



Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism

Shaul Kelner

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Since 1999 hundreds of thousands of young American Jews have visited Israel on an all-expense-paid 10-day pilgrimage-tour known as Birthright Israel. The most elaborate of the state-supported homeland tours that are cropping up all over the world, this tour seeks to foster in the American Jewish diaspora a lifelong sense of attachment to Israel based on ethnic and political solidarity. Over a half-billion dollars (and counting) has been spent cultivating this attachment, and despite 9/11 and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict the tours are still going strong.

Based on over seven years of first-hand observation in modern day Israel, Shaul Kelner provides an on-the-ground look at this hotly debated and widely emulated use of tourism to forge transnational ties. We ride the bus, attend speeches with the Prime Minister, hang out in the hotel bar, and get a fresh feel for young American Jewish identity and contemporary Israel. We see how tourism's dynamism coupled with the vibrant human agency of the individual tourists inevitably complicate tour leaders' efforts to rein tourism in and bring it under control. By looking at the broader meaning of tourism, Kelner brings to light the contradictions inherent in the tours and the ways that people understand their relationship to place both materially and symbolically. Rich in detail, engagingly written, and sensitive to the complexities of modern travel and modern diaspora Jewishness, **Tours that Bind** offers a new way of thinking about tourism as a way through which people develop understandings of place, society, and self.

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