

# The UK Jewish Youth Movements Israel Gap Year Programme

**An exploration of the Israel Gap Year programme:  
how can we best ensure the continuation,  
growth and quality of the Gap Year experience in Israel?**

## **Research team:**

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## **Executive Summary**

Key issues and findings are as follows:

1. 30% of Jewish 18 year olds take a Gap Year after finishing school.
2. 17% of Jewish 18 year olds currently choose an Israel Gap Year.
3. That percentage is decreasing.
4. The cost of the Israel Gap Year has risen from £7,000 - £11,000 in three years.
5. That cost is within proportion of some non-Israel Gap Year programmes. It is higher than others.
6. For many families, the cost of Israel Gap Year is prohibitive. The finances of the Israel Gap Year must be reviewed. This must include issues related to length, structure and content of the year, bursaries, saving schemes, raising funds etc.
7. The variable quality of the *Machon* and the price of the *Machon* is making it a challenging component of the programme.
8. The volunteering programme must address the issues stated in the UJIA Review of Volunteering paper (2008)
9. Better marketing will lead to higher recruitment. Marketing of the UJIA Israel Gap Year needs to be as sophisticated as marketing for non-Israel Gap Years
10. Follow through of *chanichim* after Israel Tour must be better addressed by the Youth Movements in the UK.
11. The possibility of developing shorter options (5-6 months) must be explored seriously.
12. The option of making the programme modular – 3 month modules that participants can pick and choose from and opt in and out of – must be explored.
13. UJIA and the Youth Movements must explore the possibility of better integration between the sections of the Gap Year.
14. UJIA and the Youth Movements should explore the desirability and possibility of including a three month component overseas, possibly volunteering in Europe or in a developing country.
15. The staffing of the Israel Experience team should be reviewed to ensure adequate cover both in the UK and in Israel, particularly at present when staff cuts and turnover of staff is acute.
16. The impact of the Gap Year on its participants is one of its unique selling points and should not be under-estimated. It should be integrated into the marketing strategy.

## Context

The UJIA Israel Experience Department supports a wide range of educational trips to Israel for schools, synagogues and the Zionist Youth Movements, creating programmes targeted to the specific needs of the trip organiser. They offer experiences that are “life-changing, fun and educational, that the participants will never forget” (UJIA website July 2009). The UJIA Israel Experience Department runs a number of short and long term programmes to Israel for participants who are over eighteen years old, supporting and working with the British Zionist Youth Movements and other organisations that offer a wide range of Gap Year options in Israel for eighteen year olds. “There is a Gap Year programme to suit all” (UJIA Website, July 2009).

We know that approximately 17% of Jewish eighteen year olds choose a Gap Year in Israel, primarily through UJIA Israel Experience, together with other suppliers. This number represents just over half of all Jewish eighteen year olds who choose to take a Gap Year before proceeding to higher education or into the workplace. Our current programmes vary but typically include a *Machon* (leadership institute) programme or study and *hadracha* (youth leadership) programme, most often in Jerusalem, as well as a volunteering programme in the Galil or elsewhere, and an “options” element, which may include a period spent on Kibbutz or engaged in a further volunteering programme, for example Magen David Adom or the Fire Service.

In the past few years, an increasing range and number of Gap Year opportunities are available outside Israel for young people, and since 2007, a decreasing number of participants have chosen Israel Gap Year programmes (see Appendix One).

This review has explored each aspect of the Israel Gap Year and given us the opportunity to speak to a wide range of stakeholders in the programme, as well as to look at Gap Year provision beyond the Israel experience and beyond the Jewish community, in order to be in a position to ensure the continuation and growth of the UJIA Gap Year experience in Israel. The terms of reference for the review can be found in Appendix Two.

## The Desired Outcomes

The purposes of this review have been to do the following:

1. Gain a full and detailed mapping and analysis of the Israel Gap Year experience from the perspective of a wide range of stakeholders.
2. Put the UJIA into context with Gap Year options outside of the UJIA framework, and take into account literature around the subject of Gap Year.
3. Identify a list of key issues and questions to be debated in order to make decisions and plan for change.
4. Enable discussion to take place to debate these key issues.
5. Make clear recommendations with a timeline for implementation.

## The Research Framework:

This has primarily been a qualitative research project and interviews and focus groups have aimed to provide a rounded picture of the following elements:

- Putting the Israel Gap Year in context
- The aims of the Israel Gap Year
- The content and structure of the Israel Gap Year
- The successes and challenges of the programme
- Desires and needs in order to develop the programme
- The relationship between the Youth Movements and UJIA.

We have also used the interviews and focus groups to gain an understanding of the key Gap Year stakeholder interests and their measures of success, as well as exploring the marketing, recruitment, budgeting and administration of the Gap Year programme. Interviewees have included our Israel based suppliers and providers, representatives of all the Youth Movements who run a Gap Year, both in Israel and the UK, UJIA professionals and lay leaders, past and future participants, those who chose not to participate in a UJIA Israel Gap Year, parents of those who participated and those who did not and senior professionals in the UK and Israel from the Jewish educational world. In total **seventy one** individual interviews were conducted by the UJIA research team. A further total of **thirty two** current participants on Gap Years, sampled from every Movement, took part in focus groups in Israel. Interview protocols can be found in Appendix Three.

Desk research has included a comprehensive survey of alternative Gap Year providers, to provide a comparison for UJIA in terms of content, marketing and budgeting. Statistical information from UJIA and information from papers previously written has provided helpful context, specifically the paper Exploring Volunteering During the UJIA Gap Year, (Miller 2008), and the MASA Israel Experience Debrief Report (Freeman and Cohen 2007). Academic literature related to the Gap Year experience is also cited to give further background.

A Review Management Group chaired by David Pliener, UJIA Israel Experience lay leader, met with Dr Helena Miller, Director of Research and Evaluation, Lisa Zeital, Research Assistant, Roy Graham, Director of UJIA UK Programme, Richard Goldstein, Director of UJIA Israel Experience and Ben Frazer, UJIA Gap Year Co-ordinator during the process of the research to oversee the process. The research was conducted jointly under the auspices of the UJIA Research and Evaluation Department and the UJIA Israel Experience Department.

The research, analysis and report writing took place during a five month period from April to August 2009, in Israel and in the UK.

## Defining the Gap Year

A Gap Year represents a break from formal education or employment for the individual to find time to engage in other experiences (Simpson 2005). It has become to be known as “any period of time between three and twenty four months which an individual takes out of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory” ( DfES 2004). For the purpose of this review, “Gap Year” means the programme provided by the Jewish Youth Movements in the UK, in conjunction with the UJIA, for young people aged 18-19 in the year after they have completed school.

## The Rise of the Gap Year

Young people have been taking a “year out” of formal education or work since the 1960s (Butcher 1993, Simpson 2004). The term “Gap Year” is more recent and corresponds with the growing trend for greater numbers of young people to take a year out in the last fifteen years. The year out has evolved from a symbol of rebellion and escape from the formal institutions of education and employment, into a constructive and planned preparation for University or work (Cremin 2007). UCAS, the University admissions body, endorse this point:

We at UCAS believe that by adding the experience of a planned year out...students actively improve their chances of successfully completing a course. Quite simply experience complements education. Universities and Colleges widely recognise the potential benefits of taking a year out which, when well organised, extend into later life. (Anthony McClaran, UCAS, <http://www.yearoutgroup.org/>)

Whilst there are no accurate statistics, an estimated 200,000 British young people aged 18-25 annually take a Gap Year (Brown 2004). The number of UCAS deferred University places has risen from approximately 15,000 to 30,000 from 1995-2003. Our best estimate of the number of Jewish young people who annually take a Gap Year after school is approximately 800-900<sup>1</sup>. Of those, the focus of this review is on the 200-250 eighteen year olds who take a Gap Year with UJIA. This number has been growing slowly in the last fifteen years, apart from the years of the second Intifada (2001-4), where numbers dropped sharply (see Appendix One).

There are a large and growing number of specialist organisations in the UK focusing largely on Gap Year provision. These providers are especially focused on post-school and post-University Gap Years. The DfES identified “between 80 and 100 specialist organisations” providing Gap Year experiences in 2001. This number has undoubtedly grown since then. The focus is on overseas travel although the DfES estimate that up to half those undertaking a Gap Year take advantage of opportunities in the UK.

The UJIA undertook an overview of overseas options available to those contemplating a post-school Gap Year. They all offer programmes in living and working in a voluntary capacity abroad from two weeks to twelve months. There is a wide range of programmes which can broadly be categorised as follows:

- Animals and conservation
- Child care
- Teaching
- Community work/humanitarian aid
- Sports
- Subject/skills based courses
- Combination of two or more of the above

In addition, there are companies which put together structured itineraries for Gap Year individuals and small groups who want to spend one to twelve months on world-wide travel and leisure.

Whilst there appear to be more opportunities to teach English in a setting overseas than anything else, the range of options overall is impressive. Gap Year participants could be

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from UJIA Israel Experience Gap Year numbers and information received from Jewish secondary schools.

involved in Turtle and Marine Conservation in Sri Lanka, or help villagers in the Amazon Rain Forest to develop organic sustainable farming. They could be caring for orphans in Africa or Romania, or helping to organise the world renowned carnival in Rio de Janeiro. These are exciting and very diverse possibilities and offer eighteen year olds a wide range of choice.

The majority of providers offer a flexible amount of time on each programme – Frontier for example, which offers a conservation and education programme, takes participants from two weeks to a year and Changing Worlds, which offers volunteering opportunities in medical and education placements (amongst others) in Ghana, takes participants from three to six months.

One common characteristic of most of the options on offer is that the Gap Year experience that they provide usually, although not always, takes place through one placement, one course or one volunteering experience. There is not usually the opportunity to both study and volunteer for example, and few of the organisations provide holistic experiences – once the participants finish their working or volunteering hours each day, their time is their own.

The cost of programmes is very variable, ranging from £900 - £4000 for a three month programme. The majority of opportunities are towards the higher end of that scale (see Appendix Four). Unsurprisingly, as the DfES (2004) observes, those who take advantage of Gap Year programmes are predominantly white, with few ethnic minority participants and from relatively affluent middle-class backgrounds.

## **The UK Jewish Youth Movements Israel Gap Year**

Almost all the Jewish Youth Movements in the UK run Gap Year programmes for 18-19 year olds in the year after they leave school and before University or work begins. The “year” has until this year (2009) been in fact approximately ten months. Participants arrive in Israel at the end of August and leave for home at the end of June. The primary reason for the programme ending in June is so that participants can contribute in the UK to their Youth Movements summer camp programme and then to have time to prepare for the University start date in September. This coming year, 2009-10, due to the economic recession, and so as not to significantly raise costs to participants, programmes will be up to two months shorter. In addition, the UJIA now supports a five month Gap Year programme, and at least one Youth Movement provides an option for participants to join the year half way through.

The content of the programmes is provided by a range of Israel-based suppliers. Youth Movements that affiliate to a world organisation, for example Bnei Akiva, FZY and RSY, usually participate under their umbrella schemes. Those without world-wide Youth Movements operate through Israel Experience Ltd., together with the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Each Youth Movement negotiates its own structure and content. The programme is always broken down into components, either two, three or four, of between one and five months each. At least one component is an educational one, ranging from participation in the *Machon I'Madrichei Chutz I'Aretz*, the Youth Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, to Jewish/Israel studies provided for the participants in individual Youth Movements e.g. FZY Jerusalem Studies component and the RSY/LJY Etgar “real world Israel” programme.



The second component that all the Youth Movements have in common is an option that focuses on volunteering. This may be a three month period volunteering on a UJIA programme in the Northern Galil, working in schools and UJIA supported projects, or volunteering with one of the Israeli services, for example Magen David Adom or the Fire Fighters, or community volunteering (again often teaching) in different parts of the country.

Other options available through some of the Youth Movements, but not all, include spending time in a yeshiva or seminary, working within the framework of the Israeli army, volunteering on kibbutz and *Shvil Yisroel* (a six week hike from South to North of Israel).

For fuller details of the structure of programmes for all the UK Youth Movements, please see Appendix Five of this report.

## Why Choose an Israel Gap Year Programme?

According to the DfES (2004), Gap Years are beneficial to participants in the following ways:

- They enhance in general a variety of life skills, for example developing independence, problem solving, team and leadership skills and management of money
- They can lead to improved educational performance through enhanced maturity and focus.
- They can lead to better informed career choices
- They can lead to a substantial gain in non academic qualifications and skills in a wide range of areas

The Israel Gap Year is no exception and interviewees across the stakeholders cited the reasons given above for choosing a Gap Year. There are of course additional specific purposes for choosing an Israel Gap Year. These include:

- Building a long lasting relationship with Israel
- Building a knowledge base of Jewish History and Israel
- Building an understanding of Jewish peoplehood
- Developing commitment to a UK Youth Movement
- Undertaking a personal Jewish journey
- Developing *hadracha* (youth leadership) skills
- Developing skills for, and commitment to University campus activism

The professionals interviewed cited additional reasons:

Ensuring the next generation of pro-Israel Jews and preventing assimilation (partner professional, Israel)

Engagement with Israel in an honest and mature depth (partner professional, Israel)

A strong agenda of Aliyah (Youth Movement professional, Israel)

A starting point for future involvement in the UK Jewish community (UJIA professional, UK)

To hug and wrestle with Israel (Israeli *shlichah*, UK)

The Gap Year participants who were interviewed listed all the reasons already mentioned but, not surprisingly emphasised the social elements:

To meet new Jewish people (participant, Israel)

The group aspect was the main attraction (participant, Israel)

Some specifically mentioned that they were attracted to an Israel Gap Year because of the opportunity for learning and others felt differently:

I want a break from studying – no responsibility (participant, Israel)

Although Hebrew was not separately cited by any of the professionals, the majority of participants interviewed mentioned the opportunity to learn Hebrew as a reason for choosing an Israel Gap Year.

Thus, we can see that the Israel Gap Year adds a value added dimension to the experience of choosing a Gap Year.

The majority of 18-19 year olds interviewed were Gap Year participants, but six young people were interviewed who had chosen to take a Gap Year outside of the Israel Gap Year framework. They all spent, or were intending to spend their year working and travelling. Only one of the six chose a volunteering option (a conservation project in Africa). The others travelled from between three to six months during the second part of the year. All had been on Israel Tour at age 16. Reasons for not choosing an Israel Gap Year included a desire to travel to unknown parts of the world, to engage in new or “different” activities, and a lack of enthusiasm for the programme on offer:

The programme never really appealed to me – the *Machon* programme did, but the volunteering not at all (non-participant, UK)

I've been to Israel a lot. I want to see other parts of the world now (non-participant, UK)

Only one of the non-participants mentioned the high cost as a factor in their decision-making. This could be because all were undertaking other Gap Year travel options which were also expensive.

A parents' focus group whose children were not taking a Gap Year but were moving straight from school to tertiary education was convened. Reasons for their children not taking a Gap Year at all included:

- Inability or lack of desire to meet the high costs of the Gap Year
- Anxiety that the young person would find it hard to return to studying after a year away from a learning environment
- Worry that by delaying university start, the fees would increase.



- Concern that the young person would have unnecessary further year(s) before graduating
- Suspicion that a Gap Year would be a frivolous and inappropriate use of time

Some of the parents were prepared to consider the option of a Gap Year for their children after they had graduated from University, but even so, three of the six felt that their children should find paid employment as quickly as possible after graduation.

The Heads of Informal Education interviewed at both of the large Jewish secondary schools stated that they promote Gap Years in Israel strongly and both felt that all students should undertake a Gap Year before going on to higher education or the world of work.

## Issues

### a) Finance

The Israel Gap Year has risen in cost from approximately £7,000 for the 2006-7 cohort to £11,000 for the 2009-10 cohort – a rise of more than 50% in three years. All prices in Israel are set in dollars and this large increase is due to the significant decline of the pound against the dollar. This is compounded by the world-wide economic recession. Additional costs have to be factored in: a monthly allowance from the parent for the participant, cell phone bills, costs related to parents visiting their child once during the programme. This adds approximately £2-3,000 to the cost of the Gap Year.

Seen in context of the non-Israel Gap Year options, this figure, whilst extremely high, is not widely out of proportion with non-Israel options. It is well within the range of the more expensive options and compares favourably with Quest's expeditions to Africa and South America (\$5,000 for 4 months) and Art History Abroad courses in Italy (£6,550 for 6 weeks). It is also worth bearing in mind, that for parents who have been used to paying school fees, the cost of an Israel Gap Year programme is roughly equivalent to one year of Independent school fees. It could be concluded, therefore, that the Israel Gap Year represents good value for money, when compared to other programmes. The Israel Gap Year is also very good value for money when compared to the cost of Israel Tour, which was approximately £2,500 for just under four weeks in 2009. In general, the professionals, parents and participants interviewed believe that the year is good value for money. Those who are thinking about a Gap Year in the future thought it was very expensive considering what it represented.

The different elements of the year are not equal in cost. The elements of the programme which are heavily reliant on teaching staff and *madrichim*, for example the *Machon*, is more expensive per capita per day than the volunteering programme.

Nevertheless, these prices are out of reach of many families. If cost is a deciding factor, then there is a choice of programmes in the wider market at a fraction of the cost of the Israel Gap Year. Project Trust costs £4,660 for a 12 month volunteering programme in Africa and China and Frontier costs £2,495 for five months of working with a Conservation and Development NGO.

The high cost was cited as a reason for not being able to recruit more participants on Gap Year and directly relates to the marketing strategy, which must address this issue as suggested in the next section.

People are put off applying for subsidies as it is so expensive in the first place”  
(year twelve student, UK)

One of the interviewees observed that the high cost is

The elephant in the room. We can tweak as many aspects [of the Gap Year experience] as possible, but it really won't increase the numbers nearly as much as cutting the price would” (partner professional, UK)

**ACTION:** The finances of the Israel Gap Year must be reviewed. This must be related to content, length and structure of the year and explore further development of bursaries, the creation of savings schemes, and work opportunities for young people prior to participating.

## **b) Marketing and Recruitment**

At present, all the Youth Movements market Israel Gap Years through brochures and information in the Masa booklet, as well as through their websites. In addition, the UJIA markets Israel Gap Year through the website, promotional DVDs and presentations.

There is a clear perception amongst Youth Movement, partner and UJIA professionals in the UK and Israel that better marketing of the Israel Gap Year would lead to increased recruitment. Marketing needs to start after Israel Tour and build up through year twelve and the first half of year thirteen. There is a recognition that some Youth Movements are better at maintaining links with those who have gone on Tour, than others. One of the Youth Movements has follow up as follows:

targeted phone calls, leadership (*hadracha*) course, peer led events, Tour reunions, football tournament, UCAS you Can evenings, Young Enterprise etc (Youth Movement professional, London)

The Youth Movements however, have one primary reason to retain the involvement of those who have gone on Tour and that is to provide leadership and *madrachim* for their Summer Camps. The second reason for retaining those who have been on Tour is to increase recruitment on Israel Gap Year. The kinds of areas to address that were suggested by our interviewees included:

- Running events for those who had been on Tour
- Have a dedicated marketing and recruitment officer
- Maintain relationships with those who have been on Tour
- Promote financial incentives and savings schemes
- Enable participants to receive accreditation for the year (towards University or Duke of Edinburgh award)
- Increase the variety of options available for Israel Gap Year
- Increase the marketing routes e.g. use Facebook, Twitter etc.
- Increase targeting and marketing to individuals
- The quality and message of marketing must be able to compete with non-Israel Gap Year marketing.

In addition, various other comments included:

A large percentage [of pupils] don't see the benefit. They've already done the Israel thing. The marketing must convince them that a year is going to be different (educator, Jewish secondary school, London)

Enable Israel to sell its Gap Year cohesively at Gap Year conferences (e.g. NEC) alongside other Gap Year providers (UJIA professional, London)

The Youth Movements are the vehicle for Gap Year. They need to be helped to be innovative. Gap Year must attract those beyond the Youth Movements (UJIA professional, London)

One of the other ways in which the marketing could be improved, is for the details of the Gap Year to be confirmed well in advance. Inevitably not all details of the year are known, but often the exact possibilities for volunteering for example are unknown until several months into the year. Several interviewees echoed the words of this Movement worker:

Actually finalising the details of the year now will make it easier to advertise it (Youth Movement worker, UK)

We are in a situation of increasing competition for both the destination and the options available for Gap Years as well as decreasing disposable income and financial flexibility. The numbers on Israel Gap Year are reduced this year (2009-10). The marketing strategy urgently needs to address this situation in order to maximise recruitment.

**ACTION:** Marketing strategies by both UJIA and the Youth Movements must be reviewed, and a developed strategy implemented. Marketing of the Israel Gap Year has to compete with an increasing range of alternative options.

### c) The Content

It was clear from the interviewees that whilst there were common threads in terms of perceived value of different aspects of the content of the year, there was no absolute consensus. In general our interviewees suggested that the Israel Gap Year must include the following:

- Hebrew
- Jewish and Israel studies
- *Tiyulim* (exploring the country)
- *Hadracha* (leadership skills)
- Volunteering
- Encounter with Israelis

Whilst there were many positive comments about each aspect of the programme, there are also specific issues currently with almost every aspect of the programme and our interviewees were forthright with their comments:

*Machon* is not working and is expensive. We need a new model (UJIA professional, UK)

The educational content is not engaging young people (UJIA professional, UK)

The volunteering is tokenistic and often boring (partner professional, Israel)

Interviewees did recognise that some effort was being employed to improve certain aspects. One of the Youth Movements observed that the Volunteering elements were “slowly improving”. When we re-visited the Review of the UJIA Volunteering programme, undertaken in 2008, we felt that there were many recommendations from that report which had still not been resolved. But, in the Spring 2009, a Living Bridge co-ordinator was employed in the Galil, and part of her remit is to address the Gap Year volunteering programme. It must be a UJIA priority for 2009-10 to improve the volunteering sections of the Gap Year, and to seriously address all issues detailed in the 2008 report.

The content of the *Machon* is another particularly problematic element. The director acknowledges that “*Machon* is certainly not suitable for everyone”, but strongly advocates for a high quality programme in leadership and Jewish and Israel related issues as being a fundamental element of the Israel Gap Year. This view is shared by the majority of the UJIA, Youth Movement and partner professionals interviewed. The issue is not whether to include a study or educational element to the Israel Gap Year, but how to do so as meaningfully as possibly.

Many of the Youth Movements do not support the *Machon* at present, preferring to run their own study and learning elements of the programme, for example the FZY Jerusalem Studies programme and the Netzer Etgar programme. These do not necessarily come in as cheaper options, but the Youth Movements feel that the content can be specifically tailored for their participants. This does mean that participants do not have the opportunity to live and study with a broader range of participants than their own Youth Movement, but the Youth Movements argue that it is more important to provide a bespoke programme that is suitable.

The Youth Movements all include an element of Hebrew language learning during the year. For those on *Machon*, this is one of the regular classes, for those who volunteer, Hebrew lessons form part of the enrichment programme. The lessons do not always engage the students and insufficient levels of teaching are provided. This is primarily due to the prohibitive cost of providing multiple teachers for each cohort, and the widely varying base levels of Hebrew language of the participants. Participants can spend the year with very little encounter with Hebrew. The most successful Hebrew learning occurs in two contexts: a) when participants are working in a Hebrew speaking environment e.g with Magen David Adom, or in schools, and b) during a yeshiva or intensive text learning situation.

There is a perception, prevalent amongst the professionals in and out of the UJIA, in Israel and in the UK, that the content of the Israel Gap Year has not changed for many years.

The content is still the same as 15-20 years ago – it doesn’t address the needs of 18 year olds today (UJIA professional, UK)

Gap Year is caught in a time warp – it’s very narrow (partner professional, Israel)

The participants, whilst critical of certain elements of the content, were by and large, overwhelmingly positive about the content of their Israel Gap Year. The common thread was that there was no clear consensus! Whilst one individual may have “hated” a certain element, another may have “loved” the same element. It is clear that the individual’s interests, abilities, personalities and prior experiences all contributed to the level of engagement with and enthusiasm for the different aspects of the content.

I loved teaching in school (participant, Israel)

I didn't want to teach – we needed more options (participant, Israel)

I was very disappointed with the classes on *Machon* (participant, Israel)

I had a really good time on *Machon* (participant, Israel)

One theme that did reoccur was that participants wanted greater choice with the options and volunteering elements of the programme. Many were not happy with the narrow possibilities, most of which were assisting in schools. There were also several suggestions to increase the “pluralism” aspects of the Gap Year. This would give participants opportunities to meet a broader range of the population, both from within the Jewish community and outside it.

Several of the UJIA and partner professionals interviewed suggested that the Israel Gap Year should be more tailored to individuals or small groups – to suit individual preferences and choices of programming. For example:

a programme specifically designed for those who want to be political activists on their return from Israel. Their year could include spending time at the Israel Foreign Ministry and the Interdisciplinary Centre in Haifa. It could include time at the UN meeting relevant organisations or work experience with lobby groups, shadowing an Israeli politician or someone in the diplomatic corps (UJIA professional, UK)

One aspect of the Israel Gap Year that was very important to the participants was actually not the formal programme but the social and group experience. Many mentioned the deepening relationship they were developing with their Youth Movements, and we know that the most active members of the Youth Movements are by and large the *bogrim* (graduates) of the Israel Gap Year. The social aspects of the Gap Year met, and often exceeded, expectations. Even where participants mentioned that there had been group issues occurring at times during the year, these always reached some kind of resolution and had not left a lasting bad feeling within the group.

The Youth Movements talked about “amazing” and “challenging” groups and two of the groups in particular in the current year had individual participants who were problematic. Sometimes, the programme or the group is not right for an individual and that participant returns home. Sometimes, individuals test the patience of the *madrichim* and teachers with challenging behaviours. Often these issues are able to be accommodated within the group and occasionally, an individual is asked to return home.

**ACTION:** The issues with *Machon* must be addressed. The issues already identified in the Volunteering Review (Miller 2008) must be addressed. The particular issues related to Israel Journey must be addressed. The UJIA and the Youth Movements must look to broaden possibilities for the content of the year.

#### d) Structure

The structure of the Israel Gap Year has been broadly similar for many years – two to four separate periods through the year, to include learning and volunteering, and interspersed with *tiyulim* and encounters of various types. We received more suggestions and advice about ways of addressing the structure of the year than for any other part of our interviews



and focus groups. Again, there were differing views. The following summarise the range of replies:

- **Order of the year:** in general, the year should move from greater dependence to greater independence. The model of *Machon* first, then independent living in a flat, is a good one, although there were some who felt that the groups should start with a group bonding experience, for example kibbutz.
- **Length of time for year sections:** many people suggested shortening or lengthening sections. There was no clear consensus.
- **Modular approach:** Several of the professionals interviewed suggested that the Gap Year be approached as a series of separate, self-contained modules, and participants then choose to opt in to as many modules as they want. This adds an element of choice of the length and cost of the year.
- **Integration:** many interviewees suggested that the sections of the year are too separate. Prepare for volunteering whilst on *Machon*. Continue Hebrew classes through the year. More explicitly follow up on themes through the year.
- **Length of the year:** this coming year, the ten month programme will be shortened by most Youth Movements to 8-9 months for financial reasons. We already have a five month Israel Journey experience and BBYO give the option of a five month as well as a ten month programme. There needs to be debate as to whether the programme could or should be further shortened. Many non-Israel Gap Years give a range of options - you can participate on some programmes from between one and six months for example. The professionals and participants all had varied views on this issue. Advantages of shortening the programme include: reduced cost to participants, possibility of participants working for some months to pay for the "year", possibility of participants doing some other travel or some other experience in their Gap Year. Disadvantages include: less opportunity to immerse yourself in Israel, less time on options or fewer different options, less of a "once in a lifetime" adventure.
- **Including a non-Israel component as part of the Israel Gap Year:** views were divided as to whether the whole year should be spent in Israel. Two options are: a) spend part of the year working with and learning about another Jewish community in Europe or elsewhere b) spend part of the year volunteering in a developing country in Africa or elsewhere. Some participants and professionals felt that this would enhance the year and attract more participants, and as many felt that this was not within the aims, ethos or remit of a UJIA Israel Gap Year, and would be detrimental to the overall experience.
- **Expectations:** these need to be more accurately based on reality and better managed by UJIA and the Youth Movements in relation to the options, the possible choices, the accommodations and the programme in general (Israel Journey participants were particularly vocal about this aspect)
- **Tiyulim:** in general these were a highlight of the year, and a welcome break from the regular routine of both *Machon* and volunteering.
- **Independence:** there was a general feeling among participants that the year begins in an over structured way. *Machon* is "too much like school". On the other hand, participants - and parents - also very much appreciated having a support network to help them through the year. Some felt restricted, others felt cared for. There was a general perception by all stakeholders that the participants are "well looked after". I think that the attitude towards feeling restricted would have been more marked in a year when the political situation would have warranted less personal freedom for the participants.



- **Chofesh (holidays):** The professionals had very little to say about this aspect of the year; the participants and parents far more: many found the Autumn chagim difficult, particularly those with no family connections in Israel. A week or more of unstructured time came too early in the year for them. The Hanukkah and Pesach breaks were welcomed by all participants, although several participants commented that they were very expensive (having to pay for accommodation, travel and living expenses).

**ACTION:** Decisions must be taken addressing the issues raised related to the length and structure of the year, including shorter options, modules, better integration. The issue of whether or not to include a non-Israel component is clearly as much a philosophical and ideological one as a practical one and UJIA and the Youth Movements must reach an agreed solution.

### e) Impact

The impact of the Israel year on the **individual** can broadly be divided into the three following, overlapping, areas:

- **Impact on relationship with Israel:** for the majority of participants and graduates, the Israel Gap Year has a hugely positive impact on their relationship with Israel. The professionals interviewed all listed ways in which Israel impacted, from developing a love for, and understanding of the country and the people, to frequent return visits, to lasting links made with Israelis, to becoming advocates for Israel at university. Some of the Youth Movements explicitly aim to encourage Aliyah and those Youth Movements feel that their aim is met. For a minority of participants, the impact on their relationship with Israel is not positive. We spoke to individuals on two programmes who had become disaffected with Israel as a result of the political challenges and social/economic inequalities they had witnessed. This significantly impacted on their overall outcome of the year. Several UJIA and partner professionals mentioned the concept of “hugging and wrestling” with Israel, a phrase at the centre of the philosophy of the Makom – the Israel Engagement Network of the Jewish Agency, headed by Jonny Ariel in Jerusalem.
- **Impact on life skills:** All interviewees in all categories agreed that the impact on life skills was high. As a result of participating on Israel Gap Year, individuals are more independent, better able to manage personal budgets, better able to get on with a range of people, better equipped to look after themselves. Parents and past participants interviewed felt strongly that graduates of Israel Gap Year are better prepared and more resilient when it comes to settling at University.
- **Impact on Jewish Identity:** There was less consensus with regard to this impact. There is no doubt that there is an impact on Jewish Identity, and professionals and participants described having explored and discovered, and had appreciated the chance to go on a “personal Jewish journey” (partner professional, Israel). Some of the Youth Movement professionals questioned the positive impact on Jewish Identity for a minority of the participants, for whom the year impacted negatively on Jewish Identity. “The kids come to be independent – not to be Jewish – it doesn’t touch their Jewishness” (Youth Movement professional, Israel). The development, or not, of a stronger Jewish Identity is not always related to the religiosity (or not) of the particular Youth Movement. Many interviewees in each sector felt

that “Jewish Identity” was not the same as “Israel Identity”, or even “Jewish peoplehood identity”.

The impact on the **Youth Movements** is considerable and it is clear that in this goal, the Israel Gap Year is a huge success. The participants become the leaders of their Youth Movements, advocates (and *madrichim*) of Israel Tour and Gap Year, advocates for Zionism and Israel as central components of their Youth Movements’ aims and practices. Gap Year graduates become the Youth Movement workers after university and Israel Gap Year becomes their reference point in many contexts. In their Jewish working and communal lives, when meeting someone new, very often connections that are made are related to when they were on *Machon*, who their *madrichim* were, with which Youth Movement they were in Israel.

Graduates of an Israel Gap Year impact on the broader **Jewish community**. They become advocates for Israel at University (already mentioned) and are key activists for both Israel and Judaism on campuses, where they attend and run Jewish Societies, become involved in UJS, CST, and raise money for Jewish (and non-Jewish) causes.

In the years after University, communal professionals and lay leaders are represented by many graduates of Israel Gap Year. In the past four annual cohorts of the UJIA Adam Science Young Leadership programme, more than 60% of participants were graduates of an Israel Gap Year.

A further piece of research to map the communal, career and life choices of Israel Gap Year graduates would give the UK community a more informed picture of this aspect of the impact of the year in Israel.

**ACTION:** The impact of the Israel Gap Year on the individual is one of its unique selling points and this should link to the developing marketing strategy. The impact could be the focus of on-going research as detailed above.

#### **f) The Youth Movements and the UJIA**

By and large, the interviewees from the Youth Movements were positive about their relationship with the UJIA. They recognised that the UJIA was very helpful, both financially and in terms of expert advice and support, and that UJIA gives a “*hechscher*” to the programme, validating it for parents and other adults. They did make constructive suggestions for developing the relationship with regard to Gap Year:

- Provide more inter-Movement opportunities in Israel and in the UK
- Become a more proactive, critical friend
- Advocate on behalf of the Youth Movements
- Help with marketing and recruitment
- Help Youth Movements adhere to the Standards Handbook
- Encourage Youth Movements to develop new programmes
- Employ an educator to help develop content of programmes in Israel
- More funding

And they did report some challenges, which included:

Random UJIA people coming in to do one off programmes (Youth Movement professional, Israel)

Smoother process needs to be implemented to get bursaries out quicker (Youth Movement professional, UK)

The support given by the UJIA representative in Israel was repeatedly acknowledged as important necessary and very helpful by the Youth Movements and also by several of the partner professionals in Israel.

UJIA personnel value the relationships built with the Youth Movements. There is a strong recognition that the Youth Movements must be involved in developing future vision for a Gap Year and they must feel part of the process. Any developments must be seen to support the Youth Movements' aims and programmes, not to conflict with them. An explicit aim of UJIA is to encourage the Youth Movements to develop a relationship with areas and projects in the North of Israel. It is important that the Youth Movements do more than just visit a UJIA project. They should learn why UJIA is in the North and how they can make a personal and collective difference by engaging in the North.

A comment voiced by many of our UJIA and partner interviewees in Israel and the UK is that the Youth Movements are inherently conservative about making any change to the Gap Year – either in the content or the structure. The Youth Movements on the other hand, do not rule out change, but see any potential for change directly related to the level of funding they receive from UJIA, to enable them to afford to make changes.

**ACTION:** Enable more groups to engage with UJIA in the North of Israel. This will relate to finance and marketing.

#### **g) UJIA Internal Administration and Management**

UJIA Israel Experience is a department of the UJIA UK Programme. It is led by its director, Richard Goldstein, and has had, until July 2009, a total staff team of eight:

Avi Gillis: school and synagogue programmes

Ben Fraser: long term programmes (including Gap Year)

Jonny Bunt: Birthright (*Taglit*) programmes

Avital Rawson: MASA programmes

Simon Levy: short term programmes

Toni Rickenback: office manager

Lerona Gelb: office administrator

As well as the above staff members, Adam Saville, UJIA UK programme representative in Israel, whilst not being directly part of this team, has effectively worked most closely with Richard and his team to ensure the smooth running of all the Israel programmes in Israel.

This summer, Richard will have lost three of his programme team members, who are leaving to take up other positions. This is inevitable in a department staffed by young people by and large, who see their role in Israel Experience as a stepping stone to either *aliyah* (Avital), teaching (Simon) or management (Jonny). As such, the years of working in Israel Experience are enormously valuable for the individual in terms of experience and skills gained for future careers. It does not help the stability of the Israel Experience staff team. In addition, the budget has been cut from the UJIA Israel programme to pay for a UK programme representative based in Israel. This is a real challenge in terms of ensuring delivery of a high quality service in all aspects of Israel programming to all sectors of the

client base. It should also be seen as an opportunity to review the staff needs and roles of this department, both in the UK and in Israel.

**ACTION:** A review of staff needs and roles of the Israel Experience department should take place. The needs arising from the departure of the UJIA UK representative in Israel must be addressed as a priority, and UJIA resources deployed to meet the identified needs.

## Making Changes

A summary of recommendation for action as detailed throughout this report is as follows:

1. The finances of the Israel Gap Year must be reviewed. This must be related to content, length and structure of the year and explore further development of subsidies, the creation of savings schemes, and work opportunities for young people prior to participating.
2. Marketing strategies by both UJIA and the Youth Movements must be reviewed, and a developed strategy implemented. Marketing of the Israel Gap Year has to compete with an increasing range of alternative options.
3. The issues with *Machon* must be addressed. The issues already identified in the Volunteering Review (Miller 2008) must be addressed. The particular issues related to Israel Journey must be addressed. The UJIA and the Youth Movements must look to broaden possibilities for the content of the year.
4. Decisions must be taken addressing the issues raised related to the length and structure of the year, including shorter options, modules, better integration. The issue of whether or not to include a non-Israel component is clearly as much a philosophical and ideological one as a practical one and UJIA and the Youth Movements must reach an agreed solution.
5. The impact of the Israel Gap Year is one of its unique selling points and this should link to the developing marketing strategy. The impact should be the focus of on-going research as detailed above.
6. Enable more groups to engage with UJIA in the North of Israel. This will relate to finance and marketing.
7. A review of staff needs and roles of the Israel Experience department should take place. The needs arising from the departure of the UJIA UK representative in Israel must be addressed as a priority.

The impact and value of the Israel Gap Year on the participants should not be underestimated. The expense of the Israel Gap Year, the current economic climate, the range of choice of other Gap Year options available and factors related to the quality and structure of the year mean that we are in danger of further losing numbers of participants. Small changes can be done easily and can make a small difference. The UJIA and the Youth Movements will need to decide to what extent they have the desire and the resources to affect real change.

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### **Appendices:**

Appendix One: Statistical Information on Israel Gap Year Take Up

Appendix Two: The Gap Year Review Process – An Exploration of the Israel Gap Year, terms of Reference

Appendix Three: Interview Protocols

Appendix Four: Overview of Organisations That Offer a Gap Year Programme

Appendix Five: Structure of Programmes for UK Youth Movements Gap Year