National Coercion and Aversion:

Ethnographic Reflections on Ideological Socialization Within Birthright Israel

By

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Submitted to
Central European University
Nationalism Studies Program
Jewish Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Supervisor: Professor Jan Rybak

Vienna, Austria

2025

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For bibliographic and reference purposes, this thesis should be referred to as:

Phillips, P. X. (2025), *National Coercion and Aversion: Ethnographic Reflections on Ideological Socialization Within Birthright Israel*. MA thesis, Nationalism Studies Program, Central European University, Vienna.

ABSTRACT

The present thesis investigates the experiences of participants in Birthright Israel, with a focus on how they encounter and internalize thematic elements within the Zionist national habitus. Drawing on ethnographic interview data, the study analyzes how the structure and messaging of these trips function as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1970), revealing Zionist social paradigms. Birthright is framed as a site of affective nationalism (Antonsich, Skey, et al. 2020), where emotional and embodied experiences shape how Jewish individuals in the diaspora build attachments to the State of Israel (Hecht et al. 2006; Sasson et al. 2014; Saxe et al. 2009). Through exposure to the security apparatus, the promotion of Jewish endogamy, and narratives of national continuity, the trips deploy social mechanisms that align personal identity formation with national belonging. Ethnographic data also highlights participants' moments of dissonance and critique, revealing both the effectiveness and the limits of Zionist ideological interpellation. Ultimately, this research contributes to scholarship on diaspora politics, nation-building, and embodied nationalism by offering a grounded analysis of how ideological narratives are lived, negotiated, and sometimes resisted within highly curated experiential settings.

Keywords: diaspora, heritage tourism, interpellation, nationalism, pronatalism, Zionism

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Paolo Xela Phillips, candidate for the MA degree in Nationalism Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled "National Coercion and Aversion: Ethnographic Reflections on Ideological Socialization Within Birthright Israel" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 13 June 2025

Paolo Xela Phillips

Acknowledgments

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without my advisor, Dr. Jan Rybak. More than your guidance and support, your enthusiastic commitment to academic inquiry—your own as well as that of your colleagues and students—is an invaluable gift that is rarer than I'd like to admit. Thank you for the careful attention you offered to my work before I could even make sense of it myself.

To my friends made in Nationalism Studies, in no particular order: Gentian Doçi, Cory Dudka, Abijah Ahern, Pearl Bianco, Edina Zelenyánszky, Ülkü Kaygısız, Isaja Karadakovska, Nazerke Kanatbekova, and Deven Toothman, thank you for making this corner of the academic world feel like where I'm meant to be. To Tyler Stephens, Alex Duni, and Viswesh Rammohan: our friendships have been a revelation, a comfort, and a more than welcome respite from hair-raising university politics (to be met with praxis and many, many laughs.)

I also want to extend appreciation to my beloveds at home in the South. Rachel, my greatest joy has been raising one another into adults; I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you for being my constant companion and believing in me enough for both of us. You know the sentiment is mutual. Pablo, my little brother, I've borrowed some words from you: "I have always strongly sensed you were like a lightning bolt contained in a body led by a force stranger and taller than fate […] if my life has a story that should be most beautiful, yours must be attached." We will keep writing until the words run into each other.

Most importantly, thank you to my mother—for everything—for raising me with your convictions and your ingenuity. I simply would never have tried to be anything at all if I couldn't make you proud. Thank you to my grandparents, Poppi and Mo, for your support, and for being whip-smart and eternally savvier than any of the kids.

Finally, thank you to Favoriten; let a hundred flowers bloom!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Shaul Kelner, widely recognized as a leading specialist in the sociology of American Jews, has written extensively on the topic of Birthright Israel and its significance in the formation of Jewish identity and relations in the contemporary era. In much the same way that some scholars describe world Jewry as the exemplary case of a diaspora people (Cohen, 2008), Kelner (2010) interrogates Birthright Israel as the preeminent case of birthright tourism. The strength of Kelner's work is in his analytical and empirical reach; rather than a pure focus on the impacts of Birthright on individuals' Jewish identity and claims of national belonging, Kelner interrogates the systemic efforts made by trip organizers to convey site-specific messages about Israel by thematizing the program's itinerary for a non-Israeli audience. As of 2001, the Birthright Foundation's Educational Standard outlined that: "In developing their programs, Trip Organizers are encouraged to use a thematic approach."[1] The goal driving this approach, as Kelner points out, is that participants may first conceptualize a discrepancy between the Jewish diaspora and an Israeli national space, a discrepancy that is predicated on the notion that Jews are members of a diaspora as long as they reside outside of Israel. The messaging of Zionism, from the state as well as non-state institutions, is clear: no matter where the Jewish people may find themselves, Israel is where they belong.

The notion of Jewish territorial sovereignty in the State of Israel is important to the study of Zionism, but preexisting concepts of collective Jewish identity, memory, and belonging bring into view the breadth of Zionism's ideological stakes, which the following chapters will demonstrate.

[1] Taglit-Birthright Israel, Revised Educational Standards 2001, 5.

1.1. Background of Birthright Israel

Birthright Israel, launched in 1999 by Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, emerged amid rising concerns over Jewish assimilation, intermarriage, and declining identification with Israel among diaspora youth (Saxe et al., 2009) who "may therefore soon be lost to the Jewish people."[2] At its launch, founding Chairperson Marlene Post stated that the program's goal was to provide young Jewish adults with "a stimulating encounter with Israel— and by extension with their own identity."[3] Sociologically, the program functions as a form of group socialization and symbolic boundary maintenance (Basch et al. 1993. Cohen, 2011. Lamont & Molnar, 2002), to strengthen Jewish identity within an institution of experiential learning. Drawing on theories of symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979) and transnationalism (Levitt, 2009), Birthright aims to foster emotional attachment and collective Jewish memory across the borders of the nation-state. It exemplifies the privatization of identity, as collective goals are coordinated between the State of Israel, diaspora organizations, and individual philanthropists through a touristic enterprise (Kelner, 2010). In this way, the program also reflects neoliberal modes of cultural production, where identity is curated through affective travel and branded experiences (Antonisch & Skey, 2017. Bunzl, 2005). Researchers have highlighted its role in constructing a normative diasporic subject loyal to Israel, while also sparking debates around authenticity, inclusion, and political neutrality (Sales & Saxe, 2006). Birthright Israel stands at the intersection of diaspora politics, nation-building, and the socio-psychological dimensions of youth cultural formation.

[2] Post, M. (1999, 20 December). "Don't Bash Birthright." The Jerusalem Report, p. 54.
[3] Ibid.

As of 2025, Birthright Israel has provided over 900,000 fully funded educational tours for Jewish young adults, aged 18 to 26, originating from at least 70 different countries.[4] These short-term, intensive programs are structured as ten-day group excursions around the country, organized by the State of Israel, local Jewish institutions, and international partner agencies. Each group is accompanied by Israeli tour guides and Madrichim—peer leaders who are often alumni of the program and the national background of the participants they supervise. The tours are also embedded in Israel's national security framework: each group travels with a designated bus driver and armed security personnel, who are licensed medics and typically active-duty members of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) or Israeli Police. A key ethnographic feature of the program is the Mifgash (Hebrew for "encounter"), during which 6 to 8 Israeli peers integrate into the group for several days, participating as equals in order to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and relational intimacy. These individuals are primarily comprised of young soldiers, granted temporary leave by the IDF for the purpose of joining Birthright trips. This state- and community-sponsored initiative is thus a site where Zionist national identity is produced through embodied, affective, and securitized experiences of place.

Researchers of Birthright Israel have noted the multiple strategies employed by program organizers to cultivate a cohesive level of group enmeshment that feeds identification with nationalism (Kelner et al., 2000, Fishman et al., 2013) These include both structural mechanisms, such as assembling groups with a high degree of internal homogeneity as well as affectively driven

[4] The Birthright Israel Foundation outlines participant eligibility on their website: "*The gift of Birthright Israel is available to all Jewish young adults, ages 18-26 who have not participated on an educational trip since they turned 18 nor lived in Israel past the age of 12. Eligibility requirements are: [1] Identify as Jewish and are recognized as such by their local community or by one of the recognized denominations of Judaism. [2] Have at least one Jewish birth parent or have completed Jewish conversion through a recognized Jewish denomination.*"

techniques. In some cases, participants are subjected to physically demanding activities early in their itinerary that foster interpersonal familiarity and trust in a team setting. Programs may also suggest frequent exercises in emotional disclosure, encouraging participants to articulate personal reflections to the rest of the group in response to their shared experiences on the trip (Cohen, S. M. & Wall, 1994). More casual social bonding is encouraged through communal lodging, beachside or other outdoorsy outings, and nightlife experiences in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Jewish cultural nights and celebratory events such as Shabbat dinners encourage identification with a transnational Jewish collective. Key historic site visits include Jerusalem's Old City and the Western Wall, Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, Masada, Mount Herzl, and Israel's national cemetery. Many groups also explore the Golan Heights, Israeli settlements, and various kibbutzim, exposing participants to the sociopolitical landscape of the region. Typically, such visits are accompanied by oral presentations that disseminate Israeli state ideology and broader Zionist narratives. Peer-aged IDF soldiers are included on the trips, presented as equal participants that fill the interstice between the group and the state's history, enlivening their role in its security objectives; in reality, these individuals are carefully selected and cognizant of their role in the perception of the non-Israeli participants. In short, the interplay of social programming and site visits functions pedagogically, reinforcing affective ties to Israel through embodied experience around a shared base of knowledge.

While the complicity of individuals is abundantly present, the cultivation of meaningful experience on Birthright Israel within a collectivized context transcends personal autonomy, and the coercive nature of the program has allegedly, at times, channeled a Zionist imperative against the comfort and well-being of its young participants. Specifically, it has been pervaded by the imperative of Jewish continuity. Published in 2018, Sarah M. Seltzer's investigative article in

Jewish Currents critically interprets Birthright Israel's programming against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement. Drawing from over 50 interviews, Seltzer's findings suggest that the program's emphasis on Jewish in-marriage and childbearing has created a pressurized, hypersexual environment that precipitates sexual misconduct and discourages reporting. According to the personal accounts provided to Jewish Currents, mutual intrigue and fetishization are especially prevalent between diaspora participants and IDF soldiers, and even explicitly instigated by Birthright staffers, but a culture of sexual pressure can be felt across the various minute social configurations of all involved—between staffers and participants and between participants themselves. Seltzer's article concludes on the point that Birthright Israel is not the source of this pressure, but that those involved have been largely uncritical of how it has come to manifest, ultimately platforming calls to tighten institutional procedures to address the issue of sexual misconduct. In contrast, this thesis adopts a more ethnographically grounded approach, focusing on the lived experiences of Birthright participants. By situating these accounts within the broader framework of Zionist pronatalism, it seeks to illuminate the social and ideological mechanisms through which sexual pressure is rendered normative.

1.2. Affective Nationalism and National Habitus

The social-constructivist (Berger & Luckmann, 1996) approach to understanding processes of nation-building has allowed researchers to focus on the affective dimension of nations as such, meaning that the relations between human actors, their social environments, and their material realities call the nation into being. A growing body of literature in the social sciences explores how national identity is embodied, socially reproduced, and emotionally sustained across diverse contexts—in other words, the methods of the national habitus, or how the nation is affectively engaged and constructed.

National habitus extends Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) idea of habitus—the internalized, embodied dispositions shaped by one's social field—to the domain of national identity. It refers to the unconscious ways individuals come to enact and perceive the nation through routine practices, aesthetics, language, and behavior. Everyday acts such as saluting the flag, referring to a national "we," or using nationally specific calendars are part of the embodied infrastructure of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). Herzfeld (2005) adds that national habitus is also shaped by state institutions and cultural narratives, creating a sense of national normalcy that appears natural, as given. Affective nationalism, on the other hand, specifically foregrounds the role of emotion and sentiment in the experience and perpetuation of national belonging. It highlights how feelings such as pride, grief, nostalgia, or anxiety are cultivated through symbolic acts, rituals, media, and education (Ahmed, 2004. Antonsich et al. 2020. Navaro-Yashin, 2002). These affective responses are not merely personal but socially orchestrated, giving emotional texture to national imaginaries. For instance, Navaro-Yashin's (2002) work in Northern Cyprus shows how nationalist sentiment is not only about ideology but about the affective attachments to spaces, memories, and losses shaped by political histories. Together, these concepts illuminate how nationalism is not only cognitively constructed or ideologically imposed but lived viscerally. They are particularly useful for anthropological studies of diaspora, where the reproduction of national identity often occurs through embodied and affective practices that transcend territorial boundaries (Carlson, S., & Schneickert, C., 2021)

While Kelner does not explicitly use the term affective nationalism, his analysis of Birthright Israel closely aligns with its core tenets, using the term "affective bonding." Kelner (2010) argues that the thematic programming of Birthright creates a heightened experience of identity formation, in that Jewish heritage and meaning are attributed to every aspect of

participants' curated encounters with the state, made to be easily consumed and in abundance. These include moments of awe at historical sites, collective mourning at memorials, and feelings of camaraderie with Israelis joining the Mifgash. Such encounters are deliberately orchestrated to evoke strong emotions that bind participants to a shared Jewish national narrative (Kelner, 2010: 71–105). He emphasizes that this emotional attachment is not purely spontaneous but structured by the design of its thematic and symbolic programming. The trip acts as a form of what he calls "diasporic pilgrimage," creating a powerful experiential link between diaspora Jews and the Zionist project in Israel. In doing so, the program generates what can be understood anthropologically as affective nationalism—an emotional investment in the nation that is felt as deeply personal yet socially and institutionally produced and reproduced by participants.

Birthright site visits to Masada[5] stand out as one particularly keen example in Kelner's work. He argues that the site operates as a stage for enacting a narrow Zionist narrative of Jewish heroism, sacrifice, and rebirth. Through storytelling, dramatic scenery, and group reflection, participants are encouraged to feel an embodied connection to an ancient past that is reinterpreted through the lens of modern Zionism and its territorial claim to the State of Israel. The emotional climax of the visit often occurs at sunrise, adding to the thematic element of rebirth. The curation of the Masada site visit illustrates how affective nationalism is produced through the alignment of body, place, and narrative, transforming the material into a symbolic landscape of Zionist memory and collective belonging.

[5] Masada is an ancient fortress built by King Herod in the 1st century BCE atop a plateau overlooking the Dead Sea in present-day Israel. It is most renowned as the site where Jewish rebels, besieged by Roman forces in 73–74 CE, chose mass suicide over capture, becoming a powerful symbol of resistance and national identity. For further reading on the contentions of Masada's symbolism see: *Sasson, Kelner, & Sasson. (2008). From Shrine to Forum: Masada and the Politics of Jewish Extremism. Israel Studies, 13(2), 146–163.*

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I discuss the foundational theoretical concepts that underpin the thematic categories explored in the present research. Namely: the conceptions of the diaspora, bereavement, and pronatalism within the Zionist imaginary. These themes are illustrated by a historiographical examination of Zionism and supported by existing sociological and anthropological scholarship. Additionally, I introduce Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation as it serves as the critical lens through which these concepts are categorically interpreted in my analysis of newly collected empirical data.

2.1. Zionism

Before discussing *categories of practice* in the construction of Zionism as a form of nationalism, I find it necessary to clarify the nation as a *category of analysis.* That is to say, the social processes by which the nation generates and sustains itself are discrete from how nationhood exists as a classificatory scheme by modern states in their pursuit of power and policy. Rogers Brubaker's (1996) suggestive outline of nationhood or nationness as an event—as something that happens rather than something that develops at a sustained pace—is useful in conceptualizing such a discrepancy. Further still, Brubaker's conceptualization of nationness rejects the notion that ours is "a world of nations" (referencing Smith, 1991: 176) but instead "a world in which nationhood is pervasively institutionalized in the practice of states and the workings of the state system. It is a world in which nation is widely, if unevenly, available and resonant as a category of social vision and division. It is a world in which nationness may suddenly, and powerfully, 'happen.' But none of this implies a world of nations- of substantial, enduring collectivities." (Brubaker, 1996: 21) Regarding Israel, Zionism is invoked in all matters of the state, contingent on the fact that the Jewish people were at one point initiated into the relational setting of nationhood.

The belief that the symbolic and historic ties between Judaism and the land on which Israel now rests license the whole of the world's Jewish people to establish a sovereign nation-state in the Levant is but one of many branches within a broad canon of Jewish nationalisms, given the shorthand *Zionism*. With respect to other historic Zionist movements which emphasized the cultural and spiritual renewal of the oppressed and assimilated Jews of Europe, *Zionism* in this thesis will refer to a singular commitment to Israeli state sovereignty, described succinctly by historian Derek Penslar as such: "[Zionism] transforms rabbinic Judaism's concepts of the sacred—the Jews' common devotion to the G-d of Israel, veneration of the biblical Land of Israel, and the concept of an eventual Jewish return to that land in the messianic era—into a modern nationalist idiom." (2023: 18) Scholars of various disciplines are wont to debate the anachronism of drawing a congruency between modern conceptions of the nation-state and ancient society, religious belief notwithstanding. To that point, inquests into the national character of Israel and its founding mythos are often underpinned by a normative objective that would either affirm or undermine the state's legitimacy according to the saliency of Zionist claims; it is important to acknowledge that phenomenon, as it looms large in the minds of subjects who assume the burden of answering state-related issues, that of their positionality, and how their own identities are implicated therein. However, the present research departs significantly from political discourses regarding the State of Israel precisely because an analysis of the state is insufficient in capturing the scope of Zionist thought and the social processes it has animated across transnational lines on the individual and collective level.

Zionist movements precipitated Israel's founding, its ideological principles have guided statecraft and policy, and today, Israel is indisputably a participant in the liberal world order of the nation-state system. However, it is not Israeli nationalism, but Zionism, that bears the explanatory

power behind understandings of world Jewry as a nation in the first place. For the past two thousand years, followers of the Jewish faith have lived in heterogeneous lands, participated in all manner of societies, spoken diverse languages, and observed variations of ritual and prayer unique to their circumstances. Often bearing little resemblance to each other in appearance and practice from one corner of the world to the next, the many lived realities of global Jewry beg the question of how and why Jews are understood as a nation—the Zionist nation—in a way that the adherents of most other world religions are not. Jewish scripture asserts that G-d promised the land of Judea to the ancient Israelites, and the historical record attests to the fact that a series of foreign conquests eroded their people's claim to the region if not entirely driving the Jewish population into exile by the Roman period. One mechanism through which a dispersed people construct national identity is the reinterpretation of historical exile as a source of collective cohesion and continuity. In this case, it is often theorized that the Jews driven from Judea conferred their longing to return to their homeland onto successive generations, generating an emotional inheritance that defines their shared stake in a geographical origin. The leverage of the affective phenomenon is evidenced by the fact that in the Twentieth Century, the state of Israel was founded on that notion in no uncertain terms, where it is written in the Declaration of Independence: "Eretz-Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here, their spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance, and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books. […] Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland."

As stated, the scope of this research relies on the terminology of Zionism, rather than Israeli nationalism, to refer to a Jewish collective identity that has animated the project of nation-building that is centered on the nation-state but problematizes its territorial boundaries. In evaluating sites

of Israeli military commemoration and their role in constructing collective memory, Sasson and Kelner (2008) rightly identify that the nation and the state are isomorphic, such that Israeli collective memory does not capture the extent of Zionist collective memory nor the boundaries of Zionist collective identity. One need not be an Israeli citizen, have spent significant time in Israel, nor speak Hebrew to participate in Zionist collective memory and find belonging in the national identity of Zionism—in fact, much of the Zionist imaginary draws from the experiences of Jewish people who have been colored by different national backgrounds. Zionist national identity is (in)formed by diverse, often disparate individuals who are not directly engaged in the traditional social institutions of the State of Israel and thus must be reached via international and transnational relational channels. Bringing Jews into the fold of Zionist identity, irrespective of their material ties to Israel, means that they must first be made to understand themselves as part of a diaspora, not as Israelis per se, but on the basis of their Jewishness in a way that is actively felt and experienced in the collective setting, Birthright among them.

The affective dimension of Zionist collective identity is longstanding, reflected in the historic record of Zionism's generative potential and how it has been articulated through social institutions. In other words, Zionism is not the ideological transmission of elite authorities, but a movement that is given legs by the participation of the collective. As a case in point, Jan Rybak's *Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe* (2021) reframes Zionist historiography by emphasizing the grassroots, everyday construction of nationalist identity in Jewish communities of the Habsburg Empire, Poland, and Lithuania (1914-1920). Departing from narrow elite-focused narratives, Rybak draws on sociological theories of everyday nationalism to demonstrate how Zionism was embedded in daily life through schools, local initiatives, youth organizing, and political praxis. His analysis of personal accounts and institutional memory reveals Zionism as a

lived experience shaped by material conditions, intergenerational tensions, and interactions with the imperial and multinational realities of East-Central European Jewish life— again, the nation is not merely what one believes, but a response to what happens to them and what they make of those experiences. This social anthropological lens contrasts with earlier historiographies that emphasize Zionism's ideological development (Avineri, 1971) or diplomatic and party histories (Shapira 2012). Although Rybak's work aligns more closely with newer social histories of Zionism, such as those by Penslar (2007) and Saposnik (2008), which stress the multiplicity and performativity of Jewish nationalist identities, his work is distinguished by the decision to focus not on the Yishuv of historic Palestine or the urban cores of Western Europe, but on the Eastern periphery of the Habsburg realm. In illustrating how nationalism may be built incrementally, locally, and often ambiguously, his analysis guides an understanding of Jewish nationalism not as derivative but generative, ultimately offering a corrective to rigid teleological undertakings of Zionist ideology. His scholarly contributions are formative to how the affective nationalist practices of Zionism are approached in the present research in the institutional context of Birthright Israel.

Being that the largest population of Jews outside of Israel since the Holocaust resides in the United States of America, much of Zionism's messaging for the Jewish diaspora has been directed at the American audience. As early as 1955, American Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan expressed concern over the potential to alienate diaspora Jews from Israel by overemphasizing the country as their singular national homeland. From Kaplan's perspective, Zionist tendencies that negate the diaspora's political and cultural affiliations with their respective Western nations could weaken Western bases of Jewish identification with the State of Israel. The result of this alienation could compromise the state's stability, particularly in the realm of international diplomacy. Writing in the context of the mid-twentieth century's political theater, Kaplan observed that Western

governments were increasingly investing in the regimes of select Arab states—primarily to secure favorable petroleum agreements—a development he feared might undermine or actively threaten Israel's geopolitical standing. In light of this, Kaplan proposed that Jews residing in the West and the United States in particular might be mobilized to mitigate these risks and advocate for Israel's strategic interests from abroad. Writing of these Jews, Kaplan argued that "they certainly cannot have a political stake, but they can and must be made to feel that their destiny as Jews is bound up with the future of the State of Israel. The last thing in the world, therefore, that should be done to them is to alienate them by making them feel delinquent in their duty as Jews because they do not wish to migrate to Israel." (Kaplan, 1955: 18) Kaplan's concern stands out in stark contrast to much of the political Zionist rhetoric around Israel's purpose in safeguarding Jewry against global antisemitism, in which the continued existence of the state is justified in large part to that end. Again, Zionism is not merely confined to matters of the state but is extended transnational abstractions of collective relations, evidenced by Kaplan's perspective which suggests that the State of Israel depends on the support of diaspora Jews. Importantly, his Zionist perspective does not dispute Israel's status as the national home of the Jewish people; rather, he implies an inversion of the conventional relationship between the state and members of the nation, whereby Jews ought to protect the state for the state's sake. In practice, Zionism continues to emphasize narratives that Israel is the bulwark against global antisemitism, but the diaspora has been increasingly incorporated by various means into the Zionist collective identity, frequently invoked by the state to various political ends, while individuals have also meaningfully redefined Zionist identity and belonging from abroad. To summarize this section, I affirm that the political utility of the state and understanding it as the national "homeland" of the Jewish people is in how it engages the

minds of Jewish people, serving as a tent pole for mass mobilization regardless of individual's desire, or lack thereof, to move there.

2.2. Ideology of Bereavement

In the years following the Nazi-led Holocaust, Zionism combined ancient and religious Jewish historiographies with the modern political imperatives presented by the genocide, its survivors, and their relationship to the construction of the young Jewish nation-state. Drawing upon the Lurianic Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun* (repair or restoration), Zionist ideology appropriated the notion of historical and spiritual restitution, framing the establishment of the State of Israel as a form of collective redress for Jewish suffering and exile caused by Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem and the Nazi-led Holocaust alike. Following their mass arrival from Europe in the mid-twentieth Century, Jewish survivors quickly became one of Israel's most significant and rapidly growing demographic groups. Their presence, however, complicated the state's emergent self-image as a young Jewish nation on the rise. Rooted in a redemptive national narrative, Israeli public discourse at times cast survivors in a negative light, portraying them as passive victims whose suffering was implicitly linked to their diasporic existence and perceived failure to resist. For many of the survivors, the genocide was a major blow to their faith in a redemptive G-d. In response, Zionism's promise of national renewal enabled it to transcend internal divisions and forge a unifying ideological framework that resonated with a broad spectrum of Jewish identity, encompassing both religious and secular adherents, whether they resided in Israel or lived in dispersion. This novel reconstruction of the national body was solidified through the public and legal response to the Eichmann trial, which began in 1961 and played a pivotal role in canonizing the Holocaust within the Zionist national imaginary, reshaping collective memory. Historian Esther Benbassa details this transformation at length, writing that "'Never again!' took on sacred

significance, that of a duty assumed by the people of Israel. […] The moral significance of the foundation of the Israeli state was thus enhanced. Every sacrifice was now justified," (Benbassa, 2010: 124) Thus, the saliency of Jewish continuity superseded more minute social divisions, best summarized by rabbi and philosopher Emil Fackenheim's concept of the 614th Commandment, a call for world Jewry to persevere against antisemitism, to fortify a collective Jewish identity, and to deny the Hitler a posthumous victory in eliminating the Jewish people.[6]

Thematically, renewal and sacrifice permeated the grammar of public life in Israel, manifesting in practices of commemoration. Anthropologist Meira Weiss (1997) explains in her work on commemorative practices and collective identity that grief in Israeli society is practiced uniformly and uncritically as a reassertion of national ideology, i.e., Zionism which is brought to the fore in historic memory sites dedicated to Jewish soldiers killed in combat. According to Weiss, the motif of sacrifice is foundational to how the nation sustains its claim to territorial sovereignty and belonging in the state of Israel. In doing so, the state *repays* the bereaved by bestowing symbolic immortality upon the fallen (Lifton 1977, 1979), strengthening a landscape of national sacrifice—both material and symbolic—that the living operate within (Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman, 1997). Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman describe the body of the fallen in the national imagination as "the authentic witness to the conjoining of intent and action in self-sacrifice, which enables gravesite and cemetery to signify the holistic unity of greater national entities." (1997: 92) Birthright Israel's thematic programming reflects this grounding in the imperative of Jewish renewal, observed consistently in ethnographic research (Chazan, 2003.

[6] Emil Fackenheim first articulated the concept of the "614th commandment" at a symposium titled *Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future,* held in New York on March 26, 1967, during Purim. Hosted by the journal *Judaism* and chaired by Steven Schwarzschild, the event marked the first occasion on which Fackenheim publicly argued that the Holocaust imposed a new moral imperative on Jews.

Kelner, 2010. Saxe et al. 2008) including that of the present study; this claim is further substantiated by the interview data presented in the subsequent sections of thematic analysis.

Given Birthright Israel's stated aim of cultivating and reinforcing affective ties between young Jewish adults in the diaspora and the State of Israel, its programming around Israel's security infrastructure is deliberately framed in affirmative terms. Tour itineraries include visits to historic battle sites and memorials dedicated to military sacrifice, where narratives of soldierly heroism, technological sophistication, and national valor are foregrounded. These curated encounters anchor contemporary Israeli statehood within a broader temporal arc, linking modern military achievements to ancient Jewish struggles for sovereignty and survival. In this context, Israeli participants—particularly the soldiers involved in the Mifgash and those providing security to the groups—are themselves informal ambassadors of a Zionist narrative. Their presence mediates the perspectives of the diaspora and what is for most participants an unfamiliar landscape of militarization, serving a critical role in shaping how their diaspora peers situate themselves in relation to the Zionist project.

The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), housed within Brandeis University, has dedicated an entire Research Area to the study of Birthright Israel since the program's 1999 launch, regularly publishing evaluation and impact studies on participants and nonparticipants[7], while increasingly sharpening its focus on the role of the Israeli elements of the Mifgash—as stated, the Mifgash is comprised primarily of IDF soldiers, and thus entwined closely with state militarization. According to their research, diaspora participants in the Summer of 2024 reportedly found that hearing firsthand from Israelis about their experiences of the War on Gaza since October

[7] CMJS defines nonparticipants as, *"similar young adults who applied to the program and did not go." https*://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/birthright/index.html

7, 2023, was one of the most meaningful aspects of the trip, but researchers also highlighted the uniquely strong preexisting ties to Israel among the 2024 cohort (Wright et al. 2025); as Birthright enrollment has waned in the wake of Israel's war on Gaza, the bottlenecking of participants who claim strong support for the State of Israel is important to consider in evaluating the data on their perceptions of the security apparatus, where statistical bias is skewed towards affirming the success of the program in its stated aim. For this reason, my research interrogates militarization and commemoration within the thematic programming of Birthright Israel for the ideological messages it conveys to participants, rather than what it accomplishes with regard to state attachments.

2.3. Pronatalism in the National Imaginary

In addition to the normalization of Israel's security apparatus, the messaging of Birthright's programming addresses child-bearing as a sector of social life that may satisfy imperatives of national significance. The reification of Jewish culture is, according to Zionist discourses, insufficient to meaningfully ensure Jewish continuity in the State of Israel and has increasingly been situated within a political epistemology of the family and reproduction. Over the past several decades, scholarly research on intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has frequently been situated in light of concerns around Jewish continuity (Berman, 2008; Lavender, 1992; Staetsky, 2021). In Israel, the legal prohibition of interfaith marriage stands as a salient expression of the state's role in regulating reproductive life.[8] This prohibition is part of a broader constellation of

[8] In general, interfaith marriages, same-sex marriages, and civil unions performed abroad are recognized within Israel, if legally valid within the jurisdiction in which they were performed.

biopolitical mechanisms (Foucault, 1975) through which the state manages boundaries of belonging and social reproduction, revealing national paradigms.[9]

These concerns have evolved alongside growing anxieties regarding the attenuated connection between younger generations of diaspora Jews (American Jews in particular) and the Zionist project, including their diminishing identification with the State of Israel—a topic that has garnered significant sociological attention (Cohen & Kelman, 2010; Sasson et al., 2012). Consequently, there has been a longitudinal study conducted through CMJS on the impacts of Birthright Israel on participants in their decisions around marriage and family planning with regard to inmarriage (Saxe et al. 2009, 2011, 2021, 2014, 2017). This initiative, known as the Jewish Futures Project, has employed a multi-year panel design to assess and survey participants and nonparticipants, and their findings strongly suggest that participation in Birthright bears a strong correlation with Jewish inmarriage, higher rates of reproduction, and a tendency to raise children with a Jewish religious and cultural grounding. Although not an official objective of the program, countering threats to Jewish continuity through the cultivation of Jewish partnership and sexual relationships has been understood as a favorable outcome of Birthright Israel. This perception is evident in statements by organizers, institutional representatives, and alumni. Among organizers, perspectives vary; some offer full-throated endorsements of the program's perceived matchmaking function, often linking it to broader Zionist aspirations, while others express more ambivalent or tacit support.[10] In both cases, interlocutors position their role in a pronatalist scheme on the side

[9] These dynamics are further intensified in the domain of assisted fertility, where legal protocols require that both gamete donors (ie; sperm and ovum) share the religious affiliation of the intended parents. In cases involving surrogacy, the surrogate must also be of the same religious background as the genetic father or sperm donor, reinforcing Jewish endogamy. Similar restrictions apply to single women seeking to conceive via sperm donation, who are likewise constrained to select donors of the same faith, underscoring how Jewish identity becomes biologized through state-sanctioned (and often state-subsidized) reproductive practices.

[10] Shlomo "Momo" Lifshitz is particularly strong proponent, evidenced by public statements and interviews that are widely documented in media. Since 2009, Lifshitz is disaffiliated from the Birthright Israel Foundation. See: Udasin,

of renewal and redemption for the nation. Importantly, the Birthright Israel Foundation's website and affiliated blog feature celebratory stories of successful matches made within the program.

In summary, the success of Zionism's promise of renewal or reparative justice for the Jewish nation is consistently imperiled according to certain socio-political contexts. Zionist discourses frequently seize upon the perceived existential threat that Jewish Israelis will be soon outnumbered by the native Palestinian and surrounding Arab population. While in the process of renewal, as the Holocaust looms large in collective memory, it is the nation's duty to repopulate world Jewry. Simultaneously, constant security threats posed by enemy states, operations of resistance to the security apparatus, and acts of terrorism all have the potential to result in the loss of a child as well as any future generations of progeny for national members. In this way, the collective commemoration of loss—enshrined in Zionist memory practices—does not merely memorialize the fallen but simultaneously reinforces the urgency of national renewal through reproduction, where the sacrifice of life necessitates the creation of new life to secure the future of the Jewish people. The importance of producing more Jewish babies is inextricably shadowed by the sacrifice of Jewish death, historically and at present. This expression of Zionist pronatalism is echoed in my data analysis and further related to themes of Israeli militarization within the scope of Jewish continuity.

2.4. Interpellation

Building on the foundational concepts above, I propose a preliminary outline of the socio-psychological mechanism through which the Zionist imaginary has come to naturalize the

S. (2010, January 6). Funding in-marriage out of his own pocket. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. https://www.jta.org/2010/01/06/ny/funding-in-marriage-out-of-his-own-pocket

conjunction of sexual reproduction and militarization; namely, Louis Althusser's (1970) theorization of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the mechanism of *interpellation*.

For Althusser, ideology operates not merely as a system of beliefs, but as a material system of institutions and practices—such as educational systems, religious rituals, media, and familial structures—that reproduce dominant state values by shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors. In referring to them as ISAs, Althusser's theory distinguishes them from the *repressive* apparatuses of the state, such as the military, which incur engagement by physical force. ISAs, on the other hand, engage with individuals through interpellation. Althusser's well-known metaphor serves as a useful heuristic: when a police officer calls out, "Hey, you!" and an individual instinctively turns, they have implicitly recognized themselves as the subject being addressed. In that moment of recognition, the individual accepts the subject-position offered to them. When similarly "hailed" by an ISA, individuals enter into an act of interpellation, exemplifying how individuals are constituted as subjects to state ideology, not through conscious assent, but through unconscious and repeated engagement with ideological norms. The subject does not emerge as autonomous, but rather as someone who appears to "freely" assume socially constructed roles such as "student," "worker," or "citizen"—roles that are, in fact, ideologically prefigured. In the context of Birthright Israel, participants are frequently "hailed" by Zionist pedagogy and the institution of marriage and the family, which preconfigures their role in satisfying the imperative of Jewish continuity.

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate the thematic programming of Birthright Israel and what participants interpret as their stakes in the Zionist project, I primarily conducted interviews using thematic analysis. This choice was pertinent to the topic for multiple reasons. Thematic analysis ensures that the logic of Zionism is explored within its specific socio-political and cultural contexts and that it is afforded due sensitivity. The explanatory power of thematic analysis makes it best suited for research of this nature because focusing on the logic of a phenomenon requires an interrogation of collective perception and interpretation to provide insight into its meaning. The reflexivity process undertaken by thematic analysis allows myself, as the researcher, to explicitly situate my conclusions regarding the data within the context of my own values and biases.

When designing my thesis, I began with a narrowed focus on themes of pronatalism and sexuality in the national habitus, intending to illuminate the sexual politics of Zionist nation-building and where it may be found in Birthright tourism. Before writing a brief summary of my project for potential interview subjects, I asked three different acquaintances if they had attended a Birthright trip and would like to participate, or if they knew anyone who had. Although they responded in the affirmative with regard to relevant experience, they each stated that their political convictions regarding Zionism compelled them to decline my request, suggesting that their participation could lend support to the political aims of the Zionist project. I noted that in the political climate that followed October 7th, 2023, the mere mention of Zionism had significant implications for how participants might reflect on their experiences and their choices in purveying them. I assured these individuals that my work had no such political motivation, but their interest could not be raised, nonetheless. Readers may notice that Zionism is conspicuously absent from the summary of my project; this decision was taken conscientiously, following multiple failed

attempts to garner participation. Those who were included in this study were provided with the following:

> *This thesis project investigates the experiences of participants in Birthright trips to Israel with a special focus on how they consolidate the role of sexuality and romance in the national habitus, and where it is encountered. Grounded by an understanding of Birthright trips as potent sites of affective nationalism (Antonsich, Skey, et al. 2020) that have profound impacts on how individuals build attachments to the state through the lens of their Jewish identity, I contend that further socio-psychological analysis of the valence of Jewish coupling illuminates another dimension of the trip's impacts on national attachment.*

Because I intended for interviews to be relatively free-flowing, I was hesitant to probe subjects on matters of sex, fearing that by making them uncomfortable or embarrassed they may withhold their insights on broader topics of nationalism in the context of their personal experiences. Thus, I never explicitly referred to sex or sexuality during the interview, but on several occasions, the subjects were comfortable enough to raise the topic themselves, to varying degrees of interest in discussing the topic in depth. Their deeply personal experiences and perspectives have been especially important in grounding my conclusions, and for their trust and generosity, I am eternally grateful. On the other hand, subjects were, for the most part, more enthusiastic to share experiences which I have related to different themes in my analysis. While the data drawn from reports and interviews by the Birthright Foundation reflects my initial focus on pronatalism and sexuality, the patterns that emerged in the novel data collected from semi-structured interviews revealed several unanticipated points of interest, and naturally, the theoretical framing of the present work evolved to account for that expansion of the empirical reach and the prevalence of my findings. The following analyses thus include a thematic approach to sex, but more often than not it merely punctuates conceptions of nationalism.

Thematic analysis in this study is organized around four primary categories: (1) *Identity and Belonging,* (2) *Grief and Memory*, (3) *Militarism and Duty*, and (4) *Sexuality and Partnership*.

My analysis of participants' responses is situated within a broader contextual framework that accounts for their selection in relation to myself as the researcher, to one another, and to pertinent institutional affiliations. Similarly, their pathways to participation in the Birthright Israel program are examined with attention to these same relational and institutional dynamics. Themes are presented in sequence and later revisited to assess their interrelations and shared significance.

There are six interview subjects in total, each referred to using a pseudonym. Apart from Perla, each subject was interviewed online. They are, of course, Jewish according to the eligibility requirements of the Birthright Foundation. Perla, Sofia, and Luca are from Argentina, and attended the same trip— the latter two formed a romantic connection during their trip and are coupled to this day. Noah is from the United States, and at the outset of his Birthright trip, Israel's 2014 War on Gaza began to unfold. One subject, Lili, is an alum of the program and now serves as a Madricha for Hungarian Birthright groups to Israel. Yosef is an Israeli who has participated in the Mifgash several times and now serves as a guide for Hungarian groups; with the exception of Yosef, participants were born and raised abroad, have never at any point resided in Israel, nor have held Israeli citizenship. The section that focuses on identity (4.1) will introduce each subject, familiarizing their individual and relational positions in this study. For clarity, their basic background information is illustrated below, in the order which I interviewed them:

NAME	NATIONALITY	YEAR(S) OF PARTICIPATION	CURRENT AGE
Perla	Argentina	2020	27
Sofia & Luca	Argentina	2020	31 & 32
Noah	United States of America	2014	30
Lili	Hungary	2022-2025	24
Yosef	Israel	2017-2025	26

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Identity and Belonging

In preparing to conduct interviews, the first subject of my study, Perla, was found by chance. A colleague struck up a conversation about heritage with Perla at a student party in which she revealed herself to be Jewish. My colleague replied that he had a friend in Central European University's Jewish Studies program—in this case, me—who was planning research around Birthright and hoping to find interviewees. Perla herself had taken a Birthright trip, and without additional context regarding my thesis, she was gracious enough to exchange her contact information with my colleague for the purpose of meeting to discuss her experiences. Some weeks later we arranged to meet in a local café in Vienna, Austria, where she allowed me to record our meeting for transcription and analysis.

Upon meeting, Perla described herself as very Jewish "culturally", explaining that she grew up in an observant household and attended a Jewish day school in her home of Buenos Aires, Argentina. She continues to celebrate Jewish holidays and many of her closest friends also belong to the local Jewish community. At the age of 16, she first attended a Birthright trip for teens. While an undergraduate in Argentina in 2020, she decided to make the trip again with three of her friends, and that trip as a young adult was the focus of our conversation. Throughout the interview, Perla expressed a distinct connection between herself and the rest of her Birthright group. The trip was purportedly for artists and proposed an arts-based theme, an aspect that Perla believes attracted individuals of a leftist political persuasion that she found familiar, described as such:

> *(Perla) "I think it attracted a lot of more left-leaning people. There's this stereotype of a young Jewish person from a certain neighborhood who has progressive parents. The Jewish community in Buenos Aires is quite big, but it's also very tight."*

Fruitfully for my work, Perla happened to maintain contact with two individuals, Luca and Sofia, who were members of the same Argentinian group to make a Birthright trip in 2020. Notably, Luca and Sofia were a couple that formed during said trip and have remained happily together five years later. Perla passed along their contact information to me, and I contacted them with a brief summary of my project and interview consent forms to indicate the legitimacy of my inquiry. Luca and Sofia obliged my request for an interview, and thus a small snowball of interviewees formed.

Hoping to explore their unique positions as a long-term couple that began during a Birthright trip, I chose to speak with them together at once, online. They spoke with me on a video call from their shared home in Buenos Aires. During the interview, I realized that their stories relied on one another to be mutually constructed, in such a way that when the other would pause to reflect on their individual perception for a moment, the other would often chime in to finish off the thought, or to explain the feelings of their partner in their own words. Sofia, in particular, was more likely to speak for Luca in moments where his perceptions could not draw from a strong grounding in Jewish identity. Unlike Sofia, Luca was not raised with any notion of Jewish heritage. In fact, he did not know he had any claim to Jewishness by birth until he was a teenager. On the other hand, Sofia spoke confidently on matters of Jewish identity and heritage, as she was raised in a relatively observant home, and has a close relationship with her grandmother, a woman she regards as having a deep attachment to Israel. Although Sofia and Luca also hail from Buenos Aires, they proclaimed to have very different experiences of Jewishness than Perla:

> *(Sofia) "We are not to like [emphasizing]* in *the Jewish community; I think there are levels of being a part, and maybe [Perla] is more into it than we are. There's a sense of belonging either way."*

Sofia deliberated on how she constitutes certain levels of embeddedness in the Jewish community, indicating a strong relational aspect. Perla, as a point of reference, was important to how Sofia reflected on her Jewishness, while at the same time, Perla's relation to a broader Jewish social fabric fortified her own from Sofia's point of view.

> *(Sofia) "Because for me, it always has been a parallel thing. I know I'm Jewish and it is important for my grandmother. […] It makes me who I am, but I don't think it touches all my life or everything I do, and I met some people like [Perla] and her friends, or others for whom it has been a main thing all their life because of the school they went to, the activities they did, or because their friends are all Jewish. So, it was interesting to be more inside."*

Sofia's reflections suggest that consistent participation in existing Jewish cultural institutions certainly indicated a strong Jewish identity and interactions with experienced individuals strengthened her own identity. Their shared visit to Israel allowed Sofia to reflect on her understanding of Jewishness, as the discrepancies between herself and other Jewish participants actually "thickened" that conception of collective identity. Luca, on the other hand, had next to zero points of reference for his Jewishness until his Birthright trip, although his experiences suggest a similar effect on his self-perception: *"100%, I feel more Jewish than before. I feel more like I am part of the community in my way, because it's not something that you have to actively do, it's just who you are."*

Luca's statement on Jewish belonging suggests that Birthright's affective programming was successful to at least some degree—Luca was an active participant in developing his Jewishness as such, but he suggests that his mere presence within a collective experience is what imbued him with a sense of shared identity.

> *(Luca) "I have to say that the trip for me, it wasn't like a nationalist thing that I feel more Israeli or more part of the country. Actually, I have to be sincere, I don't think of being Israeli. I really think on my Jewish part, on my religious side, but I feel that my identity is here in Argentina and I will never be interested in what happened in another side of the*

world—It can be Spain, it can be Mexico—because my identities are in Argentina and I will always be in that identity. But yes, the trip gave me that side, just on the religious part, not in the country— more of the traditional things."

Although Luca came home feeling *100% more Jewish than before,* attachment to Israel as a state had very little meaning for him. The people he embarked on the trip with and the relationships he formed, with Sofia and with several close friends, color the experience far more than nationalist imperatives did. This could, of course, be attributed in large part to the influence of those micro-social bonds, and the fact that his Jewish-Argentine loved ones brought a sense of belonging back home to the Jewish community of Argentina. His Jewish identity was born in a highly mobile setting, but the transnational dimensions of Zionist ideology (in this case, the opportunity to forge connections to Israel in addition to Argentina's Jewish life) appeared negligible to Luca and to Sofia, as they reiterated throughout the interview, but Sofia also raised questions of belonging as though stronger feelings towards Israel served as a key authenticator.

(Sofia) "I feel like being Jewish is like, for me, we are all around the world. I don't think about Israel as the Jewish place, [nor] as my place. For me, it's here or wherever the community is."

(Sofia) "We felt like we weren't the most Jewish people you could have talked to. [laughter]"

The transnational dimension of encounters with Zionism is also highlighted in Perla's speech. When discussing the background of the trip participants, she tried to illustrate the dynamics at play; namely, a cohesion within the group that was slightly disrupted by the presence of their guide.

(Perla) "As the art [themed] trip brought so many left-leaning and politicized people, that created interesting debates and discussions with our guide who was Argentinian but had moved to Israel very young. He was very Zionist and quite Islamophobic. I think at first, he was looking for… He was making comments to see our reactions. We would actually say 'No, what you're saying is very problematic, very debated.' He was a bit thrown by that, but then he started digging at it, so he would encourage it in a way."

Belonging to a perceived in-group, unlike their guide, was significant to her experience and presumably to the experiences of the other participants. Although their guide had an Argentinian national origin, his decision to repatriate to Israel differentiated him from the participants on the basis of what Perla suggested were political differences; his political beliefs, nor where he made his home, did not distinguish his nationality, which in Perla's view, remained Argentinian. His perspective on these perceived differences, or on what axis they rest is unknown, but Perla's interpretation underscores the significance of political affiliation in shaping perceived group boundaries and illustrates the complex interplay between national belonging and ideological alignment in processes of identity formation. Her statements suggest a political schema, rather than a national one, to Zionist identity.

Being able to interview three individuals who not only attended the same Birthright trip but were raised in the same city and claim the same national identity, was valuable to my research in that their varying responses and overlapping perceptions illuminated what Birthright trips offer for notions of Jewish belonging and difference. Thematically, these notions were raised by each interview subject, articulating a strong interpretive saliency.

When searching for more interlocuters, I reached out to Noah, a friend who was born and raised in my region of the world, the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Noah, as I have always known, is Jewish himself, but beyond the occasional in-joke or friendly acknowledgment of our shared heritage, we had never discussed Jewishness or Judaism before. Unknown to me at the time, Noah had taken a Birthright trip to Israel more than a decade ago, shortly before we met; upon my initial request for interview leads he offered to participate himself, and one month later we spoke over a video call. During the interview, Noah explained that before participating in Birthright, he had traveled to Israel with his family and members of their Synagogue, which helped

to position his foundational ideas of Jewishness and relation to the state of Israel, from which the experiences he would later have as a young adult on Birthright diverged significantly.

> *(Noah) "I had a decent knowledge about [Israel] because we had taken a trip there with the temple as a family. […] It was a little different because we were with the temple most of the time, and that's a bunch of older people. But we had a week of extra time there that was just me and my brother and my mom. And that was a really cool, really special time. And I was young, so not politically aware. But really, my whole life I was raised like 'Israel's the homeland of the Jews. It was the dream of Theodore Herzl long ago.' I went to Sunday school and they taught that history, and [the history] of the country. And then when we were there as a kid, they again went through the history of the country. And it's like 'this is the grave of David Ben Gurion. This is where this battle happened, and the Yom Kippur War, and all this stuff.' Yeah, so I was raised with a pretty staunchly Zionistic perspective."*

In Noah's speech, Zionism emerged as a given component of Jewish identity, particularly in relation to the national memory of Israel. The pedagogical framing of his Sunday school experience collapsed Israel's twentieth-century history into a broader Jewish theological continuum. This interpretive fusion underscores how religious education can naturalize nationalist ideologies within diasporic contexts. Like Perla, Noah highlighted the political dimensions embedded in his encounters with the Israeli state. Throughout our interview, he critically engaged with the sociopolitical underpinnings of the Birthright program, interrogating the ways in which it both reflected and reproduced the Zionist national imaginary. For Noah, these themes were not merely abstract; they were deeply intertwined with the foundational structures of his Jewish upbringing. His reflections illuminate how Birthright's programming operates as a site for the cultivation and contestation of diasporic Jewish subjectivities.

While my interlocutors from the Americas articulated notions of belonging grounded in communal participation—albeit, in Luca's case, such affiliations had only recently developed—my fifth interview participant, Lili, voiced a markedly different orientation. Her sense of belonging was shaped by her national origin within the Jewish diaspora and was amplified through the

transnational frameworks enabled by Zionism. It was my initial exposure to this particular sentiment that first catalyzed the scholarly inquiry underlying this study.

In May 2024, I participated in a field visit to four Jewish NGOs in Budapest as part of Central European University's Jewish Studies Program. During our engagements with Hungarian Jewish professionals working within these organizations, several shared that they had not identified as Jewish until participating in Birthright Israel, even some who had attended Jewish day schools. Within the institutional practices and educational methodologies of these NGOs, the conceptual boundaries between Jewishness, Zionism, and the State of Israel were often obscured, and the unreliability of their findings was compounded by this flaw in methodology. The pedagogical materials produced by these NGOs reflected a framework in which these categories were not easily disentangled. This led me to hypothesize that in contexts where local forms of Jewish identity were weakly articulated—such as among segments of Hungarian Jewry—Zionist programming, particularly through Birthright, played a pivotal role in cultivating a sense of collective identity anchored in Israel at the expense of other forms of Jewish nation-building. Although my current research does not focus specifically on Hungarian Jewry, the experience illuminated the affective and symbolic power of Birthright's educational mission; the phenomenon of its impact on Hungarian Jewish participants is explored extensively and effectively in the work of Jewish Studies alumna Borbála Pál (Pál, 2016). It was through such encounters in Budapest that my broader interest in the thematic production of Zionist social paradigms took shape.

Among the Jewish NGOs I visited in Budapest was *Zachor* (Hebrew for "remembrance") which provides educational programs on Jewish history that critically examine and engage with Hungary's practices of public memory. In the Spring of 2025, I emailed my contact at Zachor in search of interviewees, and Lili was keen to step forward, and we spoke over a video call. Like

many Hungarian Jews, Lili did not embark on her first Birthright trip with a strong sense of Jewish identity, but that would change as a direct result of participating in the program.

> *(Lili) "What I remember is that during those years [before Birthright] I had an idea of my Jewish identity, but I didn't really put an effort into trying to figure it out. After I came back, I realized that I really like the Hebrew language; I started to learn it. I don't know if you can say that that that's a way to connect to my Jewish identity, but after the half year when I was studying Hebrew, I decided that I wanted to go back. So, maybe we can say that basically, the birthright trip led to me learning Hebrew and then the learning led to me going back to Israel. But up until like, a year ago, I didn't really put more effort into this journey."*

Coincidentally, Lili was either preparing for a trip to Israel or in Israel at the time I visited Zachor one year earlier. By the time I spoke with her, she had served as a Madricha for a Hungarian Birthright group traveling to Israel, and her role as an educator was of conspicuous relevance to her continued engagement with the program.

> *(Lili) "I think young Jewish people in Hungary have difficulties connecting to their Jewish identity. There are a few exceptions, like when someone grew up in a household where they keep Jewish traditions and holidays and whatever, but that's not the majority. I think that the Birthright trip can be a good starting point because basically, it's not you who has to do the job; you just go there and then you can say 'Yes, I was on [Birthright.]' It's a great opportunity because you can learn about Jewish traditions, holidays, language, religion, and history and you can start to develop a connection to Israel. Which is, I think, important, because if the people around you know that you are Jewish, then they will ask you everything that they hear about Israel; you have to be prepared and be aware about what's happening. […] But what I think is that it's just a starting point, the whole 10 days. What's more important is that after you come home, what do you do with that experience?"*

Similar to Luca, Lili envisioned that participation in the trip was a significant affirmation of one's Jewishness, but she underscored what she perceived as the importance of critically engaging with the collective experience and being an active participant in representing Israel. Being a representative of Israel from an educational standpoint is further explored in Lili's interview data using an additional thematic lens in the following section on grief and memory. Her commitment to Jewish Studies is reflected in her roles at both Zachor and Birthright, as well as in

her generosity in facilitating my connection with another Birthright staffer, Yosef, whom she met while working on the same trip.

Yosef, an Israeli citizen born and raised in the country, occupied what he described as an educational role in the IDF, which he extended to his participation in Birthright. When we arranged to speak online, he chose to speak without video transmission because he was at work in an office; my camera remained on for the duration of our call. Yosef explained that Israelis are typically permitted to participate in Birthright only once, under the assumption that their groups will consist primarily of English-speaking North Americans. However, exceptions are made for those proficient in less commonly spoken languages. In Yosef's case, his fluency in Hungarian—the mother tongue of his grandparents—has enabled him to serve as a guide for multiple Birthright trips.

> *(Yosef) "In the army, I was for the education part, which decides who from the Israelis will go to birthright. And because I can speak Hungarian, then I can go more than once. So, I have been three times."*
>
> *(me) And what was the selection process, when you were in the army?*
>
> *(Yosef) "I was the selection process, so it wasn't that tough for me. […] You see that they have at least some kind of love for Israel because you want them to make a good expression. [positive representation]And you see that they are normal people and not people that will do a lot of trouble. […] There is just one day that they bring a lot of Israelis from a lot of groups, and they explain a bit about Birthright; what you should do, what you should not do, what is the purpose of it. You meet the other Israelis from your group and decide on activity to do in the birthright itself. Have you done any Birthright?"*
>
> *(me) No, I haven't.*
>
> *(Yosef) "[laughter] So I think it's about time."*

Yosef understood himself and other IDF soldiers in the Mifgash primarily as representatives of Israel, not as harbingers of Jewish belonging and identity for their diaspora peers. His occupational responsibility in selecting Israeli participants was explicitly linked to educational aims, in advancing a shared epistemology of the country. In discussing his motivation

to consistently participate, the opportunity to express Israeli national identity emerged as a prominent point of interest, with a strong suggestion that Jewishness on its own did not blur the boundaries of belonging in the nation-state— Yosef expressed concern that diaspora Jews were alienated by international representations of Israel, requiring firsthand experience in Birthright's pedagogy to reverse it.

> *(me) What initially brought you to want to participate? And other Israelis that participate, what are the motivations?*
>
> *(Yosef) "Mostly people want to do it for the experience itself. Most of the people don't really have much other than that, there is a ton of good things that you hear about from everybody about it, and for a good reason. That's an amazing adventure to have. Some of them do want to show the country, and I think in the last two years that's maybe been different. My first birthright was eight years ago. Times looked different back then. But I've been with [Lili] like two years ago, or maybe a year ago. The Birthright was contacting me because there were not enough people, so they asked me to come. I think [because of] the war maybe things have changed, I don't know how it looks right now in the army. But for me at least, it was different because there was really a thing that we should let them see and know what happened and how it happened. To show them the real Israel and how Israel is really not how the media put it out."*

In Yosef's view, I speculate that a transnational Zionist identity is a salve against negative perceptions of Israel, suggesting that participants should come away from the experience of Birthright with an understanding of shared origins in the land of Israel, despite not being Israeli nationals themselves. Sensing a boundary, I probed Yosef for clarity.

> *(me) I am interested in especially your interactions with non-Israeli Jewish kids coming onto the trip; the ways that you relate to each other, the ways that you can see differences.*
>
> *(Yosef) "You know, that's interesting, because to go to Birthright, you don't have to be full Jewish, you just have to have a grandmother that is Jewish, so not… I think it was around 2017 that I was on a Birthright, where there were more Christians, like they believe more in Christianity than Judaism. Actually, my cousins in Hungary are half Jewish, half Christians. It was interesting to ask them about how they experience these things: do they have any more relation to Israel before and after [the trip] and to Judaism? Which they don't or didn't have. [laughter] But it was interesting and they learned a few [things] about their origins."*

Some participants in Birthright are not Jewish according to Halakha, or Jewish Law; this means someone born to a Jewish mother or someone who has converted to Judaism through a recognized halakhic conversion process. Instead, Birthright's eligibility requirements are more similarly aligned with the Israeli Law of Return, which dictates that those eligible for naturalization must have at least one Jewish grandparent. As Birthright requires participants must have "at least one Jewish birth parent," that parent may be Halakhically Jewish via their own mother. Many participants, like Luca, claim Jewish heritage through their father. There is a subtle meta-statement in Yosef's reflection on the boundaries of Jewish identity, which I believe rejects popular Zionist configurations of Jewish belonging that emphasize ethnicity and culture—configurations that conveniently widen the net of Zionist belonging. Such a rejection of religious law foregrounds the operational saliency of Zionism as a salve to internal divisions across the spectrum of Jewish identity. Now more widely accepted in Jewish communities, patrilineal descent has increasingly qualified Jewish belonging (Eleff, 2018. Gibel Mevorach, 2000). These narratives will reemerge in the thematic analyses of what participants understand of Birthright's thematic programming around Jewish continuity.

4.2. Grief and Memory

Those I interviewed also raised the topic of commemoration. Perla and Sofia individually reflected on their visit to Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial institution to the victims of the Holocaust. Standard within the itinerary of Birthright trips, visits to Yad Vashem function as a ritual of collective memory that situates participants within a narrative of Jewish historical trauma and existential vulnerability. By invoking the Holocaust as a foundational moment of shared suffering, the site operates as an affective device that legitimizes Zionism as a protective response. This form of memory politics selectively amplifies trauma to cultivate affective solidarity, moral

urgency, and political alignment with Zionism. The experience thus facilitates a process of interpellation, wherein participants come to see themselves as subjects of a transgenerational Zionist project. However, Perla and Sofia found the experience challenging.

> *(Perla) "There was a very like, failed attempt at a moment of connection, which was after the Holocaust Museum [Yad Vashem]. I think that was handled very poorly. It's a very difficult place to see and to be in and usually afterwards they try to have a moment of reflection. But they always went outside and it was raining and everyone was just really struggling with their feelings."*
>
> *(me) What made it a failure, a failed moment?*
>
> *(Perla) "I think they weren't able to accommodate or provide the support that people might have needed at the time. And everyone was in a really weird mood. You know, the trip is all the time like, 'oh, fun, fun. Just go here and there,' and it's very intense and fast-paced and that was the vibe after, so everyone was like, 'just leave us alone for a bit.'"*
>
> *(me) Do you think that had more to do with just the sort of the scheduling of the itinerary or was it anything specific?*
>
> *(Perla) "I think it was a combination. They didn't have a Plan B, which I find strange. And that in combination with our madrichim's vibes and the guide's. As well as that right after they took us to this cemetery, where it's like, the heroes of the nation, soldiers and presidents."*
>
> *(me) Were they trying to connect this to the experience you just had at Yad Vashem?*
>
> *(Perla) "Definitely. It was a Zionist discourse, like 'look, we need things to be this way. It's because of the Holocaust. See how much we still need to fight for,' And I think a lot of people in the group were not buying that."*

Notably, Perla explicitly interpreted the experience and her role as a subject in a larger Zionist project, emphasizing Jewish continuity. In her view, the memory of the Holocaust was invoked in an attempt by organizers to legitimize not only the security apparatus itself, but the human lives that have been lost in its service. According to Perla, such a justification was not widely accepted by those in her group. Previous scholarship has documented the affective efficacy of Birthright's visits to Yad Vashem, attributing its impact to the emotional intensity of Holocaust commemoration (Kelner, 2010. Cohen, E. H. 2008.) However, in Perla's account, this affective potential was also undermined by a lack of adequate support and accommodation by staffers. While

the ideological contours of the program's pedagogical intent were perceptible—namely, the mobilization of trauma to foster identification with the Israeli state—they failed, in her case, to produce the intended attachment. Instead, the experience exposed the instrumentalization of memory, rendering the emotional appeal legible but affectively unconvincing. Sofia's account was critical of this particular event as well, but she did not relate it to Zionist ideology. Her description did not focus on the perceived intent of the program nor did she make any inference of its thematic programming. Instead, she explained in candid terms how it was experienced emotionally.

> *(Sofia) "There was a superficiality in the way some things were treated. We went to the Holocaust Museum and we were all buried down afterwards. That day we had a plan in the night to go dancing or to go to a bar, the only day that they allowed you to drink alcohol. It's all very scheduled and the thing is, if we would have gone to the museum and then had some time to rest, to first do other things and then go dancing… Perfect. But we had an activity to think about the museum and to exchange, after dinner and before the plan to go out. And it was really deep, you know. We had another activity to be happier, and then go dancing, and it was like, 'this is a lot and I cannot process all this in one hour.' The Madrichim were really young, younger than most of the group. I really like them and I enjoyed it and I put the best of me in all the activities, but sometimes it was like, 'you are not planning this correctly! You are playing with my emotions; you make me think of horrible things. And then you pretend me to go dancing!' Some things didn't work out very well; I remember that very well. And in the whole package, not only that day. This is serious stuff and it's all treated like a high school game. It's like a strange salad."*
>
> *(Sofia) "Not intentionally, obviously not intentionally. They were really young. They don't think someone could start crying. I remember some of us getting really emotional and in touch with a lot of things. […] So, it's not like they were playing with my emotions, but it's like they were not aware that it could impact you."*

The tension Sofia described reveals a conflict between affective engagement and programmatic choreography, in which rapid alternation between mourning and celebration undermined the capacity for sustained reflection. Sofia critiqued the way emotional transitions were managed—describing the experience as "a strange salad"—a metaphor suggesting the incoherence of emotional sequencing and the lack of integration between affective registers. Her characterization of the Madrichim as "really young" and unaware of potential emotional responses

further highlights a structural failure in the delegation of significant emotional facilitation to underprepared or unequipped actors. Such a misalignment points to a broader issue in Birthright's pedagogical model and how it employs thematic programming, wherein the emotional labor required for processing collective trauma is both expected and simultaneously unacknowledged. Sofia perceived a trivialization of that trauma, contributing not to ideological consolidation but to critical distancing. Rather than reinforcing a coherent Zionist narrative, the experience produced friction—between intent and execution, between ideology and embodiment. These disconnects call attention to how subjects may resist or reinterpret Zionism's emotional logics.

Lili's account, on the other hand, suggested that Holocaust memory politics limit Jewish collective identity, but that engaging with collective trauma could ultimately result in a deepened attachment to Israel, as this was the case for her. Lili's framing of the Holocaust as both a "connection point" and a limiting framework underscores the emotional and epistemological constraints such memory regimes can produce:

> *(Lili) "I think for most Eastern Europeans that's the channel we can [use to] connect. I have distant family in Israel but I only met them like one or two times. And even to them, my connection is that my Great grandmother's siblings moved to Israel, and then they are their descendants. So again, I have to go back to the Holocaust story to find this connection. And it is sad but that is like the point [of reference]. Otherwise, how can I connect Israel to my life? That's sad. And that's exactly the reason why I like to be in Israel and see that it's not sad. Well, sometimes it is. But I think that many people in Hungary have this Holocaust-centered Jewish identity, which I don't think is good, but I also had that and I grew up in that basically and so do many other people. So, it's a good connection point, because basically that's the only thing you heard in your life. We never did Shabbat dinner, but I knew about the Holocaust since I was in kindergarten, it's mad. I think that Birthright can be a starting point for you to start to change that narrative of your own Jewish identity, that it's not only about traumas and bad things, and crying, and sad things."*

Lili refers to an identity forged not through lived ritual practice or cultural continuity, but through encounters with the historiography of Jewish persecution. She suggested that through an institutionally mediated encounter with Israel, Birthright participants may rupture such a narrative

about their own identities. The diversity in my subjects' perceptions highlights the ambivalence of Holocaust memory and Zionist commemoration practices more broadly as both a binding force and a melancholic inheritance. Their experiences during Birthright exemplify how institutionalized memory politics enacted in a setting of affective nationalism shapes subjectivities unevenly, with participants both adopting and contesting the terms through which they are asked to remember and to belong.

4.3. Militarism and Duty

For every diaspora participant I interviewed, exposure to military violence during their visit to Israel was a profoundly novel experience. Unlike the often abstract and idealized narratives about Israel circulating in diasporic communities, the reality of state security tensions infiltrated participants' sensory and emotional worlds, disrupting preconceived notions of Israel as a safe, unified homeland. Through firsthand experience of unrest, military presence, and national crises, participants like Noah found their previously held Zionist attachments complicated by fear and unrest. This section explores how these encounters with military violence served not only as moments of personal crisis but also as critical junctures where diasporic identities and loyalties were reexamined in light of the stark realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

> *(Noah) "It was a really complicated trip… for many reasons. I was there when 3 Yeshiva students got kidnapped. I think they got kidnapped maybe the day before or the day I got there. I didn't have too many views or opinions of the country other than that the situation in the Middle East is complicated. And Israel's one of the only US allies out there, and a Jewish nation. And so, I'd just always been like, 'well, that's important to me and Jewish people and blah blah blah.' But while I was there, I was an adult, a young adult, but an adult is different, you know. You see complexities in the world. But anyway, it was just the worst national crisis they had seen in a long time, up until now. The first couple days we were there, we were in Jerusalem and we were at the Western Wall, and all of a sudden there were gunshots and smoke and sirens and everything was crazy. And you know, every Birthright group has a couple of soldiers that accompany them, and they're like 'We need to get to the bus. We need to get out right now.' [Then] we are filtered out to the bus and it was when people at the mosque… there was an Imam? [unsure] Who was basically inciting his congregation to a riot. They were throwing rocks down at people praying at the wall.*

The IDF got involved. And it was just a huge fucking mess; a huge flashpoint. We were whisked away to a kibbutz close to the border; I think we stayed there that night or the night after and I was in bed listening to bombs falling. And I, [shaken], and it was, I mean, it was just a bunch of crazy incidences like that. And that kept on happening."

Noah's sensory recall—"in bed listening to bombs falling"—serves as a vector for his political consciousness, and his personal exposure to violence oriented his perception, introducing moral and emotional complexity to his Zionist foundations. His framing of events reflects disillusionment, disrupting previously simplified diasporic loyalties.

(Noah) "Because really the only reason I did birthright is [for] free tickets to Israel, [because] I want to travel, I want to see the world, that was really my only thing. The guided trip part made me really frustrated and weirded me out because it was like we were being handled. [grimace] And I think I've always been sensitive to that to some degree. But I was like this, 'This is really weird. This sucks.' And in the midst of all this crazy shit happening, we were going to talks with ex-CIA operatives who are like 'This is why Israel's enemies are shit and this is why they're bad people. You gotta see the graveyards, they're sites of battles or wars.' We got to go play in the tanks and stuff. Really crazy, really intense. I don't know what [this was]; propaganda, I guess it's propaganda. It's just a shitload of that. In the days after the trip I was there on my own, I saw all kinds of violence and my takeaway was this is really fucked up. I don't really understand everything that's happening out here. Like what? [questioning] It's for the [Jewish Israeli] people here, but my takeaway was I never, ever ever, ever, ever, ever in my life want to live in a war zone. This is hellish. This was my biggest takeaway from all that."

Here, Noah's reflections highlight the contested terrain of Zionist interpellation and the limitations of the state's narrative control. Initially motivated by "free tickets to Israel", he entered the program as a consumer of experience but found himself as a subject to be shaped, an experience that was unsettling and alienating. Noah's visceral emotional reaction points to the embodied experience of Birthright's thematic programming, in participants were not merely taught, but managed or "handled". His exposure to "ex-CIA operatives" and the staging of military hardware illustrates how militarism and nationalism are naturalized through immersive, often performative encounters with the security apparatus. Noah identified these practices as "propaganda," marking

a critical awareness of a Zionist ideological framing, which the program seemingly sought to render invisible through emotionally resonant and pedagogically curated moments.

> *(Noah) "There were a couple times when sirens went off and people were like, 'missiles are headed into Tel Aviv!' And [then] nothing happens. I don't know how it was, [if it was] the Iron Dome or [if] it was just bad intelligence, or what. But I was scared in a way that I wasn't ever familiar with. And that's on the Israeli side of things! It was a scary time and I was really exposed to some violence and some stuff that really stuck with me. And I wasn't ever really thinking I hope Israel wins, or I hope Palestine or Jordan wins the war. Whatever. I was just like, 'this is scary and fucked up' and people are getting killed and hurt. I feel like my 20-year-old brain couldn't handle this or process this really."*

> *(Noah) "And they were sort of like, 'if you are scared or if you need anything crazy, go to the doctors. You can talk to them, talk to us.' I think we were all a little rattled, especially after that first day in Jerusalem. I think they had to change the trip around and they were definitely like, 'You know, we can talk about whatever you want.' But obviously it was a very Jewish-Israeli side. That's the only side of it you're getting. And one part of the trip that also really stuck with me was with the ex-CIA operatives. Basically, he's like, 'yeah, I've worked with this group for 20 years with the American government, and this is the history of the last 30 years.' And it was really skewed. It was really skewed towards pro-Israel and it was giving one hand propaganda, heavy. It was a really well spoken, well delivered history [so] I was like, [emphasizing] 'man, I don't know any of this shit, this is crazy.'"*

Noah's fear was not abstract or ideological, but embodied and immediate, a raw affective response that resisted political polarization. He explicitly distanced himself from nationalist affiliations and instead centers the human cost of violence, suggesting a breakdown of the moral binaries advanced by the Zionist security discourses he was offered, which framed Israel as the rational and moral actor in a hostile environment. Noah's reaction bypassed these frames entirely, demonstrating an alternative position as a subject of the program: not an engaged diaspora Zionist invested in the State of Israel nor an anti-Zionist, but an overwhelmed and emotionally saturated observer. Rather than an invitation into the Zionist project, what emerged for Noah was a distinct moment of traumatic ambivalence, where thematic meaning broke down and emotion eclipsed ideological messaging.

(Noah) "There's a shitload of ancient history there, Masada's got stories, and there's all sorts of biblical fucking places. We were in the Golan Heights and I think we were on a disputed border with Lebanon at the time, but they're obviously taking us out there. They're like, 'This is our land. This is where we fought the war. And that's the fucking sea of Galilee.' We went to a few ancient sites like the Temple Mount, of course, in Jerusalem. And a few archaeological digs, which I thought were really, really fascinating. But it was obviously with the whole bent of like 'this is where the Jews did this biblical thing. And this is where the first Jewish temple was. That was ransacked by Alexander the Great or the Romans or whatever.' Which you know, it's not really a false history, but it's, you know... It's cool to be made to feel like you are part of that history."

In Noah's account, being taken to disputed areas like the Golan Heights is particularly significant. This spatial positioning—"this is our land," spoken at the site of military conflict—functions as a performative act of territorial claim-making where ancient belonging and military modern sacrifice towards Jewish continuity are blurred.

Like Noah, Perla was dubious of the discourses that pervaded her trip and reflected on a broader theme of security theater, where the symbolic function of weapons is to convey protection. According to her, she did not share this interpretation, especially because she came from a far less openly and visibly militarized society.

(Perla) "As I had already been, I was not as surprised by how intensely militarized Israel is all the time. In Argentina, you can go your entire life without seeing a gun in person, so it's a shock to be surrounded by guns constantly. Even though I have been [before], that was intense. I was already very familiarized with the discourse and the whole thing; the whole story that they do around it, so that wasn't so impactful for me."

(me) Were there any particular incidences that you think of or was it just an overall impression of the environment?

(Perla) "Both. There's a security person with you all the time who has a gun, who shows you the gun like, 'look, you're safe because we have a gun.' There was one day when the bus that took us everywhere stopped and there were two soldiers waiting for public transport, and they're always carrying their long guns. They were very unaware of them. One of them, as one of my friends was getting off [of the bus] was basically pointing at him, directed to him. Which was not intentional at all, but he was very affected by it and it and he brought it up to the guide and he was brushed off. And then finally we had 3 Israeli people join us for parts of the trip. Everyone goes to the military, but the guy had been [recently] fighting and he would talk about that a lot. And like, [whispering] how many

people he killed. [resumes normal speech] Things like this, very openly and in a bragging way, which was also a bit of a shock."

Perla's reflections suggest the banalization of military violence in Israeli civic identity. For diaspora participants in Birthright, such encounters can be alienating rather than solidaristic. Having described his behavior as "bragging" further signals a critical distance between diaspora participants and the normative Israeli attitude toward militarism, highlighting a moral and cultural gap that was not closed by the Zionist project and disrupted the intended affective trajectory of the trip. Sofia expressed a similar concern that reflected her personal national identification.

(Sofia) "I just remembered something- for me the trip was really scary also. I remember all the time the happy things because it was a really happy trip, but I got really scared at some point because there was a situation in relation to the war. […] And for me, it's a lot. I'm not used to being in a country's war. It gave me a lot of fear; I was really anxious. I was really stressed and upset. […] I think that one of the main objectives of the trip is that people get to know the country and maybe want to go later to live there. And for me it was like 'nope!' [laughter] I prefer economic instability. I cannot live in a country that's like that, it's too much for me. If you grew up there, maybe you're used to it and then you come to Argentina and you say 'the dollar is changing all the time. How can you live like that?' And I'm like, I'm used to that and I'm not used to bombs. You know your own bad things. For me, it's too stressful."

(Luca) "I was particularly scared after the [Birthright] trip with them. I made another five-day trip continuation with another group, and I had a lot of anxiety there because I didn't know them and I missed my old group. They took us near the border to Gaza. I thought, 'this is very scary and I don't want to be here.' I really didn't enjoy those five days, but it was a mix of everything, missing all the people that I was [now] attached to, missing [Sofia], and all the things coming in my near future in Spain with my girlfriend and what was going to happen. But in particular it was those five days that I really didn't enjoy."

Luca expressed a conflation of multiple emotional stressors during the extension of his Birthright experience: separation anxiety, romantic uncertainty, and existential worry about the future. These elements compounded, leaving him a state in which he could not meaningfully engage with the trip experience. Like other subjects, the emotional intensity worked against his ability to absorb Zionist pedagogy and identification with Israel, which he and Sofia were both rather forthcoming about.

(Sofia) "I remember a lot of war talk. The guide was a really interesting man, he was Argentinian too, but he was a war expert. So maybe his main focus when he was talking about historical things all the time was in relation with weapons or fights or the army and all things I never think about. I think about that when I study European history, but it's not a present thing for me. To be in a touristic place, and to say 'there was a bombing there. There's a hole because there was a bombing there.' It's not like that was 100 years ago. That's now. So that was really stressful for me. I don't want to be thinking all the time about that. I don't want to see all the wreckage and all the results of war, especially if it's something that's still happening. It's not like going to the Holocaust Museum. That's OK, that's long gone- I hope. I think that the constant feeling in the trip for me was that I'm connected with something that's really strong for me. But I'm very I'm a very sensitive person; I don't want to watch movies that are too strong either. That kind of tourism was… I don't know, maybe it's the way this man approached the subject because it was his specialty. And then when we went to historical places, I was like [emphasizing, gesturing] fascinated. I remember that feeling of [grimace] 'Too much information. I don't want to know this.' They're so used to it! [gesturing] I don't want to think about death and war. [laughter]"

Rather than situating violence within a safely distant past, Sofia claims that their guide emphasized its ongoing presence, collapsing temporal distance and invoking a living memory of armed conflict. This mode of narration unsettled Sofia's boundaries. Her self-described emotional overwhelm and resistance is suggestive of the friction created by Zionist ideological paradigms against the personal thresholds of diasporic participants unaccustomed to a cultural militarization.

(Me) "What do you guys think about any of the current events happening in Israel and in Palestine? Do you find yourself thinking about your experiences that you had there more because of it?"

(Luca) "I'm quite disconnected from that. I'm trying to empathize with the things, but I'm here, I'm living in another country with my own things, I don't want to overload. I mean, it's not automatic, it doesn't just happen to me. Even having a familiarity there, it's not a thing that I'm thinking about or on my mind."

(Sofia) "I don't think about it, but it's more intentional. I try not to connect with those things because it would make me unstable here. There's nothing I can do for them. Maybe there is, but right now, no. It's not personal with this event or these worries or everything that's happening around the world. I don't watch the news; I'm disconnected with the actuality of the world because it upsets me a lot. I've been like this my whole life. But I remember after the trip, being more unable to disconnect from what's happening because I've just been there so it's stronger. I remember a year ago, I think that there was like a huge event, I don't remember what happened, but a friend's sister was leaving [Israel], so she had to come here. So that I connected with personally. Everyone was posting on Instagram like my family's there, my friends are there. So yeah, it was really strong, but I don't think it was

more upsetting because I've been there. It would have been upsetting if I hadn't been in Israel."

(Luca) "The same for me."

(Me) "So you think the trip did not really impact your perspective on the conflict?"

(Sofia) "No, I think the conflict was already a big deal for me before going, but not because I knew the country or the people. And I really didn't get to know the people that live there. Maybe if it had been another type of trip, like not with the group… I feel like I only met Argentinian people, I didn't meet any Israelis. I feel like it would have been different if I had met a family that lives there or made some a friend that live in Israel, then I would have been thinking of them. But I didn't. The trip was with all Argentinian people and historical sites. So I feel like my perspective of the conflict is more or less the same: it upsets me. It upsets me now and it upset me before in the same way."

(Sofia) "In relation to the conflict, the Israel-Palestine conflict, I believe [Perla] has some more strong views of it. She has more ideas about it. We are all political people, but I am not as interested in politics. As I told you, I'm a sensitive person. I cannot take sides; I'm just upset it's happening. People are dying. My grandmother is really a Zionist; she really believes Israel is all in the right. I don't think so, but I'm not on the other side either. When she talks about it [pantomimes a zipper over the mouth] I don't contradict her and just let her be. For me it's more like a very childish 'stop fighting, please!' [laughter] I know it's not that simple. If it were, it wouldn't be happening."

(Sofia) "[My grandmother] sends these chains in WhatsApp, maybe not about the conflict but like 'Israel is the place where more scientific things are happening. We're Israelis. Israel is fantastic!' And I'm like, 'great.' [indifferent] I don't feel I own that. I don't relate to that, but she does. Definitely in the conflict she's sad, she's sad about the Jewish part. [laughter] She's not sad about the conflict itself, like I am. She's definitely on one side. For her, it's a great achievement to have a country."

Although my question was posed towards current events, the responses from Luca and Sofia illuminate the latent emotional and ideological impact of the exposure to Zionist narratives tied to militarism and national duty that they were exposed to through Birthright. Notably, they both described a feeling of disconnect after their trip, but their disengagement should be read against the backdrop of their earlier immersion in a heavily securitized and militarized environment. Luca's emphasis on not wanting to "overload" and Sofia's active avoidance of the news cycle reflect an aversion to the emotional burden of being implicitly recruited into a geopolitical, nationalist narrative of belonging, obligation, and defense. Their detachment may

represent a subtle resistance to the ideological hailing that often occurs through Zionist pedagogies within Birthright. Sofia's recollection that a friend's sister fleeing Israel made her feel more personally affected than general conflict illustrates how the militarization of national belonging operates unevenly across diasporic bodies. She implies that affective resonance with Israel is activated not by the ideological appeals of Zionism to the diaspora, but through personal relational proximity. This underscores a recurring ethnographic trend in my data collection; while Birthright may seek to instill a sense of national duty through exposure to militarism, participants may mediate their relationship to these messages through emotional boundaries, skepticism, or personal coping strategies.

As an informal representative of the program, Yosef had further insight into how Birthright's programming adapted to geopolitical demands, and how its institutional objectives were implicated.

> *(me) "So, the last time you went on the trip was a year ago [Summer of 2024]. Did you notice any differences in the questions people are asking and the ways people are trying to relate to the experience? Obviously since the 7th of October, [Lili] was saying that the trip organizers didn't give any information really about it, but that they were very open to speaking with the Israelis on the trip, and that was more important with regard to October 7th."*
>
> *(Yosef) "Yeah, there's no denying that most of the talk was about 7th October because it was a huge impact on the whole of Israeli society. Mostly in the evenings we got to talk serious; the subject would come up and the trip was a bit different because of it. Not only that, but you could also see that the group was really small. They had to combine Hungarians and Czechs because they just didn't have enough people and a lot of canceling in the last minute because of it. That has definitely had a big impact. When things get serious outside the main program, usually it was around that. It definitely was felt. A lot of those in the Israeli group has lost friends over there, so there was a lot to talk about."*
>
> *(me) "I'm also curious if you feel this has affected the sort of objective of the birthright trips in general, because a lot of people I've talked to who went on the trip years and years ago, there was very much this encouragement to make Aliyah and move to Israel. I'm curious if that is still part of the programming, or how it's approached, how it's handled since [7 October]."*

(Yosef) "Is this conversation recorded? [laughter] OK, so we should not allow it to be said that the Birthright is meant for Aliyah, even though that's how it feels. Sorry, I have intel from the inside, so I know what I should talk about and what I should not. So yeah, it's not a secret that that's hopefully what people may do. The main issue is to have closer connection to Israel and the Jewish community. Which, if you will have a strong enough connection, you may do Aliyah, which makes sense. So yeah, that still feels like the main part of the program, but you can't ignore the fact that Israel has a really bad name in the world since 7th of October and it was much worse a year ago. So, it does change some of the programs- to talk more about it— and that makes sense. You need to not just make them feel more of a connection to Israel, you also need to change their mind about what they heard before in the media."

Yosef's admission—couched in humor and qualified by insider awareness—that the trip implicitly encourages Aliyah despite public denials, illuminates Birthright's pedagogical intent driving its thematic programming. His concluding comment that "you need to not just make them feel more of a connection to Israel, you also need to change their mind about what they heard before in the media," explicitly outlines how he believes that the trip serves as ideological remediation. He suggests that the program has recalibrated to counter a digital information environment that has been increasingly critical of Israel since October 7th, especially among younger Jews. Overall, his reflections illustrate how Birthright's pedagogy blends collective trauma with discursive containment to sustain Zionist attachment to Israel in a moment of reputational crisis.

4.4. Sexuality and Partnership

The official blog of the Birthright Israel Foundation features a curated series of personal narratives highlighting romantic relationships that began during the program. These accounts situate individual love stories within the symbolic and physical landscape of Israel's historical sites, framing romantic connection as part of a broader collective Jewish experience. The narratives emphasize not only emotional intimacy but also the affective power of shared heritage and national belonging. In doing so, they contribute to a cultural discourse in which personal memory becomes

intertwined with Zionist identity and collective memory. Excerpts from these narratives highlight these thematic elements, such as "It was on the second day in Tiberius [sic], overlooking the Sea of Galilee, that she knew they had something special." In what is supposedly a direct quote from the alum in question, she states, "We repelled down a mountain together, watched the sunrise on Masada, rode a camel together, floated in the Dead Sea, and so many hikes I lost count! Fast forward about 5 years, Shar and I were on a cruise over Hanukkah with my family and he proposed in front of the menorah on the 7th night of Hanukkah. Less than a year later, we were married!" [11]

When broaching the topic of romance, and social attachment more broadly, with Sofia and Luca, they raised the notion that heightened emotional bonds were born from their shared experiences of place. They were forthcoming in their belief that the emotional pitch of the program was not incidental, but by design, very much aware of how they had been "hailed."

> *(Sofia) "I think the activities and the intensity that the trip proposes helped because we had opportunities to talk and share all the time. And I think it's one of the objectives of the trip. Like they want people to meet and to have relationships as a partner or as a friend, you know?"*
>
> *(me) I'm curious about this intensity that you're describing and the way that it's encouraged by the organizers, or by your chaperones.*
>
> *(Sofia) "I like the word you said, 'encourage.' Yeah, they encourage you to open. Not only to share time, but to share feelings. […] It's deep if you are open to it. […] You feel like you are in a teenage trip in some sense. Like a graduation trip, that kind of thing. The proposal is to be open, to be intense, to make connections. […] If you want to go deep, you go deep. I think we decided to go deep."*
>
> *(Sofia) "[laughter] It was quite funny, we all knew one of the goals of the trip was to make couples. The Madrichim were making jokes all the time like, 'there's no couples, no one's kissing! No one's holding hands!' It was a thing that we talked about. Nothing happened with anyone for a lot of days, so the first time we kissed, we made it a secret for one day."*

[11] Brodie, G. (2021, March 3). 8 married couples who met on a birthright Israel trip. Birthright Israel Blog. https://www.blog.birthrightisrael.com/8-married-couples-who-met-on-a-birthright-israel-trip/

Interestingly, the pressure to form couples actually made the pair secretive regarding their relationship, suggesting that it was informed by a regulatory scheme. In light of a strong normative objective, it is possible that their individual and shared identities could be eclipsed by being a specifically *Jewish* couple, rather than themselves. Sofia affirmed at multiple points that neither she nor Luca perceived themselves as such, and that their relationship was not defined by their Jewishness but contingent on their other similarities, strongly influenced by their relations to and within Buenos Aires; Perla was compelled to characterize the pair in the same way.

> *(Sofia) "I think it's not strange to meet someone you like and to form a strong relationship, but I think ours is pretty unique- we could have met in another place and hit it off. We have friends in common but we didn't know that before the trip. But it happened there. For me, it's a great coincidence. One in a million. That's my feeling."*

Having noted the explicit encouragement of their Madrichim, Sofia seemingly did not believe that the program was successful in forming couples. This particular phenomenon is of course difficult to precisely enumerate. Unlike the couples featured on the Birthright Foundation's blog, Sofia and Luca did not attribute the success of their relationship to the program at all precisely because they were aware of the efforts made by organizers. For Perla, such efforts were not as warmly interpreted. However, she entered the program expecting as much and was perhaps defensive against potential pressures.

> *(Perla)* "*There was a lot of talk about hooking up. There's a night in the Bedouin settlement in the desert, and all the groups sleep together in a tent. The morning after that our guide came up to us at breakfast and he asked, 'has there been fluid exchange?' I think we said 'no, what the fuck?' So, people responded a bit shocked to him. It was an interesting choice of words."*

The presence of this matchmaking undercurrent, combined with the pointed "fluid exchange" comment, illustrates how Zionist pronatalism operates not through official policy, but through culture and implication. This operates in line with longstanding Zionist concerns about Jewish demographic decline.

(me) You said that there was a lot of talk of hooking up. Was it from the other participants or was it coming from your guide?

(Perla) "A bit from the guide, a bit from the Madrichim; not so much from the group. We all felt this pressure. I remember that half the trip had gone by and one night we all came up with a plan to pretend that two of the people in the group had hooked up and to play along with that. Then people started hooking up for real."

(me) For what reason did you want to pretend?

(Perla) "Because it wasn't happening and the pressure was so big that we just wanted to have some fun with it. The comment about fluid exchange was the most explicit one, but it was a constant thing."

(me) Was it framed in a way like you should be looking for somebody? What do you think?

(Perla) "Maybe I'm not the ideal person to ask because I was already very aware of the dynamic, this sort of goal behind it that's like, 'meet a nice Jewish boy or girl and get married and move to Israel' vibe that I understand to be behind the trip."

(me) When people did start hooking up, what did you observe about these relationships?

(Perla) "I think for most of them it was just a fun thing during the trip. None of them felt a serious thing, except one couple. But it wasn't framed as this. It was just that they met, they hit it off, they're actually still together, to this day in Buenos Aires. They didn't move to Israel."

As mentioned, Perla seemingly shared Sofia and Luca's sentiment regarding the relationship: because the pressure to form a Jewish couple, and moreover one that had strong ties to Israel, was so palpable that they wanted to clarify that they should not be characterized in such a way. Perla's awareness of the "meet a nice Jewish boy/girl and move to Israel" subtext points to a collective recognition of how sexuality, intimacy, and Zionist duty are fused in Birthright discourse that hails its diaspora participants.

(Perla) "I also think we were not the best test subjects for this experiment, because again, we were very progressive, and not very queer, but very aware."

(me) So, you came in with some preconceived notions about the whole thing. Did any of these notions change or shift, or were they strengthened by the trip or…?

(Perla) "To me, they were very much strengthened. I was like, OK, I've read some stuff about this and it's very real when you're there."

(me) And you mean the stuff about what, exactly?

(Perla) "About this encouragement for emotional, sexual relationships. But also, a lot of—and I don't want to say emotional manipulation, because I think that's strong—but there were a lot of these moments where they make you do exercises where you're reflecting upon the people that you've met and the feelings of being in the 'promised land' or whatever."

As Perla recognized herself as a subject and had critically examined her role in what she saw as a social experiment, she had in fact tested its limitations. This aspect of her experience was particularly interesting. Rather than merely acknowledging Zionist paradigms presented by the program, let alone accepting their imperatives, she actively reframed them in the context of her queer identity. Having done so, she suggested that their guide adapted his approach in advocating for repatriation to Israel in the context of marriage, problematizing traditional Zionist endogamy while also reflecting on where it intersected in state policy.

(Perla) "When talking about Israeli [citizenry], our guide was like, 'oh, 80% has to be Jewish and then 20% can be something else.' He is Jewish, but his wife had to convert. He was talking about that because in Israel you can't get married if your mother isn't Jewish. Because, I guess, he thought that we might be interested in it, he said 'also Israel is the only country in the Middle East that accepts LGBT marriages, there is equal marriage.' But we were like, 'no, it doesn't.' And he was like, 'yes, if you go and get married in another country, Israel will recognize it.' [laughter] But you can't get married there, so, we discussed marriage equality."

Whereas my Argentinian interlocutors had much to say about their interpretations of romantic and sexual encouragement and even some explicit pronatalist aims, Yosef, as a staffer, did not elaborate on the topic. Although brief, his statement offers a key insight: that romantic and sexual encounters while participating in Birthright are "natural." The so-called experiment in which Perla found herself and her group is implicitly unnatural or manufactured.

(Yosef) "Usually there is romantic scenes going on, between the foreigners and other foreigners, between the foreigners and the Israelis, and between the Israelis. You can't ignore if you put bunch of young people stuck in the same place, something would happen, and it's not a bad thing, it's just kind of natural. So yeah, that happens."

Diaspora participants expressed strong feelings about Birthright's programming and their interpretation of pronatalist thematic elements, unlike Yosef, who was not the primary subject and

thus indifferent. The contrast in their interpretations might suggest that the pronatalist thematic programming of Birthright fails to achieve its aims when made widely conspicuous. Yosef's embeddedness in the Zionist project is perhaps why such encounters were normalized in the context of Birthright and therefore of little interest.

Noah had a particularly distressing and emotionally fraught experience while attending Birthright and in its aftermath that he attributed to the escalation of Israel's military assault on Gaza, as well as the program's pronatalist orientation. Coincidentally, he had arrived in Israel in the days following the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers that had been hitchhiking in the West Bank. Despite the acute tensions posed by these events against the larger backdrop of Israel's security apparatus, Noah reported that a sexualized culture prevailed and was perhaps facilitated by organizers. Within this context, he recounted being the victim of sexual misconduct.

> *(me) I think there's also an unofficial objective felt on many of the trips, trying to encourage kids to partner up. I'm wondering if you felt encouraged in some way to do it because there's a huge diversity of experiences in this, for both the organizers and the participants.*
>
> *(Noah) "There's definitely a current of that. I didn't feel like I fit in with most of the kids, so I wasn't really attracted to anyone, but there was a current of that and I think me and my buddy [Jaime] were talking about it because it was weird. It did seem like they were setting up opportunities for kids to do that. I think a lot of the kids on the trip did hook up. Maybe. [pause] It was funny, because…. [uncomfortable] Well, I mean, after the trip was over, basically the American trip leader sexually assaulted me. She was like, 'come stay, I have my family here. They're Orthodox Jews, they live in Jerusalem, they have an extra bedroom, you need a place to stay, you can come stay here.' I didn't know that she had feelings for me or anything like that, but I spent a couple nights there and... [uncomfortable] Yeah, I don't know. [pause] That happened a couple times and then I left."*
>
> *(me) That's horrible. I'm sorry. And at this point, your friend is also not around?*
>
> *(Noah) "I was on my own. [Jaime] was gone. Trip was over. I think when she found out I had extended my trip, she [also] did. She said we'd 'hang out.' I didn't realize what she meant. So that was maybe part of that thing they're trying to set up between people—but it obviously wasn't a good thing. [cries] [uncomfortable laughter] Sorry, I've never really talked about it much. And then, seeing your project… I've got some stuff to talk about."*
>
> *(me) Yeah, of course it's not. Thank you for talking about it.*

(Noah) "It's also funny, after the trip ended, a couple days after I got home, the Israeli soldier who was with us, she emailed me and she was like 'I'm in love with you.'"

(me) OK. What the fuck was going on in this trip?

(Noah) "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. [laughter]"

(me) Do you remember how you responded to that e-mail?

(Noah) "I don't remember. I kind of wish I still had them. But I was friendly and you know, I was back home in the US. [I thought] 'This is weird. I don't want to hurt this person's feelings, but like, obviously, I'm never going back there if I can help it.' [emphasizing] I'm never ever going to go back to it again. *So, I was like,' oh, I don't really feel that way. But maybe we can be pen-pals or something.' And then I slowly let that drop off and die over a few weeks."*

(Noah) "It was actually really surprising to get that message. I had a lot more signals from the trip organizer that she liked me, that I also just didn't really think about much."

(Noah) "I thought about reaching out to the organization to say, 'this happens.' But I just didn't. I just wanted it to be over."

Noah described that he was drawn to participate in my research as a means of processing his time in Israel—either as a personal endeavor or within the context of academic reflection, or both. His recollections revealed a thematic entanglement of his assault, a pronatalist tendency, and the security apparatus, within his personal experience and what he saw reflected in Birthright's programming. In an unfamiliar and distressing environment, he was not only materially vulnerable, in need of guidance and accommodation, but emotionally as well. The confession of love from the IDF soldier that served as security personnel further complicated Noah's interpretation of Birthright as an institution. He articulated a sense of implicit coercion surrounding expectations of romantic and sexual engagement, suggesting that the social dynamics of the trip—and especially in the misconduct of the Madricha—carried an assumption of entitlement to such encounters, absent explicit consent. In Noah's view, this incident was not isolated, but symptomatic of a deeper ideological structure: the normalization of a Zionist pronatalist agenda that seeks to cultivate attachment to the Israeli state through interpersonal and embodied experiences. Stated plainly, the normalization of such an agenda had harmful, although ostensibly unintended consequences on a

personal level. In contrast, he illustrated what he believed to be the ideal normative objective that is often achieved by Birthright's thematic programming using the logic of Zionism, which explicitly assigns certain responsibilities on Jewish individuals.

> *(Noah) "You talk to Americans who made Aliyah and people from all over the world who made Aliyah and they were like 'it's the greatest mitzvah you can possibly do in Judaism, to do this and to come here.' Which also is kind of true, this has been in the books for a long time. It was definitely pushed and I think they were, towards the end of the trip, offering programs where you can set up and make Aliyah to go out there. They were definitely like 'as a Jew, technically this is your responsibility to come back to the homeland and [gesturing] multiply.'"*

Noah's tone captured the moral pressure embedded in the program—by saying "technically" he implies an awareness of an ideological framing as it signals the internalization of this call to duty, especially among young diaspora Jews looking to affirm their Jewish identities in their encounters with the State of Israel.

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

A key finding that emerged in interviews with Birthright participants was that subjects often invoked personal attachments to narratives of Jewish territorial belonging in the State of Israel, experienced potently when visiting historic sites, and at times they even oriented their identities in relation to a Zionist collective; importantly, they articulate those experiences and self-perceptions as distinct from what they believe constitutes Israeliness, especially in relations to Israel's civil history. This underscores a central tension: while the program seeks to cultivate attachment through memory, affect, and embodied experience, its strategies may produce the opposite effect when participants critically engage with or resist the ideological frameworks being imposed. The participants' insights expose how disidentification can emerge not in spite of, but because of the intensity of ideological saturation along specific thematic lines. Near the conclusion of Noah's interview, he raised a few unique points that I find necessary to discuss in relation to that tension.

> *(Noah) "They take you around and you're having fun the whole time… Maybe not exactly my definition of fun, but they just want everybody to have as good of a time as possible so [that] you really like it and it works. Like, [emphasizing] a lot. There's a shitload of people on Birthright who then moved there. It draws a lot of people into more Orthodoxy, too, in the religion. And I think it's somewhat effective for that. I was definitely at a point in my life where I had a lot of my own views on religion, and I was like, 'I love the Jewish culture but G-d is a fucking asshole, clearly. I don't want it. I'm not gonna ever be more religious than I am now.' Coupled with, 'I never ever, ever, ever want to live in a war zone.' I was pretty much out of the running and shutting down for these conversations."*
>
> *(Noah) "They were like, 'yeah, here's all the major advances Israel made in technology and medicine and farming. We in this country, we have our shit together, we're leading the world in XYZ and we're so small and all of the Arabs around us are very jealous and that's why they attack us.' I remember at some point they took us to a big natural valley. And they're like, 'this valley used to be a desert. Like, look around. Look what we have grown. We're farming all of these amazing things now in this space. And if you look over there, that's the border of, Gaza, or to the West Bank… look at how it's still a desert. These people don't know how to take care of their lands. It's not at all like what we're doing with science.' I remember that. And I was like, cool, making stuff. All right, whatever. I knew I had so much less context for everything outside of the Israeli viewpoint, the Jewish, American-*

Jewish viewpoint at times. They're definitely really trying to sell everything and sell their nation and stuff. Which I already really fucked with [positive] at the time, but the fact that I was being so handled and they were trying to sell it so hard in the midst of this fucking bombing and chaos, the more the trip went on the more I was like, 'I don't think I buy this,' for the first time in my life, because I've never had to think about it so much."

(Noah) "It was the stress of the conflicts, and then the feeling of being handled was really awful. And I was waiting for the trip part to be over because I didn't like it. I wasn't getting along with the other kids there; they weren't my type of person. They were really annoying. [laughter] They were fucking annoying! I can't wait to get off this trip. And then it was a few days of getting assaulted and seeing violence in the streets, and I was like, 'I need to go home!"

For Noah, the experience of Birthright Israel culminated in a sense of physical and psychological overwhelm, leading to the unequivocal conclusion: *"I need to go home!"* Rather than fostering attachment to Israel or Jewish identity, the experience intensified his detachment, showing how exposure to unfiltered geopolitical realities and forced social conformity can provoke rejection rather than affiliation. This moment offers critical insight into how programs like Birthright can backfire, especially when the affective intensity of nationalism collides with an individual's emotional and moral limits. While he initially identified with the cultural aspects of Jewish collective identity, Noah expressed a steadfast rejection of its more demanding nationalist aspects. This personal boundary resists the normative Birthright narrative of return and redemption through the nation-state. Still, the program presses on with a narrative of Zionist exceptionalism. He recalled being shown a once-barren valley transformed into fertile farmland, juxtaposed with neighboring Palestinian territories framed as undeveloped and mismanaged; this contrast was presented as empirical proof of Zionist success and Palestinian failure, feeding into a greater narrative of Western civilizational superiority—yet the persuasive veneer began to crack as the real conditions of the Zionist project intruded. Amid militarized conflict and the trampling of his bodily autonomy, Noah became increasingly skeptical, and what began as admiration morphed into critical distance. His reflection thus captures a key tension in how Zionist narratives are

delivered through affect and thematic spectacle, but also how they can unravel under the pressure of violence, sexual politics, and the complexity of human experience.

While Birthright Israel offers opportunities for personal transformation and deepened attachments to Israel, it operates simultaneously as an ISA wherein Zionist social paradigms regulate national bodies through the confluence of sexual practice and militarization. The interpellation between the Israeli state and Jewish participants in Birthright uses the grammar of Jewish continuity to articulate and advance national aims. Further analysis of Zionist pronatalism's relationship to national attachment for Israeli citizens would better illuminate the valence of Jewish sexuality and reproductive potential in strengthening the project of nation-building and support for its security apparatus against the backdrop of an ongoing crisis. Its rootedness in the emotional pitch of the present and the nation's hopes for its future is indeed what makes the body so potent, whether as an instrument of deepening attachment or growing disillusionment with the nation.

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