

Jewish philanthropist wants free Israel travel for teens - By *Steven A. Rosenberg* Globe staff September 04, 2014



Juliette Lynch for The Boston Globe

Robert Lappin, 92, at his office by the Salem seaport.

From his top-floor office overlooking Salem Harbor, Robert Lappin is trying to change Jewish policy nationwide.

The philanthropist — who has given more than \$40 million to Israel and Jewish-related causes over the years and who lost \$83 million in the [Bernard Madoff investment fraud](#) of 2008 – wants every Jewish teenager to go on a free trip to Israel.

“I am very passionate about keeping our children Jewish,” said Lappin, who is 92, pony-tailed, and known among Jewish philanthropists for creating a program offering a free trip to Israel for teenagers from the North Shore.

“Trips for young people to Israel set in motion the process of Jewish engagement that could last a lifetime,” said Steven Cohen, a professor and researcher at Hebrew Union College in New York.

Though scholarships are available, summer trips sponsored by other Jewish groups can cost from \$6,000 to more than \$9,000.



[Photos: Focus on Jewish youths](#)

“If the [question of] money is removed, then a lot more kids would be interested,” said Nicole Merken, 16, of Needham, one of 83 Greater Boston Jewish teenagers who traveled to Israel this summer on the Cohen Camps’ five-week, partially subsidized [Dor L’Dor \(Generation to Generation\) Leadership Program](#), which cost \$9,200.

A monthlong [United Synagogue Youth](#) trip to Israel costs \$5,995. Justin Korn of Sharon recently returned from his trip, where he met other Jewish teenagers from across North America. He also believes that, given the opportunity, most Jewish teenagers would sign up for a free trip.

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“I feel like it would increase Jewish identity in America,” said Korn, 17. “My trip was amazing. It was really nice to be able to bond with every single person on the trip, and at the end of the trip we became one big family.”

Lappin, who began subsidizing a free 12-day North Shore [Youth to Israel](#) (Y2I) program in 1971, released a [study](#) this summer that surveyed trip alumni between the ages of 18 and 39. The study’s biggest finding, he said, is the low intermarriage rate, 28 percent, of those who made the trip.

For decades, religious intermarriage has been a touchstone for debate among American Jews. In 2013, a [Pew Research Center study](#) reported that since 2000, 72 percent (excluding the Orthodox) had intermarried. The study also reported that 22 percent described themselves as Jews of no religion.

In addition to the Pew study, the Y2I data were also compared to statistics provided by [Birthright Israel](#), an international foundation based in New York that spends \$135 million every year on free trips to Israel for Jews ages 18 to 26. Y2I and Birthright’s findings were similar: 66 percent of Birthright alumni married Jews (compared with Y2I’s 72 percent), and 85 percent of Birthright participants were raising their children Jewish, compared with 90 percent of Y2I’s alumni.

With affiliation to synagogues and other Jewish institutions continuing to drop, Birthright has brought more than 400,000 Jews to Israel from 66 countries, including 22,600 from Massachusetts, over the last 15 years. With the findings of his report, Lappin wants Birthright to create a national program in the United States that would fully fund trips to Israel for teenagers 15 to 17.

“It would remove both a psychological and financial barrier,” Lappin said of his proposal, which he has sent to Birthright and to other philanthropists and heads of Jewish organizations.

Gidi Mark, chief executive officer of Birthright, praised the report, but said his organization has no plans to change its core mission of serving Jews 18 to 26. “We need to study it,” he said by phone from Tel Aviv.

Mark believes that Birthright’s free 10-day trips for older Jews are easier to arrange and less costly (\$3,000 versus Y2I’s fully subsidized \$6,000 per person).

“It’s easier for us in terms of legal, because we deal with people who are mature and not juniors,” said Mark.

Barry Shrage — president of [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#), the largest Jewish charity in New England — has read the Lappin report and believes that a fully subsidized, free trip for all Jewish teenagers is unrealistic.

“That’s not going to happen; it’s just too expensive,” he said.

In order to boost trips by teenagers to Israel — such programs attract up to 10 percent of all American Jewish teenagers each summer — Jewish charities should consider creating a \$2,500 subsidy, Shrage said. Currently, CJP partially subsidizes teen trips. The organization reported that more than 600 teenagers from Greater Boston went on Israel trips this summer.

Debbie Kardon-Schwartz, director of the Cohen Camps’ Dor L’Dor Leadership Program, called teenage travel to Israel “vitaly important” and said that a later trip, such as Birthright, instills a strong foundation of Judaism in participants.

“I think the combination is unbelievably powerful,” she said.

Scott Shay, an expert on teenage travel to Israel who is chairman of Signature Bank, said that as many as 20,000 Jewish teenagers traveled to Israel annually on trips before violence broke out between Palestinians and Israelis in 1989. That, combined with Birthright’s growth, has pushed teenage travel to Israel to the background, with as few as 7,000 American teenagers currently going to Israel each year, he said.

Shay hailed the Lappin report and called for creation of a nationally subsidized free trip for Jewish teenagers to Israel.

“It would be totally transformative and very worthy of Jewish communal investment,” he said. “Trips to Israel during teen years have major positive impact on connections to Israel, Judaism, and other Jews.”

While Lappin’s proposal has been rejected by Birthright and by Sheldon Adelson, the Las Vegas casino mogul who gives \$40 million a year to Birthright, Lappin is undeterred.

He has a history of beating the odds. A secular Jew who lives in Swampscott, Lappin learned about Jewish pride from his father, who was born in Belarus, immigrated to Jerusalem, and came to Salem in 1910.

Growing up, Robert Lappin said, his Jewish identity was partially shaped by the anti-Semitism he faced in Salem and the inspiration he drew from Israel, which he called a modern-day miracle.

Until 2008, Lappin’s foundation fully funded the trips to Israel it offered. But after the foundation lost [\\$83 million](#), funds he had invested from his personal fortune and for his employees’ investment accounts, Lappin turned to the public to raise \$600,000 a year for the trips, which send 100 North Shore teenagers to Israel each summer. Lappin later covered his employees’ losses from personal funds.

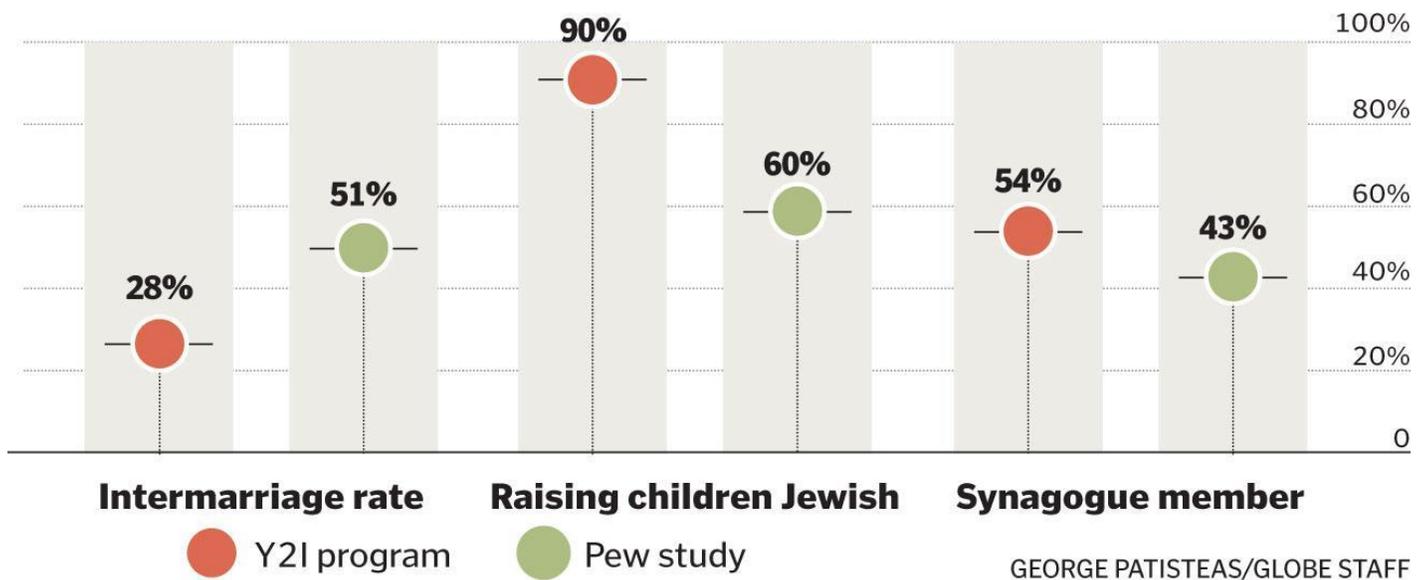
When asked about his own losses with Madoff, Lappin shrugged and said he no longer thinks about them.

“I would say it was a test of my character, if you will, and I think I came through it very well,” he said.

In Marblehead, one family is grateful that Lappin never gave up. Brad Sontz, 48, and his wife Rebecca, 45, are part of a second-generation Y2I family; their daughter Sarah, 17, went to Israel on the trip this summer. While the couple went on different trips and met later, each spoke of making lifelong friends while in Israel.

“Without a doubt, it was one of the number one factors that made me want to seek out a Jewish life,” said Brad Sontz.

Results from trips to Israel



The Lappin Foundation study used 245 responses from Jews ages 18-39 who participated in the Youth to Israel program between 1993 and 2011. For its analysis of the 2013 Pew Research Center study, Lappin used a subset of 456 Jews in the 18-39 range from that Pew report.