

## **Israeli Traveler Ministry: An intentional missions response to contemporary Israeli culture**

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### **Israeli Trekking: A well-documented cultural phenomenon**

“Exile is the Jewish condition, so perhaps it is no surprise that travel away from Israel has become central to the Israeli identity,” wrote Patrick Symmes, in his article titled “The Book” that appeared in the August 2005 edition of *Outside Magazine*<sup>1</sup>. The title of the article, “The Book”, is a reference to the handwritten, and constantly updated, travel guides that many guest houses in South America keep on their bookshelves. “The Book is ... widespread, a grassroots Talmud of travel, a commentary without beginning or end.” (The Book, 2005) It’s fame has been spread by New York Times bestseller “Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle” in which authors Dan Senor and Paul Singer link the connection between Post-Army Israeli travel and the rise of International Israeli Entrepreneurship.<sup>2</sup>

In December, 2013 *Forbes Asia* staff writer David Yin wrote an extensive article titled “Out of Israel, Into the World” that documents the apparently ubiquitous cultural trend that this paper will refer to as “Israeli Trekking” or alternatively “Israeli Backpacking.”<sup>3</sup> Yin’s emphasis is economic as he calculates that Israeli Trekkers “represent a \$150 million annual opportunity for the global tourism industry...” (Out of Israel, Into the World, 2013), but the emphasis of this paper is missiological as Israeli Trekkers represent 30,000 – 40,000 individuals annually according to research done by the Israeli Student Travel Association.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is unique to the Israeli Jewish community and has become a cultural rite of passage in the lives of those who participate. Each year 30,000 – 40,000 Israeli young adults leave Israel for an estimated average time period of 6 months, and travel to specific regions around the world for a trip that serves as a rite of passage before entering the Israeli universities or workforce. As I hope to demonstrate through this paper, many of these Israeli Trekkers are in the formative transition from adolescence into adulthood, and are seeking experiences to establish personal identity through their travels, thus making them uniquely open to considering the Messianic claims of Jesus during this time. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate avenues of evangelistic opportunity that exist exclusively with Israelis while they are outside the land of Israel amidst the established patterns of Israeli trekking.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Book,” *Outside Magazine*, August 2005; available from <http://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/south-america/argentina/The-Book.html>

<sup>2</sup> Dan Senor and Saul Singer. *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009), 57-66.

<sup>3</sup> “Out Of Israel, Into The World,” *Forbes Asia*, December 19, 2013; available from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidyin/2013/12/19/out-of-israel-into-the-world/>

<sup>4</sup> This research is mentioned in the *Forbes Asia* article, but I couldn’t find it published through ISSTA

## A Brief History

Chaim Noy and Eric Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who have studied the trends relating to Israeli backpackers, contend that Israeli trekking probably began sometime in the mid-seventies because of four factors<sup>5</sup>:

1. The institutionalization of a “shnat hofesh” (year off) by Kibbutzim that allowed the younger generation to travel abroad or work in Israel before becoming Kibbutz members.
2. The social changes that Israel underwent after the Yom Kippur War in 1973 that created an “acute internal crisis, which seems to have provoked new spiritual longings and thereby encouraged young Israelis to travel abroad” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 8).
3. The Western ideas of the sixties that promoted an exotic view of “Eastern Spirituality”.
4. The economic growth that enabled Israeli parents to support the travels of their adult children.

During the 1970’s, Israeli Trekking was individual and Israeli trekkers were “drifter tourists”<sup>6</sup>. They “represented a nonconformist, individualist, and alienated reaction ... against the hegemonic social control ... by the traditional establishment [of Israel]” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 9). Most of the trekkers came from the socioeconomic center of Israeli Jewish society. These pioneers of Israeli trekking established the itineraries and destinations that became popular with the Israeli trekkers who came later, and also served as role models: Noy and Cohen note “even the ... shoestring budget of the early drifters [has been] imitated, though contemporary [trekkers], who come mostly from the middle and upper-middle class, do not necessarily suffer from lack of funds.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 10).

Israeli trekking escalated into the 1980’s, especially after the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula which had served as a popular destination for backpacking and as a place of “escape for many [Israeli] youths during the years of the occupation (1967 – 1982)” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 10). Once Sinai was returned to Egypt, young Israelis began to increasingly choose distant destinations for travel, especially Asia and South America: following the itineraries set by the earlier pioneers.

*“For Israelis, travel is therapy. “There is a sense of a mental prison living here, surrounded by enemies,” explains Yair Qedar, editor of the Tel Aviv–based travel magazine Masa Acher. Every moment is pregnant with menace. A trip to the pizzeria can end in the flash of a bomb. And there is the claustrophobia of tight-knit families in a miniature country hemmed in by ancient social traditions. “Suffocation is a constant feeling,” Qedar says. “When the sky opens, you get out.”” (Outside Magazine, 2005)*

And that’s precisely what happened in the early 1990s after the Oslo Accord was signed. Airfares dropped as Israel’s economy boomed, and Post-Army Trekking was all but institutionalized.

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<sup>5</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Cohen, in his 1973 essay “Nomads of Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of Drifter-Tourism”, suggests that “drifter tourists” feel alienation from ordinary society, and instead associate with a counter-culture.

## Trekking and Army Service

It has been suggested, most notably by the film “Flipping Out”, that Israeli Trekking is a response and reaction to Israel’s compulsory military service: a necessary time for Israelis suffering from some type of “Post Traumatic Stress” to relax and unwind before transitioning into college or career.<sup>7</sup> This isn’t the only view, as some sociologists view Israeli Trekking as expressing continuity with military service rather than reaction to it. One author writes,

*“... there is an interesting point to these journeys, which can be seen as a sort of rite of separation from the compulsory part of military service. These travels very frequently include treks that are carried out in a “military” mode including precise planning, walking in small cohesive groups, and repeated tests of people’s abilities to withstand hardship and take risks.” (Ben-Ari 198, 116)*

Perhaps both viewpoints hold some truth as, “70% of Israeli trekkers [each season] are between ages 20 and 24, which means they represent one third of the 75,000 Israelis who have completed their mandatory military service and are discharged from the Israel Defense Force each year” (Forbes, 2013).

Noy and Cohen hypothesize that trekking

*“has a different significance for those [trekkers] who served in combat units and those who did not. For the former, the trip constitutes a relaxing inversion, which enables them at the same time to practice some of the skills that they acquired in the army. For the latter, the trip appears to provide a compensative opportunity to “rough it” and to prove themselves, an opportunity which they [didn’t] have [during] their military service.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 24)*

No matter what type of military service the Post-Army trekkers have gone through (whether combat or non-combat), the collective character of Israeli Trekkers is expressed in the camaraderie of Israelis with other Israelis they’ve met on the road. Often to the chagrin of non-Israeli travelers, Israeli trekkers tend to stick together in loud, semi-exclusive groups, rather than connecting with non-Israeli travelers. One guest house owner in Kasol, India named Hukam reflects, "There was a time when we had tourists from Italy, England, Japan, Germany and sometimes America. Ever since the Israelis have come, many of the others avoid coming here" (Outlook India, 2005).

The use of spoken and written Hebrew among Israeli trekkers, celebration of Jewish Holidays, use of Israeli cultural idioms, eating of Israeli foods, and fixation on Israeli culture “stand as boundaries that exclude travelers of other nationalities from becoming part of the group. Thus, most Israeli [trekkers] have limited relations with non-Israeli travelers” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 103).

Although it should be noted that “Some Israelis, however, do prefer to stay away from their familiar surroundings and the people they know. They would rather discover new cultures and seek the company of other Western travelers ... this is especially true of the spiritual type of traveler.

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<sup>7</sup> Yoav Shamir and others, *Flipping Out*, (Berlin International Film Festival, 2008).

Furthermore, the responsibilities they had during the army service and the hard decisions some of them had to take can also play a part in the way they want their trip to be” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 103).

### **Israeli Enclaves**

In a somewhat ironic twist, “Israeli [trekkers] travel away from their socio-cultural center (Israel), but at the same time gravitate toward [national]-ethnic enclaves.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 14) There is a paradoxical distinction between the “purported purpose of the [Post-Army Trek] and the actual conduct of the Israeli [trekkers].” As Noy and Cohen note:

*“Many [Israelis] wish initially to get far away from Israel and Israelis to remote and nontouristic areas. In fact, however, they follow similar itineraries, find themselves, or seek, the company of other Israelis, and spend a good deal of their time in Israeli enclaves in popular destinations of youth tourists, engaging much of the time in conversations on issues of common interest in their home society” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 4)*

This trend has escalated in recent years as cell phones, Skype, and Social Media have allowed Israeli travelers to stay perpetually connected with each other and with their families back home, in all but the remotest of locations.<sup>8</sup>

Coming across Israeli trekker enclaves can be rather alarming to non-Israeli travelers. One blogger wrote:

*“So far my experiences with Israelis have been pretty negative especially Manali and Leh where I've seen instance after instance of Israelis being completely condescending to the locals, dressing in very inappropriate clothes; for the Israeli girls that clutter Manali for example the dress code is bra-less tank tops, and having party after party filled with drugs and loud music... In Leh, for example I was in a restaurant with the table next to me getting very loudly stoned over lunch. Simply rude. Of course, the most offensive to me is the condescending rudeness that I have seen Israeli after Israeli talk to the locals, arguing about prices and service in a tone that in the US would, without question, have one decked before the second sentence.”*  
(onwalkabout.com)

Israeli enclaves can be found in Israeli trekker destinations across the world. They usually consist of a particular area within a city or town with a specific set of guest houses, restaurants, cafes, laundry services, taxi and travel companies, and internet cafes where the Israeli trekkers congregate.

### **Types of Trekkers and their Destinations of Choice**

According to a Ph.D. dissertation by Oded Mevorach, around twice as many Israeli trekkers travel to Asia than to South and Central America combined.<sup>9</sup> The choice of destination is motivated by personal interest.

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<sup>8</sup> Besides restaurants with Hebrew menus and Cafés serving Israeli style coffee, Israeli enclaves typically have Internet Cafés equipped with Hebrew Keyboards for Israelis who often spend time each day connecting with friends and family back home through Facebook.

*“The traditional imagery of Asia has been that of spirituality, ever since the early days of the mid-seventies when Israeli drifters began traveling there. Research indicates that this ethos still attracts [trekkers] to Asia, mainly to India (as can be assumed from their frequent participation in a variety of “spiritual” activities there). In contrast, South and Central American destinations have never shared such an image. Sojourns in ashrams, consumption of psychedelic drugs, ... “full-moon” parties at Goa beaches in India and Koh Phangan in Thailand, and trance and techno music, all are popular, and even principal activities, among various subgroups of travelers in Asia. [These activities] have no correlate in South or Central America. ... In general, it seems that travelers to South America are more interested in trekking and other intensive “nature activities,” than they are in “sitting in one place and not doing a thing,” as [is the] stereotypical [understanding of trekkers] traveling in Asia.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 26)*

The three principal destinations that form the itineraries of Israeli trekkers in Asia are India, Nepal and Thailand. Together, these destinations offer unique contributions to the trek:

1. In India the areas that are frequented specifically by Israeli trekkers are located mainly in the North. Israeli trekkers tend to visit the mountains of Kashmir and Ladak, the valleys of Shimla and Manali and the Tibetan areas of Dharamsala in the Northern state of Himachal Pradesh, and the beaches with their full-moon parties in Goa.<sup>10</sup>
2. In Nepal, the two main cities for Israeli trekkers are Kathmandu and Pokhara. Israelis often lodge in one of these cities before or after a trek. Travel in Nepal tends to consist of longer and more strenuous treks, such as the Annapurna Circuit, the Everest Base Camp trek, and treks around the Ushe Langtang-Gosaikunda region. Kathmandu is the location of the famous and popular Chabad Passover Seder that was featured in the documentary “Seder Trek”<sup>11</sup>
3. In Thailand the common destinations are the southern Islands: Koh Samui, Koh Phangan, and Koh Phi Phi. On the islands, relaxation and liberal drug use constitute an unwinding experience following visits to Nepal and India.<sup>12</sup>

“The itineraries of Israeli [trekkers] in South America generally begin in the North and proceeds southward, or vice versa.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 21) These itineraries are referred to as the “wave”. If the trip begins in the North (the “northern wave”), the first countries to be visited [typically] are in the Andes, specifically Columbia, Ecuador, and Peru. These countries are known for their famous treks such as the Machu Picchu Inka Trail, the Azangate trail, and the Huaraz trail in Peru. In Cuzco there exists a major Israeli enclave that is probably the largest and most active in South America. In Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands are a “must” for Israeli backpackers. This itinerary proceeds southward to Brazil,

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<sup>9</sup> This dissertation titled “The Long Trip after the Military Service: Characteristics of the Travelers, the Effects of the Trip, and its Meaning” was submitted to the Department of Psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1997, but has only been published in Hebrew.

<sup>10</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Shachar Zephania and others, *Seder Trek: A Passover Odyssey*, (Sisu Home Entertainment, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 21.

Chile, and Argentina. Brazil is visited mainly for Carnival, Chile is popular for trekking, particularly on the Torres del Paine trail, and Argentina is popular for the Salar salt desert and for shopping.<sup>13</sup>

The “southern wave” shares the same sites as the northern wave, but begins at Carnival in Brazil and proceeds northward towards the Andes from there.

Besides Asia and Central and South America, Australia, and New Zealand are popular destinations although they attract a different type of trekker because of the price differential.

*“According to Issta Director of Marketing Noam Ron, 60 percent of Israeli backpackers fly to Asia (mostly South and Southeast Asia), 30 percent to South and Central America, and the rest to Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. On average, they travel for six months, while ten percent travel for more than a year. Ron estimates that a half-year backpacking trip costs \$9,000 in South America, \$6,000 in Southeast Asia, \$4,000 in South Asia, and \$12,000 in Australia or New Zealand.” (Forbes, 2013)*

Noy and Cohen identify two principal dimensions differentiating the subtypes of Israeli trekkers: the outward versus inward orientation of the trekker, and the extent to which trekkers seek the company of other Israelis or contrariwise, desire to keep away from them.<sup>14</sup>

The first dimension steers Israelis toward their trekking destination. “Outward oriented trekkers seek adventure on strenuous and dangerous trips, while inward trekkers seek the seclusion of enclaves, with hedonism and drug use, as the principal desired experience.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 253) Inward oriented trekkers prefer Asia, while outward oriented trekkers choose either Asia or South and Central America.

The second dimension guides Israeli behavior during their trek. The studies presented in Noy and Cohen’s book “Israeli Backpackers” show clearly that many Israeli backpackers depart from Israel with the intention to steer clear of other Israelis on their trip – but the vast majority end up closely associating with them, often in highly distinct Israeli enclaves. Israelis who trek immediately after completing the army service are young and inexperienced, often suffering from an imbalance in social and cultural capital: while frequently enterprising, hardy, and self-reliant, they are socially insecure and inept in dealing with foreign cultures. As such, Israeli enclaves have become destinations unto themselves for some Israelis who trek specifically to visit these enclaves. Many Israeli enclaves, both in Asia and in South and Central America have guest houses, restaurants, car rental companies, and other services specifically catering to Israelis, some of which are owned by Israelis.

### **Eastern Spirituality and the Religious Response**

The post army trek is a time of personal formation for all who participate, and spiritual exploration for many. “Israeli [trekkers] who travel to India in search of spirituality often express alienation from the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>14</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 254.

materialism of their parents, but reject Judaism as a path for their spiritual exploration.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 81) India is seen as a deeply spiritual place, and is perceived as being more spiritual than Israel. Both India and Nepal have developed an industry around the spiritual quests of Israelis and other travelers with many ashrams geared toward the trekker market. These ashrams cater to travelers, with some specializing specifically in servicing the Israeli trekkers. They offer courses in yoga, meditation, and alternative medicine, for durations lasting from a few days to a few weeks.<sup>15</sup> The majority of Israelis traveling through India attend at least one such course, many out of curiosity. Some Israelis have self-professed life changing experiences through these courses, while others experience the spirituality of India as simply another tourist attraction.

Back in Israel, the older generation - both secular and religious - has expressed alarm at the trekkers’ spiritual exploration of Eastern religions. In an attempt to prevent such spiritual exploration, Chabad has established Chabad houses in many Israeli Trekker enclaves around the world with the express purpose of gathering Israeli trekkers back into the fold. While, there has been much optimism in the Israeli religious community about Chabad’s success in reaching out to Israeli trekkers, the reflections of most Israeli trekkers on Chabad’s attempts at steering them toward Judaism show that these efforts have had a negatively polarizing effect.<sup>16</sup>

Ayana Shira Haviv, who documented her travels through her own narrative and the narratives of other Israelis, in her essays included in “Israeli Backpackers”, concludes that Chabad services in India and Nepal serve as opportunities for the construction of a feeling of Israeli community defined against Chabad’s religious establishment.<sup>17</sup>

Many Israeli trekkers attend Chabad services because of the free meals and Israeli camaraderie, in spite of the resentment they feel toward Chabad, and the indifference they express toward the teachings of Judaism. From my experience, most Israeli trekkers who attend Chabad services during treks in Asia and South and Central America have never attended Chabad services in Israel, nor do they express interest in attending Chabad services once they return to Israel. Attending Chabad events has become part of the Trekker experience, but it doesn’t represent serious interest in the teachings of Orthodox Judaism.

### **The Contrast of Trekking and Life Back in Israel**

*“Closely related to the perception of [trekking] as a time of freedom is its perception as an act of rebellion against a [trekker’s] parents and the authority figures of their generation. Israeli [trekkers’] signs of rebellion include defying their parents’ fears and embarking on the trek in the first place, putting off schooling, and engaging in “hedonistic” behavior such as drug use.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 60)*

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<sup>15</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 50-51.

<sup>17</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 69.

Trekking is a time when many Israelis engage in activities that would be considered inappropriate back in Israel: drug use, casual sex, and spiritual exploration outside Judaism to name a few.

From 2008 through 2012, I spent at least a month each year travelling with the spiritual type of Israeli trekkers in Northern India, leading Jews for Jesus' Massah programs alongside Daniel Goldstein and Aaron Abramson, for a total of 6 trips and 5 cumulative months of ministry. Our ministry involved travelling between Israeli enclaves, meeting Israelis in coffee shops, guest houses, restaurants, and waypoints, and sharing the Gospel with them. We carried Hebrew New Testaments with us, giving them to Israelis we encountered, and leaving them on any bookshelf that included other books in Hebrew.

During my first time in India, I was completely surprised by the Israeli response to my basic explanation of the Gospel: extreme interest! More often than naught, all we had to do to get the opportunity to share the Gospel with Israeli Trekkers, was to say that we were Messianic Jews from America. The response was most often along the lines of, "Wow, that's really interesting, I knew someone from school whose family was like you, but no one ever explained to me what it is and what you believe, can you explain it to me?" We then would sit for as short as 20 minutes or as long as 4 hours and go through a full explanation of the Gospel, how it impacts our worldview, giving answers to whatever objections were presented, and going through scripture. Since these conversations occurred in public settings, other Israelis would often join in. What would begin as a simple statement of identity – that I am a Messianic Jew from America – would turn into a full and often nonstop day of evangelism and public Bible Study.

This experience was both remarkable and perplexing for me. Just two months before I went to India with Massah for the first time, my wife and I had participated in Jews for Jesus' first Behold Your God Israel street evangelism campaign in Tel Aviv. During the outreach in Tel Aviv I had attempted to share the Gospel with Army and Post-Army aged Israelis, but for the most part, I was either ignored or verbally attacked. I had anticipated a similar response from Israelis in India, but the response I received was predominantly positive.

I began asking each Israeli trekker I met about this incredible dichotomy of response. I had two questions I began asking nearly every Israeli trekker I met in India, the first was, "If we were back in Israel, and we met for the first time on the street in Tel Aviv, and I approached you and asked if you would like to hear about Yeshua, would you stop and talk to me?" The second question was for follow up, "What is different about India that you are open to talking about Yeshua with me now?"

The answer to the first question was always no. While the answer to the second question usually was something like, "In Israel I feel a lot of pressure, and I wouldn't want to be seen talking to you by my friends or family, but in India I feel free: I'm taking classes on meditation and cooking, and what you're talking about is interesting to me because I've never learned anything about it."

Israeli trekking promotes a mindset of openness during the trek that may not be present in Israel. Perhaps this is because of perceived freedom during the trek, or because of geographic distance between trekkers and Israel. In Israel, young Israelis feel significant pressure toward social conformity.

Whatever the reason for this mindset, its effect creates a unique window of time when Israelis are particularly open to considering non-conformist points of view.

### **Lifecycle of Israeli Trekking**

Israeli trekking begins long before they set foot on another continent.

*“The itinerary of the [trekker] begins in Israel at stores that offer trekking and traveling gear. Such stores are designed with large open spaces to allow social interaction between prospective and veteran [trekkers]. These spaces are vibrant with [trekking] lore as [trekkers] tell and retell their experiences and adventures. In addition to the regular guidebooks commonly used by trekkers ... such as Lonely Planet... these stores maintain a kind of “backpacking library,” which includes personal accounts of [other trekkers’] trips. These handwritten accounts, cataloged according to country, contain information and lore that the veteran [trekkers] share with newcomers. There are also bulletin boards for messages, which serve mainly to assist [trekkers] in finding partners for a trip – although bulletin board use is being replaced by trekking website forums such as lametayel.co.il. ... Furthermore, the stores organize various activities such as lectures that are devoted to specific countries and geographical areas... The lectures are given by veteran trekkers and include extended question and answer periods, in which the audience is invited to ask questions regarding sites, attractions, itineraries, and amenities.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 18)*

For some Israelis, planning for the trek begins before they are discharged from the army. It is something that Israelis look forward to from a young age, especially those with older siblings who already made their trek.<sup>18</sup>

Once Israeli Trekkers arrive at their first destination, they often find themselves in uniquely Israeli enclaves, as Noy and Cohen point out that “most Israelis use the same sources of information on their trip: guidebooks, traveler logs, and information posted in trekking gear stores in Israel” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 15). Israelis don’t necessarily reside in enclaves on a permanent basis during their treks, but all Israelis pass through them at some point. There is a tension between Israeli perception of enclaves: on the one hand it is often complained that “there are too many Israelis”, but on the other hand they are seen as trustworthy and a reliable source of information.<sup>19</sup>

*“The question that preoccupies many [trekkers] throughout their trip concerns the desirable distance from the Israeli enclave, that is, from fellow Israeli [trekkers] and sites of Israeli culture and ambience. Finding one’s optimum distance and relationship with the enclave is a significant factor influencing one’s sense of satisfaction from the trip. In fact, although the trip predominantly serves as a rite of passage, its salient initiatory role involves the search ... for*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 16.

*one's optimal interpersonal distance in relation to the Israeli collective, and the search for one's identity in relation to one's own cultural center.” (Noy and Cohen 2005, 17)*

To this end, Israeli trekkers at the extremes, choose to immerse themselves completely in the Israeli trekker community and disengage from non-Israeli travelers and the local culture, or completely reject the Israeli trekker community and travel with non-Israeli companions exclusively. Although, from my experience, most Israeli trekkers choose something in between, with behavior changing at different points of their trip depending on a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as: whether they are at the beginning, middle, or nearing the end of their trip, their personal level of homesickness, the levels of political conflict in Israel, and the sense of security in the region they are trekking in.

While most Israelis don't trek alone, the makeup of Israeli cohorts is frequently changing (At least this is the case in India), as these cohorts seem to be held together by similar itineraries of individuals in the cohort, rather than by an itinerary that is set by the cohort as a group. Friends who come to India together often part ways at some point in the trip when their individual itineraries conflict: this is true also for dating couples who break up on the road in order to fulfil their personal goals for the trip. This isn't to say that the relationships developed on treks are shallow; in fact, the relationships built through the shared experiences of trekking are quite deep, but the driving force in determining the itineraries of trekkers is individual rather than collective.

I've found that many Israelis (at least in India) in the midst of their treks exhibit strong feelings of loneliness if they aren't able to find other likeminded travelers. This is especially true for older trekkers who deferred their trek until after completing university, and for other outliers who have a difficult time fitting in with the group.

Israelis return to Israel from their trek for a variety of reasons: their planned itinerary has come to an end, their feelings of homesickness or loneliness are too overwhelming or they are disappointed that the experience wasn't all it was supposed to be and they cut their trip short, or they extend their trip until they run out of money or their visa expires. There is little material in English describing the reverse culture shock that Israeli trekkers experience upon returning to Israel, but there are locations in Israel that Noy and Cohen describe as “trampoline sites,” that serve as places where veteran trekkers can meet up with each other. These sites include certain cafes and discotheques that maintain an atmosphere reminiscent of the countries visited by the trekkers.<sup>20</sup> These “trampoline sites” also serve as hang-outs for serial trekkers who make repeated trips.

### **From Analysis to Strategy: Modes of Engagement with Israeli Trekkers**

Israeli trekking is a well-established cultural institution that cannot and should not be ignored by anyone interested in making a spiritual impact on the land and the people of Israel. I contend that Israelis who have positive interactions with the Gospel and other Messianic Jews on their treks, bring those experiences back to Israel and contribute to the collective sentiment held by Israelis about the Messianic

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<sup>20</sup> Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, ed. , *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 19.

claims of Yeshua. In order to address the spiritual need of Israeli trekkers and to maximize the undeniable evangelistic opportunity that is before us, I propose a fivefold approach based on the lifecycle of Israeli trekking, and the culture of the Israeli trekker communities around the world. This approach reflects many structures that are already in place with various Jewish Missions agencies and in some locales where individual Christians, pastors, or foreign missionaries have responded to a recognized opportunity at reaching the Israeli trekkers. The fivefold approach is as follows:

1. The development of Information centers for Israelis planning their trek itineraries from Israel
2. The establishment of co-trekking programs for Israeli and non-Israeli believers who can share the Gospel with Israelis while trekking with them
3. The creation of services for Israelis in recognized trekker enclaves including the establishment of restaurants, cafes, guest houses, and other businesses
4. The equipping and encouragement of Native Christians to think “missionally” about the Israelis who are traveling in their regions
5. The development of follow up centers – “trampoline sites” – where Israelis who heard the Gospel while trekking can continue the discussion back in Israel.

### **Information Centers**

Developing information centers in Israel for trekkers is perhaps most important for engaging with second generation Israeli Jewish believers in order to provide accountability for them on their trips, and to encourage them and equip them to maintain a positive witness to their fellow trekkers. Since trekking is a salient experience in developing “Israeli-ness”, the trekking experience should not be discouraged for Messianic Israelis, but training should be made available in order to help them prepare to resist the temptation of drugs and hedonism, and to equip them to share their faith during their trek.

### **Co-Trekking Programs**

Co-trekking outreach programs have been demonstrated by the efforts of various Jewish Missions Agencies to be an effective means for engaging Israeli trekkers with the Gospel. In order to develop an effective Co-trekking outreach program it is necessary to choose the right destination at the correct time of year, and to select a team based on demographics that will enable success.

In 2009, Jews for Jesus sent an exploratory team to Laos when it turned out that most Israelis were actually in Thailand. Laos is a popular destination for Israelis, but we were off by a few weeks! On the other hand, in 2012, Jews for Jesus sent a missionary couple to Manali, India (a well-known Israeli enclave) for the months of June and July, and the couple was able to connect with hundreds of Israelis, even becoming a fixture of Manali for the summer!

India and Nepal (to a lesser extent) are places where Israeli trekkers specifically go looking for spirituality outside the bounds of traditional Judaism, and as such, teams made up of Non-Hebrew speakers can have deep spiritual conversations because some of the Israelis there can be classified as “Spiritual Seekers.” On the other hand, Thailand and South and Central America are not places that Israelis trek in order to do spiritual exploration, and as such, teams made up of Hebrew speakers will have greater ease

inserting themselves into these Israeli Traveler communities that are more cohesive and less open to outsiders and Non-Hebrew speakers for the most part.

### **Services for Israeli Trekkers**

As Israeli enclaves are identified, we are presented with opportunity to establish a foothold of influence in the trekker scene by creating various kinds of businesses and services that meet the needs of Israeli trekkers. Dylan's Café is one such example. Founded in partnership between an American Jewish believer and an Indian Christian, Dylan's sits at the heart of Manali, India and is a destination for Israeli Trekkers unto itself. The owner of Dylan's is open about his faith, and invites missions teams to come and use his space for evangelism, music, and open Mic nights.<sup>21</sup> Another example is a guesthouse in Mexico, providing hospitality to Israeli trekkers in a friendly environment that allows them to feel safe.<sup>22</sup> Reach Initiative's International Outreach Center is another example, providing Messianic worship services that Israelis can attend in a popular destination in Northern India.

By leveraging existing patterns of Israeli travel, these services take full advantage of the "institutionalized" travel routes, and can focus on engaging with Israelis instead of trying to create new destinations. Starting a service or business in these countries is time consuming but can be relatively inexpensive compared to cost standards of America or Israel.

One service that I've found requires almost zero financial investment is the establishment of volunteer opportunities for Israeli Trekkers to help at local orphanages. Many Israelis who are confronted with the harsh realities of the third world during their treks feel compelled to help in some way, but don't know where to begin. By creating relationships with local orphanages and providing them with volunteers, we've been able to create valuable partnerships between the local community, and the Israelis who are seeking to help out. Creating opportunities for Israelis to serve the local community naturally leads to spiritual conversations.

### **Native Christian Ministry**

In most of the locations that Israelis choose to trek there is a local community of Christians made up of indigenous peoples. These Christians have great opportunity as locals to interact with Israelis in ways that promote the Gospel, but these local Christians need training and encouragement. Providing Jewish evangelism seminars and workshops for local Christians can greatly assist the local church in reaching out to these Israeli trekkers. One Indian Christian hairdresser in Kasol uses the line, "You came to India to study meditation and to smoke Chillum, but I believe in the God of Israel!" She has deep spiritual conversations with many Israelis who are fascinated by her Christian beliefs, and her positive attitude toward Israeli travelers.

Another positive example of an indigenous population empowered to share the Gospel with Israeli travelers is the HIT and Chiburim networks in New Zealand of Christians who host Israeli trekkers in their homes. Although there are only around 2000 Israelis who trek in New Zealand each year, these

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.dylanscoffee.com/>

<sup>22</sup> Contact Aaron for website.

networks have had tremendous impact, and have been featured in news articles back in Israel!<sup>23</sup> The expansion of such trekker hosting networks could greatly benefit ministry to Israelis across Australia, Europe, and North America where Israelis often resort to couchsurfing in order to reduce the cost of their travels.

### **Follow Up Centers**

Although there isn't much research around the topic of Israeli Reverse Culture shock, I know from my personal relationships with Israelis I met in India and stayed in touch with, that many Israelis experience intense reverse culture shock upon return to Israel. As young Israelis attempt to construct a mental framework to understand the significance of their trek within the greater context of their lives, it is easy for them to see their trip: the experiences they had and the ideas they explored, in a way that disassociates it from their lives back in Israel. Creating effective follow up ministry for trekkers who have returned to Israel has been an incredible challenge for co-trekking outreach programs, as many Israelis who express openness while trekking have no framework for pursuing that openness once they are back in Israel.

By developing follow-up centers back in Israel, the Messianic community can enable young Israelis to continue the spiritual exploration they started during their trek. Eli Birnbaum, the director of Jews for Jesus' young adult ministry in Israel and the current leader of our Massah program, has attempted to address this challenge through the Moishe Rosen Center in Florentine, Tel Aviv. On February 21, 2014 Eli hosted an India art gallery at the Rosen Center in Tel Aviv in order to connect with Israelis that our Massah team has met in India over the last several years. 176 Israelis showed up, including 120 unbelievers and the event was positively reviewed by [hodu.co.il](http://hodu.co.il), a web portal for Israeli trekkers in India.<sup>24</sup>

### **Final Reflections**

Israeli traveler ministry represents tremendous evangelistic opportunity with the possibility of creating culture shift in Israel by engaging with Israelis when they are perhaps most open to considering the Gospel. Its a great honor for me to share this paper on this topic because Israeli Traveler Ministry – specifically the Massah program – was responsible for altering the course of my life, and launching me into full time ministry with Jews for Jesus. In August 2008, the Massah team that my wife and I were leading (as volunteers) had arrived back in Delhi on our way home to America. It was in the Delhi international airport that we were interviewed by the Jews for Jesus council – using up the remaining minutes on our Indian SIM cards - and were accepted onto missionary staff. Out of our team of 18 volunteers, 14 of us would continue in ministry in one form or another, drastically changing the trajectory of our lives because our hearts were captured by this ministry. I hope this paper has captured your heart, or at least your imagination, as my goal in delivering this paper to the LCJE, is that it will stimulate further collaboration and coordination in Israeli Traveler Ministry in order to maximize our effectiveness and impact as a movement.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.newswise.com/articles/go-for-the-good-deal-and-get-a-dose-of-spirituality>

<sup>24</sup> "New Exhibition: India in the Eyes of the Travelers," [hodu.co.il](http://hodu.co.il), February 20, 2014; available from [bit.ly/1fwLOs6](http://bit.ly/1fwLOs6)

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