

Long Term Impact of the March of the Living on Participants

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1. Introduction:

In 2015, a study was conducted to determine the long-term impact of the March of the Living program on its Jewish participants. A total of 250 past participants were selected at random and interviewed at length. They included those who had gone very recently, in the Spring of 2015; those who had taken the trip five years ago, in 2010, and those who went a decade ago, in 2005. The questions covered a broad range of issues related to attitudes and behaviors about Jewish identity, views about Israel and the Holocaust, ritual observance, charitable giving, and lifestyle questions, as well as career choices.

Respondents included both observant and non-observant Jewish males and females and came from all over the United States and Canada. About 38% were affiliated with the Orthodox community, 39% with the Conservative movement, 18% identified as Reform, and 4% were unaffiliated. The refusal rate was under 1%. The researcher is not connected with the March in any way. Indeed, March leaders agreed in advance to

allow the results to be made public regardless of the outcome----positive or negative. Here are the results of the study in both short and long form:

2. Executive Summary:

Most participants went on the March of the Living because it was a chance to better understand their own Jewish culture. Friends and parents also played a role in the decision to go. The majority did not belong to any Jewish organizations before they went. About 20% became more active in their synagogues following the March, with 76%, giving credit to the March for the increase. Thirty eight percent joined Jewish organizations after the March and 28% gave credit to the March for that decision.

Two of the most remarkable findings of this study are that, first, close to half of those responding have visited Israel again since going on the March. This is a very high rate when you consider that 80% of those who either just went on the March this year or five years ago. Second, an astonishing 94% of those who had gone in 2005 have visited Israel since then.

Jews who go on the March are almost *four times* as likely to visit Israel as Jews in general. Close to half have visited Israel three or more times. Most significantly, about two-thirds assert that their decision to travel

to Israel again was influenced by the March experience. Thus we see that going on the March has a huge impact on one's future involvement with the state of Israel.

More than two-thirds of those traveling to Israel did so as tourists. About 40% also studied in Israel while there and 7% volunteered on a kibbutz, in the army, or an organization. Almost half would consider moving to Israel and half said the March influenced their views on this matter.

The overwhelming majority of unmarried March participants, 86%, assert that it's very important that their spouse be Jewish. And if the person they fell in love with happened to not be Jewish, then 65% would insist that they convert. As respondents get older higher numbers feel that way. Of those who went in 2005, ten years ago, 87% would insist on conversion.

With respect to education, 91% intend to give their children a Jewish education. And just under half were directly influenced by the March in their thinking. By a 65% to 35% margin, respondents also feel that it's important to live in a Jewish neighborhood.

One of the most important findings for the Jewish community was support for Jewish causes. Almost 90% of respondents said that the March had made it more likely that they would financially support Jewish causes.

Action speaks louder than words, of course and here the news is also

encouraging. Despite their youthfulness, over 60% have given in the past to Jewish causes.

Of those interviewed, 54% said that the March had made them more tolerant towards other groups as well. But an even higher proportion of those who went on the March ten years ago, 66%, reported that the March had made them more tolerant. Twenty two percent stated that they were involved in social causes such as helping the homeless, the poor, minorities, women's rights etc.

A full 90% felt that the March had made them more aware of the need to become involved when confronted with anti-Semitism. This was true over the long run as well. About 94% of those who went ten years ago continued to feel that the March had deeply influenced their attitudes about anti-Semitism. Those currently studying at universities were evenly split on whether anti-Semitism is a problem on campus,. Even so, 50% is a high number and the issue needs to be fully addressed.

About 95% of those who went on the March say it has strengthened their Jewish identity. About 20% say their level of observance has increased

Approximately 15% state that the March has had, or is having an impact on their career choice. This is a high number since 80% of our respondents are still in college or graduate school.

Overall, two thirds of those who went said the March had a significant impact on their thinking as a Jew and only 2% felt that it had no impact. But surprisingly, a higher proportion of those who went ten years ago felt it had a major influence on their thinking as Jews than did those who went more recently. The margin was 46% for the older cohort and 35% for the younger group. What this means is that when the dust settles, so to speak, those who went a long time ago, nevertheless, realize the March's long term impact on their lives.

When asked what aspect of the trip affected them most, 90% said it was the trips to the camps. A somewhat lower but still high percentage, around 63%, gave high rankings to both the March and the Israeli segment of the journey. The tours were considered of less interest with only 36% citing them as very important.

Given the overwhelmingly positive results, it's fair to say that the March has been and continues to be an enormously successful program in terms of ensuring and enhancing Jewish identity and in making people realize how important it is to be an engaged Jew who cares about his or her community and about human beings in general. And in many cases the March has changed the lives of its participants. And that is no small feat.

3. Results:

When asked why they went on the March most said that it was an opportunity to enhance their understanding of what it meant to be Jewish, an understanding that many said was augmented by what they had learned in high school. Slightly more than a third cited the fact that their friends were going and 24% asserted that their parents had wanted them to go. Two-thirds did not belong formally to any Jewish organizations and one-third did. The likelihood of such membership increased as the participants got older.

About 20% of respondents said they had become more active in their synagogues because of the March. The number was higher among those who had gone ten years ago (2005) because as they struck out on their own they were more likely to join. Of those, a full 76% attributed that to having gone on the March. 38% reported that they belonged to Jewish organizations and 28% asserted that their decision to do so was positively impacted by having gone on the March.

Two of the most remarkable findings of this study are that, first, close to half of those responding have visited Israel again since going on the March. This is a very high rate when you consider that this figure includes the 80% who either just went on the March this year or five

years ago. Second is that an astonishing 94% of those who had gone in 2005 have visited Israel since then.

Considering that only 20% to 25% of American Jews today have ever visited Israel it means that those who go on the March are almost four times as likely to visit Israel than are Jews in general. And let's remember that 80% have gone there **at least twice** since going on the March. The results further show that close to half have visited Israel three or more times since having gone on the March. Most importantly, about **two-thirds of those told interviewers that their decision to visit Israel again was influenced by the March. Thus we see that going on the MOL has a tremendous impact on one's future involvement with the State of Israel.**

What did they do in Israel? The majority, more than two-thirds, had gone as tourists. This is important because it indicated a highly positive feeling, even attachment to the country. People don't go three times in less than ten years unless they feel a strong affinity towards a place, in this case, Israel. Further evidence of attachment comes from the fact that 40% also spent time studying in Israel and 7% volunteered on a kibbutz, in the army, or with another organization. Almost half said they would consider moving to Israel (Aliyah) and about half of those stated that the March affected their positive views on this topic. This is truly phenomenal since only about 1%

of American Jews have, in fact, made Aliyah over the years, and perhaps half returned to the U.S. Yes, this is a selective group of people committed to Judaism to begin with, but it is clear that the March that played a significant role (about 50%) in their interest in going.

The overwhelming majority of unmarried March participants, 86%, assert that it's very important that their spouse be Jewish. And if the person they fell in love with happened to not be Jewish, then 65% would insist that they convert. As respondents get older higher numbers feel that way. Of those who went in 2005, ten years ago, 87% would insist on conversion.

With respect to education, 91% intend to give their children a Jewish education. And just under half were directly influenced by the March in their thinking. Since going on the March means that a person is concerned about and interested in Holocaust education to begin with, these results are not surprising. Most likely the March didn't create the interest. However, it significantly reinforced it. A number of those answering linked the importance of a Jewish education to a need to transmit and preserve the traditions of their grandparents who had undergone so much suffering. By a 65% to 35% margin, respondents also feel that it's important to live in a Jewish neighborhood.

One of the most important findings for the Jewish community was support for Jewish causes. Almost 90% of respondents said that the March had made it more likely that they would financially support for Jewish causes. Giving is a critical requirement for Jewish survival and any program that enhances it should be strongly supported. Action speaks louder than words, of course and here the news is also encouraging. Despite their youthfulness, over 60% have given in the past to Jewish causes.

What about attitudes towards other groups? Of those interviewed, 54% said that the March had made them more tolerant towards other groups as well. Only 4% said that it had made them less tolerant. But an even higher proportion of those who went on the March ten years ago, 66%, reported that the March had made them more tolerant. This means that over time participants become even more tolerant than those who went more recently and that the March had a significant impact in the long run on their thinking about this issue. In his excellent book, *WITNESS*, an account of the March and its impact upon participants, Eli Rubenstein notes that none of the many participants expressed anger or a desire revenge. Rather, there was a feeling that it's important to not allow the Holocaust to destroy our belief in the potential for good present in all human beings. This message of hope was

statistically corroborated by the interviews in this study. Here are some typical comments:

“You see what happened to so many people and how they died for no reason and it really makes you more tolerant towards everyone because it shouldn’t happen to anyone.”

“It makes you aware that every people, culture, and religion have a different history in different parts of the world and it’s important to respect all of them.”

“A girl on the March came from a family of Nazis. They converted to Judaism after the war. That took the bias out of my head and showed that there is so much depth to many people.”

As with charitable giving, the study sought to determine what respondents meant by greater tolerance, how seriously they took what they said. Again, there was a correlation between attitudes and behavior. Twenty two percent stated that they were involved in social causes such as helping the homeless, the poor, minorities, women’s rights etc. Some examples given were the Peres Center for peace, curing breast cancer and diabetes, Sudanese refugees, The Boys and Girls Club of America, and supporting gay rights. And 37% claimed to have been influenced to do so by the March.

Since becoming involved isn't an explicit goal of the March, it's an impressive number.

Only 13% have met anyone who denies there was a Holocaust. This may show that the campaign against deniers is succeeding. On the other hand, our sample doesn't move in these circles and the results suggests that people have largely met isolated individuals on college campuses who believe this and whose opinions are based on ignorance. Not surprisingly, 4 out of 5 respondents said the March had significantly helped them in countering such claims. And 90% felt that the March had made them more aware of the need to become involved when confronted with anti-Semitism. This was true over the long run as well. About 94% of those who went ten years ago continued to feel that the March had deeply influenced their attitudes about anti-Semitism.

Much has been made of anti-Semitism on college campuses. There is such a problem, but our group was split on this question, with half saying it was and half saying it wasn't. It is possible that students who strongly identify as Jews tend to avoid such campuses unless they are in the top tier institutions that they really want to attend. Regardless, if 50% feel it has increased then there's still a problem. As to those who went ten years ago,

even more, two-thirds, say anti-Semitism is a serious problem on campuses.

As to the BDS Movement most of those who knew what it was were strongly opposed to it, but a large proportion, about 40%, had no idea what it was. Those in the 2005 cohort were a bit more aware of BDS.

About 95% of those who went on the March say it has strengthened their Jewish identity. Almost half report that their observance of Jewish rituals like eating only kosher food or lighting candles hasn't increased, but that's usually because they were already fairly observant prior to their trip. As to the rest, about 20% say their level of observance has increased and 35% told interviewers that it hasn't. Among those who went in 2005, about 32% increased their level of observance. This may demonstrate that increased levels of observance have staying power and also that when participants marry and begin having families this matters more to them. 76% will take Jewish studies in school or have already done so. 38% say the March affected their decision to do so. Here are some typical responses:

“I now have a mezuzah and a chanukiah in my window. It's my home now. My non-Jewish boyfriend didn't want to observe Passover, so I realized there's no future to the relationship.”

“I light candles during special moments in my family's life and go to temple more often.”

“I pray more often and light Shabbat candles.”

It is these last two rituals, praying and lighting candles, that were most often cited.

Approximately 15% state that the March has had, or is having, an impact on their career choice. That may not sound like a lot until you remember that almost half of our respondents are entering freshmen who are not at all focused on this decision at this stage in their lives. The answers here are revealing and here are some of them:

“I wanted to do the history of medicine in Ontario and look at how anti-Semitism affected the ability of Jews to become doctors here.”

“I want to become more involved in international relations and the March helped to solidify that.”

“I applied for an AIPAC position and am joining the Israeli Army.”

“I want to be a doctor because I realized how many people needed medical help and during a war a medical staff is critical in tragic situations.”

“I’m now involved in public service because the March taught me about myself and how much people are in need.”

“I’m majoring in education and am possibly going to Israel to teach.”

Here’s a career change that’s unusual but was precipitated by the March:

“I was living in an area without many Jews and there was strong anti-Semitism there so I quit my job.”

Here’s a response that had to do with the Israel part of the trip:

“I started a company with friends from Israel. The trip reinforced how up and coming the Israeli tech scene is.”

And last a career change that isn’t paid work but who wouldn’t agree it’s just as important?:

“I chose to stay at home with my children because I realized how life goes on so quickly and how important it is to hold on to the special things in life.”

There were some participants of Russian heritage whose families came here during the period from 1977-1995. Here are some of their comments:

“The March was a very inspiring experience for me, especially when I walked through everything and saw what really happened. My dad was arrested for attending services on Yom Kippur and I always felt angry that my dad wasn’t able to practice his religion. . And I’m proud that I can now freely practice my religion and go on an educational trip like this related to my religion.”

“My grandparents avoided the Holocaust because of their Russian heritage. Seeing what happened first-hand made me realize what a scary place the world is. It was simply another level of intensity and emotional pain.”

Overall, two thirds of those who went said the March had a significant impact on their thinking as a Jew and only 2% felt that it had no impact. But surprisingly, a higher proportion of those who went ten years ago felt it had a major influence on their thinking as Jews than did those who went more recently. The margin was 46% for the older cohort and 35% for the younger group. What it means is that when the dust settles, so to speak, those who went a long time ago, nevertheless, realize the March’s long term impact on their lives.

Respondents were also encouraged to rank the importance of various aspects of the March. When asked what aspect of the trip affected them most, 90% said it was the trips to the camps. A somewhat lower but still high percentage, around 63%, gave high rankings to both the March and the Israeli segment of the journey. The tours were considered of less interest with only 36% citing them as very important. This is to be expected since they cannot compete with visits to camp, the March itself, and Israel. But that doesn’t mean they’re not worth doing because participants learn much

of value from these trips to towns and other historical and religious sites.

The older group of 2005 participants had the same percentages in their response when it came to assessing the value visits to sites, the camps, and the Israel segment of the trip. However, when it came to the March itself there was a significant drop in its impact, with only 40% saying it was important, while 60% of the younger group felt that way. Perhaps the bonding experience of the March means more when you're younger and still in touch with others who were with you on the March itself. But as time goes on you may lose touch with those people and your feelings aren't reinforced by those with whom you went.

The answers about the long-term impact were among the most interesting and while time doesn't allow for more than a few excerpts, those mentioned will give you an idea of how participants felt:

“It showed me how amazing it is that here we live and enjoy basic rights such as freedom in America, while in other places in the world people are hated and persecuted.”

“It's honestly something every Jew must see before leaving this world. It makes very proud to still be around, along with my nation, roaming the world, when there was a clear attempt to exterminate us.”

“The March affected my life because I now look at life from a different perspective. I learned that no matter what worries we have in our world today, we can’t even begin to fathom what our ancestors went through. So I’ve learned to be more grateful for being alive and to appreciate my friends and relatives.”

“The March made me extremely proud to be Jewish and taught me the importance of passing down the survivors’ stories.”

“The March helped me transform the number 6 million into one person *times* 6 million. It was chilling, unbelievably scary and made me feel hopeless about mankind. Yet at the same time it also taught me how a nation can rise from the ashes, rebuilt itself and become one of the strongest nations in the world. I will never forget my experience on the March., a part of my heart will forever be with those lost souls in Europe.”

While there’s room for improvement the in-depth part of the study found some complaints about certain individual leaders, a particular hotel that Marchers stayed in, and the like. Nothing in this world is perfect but considering the huge numbers of participants, the complaints were few and far between. These are addressed by the leaders in follow-up reviews of each trip.

4. Conclusion:

When you have 86% saying it's very important that their spouse be Jewish; 91% intending to give their children a Jewish education; 90% saying that the March had made it more likely that they would support Jewish causes, and 95% stating that the March strengthened their Jewish identity---- that's truly amazing. It's fair to say that the March has been and continues to be an enormously successful program in terms of ensuring and enhancing Jewish identity, creating very strong support for Israel, and making people comprehend how important it is to be an engaged Jew who cares about his or her community and about human beings in general. In short, the March has played a major role changing the lives of its participants in all the ways that matter. And that is a tremendous accomplishment.