The American Council for Judaism

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2000

SPECIAL INTEREST REPORT

A digest of news items and articles in the area of The Council's Interests

Post Office Box 9009, Alexandria, Virginia 22304 • Allan C. Brownfeld • Editor • Vol. 29 No.1

www.ACJNA.org

"Birthright" Program Brings Thousands Of Young American Jews To Israel; Critics Debate Its Cost And Value

Six thousand young Jewish college students from the U.S., Canada and a number of other countries were flown to Israel in January for a 10-day trip, which *The Washington Post* (Jan. 17, 2000) described in a front-page story as "intended to change their lives."

Their arrival, the *Post* reports, marks the start of a program whose goals are astonishingly ambitious: Bring tens of thousands of secular Jewish teenagers and young adults to Israel in the next five years, free of charge, connect them to their history, culture and peers and thereby halt the high rates of intermarriage, assimilation and drift among American and other Diaspora Jews."

The program, called Birthright Israel, is "nothing less than a $210 million marketing campaign to sell Jewishness to Jews," states the *Post*.

Richard Joel, president of Hillel, the college campus Jewish organization, said: "This is the first Jewish generation where being a Jew is an option and not a condition. If we can get Jews to feel comfortable with their Jewishness and proud of it, they will make more of their lives Jewish-flavored."

The rising rate of intermarriage is a symptom of Jewish success in America, analysts say. "Victimization is historical now," Joel declared. "The Holocaust is history, not memory. Anti-semitism is not a defining experience of every Jew."

The driving idea behind the Birthright program, states the *Post,* "is that renewing a connection to the Jewish state will trigger other connections for secular and otherwise uninvolved Diaspora Jews..."

Criticism of the program is widespread. "Providing vast sums of money to youngsters, including many from affluent homes, for 10-day junkets without requiring any form of commitment is demeaning to Israel," said Isi Leibler, the chairman of the board of the World Jewish Congress. "It is inconceivable that a 10-day trip can be the jump-off point for creating newly committed Jews."

Naomi Blumenthal, a member of the opposition Likud Party, who chairs the Israeli parliament's committee on immigration and diaspora affairs, said the government was throwing money at the wrong people for the wrong purpose.

"It bothers me that huge sums are being spent to bring young people here for free, while children in poor Israeli towns cannot afford a class trip," she said. 'The main goal of the project is not immigration to Israel but strengthening Jewish communities abroad. That's not the thrust of the State of Israel." *(New York Times,* Jan. 8, 2000).

Birthright Israel is the brainchild of Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli cabinet minister and parliament member, and two American philanthropists, Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman. Steinhardt, a Wall Street money manager, said that Israel "is the cement that can bind the Jewish community together." Describing himself as an atheist, Steinhardt states, "Israel has frankly—throughout my life and for much of my life—been a substitute for theology."

In a letter to *The Washington Post* (Jan. 23, 2000), Carol and E. James Lieberman of Potomac, Maryland write that the Birthright Israel program "hopes to stem the 50 percent intermarriage rate among Jewish young people in the U.S. by sending some of them to Israel for a visit. While that should be inspiring, American visitors may also be struck by the fact that most Israeli Jews are not religious and that Orthodox religious activists have far more influence politically than their members warrant in a democracy. Meanwhile, Jewish leaders might address the fact that it is very hard to find a rabbi who will officiate for an intermarriage, even when the non-Jewish partner is willing to have the children raised as Jews. The result is, often, alienation of both partners from the Jewish establishment, which deems intermarriage a failure rather than an opportunity to begin or to restore meaningful Jewish affiliation." ●

Israelis Are "Unsettled" By Christian Visitors; Courses Are Sought On Jesus To Combat Ignorance

Many Israelis were "unsettled' by the influx of Christian visitors for the millennium, writes *Washington Post* (Dec. 24, 1999) correspondent Lee Hockstader from Jerusalem.

According to a Gallup Poll conducted early in December on behalf of an interfaith organization, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, it was found that three-quarters of Israelis cannot identify Christmas Day as a date of "special significance." Nearly two-thirds do not have a single Christian friend, and three in five have not met any Christians in Israel.

Crucifixes and Christmas trees were banned from hotel lobbies during the millennium holidays because they are "offensive" to Jews, said Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisroel Lau. *(Jerusalem Post,* Dec. 3, 1999). The chief rabbis of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv permitted Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations in the hotels, but only in closed rooms.

The rabbinate's ban on Christmas trees in hotel lobbies angered some Christian clergymen. "If we obliged Jewish people in the United States to hide their menorahs behind closed doors, I think there'd be an uproar," said the Rev. Robert Fortin, an American priest who is overseeing millennium festivities for the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference in the Holy Land. "Here you have a religion that was born here, which is indigenous to this land, started by a Jew who was living here, and you have the people living here who don't know the first thing about it."

The Washington Post reports: "Secular and moderate Jews are furious with the hard-line rabbis for the cold shoulder they have shown Christian pilgrims, whom they consider backward-looking. Outside Jerusalem, with its heavy concentration of ultra-Orthodox Jews and its swelling crowds of tourists, there is less anxiety about Christians than about the attitudes of Jewish religious authorities."

A growing number of Israeli academics say that the time has come for Israeli students to learn about Jesus as an historical figure. Prof. Michael Harsegor notes that Jesus was the most famous Jew in history, and as the Christian era enters its third millennium, students must be taught who he was.

Prof. Aviad Kelinberg of Tel Aviv University's History Department says that students arriving at the University are "totally ignorant" about Jesus. Learning about the founding of Christianity would not only provide them with knowledge about one of the most important events in history, he said, but would give them a better understanding of their own Jewish identity.

The Washington Times (Dec. 27, 1999) reports that, "In the entire Israeli school curriculum, Jesus is mentioned only briefly in the sixth-grade course on Christianity. In school tours around the country, students are regularly taken past some of the holiest sites in Christendom but they are told virtually nothing about them...A number of academics, however, believe the country is now sufficiently mature for dis-