

**A Year to Remember:  
Students on Year-Long Programs in Israel  
During a Time of Crisis**

**Report II: Post-College Programs**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Opening Remarks</b>	<b>1</b>
Acknowledgments	2
<b>Background</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Methods</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Population</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Post-College Programs</b>	<b>10</b>
Project Otzma	10
HUC's Program	11
<b>The Decision to Come to Israel During a Time of Crisis</b>	<b>12</b>
Making a personal choice	12
Making a professional choice	14
<b>Negotiating Boundaries of Safety While in Israel</b>	<b>15</b>
Establishing Red lines	16
Learning to trust one's instincts	16
Guidance and support from administrators	17
The Structure of the program and the experience of living in Israel	20
Interaction with Israelis	20
Learning to live with terror	21
<b>The Decision to Leave Israel Early</b>	<b>23</b>
Too close to home	23
Parental pressure	26
Relationships to Israel and Zionism	26
<b>The Decision to Complete the Year in Israel</b>	<b>27</b>
A sense of responsibility and connectedness	27
<b>Conclusions and Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>30</b>
The decision to go to Israel	31
Support from families	32
Learning to live with terror	33

Rules and the role of the institution _____	33
The benefits of being in Israel during a time of crisis _____	34
<b>Final Remarks</b> _____	<b>35</b>
A core population for future Jewish leadership _____	35
Further research _____	36

## Opening Remarks

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In our educational discourse, the extended program in Israel (a semester or a year) is considered the ultimate form of experiencing Israel. Short of immigration (*aliyah*), the extended program is an opportunity to immerse oneself in Israeli life and culture, to experience the annual cycle of seasons and holidays, to learn and practice Hebrew, and to make personal connections with the country and its people. Therefore, Jewish educators and community leaders highlight the extended Israel encounter and encourage young adults to enroll in one of the programs that offer such experiences.

When we look at the programs that bring young Jews from the Diaspora to Israel, we tend to make judgments based on the very same values that stand at the basis of this endeavor. We ask questions such as: Did the participants learn Hebrew? Did they meet Israelis? Did they get to know different parts of the country? Did they grow Jewishly? Did they consider settling in Israel?

Seldom do we highlight the experience these young adults have of living in a foreign country. Aside from all the Jewish experiences that were mentioned above, living in Israel is about leaving the home country and relocating to a new environment. This new environment requires radical adjustments. Participants have to get used to different lifestyles, norms, codes, medical and financial systems, human relations, social and cultural cues, and more. This transition is difficult even under normal circumstances, when people relocate to another country for the purpose of study, work, business, or the Foreign Service.

Our study examines how young American Jews managed to sustain themselves in Israel in a time of crisis. The academic year 2001-2 was a very turbulent period of time in Israel. During that year the visiting young adults shared the reality of random suicide bombings that shook the country. Whether they lived in dorms or apartments, used public transportation or avoided taking buses—they were part of the scene, especially in Jerusalem where most of the programs are located.

The study tells us their story. It explores the participants' decisions to come to Israel, the initial adjustment they had to go through, the day-to-day living under stressful circumstances, and finally—the possibility of cutting the program short and returning home early.

I am sure that with this study we will be able to better understand the richness of the extended experience in Israel, for times of crisis as well as during “normal” days to come.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to acknowledge the students and directors of the four institutions that took part in this study for sharing their stories, experiences, and opinions with us. Their thoughts and insights were invaluable in gaining a sense of what it means to bring students to Israel during a time of crisis and what it means to be a student on a year-long program at such a time. We would like to explicitly thank Keith Berman of Young Judeaea, Ruth Ginosar of Hebrew Union College, Tova Rhein of Midreshet Lindenbaum, and Yossi Smadja of Otzma. Although we cannot name the students, we would like to thank each of them for their time with us.

We would also like to acknowledge Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, Prof. Steven M. Cohen, and Dr. Elan Ezrachi for their help in framing this study and for their suggestions and comments on the report.

## **Introduction**

This report is the second of two on the topic of young people who come to Israel on year-long programs during a time of crisis. It is based on the experiences of post-college students and the institutions which host them in Israel. (The first report was based on the experiences of post-high-school students.) While the body of each report relies on data collected about the specific age group, other sections—namely, the major findings, methods, population, policy recommendations, and concluding remarks—incorporate the data and findings on both age groups. Each report is based on narrative interviews with students who attended programs in Israel spanning the 2001–2 academic year and with program directors. Half the students who were interviewed completed their programs, while the other half left early as a result of the security situation.

This report, like its predecessor, explores the students' decision-making processes around going to Israel and staying there during a time of crisis, how students negotiated boundaries of safety while in Israel, the various support systems that were in play for them and their families during the year, and the differences between students who completed their programs and those who left early. Throughout the report, the interplay between students, parents, and the institutions is highlighted.

The research was commissioned by the Research and Development Unit of the Department of Jewish-Zionist Education of the Jewish Agency in April of 2002, as a result of the security climate in Israel at that time and the resulting sharp drop in numbers of participants for programs aimed at overseas students. The hope is that the two reports will invoke a response, setting up a dialogue between educators working with young Jews coming to Israel during times of crisis and other professional and lay people interested in Israel Experience programs.

## **Major Findings**

(1) The greatest challenge for participants on year-long programs in Israel was making the decision to participate. Once they made the decision, and after the initial settling-in period, participants found it much easier to be in Israel.

(2) Regardless of the participant's age, parental opinion was a very significant factor in the decision-making process. Furthermore, parental opinion played an even more significant role in how participants dealt emotionally with the situation. In cases where parents were unsupportive of the decision to be in Israel, students felt ongoing distress, placating their concerned families while simultaneously trying to personally cope with the stressors of being in the country under trying circumstances.

(3) Regardless of their age, participants of all programs relied heavily on the guidance and security briefings of their respective program administrations. It was clear that participants needed to feel "looked after" and "cared for" by their programs during the period of crisis.

(4) Data analyses revealed a symbiotic relationship between participants and their parents and the influence of these relations on institutional policy. In the case of the 2001–2 school year, how these institutions set policy around restrictions and how they set up support systems for their students directly reflected parental influences.

(5) When negotiating boundaries of safety—determining where to go and what to do—many participants relied on the information that was given to them by Israelis (those staffing their programs, Israeli friends and relatives, and Israelis whom they encountered throughout the year in Israel).

(6) Participants also followed their own instincts. Yet despite the influences of parental opinion, program administrations, Israelis, and intuition, none of the students could articulate how they made decisions for maintaining their personal security.

(7) Despite extreme differences between the approaches of the two post-high school programs, students from each agreed with the ways in which their administration chose to

relate to them, in terms of imposing rules and regulations. Overall, responses from post-high school participants were quite similar, regardless of their specific program.

(8) All participants were more disturbed by attacks that occurred in places that they could see themselves—places “close to home”—and in places they frequented. They felt especially vulnerable in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, while in more remote areas of Israel they felt safer.

(9) The more involved participants became with Israeli society, the more they felt a sense of belonging and the less they experienced a sense of isolation. Witnessing the daily fears and deliberations of Israelis, many participants felt that their own fears were validated and their anxieties were normalized. Meaningful interactions with Israelis also helped participants learn different coping techniques.

(10) All of the participants who chose to remain in Israel claimed that they developed a stronger commitment to Israel and a greater understanding of Israelis and closeness to them.

(11) Most of the participants who left their program early displayed unresolved feelings over the decision to leave.

## Background

Participants on year-long programs in Israel during the 2001–2 school year arrived in Israel in the midst of the al-Aqsa *Intifada* [uprising] which began in October 2000. These students embarked on their programs within months of the 1 June 2001 attack on the Dolphinarium nightclub in Tel Aviv (in which twenty-one young people were killed and 120 were wounded) and within weeks of the 8 August 2001 bombing of the Sbarro eatery in Jerusalem (in which fifteen people were killed and 130 were injured).<sup>1</sup> When in the process of deciding to spend a year in Israel, these students were well aware of the untenable security situation within the country, the improbability of it improving before they arrived, and the possibility that it would not improve throughout the time they were in Israel.

Yet conscious as these students were of the security climate in Israel before they arrived, none anticipated the extent of the violence that would occur or the close proximity of these attacks to their daily lives. From September 2001 through June of 2002, close to two hundred individuals were killed and more than fifteen hundred were injured in various suicide and car bomb attacks throughout the country. Of these attacks, fourteen occurred within Jerusalem, some within the near vicinity of those students based in the city. For example, a suicide bomber detonated himself on King David Street next to the Hebrew Union College campus while classes were in session. Another *piguah* (terrorist attack) in downtown Jerusalem occurred during a vacation time when families of students were visiting from abroad. The family of one student was caught in a suicide bombing and several family members were injured. The attempted suicide bombing attack on Caffit, a cafe in the German Colony—a neighborhood full of English-speaking permanent residents and students—occurred at the time of a large convention in Jerusalem of Reform rabbis, some of whom were sitting in the cafe when the incident occurred. The *piguah* at Moment, a popular cafe in the Rehavia neighborhood frequented by overseas students, was near the homes of several post-college participants of year-long programs; some heard the explosion and some witnessed the horrific scene. A group of post-high school students also witnessed the scene when their bus passed

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<sup>3</sup> A statement by David Ellenson, the president of HUC, explained that the 2002-3 year-in-Israel program would be held in Israel for reasons that reflect the traditional relationship between the diaspora and the State of Israel. However, after the suicide bombing at the Hebrew University in July 2002, the administration of HUC decided to allow students to defer for a year the requirement to study in Israel. As of August 2002, HUC had forty-one entering students who elected to fulfill their year-in-Israel requirement in Jerusalem during their first year of studies, while twenty-five students elected to defer the requirement. The latter students enrolled in stateside educational institutions.

by the cafe in the aftermath, as they were returning from an organized Shabbat weekend with their institution.

It was in this atmosphere of insecurity and terrorism that participants took part in their year-long programs in Israel. Throughout the year, they learned how to negotiate boundaries of safety in their own lives, and they sought out networks of support for being in Israel during a difficult time. Still, some continued to struggle with being in Israel, either because of their personal fears or because their families were pressuring them to return home, especially as the security situation worsened. Although there were bombings throughout the year, the month of March marked an upswing in suicide and car bomb attacks in Jerusalem. During this time, participants, their families, and their institutions were inevitably forced to reconsider the final months of the programs. Though the majority of participants chose to stay and complete their programs, others decided to leave early. Some of those who left did so of their own accord, while others felt that their parents forced their early departure. Still others chose to go only after their institution officially ended the program ahead of schedule.

Who are these students and who are the families of students who chose to be on year-long Israel programs in the midst of this situation? How did they decide to come and what was the process they went through during the year as the situation continued to worsen? How did they negotiate boundaries of safety while in Israel? How did some decide to stay throughout the year, while others hit a breaking point that led them to leave early?

Answers to these questions are found in the body of this report, which is divided into four sections (following the descriptions of methods and the study population): The Decision to Come to Israel During a Time of Crisis; Negotiating Boundaries of Safety While in Israel; The Decision to Leave Israel Early; and The Decision to Complete the Year in Israel. Each section examines the processes involved in participants' choices during their year away.

## **Methods**

Open-ended, non-structured interviews for this report were conducted with the director and a few participants from each of four year-long Israel Experience programs—two that cater to post-high school students and two that cater to older participants. The four directors provided the names of several students who had completed or were completing the program and names of others who had left early due to security and safety factors. Two students from each program were interviewed shortly before returning to the United States. With a single exception (one of the post-high school programs), another two participants who left early were interviewed by telephone.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics involved in the individuals' decision-making processes, we chose to conduct a qualitative narrative study. A small sample of participants was asked to explain the decision to come to and remain in Israel during a time of crisis and conflict. We were interested in hearing how the participants made sense of their year in Israel and of the choices that they made throughout the year. Although the sample cannot be considered representative, we were able to draw broad conclusions based on similarities of responses within interviews conducted with participants from four programs that were very different from one another.

We found that the open interview was more difficult to conduct over the phone. In most cases, the interviewees needed more direction and prompting. This also may reflect the difficulty these interviewees had in communicating their often-unresolved feelings about leaving Israel earlier than planned.

Both researchers together conducted the four interviews with the program directors, as well as most of the interviews with the students in Israel. Due to time constraints, three students were interviewed by only one of us. Half the phone interviews with students were conducted jointly while the other half were done by only one interviewer. All interviews were carried out in June and early July 2002.

While the directors of each program are referred to by their real names throughout the report, students are referred to by pseudonyms.

## **Population**

Each program is distinct, as is the population it serves. We studied two programs catering to older participants: Project Otzma and the Hebrew Union College (HUC) rabbinical and cantorial training program. Project Otzma is a volunteer program for individuals who have graduated from college and choose to spend a year in Israel before embarking on future educational and/or professional paths. Most of the interviewees from this program had already been in Israel. They enjoyed these earlier experiences and thus chose to spend additional time in Israel. Most displayed a strong commitment to Israel, and some of them were using their time on Otzma to gauge the possibilities of moving to Israel permanently. The director of Otzma in Israel, Yossi Smadja, indicated that what distinguished the year's participants from those of other years was the higher proportion who were Israeli-born or the children of Israelis, including one of the interviewees.

Since HUC's Israel program is a compulsory component of its rabbinical and cantorial graduate programs, participants did not voluntarily choose to be in Israel during the 2001–2 academic year. The director of student services of the program in Jerusalem, Rose Ginosar, explained that many of the first-year rabbinical students lack a strong connection to Israel. Thus, part of the educational philosophy behind HUC's holding the first year of its program in Israel is to help the students develop a greater sense of peoplehood. None of the interviewees were Israelis or born to Israeli parents. Two of the interviewees who had never been to Israel before expressed no prior feelings of commitment to the country, and yet left with a greater sense of belonging and affiliation. The other two interviewees had been to Israel before, and one of them, strongly committed to Israel, was attempting to stay in the country for another year after the program was over.

The two post-high school programs, presented in the first report—Young Judaea's Year Course and Midreshet Lindenbaum's Overseas Program—are qualitatively different from the two adult programs. Young Judaea is a Zionist youth movement, and its Year Course, an unequivocally Zionist program, is seen as the pinnacle of participants' Zionist education and commitment to Israel. Active Young Judaeans are strongly encouraged to spend a year in Israel as part of their leadership training and, according to the Year Course director Keith Berman, those who come are very committed to being in the country. Some of those interviewed expressed a desire for *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) in the future. All of those interviewed had been to Israel at least once previous to Year Course, though none were the children of Israelis.

The young women who participate in the Midreshet Lindenbaum program are mostly graduates of the Orthodox day school system in North America. Affiliated with the Orthodox movement and connected to the Jewish community, they observe Jewish law and have solid backgrounds in Jewish history and traditional Jewish texts, as well as strong feelings of commitment to Israel in most cases. According to Tova Rhein, director of the Overseas Program, the students often know throughout high school that they will spend a year learning in Israel after they graduate. They see the year of full-time intensive Jewish learning as complementing their high school education. Prior to their time at Midreshet Lindenbaum, all the young women interviewed had been to Israel at least twice, and most of their parents have also spent time in Israel. None were the children of Israelis or Israeli-born, though at least two young women expressed a serious interest in *aliyah* for the future.

## **Post-College Programs**

Each of the two post-college programs dealt with the security situation in a manner that reflected its educational and philosophical agenda. Other than the general age of the participants, these programs have little in common. The different approaches provided useful comparisons for the purposes of our study. Despite the differences between the programs, the terrifying reality meant that the participants in each program had to deal with feelings of personal vulnerability, fear, and loss. All the participants also had to cope with their parents' anxieties and opinions.

## **Project Otzma**

Project Otzma is a ten-month volunteer program in Israel that was started fifteen years ago and designed for recent college graduates (ages 20-25.) The project aims to give its participants an opportunity to live and work in a variety of settings throughout Israel. The project is coordinated in North America by the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of all Federations in the United States and Canada. The Federations are responsible for recruiting and selecting young Jewish adults with motivation, commitment, and initiative for a service-oriented year in Israel. In Israel, the Jewish Agency's Department of Jewish Zionist Education is responsible for running the program. The program works to expose its participants to the diverse faces of Israel and its society, while challenging them and enabling them to grow and develop skills and knowledge applicable to the Jewish communities in North America. The respective Federations and the Jewish Agency subsidize a considerable portion of the program. This obligates the participants to complete the program and in some instances to work in their local communities after they return to North America.

Despite the fact that participants have an obligation to their respective Federations to complete the program, the decision to remain in Israel is an entirely personal one. Yossi Smadja comments that in the past years some participants have chosen to leave the program before its completion, usually before the last track of the program, the kibbutz period, which commences around Pesach. He claims that neither the program nor the respective Federations frown upon those participants who choose to leave the program during this period.

The past year (2001-2) was challenging for Project Otzma. Firstly, the number of participants dropped significantly because of the second Intifada. "On a regular, normal year we have...about eighty to a hundred participants." This year there were eighteen participants, of whom fifteen completed the program. Secondly, the selection process for potential

candidates differed from previous years. Yossi Smadja explains that in the past it was "quite a difficult process to get accepted... This year we didn't reject anyone. It's very difficult to say 'no' to someone who wants to come to Israel now. I am not sure if it's the right thing to do. I am not sure everybody should come; it's very difficult to say no and difficult to say no to the Federation after they have worked hard to find participants."

Yossi Smadja's dilemma raises an important ideological/educational question: Can programs afford to be selective given the current situation? The rationale behind selectivity is to ensure the program's success. Yet at a time where there are few visitors to Israel, it is difficult for the administrators to reject potential candidates. The selecting of participants raised ideological issues, even before the current Intifada began; program administrators asked themselves whether they could stop young Jews from taking part in a program in Israel. In the past, those individuals who were turned down by one program were directed to other programs. Now when programs are struggling to remain open, administrators are reluctant to redirect potential participants.

While according to Yossi Smadja, the profile of the 2001-2 participants was generally not that different from past years, he was able to point out some distinguishing features. First, he found that participants were "more committed to Israel and have a better knowledge of Israel." And the percentage who were children of Israelis was much higher than usual. These factors had a major impact on the program, as more participants were familiar with and integrated into Israeli society. Thus, from the Otzma experience we learn that individuals who chose to come to Israel during the year were those who had visited Israel before and had a closer personal connection to Israel.

## **HUC's Program**

Students admitted to the rabbinical, cantorial, and education programs of Hebrew Union College are required to spend their first academic year, beginning in late June, at the College-Institute's campus in Jerusalem. In rare instances, students with exceptional backgrounds and degrees in Hebrew and cognate studies may be exempted from the year-in-Israel program and given advanced standing in other areas, based on examinations. For most students, however, the year in Israel is compulsory, in contrast to the voluntary nature of Project Otzma. Moreover, the HUC program is the only one available for North American students wishing to obtain Reform ordination.

In an interview with Rose Ginosar, the current director of student services at the Jerusalem campus, she explained that enrollment in the program had actually increased over past years, whereby the next year's class was to be the largest incoming class in thirty years. The 2001-2 academic year boasted an enrollment of sixty-two students, while seventy-one students were expected in 2002-3. Rose attributed the increased enrollment to the stock market crash and economic recession in the United States, which has led to reduced job opportunities for recent college graduates. She also explained that among the student body were a significant number of mature students who had decided to pursue a new professional path at a later stage in their lives.

HUC students view their year away in Israel as part of their graduate studies, a requirement that they are obliged to fulfill. Rose Ginosar was not sure that this perspective would continue. She indicated that if the political and security situation was to deteriorate, fewer students would remain committed to beginning their graduate studies in Israel. Over the course of last year there was a great deal of parental pressure, whereby parents were calling up and saying—as it were—“Let my child go.” At the time of the interview, Rose Ginosar could not predict how the administration of HUC would deal with the incoming class if the political situation continued to deteriorate and it was faced with increasing parental pressure.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Decision to Come to Israel During a Time of Crisis**

The distinguishing feature between the two post-college programs is the “personal choice factor.” Because participants on the HUC program viewed spending the year in Israel as a compulsory component of their graduate studies, most felt that they did not make an active choice to be in Israel during a time of political strife. That was a decision made for them by the administration of the program. They saw their own decision to spend a year in Israel as a professional choice. In contrast, participants on Project Otzma elected being in Israel during this specific period. It was a decision that they owned and struggled with constantly throughout the year as the political and security situation deteriorated.

### **Making a personal choice**

As noted, one of the distinguishing features of the participants interviewed from Project Otzma was their strong attachment to Israel. For most of them, the year in Israel was the fulfillment of a dream. They hoped to explore their Jewish identity and relationship to Israel.

Despite their strong desire, it was often difficult to make the decision to go. Many of them needed support and encouragement in making the decision.

Sara, one of the participants, explained that her first trip to Israel was two years earlier, a month before the Intifada started. She loved it and wanted very much to return. Yet because of the situation, she was “very, very hesitant” while applying for Project Otzma; “in her mind” she decided not to go, though she applied to “keep the option open.” She continued to hesitate even after she had lodged her application, and called numerous people to find out what they thought. After being accepted, she decided to go. Yet even then she equivocated. She was especially worried about her grandmother, who was anxious about her spending the year in Israel. In the days leading up to her departure, she was nervous: “You can ask anyone, I was by far the most scared person [on the group].” Sara eventually elected to stay with the decision to go, but needed the encouragement of her mother. She was concerned that she would be “so scared most of the time...that I would not go anywhere in Israel.” In response her mother told her, “Try it out, and if you're unhappy after a couple of months, then you come back.” “So I did it, I just did it.” Knowing that she could return to the United States if and when she wanted to made Sara’s decision easier.

Steven decided to join Project Otzma after having previously spent five months in Israel on a kibbutz program. During that time, he formed a “love for Zionism,” and after the program ended, he committed himself to returning. One of his main reasons for deciding to spend a year in the country was that “I thought that it was the time for me to make that decision, to feel out if I want to live in Israel.” In the interview he explained that the security situation was “definitely an issue, but it was almost as if it was meant to be that I should come here. I didn't want that to be reason for me not to come.” He feels that it is “especially important for Jews to come to Israel now.” Steven reported that his parents were supportive of his decision to go. Yet as his departure date drew closer, he became more nervous. “Once I started showing signs of nervousness, they started to get nervous. But the support of my parents and my desire to go to Israel enabled me to come.”

Both Sara and Steven had ambivalent feelings about spending the year in Israel. It was something they had planned and were eager to do, yet they were also nervous about the deteriorating political situation. In both cases, parental support was an essential element of their decision-making process. Once encouraged by their parents, who validated the desire to be in Israel, Sara and Steven were able to make the decision to go.

Josh made the decision to spend the year in Israel despite his parent’s wishes. He explained that his mother, “not a great fan of Israel,” was “furious” and refused to speak to

him for most of the year. She had wanted him to wait until “things got better” and then go. His father did not approve either, but he was not annoyed in the same way as was his mother. Josh listed a few reasons why, though he did not describe himself as “particularly Zionist,” he very much wanted to spend the year in Israel. First, he wanted to see and spend time with family members who live in the country. He also wanted to take a year off before graduate school, and he had a keen interest, after spending most of his life in Jewish day schools, in exploring the “relationship between Israel and the United States.” Lastly, Josh’s decision had a strong ideological component—he “did not want to give into terrorism.” Even though Josh made his decision alone and his parents did not endorse it, he did find support in the wider community, which articulated and backed this last sentiment.

Deciding to spend the year in Israel, then, was not an easy one for these participants. It involved constant thought, negotiation and communication, and parental opinion played a significant role. It is clear that the participants’ personal connection and attachment to Israel was fundamental to their decision. Since all of the interviewees, including those who left the program early, had been to Israel before and felt a deep connection to it, Israel and Zionism was a central element of their Jewish identity. The fact that they were familiar with Israel from previous trips and were ideologically committed to it seems to have helped them make the decision to come during this difficult time. Israel was not a remote, unknown place. It was familiar and loved.

### **Making a professional choice**

Ian, a HUC rabbinical student who had spent the past year in Israel, explained clearly that “if you want to be a Reform rabbi in HUC you have to come [to Israel].” As noted, for most of the HUC participants, spending a year in Israel is not a personal decision, but rather a professional one; not a choice to be in Israel, but a choice to begin their graduate program. Matt explained, “I was not particularly thrilled to come here and bring my family, but it was important for my career.”

Rose Ginosar explained that for the HUC participants, “being in a mandatory program removes the sense of choice.” This helped some participants, in that they did not constantly feel plagued with the responsibility and dilemma of their decision during the difficult year away. Furthermore, parents often directed their concerns to the HUC administration and attempted to pressure it to change its policy, instead of the children having to deal directly with parental pressure to leave the program and return home early.

Keith had planned for five years before his arrival to study at HUC in Israel. Initially his parents were supportive.

They knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life and they were very understanding. When the situation would become more difficult and I would be upset by it, they would help me work through it...In February their opinion changed as the situation became worse—especially after the incidents in Jerusalem. They began to pressure the organizers of the program to end. It was very upsetting for me but I could understand it. It was hard for those of us whose families were pushing for the program to end. In the beginning my parents were among the most supportive.

For others, the lack of choice was difficult. Rose Ginosar tells of one student who spent the year in Israel infuriated with the administration and hating the program. Once HUC's administration reconsidered its policy, she was happy to remain in Israel, perhaps because the choice was now hers.

Despite the fact that some students felt that they had no choice, others believed they did. Matt, who had come to Israel with his wife and his two young children, informed us in his interview that he had regular conversations throughout the year with the dean of the school, Prof. Marmur; they discussed possible alternatives if the situation became unbearable in Israel for Matt and his family.

Thus, the official policy and makeup of the respective programs notwithstanding, the degree to which participants feel they have chosen to be in Israel is ultimately subjective; it depends on the personality of the individual and on the individual's particular circumstances. It may have been easier for those individuals with unsupportive parents to believe that they had no choice. A participant like Matt, on the other hand, was responsible for a family's well-being and needed to know and believe that he always had a choice, that he could leave when he felt he needed to.

Furthermore, it is clear that all the participants, when making the decision to spend the year in Israel, needed to feel that they had not made the choice alone and were supported by a wider community. Some found support in their parents or through the institutional policy of the particular program. Others were encouraged by their own ideological commitment, which was often validated by the wider community.

## **Negotiating Boundaries of Safety While in Israel**

Once the participants arrived in Israel, regardless of program, and regardless of whether they felt they had made the decision to come, they needed to find ways to navigate the stressful

reality. In the interviews with participants of both programs, we found that in most cases reactions to the political situation and the manner in which they tried to cope with the constant stress and terror were quite similar. Furthermore, despite the mature age of these participants, parental opinion often played an important role in influencing their own decisions and in helping them deal with the situation emotionally.

### **Establishing Red lines**

Despite his reluctance, Matt decided to begin his rabbinical training and therefore spend the year in Israel. Prior to their arrival, Matt and his wife made a decision—they would not stay in Israel unconditionally. They felt that they needed to establish a “red line” for themselves. Matt explained, “The original red line was that if we could hear gunfire we would leave. We heard gunfire on the first night in our apartment and we knew then we had to change our line, but we didn't know what the line would be. It was important for my wife and we both wanted one....Shortly afterwards we decided that if anything happened in a local place or somewhere we would hang out, we would leave.”

Throughout the year the participants were involved in constant renegotiation of their “red lines” as they realized that many of their initial assumptions were unrealistic. The violence kept escalating and encroaching more upon their daily lives. Instead of establishing fixed “red lines,” participants began to make decisions regarding their personal safety on a daily basis. In making these decisions, the students began to follow their own instincts and took into account the security information and advice given to them by the administration of their particular programs. Throughout the year, the students counterbalanced their feelings of increased vulnerability by developing coping mechanisms that helped them deal with their complex reality. Students learned to live with or alongside the terror and became more absorbed in their programs and in life in Israel.

### **Learning to trust one's instincts**

Neither Project Otzma nor HUC imposed restrictions on its participants. It was clear from talking to the interviewees of both programs that participants tended to make decisions regarding their personal safety based on their own instincts and understanding of the situation. Matt explains, “I didn't feel that nothing could happen to me. I didn't feel invulnerable...to a certain extent I say, when your time comes your time comes...things happen.” Keith, another HUC participant, explained that he too made decisions based on his

“gut feelings.” Yet he had also created boundaries for himself from the outset—he would never catch buses or visit Machaneh Yehudah, the Jewish outdoor market in Jerusalem. There were certain places or situations that most of the interviewees avoided; most did not feel comfortable taking buses, going to Machaneh Yehudah, being in crowded areas, or eating at restaurants and cafés without security guards. The majority of participants felt the most vulnerable in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Reality determined this sentiment, as most attacks had taken place in the larger cities, and on buses and in areas of public entertainment. Suicide bombers usually chose crowded areas to maximize fatalities and casualties. Thus, the participants made their decisions about personal safety based on some type of calculation and not only on personal intuition. Within both groups, personal response to the security situation varied; some of the participants felt a need to restrict their movements, while others felt comfortable going anywhere they pleased. As Yael, an Otzma participant, explained, “personal security is personal.”

Interestingly, peer pressure did not seem to play an important role in individuals’ decision-making. Sara reported that there were times when people “made her feel bad” for not going out to places where she did not feel comfortable, yet despite the pressure she refused to go. She observed that as the program progressed the participants supported one another and their decisions regarding their personal safety.

### **Guidance and support from administrators**

Beyond heeding their own intuitive feelings, most of interviewees felt that their program’s administration was effective in helping them to make informed decisions. Furthermore, the administrations played a critical role in providing emotional support for the participants during the year.

Because the Intifada had erupted in October 2000, during the previous academic year, the institutions had already formulated some strategies for assisting students. Rose Ginosar related that “it was then we learned what was essential; to keep the class together and to try and reassure them as much as we could.” It was vital for the administration to give students the “idea that they are not alone and that they know what's going on.” Thus, by the beginning of the new academic year, HUC had already included in its academic program a plan to help the students cope with the situation.

From her experience, Rose Ginosar believed that the most difficult thing for these students was their feeling of isolation after the news of a bombing. Because students often do not have

family in Israel, no one calls immediately to see if they are alright. “Psychologically they need someone to call them...we took it upon us to become that family.” HUC set up a phone tree system between the administration, faculty, and students and held security briefings for the entire student body after each attack. “The administration also learned that it was important for the students to know about each bombing immediately so they would be able to call home before their parents learned of it.” Moreover, HUC made the services of a mental health professional available to the students. Students were entitled to six sessions with the counselor, with additional sessions available at their own expense if they felt they needed it.

Both HUC and Otzma held regular security briefings for their groups. These briefings were more frequent on the HUC program because all participants were in the same city throughout the year. Rose Ginosar explained the rationale: “The more you know, the easier it is to deal with reality.” The aim was to teach the students “to trust their instincts in working out where to go and what to do.” Most importantly, the briefings were to communicate what was going on and provide some sort of analysis of the situation. As part of the HUC program, after every bombing that took place in Jerusalem the administration called all the students to a meeting to discuss the event. The meeting would be followed by a prayer service—an attempt to integrate the “spiritual and the intellectual.” Almost all of the HUC participants interviewed praised the security briefings and felt somewhat guided by them. Keith explained that Paul Liptz, a lecturer for the HUC program, “told us what we could expect and how he himself was feeling. He had a good understanding of the situation and it was very helpful to me. He gave us his heartfelt opinion.” All the HUC interviewees complimented Paul Liptz and the way he conducted the security briefings.

It was more difficult for Otzma to hold regular meetings. Often participants were dispersed throughout the country. To combat this logistical difficulty, Otzma established its own phone tree system, whereby after each attack members of the group would contact each other, making sure that everyone knew what had happened and was accounted for. Some of the Otzma interviewees complained that the phone tree did not always work or that they did not hear about certain attacks in other parts of the country. There was a sense among these participants that the program could have been more thorough in communicating news to its participants.

Yossi Smadja explained that as the year progressed and the political and security situation deteriorated, Otzma enacted certain measures aimed at making the participants feel more secure. The philosophy was, “As long as you stay in the country and are part of Otzma, we will help and support you as much as possible. And we will try and help you limit the risk

you are taking by being in Israel.” In practical terms, this meant providing money for taxis instead of buses, news updates so that participants “would not make a mistake by going to a place which is not safe,” and “security guidelines and instructions to follow so they know what to do and what not to do.”

Most of the participants felt guided by the security guidelines and comforted by the advice given to them. In an interview with Sara, who had decided to stay for a week after the program ended, she explained how nervous she would have felt about being in Israel, and in Jerusalem especially, without any access to this type of information.

Yossi Smadja noted that while the program attempted to help the participants avoid potentially dangerous areas, it was not altered in any way because of the situation. “We kept the program going, nothing was stopped, they continued and adapted to whatever was happening...I sometimes felt frustrated: What else could I do so that the participants would feel that we were doing something?”

It seems that that unlike HUC, the administration of Otzma had not built into their program a thought-out, structured plan to help its participants cope with the situation. This may have been more difficult because of the nature of the program. They provided basic tools to negotiate the situation, but essentially it was up to the individual to navigate it. The Otzma administration was committed to flexibility about the ongoing decision to continue the program. This approach may have helped the participants feel that the administration was well informed and that they were able trust their assessment of the situation and their decisions.

As the participants struggled with their decision to remain in Israel, Project Otzma tried its best to provide emotional support and encouragement. Said Yossi Smadja, “They also get the message that ‘we would like you to continue here, but we will understand and support each one of you if you make the decision to go back to the States.’ I don't think at any stage of the program we tried to pass on an ideological message that you need to stay here.” He believed that the *madricha* [counselor] who worked with the group during the first part of the year was particularly helpful. “She helped them process their feelings. She had no formal training but was very good. She was also very ideological because she had just made *aliyah* and passed on a very ideological message. She probably motivated them and gave them the support to deal with the situation.” Yossi Smadja’s last statement is crucial in that it signifies the ideological sentiment of the program. This attitude unquestionably affected the running of the program and the messages transmitted by the administration to the participants. The ideological bent of the program would certainly have an impact—consciously or

unconsciously—on the participants’ decisions to remain in Israel and on how they interpreted the situation.

Despite the different administrative approaches of the two programs to the situation, almost all of the participants complimented the way their own program addressed it. Josh commented, “I couldn't have asked for a more caring community and leadership to help us all through it. They were always willing to talk and listen, especially David Ellenson” (president of HUC). Keith recognized the immense dual challenge that the administration faced throughout the year—the faculty and administrative staff were not only helping the students cope with the situation; they were also trying to cope with it themselves.

The program and its administration play a central role in giving advice, guidance, and support to participants. It was clear from the interviews that it is essential that participants do not feel alone during times of crisis. Furthermore, in making decisions regarding personal safety, participants rely heavily on the security briefings organized by the program. However, due to the nature of terror, it is clear that the program cannot guarantee the individuals’ personal safety and there are limitations to the guidance and advice it can give. While taking into account the information and guidance provided by the program administrations, essentially the participants needed to feel comfortable with their own choices and decisions regarding personal safety.

### **The Structure of the program and the experience of living in Israel**

The structure of an organized program is significant in helping participants remain in Israel. HUC provided a rigorous study schedule, which absorbed the individuals' time, concentration, and energy. For most of the week, the students were in classes; they were not on the streets or traveling in the country. The study routine restricted and contained their movements, which helped alleviate their sense of vulnerability. Their lives became more manageable as they moved between their homes and the HUC campus. In contrast, Otzma participants spent most of the year living and working in Israel alongside Israelis. They were far less insulated than were the students on the HUC program. Interestingly, this did not increase their feelings of vulnerability; rather, their close interaction with Israelis and involvement in Israeli society helped them deal with the stressful reality.

#### Interaction with Israelis

Yossi Smadja believes that the nature of the Otzma program enabled participants to remain in Israel despite the terror. “Otzma is all about living and experiencing Israel with Israelis, and on a certain level they feel like Israelis.” Through their volunteer work and their interaction with their adopted families, participants learned from Israelis how to deal with the situation. Josh explained that in making decisions as to where to go and what to do, he would speak to Israelis, and find out what they were doing. The Otzmaniks also learned through their interactions with Israeli society that, just like themselves, Israelis were frightened and were also constantly engaged by calculations and dilemmas regarding their personal safety. This helped program participants validate and normalize their fears.

Sara describes how she and her “adoptive” family tried to figure out the safest way for her to get back to Kiryat Shemonah.

And I was at my adopted parents who live in Yokne’am...that weekend and I was living in Kiryat Shemonah at the time and we were trying to decide how to go home. Go back on Saturday night, Sunday night?...Take the bus?...I was nervous but I ...don't have any other option but to take the bus so...I was joking around with my adopted brother: “So where should I sit on the bus? Where is the safest place?” “Oh sit near the back ’cause sometimes they get scared and they blow themselves up in the front of the bus, so it’s safest to sit in the back”...Joking around...like sick black humor in Israel...“City-to-city buses are safer than inner city because they have bigger seats”...“It’s better to go on a bus on Saturday night and not on Sunday morning”...

This is all on Saturday night. So then we had to decide where to go from, the Checkpost [junction] or somewhere in Haifa...My adopted brother...: “I will drop you off at the Checkpost and not at the bus station so I will increase your chances of survival”...and we were joking around...so I go Saturday night, and Sunday morning there is a *piguah* [terrorist attack] at the Checkpost—and that was so weird, I had a really hard time with that...had I gone Sunday morning I would have gone through Yokne’am...all these jokes.

In situations of trauma, humor is a coping mechanism, a means of gaining mastery over a terrifying situation. Through humor, individuals are able to express their fear in a non-threatening way. Sara's ability to laugh at the threatening situation and at her own fear enabled her to live within a terrifying reality. Sara relates her experiences throughout the year, with a sense of disbelief: she cannot believe she managed to stay in Israel and complete the program despite her intense fear and insecurity.

### Learning to live with terror

From Sara's interview we also learn that despite the tension and procrastination, participants learned to cope with and adapt to the situation. They became used to living with fear and

destruction, as they were often able to disassociate themselves from the terror. When asked how she managed to remain in Israel despite the situation, Sara replied, “It’s all perspective, it’s all just getting used to things, just simply...I don’t know, I don’t know how I did it.” The following extract demonstrates how individuals managed to “acclimatize” themselves to the war-like situation. Sara relates that on her first night in Kiryat Shemona, ...there was anti-aircraft fire there and I was so scared and I was on the phone...everyone in town was asking ‘what’s going on?’ It was the first time they had it in a long, long time and people going to the bomb shelters, and I was screaming, “oh my God!”...So nervous. And towards the end we heard it all the time in that period and I remember one of the last times we went to the *mirpeset* [balcony] and took photos of the smoke in the air...

As part of the program, many Otzmaniks lived for some time in more remote areas of Israel, which helped them feel more safe and secure. Sara explains that, “I was happy when I was in Eilat, and at the time it was one of the safest parts of the country and the rest of the group was up here (Jerusalem) and they weren’t allowed to go on buses and out to cafés and I was here and I was *chofshi* [free] and I could do whatever I wanted...and we would walk on the *tayelet* [promenade] and it felt safe.”

Josh, an Otzma participant, explained that the safest he felt all year was when he traveled down south and spent two weeks in a Bedouin village. All of the Otzma interviewees said that they felt the most vulnerable in the bigger cities—especially Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Doing volunteer work, Steven found being in Jerusalem very stressful:

When I was living in Jerusalem for about a month, working with the Jewish Agency in March, it was really the worst time in this whole situation. I had a couple of close calls when I was in the area of a *piguah*, and it was really frightening and stressful walking around. A lot of the time, I spent eating lunch in the building...And we were taking buses back and forth to work and you are always thinking at the back of your mind—not even at the back of your mind—you are always looking around just in case someone gets on the bus, or walking on the street. After that month I was really stressed out about it and felt overwhelmed by the situation...it wore me out.

It was clear from the interviews that participants felt more secure in more remote areas of Israel, where terror attacks are less frequent. Being far away from the scenes of terror allowed the participants to distance themselves from the situation and carry on with their lives. This is an important consideration for future year-long programs: participants’ sense of vulnerability and insecurity is reduced when they are living in more remote areas of the country. Interaction with Israelis is also an important aspect of their year away, helping them decipher

their own boundaries, but more importantly, helping them develop a sense of belonging. We learn from these interviews that over time participants generally adapted to the stressful environment and carved out their own comfort zones and ways of dealing with the situation. The longer they remained in Israel, the more they “got used” to the situation, and the more attached to Israel they became. These participants developed a sense of a shared destiny with Israel and Israelis that gave an ideological dimension to their decision to remain in the country.

### **The Decision to Leave Israel Early**

As the security situation deteriorated further in March 2001, the terror encroached more upon the lives of the participants. Participants of both programs began to feel the need to return home; many of them felt insecure and faced increased pressure from their parents. It is clear that the period between March and April 2001 represented a breaking point for both the administration and the participants. During this period, terror was too close and personal, and students could no longer distance themselves from the death and destruction. Furthermore, Israel’s policy in relation to the Intifada also became more aggressive, which exacerbated feelings of uncertainty. As noted, the administration of the HUC program felt compelled to reconsider its initial policy, and it decided to give its students the option of returning home and completing the program through tutorials and correspondence. Yet choosing to leave Israel earlier than originally planned was not an easy decision for most of the interviewees. Many of them had grown accustomed to living in Israel and had developed a stronger connection to the people and the place. Often they left Israel quite unresolved with their choice.

### **Too close to home**

For the most part, participants were able to remain in Israel as long as they were able to distance themselves emotionally from the terror attacks. Generally, they were able to cope if the situation did not influence their daily lives or affect them personally. Usually the attacks took place in “another town” or happened to “other people,” people whom they did not know. As long as the attacks occurred in unfamiliar places and in places that they could never see themselves visiting, they were able to maintain the precarious feeling of safety and security. Thus, it is hardly surprising that most of the interviewees explained that the most difficult of times were when the terror attacks happened in the cities where they were living or in places that they frequented.

Despite parental pressure, the HUC administration remained committed to continuing the program in Jerusalem, until 9 March 2001, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in the crowded Moment café in Jerusalem, killing eleven young adults and wounding fifty-four. After that bombing, the administration changed its policy. Rose Ginosar explained:

I had twelve students living on Azza Street, three students sitting on their balcony across from Moment when the bomb blew, and that's what did it. If there had been a bomb, I am convinced, anywhere else...in Jerusalem—[such as the] Beit HaKerem [neighborhood]—the year would have held. That's what did it. It was...a very bad month and we all know that...of course it got worse...it just touched their lives too much. And again, if it had happened at the beginning of the year at Moment, it would have been okay too. But I think it came after this relentlessness...I mean we all felt it, it was just wearing everything down and they were getting tremendous pressure from parents. I said to the president, "I have a moral problem right now, when bombs are blowing up on the street they live on, of telling people who don't want to be here, who want to go home, that they have to stay. I have a moral problem telling students to stay." I felt we couldn't tell them, "You have no choice, you have to stay." We had to give them the option to leave. We made a decision...we didn't want to polarize the class and say, "Those of you who want to leave can leave and those of you who want to stay can stay." Because we felt that would cause [a division in] this class...the heroes and the cowards. So we made a decision—I don't know if it's right or wrong—that we end the year; instead of ending the year mid-May, we ended the year at the end of March—six weeks early—and anybody could have the choice. The rest of the year would be tutorials; you could do those tutorials in Israel or in the U.S.

At least one participant believed that HUC made its decision when it did in part because of an incident during a CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) convention in Jerusalem: Some of the visiting rabbis were in Caffit, a local café when a waiter and the security guard overpowered a suicide bomber who entered. Said Ian, "...hundreds of rabbis being here, including the administration of HUC [abroad]...a few of them being here at Caffit, it felt like that was part of their decision."

Ten students left almost immediately, and over the next six weeks more and more students left. Of the sixty-two students, fifteen completed the year in Jerusalem. Once the HUC administration made its decision, it was quick to redraft the program and rebuild it for those who chose to remain in Israel. With the rest of the academic year conducted by means of tutorials via correspondence, students were free to participate either in Israel or in the U.S. Invariably, as more students left, the tutorials in Jerusalem became much smaller and more intimate. Rose Ginosar commented, "People who stayed thought the new schedule was better than the old one." The participants who chose to remain in Israel confirmed this sentiment.

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Reflecting upon HUC's decision, Rose Ginosar seemed torn between her obvious ideological commitment to Israel and the program's continuation there, and her sense of relief in not having to shoulder the burden the responsibility for keeping in Israel students who did not want to be in the country or who could no longer cope with being there. She laughed and said, "If we gave everyone the choice, we would have a great class; then we would get rid of those negative feelings of 'you made me come.'"

Rose Ginosar's account of HUC's decision is particularly illuminating in that it reflects the change in administration's attitude. Before the bombing at Moment, she did not experience a conflict in bringing students to Israel. Yet afterward, when the terror had come too close after months of relentless terror, she no longer felt that she had the right to insist that the participants stay. This conflict has also become an issue for Yossi Smadja's program. He explained that some of his counterparts in the United States have become ambivalent about recruiting prospective participants, unsure whether they want the responsibility of sending individuals to Israel at such a critical time. He fears that this change in attitude on the part of North Americans will make it increasingly difficult for him to attract potential candidates in the coming years.

Matt and his family left Israel a few days after HUC made the announcement. He explained,

The decision to leave was not made by us, but by the program. Once the program had ended, there was no reason to stay. The only rational choice then was to leave. I am proud of the fact that I managed to stick it out till the end. It was important that I completed the program. The program announced that the formal instruction was over, they did not say "go" or "stay." They said the program was over.

From this statement, we learn that some of the participants did not feel that they made the choice to leave Israel early. In the same way that their decision to come to Israel was directed from above, so was their decision to leave early.

Yet not all of the HUC participants who left the program in March understand their decision in the same way. Other participants explained that they chose to leave, yet the program in Israel had not ended. Keith maintained that he made the decision to leave the program on his own, after the bomb in the Moment café and the attempted bombing at Caffit: "Those places which had been 'off the beaten track' were no longer. Those two places, places which we visited all the time, influenced my decision." He decided to leave Israel because he did not want to feel confined and restricted. "I did not want to live in a box," he said. Although Keith did not mention it explicitly, it would also seem that pressure from his

parents to come home made it difficult for him to remain in Israel once HUC decided to end the program early.

### **Parental pressure**

Even though the participants of these programs are mature adults, the attitudes of parents were often a significant factor in the decision to remain in Israel for the duration of the program. As was discussed earlier, Josh had decided to spend the year in Israel on Otzma despite his parents' disapproval. He arrived in July 2001, felt uneasy after the bombing at Sbarro in Jerusalem, yet managed to cope with the rest of the year until March, “when things got really bad.” In April Josh received a call that his father was having a nervous breakdown. The situation in Israel had begun to affect him physically and psychologically. Josh decided to go home. It was the last track of the program—the kibbutz period—and he felt that he could give it up and go home for his father.

We asked Josh what programs could do in the future in order to give their participants a greater sense of security while in Israel. He replied, “I don't know if the program can change the mindset of the American community...The most difficult aspect of being in Israel right now is not the security threat, but the lack of support from home.” He believes that American Jewry is complacent and suffers from the “Teaneck syndrome,” content with their lives and mostly concerned with themselves and bettering their own lifestyle and comfort, with no commitment to any higher ideals or values. According to Josh, as long as this attitude persists, Jewish youth who want to go to Israel will not be able to do so.

### **Relationships to Israel and Zionism**

While Josh points to the parents' attitude to Israel as a determining factor, Rose Ginosar explains that the participants' relationship to Israel and Zionism is important in influencing the individuals' decision to remain in Israel or leave early. According to her, it became more difficult for individuals who felt less connected to Israel to remain once the situation deteriorated dramatically. Visiting HUC students “are not anti-Israel but many of them are not Israel-oriented. It hasn't been part of their lives.” This is the main consideration behind the program's educational philosophy of making the first year of the program in Israel: “A lot of students don't have a developed sense of peoplehood, that's why they come here in the first year.” Matt explained that “prior to coming I had no particular attachment to Israel. I had been here once before as a youth—passing through on a trip.” Some interviewees who

expressed a tenuous commitment to Israel did decide to remain in Israel until the end of the program. Explored to some extent below, this is an area for further research.

## **The Decision to Complete the Year in Israel**

While for some program participants the difficult time between March and April 2001 became the turning point beyond which they could no longer remain in Israel, this period only strengthened the resolve of others to remain. From their interviews, it is clear that the decision to remain was usually ideologically motivated. Over the year, these participants had developed a deep sense of commitment to Israelis and a feeling of belonging in Israel. They believed that being in the country was the right thing to do, while leaving was disloyal.

### **A sense of responsibility and connectedness**

During Pesach Sara took a trip to Bangkok. Traveling with a group of Israelis, she was shocked by their need to disassociate themselves from what was happening in Israel. She was preoccupied with the news.

And I know that because of my time in Thailand, because I was with these Israelis who, when they went away, did not want to hear about it. And I saw how much it really affected them...this was their country...in April I could go home, but what does that show if...I have somewhere else to go? You know, whenever I want to go I could take my U.S. passport and fly and go, but they don't have somewhere to go [and stay].

At the airport in Bangkok, Sara's mother asked her when she was going to return to the U.S. because the State Department had issued a warning to all American nationals. She replied, "I am not going to give up on it, I have a commitment." In the interview Sara explained, "You know, after a while you feel really connected and you don't want to just quit."

Living and traveling with Israelis during a period of vulnerability and stress heightened Sara's sense of connectedness to Israel and to Israelis. Since the beginning of the program she had been living in Israel and had shared the fate of Israelis. When the opportunity arose to go home, she chose not to. What is perhaps more significant is that she chose to return to Israel during one of the most terrifying periods of the Intifada—after the Pesach suicide bombings and Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank. At that point Sara felt unable to separate herself from Israel and Israelis and made a commitment to finish the year. Sara also attributes her decision to return to Israel and complete the program to being out of the country during the

terrible month of April. If she had been in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv during Pesach, “I can’t say that I would have gone back.”

Taking vacations and traveling outside of Israel during the year was another important factor in the participants’ ability to cope with the situation. Rose Ginosar explained that during the year HUC students traveled a lot, which helped them deal with the situation by having a break from it, “just like us Israelis.” In many instances, being outside the country and watching what they interpreted as bias in the television coverage against Israel made them feel a greater need to come back. As discussed in the first report, on post-high school program participants, for others visiting the States made coming back to Israel even more difficult.

Steven had narrowly escaped the bombing at the Moment café in Jerusalem. He and his roommate were on the way to the café an hour before the bombing, but then decided to finish watching a movie on television before heading out. On their way to the café, they heard that something had happened and decided to go back to a friend’s apartment. Steven recalled that “it was a really horrible...horrible night. So after that happened...it showed us that something could really happen to you and that it’s not just happening [elsewhere]...it’s like you don’t really think this could affect you until it get close to you. So it opened our eyes a lot.” Despite this incident, Steven decided to remain in Israel to complete the program. He felt “a pressure to stay because I wanted to finish the program [here]. I put the pressure on myself to stay.” Yossi Smadja believes that most of the Otzma participants decided to remain in Israel until the end of the program “*because of* the situation.” In previous years, most participants left Israel in March or April. “I don’t think any of them will leave before June 6 and it is not a coincidence.” He believes that once they had made the decision to stay on the program, they committed themselves to completing it; that many of them felt that if they left before the program ended they would have “failed.” “The message maybe came from us, but I also think they got the message from the ‘street,’ from Israelis.” Yossi Smadja feels that over the year, the participants began to “feel like Israelis,” and as Israelis they absorbed the message of “don’t be a traitor and leave at such a time.”

After HUC made the decision to allow students to return to the United States and complete the year there, Ian felt an increasing pressure from his parents to return home.

I told my parents about the HUC decision and I put it in such a way that...you know, the school has made this decision, people are going to start leaving, but I am going to stay until the year ends and that’s it. I tried to put it in such a way that there would be no discussion...and everything was fine until a couple of week later it started with, “Are you sure

you want to stay?" I was very adamant about staying, and there were a number of us who stayed.

Ian felt committed to completing the program in Israel, but he explained that it was difficult to have to constantly explain to his parents why he had chosen to remain in Israel. "How many times do we have to have the discussion of 'Are you sure you don't want to come home?' You know it wears you out. It wore me out..." During the month of April, the situation became even more unbearable, Ian's parents became yet more anxious, and the pressure on him to return to the States escalated. His father's challenge became, "What, you're above what's happening? You're just going to coast right through?"

Ian realized that he was in Israel because he *wanted* to be and not because he *had* to be. His decision to remain represents to him a larger issue that he is struggling with: "What does it mean to be a Jew in the diaspora, knowing that Israel exists?" After making the difficult decision to remain in Israel, Ian dealt with constant pressure from his parents to return, while having to confront his growing connectedness to Israel and commitment to Zionism. This "dual allegiance" is not unique to the current crisis, but rather since the Zionist movement began has been an issue for Jewish youth who decide to make *aliyah* and leave their families. For many such youth, the current crisis in Israel only heightens the commitment to living there, sharpening the conflict with parents who are reluctant for their children to be in Israel, especially during a time when they believe their safety and security is threatened.

It is important to mention that Ian believes he was able to withstand the pressure from his parents because during what was meant to be a visit back to the States in the course of a previous stay in Israel (during which the first Intifada erupted), he had agreed to remain, respecting his parents' anxieties and fears over his return. After acquiescing to his parents' requests then, Ian made an agreement with them: "If and when I get into HUC and have to be there, I am going to Israel, that's the way it is'...so that's the way it was until March 10."

Students who chose to stay in Israel, repeatedly saying goodbye to friends who decided to leave, were faced with a shrinking community of support. Ian explains:

Someone was always leaving, there was always a goodbye party...It was very difficult because it was constant goodbyes. As opposed to 'it's over and now we are all leaving'...There was no clean break...of our ten months here, for all of us. And we were trying to get our work done...just being realistic about it, and with all the goodbye functions and trying to get the work done, it became a challenge.

We have seen that for most of the year, students at HUC did not have to make a "choice" about whether to stay in Israel or leave their program early. They were able to participate in their program without having to battle with their parents or themselves. The decision was not

in their hands. Once the administration of HUC changed its policy, the decision-making process came all too quickly for some. Some left within a few days after the announcement, while others waited a week, a few weeks, or even a month. It was clear from the interviews that this “non-policy” made it difficult for those who wanted to stay. The HUC administration moved from inflexibility to complete flexibility and perhaps should have chartered a more moderate course throughout the year. Perhaps the institution could have been more flexible with certain individuals, and developed a more concrete “leaving policy” once the decision was made to end the year in Jerusalem earlier.

Dan, a participant on the HUC program decided to remain in Israel despite the situation because, as he explains, “My feeling was that I am not finished with my classes, I am not finished with my work...there are still things I want to see.” At the beginning of the interview, Dan said that until then he had never had the opportunity to “make it to Israel.” Finally, after finding the time and money to do so, he was determined to complete the year and see and experience as much of Israel as possible. An older student, Dan did not feel any pressure to come home early, not from his partner, family, or friends. He mentioned that once his sister had sent him an e-mail asking him to come home. He appears to have been single-minded in his commitment to complete the year and get as much out of it as he possibly could. Although not expressed explicitly, it seems that during the year Dan’s commitment to Israel was strengthened, which may have helped him stay despite the terror. He remarked, “I can now understand people who make *aliyah*.”

## **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

While the bulk of this report and the preceding one on post-high school programs divided the analysis according to age-cohort, this concluding section attempts to tie together the similar findings in each report. Despite the differences between the programs and the individual students, the participants were all young diaspora Jews who experienced living for a year in Israel during one of its more tragic times. Regardless of age, their motivations for coming, or whether or not they opted to leave Israel early, participants lived amidst fear, confusion, and proximity to terror. Being in Israel during 2001-2—confronting their vulnerability and feelings of powerlessness in a life-threatening reality—was a personal choice for these individuals. Each could have chosen to be elsewhere and yet, despite the security situation, opted to be in Israel.

Each subsection of the conclusion includes our policy recommendations for the institutions.

### **The decision to go to Israel**

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing students on year-long programs in Israel is making the decision to participate. It is clear from the interviews that in the months before the programs began, participants found themselves in a quandary. The prelude to participation was emotionally draining, even for those individuals who anticipated going on these programs for years ahead of time (most notably the students on post-high school programs). Choosing to spend a year in Israel during the 2001–2 school year was unlike choosing to spend a year there before the start of the second Intifada. The usual deliberations were augmented by a more urgent concern, namely, the question of personal safety in the midst of indiscriminate terror attacks in Israel. Most interviewees described prolonged discussions and arguments with their parents and relatives in which they continually justified their decision and even absurdly promised to guarantee their own safety. In many cases, the participants were unsure about the decision to go and filled with apprehension.

Yet despite enormous pressures, both external and internal, these young people eventually made the decision to spend the year in Israel. After the initial settling-in period, they found it much easier to be in Israel. They began developing coping mechanisms, allowing them to live in the country in a similar manner to Israelis. Furthermore, they were able to enjoy and benefit from being in Israel once they experienced the country close up and the images from the mass media were not those that dominated their minds.

Understanding the participants' decision-making process about going to Israel is crucial for institutions that bring students to Israel during times of crisis. Though younger potential students' final decisions are subject to parental control, program administrators need to be keenly aware of this process when planning policy for future years. First, knowing that many students and their families are feeling ambivalent, the programs must show unwavering commitment and support for the year in Israel. It becomes much more difficult to recruit future participants if any representative of a program shows ambivalence about sending diaspora students to Israel; the same clear message needs to come from Israeli and U.S. organizers alike. Secondly, understanding the decision-making process allows these institutions to support potential participants and their families as they go through the process. We suggest that the institutions maintain strong contact in the months and weeks leading up

to their programs, especially when these months are dominated by insecurity within the country. Parents and participants need to know that they are not the only ones thinking about their safety as they embark on a year in Israel.

### **Support from families**

While Otzma and HUC participants are adults and therefore able to make independent decisions regarding time spent in Israel, parental pressures still played a role in their ability to carry out their decisions, and the pressures played an even more significant role in how they dealt with the situation emotionally. The experience of these program participants was similar to that of Year Course and Midreshet Lindenbaum students in terms of the emotional support they received from their parents. Our research found that when parents were not supportive of the decision to be in Israel, students felt distress throughout the year as they placated their concerned families while simultaneously trying to cope emotionally with the anxiety of being in Israel under such difficult circumstances. As one student observed, “It wore me out.” For some, feeling worn out was the breaking point, and they left their program and Israel.

It is not surprising that many individuals who choose to be in Israel during these times feel they have to constantly justify their decisions, placate their parents, and fight to stay. One of the difficulties is the marked discrepancy between what parents see on their television screens and what their children experience on a day-to-day basis. The sensationalism of the media is traumatizing for the parents. Many of them have no concept as to where the violence is in relation to their children, nor do they realize that people do manage, despite the enormous difficulties and constraints, to continue living meaningful and productive lives.

Parental visits during the year were extremely useful in counteracting the media portrayal of the situation in Israel. Parental group visits during the year may help programs address this issue. Even if only a few parents are able to travel to Israel during the year, they should be invited to speak to the rest of the parents and report on what they saw and experienced. Conference calls with parents may also help break the distance between “there” and “here”; between the perceptions from far away and the daily reality. The same is true of talks given by informed speakers or a weekly newsletter compiled by the participants relating the week’s events. Any and all of these ideas are likely to prove helpful in dispelling parents’ fears and may subsequently translate into their support for their children and helping their children find strength and confidence in being in Israel during a difficult time.

## **Learning to live with terror**

Like most Israelis, students learned to re-negotiate and adapt their lives to the escalating violence and terror threats throughout the year. They were able to cope as long as the terror was removed from their “comfort zones.” When the terror struck at places which were part of their daily lives and reality, many of them had difficulty. At the point that terror became too close for comfort, some of them decided to leave. The growing violence strengthened the resolve of others to stay, as their feelings of connection and identification with Israel and its citizens increased. Through our research we found that strong ideological commitment to Israel and a sense of connection to the people and the land helped individuals live through this difficult time.

Programs cannot guarantee the safety of their participants. Both program administrations and participants are painfully aware of this. They can, however, help the participants feel more secure in Israel. Primarily, participants need to feel that they are not alone; that they have a support structure and a community to help them deal with the threatening reality. Participants also need to know what is going on in the country. They need to be provided with facts upon which to base informed decisions. Furthermore, the participants need to feel guided. Despite any uncertainty about the future, students still need to feel a sense of being “taken care” of and guided by their institutions.

## **Rules and the role of the institution**

There was a notable difference between the way the different institutions (especially the post-high school programs) chose to guide their students through rules and regulations. Young Judaea put forward firm boundaries as to where the students were and were not allowed to go. These rules were subject to constant change throughout the year. Midreshet Lindenbaum made no stipulations whatsoever, leaving it to the students and their parents to decide. While many of the students valued this approach, appreciating its educational value, others found it difficult to live with, as it meant that some girls were free to do whatever they wanted when at the same time there were girls who, per their parent’s wishes, were unable to leave the building. Beyond creating divisions within the group, this policy indirectly encouraged some girls not to be completely honest with their parents and the administration. Often they told their parents only after they had visited a certain area or did not tell them at all. On the other hand, some of the interviewees from Young Judaea were critical of the way their administration approached the situation, finding the rules and regulations too confining.

These individuals suggested that the inflexibility led to dishonesty; students who felt overly confined transgressed the rules.

Although we recognize that breaking the rules and making independent decisions counter to adult approval is an endemic part of the experience for these young adults, this is potentially more dangerous because of the current security situation in Israel. Creating boundaries for participants—especially on post-high school programs—is a difficult endeavor which involves educational, ideological, and even political considerations. Yet we believe that it is important for all students to feel guided, supported, and treated equally during their year in Israel. Based on these considerations, we suggest that the institutions find possibilities for *guiding* students in ways that are neither too restrictive nor too open or loose. It should be noted that this recommendation does not run contrary to the policy of programs that impose few restrictions. Rather, it emphasizes the need for a sense of community and a place for discussion within the program community. It is about information-sharing and encouragement and not about the actual rules an institution chooses to initiate.

### **The benefits of being in Israel during a time of crisis**

Many of the participants expressed a feeling of an even greater connectedness to Israel, to Israelis, and in some cases, to Judaism and Jewish learning because they were in Israel during a time of crisis. For many of them, being in Israel during a difficult year felt like right thing to do, and inasmuch as their year was more constrained and restricted, many felt that they had come to see a side of Israel they never would have seen otherwise. Furthermore, some felt that their year was more meaningful because of what they were seeing and experiencing. Some students commented on feeling a sense of pride in being in Israel during this difficult time, while others mentioned learning the meaning of commitment.

Participants also felt they shared in Israel's fate and developed more intimate and real relationships with Israelis as a result of the situation around them. Our research showed clearly that the more involved participants became with Israeli society, the more they felt a sense of belonging and the less they felt isolated. Witnessing the fears of Israelis and their daily deliberations, many participants felt their own fears validated and their anxieties normalized. They learned from Israelis that it was legitimate to feel afraid, and they learned different coping mechanisms from them. Furthermore, students' pride in coming to Israel during a time of crisis was enhanced through direct contact with Israelis.

Program participants were also presented with more unique (and sometimes sobering) opportunities to interact with Israelis and Israeli society than in past years. One director noted that his students became the “media darlings” of Israeli and foreign press, interviewed and invited to the homes of the mayor, the President, and other Israeli officials. Through various experiences, students learned that for many Israelis their presence was a source of inspiration and support. He noted, “Everywhere they go, it is “*kol hakavod*” [more power to you] that you are here.” Another director relayed her students’ experience as they attended the funeral of a neighbor who was killed in Jenin (on Holocaust Day 2002, during an incursion by the Israel Defense Forces). The grandmother of the soldier came up to the students, and upon finding out who they were she requested that each of them call their parents and thank them for their permission to come to Israel, as it gave her a sense of strength to know that her grandson had died for a greater purpose, for *Am Yisrael*.

The sense of vulnerability is not unique to the participants on year-long programs, but rather is experienced by all Israelis during these difficult times. In many instances, vulnerability also leads to an openness among Israelis as they often reach out to support each other in such times. This mutual support and help is a source of inspiration to many, including the program participants who are able to witness it. We believe that these moments have enormous educational value, as they teach people about giving and sharing. We therefore recommend that during their year away participants become more involved in volunteer projects that attempt to help those personally and directly affected by the terror. Furthermore, we encourage programs to arrange visits to hospitals and institutions where terror victims, especially children, are recuperating and rebuilding their physical and emotional strength. (We do not suggest visiting patients who are in critical or serious condition, but rather those who have made a significant recovery yet are still undergoing treatment.) Helping participants feel useful and helpful is vital during a time when most of us feel impotent and vulnerable.

## **Final Remarks**

### **A core population for future Jewish leadership**

As the Intifada continues, the number of participants on short- and long-term Israel Experience programs has plummeted, after a dramatic rise in numbers in the late 1990s. Jewish leaders have begun to ask: What will be the consequence for a future generation of Jewish leaders in North America who have not taken part in Israel Experience programs?

Without counting the richness of the Israel encounter as part of their collective Jewish educational experience, how will—how *can* such leaders keep Israel as a priority on the table of Jewish community concerns? How can they prioritize Israel and the plight of Israelis when they have not gained a sense of belonging in the Jewish homeland through first-hand interactions with the people and the place?

Participants on year-long programs in Israel during a time of crisis can generally be described as “Jewishly involved.” Their participation takes various forms, from leadership in Jewish or Zionist youth groups, to Israel advocacy or social action, to religious or spiritual activity. It is recommended that attention be paid to these particular individuals, as they represent a *core population* among the younger Jewish populations in North America. That is, they not only display strong (behaviorally) Jewish identities through their Jewish involvement in North America, but they also show *commitment to Israel* as part of these identities, through their participation in year-long programs in Israel during a time of crisis. Our research indicates that even among those students who came to Israel as part of a program requirement, affinity for and loyalty to Israel and Israelis grew as a result of being here during a difficult time.

We believe that individuals who continue to come to Israel on quality educational programs will make sound Jewish lay and professional leaders in the future. We call these individuals a *core population for Jewish leadership* because we believe they will be uniquely qualified to keep Israel on the agenda in the future when other Jewish leaders no longer have the tools to understand its importance, since such tools can only be developed through quality time spent in the country. Although their numbers may be small, we believe it is worth investing a variety of resources in maintaining contact with these individuals while they are in Israel and when they return to North America after their year in Israel.

### **Further research**

In thinking about future research in this area, we suggest further interviews with individuals who would ordinarily have participated in these programs but did not due to fear or parental/familial constraints. Such interviews would provide useful comparisons to the sample population of this study. They would also be helpful to institutions seeking to understand the makeup of the families that allowed their children to come to Israel versus those who did not. Interviews with the mothers and fathers of students who participated in these programs would also be useful in clarifying the parental perspective that we were only

able to assess second-hand, via their children's responses. Furthermore, such interviews might also prove useful for institutions in establishing supportive policies for the families.