Preface

There was a time when researchers would have to defend the decision to take tourism seriously. Most of their audience, after all, had probably played tourist at some point and knew firsthand that this was a temporary escape from the matters of consequence that weighed on them in their daily lives. Fellow researchers could hardly have been expected to see things differently. For them, tourism was primarily a diversion to be enjoyed between semesters. Some hours baking in the sun, the company of family or friends, a little sightseeing. Maybe they would learn a thing or two about the local culture, but only—dare I say it—as dilettantes. Real scholarship, the knowledge that counted, would be produced in the stacks, or in the lab, or in the field, or at the desk. That was work. Tourism was just R&R.

Intellectual currents shaped tourism’s reception, too. A modernist, prefeminist research agenda that enshrined labor and production could not help but marginalize the study of a consumption-based, symbol-driven, leisure activity. By the 1970s, however, tourism studies found more fertile soil in academia, as broader intellectual movements began staking claims for the centrality of symbolic consumption to self and society in market economies. At the same time that semioticians, postmodernists, and others were giving tourism a newfound respectability, those whose interest remained on the production side of the equation began to notice that tourism was becoming one of the major growth industries of the late 20th century. Now with international receipts representing more than one-fourth of global service exports and totaling over $850 billion annually, with an increasing number of developing countries staking their economic futures on the industry, with more and more cityscapes being transformed in the name of tourism development, and with today’s tourists constituting the largest international population flow in human history (903 million arrivals in 2007 alone), tourism has become a favored object of study across disciplines from the social sciences to cultural studies to business management and more.¹
In stark contrast to earlier conceptions of tourism as a peripheral curiosity, contemporary understandings locate it at ground zero of some of the most charged issues of cultural politics today. It is on the field of tourism that governments, multinational corporations, local businesses, citizens, and visitors vie for control of space and for the power to represent collective identities. It is on this field that the market penetrates local heritage and ancient tradition, transforming them into commodities for others to consume and altering locals’ relationships to their own cultures. It is on this field that forces of globalization bring diverse populations into a direct contact that can breed mutual interest and understanding, as well as exploitation, resentment, and conflict.

In this book, I take up the question of the politics of tourism at that turbulent point where modern nationalism and postmodern transnationalism meet, for tourism features centrally here, too. First mobilized in the service of nation-building projects around the world, tourism has more recently become implicated in strategies of transnation- or diaspora-building. Drawing on nationalist assertions of inherent connections between people, culture, and place, these strategies seek to unite members of globally dispersed populations by fostering a sense of shared belonging in a common political community that is simultaneously territorialized and deterritorialized, rooted and uprooted. Nation-states and diaspora organizations, each for their own reasons, have recognized tourism’s utility in furthering these transnational projects. Tourism is, after all, a medium through which people who do not live in a place can come to know it and, through a variety of practices, can actively position themselves in relation to it. The result of this recognition has been a proliferation of state- and NGO-supported international tours that represent countries as “homelands” to diaspora ethnics who are specifically brought to visit them. For governments, these homeland tours offer a means of developing ties to potential investors, political advocates, and migrants. For diaspora groups, they offer a means of strengthening collective identity and ethnic community around the world. Recognizing their mutual interest, the two sides have begun working in partnership to systematically develop tourism as a form of political socialization that fosters identification with a nation-state and a sense of belonging in a transnational ethnic community.

The case I examine here focuses on the efforts of the State of Israel and North American Jewish organizations to mobilize tourism as a means of cultivating diaspora Jewish engagement with the country. These efforts, which in recent years have come to include free tours of Israel for hundreds of thousands of diaspora Jewish young adults, represent the largest, most long-
standing and most elaborated deployment of tourism for diaspora-building purposes in the world today. As I note in chapter 1, however, they are hardly unique and are being joined by an increasing number of similar efforts by other countries, polities, and diaspora communities around the world.

At the heart of this book lie three core questions:

- What is the nature of this cultural practice, tourism, that enables it to be mobilized to effect political socialization?
- What are the limitations of the medium and the contradictions that emerge through the attempt to deploy it?
- What is the nature of the socialization that occurs when tourism is used as a strategy for introducing diaspora ethnics to a national homeland?

As these questions suggest, this is a study in the instrumentalization of culture, examining how governments and diaspora organizations are systematically deploying tourism’s distinctive set of place-engaging practices to shape political identities.

Something so ideologically pregnant tends to raise in many people’s minds a host of intertwined questions about the ethics and effectiveness of using tourism in this way. In treating these questions, I make no assumption that travelers are passive objects on whom tour operators work. On the contrary, even as I emphasize the agendas that program sponsors bring to these efforts and the ability of program operators to assert substantial control over key aspects of the touring environment, I also place the tourists themselves at the center of the analysis. Far from treating official ideologies as determinative, I probe the ethnographic data to draw out the dynamism of the social processes at work. This dynamism emerges from the human agency that tourists never relinquish, from the sometimes-divergent visions of Israeli and diaspora Jewish program sponsors, from the gaps between organizers’ intentions and staffs’ implementation, and from the very contradictions that inhere within the medium of tourism itself.

In this approach, I locate diaspora homeland tourism at the intersections of structure and agency and of production and consumption. In so doing, I try to resist the temptation of mapping organizers and tourists onto opposite sides of these admittedly problematic conceptual divides. To be sure, there is some justification for associating the sponsors of homeland tours with the forces of structure and production on one hand and the tourists themselves with agency and consumption on the other. Even so, in much of this book, I explore the ways that tourists, through their active agency, enter into
a collaboration with program sponsors and thereby position the parties as coproducers of the experience. Likewise, although tourists retain agency as individuals, the tour group as a collective emerges as an important structuring force that channels the experience of every person on the trip. As for the sponsoring organizations, the pages ahead reveal them to be self-consciously responsive to the structural constraints that the tourists and their chosen medium impose on them. Ultimately, diaspora homeland tours are revealed as sites where ideology and rationalization collide with open-ended, collaborative, and contingent processes of meaning making.

This collision offers observers a window onto fundamental aspects of tourism that usually remain invisible. (I spare the reader any comparisons with atom-smashing physicists.) Diaspora-building homeland tourism is distinguished, in one sense, by program organizers’ determined efforts to eke out of tourism its generally unrealized potentials. As organizers have learned how to use tourism to achieve effects, they have gained a practical knowledge of the nature of their medium. Part of my work involves reverse-engineering their process to identify the elemental features of tourism they are combining for use. Some of this involves scrutinizing tour organizers’ own discourse about their efforts. Some of it involves scrutinizing those moments when the process breaks down. On the trips themselves, the collision between the formal plan and the emergent reality creates many opportunities for things to go “wrong.” Such instances function as natural breaching experiments and reveal aspects of the social reality that are hidden when simply taken for granted.

What I am claiming for homeland tourism, therefore, is that its instrumental approach of “applied tourism” affords it a privileged position for shedding light on the basic question, “What is tourism?” The answer I develop in the coming chapters is intended to be broadly applicable beyond the particular case. Tourism, I argue, can be understood as a collection of ways of knowing and relating to place. Some of these are semiotic, others interactional, others embodied, and more. Because tourism is not a singular practice, its various dimensions dynamically interact with one another. This complicates any attempts to bring it under control.

Even as I attempt to speak here to general issues of tourism and specific issues of its mobilization as an instrument of transnational community building, I also have something to say expressly about the particular case that was the site for my fieldwork. Jewish tourism to Israel is now deeply implicated both in the contest between Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms and in the ongoing political debates among Jews about the ideal forms of
Jewish political community and state-diaspora relations. The former tends to be more visible in light of its broad geopolitical significance. Among Jews, the latter can generate just as much passion (as intracommunal politics are wont to do). In addressing both sets of issues, my inclination is to complicate understandings so that those seeking easy answers will think twice before accepting any.

At various points in this volume, especially chapter 3, I turn my lens onto the ways that diaspora Jewish tours represent the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts. The tours I studied are expressly intended to generate sympathy for Israeli perspectives on these conflicts, recognizing that these perspectives range across a spectrum of views. At the same time, it turns out that the tours are easily capable of accommodating a complex discourse that acknowledges Arab counternarratives. The extent to which this complexity is given expression varies, however, from group to group and from guide to guide. What is consistent across the trips I studied is that these counternarratives, when they are voiced, remain addressed at the level of discourse only. By contrast, the embodied practice that is the heart and soul of the tour is thoroughly situated in an Israeli Jewish experiential context, and it is this holistic experience that lends the Israeli narratives much of their compelling emotional weight.

As to the debates between Israeli Zionists and diaspora Jewish non-Zionists, the tours confound partisans on both sides by refusing to choose either of the ideologically “pure” extremes that the two camps put forward. In the face of old-line Zionist aspirations to end the Jewish diaspora through an ingathering of the exiles, the tours quietly substitute round-trip visits for permanent one-way migration. Without drawing attention to the implicit ideological challenge that they represent to classical Zionism, they use Israel to sustain diaspora, not eliminate it. Some non-Zionist critiques, by contrast, chide diaspora Jews for looking abroad to Israel for Jewish meaning rather than seeking such meaning in the communities in which they themselves live their Jewish lives. In the face of these charges of “vicarious” identity, the tours assert that the diasporic condition necessarily entails feeling implicated in a Jewish experience that extends beyond one’s immediate circumstances in place and time. They also affirm the modern Jewish eschatology that integrates the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel into the timeless biblical paradigms of exile and redemption, oppression and liberation, destruction and renewal. In short, against claims by Zionists and non-Zionists alike, the trips deliberately refuse to resolve the tension inherent in maintaining connections to more than one place. On the contrary,
they elaborate it, making it the de facto centerpiece of the model of diasporic identity that they are working to advance.

I say “de facto” because it is unlikely that program sponsors would express their goals in quite these terms. I am imposing a language and a set of conceptual categories here that differ from the native discourse used by those in the field. It is best to state this clearly up front. There are two key ways in which my framing diverges from those indigenous to the trips. First, I explicitly speak of these tours as a diaspora-building enterprise. Organizers, by contrast, speak of building connections with Israel. The directionality of their formulation emphasizes the closing of distance rather than the fact that the element of distance is the essential defining feature of the relationship. They also speak of strengthening Jewish identity without specifying that the nature of this identity is specifically diasporic. There are a host of reasons why diaspora is an assumed category that tour sponsors never raise to the level of principle, not the least of which, as I note in chapter 2, are the programs’ ideological roots in Zionism. My decision to break from the indigenous discourse and to represent these tours as an effort in diaspora-building is intended not only to shed light on the hidden work that the programs are actually accomplishing but also to highlight the ways that these tours are part and parcel of the broader transnationalist trends that are gaining momentum worldwide. At the same time, my commitment to engaged scholarship leads me to hope that this formulation will enter the native discourse of practitioners and enable them to reenvision the enterprise in new and currently unimagined ways.

Second, I frame diaspora homeland tourism as an effort in political socialization. Organizers of the tours to Israel would be more likely to speak of ethnic or religious socialization—or, even better, Jewish education. Certainly it is all this, too, and I do not intend to diminish this fact. Yet I prefer to speak of political socialization because it offers a clearer window onto what I consider to be the key aspects of the phenomenon: first and foremost, the tours are efforts to foster identification with a nation-state. In this, they draw on and reinforce core nationalist tropes that identify a particular cultural group with a particular stretch of land. These efforts alone would justify the use of the term, but there is more. The tours, as a diaspora-building practice, take implicit stands in favor of multiculturalism in the countries where the diasporans reside: they assert the legitimacy of maintaining sentimental ties with foreign countries and reject the notion that citizenship alone should define the boundaries of political community. Add to this the active interest that national governments take in supporting the enterprise, and the ten-
dency to view the tourists as potential goodwill ambassadors, and the utility of a political frame becomes even more apparent. All these claims refer to diaspora homeland tourism generally, regardless of the ethnic group or country in question. In the case of Israel, the notion of the trips as a form of political socialization takes on added meaning in light of the fact that the tours are tangled in the thicket of the Middle East conflict.

I, too, am tangled in this thicket, as all who choose to write on this issue eventually will be, even if they were not beforehand. My own entanglement has roots. I found work in New York for a time as speechwriter for Israel’s Mission to the United Nations. These were the years of Yitzhak Rabin’s premiership in the first half of the 1990s. I signed on a week after he and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn and raised my farewell toast two short months before Rabin was gunned down in Tel Aviv by a Jewish opponent of territorial compromise. This assassination, particularly coming after I had dedicated two years of my life trying to help Israel realize Rabin’s vision, defined my political coming of age. Even though the Oslo Accords have fallen into disrepute among Israelis and Palestinians alike, I remain proud of the work I did at the United Nations in support of them. Not that these were my best writings. Like most U.N. statements, they were painfully stilted. (Any place this book slips into jargon and overly careful formulations can be blamed on my years in Turtle Bay.) Nevertheless, they were my small contribution to a possibly quixotic effort to break the shackles of enmity that history has clamped on the region.

I have tried to be self-aware about my own biases and correct for them when writing. This includes seeking feedback from colleagues whose politics differ from my own. Such people are not hard to find. The Zionist left is an increasingly lonely place at the end of the 21st century’s first decade. Only here in Tel Aviv, where I write these words, does it seem to possess a certain normalcy. (Maybe also on Manhattan’s Upper West Side and some places in Boston.) If I have not been fully successful in controlling for my biases, readers may find this coming through in a mournful pessimism about the prospects that the two sides will opt for peaceful coexistence and in a certain exasperation with critiques that naturalize Palestinian nationalism while treating Jewish nationalism as a social construct. This latter stance is not solely a product of my politics but derives from my theoretical commitments as a determined social constructionist who balks at any notion that the approach should be selectively applied. The other area where I am aware that my theoretical and political predilections intersect regards popular critiques that portray the tours as a form of “brainwashing.” I tend to be dismissive of
these and hope that this stance stems from a principled resistance to behavioral models that smack of determinism rather than from an unwillingness to consider the political challenge embedded in the criticism.

Issues of Israeli-Palestinian politics aside, on the more fundamental issues that I deal with here regarding tourism’s deployment as an agent of diaspora-building, I have a long and complicated history with my object of study that shapes the lenses I bring to it. It can be fairly said that when it comes to diaspora Jewish homeland tours, I am as much of an insider as one can be without actually having designed or run a program. I did once staff a synagogue youth movement tour of the United States (not Israel) when I was 21. It was a coast-to-coast kosher bus trek with some 40-odd hormone-raging 15-year-olds. We wrapped ourselves in white and blue prayer shawls to recite morning blessings in truck-stop parking lots, placed a velvet Elvis next to the Torah as we put ancient Hebrew words to the King’s sublime melodies, and generally reveled in the absurd glories of America, adolescence, and the Jewish experience. The tour was the same one that I went on when I was a rising high school junior, and that was my initiation into the world of diaspora Jewish tourism. “Fine, sit alone on that couch and do nothing all summer! It’ll be your problem. I’m done nagging you about it.” The note of finality in my mother’s voice as she shouted into the den from our suburban New Jersey kitchen convinced me that, this time, she really meant it. “Awwwright,” I glumly conceded. “I’ll call Ken and send in the application.” My cousin Ken was the same age as me. He, however, was surrounded by girls. He was also able to hammer out on the keyboard any Billy Joel song you could name and had a piano-key skinny tie to prove it. Ken was active in United Synagogue Youth and had signed up for their 1985 “USY on Wheels” trip. I would ride in his wake.

Two years later, I was encouraging him to join me for USY’s 1987 “Israel Pilgrimage,” six-and-a-half weeks of touring fun. Like Wheels, but reputedly better. Although at 17 I had not yet read critiques of tourism as a form of neocolonialism, I intuitively knew that I should be packing my Banana Republic wardrobe. (Back then, Banana Republic still specialized in reproductions of Edwardian-era British army- and safari-wear. What Lawrence of Arabia wore, before he went native.) I would indulge my Orientalist fantasies.

My high school sweetheart, Pam, whom I would later marry, had taken a summer job and would not be traveling with me. That would take some fun out of the trip. I would be pining for her while my traveling companions were scoring with each other. We were prepared for the separation as we both planned in any case to head off to different colleges. But neither she nor I was
prepared for my catching what those in the field call “the Israel bug.” Some-
how, at some point during the tour, I developed an ache (there is no better
word) to return to the country for a longer time. I spoke with my counselors,
all in their early 20s, and like good mentors they told me their similar stories.
If I really wanted to come back, I could do what they did, they suggested, and
spend a year studying at an Israeli university.

I took their advice. With two semesters of conversational Hebrew under
my belt, I bid a temporary farewell to the George Washington University
and enrolled in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s One Year Program for
Overseas Students. It was a consequential decision. First, it introduced me
to academic Jewish studies, something now central to my professional life.
Second, it got me flirting with the idea of aliyah, or immigration to Israel, so
seriously that it strained my romantic relationship and led to what my wife
and I now refer to as “the Hiatus.” As Pam went to New York to pursue her
career, I returned to Israel to cut thorns off of date palms in the desert, teach
mathematics to immigrant kids from Russia and Ethiopia, and sort live fish
on a conveyor belt two stories above the kibbutz pond in which they had
been farm raised. The year of volunteer service changed my thinking about
where I wanted to make my home. I returned to the States to pursue gradu-
ate work in sociology and Jewish studies. Before I began applying to graduate
programs, however, I put to use the Hebrew-language skills I had honed in
the date fields and took a job at the Israeli U.N. Mission. The glamour of the
position and the opportunity to serve were reason enough for my 23-year-old
self to set aside a deep-rooted (and in retrospect utterly misguided) distaste
for New York City and move into the metropolis I had always sworn never to
live in. So it was, chasing Israel, that I ended up in an apartment across the
street from Pam, and the rekindled romance achieved its happy ending. Now,
we take advantage of the perks of academic life to go back and forth between
the United States and Israel. Our children are bilingual and bicultural.

In short, when I think about diaspora Jewish tourism to Israel, I cannot
help but think of my own convoluted personal history. Acquiring the criti-
cal distance needed to study it has had, for me, the sad effect of disenchant-
ing my relationship to a formative influence in my own life. Yet it is in this
sense of loss that I gain a measure of confidence in the analysis I offer here. I
learned things I did not know, and that, on reflection, I would probably have
been happier not to know. I still retain my affection for these programs and
often while conducting my fieldwork felt a tinge of envy toward the tourists
who were experiencing their trips for the first time, unburdened by the need
to adopt a stance of analytic detachment.
This, of course, makes me aware of the danger of reading my own experiences into those of the people I studied. My history with diaspora Jewish travel to Israel began with a six-week summer tour but then continued with a year of university study and a year of volunteer work, all in the context of programs that placed me in groups comprised of other diaspora Jews. These long-term study and volunteer programs were of a different order and magnitude, and I tried to keep this in mind when doing the fieldwork. Knowing that my own experience could serve as blinders, and knowing that there is an innate tendency to want to see one’s own experience reflected in that of others, I also made concerted efforts to examine lack of engagement.

The lenses I brought and the biases I had to control for were also shaped by the fact that this project, in the tradition of Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton’s Columbia School sociology, had roots in applied social research. My first years of fieldwork, from 1999 to 2004, were conducted under the auspices of Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), both for an evaluation of a diaspora Jewish homeland tourism program called Taglit-Birthright Israel (described in chapter 1) and for a doctoral dissertation that I was writing at the City University of New York Graduate Center. In winter 1999–2000, I led a team of seven participant observers from CMJS to study the first round of Birthright Israel trips. Each of the seven accompanied a different group of 40 students for the duration of their 10-day tour. I conducted participant observation alongside each of them for one to two days apiece, giving some breadth to my team’s depth. Afterward, I compiled, coded, and analyzed the hundreds of pages of field notes we had collectively generated. I repeated this again the following year with another team of seven researchers. The key difference was that, instead of joining each of them in their groups, I chose a group of my own and conducted participant observation in it for the length of the trip. Over this same period, and through 2004, I also helped design, field, and analyze annual surveys of Birthright Israel participants and applicants for the Cohen Center evaluations.

After completing the first draft, I independently undertook a second wave of fieldwork outside the framework of the program evaluation. Returning to conduct research in Israel three times between 2004 and 2008, I traveled with two Birthright Israel groups for the duration of their tours in two of those years and spent time in another year meeting with guides and observing selected program activities. Most of this occurred after I moved to Vanderbilt University. In the second wave of research, my strategy was to focus this new participant observation on attempting to disconfirm the conclusions I
had drawn in “Almost Pilgrims.” In essence, after having spent the first years of this study trying to understand how diaspora homeland tourism succeeds in accomplishing its sponsors’ goals, I spent the latter years trying to understand how it fails to accomplish them. By placing the two approaches into dialogue with one another, I hope I have produced an analysis that is more accurate, more balanced, and more sensitive to the rich complexities of the diaspora homeland tourism enterprise.