

# MULTIPLE JOURNEYS

MASA in Hebrew literally means “journey” and, thanks to MASA, every year thousands of young Jewish adults from around the world experience life in Israel by participating in the journey of their lifetime / Jonathan Danilowitz

“Long-term programs in Israel enable participants to properly explore and enhance their Jewish identity and heritage,” asserts Freda Surki, MASA’s Post-College Program Director. “The MASA experience aims at preparing the next generation of world Jewish leaders, by raising their consciousness about their heritage and shared destiny with Israel. While we’re delighted if participants come back, or never leave and make aliyah, aliyah is not our primary focus. We want great Jewish leaders in the Diaspora who have an understanding of the country, and an enduring, indelible link to it,” explains Surki.

While Taglit-Birthright Israel offers a great taste of the country for first time visitors, “MASA can be seen as an extension - a continuance if you will - of Taglit,” says Surki. “MASA gives the participants the opportunity to experience the real, ‘out-of-the-bus’ Israel.”

## Connecting and contributing

MASA’s 160 programs are divided into four main segments: Orthodox, gap-year (post

high school/pre college), academic (studying in Israel for a full semester or year), and post college. The fastest-growing segment is the post-college group. Young adults on the threshold of a career welcome the opportunity to hone their college-acquired skills through a professional internship abroad - also a nice addition on a CV.

For MASA, this is an opportunity to encourage young Diaspora Jews to choose Israel as the venue for their foreign internship and, once they are in Israel, to make sure that they wring the maximum out of their time here, absorbing the real Israel through Hebrew ulpan lessons, trips around the country, encountering Israelis in daily life, classes on Judaism and Zionism, cultural and artistic events, and more.

MASA opens doors for college graduates to obtain internships in Israel, in their career field. MASA participants volunteer some 25-30 hours a week, but by participating in a specific program, they are also exposed to a meaningful but challenging life in Israel, through the specific program’s enrichment curriculum. The programs aim at helping



participants grow and improve, and to connect with and contribute to Israeli society. The minimum period in Israel is four months; the maximum is close to a full year. Participants thus have time to achieve not only their own aspirations, but also to devote themselves to their volunteer tasks and internships.

MASA is an umbrella organization and a joint project of the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency, and participants pay to share in the subsidized programs, although most are eligible for funding through MASA itself and other sources. MASA estimates that the Israeli economy’s benefit from MASA is actually about three times the direct investment in the project as a result of participants living and spending here and having their parents visit, as well as paying for teachers, support providers, tourism infrastructure and more. Surki is careful to stress that about 75% of the budget goes to scholarships.

## Exploring a career

MASA’s 40 post-college programs are divided into ‘Career Development’ (largely through internships), ‘Social Justice and Volunteerism’ and Jewish Studies. All benefit heavily from an enrichment curriculum mutual to all programs. The Career Development programs turn the Israel experience into a de facto career experience for the participant.

Some participants, still unsure whether they want to pursue a career in the field in which they graduated, take the opportunity to explore another career in a similar or even totally different field, while others intern in the profession they studied. Everyone benefits - the participant, the company, the State of Israel and, ultimately, the Jewish community back home. Although MASA has been criticized for its internship assistance (“you are taking jobs from Israelis”) the internships are actually a parallel program to full and proper



Participants on MASA’s ‘Saving the Stones’ program research 4000-year old mud bricks in Tel Akko

Yosi Radhman



MASA's Israel Government Fellows pose with President Shimon Peres

employment, so that nobody is displaced.

Niche programs - some fairly mainstream, some very specialized - are an attractive part of the Social Justice section. Participants teach subjects such as English, mathematics, yoga or music appreciation, or else they undertake environmental and ecological work or conservation projects, or work for local municipalities, at food distribution, in gardening, public relations - even politics. All participants are guided, but not spoon-fed.

MAP, which stands for 'MASA Activities for Participants,' is perhaps the best example of MASA's underlying parallel ideology. First, it gives the participants an opportunity to meet their peers from around the world, including Israelis of course - a networking opportunity essential in rounding out future Jewish community leaders. The second aim is to expose them to events and opportunities that their specific program cannot provide. These events are mutual to all MASA participants and are not program-specific. They include such highlights as a concert at Tel Aviv's Performing Arts Center or a weekend-long workshop devoted to topics related to Israeli society, like religious pluralism, security and life in the peripheral areas.

## A unique opportunity

Israel Government Fellows (IGF) is an example of a post-college program, now in its fourth session, which is attracting a great deal of interest. A unique 10-month leadership program of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, it is endorsed by the Office of the Prime Minister and its participants intern within the Israeli government system, attending seminars with some of the leading figures in Israeli political and public life, and meeting other young Jewish leaders from around the world. Tamar Darmon, IGF Program Director, stresses that no Ministries are excluded, not

even Homeland Security or Defense.

IGF Fellows come from diverse countries and cultures, but all have one thing in common: they must have at least a BA degree and two years of professional work in their field. They undergo a formidable selection process and must be prepared for serious tasks and responsibilities.

Like the interns at other post-college MASA programs, IGF fellows go through the same month of preliminary groundwork, including *ulpan* training. They then work four days a week, with Thursdays as a seminar day. All government ministries are headquartered in the capital and, unlike other programs, IGF participants are exclusively based in Jerusalem.

## Studying, volunteering and interning

Maytal Rand, a current participant in MASA's *Otzma* program, was raised in New Jersey, has visited Israel many times and speaks fluent Hebrew. "My Israeli parents were thrilled when I was accepted to the program. My mother was a bit taken aback when she discovered it was for ten months, but that's history now," she laughs.

*Otzma* is a unique program which offers Jewish adults aged 20-26 an opportunity to live and volunteer in Israel in a variety of settings. The year is divided into different segments, allowing participants to experience studying, volunteering and interning in several different locations.

Maytal discovered the entire MASA program through - Facebook. She and her contemporaries have just completed a month's training in Beersheva. Since she is already fluent in Hebrew, she spent the *ulpan* hours volunteering at the Ethiopian Community Center, and only joined the group for the afternoon teaching training sessions. She will now

spend nine months teaching Israeli students in the periphery to raise their English-language skills to match those of students in the country's center.

"I feel at home here, and am excited at the opportunity to make an impact on Israeli society," says Maytal. When she returns to New Jersey, she may well switch careers (she was trained in emergency medical services), but her link with Israel will be stronger than ever.

## Hands-on experience

One new and extraordinary program is already making waves in ancient Acre. "Saving the Stones," under the guidance of Shelley-Anne Peleg, Director of the International Conservation Center, presently has six interns on a MASA program.

"In truth, this program has nothing to do with Jewish leadership, but we are attracting young adults interested in fields such as archi-

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tecture, archaeology, engineering, medieval studies, design and history, who might otherwise have gone to work in, say, Spain, Italy or Greece. They get hands-on practical experience in historical conservation, at the source," Peleg explains.

The conservation program has proved so popular that it will be open to Israelis as well. Israeli Jews and Arabs are interacting with the foreign interns, sharing, learning, volunteering - and saving the old stones. Each intern will also undertake a project of their own - academic or practical - for the ultimate benefit of Acre and general historical preservation worldwide. A collective project for the program is to discover how the mud brick gates were built in forgone times, and then to rebuild them, with the help of local Acre residents from all sectors of society.

The routes are many, but MASA's multiple journeys for college graduates all have a mutual destination - forging a tighter link between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel, strengthening Jewish identity and creating future Jewish leadership. ■

For more information about MASA, please visit [www.masaisrael.org](http://www.masaisrael.org).