Assessing Birthright’s Relative Reach and impact

# The Task and The Challenges

The leadership at the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs has asked the Rosov Consulting team, in our role as evaluation consultants to the Ministry, to propose an approach to identifying the “added value” of Birthright Israel relative to other programs that the Ministry funds. This assignment is aimed at addressing two evaluative concerns: (1) identifying the extent to which programs are reaching (engaging) Jewish populations of interest to the Ministry, and (2) detecting what outcomes are produced for these populations, and to what extent, as a result of participating in these programs.

In this memo, we propose two approaches to exploring these concerns, one of which is quite straightforward, while the other is aimed at generating more sophisticated insights. The second of these approaches is also intended to take account of three significant methodological challenges:

**Distinct and Common Goals**. Programs aim to accomplish a wide range of often distinct outcomes with often distinct populations. Although some of the outcomes they produce can be assessed by means of a set of shared measures, what is assessed by those shared measures may only capture a small part of what they accomplish. What they seem to accomplish is also heavily contingent on participants’ Jewish starting point.

**Synergistic effects**. Programs exist as part of an ecosystem in which their impact is more fully evident when alumni go on to participate in additional (seemingly competing) programs. By the same token, their participants may only come to them thanks to the impact of other programs. In a tightly connected communal system, it is hard to determine where one program’s impact ends and another’s impact begins. When we measure one program’s impact, we may actually be measuring the contribution of prior programs.

**Unfolding impact**. A program’s impact, and sometimes the most profound aspects of its impact, are often not known at the time of a program’s conclusion, but only many years later when, for example, alumni make or act on important life choices.

# Two Proposed Approaches

Against the backdrop of these challenges, we propose the following two evaluative approaches.

1. ***Measuring program reach.*** Currently, the Jewish and demographic profiles of participants in Birthright and in Ministry-supported programs cannot be readily compared because our surveys document participants’ characteristics by means of different measures. While we understand that Birthright will not want to modify the banks of questions it employs to construct participants’ profiles, and that enable it to compare new cohorts with those from previous years, we could collect demographic data from participants in Birthright’s winter programs who are not currently surveyed as part of Birthright’s evaluation efforts. Starting in December 2023, we can field to these young people the profile questions our team has used with participants in Mosaic programs we evaluate. By February 2024, we will be able to provide the Ministry with an initial, comparative portrait of the Jewish and demographic profiles of participants in each program.
2. ***Assessing program impact.*** The methodological concerns raised above indicate that it would be insufficient to assess Birthright’s impact with the standard approach of examining differences in outcomes between pre- and post-program surveys. Instead, we would add two additional components to this evaluation method. First, we would develop a set of shared outcomes that are common to all the programs. This would allow Birthright to be measured fairly against its own distinctive goals and against a smaller set of outcomes it shares with others. Second, we would combine a pre/post outcomes framework with other data modeling techniques that together would allow us to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the following:

* The background factors, including prior participation in other programs, that led participants to Birthright
* The impact of Birthright on both program-specific and shared outcomes; and
* Synergistic linkages between Birthright’s impacts and impacts from other program participation.

In greater detail, the specific analysis we propose—called **Path Analysis**—would allow us to assess each program’s impact on its participants along multiple dimensions:

* 1. For a set of **outcomes specific to each program** and a smaller set of **shared outcomes** **common to all the programs** (these shared outcomes would be developed in advance of the survey). This addresses the challenge of distinct and common program goals.
  2. At an **initial point in time** right after program participation and then **over time** in subsequent years. This addresses the challenge of slowly unfolding impacts over time.
  3. **Directly** due to program participation and **indirectly as mediated** by participants’ prior or subsequent experience in other programs. This addresses the challenge of synergistic effects.

Taking Birthright as an example, the **initial direct impact** of Birthright would be measured by differences in outcomes (specific and shared) on pre and post program surveys. In addition, on the pre-program survey, we would ask about prior participation in other Ministry-funded programs, such as the Campus Pillar or Shalom Corps, and perhaps other programs too. This would allow us to measure Birthright’s **initial indirect impact** on both specific and shared outcomes as mediated through other programs among those who have previously participated in them. We would also be able to model how background factors such as Jewish education and number of Jewish parents are related to Birthright and other program participation in the first place. This is work we could carry out between December 2023 and April 2024.

Over several years, we would continue to survey the Birthright participants annually. On these surveys, we would pose the specific and shared outcomes again and assess them for differences with the pre-program outcomes, thereby measuring the **longer-term** **direct impact** of Birthright participation. We would also ask about participation in the other programs since the last survey. This would allow us to examine Birthright’s **longer-term indirect impact** on specific and shared outcomes as mediated through other program participation—both prior to Birthright and subsequent to it. We would also continue to model how background variables are related to program participation.

This same approach could also be applied to other programs, such as the Campus Pillar and Shalom Corps. In those cases, the first pre-program survey would ask about prior Birthright participation, and additional surveys over the years would ask about subsequent Birthright participation. For each program, then, we would be able to assess its initial and over-time direct impact on specific and shared outcomes, and its initial and over-time indirect impact that is mediated by prior or subsequent Birthright participation (again controlling for background variables).

An important side benefit of this approach is that it would allow us to trace, over time, who started with Birthright and went on to participate in other programs; who started with other programs and went on to take part in Birthright; who participated in the other Ministry-supported programs but not Birthright; and who participated in only specific programs over time.

We believe that the approaches proposed here have potential to yield unprecedented insights into the interconnected relationships between major initiatives in Jewish education, if and how they supplement or interact with one another, and what they contribute over time to a larger whole. These evaluation strategies propose to study Birthright and additional Ministry supported programs within a larger context. They have potential to yield meaningful findings within a year of their launch, and then progressively deeper understandings over time.