

# Can a Year in Israel Transform Your Teen?



EW American communities worship the university as fervently as American Jews do. Yet no country is targeted on campus as harshly as the Jewish State is. Jewish parents are being taken for a ride. While spending big money to secure top credentials for their children, they are bankrolling institutions that increasingly reject the very values that helped American Jewry flourish: free inquiry and free speech, merit-based achievement, respect for religion and free enterprise, and a belief in the inherent worth of the American system. Many Jewish parents are fed up paying through the nose to get punched in the nose.

We don't have to accept the status quo. It's time to give generations of young Jews a year away from the illiberal liberalism that characterizes too many campuses today, a year of being wholly embraced by Jewish civilization, a year of leaving America behind so that they might understand it better and even help it mend.

Think Birthright Israel—only even more ambitious. Approximately 90,000 American Jews graduate from high school every year. The program we propose, Prep Year in Israel, will offer these young students the intellectual and spiritual equivalent of Pilates, strengthening the moral core of their Jewish identity while nurturing their engagement with the central ideas of Judaism, Zionism, the Western tradition, and American democracy.

To achieve that, we need to answer some basic questions. Why would 18- or 19-year-olds want to attend such programs? Why would their parents pay to support them? Why would Israel and the broader Jewish community invest in such programs? And how can this moonshot be a true gamechanger?

History offers some powerful models. In 1988, a few Israelis asked similar questions when Rabbi Eli Sadan launched Israel's first *mechina*, or pre-military preparatory academy, called Bnei David. Sadan and many of his fellow Religious Zionists felt stymied. Although Religious Zionism honored military service and recognized it as the stepping-stone into Israeli society, *dati*—religious—Israelis rarely became officers. The army seemed anti-religious, frequently turning pious recruits into secular veterans. Meanwhile, few IDF officers considered yeshiva boys to be officer material.

Eli Sadan proposed something new: a preparatory year of Jewish and Zionist study, along with pre-military psychological and physical training. Such groundwork could help religious soldiers become officers and commandos without losing their identities. Sadan had to sell his plan to high-school graduates, their parents, and army brass—who had to postpone interested recruits' obligatory service by a year—while financing the program.

The gamble paid off. Generations of committed, kippah-wearing, elite soldiers and officers have now served heroically while remaining passionate Religious Zionists—exiting the army as engaged Israeli citizens. Sadan's success inspired the founding of the first secular *mechina* in 1997, Nachshon, to foster democratic

idealism, patriotism, and tolerance among Israeli youth after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination.

Today, nearly 50 *mechina kdam tzvait* (pre-military preparatory) academies attract 3,300 teens annually. The programs are religious, secular, or mixed. Many of Israel's best officers and soldiers, along with Israel's top activists and educators from across the religious and political spectra, are *mechina* alumni.

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Both of us have spent countless hours over many years engaging or debating Israeli and Jewish communal leaders as to how to bolster Israeli gap-year programs. It's time to take the discussion public. We need to learn from some recent successes, as well as our perennial failures. And we need to take bold action now.

Since the 1980s, the yeshiva gap year in Israel has become an accepted rite of passage for Orthodox high-school graduates, as it has long been for rabbinic students of all denominations. At the same time, the Birthright revolution shows how even a 10-day Israel experience can launch young Jews' Jewish journeys. Masa Israel, which mixes learning, volunteering, and working in more than 200 different programs of four months to a year, demonstrates how longer experiences can provide the ideal follow-up (or alternative) to a Birthright trip. Studies show that almost every Jewish communal leader and every *oleh* (immigrant to Israel) has enjoyed a serious, transformational, Israel experience.

Nevertheless, gap years are still widely perceived by non-Orthodox teens as a wasted year "off," and only a few hundred spend the year between high school and college in Israel. Contrast this with the 700,000 young Jews who have participated in Birthright Israel since its inception in December 1999, peaking at nearly 50,000 annually. Clearly, the challenge involves mindset, not simply money.

It would be foolhardy to stand between young American Jews and their rush toward college. Many young Jews and their parents

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see a gap year as a needless detour from their cultivated career paths (which in some cases began with competition to get into the right nursery school!). Our effort will succeed only if American Jews recognize en masse that a gap year is, in fact, a not-to-be-missed opportunity that better prepares their children for college emotionally, intellectually, ideologically, even socially.

A Prep Year in Israel wouldn't have to start from scratch. We already have many of the needed tools at our disposal. The existing gap-year programs should be evaluated and—insofar as they are working—expanded. We can connect to the assets of other types of programs, such as Reichmann University's excellent "Live in Israel Study in English" programs, Shalem College's efforts to bring a liberal-arts education to Israelis, Tikvah Fund's programs teaching foundational Western texts to Jews (including to students on gap-year programs), the Shalom Hartman Institute's identity-building and Israel-engagement initiatives, and thoughtful, extended programs such as the Dorot Fellowship in Israel.

But new Prep Year programs must also appeal to American Jewry's most ambitious and academically sophisticated 12th-graders. We need a raft of new, redrawn, and scaled-up programs that model the kind of classically liberal approach to critical thinking that universities once fostered. The programs will build students' skills in these essential areas, while also strengthening their connections to Jewish civilization and to other young Jews and Israelis. They

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ought to offer college credit as well, making them seem even less like a year off and more like a way of preparing for and easing into the college experience.

These programs will cost money, because families have to recognize them as investments in their futures. Ultimately, these educational adventures should become résumé boosters, like the 10-week Birthright Israel Excel program and Masa's Israel Tech Challenge, which place superstar students in top Israeli companies for internships and, potentially, careers. American Jewish families will have to decide whether, along with the test prep and college prep so many families spend thousands of dollars on, they will also invest a bit in Moses, Miriam, Maimonides, Herzl, and other models of life prep.

As American Jews reimagine Israel's role in their children's lives, Israel will have to do some reimagining of its own. Israel's leaders initially hesitated to finance Birthright. Many wondered: Why should Israeli taxpayers bring "rich" Americans to Israel? Ultimately, subsidizing Birthright became the first phase of a massive paradigm shift in the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. As American

Jews continued contributing to Israel, Israel gave them something back: a material shift in the ways that young people understood their relationship to Israel and to their Jewish identity.

Because our proposal is less directly linked to Jewish identity-building, it marks a bigger step. Israel would be tackling a broader American educational problem while burnishing mostly American-oriented credentials. Still, there would be some clear benefits, particularly for Israeli universities that would stand to gain in money, reach, and prestige by becoming universities for the Jewish people as a whole, not just for Israeli citizens.

To do so, those universities will need to offer more courses in English and also in "American"—meaning using teachers who are skilled in the delivery of liberal-arts teaching to foster critical thinking. While improving their current course options, Israel's universities must also develop stimulating new courses that major American universities can accredit. And the government must prioritize this initiative, incentivizing universities to make the necessary adaptations.

Beyond the new programs, young Jews and their parents need a mass consciousness-raising initiative. Boosted by a popular educational advertising campaign, this expanded infrastructure can change the conversation in the Jewish world. The excitement should sweep up those who go to Israel and even those who choose not to go. That's their right, but at the very least the existence of a compelling, ever-more-popular Prep Year might get them to start thinking differently about Israel, Zionism, and Jewish identity, to say nothing of the crisis on so many American college campuses.

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Many may wonder: Why Israel? And how can programs celebrating Israel, Zionism, and Judaism also foster the liberal values and critical skills colleges should cultivate?

Our bias here is clear. We still see in the Zionist idea and the

Israel conversation the balance that healthy democracies need and that good educators should nurture between being stouthearted and staying open-minded, between identity and freedom, between having patriotic pride and being self-critical, between being the oldest of nations and the Start-Up Nation. Israel today has many educators who juggle these values effectively.

If done right, these programs just might awaken students to the exciting opportunities of Jewish identity, peoplehood, and statehood. By getting a grounded perspective on Israel and its dilemmas, in an environment encouraging analytical skills and vigorous debate, many students could emerge as involved insiders rather than dismissive outsiders. They might be less willing to abandon their Jewish state even if it occasionally disappoints or embarrasses them among their peers. A newfound aptitude for understanding and living with complexity, built in one of the most complex places on earth, will be profoundly useful when students get back home: in conversations about Israel and about America, in debates about the past and the present, in the ability to criticize without denigrating or delegitimizing.

So let the brainstorming begin! Let's talk about a month-long Hebrew intensive course and a year-long seminar on Jewish citizenship 101; about a flagship Rhodes Scholar-type program with everyone living in one renovated mansion; about regular *tiyulim* (trips), holiday celebrations, and weekend happenings. Let's also change the conversation on the American side about what we expect from young people, how we educate them, how liberal arts and liberal-democratic values are essential to American Jewish survival, how we want them to think about the Jewish future and the role that Israel can play in their lives.

We would love to see America's first-class universities return to their initial mission of fostering critical thinking and open debate or see new colleges and universities emerge to fill the void. It's an essential national mission for America. But we can't wait. If this moonshot takes off, our young Jewish students can get the prestige

payoff and professional launch that many seek from higher education, without paying the high ideological price. They will have a head start by arriving prepared morally as well as academically.

Ultimately, in proposing this Prep Year in Israel moonshot, our goal is simple: From now on, rather than having every significant adult in their lives ask Jewish high-school students, "Where are you going to college?" we want young Jews to be asked, "Where are you spending your year in Israel?" And we hope our students will be able to answer thoughtfully, choosing from an extraordinary array of life-changing programs, preparing them not only for college but also for life. \*