

LETTERS to ISRAEL
Written by 2018 Y2I Teens

Dear Israel,

First off, I would like to say thank you. Thank you, Israel, for giving me an experience that has changed my outlook on Zionism, Judaism, and my life as a whole.

I have to say, before going to Israel I had my concerns. My view on Israel was confused and warped by others who say that Israel is bad, that Israel ruthlessly kills people. And while I never doubted that the Jewish people need a country of their own, I allowed myself to be swayed by the people who question Israel and its ways. I feel somewhat ashamed, looking back now, of how I used to view my homeland.

I knew, however, that my view of Israel could be changed. I wanted it to be changed. So I became determined, while in Israel, to come to an understanding of our homeland. And throughout the two weeks that I was there, I began to understand. I saw the beauty of the rolling hills of Jerusalem, walked through the ancient streets in Jaffa and Jerusalem, heard the soothing sound of the Muslim call to prayer, and most importantly, I pressed my forehead against the Western Wall and felt the ancient force of God through the old bricks.

I had an epiphany at the Western Wall on that Friday night. The women's part was packed, and I was waiting for my turn to press my forehead against the Wall. And I was so close to all these women, some Hasidic, some not, but that didn't matter. All around me, women were reading from their little bibles or singing or crying or all three. In all the emotions I felt in that moment- the weight of seriousness and the exhilarating lightness of pure happiness, I was feeling overwhelmingly connected with all of these women. Although I didn't know any of them, I felt such an affection and love for the women. I wanted to wrap my arms around them all and give my overflowing love to all of them. They were all my aunts or my cousins or my sisters; they were family. And in that moment of intense connection and love, I finally understood Israel. Because that, to me, is what Israel is about. It is about family- my family. The Jewish family.

The Western Wall allowed me to see and understand Israel in a new light. The Wall represents our people's past, our ancestors, and our community as a Jewish people. It also represents our homeland- the land of Israel. This is why Israel needs to exist. It is our homeland, the land of our ancestors, and I believe that our people have the right to come home.

A few days after the Western Wall, we went to Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. There, I bought a Star of David necklace. It was expensive, but I knew it was special and I was excited about it. Inside the star, it says, in Hebrew, 'Zion'. I think that my connection to this necklace shows how I've changed from my experience in Israel. Before the trip, I would never have gotten a necklace that said Zion on it because of my confused connection with the word and what it means. But now, when I wear my necklace, I am comforted because to me, it reminds me of my time in Israel and my connection to my Jewish family. Now, Zionism is not confusing to me. Zionism represents my homeland, and my people. I wear my necklace proudly.

So thank you again, Israel, for teaching me to be proud, and to understand your beautiful land. I hope to return to Israel soon, and when I am away, Jerusalem will forever be in my heart.

Love,

Sophie Jefferies, Swampscott

Dear Israel,

You truly are a wonder. Despite your challenging topography, you somehow emerged prosperous. Slowly, the resilient Jewish inhabitants began to settle in their rightfully promised land; which before the 1940s was mostly sand dunes. Now, seventy years later, you thrive, with many developed cities, modern medicine, and a fairly stable democratic government.

Tel Aviv greeted me first with hospitality and delicious street food, which was nothing like the familiarity of Quincy Market back home. On top of that, the rich history on display in Jerusalem made me feel like you truly are a sacred place. I can still envision my tired feet striding across the slippery sandstone walls of the old city, and feeling a sense of overpowering serenity.

Your devotion to religion was on full display during Shabbat, where even at midday all but two cars were speeding around in the heart of the city. Clearly, you have shown me that you and your people are like an oasis, full of vitality in an otherwise tumultuous Middle East. Your neighbors may not be too inviting, but you sure debunked every slanderous remark made by the media back in the States.

Of course, nothing felt forced at all, and I felt entirely safe five thousand miles away from home. All in all, no other country in the world has accepted our entire group with such open arms. For making me feel like part of the family, I just want to say thank you.

Sincerely,

Berk Rosenwald, Lynnfield

Dear Israel,

From sand dunes to cities, 60 degrees to 115, super markets to synagogues, you are truly an extravagant place. When you enter your city of Jerusalem to see the Western Wall and get chills down your spine, religion and freedom are everywhere, no matter where you look. You changed me; you made me see just how much more to this world there is. The breathtaking views, the kind people, you are truly a safe haven and a beautiful one at that.

Before even Momo's speech I said to myself "How could I take this away from my children?" Will I marry Jewish? Who can tell? Love just happens. But my kids will be Jewish and grow up with Jewish customs. Tradition and family will surround their life. So the trip worked. My kids will be Jewish. That was the goal right? Well it did more than that. It changed me too. Thank you Y2I for truly changing my life. I'll truly never forget it.

Love,

Cam Lanza, Lynnfield

Dear Israel,

Before the Y2I trip I spelled your name wrong. I spelled Israel as ISREAL. That says a lot, doesn't it? As a Jewish girl from Newton (or Jewton as outsiders call it), I did not know how to write the name of my homeland.

I've always felt a strong sense of responsibility for Israel even though I had never set foot upon its welcoming soil and outwardly feared the opportunity of a terrorist attack. At school I do my very best to stand up to liberal teachers and students who spew words straight from the mouths of Palestinian Authority influencers. I try to fight for Israel on my own turf. Y2I gave me the chance to step out of my comfort zone and experience you firsthand - for that I am forever grateful.

To see you through the eyes of Debbie and Menash was the best lens I could have hoped for. In your streets I saw the joyous pride, determination, and creativity emulating from your population. In your museums I learned of the turbulent history of the Jewish people and their persistence to thrive in their rightful community. In your music, your tv shows, and your food, I found exotic melodies, comedy, and an appreciation for peanuts. I am so lucky to have been able to immerse myself in your rich aura and come out a different person.

I have learned the true value of family - not only my own but the Israeli family I now have in Haifa, Tel Aviv and even Peta Tikvah. I have learned to slow down and see each minute as an individual entity (even though Israelis push and shove and rush, they know that each second is a gift). I hope to be back again soon!

Love,

Talia Vyadro, Newton

In Their Own Words

Excerpts from Post-Trip Reflections Written by 2018 Y2I Teens

I never could have guessed that spending just two weeks in a different country with people I barely knew could change me so much, but it did. This change ranged from smaller things, like the music I listened to, to bigger things, like a growing sense of Jewish pride in me. It was amazing to find new friends, and I immediately felt a sense of belonging with them. I also loved meeting the Israeli teens, and seeing how we were all similar despite growing up 5,000 miles away from them.

This trip made me want to advocate for Israel more. Meeting the teens and hearing Charlotte's speeches really fueled my passion for this subject, because I realized how important it is to me. Being in Israel, I felt a very strong sense of security and community, and I think all Jews deserve to feel safe and happy in our home. From what I saw and from what I was told, I decided to take a firm pro-Israel stance on the subject. Now, I am willing to do whatever I can in order to help my family. I believe that can only be done with support, and I hope to give just that.

Y2I was one of the best opportunities I've ever had. Israel welcomed me with open arms, and I am forever thankful for its beautiful landscapes and welcoming people. This trip was life-changing for me, and I hope to give back to Israel as much as I can. Liz Bakhnov, Marblehead

One thing that stuck with me the whole trip is when one of the ambassadors for Y2I said "welcome home". I smiled and couldn't stop thinking of how two words can make an impact so large on me. Why would he say "welcome home", why those two words? The last day of the trip I finally figured out that it was the fact that I'm Jewish and I'm able to come back to where it all started. Throughout the trip I was able to see everything from Israel becoming a state to the Holocaust. For something so tragic to happen like the Holocaust, Jewish people were able to fight back and still maintain love and passion for people all around the world. Everyone in Israel takes a part in serving their country by serving in the military for two years or more. I was taught that people in the US and around the world don't like Israel. That is why we have to take charge for the Israelis who are not in the US and cannot defend themselves. We have to be the ones that stand up for millions of Jews. This is because Israel is our HOME. Zachary C Berger, Newton

Being in Israel changed me as a person more than I thought. When I went to the Western Wall, it was a surreal moment for me. Writing and putting a note in the Wall was a moment that I will always remember. I was standing next to one of the most holiest sites for the Jewish people, over 5,000 miles away from home. I had always seen it in pictures, but never in person. It made me think how crazy it was, the story of the Jewish people, how long they've been around for, how they've kept on fighting for their homeland, and for their futures. It made me think, that if they never gave up against all odds, why should I, and that I should be proud to be Jewish, and continue to be Jewish. Since I had left Cohen Hillel, and had my Bar Mitzvah, I had wanted to reconnect to Judaism, and this was my chance. It gave me that opportunity to not only reconnect, but to learn more about my religion, culture, and myself. Seeing the old parts of Israel and the new parts is something I'll never forget. This trip was the best time of my life, and I'll always be grateful for this trip and experience of a lifetime. Fischer Birnbach, Marblehead

Despite growing up Jewish, attending Hebrew school, becoming a Bat Mitzvah, getting confirmed, and going to Friday night services at temple, I always lacked the concept of where I was coming from—and I can happily say that Y2I has changed that missing component within my life. Prior to my trip to Israel, though, I never really knew what I wanted to do with myself regarding connecting the Jewish community back at home. But, after my trip with Y2I, I am now assured that I do not have to overlook this—just advocate, talk, and bring people together. By sharing my voice, I have the power to expand all of the knowledge that I have gained about Israel and Judaism. I will take whatever steps are necessary to promote the Jewish faith and culture, despite how challenging it may be living in a minority.

Being a part of Y2I has reminded me to remain true to myself and beliefs, enhancing my pride to be Jewish. I have assured myself to never shy away or deny the fact that I'm Jewish, but rather to embrace the honor and title. The people within the Jewish community have assured me that being Jewish is something to be proud of, something to consider a privilege. I enjoy being part of the Jewish community because despite how small we may be, we are all united in a way that not many people are; we have endured and grown so much over the generations, and the Jewish culture and faith has evolved in a beautiful way. We may be small, but we have the fight, determination, and dedication it takes for our voices to be heard. With us, the future of the Jewish community, I am confident that we can be the change the world needs when it comes to promoting Judaism. Our voices demand to be heard, and we will never accept anything less. Throughout what felt like two days, rather than two weeks, I have learned so much about my beliefs, community, religion, and most noticeably, myself. I have gained a sense of confidence and pride that has been hidden for so long. Israel has taught me to never shy away or deny the fact that I am Jewish. It is something to be proud of. We are the future of the Jewish community, and it is up to us to continue and carry on the legacy that has already lasted for so long. Us Jewish teens must stand up for Israel, and represent who we are and where we come from because ultimately, Israel is not just a place on the map—it is home. Jennifer Bloom, Lynnfield

My trip with Y2I changed my relationship and connection to Israel. I didn't grasp the gravity of Israel, and the importance of it for me and the Jewish People as a whole. For the last 70 years, we have been fighting to keep our state, but although it seems that we won't be able to stop fighting anytime soon, Jews are resilient and stubborn and we won't stop. We were exiled from our homeland for thousands of years, and yet we didn't forget it, and we didn't give up hope that someday we would return to it. This world now has a Jewish country and my people finally have a place to go. No matter how complicated the political situation is in Israel, Charlotte, the Israelis, and everyone on the trip showed me that this place is worth it. This is our home. Shay Bloom, Arlington

Israel before Y2I was just a small country many, many hours from me that always seemed to be in the news for its conflict with its neighbors or the Palestinians. And I went to Israel solely for the purpose of a cool free trip to travel to another country and meet new people. As I was in Israel, it became a lot more to me than that. Israel became a part of me and I feel like I now resonate much more with Jewish culture because of it. Going to Israel felt like going to another home away from home, the feeling of belonging and connecting was surprisingly strong. I loved Jerusalem and the Wall and how emotionally and spiritually connected everyone seemed to be. Israel taught me that even though I am not religious, I am still just as Jewish. Israel taught me what it feels like to truly belong. Israel also taught me what it truly means to love a country and its people as if they were your family. Skyler Burke, Marblehead

Visiting the Western Wall on Shabbat was life changing for me. I never really understood what they said when they told us that this was our home and we are all family until I was standing at the Western Wall crying, then being comforted by a girl I hadn't even met, yet feeling completely at home with her hand holding mine as if I suddenly had a sister standing with me. Then I had about twenty sisters standing with me, and this number quickly rose as we all came together to comfort those who were affected more than others. Then we all became even more connected as we walked and talked for the hour back to the hotel, laughing and unwinding and being ourselves. The impact Y2I has had on my life is large! This trip has made me feel connected to people I never thought I would even know. It brought me closer to my Jewish self and given me a sense of home in a place halfway across the world, and it has given me the confidence to stand up for my home. Bella Cabrera, Beverly

Before coming on this once in a lifetime trip to Israel, I had always thought I was just another Jew in a crowd of none-Jewish majorities. Although I have always been and felt Jewish, I didn't know what it meant **to be Jewish**. Being in a country with this many Jews was a first for me, and I'm sure it was a first for many other people. It was amazing to see Jews from every corner of the North Shore here for the same reason. To go to the home that we had never been to. We were all one big family that was making its way home.

Seeing the Western Wall had been the most powerful experience in my life. I was right there, at the center of Judaism where my connection to the faith, religion, God, and most importantly, myself was the strongest. For the short time that we were there, everything made sense and I understood why I was here and why I was proud to be a Jew.

Meeting the Israeli teens was also an unforgettable experience. Although we are thousands of miles apart from each other, I made the pleasant yet surprising discovery that we are very similar. We listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, and play Fortnite. Although we were similar to them, we had our key differences. The biggest difference being that at eighteen, their lives are put to a halt and they go to serve in the Israeli Defense Force. It was so inspiring to see that they were not only ready, but excited to do one of the greatest honors one can do for their country. It makes you want to go back home and do something just as important, which brings me to my next topic, defending our Jewish friends back at home. As we all know, Jews and Israelis receive biased and unfair coverage in the news and college campuses. Israel is often called an apartheid state and its military is viewed as murderers and terrorists. Listening to this fake news and then being able to put a friend's face to it left me feeling uneasy and angry and left me wondering, "How could something so untrue, somehow be believed by others?" After listening to both Charlotte's and Momo's lectures, we were given the proper tools and

resources to prove these people wrong, and show that Israel is not the bad guy, nor has it ever been.

Y2I has drastically changed my life, thoughts, and views. Without this trip, I would not be the person that I am today and most importantly, I wouldn't know what it's like **to be Jewish**.
Alan Chak, Middleton

All my life I have been learning and hearing about Israel. It's a part of my childhood, and one thing I always heard was that it was the one place that our people could truly call home. I have a story to tell which I think will really emphasize this point. For a few years I went to URJ 6 Points Sci-Tech Academy, a Jewish camp until I aged out recently, and I met a lot of really cool people. When we were visiting Ben Yehuda Street, by chance, I ran into three friends from that camp. These were people from all across the country and here we were, thousands of miles away from home, and I run into them by chance. I think this experience affected me the most, out of everything that happened on the trip. It made me realize that even though we could live hundreds or thousands of miles apart, any Jew will always be able to call Israel home.

Ben Colten, Beverly

Being in Israel, looking around and being able to guess that the majority of people around me were Jewish, was amazing. The feeling of community I felt, as well as being able to see the growth of Israel in just seventy years, gave me a sense of pride in being Jewish and calling Israel my second home. Through Y2I, I was surprised to find that my self-confidence grew. I felt a stronger connection to my homeland and formed many lasting relationships with other Jewish teens from America and Israel. In Israel I found it easy to connect with the other teens around me as we had one core similarity, being that we were all Jewish. I was shocked at how easily we bonded.

In Israel, I learned about Israel advocacy and the history of the Jewish people. I now have the ability to speak to people about Israel from an educated perspective. This has inspired me to learn more and enhance my advocacy skills. I now feel an obligation to Israel and my new Israeli friends to support them from the United States as best as I can. Ella Colten, Beverly

After going to Israel for two weeks, and seeing and experiencing all the cool things about the beautiful country, I can now confidently say Israel means a lot to me. One thing that has showed me how important Israel is, is the people I have met, whether they are from America, or have lived in Israel their whole lives. The love everyone has for that country is crazy. The amazing friends I have met on this trip have showed me that Israel really can bring people together. I see myself going back to Israel on numerous occasions and cannot wait for my future with my Jewish friends. Myles Despres, Peabody

Israel touched my heart and mind in ways I never could have anticipated. I now feel more connected to Israel, to who I am and to my Jewish identity. The speakers we listened to helped me realize the importance of advocating for Israel, not being ashamed of my identity, and that I want to continue being Jewish and I want to raise my children Jewish. I plan to stand up for Israel and tell stories of my adventures to my peers to obliterate any negativity towards Israel that many people think of when they hear "Israel". Walking off of an eleven hour flight into a completely unfamiliar country and hearing "welcome home" didn't mean much to me at the

time. After spending two weeks in Israel and being back in Massachusetts for a week, all I can think about is how badly I want to go back home. The people, the culture, the language, the food, everything about Israel keeps me longing for an opportunity to return. The two weeks in Israel were the best two weeks of my life and I am beyond happy that I attended.

Brooke Fabry, Beverly

You don't know you're at home until you're in Israel. That's what everyone said and that is one thing I can definitely say Y2I showed me. As soon as we landed, I was greeted with a "Welcome Home." That's when it occurred to me I was really in Israel. Every day was a new adventure on Y2I. We were constantly busy exploring Israel and visiting historical sites such as the Western Wall. It's hard to put into words what it was actually like to be there, particularly on Shabbat. Listening to the many speakers throughout the trip, you hear the passion in their voices for the country they love so much. It's almost impossible not to feel that same passion. I have developed a much deeper appreciation for not only my Jewish identity, but for Israel itself. I know what it truly means to be Jewish and I have also learned the many ways I can advocate for Israel with my new found sense of passion for a country I know I can call Home.

Hannah Finn, Andover

Y2I 2018 in all honesty changed my life. My goal after coming home from Israel is to defend it. We had so many wonderful speakers to teach us about their life and about Israel and how to defend it. These days, everywhere you go you can find someone anti-Israel and that is extremely saddening to me especially after visiting the beautiful country itself. I wholeheartedly hope to be able to defend Israel. People **need** to see what an amazing place Israel is; this amazing country does not deserve the treatment it gets. This trip has shown me it is so much more than what people say or what the media portrays Israel as. What Y2I has also done for me is show me how important it is to stay Jewish. With such a small Jewish population in the world being able to accurately represent and preserve my identity has become so much more important to me after seeing what a nation of my people is capable of. Y2I was one of the best experiences of my life--visiting the holiest sites in the world, and visiting one of the greatest countries in the world full of my own people, for once I felt at home. Max Foltz, Newburyport

I liked going to Israel with Y2I because it showed me a whole different perspective on what Israel looks like and what type of people live there. I recommend this trip to other people because it was overall a fun trip for me to go on because I met new friends.

Because of this trip I met friends that I wouldn't have made if I didn't go on the trip. The friends that you make on this trip are friends that you will keep.

Alex Freedman, Peabody

In modern times, the common problem with the younger generation is that we tend to disassociate. We avoid attachment, and avoid really connecting with the land around us. Before the Y2I trip, I would have blamed this detachment on the screens that constantly surround us; however, after traveling halfway around the world, I've learned that we stay detached because there are little to no strings attaching us to the land that usually surrounds us. Living in Boston, I

always felt surrounded by history, but when we touched ground in Israel, I realized that Boston couldn't compare.

It's the type of feeling you wouldn't know is missing until you've experienced it. Suddenly, the land around me *meant* something. With every step I took, I was filled with the thought of who had stepped there before. I looked at the buildings and wondered what they had seen. I looked at the ground and wondered what it had felt. For the first time, I felt like something so much bigger than myself, so much bigger than just a Jewish kid from Boston; I felt like a small part of a large, crazy family.

Upon coming home from the trip, I recognized the difference. I noticed that with every step, I wasn't filled with the same curiosity, or the same sense of belonging. I wasn't tied to the land, and I wasn't indigenous. My first day back in America, I felt that strange disconnection; a disconnection from not being in Israel, not being home, that I knew having a Jewish State isn't just important, it is vital. Dora Friedman, Marblehead

During our last day in Israel, I along with five other girls had the privilege and honor to have our Bat Mitzvahs in the Holy Land. Having my Bat Mitzvah in Israel made me feel more connected to Israel and Judaism. I felt something really special as I stood there with the other girls. It was an experience that was marvelous, especially at the end when everybody who came to watch us threw candy at us, and we sang and danced as one of the counselors, Yoni, played an instrument. It was such a special moment in my life! This trip is one for the books that I will cherish forever! Jamie Gaber, Swampscott

I felt very happy throughout the whole trip and I was very sad to leave my newly discovered favorite place. Not only did I make some lifelong friends, but I feel like I came out of my comfort zone and became much more outgoing. I also have a new appreciation for my religion. Prior to going on this trip, I didn't feel very interested in attending many services or going to many Jewish related activities; but since getting back I feel much more connected to my religion, and I feel that I should become much more involved. Other than impacting my connection to Judaism, Y2I also made me a more outgoing person. I feel much more open to making new friends and trying new things. I definitely learned a new sense of happiness and openness from the Israeli teens. In the future when it comes time to decide whether or not I want to raise my kids Jewish, I think I will. It is very important to continue the religion, because, there aren't many of us left, and in order to preserve Judaism, our children should be raised Jewish.

It was a very special opportunity to go on such an amazing trip, and I hope many other people can experience what I experienced. Harleigh Gastman, Newburyport

I met so many amazing people on this trip, and I will never forget the amazing moments I had. One major part of Y2I that enhanced my Judaism was attending the Western Wall on Shabbat. It was the most powerful thing I have ever been a part of. It really made me feel more connected to my religion, and it was a moment I will never forget. I feel a lot more Jewish. The acceptance of me by everyone at the Western Wall was insane. Y2I gave me many brand new perspectives about my religion and what it means to be a Jew. Jake Geisinger, Sharon

Wow! The 2018 Y2I trip, that I was lucky enough to take part in, was an incredibly wonderful and life-changing experience. Before leaving I was skeptical of the impact this trip would have on me due to the lack of Jewish identity within me. Immediately following my Bar Mitzvah I didn't take the time to do anything related to my Judaism. It wasn't a priority and didn't seem like it mattered. The absence of Judaism these past few years has really made my ties to the Jewish faith fade away. I knew going into the trip I would be affected in some way or another while in the homeland, but I never could have imagined how immensely my Jewish pride and identity would grow.

By the time we arrived in Jerusalem, I already felt a rise in my Jewish identity but not to the point where it was dramatic enough to notice; however, within the few days of being in Jerusalem my pride of being connected to Israel skyrocketed. The Western Wall was so much more impactful than I thought it would be, and Charlotte's "history of Israel's land" lesson left me with more emotion and drive to help keep control of Israel as a Jewish state than my drive to fight for the United States. I couldn't believe it. Activity after activity expanded Israel's horizon of survival throughout history and I couldn't get enough.

By the time we met the Israelis, I already wanted to learn Hebrew and spend a year abroad while in college. The amount of love and care that the Israelis had for each other, their openness and directness, were the last pieces to make me feel truly at home in Israel. When everyone I talked to in Israel showed me kindness, generosity, and a helping hand, I was astonished. This was the loving environment I had always looked for in the States but could never really find.

By the end of the trip I nearly cried to be leaving the Israelis; having to get back on that plane, I truly felt like I was leaving home. I am so thankful to have been given such a wonderful opportunity and love being a new Israel advocate back in America.

Max Gelbert, Newton Highlands

My experience in Israel with Y2I is one I will remember and cherish for years. Throughout our two weeks in Israel, I felt a strong connection to Israel and my Jewish roots. When we would all sing and dance along to traditional Jewish songs, and even some more modern Hebrew songs, I felt truly connected to my peers and my heritage. Throughout all of the activities we did and sights we visited, my connection the land of Israel and my connection to my own sense of Judaism was strengthened. I feel like I am a part of a large family, with members all around the world. Y2I helped me realize this, and I am so grateful I got to experience the gift of Israel. Aviva Gershman, Chestnut Hill

Going to Israel was the best part of my life. Going to Israel, the home of my people, made me feel connected to G-d and Judaism. The Western Wall was easily the best part of the trip because I connected with Adonai, our G-d. That was the happiest I've ever been, and also it was the most emotional part of my life. Prior to Israel I was skeptical about three things: food, security and making friends. Little did I know that it was the best food ever, safest place ever (for Jews) and where I made life-long friends. Every day was a new adventure and I ended every day knowing I made memories. Harvey Gibbs, Missouri City, TX

I've always had an off-hand apathy towards Israel. I didn't know anything about the country, and never thought much about it. That changed on this trip. I didn't realize until I was there how Israel bleeds with history - with *my* history. Every stone I walked was slippery, smoothed down from the erosion of generations upon generations. You could slide your way from the Jaffa to Zion gates. I had never felt a conscious connection to Israel, but this trip gave me one. This trip awakened not only my connection to Israel, but also intensified my Jewish identity. I want to be more active in the Jewish community, and almost every other teen from the trip I've talked to has said the same thing. Seeing this Wall, being a part of this ancient pilgrimage, I felt a deep connection to my heritage. Generations of my people, my blood and tribal ancestors, have been paying homage to this site for thousands upon thousands of years. I had never felt so purely part of any community as I did standing at that Wall. I walked away with a newfound sense of belonging in the Jewish community. I've always been into politics and political demonstrations. Advocacy appeals to me. I had heard of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I didn't know enough about it to pick sides, or have any real opinion. That changed on this trip. I feel like I have personal stake in the conflict - it's something that affects the Jewish State, and therefore me. The need for a Jewish State is real, and the presentations inspired me to become more educated on this conflict and to fight for the continued existence of the Jewish State. This trip strengthened my Jewish identity, and my appreciation for my Jewish heritage. I came to love the Jewish State. This trip gave me a new perspective on my culture, heritage, and self-identity. While my Israeli counterparts are out fighting for the security of Israel, I want to fight for tolerance and education on this side of the Atlantic. Lily Gindes, Marblehead

This trip was powerful because of the choices I made, the people I met, the places I've seen, the things I've learned, and so much more. It took me weeks on end to realize the reason I've had difficulty summing it up in words on paper is not because of procrastination or incompetence or just plain exhaustion, but because this experience I've had is so unique and transformative that even describing how difficult it is to describe is taking much more time than merely thinking of and remembering the experiences I shared with everyone. In a way, I think the only way I can somewhat do justice to what I'm thinking is by saying that the minutes I got on the plane to the US, two things ran through my mind. First, thoughts of all of the wonderful places, experiences, and most importantly friends, I was leaving behind, as well as all of the memories I was taking with me. The second, and the one at the forefront of my mind right now, is how soon can I get back? Jason Gladstone, Marblehead

Before this trip I thought that I felt somewhat connected to my faith, but it was nothing compared to how I felt after I returned. I got a much deeper connection to the country and the people. I got to learn a lot about the history of Israel, which at times seemed like a plot from a movie. Like when we learned that Israel fought multiple countries at the same time and won. At each site we visited we were taught about the meaning behind the history, whether it be religious or cultural. I chose the word religious because we were taught about what the land there meant to other religions also, which I found very fascinating. When our group had been in Israel for just a few days, people who hadn't ever talked to each other before, could turn around in line and talk to one another as though they were good friends. I don't know if it was the

bond of Judaism that we shared or the universal connection to our homeland, but we were all suddenly close in a way we had not been before. When I was in Israel I got this feeling of contentment and connection to the people around me, and to those who had passed. Even though I was only there for two weeks, I became completely bonded with Israel. So much so that when the trip came to an end, we were all feeling like we'd completed a pilgrimage. We were all happy to be going home, but I was also sad because I felt like I was leaving mine behind. Adam Goodspeed, Beverly

Going to Israel was truly a trip of a life time . It enhanced my Jewish identity. I became close with people around the North Shore and made friends with people in Israel. When arriving at the airport in Tel Aviv, after an exhausting plane ride, a man who was a part of Y2I came up to me and shook my hand, and said "Welcome Home". Right there was a click inside me, that this is really my second home and people around me are technically part of my family. Going to Israel enhanced my Jewish identity because I never really went to Temple that often or celebrated holidays a lot. But, after going to the Wall and praying, and doing Shabbat makes me want to go to Temple and learn more about Judaism. The impact that Y2I has on my life is to never be afraid of being Jewish and to make sure I raise my children Jewish so they can experience the same thing I did by going to Israel and feeling a connection.

Sean Grady, Marblehead

As my life changing experience has come to an end, I have thought long and hard about how this trip has changed me as an individual and as a Jew. The bubble that most of us live in shields us from problems that we didn't even know were possible, but are everyday issues back in Israel. I feel most connected to my religion and prouder than ever before to say that I am Jewish because it also connects me to Israel and all the amazing things such a small country was able to accomplish in its short 70 years. Advocacy for Israel and the Jewish people is something I find critically important, and I will get involved with the Lappin Foundation and Stand With Us to ensure that Israel has a truthful voice within the American people. Today's media paints Israel as a third-world land of war and hatred towards Arabs. I spent eighteen days in a country farther than I have ever been away from home, but Israel had a way of making me feel like I was home the entire time. Israel isn't just a Jewish state, it's a Jewish home for anyone who needs a place to feel welcomed and loved in a world that is filled with so much hate and conflict.

Daniel Groysman, Middleton

Before my trip to Israel, I didn't know what it meant to be Jewish. Before the trip, I thought Judaism was just a religion. Before the trip I didn't know how big of an impact we make. Now I know how much being Jewish means and how great it is that I can call myself a part of such an amazing group of people. After two weeks of exploring an identity, I understand what I didn't before. Being Jewish means persisting when others can't. Learning about how much we've persisted through and how little we've been recognized for it, I realized how special it is that I can call myself Jewish. Not only that, but I finally saw how important we've been for centuries. From inventing some of the most advanced inventions of our time, to leading the movement of modern ideas, we have such a big impact. From the trip, I now know that my spirit to fight and succeed comes from my roots as a Jewish person. The trip helped me embrace it, and now I not

only want to fight to make an impact in the world, but to make people recognize what we're doing. After the trip I know how special it is to be Jewish, and I want to thank Mr. Lappin for giving me the chance to see and understand that. Zoe Hano, Beverly

Because of my trip to Israel with Y2I, I feel more connected to other Jewish people in Israel and around the world. Before I went to Israel, I supported and felt connected to Israel, but I felt that there was something missing, which I couldn't experience without actually having been there. I heard people who had been to Israel talk about how it was an amazing and life changing experience, and I wanted to understand that for myself. Now that I have been there, I feel that I have a stronger connection to Israel than I did before, and that I truly understand what an amazing and special place it is. Sarah Hoskin, Rye, NH

Traveling to Israel was an incredible experience. Before this trip I didn't have any real opinion on Israel. I knew that it was the homeland for the Jews, but I hadn't really felt that. But during this trip I truly understood. I realized that I had never been in a place where being Jewish wasn't different. It was an amazing experience not only being with 100 teens, who had also grown up being Jewish, but also being surrounded by thousands of Jewish people. Israel had this amazing sense of community and family. This trip also opened my eyes to how complicated Israeli conflicts are and how important it is to see all sides of the issue. Learning about all of it made me really want to learn more and to defend this place because it is so one of a kind. It is not only one of a kind in scenery or architecture. It is one of a kind in that it is the only country where Jews are not the minority. It is our place to be together. Katie Hubbard, Arlington

In life, it's rare to have those moments when everything just makes sense all at once. In fact, I may have had my first eureka moment ever in Israel. We'd been to the Western Wall a day or two before, during the day. It was powerful and moving; I had my note in hand and with the sun beating down a small swarm of people silently moved towards and back from the Wall's surface. But returning that Shabbat, to say it was powerful would be an understatement. The night air was hazy with men's and women's singing. Everyone was dressed in their finest clothing; everyone was tingling with excitement. I can't even describe it- it was something I can only remember in feeling. Upon approaching the Wall, the tears already pooling the corners of my eyes, it occurred to me that this is it. This euphoric feeling of acceptance and meaning is what it means to be Jewish and has meant to be Jewish for the last seven thousand years. But then I remembered how long we, the Jewish people, were separated from the Western Wall and the homeland. This was my eureka moment, when the purpose of Israel truly registered in my brain as a necessity to the Jewish people. Everyone should be able to feel this power now and for the next seven thousand years, and then the next, and the next. As I return home, I will continue to defend our homeland, and keep an open mind to those who love the country as much as I do. Yelena Jefferies, Swampscott

When we landed, and I stepped foot in Ben Gurion Airport the only thought in my mind was "Wow I can't believe that I'm finally here". That's when I realized what people mean when they say, "Once you land in Israel you're finally home". When I saw the different parts of Israel I was amazed. The part of the trip that really changed my life was when we

drove from the city to the desert. This changed my life because it showed me how a country the size of New Jersey can be so diverse. You can go from the holy city of Jerusalem to the desert and see beautiful mountainous desert landscape. But the very best part of the trip for me was when we went to the Western Wall on Shabbat and saw the different kinds of people that were there. Another reason that it was cool to be at the Western Wall during Shabbat was because I was able to see how everyone was praying in different ways. I feel the Y2I trip changed my life for the better because I met many new people from all over the world, saw things that I had only seen in pictures and movies, and the thing that made this trip so special was the fact that I could witness all of this with friends that I have had since I was very young. Cole Johnson, Beverly

I have been to Israel once before the Y2I trip. I and my family visited Israel during the height of the 2008 Gaza conflict. In recent years, I've been wanting to visit Israel with a fresher set of eyes. I was really excited for a chance to go to Israel in 2018 with Y2I. Now that I am much older, I feel I was able to absorb more information about Israel, its people and atmosphere inside the country. My most memorable moments were the moments of the trip that were unscripted, and I was given the opportunity to explore and soak in at my own pace. I got a unique chance to learn more about Jerusalem and Israel from the counselor and the guard through personal interactions. I am now looking forward to further opportunities to travel to Israel, like taking a study abroad program, going on Birthright or any other similar prospect. Isaac Kaper, Winchester

Israel was a very eye opening experience and allowed me to learn about the history of Israel while also having a lot of fun. Going to Israel allowed me to learn about my religion and be proud of who I am. Being at the Wall on a regular afternoon and also on Shabbat was a very powerful experience. It was one of the first moments I felt G-d and felt truly religious. The feeling I had when I first touched the Wall was unexplainable and words cannot describe it. Going to Israel allowed me to appreciate my religion. I was able to realize the importance of raising my children Jewish and keeping the Jewish faith alive. Jacob Kaplan, Stoughton

Going on Y2I gave me an experience that I would never have had any other way. I met so many new people who live in my area that have common interests with me. I felt at home in a foreign country and I got to explore historic Jewish sites. When we first arrived at the airport in Israel, we were greeted with "Welcome Home" from a man that none of us knew. I never understood this until the end of the trip. It's so weird how a country you've never been to before can become like a second home in just two short weeks. Israel was a very unique experience where I made many new friends, gained a second home, and increased my Jewish identity. Shawna Kaplan, Swampscott

Its magnetic pull tugs Jews from all corners of the world, like migrant birds guided by their internal instinct that they must return to the place of their birth. Although I was not born in Israel, my people and faith are deeply rooted in this beautiful country. Everywhere in Israel relayed the story of my ancestors and I've never felt more connected to them. I felt fully immersed in the streets of Israel, the smells and sounds mysteriously made me feel as though I was experiencing

a place that bridges the past, present and future all at once. I could connect with the past through the rocks of Masada, but with a short drive I was also exposed to modern innovations. I never truly connected to Shabbat until I experienced it in Israel. Finally I was able to grasp the importance of Shabbat. It's a moment of stillness, a calmness among a whole country to reflect and remember. This blanket of quietness gave me time to really reflect on why I am Jewish. I now truly understand the concept of Judaism as a culture, not just a religion. It is an identity that shapes who I am. This journey only strengthened my connection towards the community of people who share a similar identity. Alyssa Keith, Newburyport

Thanks to Y2I I feel that I have a more closely connected identity due to visiting the Western Wall, not only on a normal day but also on Shabbat. When we arrived at the Wall I looked over at the men's side and saw Orthodox Jews of all ages with their arms around each other together in unity. I realized at that moment that if all these random strangers can come together and celebrate their love for Judaism, then I should openly appreciate my Jewish identity. Later that night I approached an Orthodox Jew and asked if he could point out a prayer for me to recite in front of the Wall and he happily said yes. As I was standing there reading the prayer, the same man grabbed a chair for me without me even asking. This made me sense a feeling of a community that no matter where you are from or your Jewish background, we all believe in the same God and that we are His people united as one. Ben Kemp, Peabody

Y2I gave me the greatest experience of my life for two weeks and am so thankful for Y2I strengthening my Jewish identity. Before this trip I was not a very religious person and I did not understand the hardships the Israelis go through. I now understand Israeli life. We learned from Momo that continuing the Jewish tradition within my family is the most important aspect. Visiting Israel I was first a little scared, but after my visit I realized Israel might be the single greatest place on the planet. I felt at home because I was surrounded by other fellow Jews. I was not the minority; we were the majority. It made me feel so proud to be a Jew. At home I used to be afraid to wear my Star of David chain, but after the trip I am now not afraid and wear it wherever I go. Israel has moved me as a person. Brady Kessler, Mansfield

The day we went to the Western Wall was one of my favorite days. Though it was scorching hot and a lot of walking, me and my newfound friends toured the streets of Jerusalem and I bought a necklace with my Hebrew name on it, something that is very special to me now. Seeing the Wall in person and touching it was the most powerful thing I have ever done. It made me feel like I was home, and I belonged somewhere. Something else that I enjoyed was learning about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, something people had asked me about for years and I had never formed my own opinion simply because I was uneducated. Finally hearing the history and both sides was refreshing and allowed me to speak up for my homeland and to continue to do so. Kendall Klipper, Middleton

My trip to Israel was amazing, to say the least. I met a lot of friends on the trip and had a lot of fun. Additionally, I met and became friends with Israelis, something I never thought I would be able to do. Before this experience, I really had no idea what Israel was like. I assumed that it was mostly desert and with its neighbors, pretty dangerous. My impressions were based on the media and little else. Now, I can proudly say that I know much more about the physicalities and history of Israel and the Israeli people. Michael Kobrosky, Danvers

Israel had a huge impact on my life. It helped me mature a bit more as a person and allowed me to change my opinion on how I now see things regarding Israel. I believe that people who live in Israel are so strong and brave - it's incredible. The people there are the reason I plan to stand up for Israel. I am going to share my story of my journey and the experience I had while visiting with my peers and explain how amazing it was. I feel as if I had a connection to Israel as soon as I stepped foot on the soil; like it was speaking to me. I am going to educate my peers and school friends about what I learned in Israel and the impact it had on me.

Ben Kramich, Lynnfield

While I will call many parts of my trip to Israel my favorite, an experience that was immediately apparent as unforgettable was our visit to the Shuk in Jerusalem. The marketplace was basically how I had pictured Israel prior to seeing it in person; streets crowded with people of seemingly every culture on Earth carrying various bizarre foods and other items, people speaking countless different languages, some with clear religious affiliations, others with none, etc. This was certainly fun and exciting to experience with friends, but it still felt like a completely foreign place, not a place in which I could actually fit in and belong. This changed however, when a couple who I had never met introduced themselves to me as Muhlenberg College. This interaction helped me see how Israel is a place for many people. There are absolutely many people living there who are in the category of the most foreign of foreigners, but it is also a place for people like me. The history and current situation of Israel is one that continues to seem endlessly complicated and confusing to me, but this experience, although brief, showed me that Israel is still a place for a more diverse array of people than I had known before. Again, there were many experiences from my trip that were particularly memorable to me. This one, however, was significant as it has changed my view on the nation and its unequalled value.

Joe Krell, Marblehead

One of my most powerful moments, one that truly made me feel connected to Israel, and that many teens on our trip experienced, was our trip to the Western Wall during Shabbat. We had gone to the Western Wall once before during the trip. However, the Shabbat experience of the Western Wall was different. I remember walking towards the Wall, looking around at the dancing people, the praying people, and the other people looking around just like me. The atmosphere was joyous. I pushed my way through the mob of people, eventually reaching a portion of the Wall that I could touch. I embraced the Wall with my eyes closed, something I had never done to any wall in the world. However, this wall truly made it worth it. I felt warmth, and somehow, I felt like I was intangibly being connected to the Jewish people surrounding me. Instead of embracing the Wall, the Wall had embraced me, and this was another one of the powerful moments I experienced during the Israel trip. Aaron Leventhal, Danvers

Everything from the trip took my breath away, from seeing the desert to the Western Wall. The whole experience was life changing. The first two days in Israel felt a little weird. Israel almost felt familiar in a sense like I've visited it before, but that feeling quickly changed when the group went to Jerusalem. Seeing all the history in the city and how the people went about their day was truly amazing. The markets showed me how diverse the country was and how people, who were so different, could live together in one small place.

The best part of the trip was not going to any particular place. It was meeting all of the one hundred kids who lived so close to me, yet I had no idea who they were. I come from a town with a very small population of Jews in it, and seeing all these people who shared being Jewish together just made us closer as a group. I've made lifelong friends from the trip who I plan to visit and hang out with in the future, and I'm very grateful for that. Zach Levin, North Andover

Meeting the Israeli teens was a significant event in my journey to better understand Israel. To my surprise, they all spoke excellent English and initiated many meaningful conversations. The thing that stuck out the most was their warm, friendly attitude towards all of us. Knowing that they would have to join the army, I would have thought they would be scared and upset. I was amazed to hear how they weren't scared, but excited to join the army and aid their country. The Israelis' sense of pride for their country was like nothing I had ever seen in another person. It gave me my own sense of Jewish pride and I was very proud to be connected to these extraordinary people. This trip has influenced my decision to raise my kids Jewish and continue the Jewish legacy. I must admit, prior to the trip, I was not nearly as excited as others. I thought that the trip would simply be about learning and history but, it ended up exceeding my expectations and being one of the most amazing experiences in my life.

Max Lewis, Swampscott

Throughout the trip I questioned my belief, my religion and my own values as I seemed to be affected by such different parts of the trip from my fellow travelers. I was the last person in the museum of the Dead Sea Scrolls, lingering in the halls and gazing at tiny things like remains of pottery and shoes that the Essenes had worn. In the Bedouin tent, I stared transfixed as I heard the words of an old Bedouin man who painted pictures of a people tied to their history in ancient traditions. I was fascinated by the stories of people who could survive for days in the desert with the tiniest amounts of water. "I think you were the only one who was listening", I was told when I tried to express my interest.

I might have continued my life as a Jew with this sense of frustration, convinced that no one felt the same way I did and that my own feelings were inadequate. But the words of my fellow travelers and others we encountered helped me to change my perspective. When I revealed some of my complaints to my friend as I moped after the first visit to the Western Wall, she had a completely different view. "I think however you felt is okay," she told me to my surprise.

By the end of the trip, I was ready to embrace how I felt about Israel and Jerusalem. It was probably different from some other people, but that was fine. I began to appreciate my interest in Israel's connections to its ancient roots. I realized that I loved the trees that I had been so annoyed to look at; the pomegranate, fig and olive trees were the same ones that ancient people had seen thousands of years ago. And I got chills when the entire group danced and sang with Israeli musicians overlooking Jerusalem, as I realized that even though we lived thousands of miles from these people, we all knew the same songs and could sing them in the same way as

others had for so long. I knew now that I loved these connections to the people of Israel, in the past and the present. But it was really the connections to myself that showed me my love for Israel, and I have that same country and the rest of Y2I to thank for that.

Maddy Liberman, Reading

Y2I has made me more connected to my greater Jewish community and Jewish peers. By the time we got to the airport to begin our trip, I already began talking to and meeting new people. I was amazed to see how quickly I began to bond with people I had never even met. By the end of the trip, people were asking me how long I had known one of my friends and all we could say was “2 weeks”. I never really believed people when they told me kids on this trip were going to become some of my best friends. Since being on Y2I, I have never been more proud to be Jewish. It is really amazing to go from a place like the United States where being Jewish is a minority, to spending two weeks in a place where everywhere you look there are other Jews. I spent two weeks watching other kids who were more religious than me and others who were not religious at all, walk around Israel and be amazed and feel connected to our Jewish religion.

In the end, all of the years of worry and the days and hours of anxiety leading up to departure day for Y2I 2018 were for nothing. Being away from home and away from my family were not nearly as difficult as I had thought that they would be, because my friends that I so easily met and bonded with were my family, and in a way, even though we were so far from our actual houses and towns, we were also home.

Arly MackRosen, Marblehead

While on the flight to Israel many different thoughts were flying through my head. As a student in Hebrew School I had spent many hours learning about Israel, and as a Bat Mitzvah having a homeland for the Jews seemed almost mystical. It was hard to believe that I was actually on my way to the Jewish Homeland. While curious, I really did not know what to expect. As I continued on my trip I was surrounded by my Jewish culture. Everywhere I heard Hebrew, ate Jewish and Israeli food, heard the music and mingled with Israelis. I loved the atmosphere and the land itself. I never felt like an outsider. In fact, I felt like no matter what type of Jew you are, or how you practice, Israel was our home. I also felt like it was my home.

Sarah Mann, Marblehead

I was really excited for these two weeks in Israel, but at the same time I was really nervous to meet so many new people. Throughout the whole trip, I met and made so many new amazing friendships, and even made a new best friend. Not only did the friends I make from Massachusetts make the trip so amazing, but meeting the Israeli teens made it even more fun.

Although the friends and people on this trip made it so much fun, Israel overall is such an amazing, interesting, and beautiful place. The food, the clothes, the people, everything, and you feel a part of their community. Overall, Y2I was definitely a great experience I would most definitely recommend to other people. Y2I gave me the experience to understand, and be able to defend Israel against negative views and comments about it. It also made me feel more proud to be a Jew, and have a better understanding of how Israel came to be the way it is today. I am so grateful to have been able to go to Israel for two weeks, with amazing people.

Samantha Martinez, Los Angeles, CA

The Y2I trip helped enhance my Jewish identity. Meeting Israeli teens and learning about their lives has opened my eyes to see new heights. Learning about their culture and seeing parallels between American teens and Israeli teens was a connection I am grateful for. I made special friendships with kids who will forever be in my life. Not only are they sweet, caring and funny, but they also bonded with Israel like I did, which made it special. I feel I made a stronger relationship with myself; I felt more confident with who I am, and I felt accepted and touched by the Jewish community. I plan to stand up for Israel, the homeland which is now my new and forever home. I plan to bring back what I experienced and share it with others and tell them to go and experience it for themselves, because what I feel is something I and God only will understand. My relationship with God definitely grew as well, and I plan on engaging with the relationship more. Thank you for an amazing experience that helped strengthen my Jewish identity! Lily McGuirk, Marblehead

Going across the Atlantic Ocean into Israel was one to the best experiences in my life. Israel made me realize how important the country is, and Y2I showed me how lucky I am to be Jewish. Before this trip I had no idea what Israel was like. This trip showed me how small yet powerful Israel is. I plan on raising my kids Jewish and sending them to Israel so they can experience what I did this summer. Justin McIvor, Mansfield

The trip was incredible and definitely had an impact on my life and how I now view Israel. Something that I now view completely differently is the IDF. The news back home often does not get the full story or are missing pieces when discussing news on Israel. Some news stations even have the audacity to try and slander the names of the brave men and women who fight in the army in Israel. For the longest time, I paid very little attention to this and I really didn't even care about what was going on in Israel and what the soldiers were going through. While on this trip however, we as a group had the chance to meet some Israeli teens and they were all incredible and friendly kids. One thing that stuck with me is that these awesome kids will be going off to fight for the freedom of Israel at 18 years old and help protect Israel, kids the same age as me. This really stuck with me still to this day and instantly changed how I view the Israeli army. I know now it is my duty to keep up with the Israeli news, especially news relating to the military in Israel. This is one of the ways that Y2I really had an impact on how I view Israel and its army. Jasper Merrill, Marblehead

Y2I, I have to give it to you, you were right about all of it. The life changing experiences, the lifelong friends that I didn't know existed yet, the memories, the beautiful places only found in paradise (aka Israel), the connection to my Jewish identity, all of it. It's a true miracle that I was even able to go on this enchanting adventure with so many different moving parts put together by so many hard working and passionate people. People willing to spend their time, effort, and money to send a hundred Jewish American teens to Israel is an act so inspiring and shows how much this purpose matters. This is a gift, more powerful than any gift anyone will receive, with an impact so strong and so emotionally touching, saying thank you will never begin to be enough. Being someone who has never been to Israel before, I was more than blown away by what I saw and what I learned. The strength that the country has, along with the confidence and bravery of the people living there, has been transforming to witness. Y2I was the gateway that showed me this new world of sacredness and warmth that was felt all throughout the country. Seeing new places every day; places my dreams aren't even creative enough to come up with, the unimaginable that somehow made it to this planet... to this holy land. I can't describe in words what it felt like being there. It's something only you can see yourself and feel what it's like. Thank you Y2I and to everyone that supports it, and to Israel itself for the true experience of a lifetime, in my case a feeling of a lifetime. Julia Miller, South Hamilton

Going to the Western Wall, especially on Shabbat, was incredibly emotional. Going on Thursday was amazing, as I had the chance to pray in peace and quiet. However, seeing everyone praying and chanting on Shabbat, and just being in that atmosphere really showed me the uniqueness of where I was standing. It's a moment that I'll never forget. Seeing everyone at the Wall, and being able to join them made me feel so proud to be Jewish. It was a feeling that I had never before felt. That Shabbat, Israel went from being a country in the Middle East to being my home. Heshi Muntiu, Swampscott

Throughout the Y2I 2018 trip, the idea that the Jewish people are small but impactful minority was constantly presented to us by a series of speakers and experiences. Everywhere that we looked in Israel was a constant reminder of the things that Jews have done, from the ancient building of Jerusalem, to the modern-day innovations of Tel Aviv. These accomplishments acted as monument to the Jewish people, as well as a reminder that the links in our historical chain must not be broken by this generation. The first time that Momo spoke to us, one of his major talking points was on the importance of maintaining the Jewish line. Momo encouraged us, when we go back to America, to make dating other Jews a larger priority. He also spoke to us about marrying other Jews in the future. Momo wanted us to understand that the Jewish community is small, and that each one of us plays a vital role in keeping it alive. But to keep Judaism on the map, the best thing that Momo said to do is to raise our kids Jewish.

Many of us connected deeply with this idea. For myself, my parents had to make the decision to either follow my dad's faith and raise me and my sister Catholic, or to follow my mother's faith and raise us Jewish. My parents went with my mom's religion and me and my sister were brought up in a Jewish household. Our parents chose to continue the chain.

Their decision has had a profound impact on my life, and it's made me realize the importance of staying Jewish. Being raised with Jewish traditions has made me unique among most of my peers. Staying Jewish has also led to an increased sense of community. Being such a small minority has drawn the Jewish community closer together and experiencing that closeness has been fantastic. Staying Jewish has also led to an increased sense of community. Being such a small minority has drawn the Jewish community closer together and experiencing that closeness has been fantastic. I've never had more than a few Jewish classmates at any given time, but we would always know who each other were, and we would bond over our one piece of shared identity. We always knew that we not only had the support of each other, but also had the support of our local Jewish community. We all had teachers and leaders at our synagogue that could lend a hand or offer advice, and we knew that we would always have a place among the congregation.

When I get older and have kids, I want them to have a similar experience. I want them to have something fun and unique that not everyone has. I want them to experience things that their classmates don't experience. And most importantly I want them to have a sense of belonging that goes deeper than just being on a sports team or in a school club. I want them to know that wherever they are, there will always be fellow Jews that will accept them in and provide them with a loving and caring community, that will support them in all of their efforts. That is why I believe in staying Jewish, as well as raising my kids Jewish.

Cole Olson, Newburyport

I had no idea what to expect going into my trip with Y2I. It was a huge leap outside my comfort zone. Immediately upon arriving in Ben Gurion, all my apprehension vanished. It no longer mattered who was friends with whom because we were all stepping off the plane together.

It took going with a group of nearly 100 kids for me to really be able to grow and learn more about myself. Whether if it was while discussing the many differences between our cultures with Israeli youth, or learning about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with Stand With Us, or hiking up Masada, I was encouraged to challenge myself in so many new and different ways. I was exposed to fresh opinions and ideas and I was able to formulate many of my own.

Y2I helped me see a whole new side of a very familiar country. I am so grateful for the memories and friendships that will stay with me forever. It is always important to leave your comfort zone, and I am looking forward to seeing where this new found open-mindedness and independence take me. Ben Ovadia, Waban

Although I only spent a short two weeks in the homeland of my ancestors, I find that I was greatly impacted by the experiences I shared with the people around me. It was not the things we did or the places we went that impacted me, but rather who I was doing them with; the people. During the first few hours of being at Logan Airport I was surrounded by a random group of teenagers, but we all had one thing in common, we were Jewish. Before the first day was even over, these kids were not such a random group anymore, they were my friends. Meeting the Israeli teenagers only added to this idea, creating a stronger connection to Israel as a whole. Ultimately Y2I 2018 was a trip I will never forget. I was able to connect with my Jewish identity, the homeland of my ancestors and most significantly 100 other Jewish teenagers, who I am happy to call my friends, many of whom I hope to keep in touch with for the rest of my life.

Olivia Patt, Wenham

The two weeks spent immersed in the Israeli culture gifted by you, has created a profound lasting impact on my life. Every day of the trip had opened my eyes to a new part of my heritage, my own beliefs towards religion, and what my future could be as an Israel advocate. Constantly being asked about the trip has provided an amazing opportunity to advocate for Israel. The speakers we all listened to during the trip and the trip in general has given me the tools to promote positivity while speaking about Israel. Reassuring people Israel is an insanely safe and secure country has been a constant theme in my discussions about the trip. Spreading respect towards the country and the Israelis is what I strive to accomplish while answering tough questions about Israel.

The gift of Israel was an eye-opening experience that I will never forget. Israel is such an amazing country that needs the help of American teens in Israel's fight to break free of the negative picture the news has painted the country. Being part of this trip has helped me understand my role in being a Jewish American teen and how it is my job to keep Judaism alive in my family and the world. Advocating for Israel will not be a challenge thanks to the amazing experience the trip has provided for me. Emma Pearlstein, Swampscott

When I signed up for Y2I's so called "trip of a lifetime," I had no idea what I was truly in for. As a student at Gann Academy, I was already traveling with the entire 10th grade to Israel. These two trips were only four weeks apart. I knew that it was important for every Jew to go to Israel at some point in their life, but who would have thought that returning a second time would be the trip that changed my life. Don't get me wrong, Gann was a great trip to Israel, but Y2I was an amazing journey. This trip connected me to my past, my present, and my future. I was free to think, self-evaluate, learn and grow. I began to sense I had a responsibility as a Jewish teen. As I journeyed with my peers, I began to figure out what that means. During the trip I was able to reflect on the direction I want my life to go. I feel the experiences the teens have on a Y2I trip are not only designed to instill Jewish values and Israel advocacy, but with the hopes of developing future Jewish leaders.

The day we visited Yad Vashem I became even more aware of the horrors of the Holocaust. I was also touched by the story of two survivors, Joseph and Rebecca Bau. I learned of how they met, fell in love, and married among the suffering and death in the Nazi concentration camp. Because of this, their hope survived. I began to question who I am and what I can become. On that day I learned not only do the Jewish people recall and memorialize history, but we also use it to plan and prepare for the future. On my trip with Y2I I realized the inspiring resilience of the Jewish people and the product of all their efforts is the State of Israel. My journey in Israel will not come to an end because I came home. I will continue to learn, grow, and create change. This trip made me passionate about becoming a Jewish leader in the community. Gillian Pergament, Middleton

Thank you for creating an opportunity for me to go to Israel and for giving me memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life. One of my favorite parts of the trip was visiting the Wailing Wall because of how different it was from anything I have ever seen in the U.S. As I sat in the airplane on the flight home I was able to take some time to reflect on the trip, and I realized I have a newfound appreciation for my religion and the people I share the beliefs with. Max Podgur, Marblehead

Before I had traveled to and explored Israel, it was no more than just another foreign country to me. I had not yet realized the significance that Israel would have on my life, and did not think that I could hold such a strong connection to a country. When I walked around Israel I felt a sense of belonging I had not felt when I had traveled abroad to other countries in the past, or even in my home country, America. Israel made me understand the importance of having a place to call home. I am proud to be Jewish after experiencing Israel. I made the decision to become a Bat Mitzvah while I was there, which has shifted my outlook on my everyday lifestyle. The experience with the Western Wall led to the desire to be Bat Mitzvahed and be a daughter of Israel. I felt that being a Bat Mitzvah would be the beginning of my deep connection to Israel and Judaism. I learned about the history of Israel and the cruciality of having a Jewish state which has made me understand the importance of perpetuating Jewish traditions and heritage. I

feel that I have found another home; a place where I feel loved and accepted and protected by the people and culture around me. Alexis Raitt, Brookline

Before going on Y2I I did not feel any real connection to Israel or my Jewish identity. I remember being told that this trip would change me. I never really believed that it would and in a way it didn't. I am still the same person I was before I left; I still have the same interests and hobbies. I don't believe that this trip changed me at all, but instead revealed a part of me that I didn't know before. My whole life I never felt 'Jewish' enough, but this trip showed me that despite the different ways Jews practice their faith or where you live in the world, you are still a part of the Jewish people with a place to belong. I am forever grateful for being given this gift of Israel.
Cam Razin, Marblehead

Walking up to the Wall during the first day we went, I was not expecting to feel much. I had not even considered putting on tefillin and only did so when a friend convinced me of its importance. But with my tefillin on, I walked up to the Wall and saw the marks made by hundreds of thousands of hands that had been there before me. Not knowing "the proper" prayer to recite in such a situation, I made one up from my heart. I put my note in the Wall and I walked away feeling in a daze, not really sure what had happened. The feeling was indescribable, since I had never felt a similar feeling before, but I knew it was one of the most powerful moments of my life and one I hope I will never forget.

When we returned to the Wall the next day on Shabbat, the atmosphere was the opposite of what I had previously experienced. Instead of having a personal moment of reflection, a group of friends and I joined about 20 Hassidic practitioners in a massive hora. It was incredible in a very different way; rather than a reflective personal experience I suddenly felt like part of an expansive community. I left Israel with this strong sense of community; a community not limited to Jewish teens in the Greater Boston Area, but a community including Israeli teens, falafel shop owners, Western Wall rabbis, and Jews from around the world. Never could I have imagined the sense of belonging that Israel provides to Jews, and its necessity as a Jewish State.

It is incredible to me that two consecutive days could have had such a meaningful impact in such very different ways. One day I had an introspective personal experience that helped me understand my Jewish identity in a way I never did before. The very next day I experienced being part of the larger Jewish community in a way I never would have imagined before the Y2I experience. Now, as I reflect on the greeting we received at the airport, I miss my Jewish home.
Eli Remis, Newton Center

After returning from Y2I and being able to reflect on my experiences, I can safely say that going on the trip to Israel has been one of the best decisions I've ever made. Y2I introduced me to so many new people that are good friends of mine now and it provided me with an experience that I never could have imagined I'd have. Y2I has made me feel an increased connection to Judaism because during my time in Israel, I always felt accepted by the people around me, and I felt connected to the Jewish people as a whole, in a much greater sense than I had ever felt before. When we visited the Western Wall on Shabbat, that was one of the most powerful things that I have ever experienced. On Shabbat at the Wall, I was surrounded by Jewish people who were all having a different experience, yet we were all connected through being Jewish. No matter why you were at the Wall or what you were praying for, you are connected and accepted by all of the

people around you, which is a truly special thing. Being surrounded by Jewish people at the Wall, who were all experiencing different emotions yet were all connected, really showed me how important being Jewish is because it comes with such a strong connection to all kinds of Jewish people. This connection is something that I will value forever and I never would have experienced it firsthand without going on this Y2I trip. Thank you again for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime to meet amazing people and enhance my Jewish identity in the land of Israel. Danny Richmond, Needham

The Y2I experience was not only an eye-opening journey for me, but also a life changing adventure that I will remember in the years to come. Throughout the trip, I gained a newfound love for Israel, and now feel obligated to stand up for the country against people who are anti-Israel. I felt a part of the group, and made friends along the way, some American, and some Israeli. Before leaving Massachusetts, I never took interest towards Israel as a member of the Jewish community, but I learned many new things about Israel that I never knew before. Previous to the trip, I had never really thought about my Jewish identity, or taking part in a Jewish club at school, or being a member of the Jewish Community Center in Marblehead. After the journey to Israel, I now feel more Jewish as a result of going on the trip. I now feel more obligated to stand up for Israel and the people who live there. I think that I not only matured as a result of leaving home, but I think that my personality as a whole has become more independent. The gift of Israel sure was a remarkable experience that I will most definitely remember for the rest of my life. Cole Riskin, Marblehead

What I can say confidently was that the most vital lesson I took away from the land of Israel spans across two experiences: the bonding I experienced with my Israeli friends, and the trip to Yad Vashem—the most significant Holocaust memorial in the entire world.

When I first met our new Israeli traveling companions, the normal “incubating” period required to break the barrier of awkwardness and make friends—something that in the U.S. can be prevalent—was nonexistent. Immediately the Israelis were warm and welcoming to us. I gleaned so much from them regarding all aspects of their lives; how driven, forward-thinking and already accomplished they are and how much these Israeli teens really are just like me.

We visited a room in Yad Vashem that was completely dark but for some candle lighting. In the room, as names of victims who had been exterminated were being read in various languages, something suddenly clicked for me—something that I had never considered before. Those names that continuously echoed throughout the mirror room...their murders were incredibly tragic, but how do they affect me today? They affect me today because as a result of their deaths, there are countless more incredible Jewish and/or Israeli friends I never got to meet. The world is missing so many individuals with the affability, intelligence, courage, and overall warm nature of my Israeli friends. The disproportionately high number of Nobel prizes won by Jews is no coincidence; the Jewish tradition of serving the world to the best of one’s ability has always existed within the religion. The truth is, we will never exactly know just who and what we are missing as a result of the lost opportunity that resulted from the mass extermination of millions of Jews, but I can say that society has an enormous vacuum as a result.

I am intending to participate in the post-trip Israel advocacy meetings. Anti-Semitism will never go away, and thus, having a Jewish state will always be necessary. It was necessary pre-Holocaust, but it sadly did not exist as it does now. With each new generation, the void of missing Jews does not go away, but it can be lessened by remembrance, never forgetting the past and continued appreciation of the role we must play in the State of Israel's survival and prosperity. Mitchell Robson, Marblehead

Y2I helped me to learn some new skills and learn more about myself. I learned to really throw myself out there and meet new people. Over the course of the trip I developed some strong friendships with some of the people I met and I've already spent time with some of them outside the trip. I discovered how much my faith really means to me as well, and I already feel much closer to it. Israel really does feel like the homeland of the Jewish people, and as a part of this people, I feel that it's my homeland too. Danny Rosen, Swampscott

This trip was a great experience. It changed my perspective and showed me the importance of embracing our culture and its history. I made friends I will never forget. I showed my differences to everyone else and they accepted me. Everyone is viewed as a family and that is something that is very special. The Y2I trip also showed me the significance of Israel and how beautiful the land and love is for that country, as well as, showed that you're safe because the army is fighting to protect you. Y2I has done a lot to make a change in people's lives. Sam Rosenberg, Salem

Over the course of the two weeks in Israel with Youth to Israel, I have learned that Israel is not only a place, but it is all of the people who live in it. Israel is a history, a people, a feeling, and an emotion. Every waking second of the trip felt special because I knew that I was in the holy land surrounded by the Hebrew language and people. What felt truly special was how there were Arabs, Muslims, Christians, and Jews roaming the same street, on the same bus, and in the same household even. My highlight of the trip was going back to Masada where I had my Bar Mitzvah. Max Rudin, Danvers

Y2I was an eye-opening and unforgettable experience. As far back as I can remember, I have been learning about the glorious State of Israel. Seeing countless photographs of the notable landscapes, learning Hebrew and studying Judaism did not prepare me for the breathtaking moment of stepping off the El Al plane onto Israeli grounds. Y2I exposed me to an amazingly warm and welcoming country. I now know I can forever call Israel my home. Y2I also granted me with insight into the lives of Israeli teens, who I will always consider my family. The trip also allowed me to realize the people of Israel are a truly caring community. The kindness is apparent between Israeli citizens and extends equally to visitors to this wonderful country. Israel is a true home for the Jewish people. Amanda Saxe, Salem

As a teen from a small town with not many other Jewish teens who share a common faith, I tried to conceal my religion unless I was asked. During my trip to Israel I got Jewish shirts, necklaces, and a lot of photos from the places we went. I heard many people say “be proud to wear your necklace or your shirt; don’t hide it.” That was an early saying on the trip, after we visited the first market. I said to myself “I don’t know if I would want to wear that stuff in my town and show people that.” You can plan a trip for 30 years to the greatest place you’ve always wanted to go to for however long you want, but in reality if you go to Israel for a week or two weeks that’s the greatest trip you’ll ever take, no matter what religion you practice. This experience has showed me in a small town, dominantly Christian, that I can wear the chain on the outside of my shirt and wear that Israeli soccer shirt and stand up for Israel and the hidden gem that people don’t realize it is. I am so proud to call myself Jewish after returning from Israel.
Tyler Seller, Swampscott

Everyone was shocked to hear how safe it is in Israel. I sat down with my mom and sister and explained to them the pressures Israel faces how completely modern and upcoming the nation is, and how news stations have been twisting the events happening in Israel. Israel also helped me enhance my Jewish identity. I live in an area of Massachusetts where I’m one of the few Jews in the area. I’m pretty sure I’m the only Jew in my grade, maybe even the school. Being Jewish was just something I was; I didn’t share it, flaunt it, I wasn’t even proud of it. Israel taught me how unique I am to this world, and how special I should feel being Jewish. I am proud to be Jewish no matter what the world tells me. Now that I know more about the problems in Israel, I plan to help people in my community understand what is truly happening. Israel taught me to be proud of who I am and has encouraged me to spread how great of a nation it is.
Emily Shal, Amesbury

I wasn’t sure what to expect, but Israel definitely exceeded everything I thought it might be. I had a once in lifetime opportunity to travel to Israel. I learned so much about Israeli culture and about Israeli life. Every moment spent in Israel was taken in and I learned from everything that happened. Justin Shapiro, North Easton

This trip helped me to improve my connection with Israel. Before the trip, if you had asked me how I viewed Israel, I would have told you that I was conflicted. On one hand, I had stories from my Israeli family members and my Rabbi, and my memories from my previous trip three years ago. On the other, Israel is constantly torn down by the media and by activists. They paint this country as an overbearing tyrant, brutally crushing the freedom of the Palestinians. While I did get to see the beautiful homeland of the Jewish people before, the programming during the trip helped me to put everything into perspective, and I was able to sort it all out in my mind. During the trip I came to love all of Israel. I feel that as a whole, I am proud of Israel, and I wish to support and advocate for the small and budding nation in the future. For the first time ever, I have the tools to appropriately defend Israel, thanks to the lovely presentations by Charlotte from “Stand with Us”. This is the kind of trip that I will remember forever, and that I have developed lasting friendships from. I will also defend Israel whenever I see anybody putting it on the chopping board. I want to defend Israel. It is my duty to help the land of my ancestors, the land of my family. Every holy site planted the seeds of Zionism in my heart. Israel

truly is an important place to every single Jew, and like many prayers say, next year, in the land of Israel. Cooper Sherf, Marblehead

This trip had a tremendous impact on my life because it improved my Jewish identity through making new friends, celebrating Shabbat in Jerusalem, and learning about Jewish customs and traditions. It is hard to enhance my Jewish Identity when there are very few Jews at my school. Making new friends is challenging in a way that you have to have something in common, but on this trip, we all had something in common, and that is being Jewish. Y2I had a terrific impact in my Jewish Identity. It changed my view on Judaism because making new Jewish friends, learning about present-day Israel, the interactions between the Israelis that I still keep in touch with, and I gained more confidence in my friendships. After my experience in Israel, I am going to marry Jewish and raise my kids Jewish, thinking of going to college in Israel, and becoming proud that I am Jewish.

Harrison Sheris, Beverly

Just the experience of getting off of that airplane and entering Ben Gurion Airport started to give me perspective of what Y2I is all about, why it is such a valuable opportunity, and how I then knew that the trip would have an impact on me. I quickly realized that we weren't just anywhere. We were in Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people. I realized that while I still didn't know many of the other teens, we all had a bond. We were about to experience something together that was an enormous privilege, and that at the end, there would be many answers and questions as to the vitality of Israel, and the conflict that exists in the Middle East. Entering the old city of Jerusalem, and descending to the Wall, and being able to pray at the Wall was truly an unforgettable experience that caused me to think about not only my ancestors, but about Jews from thousands of years ago who prayed in the very same place. This experience gave me a connection to the years of history of my religion and people that I never understood prior to Y2I. Other experiences on the trip as well gave me direct insight into the conflict faced by both the State of Israel and the Jewish people in much more recent times that cause me to understand the importance of both supporting and standing up for Israel. I am very fortunate to have been able to take part in this experience, and feel very proud to be a Jew and stand up for and speak about my support for the State of Israel. Jason Stelman, Lynnfield

I discovered that the trip offered me a chance to be a part of a community like no other. I live in the small and fairly homogeneous town of Boxford, and my high school has so few Jewish students that I could count them on one hand. We don't have days off for the Jewish holidays, and having to miss school to attend services for the High Holidays has been a part of my life since Kindergarten. That being said, I didn't know anyone who was going on the trip, and without a safety net of associates, my fears of finding friends grew. It was completely unexpected how easy it was to bond with the other participants on the trip. Even though our preliminary conversations started with standard discussions about school and our interests, they quickly evolved into deeper conversations about each of our religious upbringings, anti-Semitism in school and our towns, and looking into how our Jewish identities would impact our future. Having similar values but different perspectives laid a foundation for us to bond as a group.

Besides developing these close friendships, being in Israel provided a chance to see the commonalities between all of us. The connection between us highlighted how I will always have this community to fall back upon, and a plethora of people to grow with as we continue to learn and advocate for Israel. In addition to that, I have an amazingly close group of friends that shared this once in a lifetime experience with me. Within hours of parting from the airport, we decided we needed to get together the very next day, and all of us met up in Boston, coming from all corners of the North Shore just to be together for a few hours. The trip introduced me to this phenomenal community, and I will be forever grateful. Jenna Sutherland, Boxford

Y2I has not only enhanced my Jewish identity and made me feel like I am part of something special and important, but it has given me the tools to be proud of who I am and keep Israel alive. As I continue my journey and search for colleges, I will always keep Israel and everything I learned in mind, and use it to stand up for my home, and educate and inspire others. After this trip and all the incredible experiences I had, I do realize that my journey doesn't stop here. I feel that I have a duty to keep learning and educating myself so that I can really master the skills that are necessary when peacefully fighting back against anti-Israel biases and misconceptions. I feel inspired and excited to learn even more about the place I love so much and making a meaningful impact. Natasha Tsaryuk, Swampscott

Upon arrival at Ben-Gurion, I was greeted by a man I had never met before waiting to shake my hand and saying "Welcome home". At first, I was confused and apprehensive, but after spending a few days in Israel I understood what he meant. I fell in love with this state and felt a sense of belonging; I felt safer walking the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv than I do in Boston or New York. Not many people realize or come to appreciate the meaning of a Jewish state. The Jewish population in the United States is approximately 6 million, making us a minuscule minority. With such few Jews in our communities, many feel disconnected from their peers at school or at work. However, in Israel, 75% of the population is Jewish. This was mind-blowing to me: the realization that most of the people around me share my beliefs, customs, and traditions. Realizing this made me feel a sense of safety and belonging, like I had truly come home. Y2I has ignited my love for this incredible country and reconnected me with my 3000-year-old family. The Jewish people have been chased around the world for nearly 2000 years, and only 70 years ago found their home again in Israel. Israel is just that to me: a home. It is a beautiful place where anyone can be his or herself and be accepted into the warm, loving community. Victoria Veksler, Marblehead

My Israeli uncle asked me if Israelis are very different than American. I told him "absolutely not." They were teenagers with hopes, dreams, and souls, just like everybody else. They were equals to us. We ate the same meals together, roomed together, and jammed to the same music together. By the end of their short stay, our group shed tears for them, literally. They were certainly the highlight of the trip. Joel Vered, Swampscott

As soon as I landed, I was greeted with, “Welcome home.” At first I was confused, but as the days went by throughout the trip, I realized what it meant. I soon felt like I was at home. In my life prior to this trip, I would not consider myself religious nor have I ever truly established what being Jewish meant. Now, I feel way more connected to Judaism than I ever have before. I feel like everyone that is Jewish should be proud of their religion and not be afraid to show that pride. I can now finally say that I am not afraid to express my Judaism wherever I go, although it might be scary in some cases. Y2I has made me realize that being Jewish is something to always be proud of. On the last day of the trip, I had the option to have a small Bat Mitzvah since I did not have a chance to do so when I was younger. I decided to do this because I realized that having a Bat Mitzvah in Israel with some of my new, closest friends would be a once in a lifetime opportunity, but most importantly bring me closer to my religion and finally establish what being Jewish meant. Overall, Y2I has been one of the best trips that I have ever experienced and it put Judaism and Israel into a completely new perspective for me.

Olivia Voznyuk, Swampscott

Before this trip I have had multiple conversations with my friends about Israel, but the facts I was presenting sometimes worked and sometimes didn't in that they often had holes poked in them. But at the end of the discussion it was always a tie. Seeing Israel for the first time in person cleared away the blinding fog of ignorance, but clearing it for others without showing the beautiful homeland would be hard. Before I would “Stand up for Israel”, I would like to research opposing arguments. Once, understanding the full situation I would then form my own opinion on the matter. After that I will present what I do think to the best of my ability through the discussions over lunch with friends, to social media responses to a rising conflict.

Jared Wallen, Swampscott

The pictures can tell a story, but the memories will remain forever. A new country, a new place, with new people, and new adventures. How was a two week trip supposed to make me feel more connected to the Jewish community and change the person I already am today? I returned back to Beverly as a new independent individual. My confidence has risen above its bar, and there is no reverse button going back to two weeks ago.

The two most influential parts of Y2I that increased my love for being a part of the Jewish community were Shabbat and our Israeli friends. There was something about these two things that turned on a switch and that switch will never turn back off again. Being submerged in the culture and heart of Shabbat was one of the most amazing experiences ... ever. Words cannot begin to describe how beautiful it is that so many different kinds of people gather at the Wall each and every day, but especially on Shabbat.

The amount of walking and steps I took was worth every drop of sweat. The new places and sights that I saw will forever be imprinted in my mind and can never compare to any kind of photo. I finally understand and appreciate the importance of being greeted in the Israeli airport with a “Welcome Home”. Israel truly is a home and family for all kinds of Jewish people. There are one hundred kids that all had different experiences during these past two weeks, but what did we have in common? Not that we were from the same town, not that we liked or disliked the same things, not that we were all in Israel, but that our love for the Jewish community had grown 10 times more and we all left our homeland with a new sense of love and appreciation.

Kimberly Way, Beverly

I am truly thankful for the gift of Israel I was fortunate enough to receive. This trip was not just a “free trip to Israel”, but rather an opportunity for one to strengthen their connection to the country and discover the true meaning of one’s Jewish identity. Personally, I feel as if I joined a new family, and furthermore one in which I am obligated to stand up for- whether it be from neo-Nazis, anti-Israelis, Holocaust-deniers, or whomever else opposing Israel or Judaism. Unlike others on the trip and many other American-Jews, I have never personally been tormented, bullied, or discouraged by anyone regarding my Jewish identity; however, I am certain that this will not be the case in the future when I go to college or join the workforce. After experiencing the true delight that my Jewish identity brought me on this trip to Israel, I am sure I will stand up when the time comes. Coming into the trip, I really didn’t know much about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not only did we learn about the conflict, but Charlotte also taught us how to defend Israelis from the absurd and ignorant claims from pro-Palestinians and the biased media. Now, I am armed with the knowledge I will need in the future when I come across, likely in college, those who attack Israel. Max White, Marblehead

As we boarded the flight, I went into the trip thinking it could not be as fun as everyone said it was, but I was wrong, very wrong. I wasn’t ready for what the next two weeks held in store for me. Going to Yad Vashem was easily the most touching experience of the trip. The speakers we had were amazing, and they informed us on why it is important to carry Judaism with us and why we should stand up for Israel. Meeting the Israelis, the Israelis who are our age, but who will soon begin their training for the defense forces was crazy to think about. It’s amazing to see how passionate some of them are about going into the army and doing their service for their country. Some of the Israelis were very passionate about expressing the idea that the army was not an obligation, but a favor being given to the country that had given them so much. This really opened my eyes to see how much pride they take in the land of Israel. At the end of the day, as hard as it is to admit my brother was right--this was different than the other times I have been in Israel. The trip made me look at Israel through a new perspective.

Hannah Zafrani, Swampscott

Going to Israel was by far the most amazing experience I have ever had. One of the most evident ways this trip has changed me is that I feel greatly more connected to my Jewish identity. I now see what my father means when he says being Jewish is being part of a community. We are a very small percent of the world’s population but that makes us special and it’s important to not abandon the Jewish religion. Before this trip I did not see why I needed to marry a Jewish woman. Now I understand that we need to continue the Jewish bloodline. Being at the Western Wall on Shabbat made me feel so included and I felt the most Jewish I ever have. Every part of the trip was amazing. From the powerful moments atop Mount Masada, to the amazing times in different market places, Israel had a huge impact on me. I have a new love and passion for Israel. Nothing will ever compare to those two weeks. Adam Zamansky, Marblehead

When my friends ask me about Yad Vashem, I tell them it’s the best museum in the entire world, which isn’t a lie but isn’t the truth either, because Yad Vashem isn’t a museum but a memorial. Every exhibit is a family member whose life was uprooted, who somehow managed

to flee the pogroms, or who couldn't run fast enough and was murdered with his soul kept as a flickering reflection of a candle in the dark of the Land of Milk and Honey, of the finally free and of the remembered. Now I must remember to advocate for Israel, to cherish the sky above even though here its deepest purple will never hug me as warmly or homely as Israel's did, to sip my burnt coffee remembering Israel's sweetness, to remember the greatest innovations and mountains and valleys and seas I saw, to never forget those who gave themselves for it and therefore me, to raise my children to care for it as I do, and to never allow myself to take its safety for granted. Dina Zeldin, Newton

After an amazing and eye-opening two weeks in Israel with Y2I, I have learned quite a few things about myself. The pride in my Jewish identity deepened, and my appreciation for this beautiful country grew even more. From all the new friends I have made, new Jewish music I discovered, and delicious food I tried, this trip is not one to forget.

I always considered myself Jewish and knew that I will raise my children Jewish, but after visiting Israel, my Jewish pride grew tremendously. I felt a special spiritual connection to all the kids on the trip, knowing their parents are Jewish and were probably raised with the same traditions as me. While staying two days in modern Tel Aviv and learning about Israel's high-tech innovations and about all the start-up companies, I felt even more proud of the people of this country. Several times during the two weeks, Charlotte from "Stand With Us" came to speak to Y2I participants about the Arab-Israeli conflict and what we can do. After this I felt much more prepared returning back to my high school and later on moving to college campus, knowing how to deal with potential anti-semitic instances. I now feel educated and empowered enough to have a constructive conversation with someone about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and want to stand up for Israel. Spending a night in the desert, climbing up Masada to see a sunrise, and four nights in Jerusalem made my appreciation and love for this small country even more special. I feel like it is now my responsibility as an American Jew to be more proactive and involved. Thinking back on the trip, there are so many different experiences and memories I can take with me and I cannot pick just one. Everything will stay with me forever; the friendships I developed, the bonds I formed with the Israelis, and self-discoveries. Israel has impacted my life in ways that I am still discovering and processing. Elizabeth Zhorov, Marblehead

Y2I really helped me to understand how important and unique Israel truly is. Israel is a country with a blend of new and old, with a deep history that goes back thousands of years and new cities with towering skyscrapers. Every place we visited in Israel was unique and beautiful in its own way. Israel is a product of generations and generations of Jews who were searching for a place to call home. Israel doesn't just serve its citizens, it honors those who didn't get a chance to enjoy a Jewish state, or who died from various forms of oppression against the Jewish people. It's a miracle that we have a Jewish state, and now I understand the importance of cherishing Israel and my Jewish identity. Sam Zuckerman, Sudbury