

IsraElite Young Women's Leadership Program (Mechina)

Activity Report July 2019

Matanel Foundation

Participant Testimonies:

M. is 19 years old from Kiryat Malachi where she was raised by her grandparents, and later attended a youth village. Mazal agreed to attend the Mechina because her older sister had also attended, but "didn't promise anything" in regard to outcome. She was very difficult, didn't want to meet with her instructors, was isolating herself, wasn't participating but did show some interest in the hiking and outdoor activities. In the middle of year she considered leaving the program. The staff worked with her closely to ensure she stay and complete the program and re-commit to the process. Once she decided to stay, she was committed and participated a lot, now fully understands the benefit of choosing to stay and of the power she had in determining her future. In her words, she *"went through a process of empowerment, overcame my fears. Do not let your problems push you down, let your dreams help you rise."*

C. is 19 years old from Kiryat Atta. Her parents are divorced, and she lives with her mom and stepdad. She came to the Mechina without any respect for authority, could not distinguish between constructive criticism and negative criticism and suffered from low self-esteem. It took her awhile before she really understood the benefits of being at the Mechina and to better understand how behavior can adversely affect the future. By mid-year, she began to undergo a profound change. She served as the Chair of the Nutrition and Health Committee, learned to delegate authority, give constructive feedback, was a leader in helping motivate participants in the morning and showed an extreme sense of responsibility. In her words, IsraElite *"expanded my knowledge, helped me discover and experience things that I never had and learned how to work in a group."* She now knows that *"if it's hard for you, it's a sign you're on the right path."*

L. is 20 years old from Rishon LeZion and has three siblings. Her mother is chronically ill and receives disability, her father is an alcoholic and home life is not stable. She underwent a significant change during her time at the Mechina. She learned how to work in a team and to stop being pretentious, instead making herself a favorite among all participants and staff. She was chosen by the participants to be Head of the Committees (a role that involves elections at the beginning and mid-year, served by two separate participants) because she showed maturity and responsibility. She learned a lot about herself in particular and about Israeli society overall. She not how much she *"strengthened my abilities and only gained from this year. I do not regret this decision at all to take a gap-year."* She understands that *"when you lose in battle you learn how to win the war."*

S. is 19 years old from Kiryat Motzkin. She came from an extremely broken home where her mother passed away when she was young, she's no longer in contact with her father and her older brother is in prison. She was raised by her bigger sister, but her life has not been easy. She notes that "this year I truly learned about myself, I built up my self-confidence, made new friendships and learned many new things that I would not have learned elsewhere." She took part in many volunteer activities, such as helping during the Hanukah and Purim holidays at the senior citizens home and working with children at the community center. Due to her gap-year experience, she truly came to understand that *"no one will be poor because of giving."*

A. is 19 years old from Kiryat Bialik and has two sisters who were all raised by their single mother. The divorce was very complicated and a difficult experience for her and her sisters, her father is not involved in her life at all. Initially A. had trouble connecting with the other young women. She found it extremely difficult to present in front of others which was partially caused by her lack of confidence and low self-esteem. According to her instructor, she was very closed off. However, as she continued with the Mechina, she learned to open up and to recognize that even if she experiences difficulty (learning, presenting, etc.) she can change this by investing in herself and connecting with others. She was eventually elected Chair of the Lifestyle Committee in the Mechina and demonstrated a lot of responsibility. She noted *"it was a challenging year for me. I expanded my knowledge, had the opportunity of a lifetime and accumulated life experience."* She realized *"everything is just in your head,"* in relation to holding oneself back in life.

Evaluation of Activities

The IsraElite Young Women's Leadership Program is a unique gap-year experience focused on empowering young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, the majority Ethiopian Israelis, to maximize their potential and become contributing members of Israeli society. The IsraElite program provided a holistic educational experience that guided participants through a process of personal development. The program components included:

Educational Opportunities: Throughout the year they have participated in a full course load of classes, workshops, and interactive learning experiences that served to guide the participants along their process of personal development. The courses included time management, public speaking, conflict management, writing a personal narrative and family history, Jewish studies and army service preparation. This year there were also a number of courses exploring gender, including women's and feminist history as well as exploring their own roles, values, and relationships. These courses were all provided in an informal, interactive setting, which allow the women to take active roles in their learning, to dare to participate, and to have experiences of success surrounding topics that interest them. This is especially important for young women who may have never had positive experiences in an academic environment in the past.

An important part of the program is touring around Israel to major historic sites and museums, many for the first time, and fostering among our participants a sense of belonging to the Jewish People and to Israeli society, and that they have a role to contribute in the timeline of Jewish history. Throughout the year, our participants also travelled around the country during unique field seminars and special activities, to help them learn more about the land, history, and culture of Israel, as well as on the diversity of populations and political parties within the country.

Community Involvement (Tikkun Olam): Tikkun Olam is a central component to the program. The young women volunteered twice a week with year-long community service placements, including with children, with elderly, and people with special needs. They developed strong connections with the people they served, and the special events throughout the year always included those with whom they volunteered, such as the Purim carnival or preparing gifts of food for Passover or distributing jelly doughnuts to before Hanukkah celebrations. *One participant said, "I always felt that I was someone in need, someone others had to give to. Now I see myself as someone who has what she needs, who has enough to give to others."*

Now in its sixth year, IsraElite continues to prove it is a vital force in the Migdal HaEmek community; the young women actively participate in municipal events and help with local initiatives. The city sees the Israelite participants as a resource to be utilized in putting on all of the large-scale city-wide events, whether it is Sigd celebrations, Purim, the Spring Festival, Lag B'Omer or Jerusalem Day.

The Sigd holiday is an ancient festival of the Ethiopian Jewish community that has for generations yearned to return to their homeland in Israel. It has become IsraElite tradition to put on an impressive show in Migdal HaEmek for the holiday, in cooperation with local community organizations. Participants prepared and staffed educational booths about various aspects of Ethiopian culture and also coordinated the traditional prayer service and music and dancing celebration. Leading up to the event, the young women also taught about the holiday to young students in local elementary schools. Through song, dance, and stories they made meaningful connections in the community and strengthened their pride in their cultural heritage, while practicing important skills.

Outdoor Education: The outdoors serve as the perfect backdrop to practice all of the lessons and principles taught on the IsraElite program, such as teamwork and responsibility. When participants encounter physical and psychological obstacles in the field, they have no choice but to work together to overcome them, in order to push through to make it to the next campsite or figure out how to cook a meal together. These outdoor experiences are often among the most meaningful experiences for our participants in getting them to change their mindset, from one of survival to one of leadership.

Outdoor excursions included multi-day hikes through the Judean Desert in the Jezreel Valley. During the last week of May, the young women embarked in the final hike of the year: the four-day Sea-to-Sea Journey. They began along the shores of the Mediterranean and ended at the banks of the Sea of Galilee; taking responsibility for planning the entire trip, navigating the trails, preparing their own food, setting up camp and understanding the historical and geographic details along the way.

Committees: Each participant must participate in a Mechina Committee to help maintain the day-to-day logistics of the program. The different committees included management of food, finances, recruitment, logistics and housework, and each gave the participants a sense of personal responsibility for their actions while also better understanding teamwork and gaining leadership skills through hands-on experience. This process significantly contributes to the process of personal development among our participants, as we see many young women flourishing as leaders when given the opportunity to take responsibility for the well-being of their community.

Personal Development: Each of the young women who participated in the program are on their way to meeting the goals of the program, meaning that on the whole they have succeeded in building up a sense of self-worth and belief in their abilities; they have increased their life and leadership skills; they have

developed a sense of communal responsibility, a strong personal identity, and sense of belonging to Israeli society. They have developed a sense of pride in their cultural heritage and family history, which provides them with a sense of self confidence that they carry with them into the future.

Graduates: We have continued working to help our graduates obtain meaningful roles in their mandatory military service, better understand how to perform under pressure in these roles, obtain recognition for their performance, and rise to positions of leadership. We are proud to report that all of our graduates are completing a full period of service, with no drop-out or dismissal. The vast majority are serving in meaningful positions, where they are learning and utilizing important life skills and contributing of themselves to a better, stronger military. Many are serving in command positions, and recently we have seen more of our graduates receiving awards for their service: Aviva Tedesa from the fourth cohort who is serving as an education non-commissioned officer, recently received outstanding soldier award from the central district of the Education Corps, and Alam Abera, who received an outstanding soldier award for her performance in her squad leader's course.

Graduates continued to volunteer at the Mechina, share their experiences with participants and participate in events and celebrations. They serve as important role models for our current participants, many of whom do not have role models in their immediate family and neighborhood to look up to regarding successful military service, higher education, and fulfilling professional opportunities.

Mazal Balaya from our third cohort, recently completed her military service, after serving as a sergeant at Machveh Alon educational army base. She wrote to all of the Mechina staff and participants a letter for this occasion: *"You cannot receive so much good without looking back a second and saying how did I get here. Who is responsible for all this, that I have so much goodness to be grateful for? I can trace it back to the beginning, where it all started, from the first step, three years ago. I found it. If it would not be for the Mechina, I would not be who I am today. It gave me something that nobody could give me, and it did not happen in one moment. It took a lot of work and strength from me, and it was hard, but worth it. It made such small things become so meaningful. Thanks to the Mechina I ran up the mountain, and looked up, not to see when it was over, but to look at the men running behind me. Thanks to the Mechina I managed to be strong in my opinions. It was thanks to the Mechina that I was not afraid to stand in the center of a group when everyone was watching you. And most importantly listen only to myself, what is in my heart. So please accept these words as words of thanks and appreciation."*

Long-term, we aim for our graduates to become functioning heads of households who contribute to their community. Our graduate coordinator continued to work with Mechina staff providing essential resources, counseling and support to our graduates. We recently hosted a conference for the three cohorts of graduates who have completed their mandatory military service focusing on their choices for the next steps in their life, employment and higher education. We are proud that this year we are providing modest scholarships to eight of our program graduates who are pursuing academic degrees or vocational programs in areas such as nursing, human resources management, and law. We look forward to continuing to accompany these young women on their journey.