

TEEN PROGRAMS JOIN FORCES

Every year, close to 14,000 high school-age Diaspora Jews come to Israel on Lapid programs. Twenty organizations that run high-school age programs and encompass among them the majority of teens coming to Israel annually have already joined the Lapid coalition. For these young participants, the journey represents a life changing experience / Ella Lavon

“**M**eaningful Israel experiences influence the commitment of participants to their own Jewish communities,” says Leah Garber, JCC Association Regional Vice President and Israel office director and Lapid member.

While the main denominator of the trip to Israel is to see their homeland, each teenage participant has his or her own interests; some are academically oriented, many are keen on outdoor activities, while others want to be exposed and engaged with social issues.

These needs are met by the diverse range of Lapid programs that run for varying lengths of time, from three weeks to four months in duration. “The summer and academic high school Israel experiences offered by Lapid affiliates are crucial to the Jewish and social development of our teens,” says Dr. Joe Freedman, Director of Ramah Programs in Israel and Lapid member. For the teenagers, for whom it is mostly their first visit to Israel, “the programs help them to form a relationship with the country and find a place for Israel in their personal and Jewish identities,” notes Dan Krakow, Lapid Co-Chairman and Director of Young Judea in Israel.

“The need for a coalition such as Lapid has been a long time in coming,” says Miami Beach entrepreneur Stephen Muss, who has recently accepted the position of Honorary Chairman of Lapid. With his added help and support, Lapid plans to continue to expand both in numbers and scope. “As the Chairman of Alexander Muss High School in Israel, I know first hand that our 20,000 graduates have developed a strong connection to Israel, discovered their heritage and reinforced their Jewish identity and Jewish continuity. Teaching Diaspora students ranging in age from 8th Grade to senior year in high school in Israel has had extraordinary results. It’s time the government of Israel recognizes this and supports such programs.”

A wide variety of programs

The programs offered can be divided into three general categories: touring, academic and specialty programs. One example of Lapid’s



touring options is the trips arranged by the North American Federation of Temple Youth, or NFTY as it is more commonly known. Since 1958, the organization has been bringing youth to Israel for 4-6 week summer programs. Along with the basic “NFTY Adventure” touring option, applicants can also choose to combine the visit with a trip to Spain or Eastern Europe, spend time on a kibbutz or engage in volunteer work.

But it’s not only about fun and travel. NFTY-EIE students leave the four-month long semester in Israel having advanced on average at least three grade levels in Hebrew language proficiency. Moreover, 30-40 percent of NFTY-EIE alumni return to Israel in the 36 months following their semester, and upwards of 80 percent continue with Hebrew language and/or Jewish studies courses at the university level. “Our success is in building a Jewish knowledge-based identity that can be sustained and enlarged over a lifetime,” affirms Baruch Kraus, Principal of the Union for Reform Judaism’s NFTY-EIE High School in Israel, and a Lapid member.

Another such academic-style program is the Alexander Muss High School in Israel, which focuses on Jewish and Israeli history and cleverly designs the program’s outings to chronologically follow a historical timeline to enhance the study curriculum. With approximately 1,000 teens participating in one of Muss’s six sessions offered throughout the year, students are able to continue their required studies from their home schools while simultaneously learning about and experiencing Israel.

“Constant innovation is going on in order to adapt the program options to the evolving interests and needs of the community, with many including encounters with Israeli peers,” notes Krakow. David Keren, Director

Unlike MASA and Birthright, high school-age programs unfortunately receive no financial support from the Government of Israel or the Jewish Agency

of the Conservative movement’s USY-United Synagogue Youth, relates to the connection between the Israel program and the unique learning needs of the emerging Jewish Day School market. USY organizes the Solomon Schechter Day School high school trips to Israel. “The rationale behind the trip is that every student should have a deep connection to Israel; the trip is not a spark, but a way of deepening connections. The trip just continues practice learned at school. The goal is to grapple with Israel as a complex and intricate society,” Keren explains.

The main benefit of Lapid’s high school-age programs is the unique impact that they have on the Jewish Diaspora participants. Krakow explains that “when they come in high school, they meet kids from all over the United States and other countries, and get a sense of themselves as people, of Judaism and of their connection to Israel. Because they are still in high school, they can implement these new understandings at a young age, which can significantly impact on their future decisions.”

Diaspora teens enjoying one of the Lapid coalition's high-school age programs

According to Krakow, it may lead kids to choose to go to a college with more Jewish students and an active Jewish organization that they can engage with, depending on their personal interests. Undertaking an Israeli experience at this critical age may also influence dating patterns, with many acquiring a stronger sense of commitment to wanting to date fellow Jews.

Another important advantage is their impact on the subsequent interest in college and post-college long-term experiences in Israel. According to Krakow, "some 90 percent of all Young Judaea long-term programs participants, participated previously in a high school-age program".

Meir Hoyzman, North American Division Director of Israel Experience - Educational Tourism Services Ltd. and a Lapid member, further emphasizes this sentiment. "Lapid's goal is to enable as many Jewish teens as possible the chance to get to Israel at an earlier stage in their lives. By gaining a deep and meaningful Israel experience, a teenager will most likely make Israel and Judaism a significant part of his or her life," says Hoyzman.

Lack of funding

High school-age programs represent one of three major segments of programming in Israel for young people from abroad, along with MASA, which is the long-term college and post-college segment, and Taglit-Birthright Israel, ten-day trips for college students.

Lapid (Hebrew for 'torch') was established in early 2008 with the aim of advancing the interests of its members. "We realized that the Israeli Government and the Jewish Agency's funding over the past few years has shifted towards the MASA and Birthright programs, which has left the high school age programs reliant almost exclusively on the diminishing and critical support of the Jewish Federations," remarks Gideon Shavit, Lapid Co-Chairman and CEO of the Alexander Muss High School in Israel.

"While MASA participants receive major support from the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency, and Birthright trips are fully subsidized, the high school-age programs are left out. The Israeli government should be commended for setting aside large sums for the important purpose of bringing Diaspora Jews from abroad to experience Israel, but it has chosen to neglect the Lapid programs, which play a vital part in building Jewish identity, leadership preparation, college choices and connection to the State of Israel," says Shavit.

"Investing in these Israel programs has the potential of having a ripple effect on the whole family - more so than college-age programs," asserts Freedman. "Moreover, spending several weeks to several months in Israel in high school is an important step towards more extensive Israel involvement through MASA."

Both Krakow and Shavit stress that they believe that each of the three segments - MASA, Birthright and Lapid - uniquely contributes to the strengthening of the bond between Israel and the Jewish communities abroad and the identity of the next generation of Diaspora Jews. The current global financial crisis has also taken its toll on high school-age participant numbers, with many families finding they cannot afford to send their kids on a trip to Israel and many Jewish Federations cutting back on funding.

"We feel that it is essential that the Jewish community, and the Israeli government in particular, recognizes the need to offer scholarships to high school-age program participants to make it easier for the families during these difficult economic times, and also to help raise the profile and reeducate the community about the importance of high school-age programs," asserts Krakow.

"Our goals and responsibility is to help communities develop and nurture the next generation of Jewish leaders," Gerber points out, "and to assure the continuity of strong Zionist Jewish communities that are obligated to their connection with Israel." ■

For more information about Lapid, please visit www.lapidisrael.org.



THE
COALITION
FOR HIGH
SCHOOL AGE
PROGRAMS
IN ISRAEL

Lapid was founded as a coalition to strengthen the community of high-school study and travel programs in Israel and to lobby for recognition and financial and institutional support on par with comparable programs for university-age participants.

To date Lapid has built a network of thousands of committed alumni, families and investors who want to be an integral part of the Jewish People's future.

With continued growth Lapid will further raise awareness and significantly increase participation in quality high-school Israel programs and thus help sustain a strong relationship with the Jewish State by facilitating a meaningful Israel educational experience for high school students-vital for fostering a strong Jewish identity.

HONORARY CHAIRMAN:
Stephen Muss

LAPID'S MEMBERS:

Alexander Muss High School in Israel
American Hebrew Academy
Canada Israel Experience
Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School
Habonim Dror
Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy
JCC Association
Jewish National Fund
The Lappin Foundation
Maccabi World Union
Milken Community High School
Netzer Olami
NFTY
Oranim Educational Initiatives
Ramah
The Israel Experience
Tzofim - Israel Scouts
USY
World Bnei Akiva
Young Judaea

We welcome individuals, organizations and programs who share our vision and sense of purpose to join Lapid and help create a new future for High School programming in Israel.

For more info, contact Lapid's Co-Chairmen,
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