

## Hillel head wants 'reverse birthright' program for Israelis

By Haviv Rettig

January 4, 2008

Wayne Firestone, president of the campus life organization Hillel, wants to see the expansion of Birthright Israel to include not just Diaspora Jews, but Israelis, too.

Where would the Israelis go on birthright-style paid trips? To Silicon Valley, South America, Moscow and everywhere in between that has Jewish communities.

"What have we learned from birthright that works?" Firestone asked during a conversation with The Jerusalem Post this week. "We've learned that giving people an opportunity to meet in Israel socially and to give them some context of what's going on in Israeli society has been a very successful engagement tool for otherwise unaffiliated and uninvolved people to learn about their Jewish identity."

But young Israelis are also often unaffiliated and uninvolved in Jewish life, he said.

"What if we utilized a similar context to allow young Israelis who are uncertain about their Jewish identities - they're patriotic and have a sense of who they are as Israelis, not as Jews - the chance to explore meaningfully what it means to be Jewish?"

According to Firestone, many young Israeli Jews have "rejected the options open to them" in Israel, and he'd like to see them "interacting with peers in a different setting, with Jewish peers around the world."

"Many have roots in the former Soviet Union, many travel to South America for adventures, and many go to work or study in the United States. What if we tried to engineer that a little bit and created a structure and joint initiatives experimenting with models of interaction that are aimed at saying that there are aspects of life in the Diaspora that could be valuable to Jewish civilization generally?" he asked.

"Young Israelis could be hosted by, or given an opportunity to meet, their peers abroad, and could explore and taste other Jewish communities on an equal footing. The goal is to have them learn and take back [to Israel] what they find in these communities."

How would Firestone propose to fund such a project? Government funds are unlikely to be forthcoming, and Jewish world institutions operating with Israel, such as the Jewish Agency, are already cash-strapped.

"It will take time to sensitize [funders] to the concept before there is an investment of huge amounts of money, but I'd like to see some pilot initiatives," Firestone said. "A group of students from the Technion and Ben-Gurion University who have backgrounds in engineering could do something jointly with students from the FSU, South America, the US, and make a contribution. I'd like to see Israelis getting in on the kinds of discussions of Jewish ethics we have at Hillel."



Furthermore, said Firestone, who has a background in hi-tech and international trade, Israel has much to gain financially from investing in its connection with the Jewish world.

"I remember in 1996-97, when the hi-tech industry was growing, people in the industry [in Israel] said they could grow without end if they could only find enough manpower. They talked about recruiting people from Silicon Valley or engineering students from overseas for the short-term," he said.

Firestone believes Israel should consider "what assets the Jewish community all around the world can bring... What sort of contacts will Israel need to be a global information superpower? What resources could it find here?"

The initiative could also take the form of a service corps of Jews from Israel and around the world.

"A number of groups have been talking to the Foreign Ministry and the Education Ministry over the past few years about this idea - deploying and involving young Israelis in an international service corps. One can imagine a very collaborative effort between elements of the Foreign Ministry, private funders and foundations that have been looking at this and thinking about a short-term service experience," he said.

College-age Israelis "are post-army people with skills Americans or FSU kids don't have. We could create collaborative teams doing work projects that could be funded by a number of institutional and private funding," he said.

Firestone believes the idea is workable, but would take "institutional impetus" to make it happen.

"What's the vision of the Jewish state for the next 60 years?" he asked. "If the vision is to be the center of the Jewish world, we have to bring Jews in Israel and the Diaspora to interact to grow the relationship, and not just in moments of crisis."

Would Israelis want to learn about Jewish communities or join service projects around the world?

"That's the thing that defines this generation [of college-age youth], and it's a global phenomenon," Firestone said. "This is a generation of searching, a generation that isn't looking to join things or define themselves by ideology. They don't want to reach a communal answer, but a personal one. We see this on American campuses, and it's not different from what we see in the FSU, where many of the kids didn't even know they were Jewish growing up. We're seeing it in the Israelis, too," Firestone said.

As Israel's population and economy expand, he said, "one can imagine an Israeli society that in many respects - language, culture and innovation - has become the center of the Jewish world. The question is how communities around the world relate to Israel, and how Israelis can have an understanding of these communities."

Until that question is properly raised and dealt with, Firestone believes, all that most Israelis will know of the Diaspora "are the extinguished communities and death camps some of them visit on high school trips."

