



A BIRTHRIGHT CHECK-UP

∞ *Facilitators' Guide* ∞

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Sponsored by:

The Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning
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Illustrations by Maria Radacsi

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WELCOME

Welcome to the “Birthright check-up” designed and written for Hillel’s Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning by Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, Director of Spiritual Education at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem.

This “Birthright check-up” is designed to help students take a moment and reflect in a meaningful way about their experiences in Israel, and think about the things that give meaning to their lives.

The workshop is a ready-made activity for use on campuses of all kinds. We hope that it will spark conversations, enrich the students with some experience of studying Jewish thought and help them feel connected to their Jewish identities.

It can be used in many ways; as part of a larger series of reunion events for Birthright alumni; as part of a curriculum for a Birthright reunion retreat over a Shabbat; as a one-time evening activity. The Birthright Check-Up can also be broken up and the parts integrated into other activities. More ideas for how to adapt these activities is at the end of this document.

For the sake of clarity and convenience, each Birthright Check-Up includes the **Facilitator’s Guide, Student Guide** and **Experiential Exercise**. The Facilitator’s Guide is the same for each Check-Up.

BEFORE THE SESSION

1. Marketing and Targeting the Birthright Check-Up

- a. Which students would you like to participate in this session? Do you want your student board and other empowered students who went on Birthright to have the opportunity to think deeply about the experience? Are you going to use the topic of Birthright to attract Birthright alumni who don’t usually come to Jewish events?
- b. Make sure that you think about the words you use on the publicity. Don’t forget to tell people that this is a workshop that requires their full participation for the whole time (usually 1.5 hours). It is very disruptive for the whole group if people come late and leave early.
- c. As with all Hillel events, students will be much more likely to come to this event if they have had personal contact with someone involved. Think about sending personalized invitations in advance, or calling people personally. This is the kind

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of event that requires the personal touch. You could also advertise that there will be dinner served, which makes it into a whole evening program.

2. Selecting a Location

Who are the students you are targeting? Where are they? Which location would be the best for them? Sometimes hosting events at Hillel will deter unaffiliated students from coming. Think about the best place to host the event, remembering that it should be comfortable and with a relaxed and quiet atmosphere.

3. Preparing the Room

- a. **Most importantly – make sure that it doesn't resemble a classroom.** Is the setting friendly? Are the chairs in a circle? Can you pull a couch into the circle? Are there pillows on the floor to sit on? Students walk into a classroom and automatically go into an academic mode of detachment. We want a warm, inviting atmosphere to help them unwind, and maybe even open up their hearts.
- b. How is the lighting? Don't try to make it too moodful or dark. They'll just fall asleep.
- c. Is the room clean? Are there any newspapers, magazines, or flyers lying around? Coffee cups or candy wrappers? Get rid of them. We don't want any distractions.
- d. Will you need a white board or an easel with markers that work? Double check.
- e. How about pens and paper for the writing exercise? Or are they readily available?
- f. Do you have the booklets copied and ready? If you don't have enough, are there enough to share?
- g. Snacks? Not essential but create a friendly atmosphere.

☞ DURING THE BIRTHRIGHT CHECK-UP

1. Preparing to be the Facilitator

Nervous? Relax. Remember - it's not about you.

- ☞ You don't have to dazzle them with your erudition or charisma.
- ☞ You don't have to be funny.
- ☞ You don't have to know everything.

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- ☞ You don't have to have an answer for every question. Remember that at the Pesach Seder we start off by asking four questions. Then we read the *Haggadah*. We only answer three of the questions, one of the questions we never answer.

You just have to be personal and sincere. Your job is to:

- ☞ Guide them through the booklet and facilitate the writing exercise in order to bring them to the personal *chevruta* (one-on-one dialogue) at the end, which always works, because it's completely dependent on them.
- ☞ Make sure that the evening keeps moving. Don't let it get bogged down. Don't let anyone monopolize the evening.
- ☞ Try to bring in people who appear to be on the outside, without drawing attention to the fact that they are an outsider, or that it is their first time.
- ☞ Encourage people to ask questions, and help to make them inclusive so that everyone understands and can participate.

You can do it. So relax and enjoy it. If you are transformed by the workshop, then for sure it will work for everyone else.

2. *The Welcome*

Are the students seated comfortably? Can you make eye contact with everyone?

- ☞ Find the people who chose to sit on the outside. They're nervous. They're not sure if they really want to be here. They're checking things out. They're not just sitting on the outside; they're emotionally on the outside. They're the most likely to leave.
- ☞ Give them a big smile and bring them into the circle. Start a conversation with them.

Everyone seated? Let's get them talking. Ask someone: "Why did you come here tonight?"

Just point and shoot. Ask someone else. Try to bring in the people who are looking distant. It will help warm them up. It should give you a feel of the crowd.

The students are coming from all different places – classes, sleeping in their rooms, exercise, coffee shop, etc. Your job now is to bring them together and to help them focus on the program. For this program to work, everyone will need to concentrate. Look serious. Even better, be serious.

3. *Get Personal*

You, the facilitator, now have to set the tone by saying something personal about yourself. If you don't lead the way, then they will not fully engage.

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1. Talk about why this is an important subject for **you**. Try to be as specific as possible. Offer a moment – positive or challenging – relating to Birthright or your personal connection to Israel. It's a great opportunity to deepen the bond you have with the students, and to show new students that you can create an engaging and welcoming space for them to discuss meaningful issues. Most of their professors do not share their personal side.
2. You're giving them permission to bring their hearts and souls (not just their minds) to the activity.
3. Don't (!) talk too long. Three minutes is plenty. Remember, it's not about you. It's about them. You're just the catalyst.

4. *Timing and the Components of the Session*

The program is relatively long, but each piece is crucial. You may need to tell students that they have to commit to staying the whole time. If they come late or leave early it will distract the whole group.

Think of the program as two 45-minute parts. (If there are less than 10 participants it will take less time.)

These are the elements of the program:

<p>Introduction The introduction is read by the participants; just follow along in the <i>haggadah</i>.</p>	10 minutes
<p>Learning and Review of the Sources In small groups of 4 or 5. All you need to do is divide the participants into these groups, tell them to follow the directions in their <i>haggadah</i>, and the discussion will run itself.</p>	30 minutes
<p>Break (optional) You might want to add a short game to lighten the mood and get people moving.</p>	
<p>Experiential Component An art or writing exercise which you facilitate (see the document entitled "experiential exercise" at the end of this facilitator's guide) and which is then followed by sharing in small groups of 4 or 5. These need not be the same groups as the previous part.</p>	15 minutes
<p>Personal <i>Chevruta</i> One-on-one dialogue between two participants. Encourage the participants to choose a partner from among the people they know the least.</p>	25 minutes
<p>Closing Words (the <i>afikomen</i> and anything else you want to add)</p>	10 minutes
<p>Total</p>	90 minutes

Your most important responsibility is to continually check the time. Work backwards. Figure out what time you want to finish. Then subtract 10 minutes for closing words. Then subtract 25 minutes for the personal *chevruta*. Then subtract 15 minutes for the writing exercise and sharing. Then subtract 5 minutes for a break. That means that the

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second half of the program (writing, personal *chevruta* and closing) is 50 minutes. So you can't get bogged down during the first half of the program (introduction, *chevruta* on sources, and reading of booklet's analysis of sources). Remember - if you shorten the personal *chevruta* at the end the whole evening will be diminished. That's almost always the most powerful part of the evening. It works well to have dinner for them beforehand. Then the whole evening becomes 1.5 hours. Don't serve dinner in the middle; the program will lose its flow.

After the Session

One of the most important parts of these workshops is what you do *afterwards*. How are you going to capitalize on the success of the workshops? How can you involve these students in future activities? How can you build on their interest and energy? Even before the session starts, invest some time in thinking about what will happen afterwards. Here are some ideas of how to continue the connection with the students who participate.

Ideas for Follow-Up

- a. Invite all those who participate to have coffee with a Hillel staff member in the week following the workshop. Call them up and make a date to talk about their interests and how birthright affected them.
- b. Encourage the students to start meeting on a regular (perhaps once a month), informal basis to attend Hillel events, Israel-related events, to hang out, or attend other events on campus together.
- c. Be in touch with students to let them know about travel, study abroad, and volunteer opportunities in Israel.

ADAPTING AND "TWEAKING" THE BIRTHRIGHT WORKSHOP

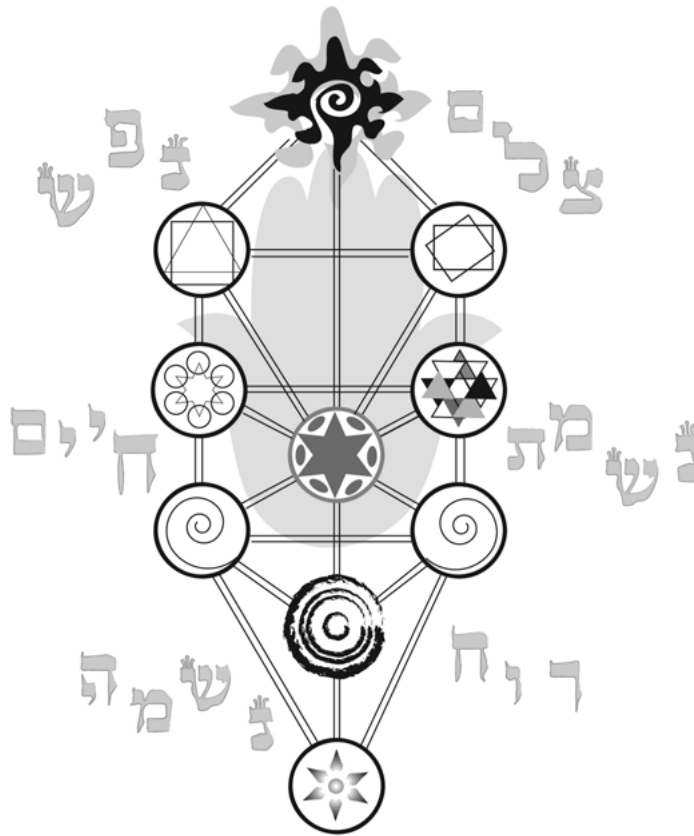
The Birthright check-up is written in a "*haggadah*" format, meaning that it is ready to use and doesn't require any additional material. You simply take the "*haggadah*," make copies for the participants, and start!

But, you should also feel free to take the material and adapt it to suit your needs, your students and your own personal style. Make it personal, add individual touches, and do whatever you need to make it work. The following are some ideas taken from things that other Hillel professionals have already done to make these workshops work for them.

- a. Begin the whole evening with a moment of reflection. You could end with one too.
- b. Begin with a personal story about your connection to Israel or birthright.
- c. Ask a small number of students to share their spiritual moments at different times during the evening.

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- d. Ask everyone to write down a word describing how they feel at the start of the evening, and then do this again at the end, comparing how the feelings are different.
- e. Have people introduce themselves by saying something about their souls.
- f. Don't be afraid to ask people to "just sit with this idea for a moment" if something interesting comes up. Ask them to reflect on this at the end.
- g. Add an ice-breaker game at the start or in the middle.



∞ A BIRTHRIGHT CHECK-UP

EXPERIENTIAL COMPONENT

WRITING EXERCISE

For the Facilitator

∞ Supplies needed:

Just pens. Blank sheets of paper should be in the *haggadah* booklet.

Warm-up:

1. Ready? Pen in hand? I'm going to say a word and without thinking, you're going to write down the first 3 or 4 words that cross your mind. No thinking. We're finished with thinking. No filtering. Just write. [Facilitator: pick 5 words. Some funny. Maybe a celebrity or a kind of food. Maybe something connected to their campus or city. Last time I picked: 1. fun, 2. Madonna, 3. the name of their school, 4. ice-cream, 5. Mickey Mouse.]
2. Okay, now look at your list of words. Everyone heard the same words but wrote down a different list. Write 3 sentences using your words. You can add on additional words. It doesn't have to make any sense. Just have fun. Throw the words together. It's just a warm-up. Be silly if you want.
3. Finished? Can we have a couple volunteers to read theirs?

Actual:

1. Now that we're warmed up, this one counts. Remember, no thinking. Anyone caught thinking fails this workshop. Pen ready?

Here we go:

Imagine that you met someone who has never been to Israel. Pick one moment of your trip that you felt you were attached to something greater in time, history, and destiny. Try to describe how that experience made you feel.



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∞ STUDENTS' GUIDE ∞

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☞ *First Reader:*

☞ GUIDELINES FOR THE READING OF THE BOOKLET

These booklets are modeled after the *Haggadah* of the Passover Seder; the book that we use to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Just like the *Haggadah*, this text will be read by the participants of the evening.

Guidelines for Readers:

1. Some people get nervous when they read aloud and end up reading very quickly. Try to read loudly and slowly.
2. Try to add a bit of life to what you're reading. Relax. Have some fun.
3. Please don't read ahead. The *Haggadah* works better when we're all on the same page.
4. Occasionally there will be "Instructions to the Reader" directions, don't be alarmed, enjoy it.
5. If you do not feel comfortable reading aloud, please feel free to call on someone else.

At the ☞ *Next Reader* sign, pick the next reader of your choice.

☞ *Next Reader*

First we have to prepare ourselves appropriately. Just like on Passover when we get rid of all of our *hametz* (leavened products), so too tonight we're going to have to get rid of something for this workshop to be meaningful. Tonight, our *hametz* is our cynicism or sarcasm. For the duration of this workshop we will be functioning in a cynicism-free zone. Why? It's very hard for one person to raise the mood of a whole group, but it is very easy for one person to bring down the mood of the whole group. Tonight, we'll have to work together to make this workshop productive.

We have all been in a group setting in which someone makes a very personal remark and another person rolls his or her eyes. Everyone sees the eyes rolling. It only takes a second but at that moment, everyone else in the room shuts down. No one is willing to become the next target of rolling eyes.

Just like we replace *hametz* with matzah, so too tonight we're going to replace cynicism with tolerance and support. We will not judge each other. We will not criticize each other. We will not attack each other. We want to create an environment of "safe space." Keep in mind that people may be in very different places, and that we have to maintain mutual respect to ensure this session will be meaningful.

Okay, let's start. (Please turn off cell phones.)

🌀 GETTING STARTED

Birthright.

A free trip to Israel. Wow. Generations and generations of Jews never made it to Israel, and we were given a free trip. What a gift. Ten amazing days. I've been so busy since then I feel that it's beginning to slip away. Let's try and freshen the memories a bit.

Instructions to Reader: ask participants to turn to the person next to them and share a few memories from their trip. We may have traveled with groups to other places in the world, so try to think of "only in Israel" memories. After five minutes, ask if any of them want to share a memory with the whole group. Then call on the Next Reader.

🌀 *Next Reader*

Birthright.

Why was it called Birthright and not something else like – "Experience Israel" or "Want a Free Trip?"

The name "Birthright" was chosen intentionally. It evokes the story of the birthright mentioned in the Torah. We might remember the story from a Sunday school class. In that story, Esau came in from the field, tired and impatient to eat. Jacob, his brother, is cooking a pot of lentils. He makes a deal with Esau to sell Esau the food in exchange for Esau's birthright. Esau agrees, and he sells his birthright to his brother Jacob. He relinquishes his birthright for a pot of lentils!

The commentators say that it wasn't just that Esau was so hungry. He wasn't that stupid and easily swindled. Rather he didn't want the birthright. He wanted to get rid of it. A birthright is both a privilege and a responsibility. It's not easy being the eldest child. He knew that it came with a certain responsibilities that he didn't want to shoulder. The offer from Jacob was a good opportunity to unload his birthright.

Birthright and responsibility?

Most of us think of it as a gift. A free trip to Israel. A chance to travel, see new things and meet new people. But does it also carry with it any responsibility?

Instructions to Reader: ask participants to reflect on if they think their trip to Israel also carries with it any responsibility. Ask a couple of them to share their thoughts.

🌀 *Next Reader*

One level of responsibility is simply to remember the experience, to remember the trip. Trips have a way of gradually disappearing. They become faded photograph albums

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sitting on a shelf, eventually forgotten through the passage of time, or replaced by the next trip.

Should a trip to Israel be any different than a trip to any other exotic place? Should the memories be remembered differently?

Should they be wonderful episodes of nostalgia, or should they continue to affect me, to impact my life?

Three thousand years ago, the book of Psalms reflected on the place Jerusalem should hold in our memories, in our lives. Let's take a look at what the Jewish perspective on remembering Jerusalem was 3,000 years ago.

❧ Sources ❧

Psalms 137: 1-6

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we also wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in its midst, we hung our harps. For there, they who carried us away captive asked us for a song; and they who shattered us, mockingly asked us, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? **If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not raise up Jerusalem above my highest joy.**

Instructions to Reader: ask everyone to take a moment and reread these verses. Ask them if they have any observations about what it is saying, especially regarding remembering and forgetting.

We're instructed to remember Jerusalem. To place it above all our other joys. One of the ways that we have implemented this idea is to break a glass at a wedding and then recite these verses. Some people leave a bit of their homes unpainted.

But what exactly am I supposed to remember? And what is the effect of this memory? I remember a lot of things about Jerusalem. The falafel, the Hebrew, the Old City, the crowds and pushing. What effect is Jerusalem supposed to have on me that is so important that if I forget it – my right hand will disappear and my tongue will stick to my mouth?

What am I instructed not to forget?

☞ *Next Reader*

In order to address this question, we're going to look at the writings of a 20th century rabbi, philosopher, poet and social activist – Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel visited Israel after the 1967 6-Day War and was inspired to write a book of his reflections.

☞ *Next Reader*

Instructions to Reader: Let's divide into small groups and study the following sources. Ask each person in the small group to select a section that especially resonated with them, and share why with their small group. After you think they have discussed the sources enough, call everyone back together and call on the Next Reader.

From Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*

Jerusalem is not the first among cities. She is the first among visions. She is more than a city among cities; she is a city full of vision, a city with an extrasensory dimension. Her fascination is not in her age. Her power is in her promise. What is the mystery of Jerusalem? A promise: peace and God's presence. Without Jerusalem the spiritual history of the world would be stagnant; with Jerusalem there is a vision and a promise.

What is the meaning of the name Yerushalayim? Yerushalayim combines two names: Yireh and Shalom, vision and peace.

When the Moors were driven out of Spain they left the land forever. When the Jews were driven out and no longer dwelled in the Holy Land, the land continued to dwell in them.

Why did our hearts throughout the ages turn to Eretz Yisrael? Because of hope. Over and above the deep sadness of our melodies, fears and experience of persecutions, rituals of mourning and memories of sorrow, hovers the power of hope. Hope is our power.

Hope is not cheerfulness, a temperamental confidence that all will turn out for the best. It is not an inclination to be guided by illusions rather than facts. Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust.

Jewish hope continues as yearning and expectation. It is part of our very existence to be faithful to the future, to keep alive the beginning by nursing the vision of the end. We misunderstand events past unless we are certain of events to come.

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What is holy about the Holy Land? It is an anticipation. Israel reborn is an explicit rendering of an ineffable, inexplicable mystery. This is part of our exultation: to witness the resurrection of the land of the Bible; a land that was dead for nearly 2,000 years is now a land the sings.

What lends meaning to history? The promise of the future. If there is no promise, there is no meaningful history. Significance is contingent on vision and anticipation, on living the future in the present tense.

What does Israel say to us? That waiting for wonder is not in vain. The inspiration that goes out of Zion today is the repudiation of despair and the example of renewal. The dreadful experiences of the past 100 years, far from having poisoned us with a sense of despair, have on the contrary evoked in us the vigor of hope and of resolve for renewal. Despair is not man's last word. Hiddenness is not God's last act.

What brought the State of Israel into being? A stream of dreaming.

☞ *Next Reader*

Instructions to Reader: ask a few people to share some of the thoughts they had in the small group discussion with the whole group.

Every city evokes a different mood, different feelings. Think of the cities that you know – what different moods do they elicit? What does New York arouse in you? Los Angeles? Las Vegas?

What about Jerusalem? It's probably easy to miss the Jerusalem that Heschel saw. It's easy to see just another busy city, albeit with a bit of a Middle-Eastern flavor. According to Heschel, to really see Jerusalem one has to see it with different eyes. With eyes that have recorded 3,000 years of history. With eyes that have witnessed the horrors of the last century. How does one see a promise or an anticipation?

Israel may have innumerable problems, crises, and also disappointments. Heschel did not say that we are actually doing a good job and succeeding to be a light unto the nations. Nevertheless, according to Heschel, somehow beyond all of the frustrations, there lies within it the secret of a greater vision and hope to bequeath to the world.

Instructions to Reader: ask participants if any of them felt any of the ideas that Heschel wrote about – vision, hope, promise, dreaming – while they were in Jerusalem or Israel.

☞ *Next Reader*

What happens to a person who has acquired a deeper sense of vision, hope, or promise? How does this affect him or her?

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According to the Kabbalah, there is a spiritual voice within us that we can only hear when we are attached to a people or place that summons a deeper point within us. A people or place that makes us conscious of our role in history, that we are a link between the past and the future. According to this voice we are wired in such a way that we yearn to be part of something much greater than ourselves. A family, a community, and also a people.

We yearn to be part of a place and a people. There is a voice within us which impels us to seek out a vision of contributing to the betterment of the whole world. Perhaps that is part of the song of Jerusalem that is harder to sing while we are on foreign soil. Harder, but not impossible.

Perhaps this is what our captives mocked us when they said, ““Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” They thought that our hope had been destroyed.

Yet, 2,500 years later a people returned to its land and began to sing its song, appropriately called “*HaTikvah*,” the hope.

☞ *Next Reader*

BOTTOM LINE

Birthright is not supposed to be just a 10-day free trip to an exotic destination. It is both a gift and an opportunity, a privilege and a responsibility. A responsibility not to forget the vision and dream of Jerusalem. It is supposed to be the beginning of a life-long relationship with the hope that Israel can bring to the whole world.

☞ FIVE-MINUTE BREAK

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ WRITING EXERCISE

Instructions to Reader: Break the group up into small groups of 4. Make sure that everyone has something to write with.

We’re going to write for a few minutes. Don’t get nervous. We are not writers. We’re not interested in the quality of the writing. We’re not going to examine the grammar or syntax. This is not English 101. We’re not going to compare or judge. The writing exercise is simply a form to express ourselves. Let’s enjoy it.

☞ WARM-UP EXERCISE

☞ WRITING EXERCISE

Imagine that you met someone who has never been to Israel. Pick one moment of your trip that you felt you were attached to something greater in time, history, and destiny. Try to describe how that experience made you feel.

Use the space below to write on.

Instructions to Reader: after giving people a few minutes to write, ask people to share something of what they wrote in their small groups.

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ **PERSONAL CHEVRUTA (ONE-ON-ONE DIALOGUE)**

Okay. We've used our minds. We've written something. Now comes the last and most important part of the evening.

We're going to divide into pairs. In a moment, everyone should get a partner.

We're going to give each other a "spiritual check-up." It's very similar to a physical check-up.

These are the ground rules:

1. **Confidentiality.** Just like with a doctor, everything that is said between the two of you stays between the two of you.
2. **Total respect.** No judging or evaluating each other. No giving advice. We're not trying to fix each other. We're trying to create a "safe space" so that each of you can sincerely express where you are holding spiritually.
3. **Deep listening.** Focus on each other. Most people today just listen, but don't deeply listen. There are some people in the world who are blessed to be exceptional listeners. When someone deeply listens to us that enables us to deeply listen to ourselves.
4. **Reflective Questions:** If you ask your partner a question, make sure that it is a reflective, open-ended question. Not a question in which you are looking for a certain answer. Examples of reflective questions: "How long have you felt like that?" "How does that make you feel?" Examples of non-reflective, non-open-ended questions: "Why don't you do this . . . ?" "Have you ever considered doing this . . . ?"

Take turns. Listen to each other. Here are your questions.

☞ **THE FOUR QUESTIONS**

1. Describe your relationship with Israel, with Jerusalem.
2. Would you like to deepen this connection? How would your life be different if you had a closer relationship with Israel?
3. How could you accomplish this?
4. Describe a moment that you experienced on your birthright trip that continues to affect you.

∞ *Next Reader*

∞ *AFIKOMEN*

This workshop is coming to a close. The reading of the *Haggadah* is almost over. Hopefully we have gained, individually and collectively, from this experience.

Instructions to Reader: Ask if anyone has any reflections on the evening.

At the end of the Passover seder we look for the *afikomen*. How appropriate. In the end, we are always searching. Searching for our true selves.

And this searching is culminated at the end of the Seder when we sing out “*L’shana ha’ba B’Yerushalayim.*” Next year in Jerusalem. Yearning. Countless families proclaiming over countless generations – Next year in Jerusalem. What has been the effect of this declaration on the collective consciousness of the Jewish People?

Perhaps it has created an indelible sense – our Birthright and our responsibility – to make sure that the vision and dream that Jerusalem bears are never forgotten.

