

Yemin Orde Young Men's Leadership Program (Mechina)

Activity Report July 2019

Matanel Foundation

Participant Testimonies

Ya. is 19 from Rishon Letzion. He first heard about the Mechina program from his uncle, who had been a participant years ago. He knew it would be a meaningful year for him, and he really wanted to see a change, but he was worried he would not be able to carry out all of the requirements, that he would not be able to follow through. He shared on graduation night, "This year has caused such a change for me. I am such a different person now. I used to give in to things and give up easily. I was really a quitter. But here I have learned to persist, not to give up. I saw so much of my own personal changes on the Survival Hike. I wanted to give up on the first day, it was so hard, and I hadn't performed as well as I had hoped. But that first night, I thought about all I had learned over the year, my counselors here, and my family. I committed to try harder the next day. I got up with a renewed strength and stuck it out until the end. And now I am actually finishing the Mechina! I am so proud!"

Yo. is 20 years old from Beit Shemesh. He had attended a youth village and decided to attend the Mechina afterward with two other friends. He immediately enjoyed the program, despite early challenges. He says that his parents were worried at the beginning because he was so focused on the program, and they did not understand what it was or what he was doing there. He shares, "Quickly they began to see a real change. I started cleaning my room, and helping around the house, and being organized, and not sleeping all day. They could not believe the changes I was going through." He also comments on the community service as an important part of the program for his own personal development. "The volunteering was such a huge part of this year for me. I have never experienced anything like it. I worked with the center for disabled adults, which happens to be just down the road to the Mechina. I was paired with two brothers with developmental disabilities. It wasn't just going to visit once in a while. I really connected to these guys, and soon we were seeing each other all the time, whenever we could. We hosted them for big events, like for our Sigd celebrations, or our big Purim carnival. It changes who you are as a person, and also – I was surprised how much I learned from them. This was something really special I never expected to get at this year."

T. is 19 years old from Neve Mivtah and arrived at the Mechina as an extreme introvert. He rarely spoke and mainly just when it was one-on-one sessions. He would avoid large groups, constantly look at the floor, and stutter under stress. He had intense negative thoughts related to his appearance, and thought everyone laughed at him and felt unworthy. His family life is stressful and is the eldest of two brothers with divorced parents. As a child, Tommy underwent

a period of violent outbursts that lasted several years. Tommy began working on himself mainly in relation to social interactions, his low self-confidence and lack of assertiveness. Throughout his time at the Mechina, he began showing improvement through public speaking efforts and as part of the Mechina's cultural committee. The stuttering and nervousness around others began to diminish more and more. At graduation he performed on stage with a guitar, and has made some strong friendships with other participants.

T. 19 years old from Hadera. At the beginning of the year, it was clear that T. was charming and fun but also an extreme introvert, with a ton of anxiety when having to present in front of an audience. The first six months at the Mechina proved to be difficult but in smaller groups he started to improve. He was part of the navigating committee which helped with navigation aspects on all hikes and outdoor activities and allowed him to connect to other participants, building his confidence. From here it was possible to continue moving forward, with T. giving a lecture in front of an audience and field instructions. Tomer reached the peak of his development when he presented at the graduation ceremony.

K. 19 years old from Petach Tikva. He initially started the Mechina year with a lot of cynicism and criticism towards his surroundings, which was a barrier to feeling part of the group. When it came time to choose committees, he chose the cultural committee, where he was able to lead social activities for the group. He had to reassess what it meant to be a leader, with less cynicism and criticism. At first, it was difficult to understand but then slowly he began to work on himself after receiving feedback from his peers. In the last third of the year, K. was chosen to be the Deputy Chairman of the Mechina. He came out of the program believing in his abilities, received tools for leadership and most significantly is now able to empathize better with others and be less cynical. At the graduation ceremony he noted, "I realized that if you do not work as a team and cooperate, you will not go anywhere."

Evaluation of Activities

The Yemin Orde Young Men's Leadership Program is a unique gap-year experience focused on empowering young men from disadvantaged backgrounds, the majority Ethiopian Israelis, to maximize their potential and become contributing members of Israeli society. This year, 48 young men completed the intense program, which included:

Educational Opportunities: Throughout the year these young men participated in a full course load of classes, workshops, and interactive learning experiences on topics such as public speaking, family history and interpersonal relationships, cognitive awareness, Jewish studies, Israeli history, and IDF preparation. These courses were all provided in an informal, interactive setting, which allowed these young men to fully engage in the topics to have experiences of success in a learning environment.

In addition, program participants spent time on educational seminars and tours around Israel to major historic sites, many for the first time, in order to connect them to the Jewish People

and to Israeli society, and to impart on them 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, and to better prepare them for their upcoming service. These seminars included two separate weeks in Jerusalem and an IDF army seminar.

Community Involvement (Tikkun Olam): A vital part of the Mechina year is regular community service placements in the local Hatzor Haglilit community. These young men went out twice a week to their placements, serving as mentors for kids in various frameworks, such as a local absorption center, a program for youth at risk, and an after-school center for young children, while others worked with the elderly or adults with special needs. This community service served an important role in changing how the participants perceive themselves. These young men are used to receiving help, but when they begin volunteering every week, this changes: they feel needed, they see they are contributing just by being themselves and opening up to others, and this gives them so much self-confidence.

Outdoor Education: The outdoors serves as a natural laboratory for personal development. These trips are often among the most meaningful experiences over the year, where the participants see a physical expression of all of the lessons learned over the course of the year: persistence, overcoming obstacles, achieving new things, working in teams, leading by personal example, and so much more. The young men went on a number of multi-day hiking trips throughout the year, each with its own challenges. The Survival/Empowerment Hike in May served as the culmination of so much of what was learned over the year on the Mechina program: navigation skills, teamwork, leadership skills, personal responsibility and pushing personal boundaries. On this final hike, they knew they would be on their own, with no staff involvement, having to work together under difficult conditions. At the beginning of the week, the young men were divided into small groups; each group was dropped off during the night at different parts of the desert and had to orient themselves and navigate to reach their destination. Throughout the week they hiked long distances with heavy packs, while dealing with difficult terrain, limited food, and social challenges. The Mechina staff monitored each group but did not contact them. The young men learn so much about themselves over this week, especially about their own internal strength and how they can succeed in the face of adversity. At the end of the week, the participants were welcomed at Sde Boker with the cheering of their families and friends, who were bussed from all around the country by the Mechina in order to support the participants on this big day.

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. Participants have the opportunity to work on three different committees over the course of the year. This process significantly contributes to the process of personal development among our participants, as we see many young men

flourishing as leaders when given the opportunity to take responsibility for the well-being of their community.

Personal Development: The core of the mechina program is the process of personal development of each one of the program participants. This process is facilitated by the educational activities and by the personal relationships built between the staff members and the participants. Each staff member has about ten participants whom they accompany individually over the year, with regular one-on-one conversations. In addition, the staff runs regular small group sessions where the staff member and those same ten young men come together and speak openly about different issues, mainly their experiences over the year on the program, their feelings, their difficulties. These small groups constitute a safe space for the participants where they can open up in ways many of them never have before. By the end of the year, every one of the participants on the program could point to how they had changed.

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, many of them in combat units and other sought-after roles, with a large number also rising to command positions.

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.

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 are proud that this year we are providing modest scholarships to fifty of our program graduates who are pursuing academic degrees or vocational programs. Scholarship recipients this year included young men from around the country pursuing academic degrees and vocational studies in a wide range of subjects, including criminology, engineering, nursing, law, government and diplomacy, media design, business, tour guiding courses and technician courses. We are so proud of our graduates who are investing in themselves and in their future.