



## **Beyond Flipping Out: Experiences of Year-in-Israel Programs**

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### **Introduction**

One item on ATID's agenda in recent years has been the attempt to gather more information, and more detailed information, about our students and their experiences.<sup>1</sup> Our interactions with students are generally characterized by the student-teacher relationship. This relationship is, of course, critical in helping students grow and develop, but the contours of that relationship – its long-term nature, the power structure inherent in it, and the hierarchy between people in the school – also colors what students tell us, and hence the information we have about who they really are. Good, healthy teacher-student relationships are characterized by openness and sincerity, but some things are still more easily communicated to a stranger in an "antiseptic" conversation, and this can provide a different angle on our students and their experiences.

In order to further ATID's agenda, over the course of the 2007-2008 academic year we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with students, both male and female, during their post-high school year of study in Israel. We contacted administrators in one year programs for foreign students, and asked them to choose random students from their student

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<sup>1</sup> See *Hagut VeHitnahagut: Mekorot HaEmunah VeLimmud Mahshevet Yisrael BeKerev Tze'irim Yisraeli'im Dati'im Tzioni'im* (ATID: Jerusalem, 2008), and Yoel Finkelman, "A Good Hard Look at Our Students," in *Teaching Toward Tomorrow: Setting An Agenda for Modern Orthodox Education*, ed. Yoel Finkelman (Jerusalem: ATID, forthcoming).

body. These students were asked if they would agree to be interviewed, and all agreed.<sup>2</sup> In the end, we interviewed fourteen students, eight men and six women, from six different institutions.<sup>3</sup> The institutions represented a range of the mainstream Modern Orthodox Israel programs, some more selective than others, but all drawing from a "typical" population of Orthodox day-school graduates.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this research was exploratory. We want less to draw conclusions, and more to try to figure out what about our students and their religious lives is important, what it is that we don't know. For that reason, we developed an open ended questionnaire. The questionnaire contained sixteen fixed questions, which the interviewer was to ask over the course of the discussion. However, the discussion was also somewhat more free, and follow-up questions built on points that were not explicit in the questionnaire.

Students were, for the most part, forthcoming, though there were a few students who declined to speak of certain particularly personal issues. Our impression is that they were honest in their responses, happy if not always eager to answer our questions. They did not come across as defensive or uptight, instead seeming genuinely interested in sharing their experiences with us.

In the attached documents, we would like to share with the community of educators some of our thoughts as a result of these interviews. We can hardly claim to be able to draw any final conclusions, but, given the exploratory nature of the project, we certainly have emerged with food for thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Administrators chose students randomly, based on picking numbers from their alphabetized student list. We did not want administrators to hand pick the students. One administrator was not comfortable with our method, and instead made a public announcement asking for volunteers.

<sup>3</sup> Thirteen came from North America, and one hailed from England.

<sup>4</sup> Though, as we shall see, even "typical" students often have less than typical backgrounds. We did not interview students from *ba'al teshuvah* institutions or from institutions focused on at-risk students.

## **The Year in Israel as a Factor in Religious Growth**

Yoel Finkelman

In the coming paragraphs we would like to offer some perspective on the phenomenon of religious change during the year in Israel. We would like to suggest – at least tentatively – that Israel plays a significant role in the religious development of Modern Orthodox teens, but that that role should not be exaggerated. If our sample is at all representative, many Modern Orthodox teens, often very strong ones from a religious perspective, do not undergo dramatic religious change during their lives, either before or during the year in Israel. Those that do often begin that change during high school (if not before) and it continues through Israel. In at least some cases, the year in Israel may be a point of religious weakening for students. The Israel programs may not deserve too much credit for the religious strengthening of Orthodox students, and they may not deserve too much of the blame for the "flipping out" (to the extent that such a phenomenon exists) of their students. Year in Israel programs do not so much rework the students who they educate; instead they work with the material that the high schools send them, nudging, perhaps, in one direction or the other, but they are often not the causes of radical change.

These suggestions are meant to provide context for the public discussion of the phenomenon of students who are colloquially said to undergo a process of "flipping out" while in Israel. Understanding the year in Israel in these terms, or even in terms of radical religious change and conversion experiences, may be only one piece of the puzzle, and may miss the experience of a great many, probably the majority, of students.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Berger, Jacobson, and Waxman's book of research on the Israel experience is provocatively titled "flipping out," but oddly, that topic is not the focus of either Berger or Waxman's research. See Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out: Myth or Fact? The Impact of the "Year in Israel"*, (New York: Yashar Books, 2007). Berger's work argues that students as an aggregate undergo significant religious change over the course of the year, but his research does not suggest life-transformative change or ongoing conflict with parents. Even Jacobson, who did focus on students who underwent significant religious change, and did conceptualize students' experiences within categories of conversion, did not describe that change as being necessarily conflict-ridden or radically transformative, and he emphasized, as we will below, the continuity between the students' past lives and their changes during Israel. Furthermore, Jacobson deliberately sought out

The image of "flipping out" describes a young man or woman, emerging from high school religiously indifferent or even rebellious, having gone to a less-than-inspiring high school, and having been raised by parents who are less than religiously passionate. He or she arrives in Israel, and – in an environment of social isolation, under the influence of charismatic teachers and role models, and under pressure from peers – becomes inspired and passionate about religion. This change is manifest in rejection of or rebellion against the supposedly passionless Modern Orthodox religion of the parents and community, and therefore this student must negotiate inevitable conflict with parents and with the home community. In the long term, this student adopts a thoroughly different academic and professional path than the one he or she had imagined, dropping or downplaying college education, often to the consternation of parents. In short, a student arrives in Israel religiously weak or indifferent, becomes inspired by something or someone in the Israel environment, and emerges from the year in Israel radically different than he or she began.

This "flipping out" model focuses on several aspects of how religious change occurs. First, it picks up on the kind of change that is radical and transformative. Second, it emphasizes the particular experiences in Israel as the catalyst for change, deemphasizing other influences on students that occurred in other contexts and prior to arrival in Israel. Third, it suggests that a religiously indifferent student emerge from Israel religiously very dedicated.

Our interviews suggest that something else is occurring, at least to many students. First, the students with whom we met, for the most part, spoke not of radical transformation, but of moderate growth. Second, they spoke of their religious growth as having begun earlier than Israel, and having been influenced by significant events prior to (but also including) the

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students who underwent significant religious change, and he does not address the question of how common a phenomenon that is. Heilman suggests that the year in Israel is transformative not only of individuals, but of a whole generation. In his vision, the programs in Israel are staffed by religiously right-wing educators who subtly and not so subtly subvert the Modern Orthodox education of the youth, converting them to a more fundamentalist and Haredi vision. See Samuel Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), Chap. 3.

year in Israel. Even when religious change was dramatic, Israel was not the only, or even the primary, cause. Third, we did not find major changes in religious trajectory. The religiously most dedicated students during Israel were the most religiously dedicated students when they arrived; the religiously struggling students we spoke to were struggling religiously when they arrived. Granted, these interviews occurred in the winter and spring of the year in Israel. One could claim that the flipping out occurs later, but the students we spoke to, for the most part, did not seem to be on that path.

Our sample size does not allow for generalization about percentages of students who "flip out" or undergo radical religious change, though there is no doubt that the phenomena certainly exist. Nor does the sample allow us to generalize about what "most students" do. We are not attempting to quantify the ways in which religious change occurs in Israel. Yet, what we are trying to claim is that educators should pay attention to the very many students whose religious growth follows a different trajectory, that public discussion in the Orthodox community about the influence of the year in Israel reflect that situation of those students, and that the reflection about historical shifts in the texture of American Orthodoxy account for moderate religious change. More public attention should be focused on those students in Israel whose experience is less than transformative. We need to listen to the voices of students, and to raise questions about how the categories and language that students use to describe themselves differ in significant ways from how these students are understood in the public discourse about the year in Israel programs.

Furthermore, we call on educators in Israel to think closely about what education they are providing their students, and how they define their goals. Are they trying to construct educational experiences that will create radical change in students? Or are they working more directly with the "raw materials" that are handed to them from the high schools, hoping to broaden perspectives, strengthen gradually, and move slowly? We are, personally, committed

to the latter approach not only on grounds of ideology – the attempt to radically change kids is fraught with pedagogic, moral, religious, and practical problems – but also as a better way of thinking about what actually happens in at least many Israel institutions. In this essay, we hope to present some of the language that these students used to describe their own religious paths, and in the process try to provide some nuance that will be helpful for educators, parents, and students themselves in discussing the place and influence of the year in Israel.

### **Flipping Out?**

Only one of the students who we interviewed came even close to the "flipping out" model [1]. He was anything but a typical Modern Orthodox high school graduate, and as Jacobson's research suggests, had an unhappy and conflict-ridden high school career.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, he dropped out of high school during his senior year, which he refers to as a "bad year."<sup>7</sup> He explains that "I wasn't so happy," because I was "angry at God." There were "a solid two, three weeks that I barely prayed, barely did stuff." Eventually, after a long conversation with a rabbi with whom he was close, and under the influence of his father, he went back to basic halakhic practice, but "all the mitzvot were just robotic," and devoid of feeling.

Due to his troubled background, he did not find it easy to be accepted to a yeshiva in Israel, but eventually he found one, and it was during that year in Israel that things began to straighten out. He speaks in glowing terms of the time he spent praying at *me'arat hamahpelah*, the gravesite of the Biblical forefathers, defining it as a transformative moment. He praises his morning *seder* teacher, who made him feel capable of learning, who taught him "how to learn." "I like learning Gemara now a lot. I enjoy it, but I never understood it in high school, but now [I am more involved in learning.]" In the end of the day, he describes himself

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<sup>6</sup> Jacobson, 105-112.

<sup>7</sup> We have placed direct quotes from students within quotation marks, though we occasionally "neatened" their English, when expressions such as "like" or "you know" made it difficult to follow their statements.

as being religiously much more consistent, passionate, and dedicated now that he is in Israel than he had been in years past.

For this individual, religious and academic achievement in Israel are tied to a sense of therapeutic self-growth, something that he attributes specifically to the Israel experience. "I had a really bad year last year. That's why I left X school. Now this year I'm focusing on myself. Lots of things went wrong last year. This year I'm focusing on myself. I don't go out [i.e. leave yeshiva to socialize]." Further, he anticipated that this religious change will continue into the future. "Hopefully there are things that I will do [take on] in the future."

In his description of his trajectory and the things that influenced him, this student used language that emphasizes dramatic shifts and changes. He referred to two different people – both of them his peers, rather than his teachers – who were influential in his life and each of whom was "a big *ba'al teshuvah* story" as well as "cool." In the same context, he emphasized that his "rabbis" from high school, who had not themselves undergone their own religious change, may have been "all really cool" but "they didn't get me to *daven* or anything."

But even this student does not see Israel as the sole, or even primary, aspect of his religious change. He explained that his high school rebellion against religion was never motivated by a lack of belief, but rather by emotional and psychological challenges, and that therefore (at least in retrospect) he expected to eventually return to observance. Even in high school "I always knew that it was the right thing. I always believed that God wrote the Torah and everything. I always believed it, but I wasn't always into it."

Furthermore, there were profound religious influences that occurred prior to his arrival in Israel that have kept him religiously motivated. Trips to Israel for his *bar mitzvah* and for holidays have helped instill in him a sense of the Land's sanctity, he explained. During the period of his most bitter high-school rebellion he was able to snap out of it, "because I asked a rabbi and he said that that just happens sometimes. I got out of it because I just calmed down."

His father's attitude that demanded religious consistency even when one is not motivated helped him ride out the tough times. He even described himself as "very much [religiously] inspired" by a particular song by a certain well-known heavy metal band. "There's lots of secular music that inspires me." In fact, when asked point blank about "the most important influences in your religious life," he did not mention Israel, but rather a series of other things. Israel came up in other contexts.

That is to say, even for the student who most closely resembles the "flipping out" stereotype, it is a mistake to describe his experiences as centered on Israel as the prime catalyst for religious change. Instead, religious change is an ongoing and complex process, of which the year in Israel, even when significant, is only one piece.

### **Others Who Did Not Flip Out**

There were other students who described themselves as undergoing significant religious change, but not in ways that match the "flipping out" model. Another student is worth discussing at length in this context, because of the way in which his significant religious growth is tempered by limits and is caused by multiple factors.

Hailing from a community with a reputation as being more Haredi than Modern Orthodox, he was unable to find a local high school to attend. He commuted a significant distance to a Modern Orthodox school in another community during his freshman year, but this did not last, both due to the distance from home and due to a series of personal and interpersonal problems, and he attended junior college for most of his senior year of high school. His unconventional personal biography made it difficult for him to be accepted to yeshiva, though he eventually found a one-year program that would have him.

Here is some of the language that he uses to describe his religious trajectory.



"When I was 13 maybe 12 I never really questioned how religious I was, and always did things. Towards 14, 15, 16 I started struggling with my appreciation for being religious.... And I started to think about things that I wasn't doing so well, like davening. Since I've gotten to yeshiva, things have gotten much better..... Changing high schools, with different environments, issues with friends, whatever. A lot of that has to do with the community, sort of finding yourself.... I personally had a hard time with it, and I wasn't happy for a long time. Eventually it started changing; its improved like dramatically. Specifically here, specifically in Israel"

Several things become clear in this description. First, he considers his time in Israel to have religiously influenced him positively and significantly. Yet, even he contextualizes that influence within his broader religious trajectory, and within the more consistent, even if not deeply thought-out, practice which had characterized his early teen years. Furthermore, in another place in the interview he describes having been consistent in his observance of basic Jewish laws, like kashrut and tzitzit, throughout his life. Nor is this young man's religious change so dramatic as to have become a fully-committed observant Jew. He still describes, during the height of his year in Israel, difficulty in attending "minyan on time or learning consistently," which have been "problems for me," and he indicated that there are still many "mitzvot" that he "struggle[s] with." That is to say, his time in yeshiva has been a significant step on his religious trajectory, inducing significant religious change, but we should not overestimate just how dramatic that change has been.

### **Radical vs. Moderate Religious Change**

Given the small sample size in this study, we do not want to overstate our conclusions in terms of numbers. It is difficult to know how much any given student or pattern in our interviews is representative. Still, much more common than the significant religious change

described regarding these two students were students who described their religious growth in Israel as being in simple continuity with their religious growth from the past. Seven of the fourteen students with whom we spoke used language indicating their religious growth in Israel as being part and parcel of similar and ongoing religious growth that had begun as children, and which had continued as part of a maturing process through high school. One particularly religiously committed young woman said that she is learning well and growing religiously in Israel, but “I would have given the same answers [to your questions about religious commitments] a year ago” [12]. Or, more bluntly, “I have always been into it” [8]. Another young woman offered a broader contextualization of her growth in Israel that viewed Israel as a continuation of her past. “I really don’t think that I like changed that much. And like most people who I see they don't think, 'Oh my God, she is so different.' I really think like I stayed true to who I am. I expanded my knowledge a lot.... I don't think it was that drastic, but for some people maybe it is” [14]. “Every year I try to increase, but I don’t think there was a huge jump. Its been pretty even every year” [14].

Significantly, the three students who came across as most observant and consistent in their religious beliefs and practices are the three who claim never to have undergone radical religious change of any kind. They were religiously serious and observant during their teen years, and are largely the same today, albeit somewhat more intensively and with a greater basis of knowledge. For example, one young woman described herself in the interview as being very comfortable religiously, consistent in her practice, serious and dedicated in her Judaism. She explained that there was nothing in Judaism that bothered her (with the exception of the inconvenience of various aspects of the dress code for woman, which she identifies with but finds uncomfortable at times). Yet, this young woman also described herself as similarly observant in high school. She used to attend Shabbat *minhah* in her synagogue in North America, and was actively involved in various *hesed* activities in high

school. She had always felt that *Shabbat* was a day that brings blessing to the entire week. She had always prayed regularly and consistently (and had developed several tricks to motivate herself to wake early enough to pray). She saw this not as the legacy of her year in Israel, but as the legacy of her family and friends. She recalls as a young child attending synagogue with her father on a regular basis, and sees her serious and observant family as ideal religious role models. She thanks her good friend from high school who would always push her to be more consistent about prayer and good deeds.

Two particularly dedicated young men described a similar trajectory [8 and 9]. They were very serious about their learning and observance at the time of the interviews— clearly the most "religious" of the young men who we interviewed – but they describe the way they had been in high school in similar terms. One [student 9] said that during the year in Israel he "developed an appreciation for *shmittah* and maybe *terumah* and *ma'aser*," but explicitly denied that there was any significant change in overall outlook and level of practice. "I used to learn; I still learn," he said, when asked if he had changed religiously over time. When asked about the most important influences on his religious life, he too listed a series of people and events during his high school years in North America, before mentioning one of his teachers in Israel.

### **Flipping Out Before Israel**

Furthermore, we encountered three [2, 5, 7] students who had "flipped out" at some point in their lives, but not during the year in Israel. That is to say, these students sometimes together with their families, had undergone religious change of a radical nature before they had come to Israel. Student 5's family had been non-observant, and they became observant together over the course of her childhood and teen-years. For her, the year in Israel was very important, and she felt that she was working hard to maximize her time learning and growing,

because she felt that she had missed out on opportunities that had been available to her peers who had been observant since birth, and who had attended Orthodox schools throughout their lives.

Student 7 speaks about the transformative nature of his years in Israel, but he had only began keeping kosher the year before, as his family became more observant. When describing "the most important influences" on his "religious life," he singled out his "parents... my shul rabbi [from North America] and the community of friends he developed in high school." The Israeli yeshiva experience, per se, was not the thing that had prompted his growth, nor is it clear that it deserves the credit for his dramatic change. Furthermore, he describes himself as not completely living up to what he thinks he ought to, particularly regarding the physical aspects of his relationship with his girlfriend.

Teachers of such students need to be aware – and at an individual level, they certainly are – of their students who have undergone a significant religious journey prior to the year in Israel. Yet, another lesson to be learned from the relatively high number of such students in our interviews is the importance of contextualizing the impact of the year in Israel within the personal history of the individual students, and within the various other factors that have had an impact on their religious lives.

### **Contextualizing Israel Within Other Religious Influences**

This leads us into a discussion of the way in which students viewed the significant religious influences on their lives. When speaking about what they considered the major positive influences on their religious lives, ten of the fourteen students responded with lists of items that included the year in Israel, but that they did not privilege it above many other factors, particularly parents and high school. Another three mentioned only factors prior to the year in Israel [11, 14, 4]. And one student described the year in Israel as a negative

influence [6]. For none of these students was the year in Israel the first item on the list of influences, and for none was it the exclusive item. All mentioned things from prior to their year in Israel, either exclusively or in addition to listing the year in Israel.

Student 13, for example, mentioned her parents, her community rabbi from *hutz la'aretz*, and, to a lesser degree, Torah learning during high school. She had gained a great deal from Israel, she claimed, but it deepened the trajectory she had been on due to these other influences, rather than changing the trajectory. Over the years, “I only got stronger.... As I grow older I understand more and learn more, you know, and its more like I want to do it.... [My change this year has been] not so dramatic. I know that there are some girls [who did change dramatically], I've seen because of my friend. Yes, increase, but I am still the same person, and I will be the same person when I go home.... I'm just stronger in my values. I have not, you know, 'flipped out.'” Student 2, is another example, who mentioned a slew of teachers and *rebbeim*, a high-school trip to Eastern Europe and Israel, R. Aryeh Kaplan's book about *tefillin*, a support group led by a Habad rabbi, all these in addition to positive things he said about his year in Israel.

Student 11 is interesting precisely because he mentioned many influences, but not Israel. The most significant of those influences was his experience in a more "black hat" yeshiva beginning in seventh grade. “Going to yeshiva in 7<sup>th</sup> grade was a big turn on, a switch, an eye opener.... There was so much Torah, and such a strong *hashkafah*. People in a big room, people concentrating, and learning and with a loud voice, and *kavanah*, and everyone is dressed. All black hats, it was very powerful. Being around so many people who are big in Torah. Definitely created energy, clarity, connection, meaning, seeing other people, bochorim, who are what I would like to be, things I intuitively felt was right.” A yeshiva and its unique atmosphere were certainly important influences on his religious life, but the yeshiva in question was not in his post-high school yeshiva in Israel.

Furthermore, as mentioned, there was one student who indicated that the year in Israel had involved a religious weakening. Student 6, who found himself slipping religiously in some areas while in Israel, had much more to say about the positive influence of family members than yeshiva in Israel. It was his parents and grandparents, particularly his father's moderation and "middle of the roadness" that he felt were his religious role models. While his peers were, he said, focused on changing externals, he had decided to "go inside myself and see what I connect to in Judaism and just in general life... and try to be honest about what I connect with." He found that many of the external actions and signs of piety, which he associated with Orthodoxy, were not nearly as important to him as a simple faith and honesty, which more often than not he had seen among non-observant people and even non-Jews. Further, he found himself less excited and inspired by text study and learning than he had been, even in high school.

### **Religious Change and Theological Articulateness**

Over the course of the interviews, students were asked "What do you believe as a Jew?" and "Why do you believe it?" Irrespective of the particular content of the students' answers, there was a range of levels of articulateness which students brought to answering these questions. Some were able to explain in a few short sentences their attitudes toward basic Jewish beliefs – existence of God, the normative nature of Jewish law, divine providential concern for his creatures.<sup>8</sup> Student 12, for example, explained that "I believe that God created the world, and that God runs the world and that God created me, and that's the most true thing I know. That's what I believe.... I really don't see how someone could look at the world, at your hand or your foot... and not believe that it is created.... You have to believe that, you know, that there is a God who created the world, and that he looked at Torah

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<sup>8</sup> Articulateness is not the same as having final or unquestioned beliefs. Some students were able to identify in a clear and articulate way why they struggled with or were unsure about certain Jewish beliefs.

and created the world. So the Torah was given by God. It's amazing." She went on to explain that the source of her faith is "deep down inside," but that this is bolstered by her examination of the wonders in nature and "endless wisdom" that is embedded in Torah literature.

Others seemed confused by the question, unable to provide a minimally coherent response. Student 1 initially asked the interviewer to elaborate on the question, and then after a pause explained that "Like, I believe in God and all that. I don't know. It's a difficult question to answer.... Its not something I have taken time to think about. I think I should attempt to do.... I don't know. I don't think I could give an answer without thinking about it..... Something that might not be what I truly think but its sort of what I think. I don't think that I really do everything. I try to think about..." Eventually, the conversation moved on.

Of course, level of articulateness cannot be easily measured, and there is more than a little element of subjectivity in measuring this. Furthermore, theology is not everyone's cup of tea, and there may be many reasons such as intellectual proclivities and personality why some people might be more theologically articulate than others. The less articulate student just quoted may simply be less interested in matters of faith and belief than the first. While we did not identify specific patterns regarding who was more articulate than whom, there was one factor that did jump out.

The two students who offered the least articulate responses to the questions about belief were also the students who underwent the most dramatic change during their year in Israel. We have already cited student 1 – who had approached the "flipping out" model – and his response to the questions about belief. Student 10, who as noted also made a dramatic change while in Israel, responded to the question, "What do you believe as a Jew," with what would appear to be a tangential comment : "I believe that this [the Land of Israel] is our land." He elaborated for several minutes on the importance of holy cities in the Land of Israel, and

on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but even after a follow up question that attempted to refocus him on questions of faith and belief, he had little to say about his theological assertions and their sources.

This is in contrast to those who underwent significant religious change earlier in their lives - i.e. the three students who had become *ba'alei teshuvah* earlier in their lives – all of whom were at least moderately articulate about their beliefs. 3, for example, spoke clearly about her struggles with the suffering that she has seen around her over the years, and her developing awareness that God has hidden the answers to certain basic questions. 2 struggled to address the question, but at least was able to discuss his belief in God, the idea of reward of punishment as a motivator for action, and the idea that there is "a creator of the world who wants people to live in a certain way." Student 7 explained that "I do believe for sure that there is a God. I do believe that he gave us the Torah, and we should be keeping all the mitzvot." But he also explained that there are things – "even things it says in the Torah" – with which he struggles. Each of these responses is considerably more articulate than that of those who were currently undergoing religious change, and these three responses were not dramatically different from those of students who did not undergo significant change.

Why, then, were the students who were in the very throes of their religious change also the ones who were least articulate about their beliefs (in addition to the obvious possibility that the small sample size means that the phenomenon is accidental)? Several things strike us as plausible and as worthy of follow-up research. First, that theological clarity is not always a cause of religious change, but sometimes comes later. As we have suggested in a recent study of Israeli religious-Zionist teens, a linear model in which one first clarifies what one believes, and then determines how to act in light of those beliefs, may be



oversimplified.<sup>9</sup> Rather, people intuit how to behave religiously before they have clarified what they believe religiously. Second, and relatedly, clarity of belief takes time, and may not occur at the same pace as other kinds of religious change.

### **What about Israel was successful?**

Many others spoke of specific influences or strengthening in particular areas while in Israel. The patterns, here, are not consistent enough, given the small sample size, to make generalizations about what in Israel matters. There was a wide variety of responses. Student 13, for example, felt that in Israel she had learned specific laws from her “great halakhah teachers” and other “great teachers who are amazing and inspiring.” Others focused on greater choice that they had in picking particular classes, learning programs, and even schools [13, 14]. Still others focused on the inspiring teachers [13]; lack of distractions [14]; a "safe environment" for exploration and growth [2]; or being surrounded by "serious people" [8]. At least for these students, there is no single aspects of the year in Israel that can be easily pointed to and identified as reasons why Israel can be influential.

### **Parental Conflict**

A corollary of the continuity we have described between the Israel experience and students' religious lives prior to Israel is that our subjects did not voice concern over anticipated conflict with parents or communities upon their return from Israel. Though they were not asked about it explicitly, no students mentioned in the course of the conversation anticipating such a conflict (though they did not deny it either). It might be tempting to suggest that our interviews occurred too early in the year, before the issue of "re-entry" would come up. Yet, we also found evidence that such conflict was not likely to be a source of

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<sup>9</sup> *Hagut VeHitnahagut: Mekorot HaEmunah Vellimud Mahshevet Yisrael BeKerev Tze'irim Yisraeli'im Dati'im Tzioni'im* (ATID: Jerusalem, 2008)

major religious tension for these students. On the contrary, fully ten students described their parents as religious role models and/or as key influences on them, both religiously and in other ways. Three did not bring up parents significantly, and one [2], who had become more observant during high school, felt that even though his parents did not take the same religious journey that he had, they were supportive and helpful as he became more Orthodox.

Listening to these young people, one gets the impression not of the stereotypical conflict between parents and teen-agers, not of a vast generation gap, but rather, for the most part, a deep respect for their parents as religious and personal role models. 12 describes her parents as “great, spiritual religious people.” It helps, she said, to have such a supportive family environment.

### **An Optical Illusion?**

Is it possible that the image of radical and dramatic change during the year in Israel is, at least in part, an optical illusion? Perhaps not. Perhaps the moments at which we asked the questions, namely during the height of the year, led students to underestimate that influence. Perhaps raising such questions right after the year, and even five or ten years later, would find different responses. Perhaps there are schools that push harder to change their students in radical ways, and we did not happen to meet students from those schools. Or, perhaps our small sample size means that these results are not representative. These suggestions are certainly plausible.

However, I would like to consider another option. In explaining young people's religious trajectories, it is simply too easy to overlook the complexities of religious change among adolescents, and it is extraordinarily difficult to account for all the factors that might come into play. It is easier to identify one institution, particularly one that is distant and

isolated. It is easy to compare and contrast, to examine the before and after, and thereby to imagine Israel as the sole or most important independent variable.

In contrast, we are trying to suggest that the year in Israel is *not* necessarily the most important independent variable. Students come into Israel with enormous baggage and background, and that background is just as important an independent variable in understanding the students "outcome" as is the particular details of the year in Israel. Perhaps the programs in Israel deserve less of the blame when students do "flip out," but also less of the credit when they grow in more moderate and healthy ways.