

# *MATANEL FOUNDATION*

## *ACTIVITY REPORT*

**Name of the Program:** IsraElite Young Women's Leadership Program (Mechina)

**Year of activity:** 2019-2020

**Name of the report's writer:** Benny Vaknin

**Function of the report's writer:** Resource Development

**Mail:** benny@derechkfar.org.il      **Phones:** 052-5515700

**Website / Facebook address of the organization:**

[https://www.instagram.com/mechina\\_Israelit/](https://www.instagram.com/mechina_Israelit/)

**Number of active participants in the program:** 13 for 2019-2020 cohort

**Estimated number of impacted participants:** All 7 cohorts = 153 graduates

**Give the actual state of the program (where the program stands at the date of the activity report, no more than ten lines):**

As if the writing of this report, IsraElite is in its 8th year, providing an intense program for at-risk young women before moving on to their mandatory military service. We are honored to introduce the new director, Orly Barzel, who has extensive experience in informal education and community leadership. The former director, Anat Steiner is working with the Mechina graduates accompanying them through their next steps in life.

As for the pandemic, the Mechina has been a lifeline for our participants from difficult circumstances, especially during these times of uncertainty and upheaval. The staff are working hard to ensure that these young women continue to have meaningful experiences and a stable support system to help them enter young adulthood with a strong foundation. We are complying with the Ministry of Education regulations and therefore operating in two capsules, maintaining distance and wearing masks. The young women are taking part in courses about Israeli history and geography, exploring their Jewish identity and running logistics of the program through a process of self-governance. They are going on day-hike excursions that challenge them to overcome physical and psychological obstacles. They are also meeting with Mechina graduates on Zoom to help better prepare for their mandatory army service. Other activities have either been cancelled, such as overnight trips, or modified, such as volunteer activities – where they prepare food packages but don't work directly with kids or elderly in the community.

**The main achievements during the last year of activity (main achievements, number of events, number of participants, etc.):**

Our 7<sup>th</sup> cohort, of which this grant supported, graduated in June 2020 and has either gone on to serve in the army or is waiting for their official notifications of service. They were between the ages of 18 to 20 years old and came from at-risk communities across Israel. Over the course of the year, this cohort benefited from a unique educational curriculum where courses and workshops were offered in an informal, interactive setting and were specifically designed to fit their needs and better prepare them for adulthood.

In terms of numbers, we offered ten different courses which included understanding group dynamics, female awareness, leadership and gender, interview and presentation preparation, budgeting and personal finance and more. We held four seminars that included meeting monthly with other gap-year leadership programs from the north, spending a week at an army base to understand expectations for mandatory IDF service, participating in a seminar to promote healthy mindsets and a seminar on "self-discovery" which involved different thought provoking activities to help our participants work towards personal and life goals.

We added a new component to the program where the young women reflected on what they wanted to learn more about in society. We then handed over some of the decision making for field trips to them. Whereas in the past, staff would plan most outings: where the group would go, educational material to be taught, travel logistics and more, now the participants became responsible for the activity. This required choosing a topic, planning the day, leading the activity and teaching the group about personal interests.

One of the most important means to teach life skills at the Mechina was through managing day-to-day logistics of the program, divided up into committees. This aspect taught participants to take responsibility for their own actions as well as better understand group dynamics. For this year, the committees were placed into three general groupings, meeting at least bi-weekly if not more. Elections to the committees were held twice, one at the beginning of the program and one in January to give participants a chance to experience different roles.

The Mechina has also become an important part of the local municipality; Migdal HeEmek, engaging with the local community and volunteering there. The young women volunteered twice a week at either an elementary school for disadvantaged children, at a local rehabilitation center for severe physical disabilities, an organization for kids with cognitive disabilities and a local community center. They planned special events within the community for the Ethiopian holiday of Sigd and Purim. By the time the corona crisis came, it was hard for the participants to return home as required by the Ministries of Education and Health. They wanted to help the community in which they had developed such strong connections to. But they took these experiences home with them, understanding it was important to help where needed, with parents, siblings or grandparents. When they were able to return to the program after Passover, it was to go out to volunteer: packing and delivering food boxes for those in need, helping farmers with crop and field maintenance and calling those in the community to check on them.

Even with government restrictions on gatherings, what they could do, where they could go, that lasted through graduation; they still found ways to help others less fortunate. For their final project they raised funds that were donated to a nonprofit working with extremely at-risk, homeless teen girls. Our young women took these girls out for a day, hiking near the Beit Shean Valley, talking to them about their own experiences and how being at IsraElite has changed them for the positive. The Tikkun Olam aspect was such an important component, helping our young women develop a sense of responsibility to others around them.

**The evaluation (methodology, results, comparisons with the precedent year, conclusions for the future...):**

The shorter-term impact is ultimately measured by the transformation and maturity of the participants while in the program. By the end of the program year, we expect to see that these young women have increased self-confidence and the ability to overcome obstacles, that they have internalized the skills taught in courses and can utilize these skills, that they are more knowledgeable about Israeli society and have developed a sense of belonging, that they feel committed to their community and broader society. These are measured by regular one-on-one and group meetings with the young women, tracking how they believe they are progressing.

The longer-term impact is seen after graduation, when they move on to the next stage of their lives. One key measure that demonstrates how well our graduates are integrating into society and achieving success is through their mandatory military service. In Israel, service is looked at as a means to become a part of Israeli society and to develop connections to others outside of one's own community. However, in the general Ethiopian Israeli population, there are double-digit rates of drop-out and incarceration in the army. Yet our graduates are succeeding by completing a full period of meaningful service and striving for recognition of excellence. When analyzing the data from our first three cohorts (who have all completed their army service or are about to), the statistics show that:

- 100% have completed a full term of mandatory army service. The majority of our graduates come from Ethiopian backgrounds, which makes the data even more significant. In comparison, for those Ethiopian Israeli young women who do serve,

about 10% drop out or are dismissed from the IDF before completing a full period of service.

- 58% have served in leadership positions, as commanders, instructors, etc.
- 38% received awards or recognition during their service.
- 4 attended the prestigious officer's course and served or are serving as officers
- 2 young women have been recipients of the prestigious President's Award for Outstanding Service.

With most of the young women from the first three cohorts having moved on from their army service, we are helping them determine next steps. We do this through holding workshops and events in order to maintain face-to-face connections. It allows us to truly see how they are doing and for them to see we are there as they move on into adulthood. Though many of our graduates are still relatively young, and in Israel most young people take time off between completing army service and pursuing higher education or vocational studies, we are proud to note that out of the first cohort of young women, 54% are pursuing some kind of advanced study, either academic degrees or professional certification. They are studying for degrees in psychology, criminology, bookkeeping, human resources, nursing and more.

### **Provisional guide lines for the advancement of the program in the next year:**

Overall, we have been reaching our defined population - women from at-risk communities who are willing to take advantage of opportunities offered by this program and who are committed to making a change in their lives. Unfortunately, last program year was challenging, both in terms of corona and in terms of the number of participants as we had fewer than anticipated. We believe the cause was the lack of diversity as the Mechina had been categorized in many circles as only being for Ethiopian Israelis, yet there are many at-risk young women who need such a transformative experience. We created a steering committee that met once a month, asking hard questions about improvements needed, planning ahead and determining policy. We then spent more time, effort and resources in strategically reaching the right young women for the program, with a goal of having a diverse number. *Our efforts were successful and we have a mixed group of around 30 participants this year.*

At this time, the most pressing challenge is ensuring the safety and security of the 2020-2021 cohort and the staff. We are continually working to ensure that the structure of the program remains as consistent as possible while complying with any government guidelines. As stated in the first question above, there are activities participants are allowed to do: courses and hikes, while others have been put on hold: volunteering with children and the elderly. We are working within two capsules and will continue this structure for as long as needed. Those who must be in quarantine are not allowed on site until the quarantine period is over.

We are extremely concerned about our graduates, as this year has been tough, especially for those who have recently finished the army and have yet to make the next step in their lives. They are navigating young adulthood while facing lockdowns, uncertainty and seeing their families in even more dire economic situations. We have been in contact with them and will remain in contact, providing guidance in making life decisions and considering options for their futures as well as helping them navigate government bureaucracy and find ways to receive stipends and/or financial assistance.

### **Movie:**

This film is currently available only in Hebrew.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAt-xL8Zlxs&feature=youtu.be>

### **ATTACHED SEPARATELY**

**Financial Report pdf**

**List of participants and stories pdf**

**Photos in JPG format**