorter trips or a longer stay.

In Hungary, one focus group research was conducted about Taglit in 2007.<sup>122</sup> The research revealed that Taglit participants were ‘typical’ young Hungarian Jews as they came from fully assimilated families where no form of Jewish tradition was present. They had little knowledge about Judaism and had not regarded Jewish life as central for themselves before the trip. Nevertheless, they emphasized that Taglit was a positive experience for them, and for many this journey was the first time when they heard about Jewish traditions and religion more in-depth. Many participants mentioned that the community experience was the major

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<sup>121</sup> Pokorná, “Is the Taglit Experience Something to Talk Of?”

<sup>122</sup> Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program.”



positive feature of the trip, but certain sites, such as the Western Wall, Yad Vashem or the Memorial Museum of Hungarian Speaking Jewry in Safed were also mentioned as best experiences. After the trip, participants reported changed attitudes towards Jewish life: they showed greater interest in Jewish topics and gained more Jewish friends. However, the research also found the ‘paradox of engagement’ in case of Hungarian Jews: changed attitudes towards Jewish life did not lead to the same amount of change in Jewish practices. Those participants who were already connected to the institutionalized forms of Judaism prior to the trip reported a greater involvement afterwards, but the unaffiliated participants only mentioned a couple of Jewish events that they visited. This might be due to the fact that Hungarian Jewish youth organizations did not make efforts to reach out for Taglit alumni. Also, the effects of the community experience weakened over time, and the groups formed during the trip began to break up. Concerning Israel, majority of participants reported that the country made a positive impression on them, while others mentioned antipathy towards the strong national sentiments and militarism. Many Taglit alumni planned to return to Israel even for longer periods. Some people also mentioned that they would settle in Israel if they would find better job opportunities there or if the political situation in Hungary deteriorates.

To conclude, there were several impact assessments conducted on Taglit, but there is a serious lack in qualitative researches and surveys that focus on European participants. Quantitative researches are useful in measuring attitudes towards Israel, the worldwide Jewry and various other Jewish issues, but they are unable to measure how Taglit impacted the Jewish identification of participants. Also, quantitative surveys can not answer how and why Taglit alumni get or do not get involved in Jewish organizations, and what are the factors behind the ‘paradox of engagement’. These issues can only be investigated through qualitative techniques, however, only a few researches chose to adapt these methods. Similarly, there is a serious lack in Taglit researches that focus on the countries outside North

America; therefore there is no information on the experiences of groups that come from these parts of the world. As impact assessments almost exclusively focus on cohorts that have multiple connections to Judaism and Jewish communities prior to the trip, it remains unknown how Taglit impacts the less affiliated participant groups. Considering this, the present thesis fills multiple gaps: it adapts a qualitative interview technique; it focuses on the so far neglected Hungarian Taglit participants; and finally, it serves as an interesting case study for the Birthright experiences of those who are completely unaffiliated prior to their trip.

## **5. Methodology**

The present research aims to investigate the experiences of those Hungarian youths who participated in the Taglit program, as well as the impact that the trip has made on their Jewish identifications, activities, and connections to Israel. To gain an in-depth picture about these issues, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with participants of the 2015 summer trips. The method was chosen as it allowed me to name the main areas I was interested in, but due to the open questions, interviewees were allowed to answer freely and formulate their own narratives about the topics. Also, I supposed that participants' feelings towards Taglit and their Jewishness changes over time: I assumed that they are full of experiences and excitement right after the trip, but these feelings gradually fade away after some time. To be able to track these changes, two sets of interviews have been conducted: one right after the summer trips, and one half a year later. During the first interviews, I was mainly interested in the Jewish background of participants, their motivations to apply to the journey, and their various experiences in Israel. Interviewees were also asked about their future plans, and they

could name several Jewish organizations they wanted to join to or programs they wanted to take part in. During the second interviews, I was mainly interested in whether these plans came to reality in the last six months, and whether the heightened emotions of participants towards Israel and their group proved to be persistent. Questions were also asked about how much role Jewishness plays in the partner choice and future family plans of interviewees, as well as on their views on Israel's politics.

The first interviews were conducted during August and September. I addressed the *madrichim* (group leaders) of the Taglit groups and asked them to transmit a call for participation in my research to their group members. Some interviewees applied voluntary for my call; others were chosen by the advice of the *madrichim* and were asked directly to participate. 18 interviews were conducted with Taglit participants aged between 18 and 27, and there were 7 males and 11 females among them. During the summer, five Taglit trips were organized; four of them were exclusively for Hungarians while one was international, involving Jews of the Eastern European region. Among the interviewees, eight participated in the first, five in the second, one in the third and one in the fourth trip (which was the international one), while three participants travelled with the fifth group (*Table 1.*). As all the trips follow more or less the same itinerary, it can be assumed that all participants had similar experiences. One major difference is that unlike the others, the first Taglit group had the opportunity to participate in the Mega Event; also, there were two groups that did not climb the fortress of Masada due to the extreme heat. The second interviews were conducted between March and May of 2016. All interviewees were willing to participate again in a second discussion, however due to other activities the interview with Andris could not take place. Therefore at the end only 17 interviews were conducted in the second round. This, however seemed to be only a minor problem as in spite of their diverse background, interviewees gave surprisingly similar answers to my questions during the second interviews.

Most interviews have been conducted in a public place, in an outside park or a coffee house. Only three participants offered to take an interview in their homes. Also, two interviews have been conducted via skype, with Taglit alumni who do their university studies outside Budapest. Depending on the participants, most interviews were 30-50 minutes long. Participants were informed about the thesis project and were granted anonymity. All interviewees let the discussion to be recorded, with the condition that the recordings will only be used for this research and will not be given to a third party.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Taglit group
Anna	Female	19	1.
Flóra	Female	22	1.
Péter	Male	22	1.
Ádám	Male	18	1.
Zoé	Female	26	1.
Hanna	Female	19	1.
Andris	Male	22	1.
Gábor	Male	20	1.
Domi	Male	27	2.
Ivett	Female	22	2.
Zsuzsi	Female	25	2.
Kristóf	Male	26	2.
Áron	Male	18	2.
Kriszta	Female	23	3.
Eszter	Female	21	4.
Vanda	Female	21	5.
Petra	Female	23	5.
Noémi	Female	18	5.

Table 1. The participants of this research

All interviews have been transcribed, and the research findings of this thesis are based on the summarizing content analysis of the transcriptions.<sup>123</sup> First the relevant parts of the interviews have been selected, and analytic categories have been created based on the main topics and questions of the research. Finally, the content of the interviews has been summarized and categorized. In the analysis, I focused on themes that are connected to the

<sup>123</sup> Uwe Flick, ed., *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 323–28.

main aims of Taglit and therefore usually appear in the surveys reviewed in the former chapter. These main areas include the impact of Taglit on the Jewish identification of participants; their Jewish practices and involvement in Jewish institutions; their marriage and family plans; as well as their connection to Israel and opinion about Israel's politics. Within every theme, I analyze what proved to be important for my interviewees, as well as issues that were rarely mentioned or were avoided in the discussions. Together, the analysis of the interviews sheds lights on what is most significant for Taglit participants about their own Jewishness, what were their most important experiences during the trip, and how their visit in Israel altered their Jewish identification, practices, and views on Israel. The interviews also show what was less significant or unimportant for participants, and what were the cases when they disagreed with the presented narratives or the situations that they did not like. The linguistic aspects of the interviews were generally not taken into consideration, with one exception: I was interested in how the word *Jew* is used by the interviewees, as it is an indicator of the stigmatized identity. This structure allows me to compare my research with the findings of the existing impact assessments, as well as to assess how successful Taglit is in achieving its aims in case of the Hungarian participants.

Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the findings are unfit for generalization and should only serve as starting points in understanding the patterns in the impact of Taglit. Due to the way interviewees were chosen for this research, my sample might be biased towards those Taglit alumni who are more strongly affected by the trip. I assume that those who applied voluntarily for my call did so because they were excited about the trip and felt a need to 'talk out' their experiences. However, it often turned out that those interviewees who were recommended by the madrichim and were approached personally are not the most talkative and involved ones. Another problem might be that the sample does not include members of each Taglit cohort equally; however, as the trip itinerary is more or less the same

for every group, I assume that each participant went through the same events. Also, although I aimed to conduct the first interviews right after the trip, I talked to each participant in August-September; for some people, it was one week after their arrival, but for others it could have been a month. Still, generally all interviewees had vivid memories about their trip and could easily recall what happened to them in Israel.

Generally I found the participants of this research and convinced them to talk to me without any difficulty. Almost all interviewees were incredibly nice and open, and they were happy to discuss their Taglit experiences. I believe it is partly due to the fact that I belong to their age group and I myself am a Jewish person; I felt that my interviewees trusted me and I could easily relate to them. Owing to the open and free atmosphere of the discussions, participants soon forgot about the interview situation and gave honest answers to my questions. To conclude, I believe that my sample is reliable and sufficient for a good qualitative research; the results of the interview analysis contribute greatly to the understanding of how Taglit influences its Hungarian participants.

## **6. Research results**

Overall, this chapter has two aims: first, to analyze the impact that Taglit makes on Hungarian participants and assess how successful the trip is in achieving its aims; and second, to answer the main question of this thesis, whether Taglit has a ‘diaspora-creating’ impact in case of this group. The chapter is divided into six parts; first, the Jewish background of the participants of this research is presented; second, their general experiences during the Taglit trip are summarized. Third, through analyzing the Jewish identification of participants before, during,

and after the trip, it is shown how the birthright journey impacted the meanings these youths connect to their Jewish origins and their perceptions about being Jewish. Fourth, it is analyzed in-depth how Taglit influenced the Jewish practices, future plans and choices of participants, and whether there are any ‘tangible’ changes in participants’ lives as a consequence of the trip. The fifth section focuses on the attitudes of Taglit alumni towards Israel, as well as their opinion about the Israeli-Arab conflict. And sixth, based on the findings, the last part of the chapter aims to answer whether Taglit has a diaspora-creating impact in case of the Hungarian Jews.

## **6.1. The Jewish background of participants**

Participants of this research can be considered as ‘typical’ young Hungarian Jews: for most of them, Jewishness was not an openly discussed topic at home, they never kept any of the traditions, and generally had a rather limited knowledge about Judaism. It was often mentioned that although their grandparents celebrated the Jewish holidays in their childhood, with the Holocaust and communism these traditions were given up, and their parents already grew up with the sense that Jewishness is a taboo. My interviewees were already born into assimilated and secular families; if religion was present in any form, it was Christianity, and not Judaism: some participants mentioned that they are baptised, visited religious classes as children, and celebrate Christmas and Easter at home. For many participants, the pre-Taglit meeting with their group was the first time to visit a synagogue. Among my respondents, only Áron and Noémi have close connections to Judaism: both of them were born to a religious family, therefore they are well aware of the Jewish traditions and being a Jew is a significant aspect of their life. However, only Noémi considers herself to be a believer. Besides Noémi

and Áron, two other participants, Zoé and Ádám have closer connections to the Jewish community: they are both secular, but celebrate the major Jewish holidays and have multiple relations to Jewish youth organizations.

Some participants mentioned that they always knew that they are Jews, while others said that their origins were ‘revealed’ when they were teenagers. None of them mentioned that getting to know that they are Jewish was especially shocking; instead, it was rather surprising or confusing. In the case of Ivett, the family decided to talk about Jewishness because she and her brother started to take up antisemitic discourses from their classmates. Due to the fact that Jewishness was not an openly discussed topic in most of the families, some participants accepted it as a fact without any meaning:

“When I was told that I’m a Jew, this had no meaning to me. I did not know whether it is good or bad, or anything, I just accepted it as a fact. I had no memories and experiences about it, I never paid attention to it, I never heard antisemitic comments from anyone, so I did not know what it is... Moreover, I did not even know that I count as a Jew. I knew that my mom is Jewish, my father isn’t... I did not realize how this all works.” (Domi)

There were interviewees, however, who mentioned that after learning about their origins, they became interested in Judaism and Jewishness, and felt that they want to know more about these issues. They felt puzzled by the silence that surrounded the topic in the family, and wanted to understand what being a Jew means. This is consistent with the findings of Kovács, who argues that contrary to their parents, a group of young Jews starts to become interested in Jewishness and ‘returns’ to the traditions.<sup>124</sup> These participants mentioned that going to the Taglit trip seemed to be a good opportunity to learn about the Jewish culture and their ancestry. Another motivation to apply to Taglit was to see an exotic foreign country for free; most of the participants had never been to Israel before. Naturally, a main motivation to apply was also to have fun. Several participants had friends or relatives who already participated in

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<sup>124</sup> Kovács, “Zsidó Csoportok.”



Taglit, and they all heard that the trip is fantastic; therefore, although they did not exactly know what will happen to them, they expected that their stay in Israel will be a good experience.

## **6.2. General experiences during Taglit**

Without exception, every participant of this research explained enthusiastically that the trip was a fantastic experience for them; some people even said that it was the best summer of their life. Although participants had high expectations towards the trip, it was often mentioned that these expectations were greatly exceeded. Even after six months, participants agreed that Taglit is “a good memory for a lifetime”, and they often think about it and recommend it to others. As most of young Jews had a very limited knowledge about Jewish culture and religion when they went to Israel, it was often mentioned that they got a tremendous amount of new information. For many, the greatest experience was that they could get to know the country “from the inside” by talking to locals and visiting places that are not strictly ‘touristic’. The presence of young soldiers and the professionalism of the local tour guide were also highly valued, as they contributed to the authenticity of the trip. When asked about negative experiences, some participants could not recall any; others generally only mentioned minor ‘technical’ inconveniences, such as the intensity of the trip and that they often had to wait for others. A recurring preconception before the trip was that Taglit will be a big propaganda aiming to proselytize its participants. Many applicants were surprised that they are eligible to visit Israel for free without a strong Jewish background; and they were afraid that in return, they will be ‘obliged’ to participate events or join organizations. Interviewees generally reported relief that these expectations were not met, and they got an objective,

balanced picture about Jewishness and Israel without any ‘preaching’. There were only some participants who emphasized that they realized that Taglit presents a “dream world” for them, focusing only on the bright side of Israel while leaving out the negative parts.

### **6.3. The Jewish identification of participants**

Concerning *identity*, the present research focuses on the relation that participants have towards their Jewish origin; their ideas, feelings and conceptions about what it means to be a Jew for them. First, this Jewish identification of participants before the trip is analyzed; then the processes are shown that influenced this identification during the ten days of Israel. Lastly, it is explained how participants relate to their Jewishness after returning to Hungary.

#### **6.3.1. Jewish identification before the trip**

Concerning pre-trip identification, I argue that the Jewish identity of the ‘typical’ Taglit participant is characterized by a lack of active identification and a certain stigmatized consciousness. As it has been mentioned earlier, for most participants, Jewishness did not appear in the everyday life of the family; being a Jew was a known ‘fact’, a category that young Jews accepted for themselves without connecting any meaningful content to it. As Kriszta explains it: “I never thought that being a Jew is anything more than a simple fact.” Petra went even further when saying that she does not even consider herself to be a Jew: having one Jewish grandfather who was baptized as a child, she was only Jewish enough to

get into the Taglit group. She accepted that she might *count as a Jew* according to the program's objectives, but she did not actively identify with the term. Besides this lack of identification, however, third generation Jews in Hungary have a vague sense that being a Jew is something negative. They might do not know anything about Jewish religion, traditions, or culture; but they are well aware of how the Holocaust impacted their families, and sense the silence that surrounds the topic of Jewishness at home:

“My mother is Jewish. Actually this was not really a topic at home, so I did not know about it until I was a teenager, and I never really paid attention to it. My grandparents are Holocaust survivors, and they tried to protect my mom by not talking about it. My mom knows what happened, but it was accepted in the family that we do not talk about it in front of others, in order not to be stigmatized and not to have any problems. So we never talked about it.”  
(Domi)

This vague disposition of negative identity is further reinforced when participants meet antisemitism in their everyday life. Even if they do not experience it personally, they encounter antisemitic discourses and comments in their school class, among their colleagues, or in the media. These experiences do not help young Jews to figure out what it means to be a Jew; they only strengthen the sense that being a Jew is something negative:

Before the Taglit, I did not know anything about what Jewishness is and what it means to be a Jew. And then I got to know Jews, and saw, what it is like... [...] Wait, it is not entirely true that I did not know what it is to be a Jew. I knew that in Hungary it is something negative. That you are looked at as an outsider because of it. (Gábor)

During this research, the sense of stigma was recurring in participants' narratives. Although most participants used the word 'Jew' with ease, in some cases they lowered their voice or substituted the word with determinatives such as 'it' or 'that'. When asked about their Jewish background, some interviewees automatically started to talk about how persecutions impacted their families, which clearly indicates that the memory of the Holocaust is at the center of the

Jewish identity still for younger generations. Also, antisemitism in Hungary was mentioned by almost every interview participant, although there were no direct questions asked about the topic. It was often emphasized that there is an “antisemitic atmosphere” in the country, and prejudice towards Jews is “encoded into every generation”.

Here, if you want to enter to the Israeli Cultural Institute, you need to look around. When I first went in, I looked around, thrice, than another time, and then I entered. In Israel, I did not have these disturbing feelings. (Vanda)

“I think we are still stigmatized, although we do not do anything to deserve it. I don’t really understand it. But I still feel it.” (Péter)

Although interviewees had a strong sense that the social environment in Hungary is antisemitic, only a few of them mentioned that they actually experienced antisemitism personally. This reflects the findings of Kovács, who argued that negative identity is inherited from parents and grandparents, and young Jews might have a stigmatized consciousness even without personally experiencing discrimination.<sup>125</sup>

A consequence of stigmatized identity is the decision that Jewishness needs to be kept as a secret, or at least it should not be displayed openly. From the interviews it turned out that young Jews are constantly mapping their environment, trying to cautiously figure out whether it is safe or unsafe to reveal themselves. Some participants mentioned that they are lucky to have a tolerant environment – such as a liberal school or workplace – where it is not a problem to be a Jew. Others, however, were more cautious and said that they only told about their origins to close friends.

“So, you don’t usually talk about your origin. It’s not that you actually hide it, but you don’t tell it to anyone, because I think there are atrocities, and we live in a society that is full of prejudiced people.” (Anna)

“This is why I don’t tell it to several people, because I think they would look at me differently. Which, actually, is quite disappointing and pathetic, and

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<sup>125</sup> Kovács, “Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary.”

those people should not be your friends, but still, the truth is they look at you differently.” (Péter)

The question of hiding naturally appeared when young Jews went to Israel and needed to tell their colleagues, friends and other acquaintances where they go and why. Several participants mentioned that they did not keep Taglit as a secret and openly talked about it when they were asked, however others said exactly the opposite. Some participants only told about Taglit to the closest friends and relatives, and avoided to give a detailed explanation of their summer to others. Péter even lied to some acquaintances and said that he travels to Italy.

Me actually... only told about it to people with whom I have a close relation and whom I trust. (Flóra)

Well, I talked about it, but I did not go into details. If I was asked... the problem is, I did not want to go into details because today in Hungary this could lead to conflicts, and you get questions, and you end up talking about completely different issues. So I only said that there was this opportunity, I went there through an organization, and got to know the local culture. But I did not go into details. (Andris)

The fact that young Jews do not dare to talk openly about their origins also hinders Jewish community formation. Many participants mentioned that they have no idea who is Jewish in their environment and who is not; and they might have Jewish friends, but simply do not know about it. Some interviewees mentioned funny situations when it accidentally turned out that a person they knew was Jewish, and said that being Jewish can be a ‘common base’ in a relationship.

To conclude, although there are differences between participants, most young Jews have little knowledge about Judaism and do not regard Jewish life as central for themselves when they go to the Taglit trip. Being a Jew is a fact that they accept without any significance. Besides that, however, many of them have a stigmatized consciousness that is inherited from the family and further reinforced by the antisemitic Hungarian social environment. The next

sections aim to discover how Taglit impacts the significance and stigmatized nature of participants' Jewish identifications.

### **6.3.2. Jewish identification during the trip**

The ten days of the Taglit trip was in many respects a new situation for participants: as Kelner pointed out, they were placed to a 'liminal context': they were singled out from their home environment because they were Jewish, and were placed among forty other young Jews.<sup>126</sup> Concerning how insignificant participants' Jewish identity was before the trip, being "first and foremost Jewish" for ten days was a whole new life situation for them. Usually, interviewees said that they had a great group during the trip. Naturally, some people managed to build closer connections with their group members than others; some participants were very enthusiastic about their group, while others were less impressed. Still, the opinion of participants about their Taglit community was largely positive. A recurring narrative was to frame the trip and the group as 'liberating': while at home young Jews needed to be careful when displaying their Jewishness, with Taglit they arrived to a Jewish country, with a group of exclusively Jewish people. They were not required to hide "who they are"; on the contrary, their Jewishness was suddenly put into spotlight. Several participants mentioned that this new situation allowed them to open up, talk about personal issues and discuss topics that they have never talked about with non-Jews at home:

It was strange, because we Hungarian Jews usually don't say... I don't introduce myself, like, hi, I'm XY, Jewish, 19... You don't usually say that. If someone is Jewish, it turns out only after weeks. [...] And here it was strange

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<sup>126</sup> Kelner, "Constructing Jewish Belonging through Mass Tourism."

that everyone knows it about the others, and you don't have to hide it. Just, "Are you Jewish? Me too." That was it. (Anna)

[Group discussions] were very good, because I sat there with similar people in front of me, and we could talk to each other without taboos. I did not have experiences like that before. (Péter)

For those participants who had stronger connections to Jewish religion and culture before the trip, 'being Jewish' was of course not a new life situation. Áron, Noémi, Ádám and Zoé unanimously said that they were surprised to meet so many young Jews who have no idea about Judaism and other issues that are natural for them. Taglit therefore was an opportunity for them to move out from the 'Jewish bubble' and meet unaffiliated Jewish peers.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their best experiences. Jerusalem and especially the Western Wall was mentioned as the most significant site of the trip. Generally, participants reported that they felt belonging and a strong sense of community at the Wall, and they were amazed by the greatness of Jewish history there. Several interviewees emphasized that they were surprised how they reacted to the Wall; in spite of being non-religious, they mentioned that they had a strong spiritual experience:

The Western Wall was a memorable experience for everyone I think. You need to know about me that I'm not a spiritual person; I'm not religious at all. I'm baptised, but I don't care... I never went to church, synagogue, nowhere; I never had connections to anything spiritual. Then I went to the Western Wall, and one Israeli girl came with me. And when I put my hands to the Wall and leant my forehead against it... I still have goose bumps when talking about it, it was such a fantastic experience. And really... really in spite of the fact that I don't consider myself to be a Jew, and let's face it, I'm not a Jew... I'm only Jewish enough to go to the Taglit. But when I was there, I felt this thing, this I don't exactly know what... These hundred, thousand years of persecution, overcoming the difficulties together. So that place has a strong power. It hit me so strongly. (Petra)

Even Andris, who was the most sceptical about the trip and the less concerned about his Jewish origin among the interviewees, reported strong feelings at the Wall:

When we got to the Wall, I don't know...I talked a lot about it with my grandmother, but it was not important, because it had no big effect on me, it was mainly she who was talking. [...] And she talked about it, and when I was there I remembered everything... And I know it is stupid, and there is no such thing that you put a note there and she gets it, but when I got there, I know it's stupid, but I felt so touched. And then I sat down, wrote my little letter, that I'm here, I remember everything she said... Because she told me that it was such a great experience when she was here in Israel, and she also wants me to get here. And then suddenly these feelings erupted. But I was really surprised. (Andris)

Similarly to the North Americans in the studies of Powers and Kelner, Hungarian participants were also strongly impacted by the Wall, had a intense sense of community there and framed their experiences as spiritual.<sup>127</sup> My results are also consistent with the findings of Pokorná and Kovács, that Eastern-European Taglit participants tend to frame The Western Wall as best experiences.<sup>128</sup> It seems, therefore, that the Western Wall is indeed such a powerful symbol that it is capable to touch even the most unaffiliated Jews through evoking memories from the Jewish past to which everyone feels connected.

Besides the Western Wall, The Holocaust Museum and the military cemetery were also mentioned as memorable and “cathartic” experiences. Several participants mentioned that visiting the museum was very touching and upsetting, and many from the group cried. The Hungarian Taglit groups also visited the Hungarian Museum of Safed, where they saw an exhibition about the history of the Hungarian Jewry and met an old couple who migrated to Israel after the Holocaust. This Hungarian Museum was also often mentioned during the interviews as one of the best sites. Again, this result is consistent with the findings of Pokorná and Kovács and indicates that the memory of the Holocaust is central for today's young Jews.<sup>129</sup> The Yad Vashem Museum and the Hungarian Museum in Safed were places where Taglit participants faced the history that impacted their families; during these moments, they felt connected to the Jewish community, and, indirectly, to Israel.

<sup>127</sup> Powers, “Reimagining the Imagined Community”; Kelner et al., “Making Meaning.”

<sup>128</sup> Pokorná, “Is the Taglit Experience Something to Talk Of?”; Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program.”

<sup>129</sup> Pokorná, “Is the Taglit Experience Something to Talk Of?”; Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program.”



As it was mentioned earlier, 2015 was the first year that a Hungarian Taglit group participated in the Mega Event. Although Kelner argues that it is one of the ‘peak experiences’ of Taglit, in my research it was not mentioned as a memorable event.<sup>130</sup> It was only Anna who said it was especially significant for her: “The Mega Event was moving. In this event we met Jewish soldiers, we listened to the anthem, the Jewish anthem, and that was when I felt closest to this whole thing.” Generally, however, it seems that neither the Mega Event, nor the often cited Masada fortress did make a strong impact on Hungarian participants. A possible answer for this is the structural difference between the North American and Hungarian Taglit itineraries: while the former groups usually climb Masada at dawn and experience the sunrise at the top, Hungarians visit the fortress during daytime. It seems that this difference influences what meanings participants connect to the place and what experiences they have during their visit.

### **6.3.3. Jewish identification after the trip**

The ten days of Birthright Israel made various impacts on how participants relate to their own Jewishness, to the Jewish community, and to Israel. Generally, it can be said that the trip brought Jewishness closer to every participant; none of my interviewees said that the journey actually distanced them from these issues. Also, as expected, there were great differences between the first and second interviews: while right after the trip, participants reported heightened emotions, after six months they told that their experiences settled and their excitement faded away.

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<sup>130</sup> Kelner, “The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel’s Symbolic Meaning.”

Participants reacted differently to the same input of the Taglit trip. Those who showed some interest towards Jewish culture and Judaism before the Taglit said that after the trip they were more aware of their roots and started to ‘discover’ who they are and what their Jewishness means; that the trip helped them to “put things into their place”. In case of those, however, who never considered their Jewishness to be more than a mere fact, Taglit was more a confusing experience:

A lot of things changed. Mostly, I’m totally confused. At this point I think, and it may sounds ridiculous, but the truth is that I’m not a Jew, but I’d love to be one, and if I wished it, I could become one. (Petra)

I don’t really know what to do with this. [...] I’m only playing with my Jewish identity, or I don’t even know, how to call it... (Kriszta)

The dilemma of Petra and Kriszta is that they grew up without any connection to their Jewish origins; however, after spending ten days in Israel, their Jewishness suddenly became salient, much more than a mere fact. The girls felt puzzled as they did not know how to integrate the new experiences into their everyday lives, and what role Jewishness should play in their future. During our interview, they mentioned that they want to “do something with it”, but were unsure about what to do exactly. This ‘readiness’ to be Jewish could be a good starting point to embrace Judaism, take Jewish actions and make significant changes in one’s life. However, neither Petra nor Kriszta reported any changes during our second interview. Both of them mentioned that the emotions that Taglit stirred up faded away:

Sadly, I have to say that I think this will slowly settle and fade away. I think I will join the group of those for whom this trip remains a very-very good experience, a thing that I will always think about warmheartedly, and it will always have an important role among my memories. But I don’t think it will develop anywhere, because I’m not in that situation, and I don’t know... my life went to a different direction. (Petra)

I think this still remained a fact for me. And the fact that I am a Jew makes me neither a better nor a worse person. But I think I am more that I know it, because I know the Jewish culture better, up-close. (Kriszta)

During the interview with Petra it not only turned out that Taglit has an impact of the Jewish identification of participants; it was also revealed that Taglit might have an impact on other aspects of identifications as well. Having spent a year in an Arabic country, speaking Arab fluently and studying Islamic arts, Petra had strong connections to the Arabic world. After her stay in Israel, however, she reported that she had several highly positive experiences concerning Jews, and rather negative ones with the Arab population of the country. After Taglit, she spent an extra week in Israel aiming to visit Muslim sights as well; however she met hostility and rejection from the Arabs. In the weeks following her return, these experiences led to a real identity crisis in her, and she even considered changing her original plan about conducting her future studies in Islamic art. When asked about this in the second interview, she said that she thought a lot about these issues after Taglit, but slowly got back to her normal life. Although in this example the Taglit did not lead to significant changes in Petra's life, it caused serious dilemmas and an identity crisis that was still present in the background after six months.

Besides the above mentioned cases, Taglit also transformed the stigmatized Jewish identity of participants. During the trip, youths experienced that being a Jew is not only something negative: they visited a beautiful country, made new friends, and had fantastic experiences because they are Jewish. Also, owing to the new narratives they encountered, they realized that their Jewishness means that they are part of a monumental history and a strong community; they have a valuable cultural heritage and beautiful traditions. These new experiences filled their otherwise empty, rather negative Jewish self-image with positive content, and fostered them to embrace their Jewish origins and be proud of it. Several participants mentioned that they are more ready to be open about their origins and do not want to hide it anymore. This does not necessarily mean that they openly display that they are Jews, but they do not try to consciously keep it as a secret, and do not consider it to be a taboo.

I realized that earlier I only told about this to my friends, boyfriends, and closer acquaintances. But since the Taglit I tell it to more and more people. I also uploaded pictures about Israel, so everyone can tell... So, after the trip I dare to be more open and talk about it. (Vanda)

Well, I became more proud, yes, more proud of my origins, and it is good that I'm more open about it than last year or the year before. Okay, I'm still not telling it to everyone, but I'm thinking, like, what could happen? At most they badmouth me behind my back. So now I'm more open about my origins. (Anna)

After the trip, participants also realized that their Jewishness arises in more life situations than before. First, they were more likely to react when a Jewish topic came up at home, with their friends or colleagues, or in the media. Also, they were paying more attention to Jewish events, and felt that they are connected to them when reading or hearing about them. By paying more attention to these issues, the number of cases when participants 'feel Jewish' grew significantly. Second, after the Taglit, some participants were also seen by their environment as the "proficient Jews", who are competent in answering any Jewish-related questions. Interviewees mentioned that since their origins are known to their environment, they are regularly asked for their opinion whenever a topic emerges about Judaism or Israel (and they laughingly added that in most cases, they have no idea how to answer). Third, interestingly, the Jewish identity of participants became salient when their Hungarian identity weakened or were shaken. Some interviewees expressed that due to the serious mistakes of the current government and the rise of the political far-right they have ambiguous feelings towards being Hungarian; that if 'Hungarianness' is defined in the right-wing nationalistic terms, they can not identify with it. In this context, the Jewish origins of participants appeared as something to be proud of, while being Hungarian was depicted as something rather shameful:

It's a big thing maybe, because I could never really identify with being Hungarian. For me Hungarians... it sounds weird, but I don't know, somehow they are not so likeable in general. They are so negative, mistrustful, and rather hostile towards foreigners, and I don't like this. And I know long since that I don't want to live here. And it came in handy, that oh, wait, I'm not only

Hungarian, I'm also Jewish, and Jews are so great. And I don't know, it gave me a new identity. I don't know whether this makes sense. (Gábor)

Yesterday I heard that a Hungarian idiot figured out that the Hungarian language is the protolanguage, and what proves this is that the sound of chickens is similar to the Hungarian vowel system, so the human language derives from the sound of chickens. And I listened to this, and then I felt that I better be a Jew than a Hungarian. (Ivett)

These findings are similar to the results of the Hungarian focus group research, which found that after the trip, the Jewishness of Taglit alumni appears in more life situations than before.<sup>131</sup> This thesis also confirms that identities and identification in general are not fixed, but rather fluid and situational.

It also appeared in the interviews that being Jewish is something *special*, and some participants mentioned that after the trip they feel unique and proud to belong to the Jewish community.

After the Taglit, I think it makes me special. I think it's great. You have something that others don't have. This supports the identity in me, the Jewish identity. (Zsuzsi)

These above mentioned examples, however, do not mean that the stigmatized nature of Jewish identity completely disappeared from Taglit alumni. Rather, I argue that trip participants adapt a dynamic strategy of hiding and embracing their Jewishness, being more open about it but still constantly mapping their environment to see how far they could and could not go. For example, Anna mentioned that she has several acquaintances who do not like Jews and therefore she does not want to bring the topic up in front of them. In spite of this, however, she decided to upload several pictures about Israel on Facebook and later realized that she lost some Facebook friends due to the photos. The case of Anna represents a typical dilemma of Taglit alumni: they want to embrace their Jewishness, but feel limited by

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<sup>131</sup> Kovács, "Taglit-Birthright Israel Program."

antisemites; however, they also want to overcome these limitations and in some cases dare to confront. Besides Anna, several other interviewees mentioned that their Jewishness now appears on Facebook: by uploading pictures, liking certain posts or participating Jewish events, they indirectly let their environment know that they are Jewish. This ‘Facebook Jewishness’ seems to be a safe ground: participants do not keep being a Jew as a secret; still, they can ‘hide’ behind the screen, and do not have to face others’ reactions. Also, Facebook posts do not need to be publicly shared: Vanda, for example, mentioned that she grouped her ‘antisemitic Facebook friends’ to a folder and changed her profile settings so that this certain group does not see her Jewish posts. Therefore, it seems that although participants are more open about their origins, they still feel the need to be cautious in certain situations.

Some participants mentioned that after the trip they tend to enter into debates about Jews and Israel with their acquaintances. They said that Taglit made them more prepared for these debates, and as they experienced the ‘true face’ of Israel, they can easily respond to those who criticise the country. Also, they are more likely to react on antisemitism if it appears in their environment. It was often mentioned that actually non-Jews have no idea about who the Jews are, what they are like and what Jewish religion and culture is about: therefore being more open also contributes to dialogues and mutual understanding. Ivett and Domi even mentioned ‘success stories’, when they managed to convince their friends about an issue or made their environment more tolerant.

To conclude, the initial goals of Taglit to “strengthen the Jewish identity” of participants and “motivate young people to continue to explore their Jewish identity” were partially reached.<sup>132</sup> It would be misleading to claim that the Jewish identity of Hungarian participants strengthened after the trip; but I argue that it became more meaningful, appeared in more life situations, and was filled with positive content. Even after six months, these

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<sup>132</sup> “Birthright Israel.”

feelings seemed to be persistent, and participants tended to be more open about their origins towards their environment. In this respect, Taglit indeed made a strong impact on the Jewish identification of its participants. It remains a question, however, whether this impact manifests in the everyday practices of participants, and whether it leads to significant behavioural changes. This is elaborated in the next section.

## **6.4. Jewish practices, future plans and choices**

### **6.4.1. The ‘paradox of engagement’ in case of Hungarian participants**

Impact assessments of Taglit consistently find that although the trip has a strong impact on Jewish identification, these changed attitudes towards Jewishness after Taglit do not lead to the same amount of change in Jewish practices. Even if participants report that they feel “very much connected” to Judaism, Jewish people, and Israel, they are not more likely to visit a synagogue, celebrate the Jewish holidays or join organizations after the trip. This phenomenon is called the ‘paradox of engagement’, and so far it is unknown what causes stand behind it.<sup>133</sup> In the present section, it is shown how the ‘paradox of engagement’ appeared in the case of Hungarian Taglit participants, and explanations are presented for the phenomenon.

Consistently with former surveys, this research found that heightened emotions towards Jewishness do not lead to community engagement and changes in Jewish practices. During the first interviews, participants were asked whether they have any future plans that

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<sup>133</sup> Sasson et al., “After Birthright Israel”; Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program.”

are related to Jewish issues. In September, a major event was organized for all Taglit alumni in Budapest, where several Jewish organizations were present. During the event named *Tagliot Suk*, participants were informed about what kind of opportunities they have after the trip; both Hungarian and Israeli programs were presented. Almost every interviewee mentioned that they participated in this event and informed about their opportunities. Although only a few of them had clear plans, almost everyone mentioned programs that they would like to be involved in later in the future. Concerning Hungarian programs, the mádrich training<sup>134</sup> and Hebrew language courses were often mentioned, and interviewees generally expressed their desire to somehow “get closer to the Hungarian Jewish community”. Participants also showed great interest towards Israeli opportunities and mentioned that they would like to study, volunteer or work in the country. Gábor and Ivett said that they already bought plane tickets to Israel for their next holiday.

In the second interviews, Taglit alumni were asked about what happened to them in the last six months and whether their plans came into reality. As it turned out, none or only minor changes were made in participants’ Jewish practices. Those who were already involved in Jewish communal life before the Taglit said that they continue those practices without any change. It was only Zoé who mentioned that the trip strengthened her motivation to be active in the community. Concerning others, only Anna and Hanna can be considered as ‘success stories’ according to the Taglit objectives: both of them showed a great motivation to be active in the Jewish cultural and communal life. Hanna said that she regularly meets her Jewish friends from Taglit and visits events organized by Jewish institutions. In turn, Anna expressed a great desire to grab every opportunity to return to Israel: in February, she spent three weeks in the Israeli Defence Forces as a volunteer, and she also joined a Hungarian program which ends with a one-week volunteering in the Jewish State. Besides these two girls,

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<sup>134</sup> The mádrich training is a one-year program through which participants are trained to become Taglit group leaders. The training requires participation in weekly sessions, and involves various elements such as lectures about Jewish culture, religion and Israel, or community-building techniques.



however, no Taglit alumni got actively involved in the Jewish communal life. The plans mentioned during the first interviews were generally not implemented: neither Ivett, nor Gábor managed to get to Israel, nobody started the mádrich training or any other program that requires greater commitment. In some cases, these programs were started but given up after a couple of weeks. Participants also did not start to follow the Jewish traditions. In some cases the Taglit group participated together in an organized Shabbat evening, celebrated Hanuka or other Jewish holidays, but no participants started to celebrate the holidays consistently or expressed a desire to do so. Similarly, none of the interviewees moved to a more religious direction; on the contrary, Taglit alumni emphasized that they could never become religious, and if they celebrate a Jewish holiday they do so because of the cultural, not the religious aspects. To conclude, although one of the main aims of Taglit is to “strengthen Jewish communities” and foster participants to “take active roles in Jewish organizations and participate in follow-up activities” after their return, it seems that in case of Hungarian Jews these goals were not reached.<sup>135</sup>

The communities that were formed during the trip in Israel also weakened over time. Right after return, most participants reported a great desire to keep the group together, and mentioned that meetings are regularly organized. After half year, however, participants said that their groups began to break up. As time passes by, less and less meetings are organized, and less and less people participates in them. Online contacts are also difficult to maintain, and although each Taglit group had their own Facebook groups, they also turned to be inactive. Only some interviewees mentioned that they made a couple of closer friends during the trip with whom they still maintain ties.

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<sup>135</sup> “Birthright Israel.”

### 6.4.2. Explaining the ‘paradox of engagement’

In the interviews, participants provided simple and congruent reasons for why they did not get more involved in Jewish organizations: after coming home from Israel, they had to return to their everyday routines, and did not have time and energy for other causes. Almost every interviewee emphasized that although they would like to be more active in the Jewish community, they simply have other priorities: jobs, university studies, sports activities, and group of friends. These everyday activities are generally not connected to Jewish issues, therefore they supersede them; and it seems that Taglit is not powerful enough to convince participants to spare extra time and energy besides their everyday duties to Jewish programs.

It is an inner battle in me, what to do with this. Because this tie is not strong enough to be built just by itself. It should be a conscious decision if I want to do this, that I want to deal with this. And the truth is that it was pushed into the background because life goes on. I have to graduate by the way, apply for master studies, I have two jobs... life simply happens. And if there is no push, no background, then this carriage won't roll by itself. It would be a lot of energy and time to maintain it. (Petra)

Everyone went back to their everyday lives; some people started to go to a university or started a job. So these everyday duties somehow repress these [Jewish] things. (Kristóf)

Simply the fact is that I have relatively little free time, and I already have a big group of friends, so I don't have the time. It was a great group and we really had a great time in Israel, but everyone has his own friends and therefore it is more difficult to meet. (Domi)

Another reason for not being active in the Jewish communal life and not following the Jewish traditions is the lack of commitment: some participants said that the ten days in Israel simply did not make them “Jewish enough” to fit into the Jewish community. Institutional involvement would require such a big transformation that most Taglit alumni do not feel ready to comply with:

Once – this is an interesting thing – I went to the event of the local Jewish society and enthusiastically registered, that okay, now I’m going to be a Jew. But somehow I felt that damn, no. I don’t know anything about it, and I feel that it is... I’m not saying it’s too late, but I would have to start learning it from the very beginning. And that was somehow too much. [...] When I went there, I felt that oh my god, I’m such an alien here. (Petra)

I agree with Pokorná who argued that although the trip leaves a lasting imprint in participant’s lives, “it cannot make up for the discontinuities in the passing down of Jewish tradition that left them without meaningful frames for maintaining the Jewish identity.”<sup>136</sup> Although during Taglit participants get a tremendous amount of new information about Jewish religion, culture and traditions, without the support of family and friends, they are not likely to actually follow them. Similarly, without a strong background, it is unlikely that a young Jew commits himself to a Jewish organization. Therefore, the ‘paradox of engagement’ is the result of the fact that in most cases, Hungarian participants do not have an extensive Jewish network in their life, and it seems that the Taglit trip in itself is unable to create those networks that would foster involvement. In spite of the efforts to keep the Taglit group together, most alumni soon loose contact with each other, and only those stay more connected who managed to build close friendships during the trip. Therefore, it is a finding of this research that concerning involvement, it is crucial whether participants have a person or persons to get involved with. Taglit alumni are more likely to join an organization or participate in an event if they have friends or acquaintances there. Vanda for example built a friendship on the trip with a religious girl, and asked her to visit a synagogue together a couple of times to see how ceremonies look like. Similarly, Áron started to get increasingly involved in the life of a Reform community because of his girlfriend. Others considered applying to the mádrich training or a volunteer program together with their friends, and gave the plans up after the friends did not go. Those participants who stayed closer to their Taglit group were also more

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<sup>136</sup> Pokorná, “Is the Taglit Experience Something to Talk Of?,” 13.

likely to organize Jewish events for themselves, such as occasional Shabbat evenings, a Hanuka dinner or movie nights. Even Petra and Kriszta, who confessed that they marginalized Jewish issues in their lives, emphasized that it might happen that they meet someone in the future who makes them involved. Jewish friends and networks, therefore, seem to be crucial to communal involvement.

### **6.4.3. Openness to Jewish issues**

Even if Taglit alumni did not actively engage in Jewish communal life after the trip, they generally showed a heightened interest towards anything that is Jewish: organizations, cultural events or Israeli opportunities. I argue that it is a significant impact of Taglit that it informs participants about these programs and creates openness towards them. Even if Taglit alumni do not have time and energy to be actively engaged, they always have the opportunities back in their mind and consider them when thinking about their future. Also, they pay much more attention when encountering a Jewish event or news concerning Jewish issues:

Maybe I pay a bit more attention to cultural issues. I gained a lot of new friends on Facebook, I see the events and related articles, and I pay more attention to these things. I'm not saying I'll go to every event, but I'm more interested in them than before. (Flóra)

If there is a Jewish event, or a festival, maybe I pay more attention, it grabs my attention, that it's a great thing. (Andris)

Maybe if there are Jewish events, a performance or something, I'm not automatically flipping it through but I properly read it, and if I'm interested then I go. It brought me a bit closer, but not too close. (Domi)

Similarly, Taglit alumni showed a heightened interest towards Israel and Israeli opportunities. Being young intellectuals with cosmopolitan attitudes, the participants of this study represent a social group that generally considers going abroad to study or work. Almost every interviewee mentioned that they informed about their opportunities and seriously consider going to Israel for a shorter period to do an exchange program or an internship. Also, almost everyone expressed a desire to return to Israel for holiday. To conclude, these findings are consistent with the Hungarian focus group research that pointed out that Taglit alumni generally show greater interest towards Jewish topics and keep Israel among their future plans.<sup>137</sup>

#### **6.4.4. Symbolic ethnicity**

In his influential theory in the 1970s, Gans argued that third and fourth generation ethnics in America find new ways to express their ethnic identity: instead of institutional involvement and following traditions, they choose symbolic forms of expression.<sup>138</sup> Being largely acculturated and assimilated into the majority society, youths look for relatively effortless ways of maintaining their ethnic identities, such as consuming ‘ethnic’ food or films, or nurturing symbolic ties with their ‘homeland’. The present research revealed that symbolic forms of ethnicity are especially salient in case of young Hungarian Jews. As elaborated in the previous section, interviewees rejected to participate in organizations and programs that required significant time and energy; however, they were more open to occasional, ‘symbolic’ Jewish events, such as Jewish concerts, films, or informal gatherings. The connection to

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<sup>137</sup> Kovács, “Taglit-Birthright Israel Program.”

<sup>138</sup> Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity.”

Jewishness through food culture and the Middle-Eastern cuisine was also often mentioned. The most remarkable form of symbolic ethnicity, however, was the wearing of jewellery. Interestingly, the majority of the female interviewees had a piece of jewellery with Jewish symbols on them. The two more affiliated girls, Noémi and Zoé had their own necklaces even prior the trip, but in case of Anna, Eszter, Kriszta, Hanna, Zsuzsi and Ivett wearing a Jewish necklace or bracelet was the direct impact of the trip: they usually bought a piece of jewel in Israel, and started to wear it upon their return. When asked about it, most participants said that they wear the necklace every day, and they named various reasons why they considered their jewellery important. For Ivett, the necklace helped to accept and embrace “who she is”; for Kriszta, it was a means to provoke her environment and start discussions about the topic; while others mentioned that they wear the necklace because it carries good memories and energies.

Well, this is a memory, a sort of connection, because I did not have this Jewish identity before, but it gradually unfolds in me as I participate in more and more programs. I did not wear it often during the summer, because I was afraid it might go bust, I have been in water and the like... But there were times when I wished it was there, so that I could have touched it and it could have given me some energy or protected me. [...] Somehow it makes me feel safe. (Hanna)

I like this Hamsa symbol very much. I think because I am not religious, I did not want the Star of David. You know why I did not want the map of Israel. It was just too much. But this is middle ground. This reminds me who my grandfather was, makes me remember that this is part of my life, and protects me. It's so nice. How do we call this? It's a mascot.” (Eszter)

Similarly to Eszter, almost all the girls bought a Hamsa medallion, only Kriszta and Zoé chose to wear the Star of David. The reason is that the Star of David is the strongest Jewish symbol, standing for the entire Jewish nation and the Jewish religion at the same time. Participants, however, did not have a strengthened religious affiliation after the trip; therefore the Star of David would not be an appropriate symbol to express their Jewish identification. Also, considering the antisemitic atmosphere in Hungary, wearing a necklace and openly

displaying one's Jewishness can be considered as a risky act. Girls chose to wear the Hamsa as they considered it to be a 'safe' symbol: it became rather popular in the last years, appearing on T-shirts and trinkets, and therefore it is not exclusively 'Jewish'. Wearing the Hamsa therefore is an option for Taglit alumni to show that they are Jewish without risking confrontation.

I was thinking about this, that it is quite risky to wear a Star of David. So a Haim, for example, was good because those who know what it means understood it, because they were Jewish, but for others it was rather meaningless. However, the Star of David is an obvious, internationally known symbol. It makes you a bigger target... I'm thinking about this, probably I won't wear it forever, to be honest. (Zoé)

I have a lot of jewelleries, you know, heritage and gifts, but I don't dare to wear them. So I don't wear it every day. If I go to a certain place or community, then I put it on. But not on the street. (Noémi)

To conclude, symbolic forms of ethnicity strongly appear in case of Taglit alumni: instead of getting involved in organizations that would require a lot of time and energy, participants choose relatively effortless ways to express their Jewish identification: cultural events, online activities, food, and jewelleries. Although in many respects these young Hungarian Jews are similar to the third and fourth generation ethnics of America, I argue that the 'symbolic ethnicity' of the two groups is fundamentally different. While Gans calls the symbolic ethnicity in America "an ethnicity of last resort", in case of Hungarian Jews symbolic ethnicity might be 'the first resort', the first step in returning to Jewish life and traditions.<sup>139</sup> I argue that symbolic ethnicity here fits into a larger trend of 'return' and heightened openness towards Jewish issues. As elaborated in the next section, Taglit alumni also often express a desire to get closer to their Jewishness and lead a Jewish life in the future.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 112.

#### 6.4.5. Marriage and family

As the Taglit program itself grew out of the concern of intermarriages, it remains a question whether the trip is successful in motivating participants to choose a Jewish partner and lead a Jewish family life. In the present research, participants were also asked about how important they consider to have a Jewish partner and how much emphasis they would put on Jewish issues in their future families. As expected, interviewees unanimously said that having a Jewish partner is not a criterion for them. Many of them expressed highly liberal views and said they do not want to limit their partner choice in any way. Even the more religious Noémi and Áron would accept a non-Jewish partner (and both of them actually have a non-Jewish partner at present). It is a surprising finding of this research, however, that although Taglit alumni do not consider Jewishness as a criterion, they would *prefer* to have a Jewish partner. It was emphasized that the Jewish origin would be an “extra bond” between the partners, and they could better express their “Jewish self” next to a Jewish person. Nonetheless, interviewees mentioned that it is not “very likely” that they find a Jewish partner: as they are not involved in Jewish communal life and often do not know who is Jewish in their environment, they have a higher chance to meet and fall in love with someone non-Jewish. It was often emphasized, however, that this non-Jewish partner needs to be open and tolerant – and should be devoid of any antisemitic attitudes. These findings contradict to the results of North American impact assessments that found that Taglit has a robust impact on participants’ willingness to have a Jewish partner.<sup>140</sup> An explanation for this difference might be that North American participants have a much stronger Jewish background and a more extensive organizational network system than Hungarians. As Hungarians usually do not

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<sup>140</sup> Saxe et al., “Intermarriage”; Saxe et al., “Jewish Futures Project. The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: Marriage and Family.”



consider their Jewish origin to be central in their lives, they do not see the difference between having a Jewish or a non-Jewish partner.

Considering family plans, the research revealed that young Taglit alumni are much more ready than their parents' generation to integrate Jewishness into their family life. As it was emphasized in Chapter three, the memories of persecution motivated several families in the last decades to deliberately conceal their Jewish origins. A significant proportion of Hungarian Jewish parents decided not to tell their children that they are Jews in order to protect them.<sup>141</sup> On the contrary, when the participants of this research were asked whether they want their children to know that they are Jewish, they immediately gave a positive answer, that "obviously", "naturally" and "definitely" they want to talk about their origins to their kids. Concerning Jewish family life, however, most interviewees said they could not really teach the Jewish traditions as they themselves are not aware of them. Some participants expressed a desire to learn more about Judaism until they start a family, and give their children the background they did not have in their childhood:

I want them to follow the traditions to some extent. I try to learn more about this until I get there. (Hanna)

I want my kids to get what I did not get. (Gábor)

Most participants expressed liberal views concerning child raising and said that they only want their children to be aware of the Jewish culture, but they would let them decide what they want to do with the information. They would support their children if they want to follow the traditions, but they do not want to force it on them. Eszter and Ivett went even further when saying that they actually want to teach their children about all religions and cultures to create a tolerant and open worldview in them. Ivett also said that she would get her child baptised because she considers the mixing of different cultures beneficial. Among the

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<sup>141</sup> Kovács, "Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary."

interviewees, it was only Domi who echoed the concerns of the former generations and said that he would rather hide the Jewish roots of the family:

Actually this sounds terrible, but... if I had a religious partner, it would be better if she would be Christian, not Jewish. Because for me it is important to keep my family safe, and I would feel that they are more at risk... It would be puzzling to know that there is a lot of antisemitism in the world, and we would live with crosshairs on our heads. I wouldn't want that. (Domi)

To conclude, in spite of the concerns of Domi, it seems that contrary to their parents' generation, most participants want to be open about their Jewish origins at home, teach their children about Jewishness and possibly motivate them to follow the Jewish traditions. It is a question whether these attitudes are the consequences of Taglit, or the general liberal and multicultural atmosphere of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also, it is obvious that only time can tell whether these plans came into reality. Still, these findings support former observations that there is a trend to 'return' to the traditions and Jewish life among young Hungarian Jews.<sup>142</sup>

## **6.5. Connection to Israel**

### **6.5.1. Attitudes towards Israel**

As mentioned earlier, participants evaluated the trip highly positively, and they talked about Israel with similar enthusiasm. Every interviewee had extremely positive attitudes towards the Jewish State and reported an intense passion for the country even after six months. First, the beauties of Israel were often emphasized: the diverse nature, the sea and especially, the desert

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<sup>142</sup> Kovács, "Zsidó Csoportok."

amazed participants. Second, interviewees repeatedly expressed that they loved the general atmosphere of the country. Israeli people were depicted as very open and helpful, being optimistic and strongly keeping together. In spite of its location, the country was perceived as ‘European’ and democratic.

As a consequence of Taglit, Israel became a central element of participants’ Jewish identification. Several interviewees mentioned that the trip brought them closer to Israel, and ‘being Jewish’ now also means being connected to the Jewish state:

I definitely feel Israel and the Jewish culture closer to me. There is a place where I belong. Until that I was not connected, I’m not religious, so I was not interested in these issues... now that it turned out that I’m a Jew, it started to mean something to me. There is a certain belonging, a connection between the history, my grandmother, Israel, and with a lot of other people who turned out to be Jews. It means a certain belonging to me. (Hanna)

How to say... I feel that the issues of the State of Israel and its people are also my issues, I’m closer to it. I don’t believe that the country perceives that I belong there, but I’m much more supportive to it now that I know about its background. (Kristóf)

Also because I made friendships with Israelis, I feel much more connected to the country, it has grown to my heart, so to say. If I read an article about what happened in Israel, it touches me much more, I read it more carefully. So far, I had nothing to do with it. (Péter)

Also, some participants accepted the homeland narrative and said that Israel is a place where they felt home and where they are always warmly welcome. The country was also seen as an ancient homeland to which participants have ‘primordial’ ties:

It was a great feeling that there is a country where I came from, even if only from one side. It was tangible, not only seen through touristic magazines or pictures about the war. It was good, that there is a tangible point from where I came from. (Anna)

For me it’s inconceivable to imagine that once Israel did not exist. That there is no Israel, no cradle, no starting point, which is always an option, which is always somehow yours. That somehow you have a navel cord to there. (Zoé)

It's so interesting that there is a little country where I feel so much like home. If I go abroad, I never feel at home. Sometimes not even in Hungary. But there immediately as I got off the plane, I felt like home. It was very strange. But maybe it was just because of the palm trees. (Ivett)

Connections to Israel were further built by the *mifgash*, the encounter with Israeli peers; although it seems that for most participants it was not a central element of their Taglit experience. There were only some participants who spent more time with the soldiers and managed to build friendships with them, while others said that they did not really talk to the Israelis. The reason is that the soldiers have limited opportunity to closely get to know every group member, and usually soon they choose a couple of friends whom they spend most of their time with. Also, even the strongest connections proved to be temporary as during the second interviews, most participants said that they are not in touch with the soldiers. Still, it was a general opinion that soldiers brought Israel closer to participants by telling personal stories and showing the 'real face' of Israel. Sometimes Israelis and Hungarians entered into deep discussions about each other's lives, and in some cases, love relationships were also formed. The *mifgash*, however, in some cases also distanced participants from Israel and Israeli life. When asked about what they remember about the soldiers, most interviewees mentioned shocking stories about combat situations and personal losses of their Israeli peers. Soldiers were generally depicted as brave, responsible and mature, however, their strong militarism and nationalism was also seen as excessive:

It was weird that they had such a strong national consciousness. For example one evening we played and drew in the sand. And every one of them drew and Israeli flag independently from each other, while we drew a little sun or stars or anything. They have such a strong national consciousness. Also if we would say anything bad about Israel... or something like, "Hungary is so beautiful", than they would immediately respond, "but Israel is more beautiful". It's somehow encoded in them. (Ivett)

But the Israelis are... somehow too Jewish. I think nationalism is just too strong in them. They build their whole life around this. Everyone takes it

normal that they go to the army, fight, go to the battlefield, just because they are Israelis, and long live Israel... For me it's a bit too much. (Gábor)

Participants regularly compared themselves to the Israelis, and also Hungary to Israel. A recurring narrative was to frame Israeli youths as responsible adults dealing with serious problems, while young people in Hungary are complaining over every minor grievance. Participants often felt ashamed that their problems are so insignificant, and imagined how they would perform in the place of their Israeli peers:

The military cemetery was quite shocking, because there was this big war last year, and you feel it so close to you if you think about what was your biggest problem last year, going to a summer festival or not... And there was a big war, and 18-25 year old soldiers were fighting, exactly your age... (Anna)

I felt so badly, that we in Europe struggle with various problems, but what are those if you compare them [to Israel], where in order to exist as a country, your closest friends need to die daily on the battlefield at the age of twenty. (Kriszta)

Hungary was also regularly compared to Israel, and it was always the latter that was evaluated more positively. Hungarian Taglit participants represent a social group that tends to be critical towards the contemporary political leadership of the country: it was often stated that Israel is much more democratic, open, and tolerant than Hungary. Also, young Hungarian intellectuals often perceive that they have limited career opportunities at home, while in Israel they experienced better life standards and economic prospects. Obviously, the Jewish State is also a place where young Jews do not have to face antisemitism. Interviewees also often cited the well-known stereotypes of Hungarians, that the nation is generally pessimistic, depressed, and stressed, while Israelis seemed to be happier, helpful, and generally satisfied with their lives – even in spite of the war situation they live in.

To conclude, the aim of Taglit to strengthen participants' connection to Israel was achieved as Hungarian interviewees consistently reported that Israel made a highly positive

impression on them and now they feel closer to the country and its citizens. This is consistent with the results of other impact assessments that found the same in case of North American participants.<sup>143</sup> I argue that feeling connected to Israel became a central element of Hungarians' Jewish identification after the trip, which is a serious and direct impact of Taglit. However, participants did not really manage to build long-lasting connections with their Israeli peers; therefore this goal of Taglit was not achieved. Youths regularly compared Israel to Hungary, and generally felt that the former is better in many respects; however, as it will be seen, they never forgot about the conflict between Israel and the Arab population, and their opinion about the tension was a significant element of how they evaluate the country.

### **6.5.2. Perceptions of the Israeli-Arab conflict**

The Israeli-Arab conflict is the primary lens through which Taglit participants see Israel; it was often mentioned that prior to their trip, interviewees have only known the country for its wars. Participants also mentioned that whenever they told others that they were in Israel, the first reaction was always shock that they dared to visit a “war zone”. Young Jews themselves were aware of the fact that they visit a country full of tensions: they were constantly accompanied by an armed medic, and the presence of soldiers and their stories made participants remember that they are in a country that is practically always at war. In spite of this, interviewees reported that they felt fully safe in Israel, and the country is much more peaceful than it is depicted by the media. The average citizens – be they Jews or Arabs – live in peace next to each other, and people are calm and happy in spite of the political tensions.

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<sup>143</sup> Saxe, Sasson, and Hecht, “Taglit-Birthright Israel: Impact on Jewish Identity, Peoplehood, and Connection to Israel.”

Signifiers of violence, such as tanks, military aircrafts and armed soldiers on the streets were also rather seen as guarantees of peace than terrifying:

What I really liked is that this country is prepared for everything. I really liked this military preparedness, that if something happens, there is an immediate reaction, everything is recognized and looked through. While others were afraid that oh my god, there are so many soldiers, for me it gave a sense of security, because in Hungary public safety is really shit... You are killed thrice until the police arrive. (Vanda)

Participants also relativized the threat in Israel by comparing it to the poor security in Hungary and Europe in general. Especially the terrorist attack of Paris in 2015 November was mentioned as proof that “such attacks can happen everywhere” and therefore the case of Israel is not so outstanding. Together, the picture that developed in participants about Israel was rather dichotomous: the country was both seen as a beautiful, ‘European’ homeland with fantastic opportunities, and a distant, ‘Middle-Eastern’, dangerous place. With the words of Ádám, “it is like Hawaii under bombing”.

During the interviews, participants were also asked about how they perceive the Israeli-Arab conflict. Generally, it can be said that young Jews were rather insecure to openly formulate their own opinion, and often tried to give politically correct answers without judging any of the parties involved. Clear criticism towards Israel was very rarely formulated, while participants often echoed the narratives they heard during the trip which depicted the Israeli side in more positive light. Several participants remembered stories about how fairly Israel treats the Arab population of the country, and claimed that Israel is humane to its enemies even at the times of war. Israel was perceived as a democratic country where Jews and Arabs are equal, and where Arabs are accepted and free to live their lives:

For me it was quite convincing what I heard during Taglit, that Israel basically treats Arab citizens equally. This is also my impression based on what I’ve seen. (Áron)

Interestingly, Israelis do not talk badly about Palestinians. At least not officially. It's rather the other way around. (Gábor)

Generally, Arabs were seen as aggressors while Israel was a defender. Some participants said the main reason for the war is that the Arabs are “jihadists” and “extremists”, and therefore they can not accept a Jewish country in their neighbourhood. Even if participants emphasized that they do not want to be prejudiced towards the Arab population, they mentioned moments from the trip when they perceived the Palestinians as frightening. Ádám mentioned that it was a bit scary when they heard the sound of a shofar at the Western Wall, because it sounded like a battle cry; Kristóf said that they saw Arab parties in Tel Aviv that seemed a bit “dangerous”. Péter explained that after hearing about the series of stabbings in Jerusalem, he started to be afraid of the Arabs in London, where he studied:

At that time in Israel these stabbings started, and there were some terror attacks. And I started to realize that if I encountered an Arab person on the street, I felt a certain antipathy. [...] You thought about it, when you saw them coming towards you, that maybe they are the ones who are causing the big problems for the Israelis. (Péter)

Only some interviewees articulated clear criticism towards Israel and its politics. Generally, criticism was expressed during the second interview, and was the direct result of certain ‘eye-opening’ events that took place after the Taglit. Eszter, for example, criticised Israel strongly after entering into a relationship with a Palestinian boy in Budapest; while Petra learned about the conflict during her studies in Islamic art. Both interviewees expressed that they realized that Taglit only showed “one side of the debate”, and now they are more critical and condemnatory towards Israel:

I think this and also the time helped this pink mist of how cool Taglit was to disappear. I still feel that I'd like to go back, nurture my relationships, but I think I'm more critical towards this whole thing, and less understanding and tolerant. (Petra)



I have ambiguous feelings, to tell the truth. It was great, Israel is beautiful, I love it, I could go back anytime for a holiday, but I wouldn't live there. I'm sure of that. I think it's a shame what the Jews are doing, but I can also understand it. [...] Because actually, if you think about it, we do the same with Palestinians as what happened to Jews in Europe. (Eszter)

Generally all participants agreed that there are “two sides of the debate”, “both parties are right to some extent” and “there is hatred on both sides”. Several interviewees were reluctant to formulate a more elaborate thought on the conflict: they said that they do not have enough information and knowledge to have an opinion. Even if participants had the opportunity to learn about the conflict more in-depth, they said they do not know what to think as they realized that the issue is too complex. Participants differed in how much they accepted the narratives of their tour guides: generally, they agreed that they were provided a balanced picture, but some interviewees complained that they did not get enough information about the conflict during the trip. Some participants also emphasized that they perceived the narratives of Imre – the more radical tour guide – too extreme, and were rather critical towards it.

To conclude, although participants learn about the Israeli-Arab conflict during the trip, they are rather hesitant to formulate their own opinion concerning the situation. This is similar to the findings of Sasson et al. who found the same in case of North American participants.<sup>144</sup> It is not clear why Taglit alumni are reluctant to take sides in the issue. On the one hand, it seems that participants perceive the complexity of the conflict and feel that they do not have enough information to formulate an opinion; also, often they are aware that they only heard one side of the debate, therefore it would not be appropriate to decide in the question. On the other hand, however, it is also possible that interviewees did not dare to talk about such sensitive topics during our discussion, being afraid that they will meet dissent. It seems, therefore, that the aim of Taglit to mobilize participants to support Israel in the conflict is not fully successful. Still, this research is consistent with the findings of Kelner who pointed out

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<sup>144</sup> Sasson et al., “Does Taglit-Birthright Israel Foster Long-Distance Nationalism?”

that after Birthright, participants tend to identify with the Israeli side, and only criticize Israel if they have the opportunity to learn about the Palestinian side of the debate more in-depth.<sup>145</sup>

### 6.5.3. Israel in participants' everyday lives

In spite of the heightened emotions and positive feelings that participants have shown towards Israel, most interviewees did not express interest in actively following the news of the country. Most participants said that they sometimes see articles on their Facebook, or on Hungarian news portals, and now they are more likely to click on them than before Taglit. Due to this limited news consumption, however, what participants heard about Israel in the last months was mainly about war, terrorist attacks, and stabbing; it seems, therefore, that Taglit alumni tend to encounter Israel in the news the same way as they did before the trip.

Being aware of the conflict situation in the country, participants are rather hesitant when thinking about what role Israel should play in their futures. Although interviewees expressed a great motivation to go to Israel temporarily to study or work, they generally felt that they could not settle in Israel permanently. Some participants said that they simply do not want to leave Hungary, or already have plans to move to another European country; it was also a recurring narrative, however, that although it would be great to move to Israel, the war situation and the military duty are deterrent. As a consequence, Israel remains a “plan B” for participants, a place to go to if Hungary must be left behind:

If it wouldn't be a war zone, I would move there tomorrow. But if Jobbik wins the elections, I'll go there immediately. I said it, if Jobbik comes to power, I go there, I don't care. I won't even wait for my graduation. Because I don't

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<sup>145</sup> Kelner, *Tours That Bind*, 51.

want to live in a country where everyone wants to see me in a concentration camp. I'm exaggerating, but you now what I mean. (Anna)

Definitely it's a good feeling that if there's any trouble, that country accepts me without a problem. I only need to say that I want to move, and they help me to integrate, they are very open. Still, I don't only look at it as a plan X, going there if all else fails. I'm more and more thinking about having Israel in my future. (Ádám)

What's interesting is that I have this positive feeling, that Israel is there, and I could go there anytime if I wished it. I don't want to go, maybe I can't, but still it is good that [...] there is an extra country which could be my home if I wished it. This gives me stability. (Domi)

First, the lack of job opportunities and economic prosperity were mentioned as motives to move; in this respect, participants are conscious youths who plan their future career. Second, the deterioration of the political situation and the rise of the far-right in Hungary were also mentioned as significant factors in moving to Israel. This proves that participants are concerned about the antisemitic discourses of Hungary and perceive Israel as a safe haven where they could be Jews without being threatened. The existence of Israel and the opportunity to make aliyah were therefore generally seen as providing security and stability.

## **6.6. Creating diaspora**

Based on the results of this research, I argue that Taglit-Birthright Israel has a diaspora-creating effect in case of the Hungarian Jews. As explained in the theoretical chapter of this thesis, Brubaker argues that the term 'diaspora' has proliferated and there are several phenomena that we are ready to call diasporic; however, three core elements - dispersion in space, orientation to a real or imagined homeland, and boundary-maintenance - remain widely

understood as diaspora constituents.<sup>146</sup> Similarly to former researches, this thesis revealed that the ‘typical’ young Hungarian Jews can not be considered as part of the Brubakerian concept of the Jewish diaspora. Their ancestors might have “dispersed in space”, but they lack the connections to the land of Israel and do not define themselves as different from the Hungarian majority society. They take it for granted that Hungary is their home country, and their Jewishness is not central in their self-identification.

I argue, however, that the ten days of Taglit-Birthright Israel radically change these dispositions. After the trip, participants tend to accept Israel as their homeland, and their connection to that homeland appears as a significant element of their Jewish identification. Also, while making the Jewish identity of participants more salient and meaningful, the trip also contributes to a sort of boundary-making. Taglit alumni realize that due to their Jewishness, they are in some respects *different* from the non-Jewish society, and this difference arises in several life situations. Also, by integrating Jewishness into their lives – either symbolic or more expressive ways – Taglit alumni also contribute to the boundary-maintenance between non-Jews and themselves. To conclude, by being oriented towards Israel and creating boundaries between non-Jews and themselves, Taglit alumni start to fit the diaspora concept of Brubaker. Still, as it appears in the ‘diasporic transnationalism’ concept of Tölölyan, Israel does not become central for young Hungarian Jews: they keep considering Hungary as their homeland, while Israel remains only a ‘second home’, an ‘option B’ for them.<sup>147</sup> Although they think and care about Israel, they do not show a permanent interest towards it, and their real duties and obligations remain to tie them to Hungary. Also, considering their activities, Taglit alumni do not become real ‘transnationals’ after the trip. Even if they occasionally return to Israel for holiday, study, or work, or show interest in learning Hebrew, they remain primarily rooted in Hungary. Therefore, even after the trip,

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<sup>146</sup> Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ Diaspora.”

<sup>147</sup> Tölölyan, “Beyond the Homeland.”

Hungarian Jews remain in the ‘localized diasporic transnational formation’ category of Dahinden, as the degree of their local ties in Hungary are high, while their physical mobility to Israel remains low.<sup>148</sup>

These examples show that Taglit is not capable of making a 180 degree turn in the lives of its participants; it only orients them towards a transnational diasporic existence. Obviously, some participants are more impacted by Taglit-Birthright Israel while others do not show any changes; also, it remains a question how persistent the program’s impact remains, and whether these effects prove to be long-lasting. It seems, however, that with minor steps, Taglit indeed contributes to the recreation of the Hungarian Jewish diaspora.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how the largest birthright journey in the world, Taglit-Birthright Israel impacts its Hungarian participants. Although former impact assessments among North American Taglit participants found that the trip achieves its aims highly successfully, it remained a question how Taglit impacts other nationals who have a different Jewish background and family history. I also argued that young Hungarian Jews form an especially interesting case for investigation as they lack any meaningful connections to their Jewish origins and being a Jew is rather insignificant in their life. If the three criteria of Brubaker are used to define what diaspora is – dispersion in space, orientation to a homeland and boundary-maintenance – I argued that the Hungarian Jewry does not belong to the Jewish diaspora. Furthermore, the Hungarian Jewry is special as it is characterized by a stigmatized identification, and Hungarian Jews tend to consciously repress and conceal their

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<sup>148</sup> Dahinden, “The Dynamics of Migrants’ Transnational Formations: Between Mobility and Locality.”

Jewish origins. Therefore, a main question of the thesis was how Taglit impacts this highly insignificant and often negative identity of third generation Jews, and whether the trip is capable to ‘re-create’ the Hungarian Jewish diaspora by reconnecting youths to their roots and Israel.

The research found that Taglit-Birthright Israel makes a less visible, but significant impact on Hungarian participants. Although young Jews are diverse in their background, dispositions, and opinions, the ten days of Israel were unanimously considered as a great experience, and no one remained untouched. During and after the trip, the Jewish identification, practices, and participants’ relation to Israel went through a transformation, and this impact seemed to be lasting even after six months.

First, the journey in Israel made a strong impact on how participants relate to their own Jewishness, and what meanings they connect to it. Generally the trip brought the topic of Judaism and Jewishness much closer to participants, and filled their empty category of being a Jew with positive content. After the trip, participants were more proud of who they are, and found more and more situations where their Jewishness emerged and appeared significant. Also, the stigmatized identity of young Jews went through a transformation: after the fantastic experiences in Israel, they were more ready to embrace their origins and be more open about it to their environment. Taglit alumni even dared to confront and enter into debates about the Jewry and Israel, trying to convince their environment to be more tolerant.

Second, similarly to other surveys measuring the impact of Taglit, this research revealed that the changes in Jewish identification after the trip do not lead to the same amount of change in Jewish practices. After their return, participants did not make any significant changes in how they live their life: they did not get involved in Jewish communities, did not start to follow Jewish traditions, and after a while, they also lost contact with their Taglit group. The research discovered that the reasons for this ‘paradox of engagement’ are that

participants need to return to their – largely non-Jewish – everyday life: to their jobs, studies, and group of friends. It seems that the experiences in Israel are not motivating enough to spare extra time and energies for Jewish causes, and they are also unable to create the supportive Jewish networks that would foster involvement. However, Taglit-Birthright Israel is not completely ineffective concerning the Jewish practices of participants, as it fosters Taglit alumni to adapt symbolic forms of ethnicity to express their Jewishness. After the trip, young Hungarian Jews are more interested and open towards Jewish issues, and they tend to engage in minor activities, such as participating in cultural events, consuming Jewish food or wearing Jewish symbols. It also seems that Taglit alumni want their Jewishness somehow to appear in their future: unlike the generation of their parents, they want their children to know about their origins and learn about the Jewish traditions.

Third, Taglit also made a robust impact on how participants relate to Israel. The trip generally brought everyone closer to the country, and the connections to the Jewish state became a significant part of the Jewish identification of Hungarian Jews. They tended to see Israel in a very positive light, as a beautiful country with nice and open people; and they accepted it as their homeland, a place to where they belong. The Jewish state was also seen as a surprisingly peaceful country in spite of its wars; however, participants never forgot about the constant tension between Israel and its neighbours, and they found this situation frightening and distancing. It remains rather unclear how the trip influenced participants' opinion about the Israeli-Arab conflict. It seems that the trip is successful in making participants accept the narratives that generally depict the Israeli side as positive; still, Taglit alumni are rather hesitant to articulate their own opinion in the question, and criticism towards Israeli actions is also not rare. Even if they perceived Israel as in many respects better than Hungary, participants did not consider moving to the country due to the constant threat

and political tension. Israel rather appeared for them as an “option B”, a place to go to when Hungary must be left behind for political or livelihood reasons.

Finally, the research revealed that by making participants’ Jewish identification more meaningful and by connecting them to Israel, Taglit has a diaspora-creating effect in case of Hungarian Jews. While before the trip, young Jews were not characterized by an orientation towards Israel and boundary-maintenance, these dispositions changed radically after their return. Participants realized that due to their Jewishness, they are in some respects *different* from the non-Jewish society, and this difference appeared in several life situations; also, by integrating Jewishness into their lives – either in symbolic or more expressive ways – Taglit alumni also contribute to the boundary-maintenance between non-Jews and themselves. Also, after Taglit, Israel came closer to the participants; they accepted it as their homeland, something that is a significant constituent of their Jewish self. Therefore, it is a finding of this research that even in case of a well-assimilated group, diasporic sentiments can be awakened through carefully structured narratives and experiences. Overall, it seems that Hungarian – and generally Central- and Eastern European - Taglit participants worth the investigation as their reaction to the trip is significantly different from North Americans.

Naturally, the ten days of Israel were not enough to make a 180 degree turn in the lives of participants. Even after the journey, young Hungarian Jews consider Hungary as their home, and continue to live a secular, assimilated Jewish life with only symbolic references to their origins. Only future researches can tell how persistent the impact of Taglit proves to be and what role Jewishness and Israel will play in the future life of Taglit alumni. Still, it is indubitable that Taglit-Birthright Israel oriented its participants towards a transnational diasporic existence, and helped them accept and embrace their Jewish ancestry.



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