New Initiative Looks to Boost Teen Israel Travel and Aims for Tens of Thousands of Participants Each Summer

Led by The Jewish Education Project, “RootOne” Will Lower Price of Trips and Enable More Teens to Strengthen Jewish Identity and Connection to Israel During Formative Years

New York, NY -- An ambitious new initiative will lower the cost of teen travel to Israel, aiming to help tens of thousands travel there each summer with expertly trained trip leaders, educators, and Israeli teens creating a transformational and meaningful experience. Led by The Jewish Education Project, the initiative, known as RootOne (RootOne.org) received a $20 million seed gift from The Marcus Foundation to provide major subsidies for trip participants while also investing in trip curricula and experiences, and providing deeper pre and post-trip engagement to strengthen participants’ Jewish identities and connections to Israel before they begin college. Five youth serving organizations (YSOs)—BBYO, USY, Ramah, Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), and NCSY—are working with RootOne to elevate and increase participation in their Israel travel programs.

“Teen travel to Israel is a deeply impactful experience that can set a teen on a path for ongoing, meaningful Jewish engagement filled with lifelong friendships,” says David Bryfman, CEO of The Jewish Education Project. “We are thrilled to partner with these youth serving organizations that have the track record and experience of running great Israel travel programs. Now, together, we can transform the field and elevate the experience to make it more accessible for more teens.

Through RootOne, the YSOs will receive subsidies, “RootOne vouchers,” to lower their price point by $3,000 per participant on their trips. RootOne aims to increase teens traveling to Israel on these trips by nearly 40% year over year. By 2025, more than 10,000 Jewish teens are expected to travel to Israel on RootOne peer programs every summer. And by 2030, that becomes 20,000 teens.

“We want young people stepping onto their college campuses with deep connections to Israel and strong Jewish identities,” says Bernie Marcus, Chairman of the Marcus Foundation. “These types of trips are proven to greatly impact participants in these ways. Over the next decade, The Jewish Education Project and their partners can inspire tens of thousands of teens, helping prepare them to be Jewish leaders in college and proud supporters of Israel and in turn changing the trajectory of American Jewish life.”

Previously a normative part of many Jewish teens’ lives, teen Israel travel has declined over the last 20 years for a variety of reasons. RootOne aims to reverse that trend with a new level of focus and intentionality built into all aspects of the trip and pre and post trip engagement.

“Teens are eager to engage in challenging conversations, to learn about all aspects of Israel, and to understand how Israel is or can be a part of their lives,” adds Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President, Union for Reform Judaism.

“We’re excited to offer immersive Israel experiences in coordination with other learning opportunities designed for today’s teens and the world in which they live,” says Rabbi Micah Greenland, International Director, NCSY.

The iCenter for Israel Education, the primary educational advisor for RootOne, will train all American staff who will lead trips, using a similar model to what The iCenter currently uses to train Birthright Israel staff. The iCenter also will develop trip curricula as well as pre- and post-program engagement, will help prepare Israeli teens who will join the trips, and will ensure that any existing training programs use best-in-class newly created resources.

The first RootOne trips are expected to leave summer 2021. In addition to the YSO partners, RootOne is partnering with the Jewish communities in Denver, Houston and Atlanta to enhance select community Israel trips. RootOne also will release an RFP for an additional Innovation Fund that will provide subsidies for Jewish residential camps that send teens on Israel summer trips through other YSOs to help kickstart Israel programs that have been incubating.