

GRANT REPORT AUGUST 2026

To MATANEL FOUNDATION mail@matanel.org

Program: IsraElite Young Women's Leadership Program for At-Risk and Immigrant Youth (Mechina)

Year: 2026

The Association

1. Name of the association (hereinafter: the "Association"): Village Way Educational Initiatives
2. Date of registration of the Association in the Registrar of Associations (hereinafter: the "Registrar"): 21 Sep 2006
3. Registered number of the Association in the Registrar: 58046571-4
4. Registered seat of the Association in the Registrar (including postal-code): Hof Carmel D.N. 30895000, Yemin Orde
5. Date of creation of the submitted project (if the project is already running): 2013

The project for which the donation is sought

1. Project's name: IsraElite Young Women's Leadership Program for At-Risk and Immigrant Youth (Mechina)
2. Name of the project's coordinator: Hadas Azulay
3. Coordinator's role and/or position in the Association: Director, Yemin Orde Young Women's Leadership Program
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6. Coordinator's direct address for correspondences: Mechina IsraElite, Kibbutz Kitiyat Anavim, 9083300, Mateh Yehuda Regional Council.
7. Name of the person empowered to sign for the Association: Benny Vaknin

Mechina IsraElite

August 2026 Update



Introduction

Mechina IsraElite has just graduated its 12th cohort and is preparing to welcome its 13th cohort in September 2026. Operating from Kiryat Anavim, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the program supports young women from some of Israel's most complex and disadvantaged backgrounds. Many participants arrive carrying burdens from fractured families, trauma, poverty, instability, mental health challenges, or years of disappointment from the adults meant to care for them. However, ten months later, they leave transformed, leaving the program with confidence, responsibility, purpose, and the knowledge that their future does not have to mirror their past.

The numbers tell an important story: This year, 31 young women began the program. Supported by a dedicated staff of 11 professionals, 26 completed the 10 months, of which 24 are continuing into military service, and 2 are pursuing meaningful national service opportunities. At year's end, 100% reported gaining tools that will help them throughout life, 94% shared that they had discovered new strengths as a result of the program, and 89% said they would recommend the program to others. As one participant reflected: ***"I discovered that I can do things I never believed I could do."***

Motivation & Personal Challenges

This year's cohort was characterized by remarkable motivation and determination despite extraordinary personal challenges and ongoing war. Participants navigated anxiety, trauma, OCD, personality disorders, housing instability, family crises, financial hardship, and social exclusion. Yet day after day, they chose growth over resignation. Living together around the clock created countless opportunities for growth and self-discovery. Many participants arrived believing they had little to offer. Through daily experiences and meaningful challenges, they began to recognize their own strengths, resilience, and ability to lead and positively impact others. As one of them reflected back on the program: ***"I discovered I can lead projects and make things happen, work in a group and lead initiatives, that people actually like me and that I can be meaningful to other people without even noticing it."***

Program Developments

Since reopening in September 2024, Mechina IsraElite has continued to strengthen its educational and therapeutic model, combining intensive personal support with high standards. This balance is essential because many participants have spent most of their lives responding to crises rather than influencing their futures. Some arrive having never owned bed linen or sports equipment. Some have never had a quiet desk where they could study. Others have never experienced financial stability or long-term goal setting. IsraElite seeks to create an entirely different reality. The Mechina provides not only emotional support and educational guidance, but also the physical infrastructure necessary for growth: outdoor equipment, study spaces, fitness facilities, leadership opportunities, and safe environments where participants can develop confidence and independence.

Learning and Activities

Every activity at IsraElite serves a larger purpose: expanding horizons. Many participants arrive with lives shaped by immediate survival. IsraElite introduces them to a world of possibility.

Educational Learning

Participants engage in weekly studies covering:

- Israeli society, government and politics
- Jewish identity

- Public speaking
- Critical thinking
- Financial literacy
- Healthy relationships
- Mental health and resilience
- Physical wellness
- Leadership development

Many discover passions and abilities they never knew existed. Staff frequently observe participants who initially define themselves as "not academic" becoming deeply engaged in discussions about history, geography, politics, and current events.

Medurat HaShevet (The Tribe Campfire)

One of the most powerful programs is "Medurat HaShevet" where in small, trusted circles, participants tell their life stories. For many, it is the first time they are able to share their experiences without shame or judgment. The program communicates a simple but transformative message: "***Own your story. You have the right to tell it.***" Through listening and being heard, participants begin to rewrite the narratives they carry about themselves.

Outdoor Journeys and Exploration

Participants spend nearly thirteen weeks throughout the year in the field. These journeys include the Arava, Galilee, Carmel, Jerusalem, the Eilat Mountains, the Negev, the Gaza Envelope and other regions across Israel. The goal is not simply hiking. The goal is connecting to Israel, getting to know it and in the process discovering one's own capabilities. Many participants encounter experiences that other youth their age take for granted. For some, it was their first time sleeping outdoors. For others, their first time visiting the Kinneret, Knesset, Dead Sea or any other national landmark. Along the way they meet Druze communities, Samaritans, Ethiopian Israelis, ultra-Orthodox communities, Bedouins, and other diverse populations. Each journey broadens their understanding of Israel and their place within it.

Mifrasit (Small sailboat) Sailing Leadership Program

Among the most transformative experiences this year was the "Mifrasit" program. Here, participants learned to sail and operate a vessel together. At first many found the experience frustrating and physically demanding, which brought up a lot of resistance in the group. However, by the end of the program, they understood that like in life, the boat only moves when everyone contributes. Through the skill of sailing they learned about trust, teamwork, leadership, responsibility, and mutual dependence. As one staff member reflected: "***Many girls hated it at first. By the end they discovered how powerful they are together and how much they can trust one another.***"

Health, Fitness and Wellbeing

Many participants arrive carrying not only emotional burdens but also unhealthy habits shaped by years of instability. The Mechina addresses both body and mind as participants receive:

- Personal fitness plans
- Twice-weekly training sessions
- Nutritional guidance
- Yoga and wellness activities
- Education about the connection between physical and mental health

According to Hadas, the program director, the shift from self-neglect to self-investment is one of the program's most impactful outcomes.

Leadership Through Tikkun Ha Lev (Mending of the heart)

At IsraElite, healing and leadership develop together. Through volunteer programs with children, vulnerable families, communities in the Gaza Envelope, northern communities affected by war, shelters, food distribution organizations and countless local initiatives, participants move from being recipients of support to providers of support. Throughout the year, participants organized volunteer initiatives, blood drives, educational activities, support for struggling families, and community projects in their area and beyond. The message is clear: Young women who once felt invisible, discover their ability to impact the lives of others.

Cohort Dynamics and Personal Growth

Personal growth at IsraElite does not take place in a single dramatic moment. It occurs gradually through thousands of small, mundane and daily experiences. It happens when a participant who struggled for years with routine begins waking up every morning on time. It happens when a young woman who never believed she could lead stands up in front of her peers and takes responsibility. It happens when someone who once avoided challenges completes a multi-day desert trek carrying her own equipment on her back. It happens when a participant learns to ask for help instead of facing every obstacle alone. The transformation is visible everywhere: In conversations, the classroom, on the hiking trail, the kitchen, during volunteer projects, around the campfire and so on. Most importantly, many discover for the first time that adults can be trusted. The result is a group of young women increasingly willing to take risks, dream bigger dreams, assume leadership roles, and envision futures that once felt impossible. One participant reflected: ***"The Mechina is a safe place to make real change."***

Impact of the War

The war remained a constant backdrop throughout the year. Many participants arrived carrying anxiety, grief, uncertainty, and fear about both their personal futures and the future of the country. Staff members faced repeated reserve duty call-ups and personal losses. Yet throughout these challenges the Mechina remained a pillar of stability. A participant reflected: ***"Going through a war together showed us that the staff was truly there for us, no matter what happened."*** For young women who have often experienced inconsistency and abandonment, this steadfastness was a major point of change. The lesson was not simply that difficult times can be endured, but that they do not have to endure them alone.

Graduate Support and Alumni Achievements

IsraElite's commitment to participants does not end at graduation. Today, the program's alumni network includes approximately 250 graduates across 12 cohorts, many of whom continue to rely on IsraElite as they navigate military service, higher education, employment, and independent adulthood. Through a dedicated Graduate Program Coordinator, alumnae receive individualized mentoring, educational guidance, scholarship support, crisis intervention, and assistance accessing essential rights and resources. The program's long-term impact is reflected in the achievements of its graduates. More than 80% of alumnae have served in meaningful military roles, and many continue to contribute through reserve service.

Since October 7, graduates serving as combat soldiers, medics, and search-and-rescue personnel have been called to reserve duty, demonstrating extraordinary resilience and leadership. These accomplishments are especially significant for young women who only a few years earlier often struggled with basic stability, self-confidence, and personal direction. As the ongoing war has increased the challenges facing young adults, IsraElite's support has become even more critical. Many graduates are balancing military service, reserve duty,

financial pressures, housing needs, and academic studies, often without strong family support systems. The Graduate Program provides personalized assistance that helps them remain on track, overcome obstacles, and make informed decisions about their future. All recent graduates entered military or national service, and none have dropped out of their service frameworks.

A cornerstone of the alumni program is the annual scholarship initiative. On January 26, 2026, 22 graduates received academic scholarships, many of them the first in their families to pursue higher education. Scholarship recipients are currently studying fields including law, nursing, education, social work, communications, public policy, and physics, while several alumnae have already progressed to master's degree studies. The scholarship ceremony brings current participants and graduates together, creating meaningful conversations about military service, higher education, leadership, and life after the Mechina. For current participants, these graduates are not distant role models but tangible examples of what can be achieved. Increasingly, graduates return as mentors and volunteers, offering guidance, encouragement, and practical support to younger cohorts. This cycle of giving back reflects one of IsraElite's most important outcomes: young women who once needed support become leaders who strengthen and inspire the next generation. As one alumna shared: ***"I went from being the person who needed support to becoming someone who could support others."***

Conclusion

When asked about the greatest achievement of the year, IsraElite Director Hadas does not talk first about enlistment rates, graduation statistics, or program milestones: ***"Every participant who stays until the end of the year is an achievement. Every young woman who does something she never believed she could do is a success."*** That philosophy sits at the heart of IsraElite's work. Success is the young woman who arrives convinced she cannot trust anyone and leaves surrounded by meaningful relationships. It is the participant who never imagined she could lead and discovers she is capable of leading others. It is the young woman who spent years focused on surviving each day and begins to imagine a future worth planning for. It is the graduate who returns years later as a soldier, a student, a mother, a professional, or a mentor, standing before the next generation and showing them what is possible.

The true impact of IsraElite cannot be measured only in the 26 graduates who completed the program this year, the 24 who are entering military service, or the 250 young women who are now part of the alumni network. It is found in the confidence gained, the trust rebuilt, the horizons expanded, and the belief restored. Over ten months, young women who often arrive carrying years of hardship, instability, and disappointment begin to rewrite the stories they tell about themselves. They learn that their circumstances do not define them, that they are worthy of investing in, and that they have the power to shape their own futures. **We are grateful to the Matanel Foundation for its partnership and support, which helps make this transformative journey possible for each young woman who participates in the program.** That is the enduring story of Mechina IsraElite: creating the conditions for vulnerable young women not only to overcome adversity, but to flourish, lead, contribute, and build lives filled with purpose, belonging, and possibility.

