

In Their Own Words
Excerpts from 2019 Y2I Post-Trip Reflections written by Teens

Walking through Yad Vashem, what with its brilliant architecture, I was struck with the realization that the people I saw in the pictures and videos - particularly that especially graphic one with the dead bodies getting piled into a ravine – were what I was. A Jew. “That’s what I am!” I thought. They were me. I was them. Hitler was killing me. Me? Me. For the first time I truly understood the monstrosity of the Holocaust. Not because I now knew a death toll, but because, looking around me, at all my friends, acquaintances, and counselors, that all those Nazis would, without hesitation, have us sent to gas chambers. To be killed. To die. I was able to imagine the Holocaust taking place and having everyone I knew killed in it. A single defiant... child, really, standing with hate against this political group called the Nazi Party, with its adults and officials and powerful people. I’d say that what I felt, the intensity, at least, is only a fraction of what those who were actually victims of the Holocaust must have felt. In fact, I’d say it was about... one six-millionth? Indeed, **I would not have felt even that much had it not been for the experiences I had experienced in those days leading up to the visit to Yad Vashem. only because I realized my Judaism, that itself due to Y2I.**

Joey Albert, Marblehead

*It is difficult to describe the affect Israel and its people had on me. The land itself was truly magical. Every spot we visited had a lot of importance and the views were breathtaking. But when 30 Israeli teens joined our trip for five days, I have never connected with people as quickly as I did with them. From stargazing at the Bedouin tents, to just talking about life, these are people that I hope to have in my life forever. We shared many things in common, including what we like to do outside of school, favorite foods, favorite movies, and so much more. If it wasn’t for the accents, you honestly couldn’t tell who was from the U.S and who was from Israel. I would also like to add that during the trip we heard a lot about Israel Advocacy from different speakers and different activities. However, **hearing my Israeli friends say how they want us to be their voice, to protect Israel overseas, was when I became truly inspired to advocate for the country, that both the Israelis and I call home.** Abby Avin, Marblehead*

Y2I really changed my life. While in middle school I was bullied for being Jewish. During those times I started to stop believing that I was Jewish. I now feel proud to be a Jew and glad that I am one. Ben Applebaum, Peabody

Dear Israel,

*Thank you for showing me the truth. I was blindsided by the world; its hatred, its persistence, its ignorance. All my life I knew of the importance of Israel, but it never clicked until this trip. **Thank you for opening my mind to the possibility of a different reality for teens that are essentially just like me.** Thank you for solidifying what Judaism means to me specifically. Thank you for showing me your beauty, our culture, and our history. Most of all, thank you for giving me the opportunity to realize what home truly is.*

Maya Baranovsky, Wayland

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Y2I 2019 changed my life. I enjoyed meeting my Jewish peers from all across the North Shore, amazing people that I may have not met. I remember the feeling I had walking through Ben Gurion Airport. I was home. There is no other way to describe it. **I now have a very strong Jewish identity because of my Y2I 2019 experience.** I would not have made the friends and feel as connected to the Jewish community without Y2I. This trip is only the beginning of my journey with Israel.
Joshua Barosin, Georgetown

Dear Israel,

*I want to say thank you. **Thank you for opening my eyes to see new and better things than what I would just see at home.** A year before the trip I wasn't sure if it would be something I would do. Then I thought even if I don't make friends, I could still take back the views. But now that I made friends, I took back with me great memories and the experiences.*
Taylah Baseman, Gloucester

From its people, to its views, to its unbearable climate, Israel has changed me as a person and I can easily say it was for the better. I feel more comfortable being myself back home, knowing that there is a place in this world where I am and always will be truly welcome. **Visiting Israel has made me become much more proud to be Jewish;** I revere my history and am empowered by the stories of the Israelites. Not only this, but the modern history of Israel has also inspired me and made me much more inspired to achieve greatness in my life. Not only is my lifestyle more improved after visiting Israel, but I have made friends who I know will be there for the rest of my life. From Israelis who live thousands of miles away to friends who live right around the corner, I share one very specific thing with all of them and it unites us and everyone in Israel alike – our Jewish pride. I plan to revisit Israel and experience more of what it's like to be Jewish and Proud. I plan to further defend and join advocacy groups for Israel because I believe it is impossible that anyone could belittle such an amazing country. I will keep up to date with Israel, keep in touch with my new Israeli friends, and keep the people of Israel, past, present, and future, proud of the Jewish civilization that has blossomed. Israel is my home and I will do whatever I can to make my home welcoming to all. **Erik Bazarov, Swampscott**

Thank you for giving me this opportunity. It not only was life changing, but it changed many of my ideas about Israel as a whole. Going into this I thought I would see a very political, warlike place with police and army forces everywhere. What I saw was the complete opposite. I saw strangers helping one another, people greeting one another, and an overall welcoming place. **My ideas about Israel have completely changed, and now when people say negative things about Israel I am able to correct them and share with them my experiences from going there.**
Sophie Bendoris, Wenham

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Going on the Y2I trip enhanced the meaning of Israel to me. After going, I know more about the state of Israel today as well as about its history. Israel to me is about a homeland for all Jews, a place of religious history, and a thriving country. From the history to the sites still standing, it has meaning to Jews all around the world. As a thriving state and as a symbol, it is something that all Jews can support. Because of my trip to Israel and because of the Y2I experience, Israel means more to me.

Josh Berg, Marblehead

My experience was amazing and it was well above my expectations. First of all, I went into the trip thinking I wasn't going to know anyone, because I didn't. I didn't think I was going to make any friends, but I did, a lot. What impacted me the most and I will always remember was singing and prayers at the Western Wall. **I was with many people I didn't even know and felt welcome and that I belonged.** I recommend this trip to anyone who has the opportunity to go. It has been life changing.

Phil Berquist, Lynnfield

Dear Israel,

*I would like to thank you for all that I have experienced on my recent trip. **Israel has shown me many great sites, people, activities, markets and food.** Thank you for continuing to thrive so many people can visit you and also live in the joy that is Israel.*

Noah Book, Lynnfield

Before I went on Y2I, I may have been Jewish, had Jewish parents, ate kosher, and celebrated holidays and such, but I pretty much decided that I didn't consider myself Jewish anymore. I was ready to leave all the traditions and history behind. When we started learning about the conflict in more detail with Charlotte, I fell in love with the tragic story of Israel and everyone involved in the conflict. Nowhere ever had I heard the whole history of the conflict and sensed the dimension and depth of it. Even after those first two hours, I realized how important it is to be Jewish. Not just for the reason that I need to be Jewish, but because of how much I appreciate the history and culture of the Jewish people made me feel so much more connected to the religion. With my newfound and rekindled friendships combined with my new knowledge of my homeland I felt in a way... renewed. Towards the end of the trip, I knew that a lot of things had changed for me. After this experience I now know that I will stay involved with my community and stay educated about what's happening in my homeland, which is way more than I could have hoped to get out of this trip. **I can now say that I am truly proud to be Jewish.**

Julia Brockman, Marblehead.

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*Y2I has absolutely changed my life. Before going on the trip I had no connection to Israel. It was just a place where Judaism had its roots and Jewish people lived, but really had no meaning to me. After going on this life-changing journey Israel has a whole different meaning to me. It is a beautiful country, one that is the safe haven to many people, and home to all Jewish people around the globe, whether they live there or they don't. **Because of Y2I, Israel is now a place that I will fight for and I will advocate for this country.** Y2I has completely changed my outlook on that amazing country, and everything that it has done for me. Y2I brought me to a place that I hope to return very soon. Y2I is an amazing experience that I hope will continue for generations and generations and many teens get to take advantage of it.*

Brian Burrows, Amesbury

I chose to write about what Israel means to me because for me the meaning of Israel now is quite different than before I went on Y2I. In the broadest sense, Israel was a place and a people that I had read about and studied. Now Israel and Israelis are tangible and real, with a deeper and more focused meaning. **I can now understand why Israel is so important to Jews in the world, including us here in the United States.** As much as we may feel we are accepted as Jews by our friends and neighbors here, Israel is clearly a home that welcomes all Jews around the world, including those from places that are not as tolerant as our home. It is a “safe haven” for all Jews which is why its creation as a state and continued existence is so important. It was also important for me to meet Israelis my own age. I found that they were very much like me and my friends. They dressed like us and had the same interests in sports, school and technology. After Y2I, Israel and Israelis have a much different and more important meaning for me.

Matthew Caplan, Marblehead

I found myself completely changed after this trip. I learned stories about people's understanding of what Israel really meant to them deep down in their hearts, how we've all experienced antisemitism in our own communities, and how important it is to have a strong support system behind us through our journey in life as American Jews. We had many conversations about how important it is to stay Jewish in the future and show the world that it's not bad to be Jewish. Bonding with these other teens has already improved my life and myself for the better, and I cannot wait for my other opportunities in the future as a Jewish teen. This trip has opened my eyes to trying new things and meeting new people, and for that I will forever be grateful for this trip. **How blessed I am to have had this opportunity to visit my second home and create a second family full of amazing likeminded teens.**

Averi Carroll, Marblehead

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*It is said that Israel is put under a microscope. When most people say that something is put under a microscope, they talk about magnifying something; often more than necessary. In this case, that something is the politics - more specifically the Israeli Palestinian conflict. But when something is put under a microscope, something else happens. You don't see everything in front of you. When we look at Israel, we see its problems, of which there are many, but most don't see a country ripe with beauty. Before I came on Y2I, I too didn't see it. It's true that there are political issues in Israel, but that isn't what defines Israel - what makes Israel Israel. I guess for everyone that is different, and there is no right and wrong. **For me, at least, I learned what Israel means to me on Y2I.** Israel is some of the greatest memories of my life - from being nervous to speak in Hebrew for years after using male pronouns to my grandmother when I was six, to the friends I've made and experiences I've had this summer with Y2I. Israel is home.*

Ben Cohen, Rumford, RI

Upon arriving in Israel one of the first things that was said to me in which I found to be very reassuring was, "welcome home". Hearing this reminded me that this country I was entering wasn't just a place of foreigners, but rather a place of many people who shared a very similar heritage of Judaism just like me and everyone else on the trip. Back home was where my family lived along with my friends and everything I owned, but entering Israel allowed me to realize that there's always another home always waiting with open arms to let me in.

Visiting Israel wasn't just another trip, but it was rather an awakening for me to the greater picture of being Jewish. Before going to a Y2I meeting I didn't realize that there were this many kids that really considered themselves to be Jewish and were mostly proud and open about it. I also became aware that being Jewish doesn't just mean that you are part of a religion, but you are also part of a community that over the years is becoming bigger. And finally, I realized that if you ever don't feel at home just because of the fact that you are Jewish, Israel's always open- armed to take you in.

Liam Conley, Marblehead

The first major experience I had there was going to the Western Wall. I walked up and touched the Wall with my hand and head and suddenly shed a tear because I felt so connected being a Jew. I have never felt more proud to be Jewish as this moment in time. It almost did not feel real. Dancing in circles on Shabbat, being proud to be who I am, and being surrounded by supportive people was all I needed to feel more connected. **Y2I opened up my eyes to a whole other world.** I was finally proud to be a Jew and not having to duck my head every time someone said "Merry Christmas" or asking questions like how I was Jewish and what it meant to me. The first Friday I got back, I went to a Friday night Shabbat service and it made me feel as if I was still in Israel. I am planning to continue going to temple a few Fridays a month and continue to take action for Israel and keeping us connected from across the world. Y2I has been a life changing experience for me, and I feel as if I am a completely different person for the better. I am more aware of everything and everyone around me and I have even seen changes personally in myself. Never in a million years would I think traveling to a country with 100 random people would change my life, but it really did. **Arielle Cushinsky, Marblehead**

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*The recent history of Israel, starting in the mid-1900s, is one that is full of innovative ideas and technological advancements that made the impossible possible. Drip irrigation was introduced in the late 1950s, early 1960s, allowing them to bring water to the driest parts of the desert. This form of irrigation allowed Israel's number one export to be fruits and vegetables. This fact alone is impressive, considering Israel was nothing but a desert for a while. So what did that little piece of Israel's history have to do with what Israel means to me? **For me, Israel is a haven of new ideas, innovation, and technological advancements.** Israel is this wonderful oasis in a land full of desert, an oasis that's green because it wanted to be green. The State of Israel, to me, is the state of perseverance.*

Keren Dahan, Wayland

While I was on the trip I didn't really think being in Israel and going on Y2I changed my Jewish identity, but now that I am home I have realized that it did. Looking back at the trip going to the Western Wall for Shabbat was what changed the impact of Israel on my life. Being there and going up to the Wall, singing in big circles, and meeting lots of new people was very special to me and will impact my life forever. I think it is important for my children to be raised Jewish one day, not only so they can experience going to Israel, but so we can stay connected as family within our home for the holidays, Shabbat and any other days. In conclusion, I am so relieved that I decided to get on the plane because if I didn't I would not have gotten the experience of a lifetime in such an amazing place that I have wanted to go to forever. **Israel has changed my life forever.** **Lauren Donovan, Marblehead**

I really enjoyed my time in Israel and it was really fun. Ryan Ebright, Stamford, CT

*For me Y2I was an incredible experience. There wasn't a single day where I didn't enjoy myself and do something meaningful. Every night I would feel both extremely exhausted and deeply fulfilled. The most important connections to me were the ones between me and my peers and the ones between me and the past and my Jewish heritage. During the trip I met so many new people and I became friends with a lot of them. By coming to Israel together I realized how much we all had in common. In addition I befriended lots of the Israelis. By sitting and playing cards with them we all very quickly realized that we shared so many interests. We laughed at the same jokes, listened to the same music, watched the same shows, and even played the same sports. **By coming on this trip, I realized that even though we all may come from different towns and backgrounds and may even be separated by a ten-hour flight, we all share a history and heritage that is thousands of years old.***

Ben Farfel, Marblehead

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My time in Israel taught me about the Jewish family. A year ago, I would have thought the Jewish family only included my parents, brothers, and sister. However, now I know that Judaism is more than a religion. It is a culture, and the Jews are one big family. Everywhere I went in Israel I felt welcomed by the Jews in that community. It is important for me to stay Jewish so that I do not lose that connection. My religion has been passed down from many generations to me, and it is so deeply rooted that it has become a part of me. Without it, I would not be the person I am today. I want to prioritize a Jewish partner so that I can keep passing my faith down. I want to share my experiences of Judaism with my children. **The only way for me to see these traditions passed on is to remain Jewish and raise Jewish children.**

Sophia Feingold, Beverly

I began the trip with a deep connection to Judaism, but only within the walls of my temple. **I returned bursting with pride in my Jewish identity, feeling more comfortable with this part of myself than I had ever thought possible.** For my entire life, society had been instilling in me that being Jewish was not something to be proud of. I had never been so immersed in Jewish life before, and came to realize that Judaism is a thread that connects millions of people around the world. Israel wrapped me in its arms and embraced me as no place had ever done before. I was awed by its beauty and culture and wanted to return to America and shout from the rooftops that I was Jewish, and that my people did amazing things and built a beautiful country from nothing. I wanted to tell anyone who would listen that I wasn't afraid to be Jewish anymore, because I had seen the strength of my people, and the love that held us together. Judaism was no longer a stain on my shirt that I hid underneath a sweater. It was not something dark, or humiliating. The trip helped me realize that, no matter how hard the world tried to tell me that I couldn't be proud of something like Judaism, it was my duty to defend my religion and my culture. I was now a spokesperson for a community of millions of people around the world, and the light that had almost been extinguished by ignorance and hatred now shone brightly within me. I knew that I could never again hide being Jewish, because that would mean hiding the most important and beautiful parts of myself.

Talia Fein, Arlington

I believe that being Jewish and raising Jewish children is very important to me and my Jewish brothers and sisters. When I traveled to Israel, I experienced what being the Jewish majority really meant. It was a wonderful thing. The more of us there are and the closer we are to each other, it will be harder for people to persecute us, which as we have seen happened very easily. We must stay strong with our religious and orthodox values. This is not only how we will survive, but it is how we will thrive. **Alejandro Garber, Melrose**

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Every time I walked through a market, every time I saw a beautiful view, every time I walked around and interacted with people, I rediscovered my love for Israel. In my scout troop we have a tradition called roses, buds, and thorns where after a camping trip we go around in a circle and say something we enjoyed (the rose), something we disliked (the thorn) and something we are looking forward to (the bud). My thorn was having to leave Tel Aviv early. My rose of Y2I was experiencing the most amazing place on earth. My bud is attending the Israel advocacy trainings in the future and eventually going on Birthright.

Jordan Gladstone, Marblehead

Y2I has made a huge impact on my life, in the most positive way. Before Y2I, I never understood why Israel was so special, partially because I had never been. After being in Israel for less than 24 hours, I felt at home. In the United States, I always feel like a minority as a Jew. Israel made me feel safe and also part of a special family of Jewish people. Shabbat at the Western Wall was the night everything clicked for me. I realized why people call Israel the “Holy Land”. Each lecture helped me understand more about how special Israel is, its role as a democracy in the Middle East and how it is important that we, as Americans, advocate for Israel. **Y2I changed my whole world.** I went to Israel feeling absolutely terrified and left Israel beaming with joy. I made Jewish friends on the trip. Y2I has made me a better person and taught me where I come from. I now feel connected to the Jewish people of the past, present and future. I plan to advocate for Israel and help support Israel and its ideals.

Sabrina Glaser, Needham

Dear Israel,

*I will be forever thankful for the life changing experience you provided me with. I did not think I would leave after two weeks with so many new friends, new mindsets, and most importantly, new information on Israel itself. The minute I stepped out of Ben Gurion Airport and a broad yet powerful phrase caught my attention: “Welcome home”. These simple two words ruminated through my mind during my two weeks in Israel, and in pure confidence, I can say that for every moment I truly did feel at home. Each day was a new adventure and came with important takeaways and lessons. I look back on these two weeks that flew by in awe. **I feel in love with the culture, most definitely the food, my religion, and most importantly, the Israeli people.***

Rachel Goland, Swampscott

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The Y2I 2019 trip has not only changed the way I view Israel, but also enhanced my Jewish identity. Before embarking on this amazing trip I was skeptical about the whole situation. I come from an interfaith family, but I was raised Jewish. All holidays were celebrated in my family, but primarily Jewish ones. When I was younger I went to all the high Holidays at Temple, sometimes went on Saturdays, and even had a family Shabbat here and there. As my sisters and I got older and schedules got busier the Jewish practices in my family slowly faded away. We were too busy with sports and hanging with friends. The only thing keeping my Jewish Identity alive was my Jewish day school, which I was soon graduating from. After leaving private school and going to public school, I think my Jewish Identity got pushed aside by sports, friends, and the life of high school. My family stopped practicing Jewish traditions. I still identified as being Jewish but I'm not sure I meant it. **Going on Y2I lit the flame of my Jewish identity.** Being in Israel showed me that being Jewish is not just religious practices. It's speaking the language, eating the food, and having pride. Israel is filled with Jewish pride in all forms and seeing this first hand helped me become more in touch with my Jewish identity. This trip made me realize that being Jewish is not just my religion, but it is a part of who I am and my roots. I am more comfortable with being Jewish, and proud of my Jewish roots. This is all thanks to the unforgettable Y2I trip.

Natalia Goldwasser, Marblehead

*Before the Y2I trip, Israel honestly didn't mean that much to me and I wasn't very educated on the problems going on there. **After going on the trip, it really opened my eyes to all the things going on in Israel and what I can do to help Israel.** I think the best thing I can do to help is to spread awareness and educate people on what's happening. For example, with the situation in the West Bank, lots of people have one sided opinions without really knowing what's going on and I want to be able to educate them on what's really going on. This is my plan to stand up for Israel and help people better understand the conflicts that are affecting Israel. I think this trip opened my eyes to so many things that I wasn't expecting and I am so thankful for Y2I for providing me with the opportunity to go on this trip. I plan to use all of the information and use all of the experiences I had on the trip to tell people about Israel and advocate for it.*

Alex Greenfield, Swampscott

I believe this trip to Israel really helped me connect to my Jewish identity and Israel itself. There were many different events and activities that we had done, but one of my favorites was when we went to the Western Wall on Shabbat. Originally, I was trying to get through the crowd of people to get to touch the Wall, but instead, I and a few of my friends got pulled over to a table with Orthodox Jews where we sang songs and prayers. **I believe this trip was a life changing experience as it brought me closer to my Jewish identity and I got to make a lot of new friends.**

Matthew Griffin, Swampscott

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When I think of Israel I see history in the modern world. Israel is changing with the world while holding onto its ancient roots. The religious figures and world leaders walked the same limestone I did, which just boggles my mind. **So when I think Israel, I think of being deeply connected to not only my history but the history of others.** If it was not for others I would not be here. I feel connected to everyone whom I pass because we all walk the same roads and experience the beautiful buildings around. Israel did not change me but made me better.

Jadyn Gross, Marblehead

*I come from an interfaith family; I celebrate the majority of the Jewish holidays and some of the Catholic holidays. When I was little I grew up going to temple and going to Hebrew school whenever I could and I enjoyed it. It gave me time to be with my family, enjoy their company, meet new people, and in a way become connected with Judaism. As I grew older, other activities, sports and school started to become more of a focus on me and being Jewish was not something that I even really felt anymore. It felt that I had lost my Jewish part of my Mojo so to say, and it made me feel off. **The story of Masada and the meaning of it to the Israeli's gave it a whole new meaning that left me proud to be Jewish when we were walking down the mountain.** I want to take back my experience and my new-found knowledge of what I have learned and teach my friends and peers what they have been fed. It's not their fault that it is the negative media they see, so I need to in a way show them the light and let them choose which path they would rather learn more about. I'm so grateful to Mr.Lappin and other teens' families in the past for giving me this chance to go to Israel and learn and bond with others. Thank you, so much for the experience and enlightenment you have brought into my life.*

Ian Guilmet, Beverly

Going to Israel was an amazing experience for me. I learned so much and will never forget the memories and friends that I made. But the most important part of the trip for me was the understanding of what Israel truly is. **The beauty of the country, the feeling of being at the Western Wall and other religious sites and more amazing Israeli things gave me a connection to the country that I didn't know I could foster in only two weeks.** It is a truly amazing country and before going there I couldn't possibly have understood how I feel about it now.

Sam Gutin, Marblehead

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This trip played large role of solidifying my Jewish identity and helped me better understand my roots. Talks such as those we had with the people from *Stand with Us* made many of the complex political situations more understandable. As well, it highlighted the importance of being proud of my roots and standing up for my people. Alongside that, traveling across Israel and going to places such as Jerusalem, the Druse village, and the Holocaust Museum strengthened my roots and my knowledge of them. To expand, the museum had a profound impact on myself and many of the other teens on the trip by bringing to life the details of the tragedy of which I learned about through school, stories and books. It turned all those words and numbers that we've heard into something more impactful and personal. The visit to the Druse village and the marketplaces expanded my view and perspective of Israel. They showed the diversity of Israel and how the culture is filled with many beliefs, traditions, and people. The last thing I wanted to touch on was the bonds I was able to build with other local Jewish teens. Through the many wonderful meals, adventures around Israel, and free-time within the hotels I was able to build connections with others around me that will last a lifetime. As a teenager coming from Danvers, which contains far fewer other Jews, being in a place where I was surrounded by other Jewish people helped me connect to my Jewish roots and feel more comfortable. This trip has certainly left a lifelong impact on me and has changed me for the better. I will forever appreciate how this opened my mind and strengthened my Jewish identity. This trip has arisen my interest in Jewish activism and has helped me better understand where I came from.

Jared Hass, Danvers

*Israel did an outstanding job of enhancing my Jewish identity. I felt like I belonged here, especially being surrounded by thousands of people that identify as Jewish. When we went to the Western Wall, I picked up a new-found sense of pride and confidence to be Jewish. I looked around and all I saw were people who looked different, similar, tall, short; people who were Jewish. Even though I may have a very different daily life as the people in Israel, I am still connected through faith. That to me, **that little realization that people on the other side of the planet are all bonded together through shared history, traditions, language and beliefs, played a major role in enhancing my Jewish identity.** Shared traditions and culture is meaningless if it does not continue. If there is no one to tell the story of the Jewish people, how can we be remembered? There are people today who deny that the Holocaust even happened. This is one of the most hurtful things that can be said. As those words spread, over time people will not remember the Holocaust. Did all of those innocent Jews die for nothing? It is not only my job to correct these lies but to educate future generations about Israel and its history. **I will raise my children Jewish and make sure they raise their children Jewish to make sure history doesn't repeat itself.** I plan to educate, inform and stand up for Israel in America whenever possible. When I hear something false said about the country I will not hesitate to correct them. I will use the skills Charlotte has taught me to defend Israel. In this fashion, I hope to help improve the image and misconceptions of Israel.*

Cam Heafitz, Marblehead

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Going to Israel has given me an amazing life experience! I made many new friends and witnessed things I never would have had the opportunity to before. My favorite part of the trip was climbing Mount Masada. Seeing the sunrise over the Dead Sea was a sight I'll never forget. Although I'm not super religious, **I feel a much deeper connection to being Jewish, now that I've visited Israel.** Thank you for giving me his very special experience. I hope to use my knowledge to be an ambassador for Israel. **Lexie Hoffman, Marblehead**

*During our time in Israel we had an amazing opportunity to make some new lifelong friends. It was a great chance for us to really connect to our religion. **Sam Kagan, North Easton***

One of the most powerful aspects of Y2I was simply being exposed to average Israeli life, and observing how people live Jewish lives. I have always felt some sort of separation between my Jewish life and my "normal" life, such as walking into my temple or celebrating holidays in my home, while avoiding that part of me in public. Seeing how common it was to express a connection with Judaism in Israel certainly broke that barrier. I now feel that I have a deeper and wider understanding of what it means to be Jewish, beyond going to synagogue. My Jewish life is now just another part of my "normal" life, and not something that needs to be separated. In this way, **I feel more Jewish overall, and more connected to the global community of Jews.** Overall, this trip has educated me and connected me to the land of Israel. I feel more Jewish than ever after being surrounded by so many fellow Jews and spending time in our home. I will be forever grateful for this experience that sparked the beginning of my relationship with Israel.
Leah Katz, Beverly.

*As I embarked on my journey through Y2I, I realized that there's more than one way to be Jewish and feel connected to Judaism. I felt most Jewish while walking down Ben Yehuda street and dancing with Israelis we met that night, being stuck in a bathroom at a falafel restaurant, jumping up and down on a boat in the exquisite Sea of Galilee, placing a note in the Western Wall, playing cards games...or in my case loosing cards games, and sitting on the rocks in the back of the Bedouin tents, staring up at the stars with three friends, avoiding sleep in attempts to take advantage of every second we had in such a surreal environment. It's these small unplanned moments that Y2I allowed me to have that made me realize- "this is what it means to be Jewish. Its natural, unforced, small instances like those where I was able to fathom that surrounding myself with other Jews my age and being immersed in a new culture that I belong to has fostered my understanding that those moments make me feel more connected to Judaism than any temple ever would. Thanks to this incredible program, I have discovered my connection to Judaism, and love for Israel. Y2I and the country of Israel have given me memories and have taught me lessons that I will truly carry with me for the rest of my life.
Emma Keith, Newburyport*

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Before I went to Israel, I felt there was something missing from my Jewish identity. I wasn't sure if it was a need to celebrate Shabbat, go to synagogue more regularly, or something more profound. Before entering the Holy Land, I never knew about half (or more to be honest) of the history that had made my homeland what it is today. After getting home, I felt I could teach a basic history lesson to my family about what developed Israel. **Y2I was also impactful as I came home realizing how fulfilled I felt being Jewish.** At home, I am one of only five Jewish kids in my school, and it feels like only twenty in my town. Yet, 5,523 miles away, I actually belong to the 6.5 million people who call themselves Jews. I am so thankful that Y2I gave me the opportunity to experience Israel and find my love for the country, as well as make Jewish friends with whom I will share a special bond with for life. My Y2I experience has not only deepened my love for my religion, but it has brought me closer than ever to Jewish teens all across the North Shore. It showed me we have strength, even in small numbers, and at the end of the day, peace, love, hope, and teaching can make us successful and indestructible. Y2I has opened my outlook towards being an advocate for Israeli Jews. **As I finish my last two years of high school and go on to college, I am prouder than ever to call myself a Jew.** **Adriana Kotler, Lynnfield**

*Every Jew isn't the same. Some go to synagogue at least twice a week, some go to synagogue twice a year, while others never go. It doesn't matter how religious we are, or how Jewish we are. And those words really stuck with me. They made me think. I took those words to heart and I realized that she was right. I had every right to be here just as much as all the other teens did. I also realized that Israel is my second home. I felt so safe being there and I really did not want to leave. Words can't describe how I felt. Before I got to Israel, my opinion of it was just like a lot of other peoples. That Israel is a country of war, and that it isn't a safe place. Boy was I wrong. The only thing people hear in the news is when wars break out between Israel and another country. People rarely hear about the good stuff. I learned that Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. **This trip to Israel was definitely life changing.***
Devan Latham, Newburyport

During my time in Israel I made so many new friends from here and from Israel. Also we did so many incredible things. **Overall my time in Israel had a huge impact on my Jewish identity and changed my attitude in a positive way.** **Josh Liebman, West Hartford, CT**

*After my first day in Israel, I was walking with a group of newly made friends and we were talking about how it didn't even feel like we were in Israel or that we were far from home. Israel quickly became our second home and we all felt unbelievably comfortable in this seemingly new and diverse environment. After being back in my actual home for five days and spending them reflecting on my trip, I have realized how much closer and more connected I feel to my Jewish identity and culture. Walking around Jerusalem, actually walking in this ancient city that holds so much history was so unbelievable and powerful. Hiking Masada and hearing the story of our brave ancestors was so compelling. **Learning about the years of turmoil, prejudice, and destruction that the Jewish people had to go through helped me understand how truly wonderful and strong Judaism is.***
Masha Likhterman, Marblehead

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I had such high expectations, and the trip managed to exceed all of them. As soon as we got back to Boston, I was ready to go back. I returned with new knowledge, pride, memories, friends, and the desire to return back to Israel as soon as possible. I now have knowledge about Jewish history, Israeli culture, and the modern conflicts the country faces. **I have more pride about being Jewish and knowing I have such a close knit community with people from all around the globe.** I have memories that will last forever, from little moments like buying falafel for lunch at the market to big experiences, like spending Shabbat at the Western Wall. I have new friends, from 5 miles away...or 5000 miles away, that I know I can count on. Lastly, I have the desire to return back, and I cannot wait until that day comes.

Hannah Lippman, Swampscott

Going to Israel showed me truly how important it is to allow this beautiful religion to thrive. Traveling to the homeland showed me a different reason for which I want to raise my children Jewish. I really don't have any other choice because I want only the best and more for the religion that has opened so many doors for me. Being Jewish has enhanced my life in so many ways that I wish the whole world could be Jewish. It has given me friends, values, the motivation to do good, a community, a home and, endless love, and so much more.

Bella London, Marblehead

I want to say that since going on the trip I feel more connected to my Jewish side and feel like I have a duty to keep the religion alive. The trip was great and was a great experience for me as a person and a Jew. **Will MacDonald, Newton**

*At the beginning of this trip, I had no idea how much Y2I would change my perspective on Israel and what it means to be Jewish person. These two weeks definitely exceeded my expectations going into it. The State of Israel had an immediate impact on me as soon as I stepped off the plane and into the country. I could feel the holiness and excitement in the air, whether it be the Jewish people singing prayers or the little kids running around and chasing each other. These little things that Israel had to offer made Y2I that much better. **There must have been thousands of people at the holy Western Wall while we were there, and at this moment, I was as proud to be Jewish as I have ever been in my life.** I cannot wait to return to Israel in the future, and I will always love my second home!*

Charlie Mack, Beverly

Israel was one of the most exciting things I have ever done and it has given me memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I wasn't friends with too many people before the trip. While on the trip, I was able to meet people who are now some of my best friends, even some from Israel. **Visiting all of those places really put the importance of why we need Israel and the significance of a Jewish homeland.** This trip has given me a lot to think about. It truly was one of the best times of my life. **Matt Maldonado, Swampscott**

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*Israel has also taught me that it isn't what you see in the news. Israel is not 100% a war zone full of violence. Most of Israel is made up of caring, compassionate, kind and outgoing Israelis. During my time in Israel I had a moment of realization. The moment made me realize that being Jewish isn't all about being religious. **Judaism is mostly known as a religion, but I learned that it is also a culture and a lifestyle, but you can make it fit however you choose in your life.** Overall this trip has brought me memories, experiences, friends and deeper understanding of what it means to be Jewish. **Sunny Marcus, Malden***

To say that Israel was a meaningful and life changing experience would be an understatement. Everything about this new place screamed home to me which was so ironic. How can I feel like I belong in a place that I have never been before? Everyone will have a different answer as to what made them feel so integrated in such a foreign place, but for me, it was the people. Everyone at home is so used to being connected through their culture, which includes religion. While Jews can still fit into the culture in many senses, Judaism will always be a boundary that sets us apart just like any other religion. Coming from such a strongly Christian community, I always felt singled out when it came to religion. I thought that I would feel singled out yet again because I came into the trip not knowing anyone. However, when I met all of the Jewish teens from the North Shore and Israel, I felt so close to them immediately. Looking back at the trip, I went in underestimating how much I would have loved it. I made new friends, tried new foods, and explored a new place. I am so glad I took the opportunity to go to Israel and make the memories of a lifetime.

Anna McCloskey, Newburyport

This trip was a once and a lifetime opportunity.** I had a lot of fun on this trip and met a lot of cool people. I liked going to the Dead Sea and waking up to climb mount Masada. Also going to the Western wall was cool being able to pray and have fun in dance circles. It was fun being able to talk and get to know the Israelis and learn things about them and what they have to go through preparing for the army. **Matt McIntire, Swampscott

This trip came at a time I needed most, at a time when I was questioning my Jewish identity due to the anti-semitism going on at my school. I now view and appreciate Israel and Judaism in a whole new way. Judaism means more to me than just being Jewish now. In the past few years, I have contemplated wanting to be Jewish because it made me feel so different from my friends and peers. But now I understand what it means to be Jewish and the deeper meaning of it. When we were at the Kotel, I was pulled aside and got tefillin put on me by three Orthodox men for no charge. I then went to the Wall and read the pamphlet of prayers that was given to me and read them with the other Orthodox men. **At that moment Judaism changed for me. I felt like I was part of something and felt accepted which sounds strange, but it's the only way I can describe it.** This trip has done so much for me. It has given me friends that I feel like I've known for a lifetime. It has taught me what being Jewish truly means, and it has given me a whole new appreciation for a country I have called my second home all of my life. From the bottom of my heart, thank you Y2I. **Ari Menes, Reading**

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My time in Israel helped me discover my Jewish identity. Before I went to Israel, being Jewish had little significance to me. I didn't fully understand what it means to be a Jewish person and what the full scope of the community is. I didn't understand how important it was to represent myself as a Jewish teen living in the United States. My trip to Israel really gave me a different perspective on what it means to be Jewish. I was amazed at the diversity in Israel. I remember walking around the Western Wall and seeing so many Jews from different backgrounds. They were of various ethnicities, nationalities and levels of worship. But they all shared one thing in common: an identity as a Jewish people. This was really powerful for me as it helped me to understand the wide scope of the Jewish community and how it ties people together. This trip also taught me and the rest of the group a lot about the history of the Jewish people, and how important it is to protect the land that is so sacred to millions of people. Before this trip, I really didn't think of Israel in this light. I thought of Israel as more of just a country of primarily Jews, not as a spiritual and symbolic homeland for the Jewish people. **I have developed a deep understanding of what it means to be Jewish and will carry it with me throughout my life.**

Aidan Merriam, Marblehead

*The more we traveled the streets of Tel Aviv, I realized how in love I am with the modern city, already texting my mom "Can I come back next summer?!" I have never been on vacation to a place where I truly felt at home and in my element. Where my features or religion didn't matter and the culture is so diverse. Knowing I had at least one thing in common with each person I passed on the street was incredible and refreshing. **During my final days of being in Israel, I felt truly connected to Judaism, what it means to be Jewish, the culture, and the community.** I learned so much about Israel, war, and politics. I feel truly educated and ready to defend Israel when ignorance tries to dull Israel's beauty. While I left a part of my heart in Israel, I took home new knowledge, amazing memories, and friendships. The next step in my Jewish journey is to advocate for my people, my culture, and my community.*

Nicole Michelman, Peabody

My experience in Israel brought me more connected to Judaism and my roots than I thought I could. **For me the trip showed me to be truly proud of my religion and who I am as a person, because when you see Israel in person and connect with it, you realize how many people before you worked towards making Israel and everything it has and is today.** When you are in Israel you are really able to be free to choose who you want to be, and be openly Jewish.

Brett Miller, Waban

*Israel always appeared as a far-away place that was important to the Jewish people that I would hear about on the news. But now I feel like Israel is a second home, and possibly one day will be home. **When we listened to Hatikva at a museum in Tel Aviv, for the first time I actually felt patriotic to a country, and felt meaning in an anthem rather than it being an artificial routine in school.** So now after college, after birthright and hopefully a semester abroad, I will consider making Aliyah, which I am aware goes against the purpose of strengthening Jewish identity on the North Shore. So now I know there is another place where I can live a Jewish life free of anti-semitism and assimilation, and that it will always be waiting for me after my experience in Y2I.*

Ethan Miller, Beverly

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This trip gave me an outlook on the people in the country, the stories behind the country, and the different cultures in the country. Israel is a home for many, not just the Jews. This trip changed me. I have a different outlook on a lot of things in my life now. I learned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. **I learned how to speak up for Israel, and how to represent the country better. I learned leadership skills.** I have done so much more than I could have dreamed to do all thanks to this trip. And most importantly, I made friendships that will last a lifetime.

Jackie Mindlin, Dartmouth

The trip as a whole was life-changing. I met many new kids who share the same religious views as I do. It was great to see so many people come together, and experience this trip of a lifetime.

Dylan Morris, Mansfield

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Israel, My Home
by Anna Nazarenko, Swampscott

Anxious and eager I arrived to the drop-off.
They told me *shalom*,
As I entered the bus,
And as I stepped off the plane, I was welcomed home.

Never before was I in this much excitement.
The heat, the culture, the food,
Was all new in my first home Tel Aviv,
From there only more eagerness brewed.

I had never felt more welcomed,
Than I did at the holy Western Wall.
We danced for hours on Shabbat, Together,
one people as all.

Hummus, pita, falafel galore,
There wasn't a day without a burst of flavors.
I ate so much!
The food wasn't doing me any favors...

We bargained for prices,
We hiked Mt. Masada,
We lived in the dessert,
And bought iced cafe from Aroma.

The Dead Sea was a stinging delight,
As was the bumpy camel ride,
All something you can only experience Israel,
A land in which I confide.

Thank you, Israel,
For serving as my home.
I will return one day,
But for now I wave *shalom*!

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Before going on the trip, I really had no idea how many different aspects of my life would be impacted by the Y2I journey. The first was the social impact: simply being able to branch out to a whole new group of people than just the kids from my town and making new friends enhanced my experience during the trip, and will continue to enhance my life here at home. The next impact was just my understanding of the land of Israel. Before going on Y2I, I had a basic understanding of Israel's coming to be as a Jewish State, its current conflicts, and its ancient history. But this trip has completely enhanced my understanding in each of these areas, including one that I had never known before, and that is Israel's culture, which being exposed to on a daily basis was truly amazing and a learning experience like no other. Finally, **one thing that I found very unique to the experience I gained from Y2I was a true understanding of how and why I will stand up for Israel.** Charlotte's presentations were so effective for me, and they were full of new thoughts and perspectives that I hope to never forget. Because of the conversations she sparks with teens like us and so many others, I now have a true understanding of why I need to defend Israel, and that is something that I hope to continue learning about and doing in the future.

Ben Neilan, Swampscott

I believe Y2I has greatly impacted my life by giving me the opportunity to experience the world, connect with my Jewish roots, and make new friends. Y2I allowed me to experience Israel in a way I would never have been able to if I had not gone on the trip by allowing me to experience everything from cities to the desert, Druze, Jewish, and Arab cultures, underground tunnels, hikes, camel rides, museums, and more. Y2I allowed me to experience the world outside of our small communities, and exposed me to cultures and places that will change my perspective of the world forever. The trip really made me feel connected to my culture and proud to be Jewish. It also prepared me to properly advocate for Israel (something I would have not known how to do if it were not for Y2I's program with Stand With Us). Finally, Y2I allowed me to make new friends from my own community, surrounding communities, and even from across the world. Y2I has enhanced my life in ways I could not imagine.

Owen Neilan, Swampscott

Going to Israel with Y2I changed me in a few ways. First of all it made being Jewish seem more acceptable in the eyes of other people. So many people were interested in what I did on my trip and asked me lots of questions about being Jewish and the things I do as a Jewish teen. Secondly it changed my views on a lot of the stereotypes I had about Israel as a country. I had always thought that it was a dangerous place but after going and hearing from Charlotte and other Israelis I now know that it is a very safe place but with some conflict. Lastly, **Y2I gave me a chance to see a brand new place in the world and changed my perspective on a lot of things.**

Maia Newburg, Marblehead

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Israel to me is a place where everyone, no matter where they are from or what they look like can come together and be one. Seeing people of different races and people wearing different types of clothing, in one small place, made me feel as if we were all one. Walking towards the Western Wall especially made me feel the same sense of being one. I remember on Shabbat when I was walking through the crowds of people trying to get to the Wall, hearing multiple languages. I heard Hebrew, English, Spanish, French and so many more languages. Hearing all of these languages and connecting those to different parts of the world helped me realize that people from all over the world were coming together and praying at the same place. **My favorite part about Israel is that you can be whoever and whatever you want to be and there will always be a place for you.**

Samantha Oberlander, Marblehead

Y2I was an amazing experience for me that I will never forget. I not only met a friend, but I also got to meet my family. It was like no other experience I had before. Hiking Mount Masada to swimming in the Dead Sea, whatever we were doing, I had a great time every second. During the trip I felt close to the Jewish religion and I know now that I will feel closer to Judaism forever. **Jayla Odorczuk, Swampscott**

The Israel trip was an incredible opportunity and I feel way more connected to my inner Jew. The rafting was great, the boat party was amazing, and the Wall was something I never thought I'd experience.

Jacob Patterson, Weston, CT

*After being in Israel for just two short weeks, I fell in love with the country, learned so much about its history and my roots, and met some amazing new best friends. Celebrating Shabbat at the Western Wall was where I felt the most proud to be a Jew. It was like no other celebration I have seen before. There were Jews from all over the spectrum and all over the world. I saw people with their heads in the Torah, facing the Wall and praying. I saw people singing and dancing in circles. I saw people sitting down, simply taking in the view. It amazed me to see Jews from all over with many different beliefs and ideas come together and celebrate the same thing. Throughout the trip we learned about Israel Advocacy, which I felt was very important. Throughout all of the meetings, I learned how important it was to stand up for the country that I fell in love with these last two weeks. In America, there is a lot of fake news about Israel. People like to talk about situations that they are misinformed about. **After my time in Israel, I feel like it is my responsibility to give a different message about the current events in Israel, so people can begin to see it for the beautiful place that it is.** Y2I was truly a once in a lifetime trip and I will carry not only my memories, but also everything I learned there with me forever.*

Chloe Pickering, Marblehead

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Before the Y2I trip I've never really embraced my Jewish side that much aside from specific holidays, but this two week journey opened my eyes. It showed me beautiful areas, breathtaking landmarks, and how being Jewish is more than just a religion. Throughout the trip there were many moments that truly were memories I'll keep in my heart forever. While I was able to see so many amazing parts of Israel; the most amazing part of the trip was meeting the many people from both the USA and Israel I now can call my friends. Thanks to these special two weeks of my life I've been able to talk to people I've never thought I would have, finding a lot in common with others, and tackling challenges with them I would have never done alone.

Tyler Roads, Marblehead

*I am so thankful to say I was a part of what is such a life-changing and worthwhile program, Youth to Israel. Everything that occurred truly confirmed just how wonderful and great is for me to be able to say I'm Jewish. Israel now holds a whole new, incredible meaning for me. Being that I had not been to Israel before, I did not realize I would be welcomed home. It continues to amaze me that there is such a wonderful place all Jews can come home to. Not only that, but I was taken aback by the immense national pride that each person held. Before coming to Israel, I had mainly created my thoughts and opinions of its society through the daily news. However, Israel is so much more than what it is portrayed through the media. I am so thankful that I could learn about the culture and politics of Israel through the lens of an advocate while on the trip. It made me realize that the existence of Israel is so important for the Jewish people, and as a model for the world in technology and innovation. I came to learn that Israel is a living, breathing country with so many diverse parts. Really, the only way to grasp an understanding about the importance of Israel is to experience Israel and its dynamic parts. I am so grateful Youth to Israel has shown me how to advocate and I will come home with the goal to teach others and stand up for an amazing country in return for all it has done for me. **I've truly come away with a strong connection to Israel that allows me to have a greater Jewish identity.***

Julia Rosenberg, South Dartmouth

Before I went to Israel, I'll be honest; it didn't mean much. Why would it? It was just another small war-torn country. Portrayed in the media as a monster, disliked by many, what did Israel mean to me? Nothing...until I got there. I have had a hard time connecting and identifying with my Jewish identity. In all honesty, it's been a while since I felt connected to anything. Once we got off the airplane, a man on the trip said to all of us "Welcome home". Much later in the trip, we discussed what that meant, and a lot of people stuttered. I knew exactly what he meant the moment he said it. Israel quickly grew to become very important to me. **I was immediately in a state of awe because I finally knew where I belonged.** Israel meant culture, people, identity, but also I was no longer a guest in my own country. It was settling knowing I was now surrounded by people who practice the same religion as me. I have never experienced such intense emotions as I did in Israel. It changed me for the better. While it could be challenging, and some of the information could be really heavy to bear, it was a very important event in my life. It has forever changed me. **Jessie Ross, Marblehead**

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Dear Israel,

I say with complete confidence that the trip changed me more than any other experience in my entire life. I saw things I'd never saw before, ate things I'd never think to put in my mouth, and met people who changed my mood just by being in their presence. Your people are unique, unlike any others in the world. They are gruff, no-nonsense people on the outside, but gentle and glowing on the inside. Every time I looked out the window my excitement was renewed as I was blessed with elegance of your deserts and the allure of your forests. Each time I closed my eyes, I was astounded with the overwhelming sense of belonging I felt in this foreign place. And when your beautiful sunrise woke me in the morning, I felt a peacefulness inside that I had never possessed before. But the most important thing you did for me was show me how important it is for me to defend my people and my country. In America and around the world, there are many people who believe that you shouldn't exist. There are a multitude of organizations who are actively trying to remove your right to be your own country. So after visiting you, and experiencing what makes you truly unique and special, I have been given new motivation to defend you on my front. Thank you for inspiring me and educating me, I hope to see you again soon. **Griffin Saginor, Boxford**

*Before I came on this trip, whenever somebody that did go would tell me about all the friends they made that they still keep in touch with, I would think that they were stretching reality. I thought that there's no way that over the course of just under two weeks you could get that close with a group of people. But now, I'm going to be one of those people, because I came back with a group that's like family that I hope will stay together through the years. They have truly changed my life for the better and I'm so thankful for them and this trip that brought us all together. What's even better is that they're also Jewish. I now have friends that religiously believe the same things that I do, and celebrate the same holidays, so I now have a larger community of Jewish peers which gives me a stronger Jewish identity. I've always identified as Jewish, but I never really had a group of peers that also identified as Jewish. **Being a part of a friend group that's Jewish, it's strengthened my Jewish identity and makes me feel normal.** I didn't have that before, and having it now is amazing. **Jessica Sapozhnik, Salem***

The impact that Y2I has had on my life is that it gave me an opportunity to visit a place and people I haven't had the chance of seeing before. I got to visit Yad Vashem, which opened my eyes to what the Jews experienced during the Holocaust. This means a lot to me and it has impacted my life greatly. **Justin Sapozhnik, Salem**

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Dear Israel,

*Thank you for helping me to dig deeper into realizing my Jewish identity and thank you for creating everlasting memories I will never forget. From the moment we walked into Ben Gurion and Amnon said to us “welcome home,” that really stuck with me. Yes, there are Jews living all around the world who all have something that others do not; different qualities, interests, or skills, but the one thing we all have in common is you, Israel. **Thank you for providing a safe and comforting place for all Jews and keeping us protected.***

You are truly a wonder with your enriched history and there is still so much that the world has yet to discover about you. Although everything is constantly in motion and never stops, every Israeli citizen knows that each second on this planet is a gift and they never takes it for granted.

Your museums helped me learn that nothing has ever come easy to Israel. You got to where you are today from fighting for liberation and becoming free from oppression. I learned that all Jews are a family. Thanks to you, Israel, we all have a common denominator.

*Thank you for the life lessons you have taught me to never take anything for granted. Thank you for leaving me with memories I will never forget, from swimming in the Dead Sea, praying at the Western Wall, climbing Mount Masada, and many more unforgettable experiences along with the many lifelong friendships have made that we will forever share a special bond. I look forward to coming back to you soon with my family, and someday my own children. Just know that you have left a mark on my heart for all eternity and that I will advocate for you and spread Judaism for you. **Justin Saslaw from Peabody***

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When I was living in Marblehead, I often used my Jewish identity to connect with people, which in turn motivated me to continue improving this part of me. But in Wenham, this was more difficult. So even though I kept my Jewish traditions, I felt like my Jewish identity was becoming a less integral part of my life. In hindsight, not being around Jewish people for years made me subconsciously dismiss the importance of being a Jew. Until Y2I, I did not appreciate just how much I missed that connection. Traveling to Israel on Y2I brought that connection back. For the first time in years, I was with a large group of Jewish peers who, like me, inherently understood what it meant to be Jewish. With them, I did not have to explain what it meant to keep kosher, what the mezuzahs on my door meant, or why I fasted on Yom Kippur. This Jewish connection felt even stronger when I arrived in Israel. Everyone I met welcomed me like family. By far, however, my favorite part of the entire trip was meeting and traveling with the Israeli teenagers. Despite growing up on different sides of the world, our shared Jewish identity instantly connected us. As I thought about all this on the plane ride home, I realized just how important these connections are to me. I am not going to let myself lose them again. Perhaps even more important than reconnecting me with other Jews, this trip also confirmed something I already knew: I am not only proud to be Jewish, my support for Israel is unwavering. However, up until now I have often been afraid to voice that support for fear of being marginalized. Going forward, I am not going to be bullied into silence. Instead **I am going to have the confidence and courage to voice what I know to be true and what my heart believes in. I am going to advocate for Israel and stand up to anti-Semitism. Above all, I am going to continue to seek out Jewish connections that will help foster my Jewish identity.**

Carter Segal, Swampscott

*Going to the Western Wall made me want to stay in touch with my community at Beth El. I appreciate being given the opportunity to go on this trip to see what I'm standing up for back at home. And when people say bad things about Israel and the Jewish community, knowing how to respond to them and prove them wrong. That Israel being a place is a good thing and to show people the false image that anti-Israel activists show to make Israel look bad. But in the end, **this trip connected me back to my Jewish roots. This showed me that being Jewish was one trait that makes me unique from everyone else, and I have a whole additional family back in Israel that I belong to, and my kids will be able to belong to after I'm gone.***

Jonah Seiger, Belmont

Y2I had an amazing impact on my life and really helped me connect to my Jewish religion. I branched out and made amazing friendships. **This trip was a life-changing experience and changed my perspective on many topics in Israel.** Ethan Sheris, Beverly

Y2I has shown me as a Jewish teen what it actually means to be Jewish and how

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important a Jewish state is. Before Y2I being Jewish to me was celebrating high holidays and going to temple regularly. However, while in Israel we had many lectures after a day of sightseeing and learning about the history of Israel, in these lectures we were told how being Jewish is not only following a religion but being a part of a people. Besides the fact of realizing what it actually means to be Jewish, I figured out what being Jewish means to me. While talking about Israel's past and Jewish history I understood how important it actually is to have a Jewish state. To hear how Israel has tried to make peace countless of times and have been rejected many times is devastating and to hear how people think a nation built to be a safe haven for Jews doesn't have a right to exist. However that's not the most important thing I learned on the trip. After the Holocaust museum I was sad and frustrated, and wondered how could this have happened and how can we be told after that, that Israel doesn't have a right to exist. Once I calmed down I realized that even after six million of our community were killed, we didn't rise up in anger or seek revenge for those who have killed us. We sought to help each other and everyone that we possibly could. And then all the stories told to me along the trip of how a South African boy can get a new heart in Israel and that during the war with Syria we would take their wounded and bring them to hospitals, hit me. Israel seeks to help anyone in need even if they want to take our home away. In that moment after the museum I figured out being Jewish is being kind above all else and helping anyone in need of help. **Gavin Shevory, Marblehead**

*While in Israel, my friends and I fostered our Jewish identities, constantly interacting with new people, as well as old peers, making connections, and forming life-long bonds. In Israel, all of us not only shared a common religion, but also a common culture. Noticing just how similar all of us are to one another was something that really stood out to me on this trip. I ultimately came to the realization that all of us were just as connected as grapes are to the vine. The vine being what we all share, what we all have in common, and the grapes being us, the Jews, those who are filled with life, but also those who are rooted in culture and tradition. As a result of this trip, I've come back a more educated, thoughtful, and dedicated Jew to the continuation and existence of a Jewish homeland. **Carson Shore, Swampscott***

No matter how much the Jewish people believe in Israel, whether it is the culture, the land, or the people, there are always others who will oppose it. On the day we arrived back to Boston from our amazing trip to Israel, I heard about Holocaust-denial fliers posted on my own temple. This was not just a piece of paper taped on a door; it was an anti-Semitic attack. No longer was my head stuck in the ground, ignoring the accusations of anti-Israel rhetoric. **I will stand up for the Jewish people and their place in the world because no one deserves to be denied their past.** Thanks to Charlotte from Stand With Us, **my arsenal for defense and activism for Israel has greatly expanded.** I hope to participate in further presentations so that I can be Jewish without being threatened. I plan on joining B.B.Y.O. in order to defend the Jewish culture and people through becoming part of the community. By taking part in these programs, I am able to spread more accurate information about the Jewish people.

Elie Siegel, Marblehead

If someone asked me to describe my experience in Israel in one word, I would say enlightening. I didn't even realize my stronger sense of Judaism until the end of the trip when I

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took a moment to think about myself and my personal connection to the religion. However, **as soon as I got back home from the whirlwind of a trip I had just been on, I knew for a fact that I definitely wanted to start going to temple more often and overall, simply having Judaism be a bigger part of my life.** I had never considered it very important prior to the trip, but now I feel a stronger connection to the religion and entire culture as a whole. I feel that it's extremely important to try and immerse myself in the culture at home more. Aside from the cultural aspects of the trip, physically being there and learning about centuries of history helped strengthen my Jewish identity. Seeing the Western Wall with my own eyes, the Dead Sea scrolls, Yad Vashem, the Dead Sea, Jaffa Port, all of it, was so special. It was definitely more meaningful being there in person versus learning about it at home. I will never forget this trip and the amazing friends I made and diverse places I went. I feel extremely fortunate and lucky to have had the opportunity to be a part of Y2I. **Ella Slavin-Reker, Swampscott**

Israel means so many different things to me. When I am in Israel, I feel protected, connected, safe and part of the community because I know we share many aspects including a shared land and history. Also, Israel has the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) who are always there to protect us. Israel is a place where I feel at home with a shared culture and language. Israel means a welcoming place that accepts any Jew of any race or ethnicity no matter if you are Black, Asian, European or American. From what I learned in the Torah and from my trip, Israel is a place of kind, loving and ambitious people who only use violence in self-defense. In conclusion, Israel is a very special place to me and I am very grateful for the Y2I trip and the people that I got to meet. **Noah Smith, Marblehead**

This place that I now call home is full of the most vibrant and welcoming people I know. I will truly never forget all of the times an Israeli was interested in where we were from, and how we were enjoying our trip. Their warm and caring energy made it easy to have conversations with strangers building a connection with this land. Although we live across the world and live different lives than Israelis, I found it extremely easy to connect with them. Israeli teens may live far away but we listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and all go to high school. **Through this lifelong connection to Israel and my Israeli friends, I feel a duty to protect Israel against misinformation and ignorance. As my friends go into the army to protect Israel for Jews around the world, we owe it to them to inform others in the US.** I have made so many close friendships, and I have grown the friendships with the people in my town. But most importantly I have learned that a home is not just where you live, but where you hold memories, friendships, love, and a connection. **Ella Sprague, Swampscott**

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The last night in Israel, we were asked what from the trip would we take home with us. It wasn't until I got home, and I was telling the stories to my parents that I truly understood what this question was asking me. Y2I gave me, one Jewish kid from a very non-diverse town, an understanding of what it's like to be around so many people who are so different but all share the same background. **Y2I gave me the real meaning of being Jewish.** This trip opened my eyes and made me realize that being Jewish is not in fact just a religion, but Jews are people and to be a good Jew is very different and separate from being religious. Y2I has impacted my life because it gave me a sense of belonging in the Jewish community worldwide, as well as giving me confidence that I have a right to stand up when someone says something bad about my religion and my people.

Jenna Tabenkin, Georgetown

*The highlight of my trip was visiting the Western Wall during Shabbat. It may have been the only time in my life that I truly felt 100% Jewish. I am not very strict in terms of religion, and after visiting Jerusalem, I am sad that I have not been more interested in the Jewish aspect of my life. I think that being able to meet new kids that are all Jewish and from different towns, is a great experience, as lifelong friendships are created through this bond in the two weeks spent together. **The trip impacted my life because it finally opened my eyes about what it is like to be Jewish and to eat Jewish food, and to sing/dance to Jewish music.** It was surely a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and as for my Jewish identity: I am proud to be Jewish. **Joe Tarlin, Natick***

It took me two weeks with the Y2I crew to truly understand why they referred to Israel as “home”. In these two weeks, I learned Israel is home because it's where Jewish heritage is present and thriving. Israel is home because I will always feel safe surrounded by the IDF officers in the streets. Israel is home because I can go to the Western Wall and pray and feel close to God. Israel is home because I feel free to be me without judgment. **Israel is home, because there, I'm able to be a Jew with overwhelming pride.** Overall, I made so many amazing memories on Y2I. I am so grateful to have been a part of this trip and had the opportunity to make amazing new friendships and reinforce my love for Judaism and Israel. I look forward to the next time I can visit my home - Israel. **Katie Tassinari, Marblehead**

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I started off the trip with Y2I not knowing a soul. By the time I boarded the actual plane, I had never felt more secure. These people, who hardly knew me, welcomed me into their friend groups, graciously extending hospitality. I'd like to blame this upon the fact that everyone was just amazingly friendly, but I feel that what really caused this instant connection was Judaism. I would often find myself looking around at all of our faces during group events. These kids, these random people who I felt couldn't be more different than I, were all alike me in some ways. Because of our Jewish roots, our upbringing, our morals and our stories, they all intertwined. We could bond over holiday horror stories, or camp songs we all knew, things my friends from home just couldn't relate to. It felt empowering to be surrounded by people who could actually understand a part of my identity I had often felt forced to hide. I left the small bubble of my New England boarding school with so many anxiety provoking thoughts, not only about the trip, but about my own identity as a Jewish woman in the modern American world. I have returned with all of those nerves pushed aside. I have found pride in my Jewish roots- this part of me that holds so much history and weight, it almost feels wrong to try and push it aside. Not only that, but I have found a community that will forever accept me for who I am, and love me unconditionally. Y2I has given me not only a new family, but a constant reminder that that new family is there to stay. **No matter where we all go, no matter what we all do, our roots of Judaism are forever intertwined.** Bryn Taylor, Topsfield

*When I heard about Y2I was thrilled. Not only was I being offered a trip to Israel, but I was also given an opportunity to meet new people from my community. Prior to the trip I always saw myself as a proud Jew, so I didn't see how any major change or impact could occur. I was wrong. **Y2I broadened my idea of Judaism and strengthened my feelings towards the culture.** From the first few moments we were in Israel, I already felt at home. I felt comfortable and welcomed. I felt so connected to these people and this land and even more so at the Western Wall. The feeling is indescribable; it's honestly an out of body experience. On top of all of this, we had amazing lectures by the Stand With Us organization which helped me learn more about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gave information on how to properly defend Israel during discussions. I am so glad I went on this trip and I hope that in the future, more Jewish teens are able to get this eye opening experience of a lifetime.*

Mary Viner, Swampscott

As I got older and my hobby for reading politics grew, I read more about Israel and the Israel-Palestinian crisis going on. At the time I just thought of it as politics, I had no connection to this land, that was until I went on Y2I. **This trip fostered and built a connection to a place I didn't think right now I'd be telling everyone I want to go back as soon as possible.** I didn't think I would be crying for strangers I spent four days because they are going to the army. I didn't think I even had a second home. This trip truly enlightened me. It made feel a connection to place in a matter of days. Awed by the history and architecture who wouldn't let Israel grow on them quickly. The other reason why this trip made Israel feel like a second home was the mifgash. The mifgash helped us grasp the reality of Israelis, and also gave us new friends and a constant outlet to think and talk about Israel with them. I can say this trip was worthwhile and every Jewish teen needs to go whether they come out advocating for Israel or thinking it is their second home. The memories and fun will last forever. Gregory Vinitsker, Swampscott

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I lived in Israel for eleven years before moving back to the US, but even in all that time, I was never able to truly appreciate all the wonders of the country. Going on the Y2I trip inspired me to think about moving back to Israel in the future. Although I grew up as an Orthodox Jew, I never understood just how connected the Jewish community is. Everyone on the trip embraced the Jewish religion in their own way and it wasn't hard to find a place amongst my new friends. Visiting Israel after four years was more than anything I could have dreamed of. Even though I lived in Israel, the beauty of it all never fails to amaze me. The Israeli-Arab conflict is also not an easy thing to experience or understand, but going on the Y2I trip opened my eyes to just how complex the issue is. **Advocating for Israel is important, and as Jews, we have an obligation to defend our homeland. The trip was more than anything I could have dreamed of.**
Shani Weisman, Beverly

Overall the Israel trip was an amazing experience that I will never forget. Words can't describe what I felt when I touched the Wall. I made many new friends on the trip from both America and Israel. The trip was amazing. **Ben Wiener, Wilton, CT**

I am glad to say my expectations were not just met, but they were exceeded beyond anything I could have imagined. One of the things that I think will stay with me forever is just how open and kind everyone was. Y2I truly changed how I think. I went into this trip thinking Israel would change my feeling towards being religious. I thought I was going to see Conservative or Orthodox Jews everywhere, and I was going to be inspired to come home and be a "better" Jew. I was very wrong. I ended up seeing and meeting many people just like me. I realized that there are a lot Jews who are proud of their Jewish culture, but don't pray or go to temple every day. After seeing all different kinds of people every day, I know there is no such thing as being a "better" Jew. **You can be Jewish any way you want to be, as long as you are proud to call yourself Jewish.** Before going on this trip, my Jewish heritage started with my great, great, grandparents, coming to America from Europe. Of course I knew the Jewish religion started in Israel, but to me, my family was Russian and Austrian Jews. However, once I went to the Western Wall on Shabbat, and walked the streets of Jerusalem, those feelings changed. I know now that Israel is a home for every Jew. If I could say one thing to Israel, I would say Thank You. **Thank you for being a constant beacon of hope, Thank You for always offering a protective arm if we ever need it, and most of all, Thank You for being a place where many different kinds of people and cultures can feel comfortable and thrive.**
Sarah Winters, Swampscott

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Y2I was able to let me challenge myself in a way I had never challenged myself before, allowing me to confront things head-on that once terrified me. Before going on the trip, I was somewhat of an introvert, I didn't like meeting new people and I'd much rather stick with those that I knew than to talk to strangers. However, I saw the trip as a perfect opportunity to crawl out of my shell, and become as extroverted as I could for two weeks. I challenged myself to start conversations, make new friends, and to stop using my phone as a way to avoid unwanted interactions. And looking back on the trip, I can proudly say that I dominated the challenge that I presented myself with. I met so many awesome Jewish teens who I would have never met if it weren't for this trip. Not only did I make friends with the teens from Massachusetts, but also with the Israeli teens from the trip. And instead of using my phone as a shield against social interaction, I used it as a tool instead, asking whoever I could for their numbers, instagrams, or snapchats. In all, **Y2I was so impactful on my life because it gave me the ability to escape from my introverted cage, and gave me the chance to meet so many incredible, inspiring, and delightful people, who if not for the trip, I would never have met.**

Eli Younger Beverly

*After returning from the trip, I have realized the impact Y2I had on my life. The adventure caused me to finally realize the importance of religion in my life. Before the trip, I never realized what Judaism really meant to me. I had finished Hebrew school, been Bar Mitzvahed, and been confirmed, but it all occurred from the encouragement of my family. Never once did I go to a confirmation class because I wanted to go. Now, I understand why it was important to do this. I now know that I need to be a soldier in the battle against persecution of my religion. I now understand that it was important for me to be raised Jewish because now it is my turn to continue the traditions of our people. **Y2I was an important experience in my life. It enhanced my Jewish identity, allowed me to gain more knowledge about my home country and my people, and it opened my eyes to the importance of being Jewish.***

Jack Zalvan, Lynnfield

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Dear Israel,

You and I have a lot of history together. About three thousand years give or take. My ancestors used to toil your land and worship in your holy temples, sacrificing their lambs and cattle in search of God. You and I go so far back that most have forgotten our history. How you nurtured the Jewish people and let them labor over your arid land and build a prosperous kingdom long forgotten.

It took me awhile to come to terms with our history, Israel. To me, you were just a country. A place with rules, and laws, and citizens. A place like any other. But I've learned that you are so much more. It's when I walked down the cobbled streets of Jaffa, looking over the never-ending ocean and passing by Russian restaurants and Israeli food stands that I realized what you are. It's when I stopped at the Western Wall, and touched the stones so many have felt, and prayed in the place countless have worshipped, and walked in the footsteps of prophets while being surrounded by the Jewish people, some orthodox, some secular, Ethiopian and Ashkenazi, a complete melangerie of colors and textures. It's then that I realized what Israel is. It's when I looked over Mount Masada, and saw the sunrise light up the desolate landscape, highlighting the majestic curves and bends of the sands that reached towards the clear-blue waters of the Dead Sea. Or maybe it was when I sat down to eat, passing the hummus to my friends on the left and the pita to the fellow on my right that I learned what Israel is. But I think that it is when I walked on the streets of Jerusalem on Shabbat night, and heard as the sounds of prayers reached up into the skies. **The city was hushed as the Jewish people celebrated together, singing and dancing into the dead of night.**

This is when I realized that Israel is my home. A home where any Jew can come and live.

To be frank, Israel, I've never been religious. Never learned Hebrew. Never really worshipped or prayed. But Israel, you were able to touch upon something inside me that was dormant. You enveloped me in Jewish culture, surrounding me in a blanket of security.

There is no hiding that you, Israel, are a complicated place. A place with wars and conflicts. A place divided between secular and observant Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Druze, and Christians. While these problems are viewed by many as the most pertinent aspects of Israel, they only cover the surface level of a much more beautiful and diverse country.

I can't wait to see you again, Israel. I know it won't be too long. I can already hear my fellow Jews, singing and dancing, sababa-ing in the land of milk and honey.

Next year in Jerusalem,

**Maya Zeldin,
Newton**

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To me, Israel is a nation to which I can flee to if the need arises, it is a nation to which I can go to in order to feel welcome, and it is a nation that I can go to in the pursuit of ideas. To me, Israel has so many more meanings than just one, some being quite drastic while others having more practical backgrounds. My first realization of what Israel means to me struck me during our first Shabbat, when the entire group gathered in the hotel and sang songs together. I had never been in a room filled only with Jews in a country in which daily antisemitism is scarce. It's not that I don't feel like I belong in the U.S., but being in that room, at that time, in the nation of Israel, gave me a feeling of belonging that is unrivaled by any other. This feeling continued throughout the night, especially at the Western Wall. And when the streets of Jerusalem stood still on Friday night, I finally understood what it meant to have a Jewish state.

Mark Zolott, Swampscott