

# **A Challenging Summer: Israel Tour and Birthright Groups 2014**

## **Support for Madrichim**

### **R E P O R T**

#### **1. Introduction**

This summer has been a challenging and exceptional one for Israel Tour madrichim, who have run Tour during a period of ferocious hostilities between Israel and Gaza, which have impacted on both the itineraries and the day to day running of their groups. They have had to deal with sirens, taking their groups into shelters, hearing explosions afar and nearby, the political situation and last minute changes to itineraries caused by the security situation. This of course, has been in addition to the regular stresses and challenges of being responsible for a group of 35-40 sixteen year olds for three and a half weeks in Israel.

Remarkably, the chanichim have almost without exception had a fantastic time. UJIA felt, however, that it would be the responsible way forward to follow up with all madrichim on their return, to do the following:

- a) To thank the madrichim
- b) To acknowledge concern for the welfare for the madrichim
- c) To see if there are any particular chanichim requiring follow up
- d) To find out the extent to which Tour Providers/YMs/UJIA/taglit/other agencies and individuals were supportive to them and their chanichim before and during the time in Israel
- e) To find out if the madrichim would like/need additional support/counselling etc now that they are home.

- f) To find out whether the madrichim have any advice for UJIA regarding our handling of the situation, handling of the madrichim and YMs, and could this be improved upon for the future.

In addition, we agreed that a letter of appreciation and thanks would be emailed to all madrichim just prior to return. In the email, they were told that a named person (usually their UJIA contact) would 'phone them within a couple of days of their return to debrief and check how they are.

## **2. Telephone Interview:**

The interviews took place at the earliest a couple of days after groups returned (to give the madrichim time to sleep!). The Informal education team members conducted the interviews which were semi structured in format. In total, 68 madrichim led 32 groups on Israel Tour from ten Youth Movements, and in addition 11 madrichim led 5 Birthright groups this summer.

Please see Appendix One for the list of Youth Movements and numbers of Tours.

The Tour groups returned between 25<sup>th</sup> July and 21<sup>st</sup> August. By 29<sup>th</sup> August, 38 of the 79 madrichim had been interviewed, representing eight youth movements, and also representing three of the five Birthright groups.

19 of the 38 madrichim interviewed were male and 19 female. This exact gender split was by chance. There were no obvious differences related to gender in the responses received to the questions.

In the responses to the questions, there were a few occasions where issues that arose were specific to one Youth Movement or another (for example, where the relationship with a particular racaz had been problematic), but in general the responses were not Movement specific (for example whether or not the madrich/a was more, or less, likely to return to Israel).

This report relates to the responses received by 29<sup>th</sup> August 2014.

Please see Appendix Two for a copy of the madrichim interview protocol.

### **3. Levels of Support whilst Leading Israel Tour:**

Every madrich/a stated that they felt that they had a good level of support during Tour. Many madrichim used superlatives to describe the racaz/rakezet: “*amazing*” “*superb*”.

They stated that a good level of support had been provided by the racaz/rakezet, their Movement office team in the UK, their Israel Tour providers, Movement representatives in Israel, and UJIA. The support took the form of advice over the phone or by email, visits and this advice was primarily geared towards security issues and welfare issues.

*“We spoke twice a day, she visited, and texted or what’s apped twice a day”*

Every madrich/a felt that the support was adequate and the only criticisms were one madrich who said it had taken

*“time to sort out the hierarchy of who to tell what to”*

and two madrichim who felt there was

*“too much” support. xxx were calling lots (even during sessions). And I didn’t always answer. When I called back they were cross I hadn’t answered in the first place”.*

One madrich observed that there was enough support but that s/he felt that further support would have been needed if the group had heard more sirens (they heard one), and another madricha would have liked more support after they had heard a siren. The madrichim were generally very positive about support, having practical outcomes. Here is a selection of the many examples cited:

*“The rakezet found a practical solution”.*

*“He used the situation as a way to do education work – turned a negative into a positive”*

*“We met with a boger who made Aliyah. He spoke to the group about living in Israel through conflict, which was great”*

*“UJIA helped sort out some serious welfare/medical issues”*

A small minority of madrichim stated that they had had “some working difficulties” with co-madrichim, especially with the Israeli madrichim.

*“We didn’t expect to be involved in every decision, but sometimes the Israelis would just chat on the phone in Hebrew and then announce what was happening.”*

*“I would have preferred more clarity [from the racaz]”*

One madricha stated that the racaz had not been particularly helpful.

Many of the madrichim did not limit their examples of support to the security issues. It was clear that the nature of support was viewed by them in a holistic way to encompass all aspects of social, welfare, programmatic and security. There was a minority of madrichim who had clearly been more preoccupied with behavioural issues than with security related issues.

*“Disciplinary stuff was really tough”.*

*“I felt quite overwhelmed at points about the kids’ bad behaviour”.*

We asked the madrichim to give some examples of how they dealt with the security situation with their chanichim.

*“Opening up group discussions”*

*“regular up-dates”*

*“xxx came from London and was able to give her view from the xxx Movement perspective which was helpful”*

*“the kids knew how to find out stuff themselves”*

*“One to one conversations, a news report committee giving updates, having Israelis talk about their experiences.”*

#### 4. The Effects of the Security Situation:

There were more comments from madrichim saying that the security situation “*didn't affect*” their chanichim, than there were those who said their chanichim were upset or affected. The group whose madricha was the most upset was a group which had been in Eilat and had been affected by the sirens and rocket there. It is not surprising that the madrichim who had not heard sirens or had to go into shelters, were the least affected emotionally.

For the madrichim themselves, the hardest part of being caught up in the escalating situation was mostly around issues of uncertainty:

*“changes to the tochnit”*

*“not knowing if the Israeli madrichim and racaz would be called up”*

*“getting used to a new [Israeli] madrich”*

*“Uncertainty about what we were doing”*

*“not knowing what was going to happen”*

More than one madrich commented that they felt it was a loss “*not going to Tel Aviv*” and the Birthright madrichim all commented on the lack of freedom of movement for their chanichim “*being in the middle of a city with no freedom of movement*”. This is not surprising given the age group of the Birthright groups, who are adults used to being independent.

There were several comments around issues of honesty:

*“telling the chanichim they were going somewhere safe and then hearing sirens and a rocket going off”*

*“Morally difficult...disagreed with how Israel was dealing with it”.*

And there were a few comments around issues of relating to the chanichim:

*“showing the kids a brave face”*

*“a friend died in Gaza but I had to keep a brave face that everything was OK”*  
*“having to justify changes to the kids”*

There were some comments related to the challenge of balancing what to tell and what not to tell the chanichim, particularly because all the chanichim had phones with them as well as TVs in their hotel rooms. This meant that some of the madrichim felt they were out of control of the information reaching their groups.

## **5. After Care:**

The madrichim were asked whether we could help them in any way – for example, arranging someone to talk to about their experiences, or more formal counselling? Many of the madrichim said that their Youth Movements would either be arranging a de-brief, or that they have already had good support already from their tzevet, or their Movement.

One suggestion was :

*“it would be useful to have something to tell the kids about how to deal with people when they got home...what to say about the conflict, to defend Israel...”* UJIA is addressing this issue.

The majority of madrichim said they were “OK”, a couple said they “*maybe*” some support would be useful, and one madrich said “*yes, it would be useful to talk as a group*”.

## **6. How UJIA Can Improve Our Service:**

Generally, there were positive comments about preparation and training that the madrichim had received prior to Tour. There were several madrichim who suggested that there should be a session on the madrichim training seminar to help them deal with sirens, drills, possible time spent in shelters etc. There were others who said that UJIA can't be expected to prepare them for every eventuality and that is why there are plans in place for support during Tour itself. One comment suggested that

the Youth Movements need a greater clarification of the roles and expectations of the British madrichim.

The changes to schedules were handled efficiently and speedily, and madrichim saw the wisdom of the decisions that were being made. There was more than one comment to the effect that

*“it can be hard to relate the education [on the preparation Seminar] to the realities of Tour”.*

There was a lot of appreciation of the email up-dates, although there was more than one comment that on some occasions madrichim were in places with no internet access. Some madrichim were concerned that they

*“didn’t feel we were getting all the information...information was coming in small snippets”.*

One madrich suggested a

*“briefing paper for participants, even when it is not dangerous”.*

There was more than one comment that *“UJIA presence during Tour would be good”.*

## **7. Education:**

We asked about the training for Tour. Which sessions were most helpful for the madrichim? The answers all went beyond anything to do with security issues. Examples included: tiyul simulations, welfare sessions, arts and craft sessions, gender and sexuality session, sessions on Shabbat, politics up-date, how to talk to a group session, inter-Movement opportunities. The variety of responses (almost all of which were stated more than once) shows that probably the mix of content of the Madrichim seminar is about right.

The madrichim were then asked to give an example of how and when they used something from one of the education training sessions on Tour. The examples included “*the improv. comedy session*”, the session about gender and sexuality “*it was really in tune with being 16*”, welfare sessions (cited by many), management of chanichim and discipline issues (cited by several), games “*to fill in time*”, “*the phone one*”, and the arts and craft session - “*the best education session we’ve ever done*”.

## **8. Chanichim Follow Up:**

We asked the madrichim whether there were any particular chanichim that needed following up – beyond those for whom they had already submitted a report. Almost all the responses were “*no*”. A few comments related to chanichim who were recommended for follow up due to welfare-related issues. The only comments related to the security situation mentioned that some chanichim had been anxious at the start of Tour but that it had subsided as they got used to the situation.

One of the Youth Movements commented that almost all their chanichim would be going on to summer camp in the UK as madrichim, where there would be support in place.

## **9. Relationship With Israel:**

Finally, the madrichim were asked if the experiences of this summer would make them more or less likely to return to Israel in the near future. The madrichim were almost exactly split between “*more*” and “*the same*”. Only one madrich said he would be less likely to return “*only because I’m so against the actions of Israel*”

Comments included

*“I feel much more connection definitely”,*

*“I need to do something for my country” (meaning Israel),*

*“loved it. Most incredible experience”,*

*“I always planned to go back – this summer didn’t change my opinion”,*

*“Although this summer also re-strengthened the reasons why I love Israel as well”,*



*“I’m an Israel keeno”,*  
*“I want to spend as much time as possible anyway”,*  
*“I’m going back soon – but I’m not sure I could live there”,*  
*“it’s the first time I really want to go back”.*

Whilst these answers are primarily the result of the emotional response to leading Tour, and must be similar every year straight after returning from leading Tour, it is to the credit of UJIA, the providers in Israel and the Youth Movement that the extreme security situation this year did not adversely affect the madrichim’s relationship with Israel, and in some cases seems to have actually strengthened their ties to Israel.

## **10. Conclusion:**

Over all, the level of care and support for Israel Tour this summer resulted in a smooth running, positive experience for the vast majority of the madrichim. Huge credit for that must go to the UJIA professional and lay team, the providers in Israel, the Youth Movements both in Israel and the UK, and the way that the madrichim themselves rose to the occasion and conducted themselves. The madrichim managed to keep away the anxiety and uncertainty from the chanichim, recognising it was their responsibility to respond to the changing and uncertain situation.

UJIA should consider whether any changes should be made in future to the tochnit of the madrichim training seminar to take into account possible future security issues, and also whether in fact this level of madrichim feedback is helpful to undertake in any case in future years.

Whilst this report focused primarily on the security situation and related issues, it was clear that the madrichim did not always separate out their replies, combining issues of welfare with issues of security. This may show that the security issues did not assume greater importance than all the other regular issues being dealt with by the madrichim at any one time. Again, this is to be expected when a madrich/a is in the moment of dealing with thirty to forty 16 year olds.

Dr. Helena Miller

1<sup>st</sup> September 2014

## 11. Appendices:

### a) Appendix One

#### Israel Tour and Birthright Groups Summer 2014

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Number of groups</b>	<b>Number of Madrichim</b>	<b>Number interviewed by 29.8.14</b>
JLGB	1	2	2
Tribe	1	2	2
Bnei Akiva	5	10	7
FZY	11	22	12
BBYO	1	3	0
Noam	2	5	3
LJY-Netzer	1	2	1
RSY-Netzer	6	12	4
Habonim-Dror	1	3	2
Ezra	2	7	0
Birthright	5	11	5

### b) Appendix Two

#### Questionnaire for Madrichim

The calls to be made after madrichim return, have the following aims:

- a) To thank the madrichim
- b) To acknowledge concern for the welfare for the madrichim
- c) To see if there are any particular chanichim requiring follow up
- d) To find out the extent to which Tour Providers/YMs/UJIA/taglit/other agencies and individuals were supportive to them and their chanichim before and during the time in Israel
- e) To find out if the madrichim would like/need additional support/counselling etc now that they are home.

f) To find out whether the madrichim have any advice for UJIA regarding our handling of the situation, handling of the madrichim and YMs, and could this be improved upon for the future.

**Questions:**

Please use these questions as a guide and be alert to the answers so that you can pick up on, and follow up with, follow up questions. Write the answers under each question. Continue on a separate sheet if necessary.

Name of Madrich/a:..... Movt: .....  
Group No:.....

Name of UJIA Caller: .....Date of Call: .....

- i. Start by introducing yourself, and saying you are from UJIA/how are they etc.
- ii. Next, THANK the madrich/a, acknowledging the great job they did, particularly in the circumstances and acknowledging they must be exhausted (have you had a chance to sleep since you've been back? etc).
- iii. Explain that you are ringing to follow up the madrich/a experience of being in Israel at this challenging time. Is it OK if we chat – it shouldn't take longer than 5 minutes?  
  
If they say yes, move to Q4. If they say no, ask when you can ring back for a quick chat and make a note here.....
- iv. You had a huge responsibility because of the situation in addition to what you must have been expecting as a madrich/a. Did you feel you had support? From who? (Tour Providers, YM, UJIA, Taglit, other agencies in Israel, other madrichim etc.)
- v. What form did the support take? (someone on the end of a phone, advice about dealing with chanichim, etc etc)
- vi. Was the support adequate? Would you have liked more/less support
  
- vii. Can you give me an example of how ..... [named person/organisation] supported you while you were in Israel?
- viii. How did you deal with the situation with your chanichim? Educationally? Pastorally? Can you give me some examples?

- viii. What was the hardest part for you of being caught up in the escalating situation in Israel?
- ix. Now that you're home, could we help you in any way? For example, arranging someone for you to talk to about your experiences, counselling? If yes, would you prefer this to be individual or in a group with other madrichim?
- x. Do you have any advice for us at UJIA in terms of how we handled the Tour/Birthright groups – both before and while they were out in Israel? Please tell us so that we can improve the service that we provide for you and others in the future.
- xi. Thinking back to the UJIA training – the screening days, the April seminar, the June seminar – what was the most helpful session we ran?
- xii. can you give an example of when and how you used something from one of our education sessions on Tour?
- xiii. Are there any particular chanichim that you think need follow up – beyond those for whom you have already prepared a report?
- xii. Did the experience of this summer make you more or less likely to return to Israel in the near future? Why?

Finally, thank the madrich/a again.

Please give completed questionnaires to Deborah H, who will see where there needs to be follow up or referral. She will then pass the questionnaires to Helena, who will compile a report.

Many thanks,

Helena Miller  
30<sup>th</sup> July 2014