I want to begin by telling you a story of the greatest Jewish movement for social change in the last 50 years. It is the story of Taglit/Birthright, the organization that has sent more than 250,000 college age Jews on free trips to Israel in the last 10 years. Birthright began out of a profound crisis in the American Jewish community. As we all remember in the mid 90s and the first half of this decade Israel experience two waves of wide spread Palestinian led terrorist attacks known as the 1st and 2nd intifada. In addition to the carnage these attacks brought to Israeli streets and café's they had a chilling affect on American Jewish tourism to Israel.

What was a right of passage when many of us were teens, a high school youth group trip to Israel in the summer of your junior year instantly evaporated in a haze of very real fear for the safety of our children. Jewish parents sent their kids to Jewish summer camp or took family vacations to sunny beaches – but didn't go to Israel. They reasoned their children would go to Israel in college when things settled down. Then 9/11 and the second intifada erupted and another wave of suicide bombing on buses and in pizza parlors similarly squashed those plans.

American Jewish leaders were faced with a serious crisis, with this sequence of events it was entirely possible that a whole generation of Jewish teens and young adults would grow up without ever having experienced Israel first hand. For the first time in two generations – the next generation of Jewish leaders would not have walked along the streets of Tel Aviv, mingled in Zion square and Ben Yehuda street in Jerusalem. They would not have first had accounts of sleeping in Bedouin tents and climbing Masada to see the early sunrise over the Judean desert, or float in the dead sea. They would not have fold and put prayers on scraps of paper in the cracks of the walls of the ancient temple. They would marvel at Israeli soldiers – similarly their age but charged with defending the Jewish state. They would not fall in love with Israel or an Israeli, or falafel, or Goldstar Beer, or come back with a funny t-shirt or a gumi bracelet given to them by a tall dark and handsome Jewish soldier. And if they didn't have those experiences if they did not fall in love with Israel, then our leaders worried how would they pass that love for Israel on to their own children when it was their time for this right of passage?

And so Birthright was born, a couple of very rich Jews got together and said the stakes were too high, we could not allow a generation of Jews to grow up without a personal connection to Israel – because if they did we might lose our connection all together. Birthright is a non-partisan program, an open-ended gift defined by the catchphrase "no strings attached." As the new voluntary chairman of the Birthright Israel International Education Committee, I have been struck how researchers tracking the program report that few participants complain about being force-fed a line. The trip's organizers know their credibility as educators rests on being open-minded not heavy-handed. Birthright is not an advocacy program but an identity-building program, launching thousands of individualized Jewish journeys.