

A YEAR (OR SIX MONTHS) IN THE LIFE

A Gap Year Journey Abroad

The idea of taking time off between college and high school is starting to take hold in the U.S. It works like this: A high school senior applies to college and accepts an offer of admission, but instead of showing up on campus a few months later, he or she defers freshman year for a while. That interim period, popularly referred to as a “gap year,” produces a confident and mature young adult who has enjoyed a dynamic experience engaged in studying, service and/or travel.

A number of years ago, I received an invitation to participate in the first-ever college counselor tour of gap-year programs in the State of Israel. My trip was sponsored by MASA, an innovative partnership between The Jewish Agency and the State of Israel that's a one-stop resource for long-term, post-high school programs in Israel. MASA's co-sponsor was the Avi Chai Foundation, which promotes mutual understanding and sensitivity among Jews of different religious backgrounds and commitments. I was one of more than 20 counselors and educators from the U.S. and Canada -- and the only counselor from New York -- on the trip.

MASA means journey, and that's what we did. In less than a week, we criss-crossed the country, visiting five of Israel's seven universities, several privately sponsored programs, and an Israeli high school that has American accreditation. We also learned about an Israeli school of jazz and contemporary music that accepts international students. Although most of the programs were for the gap year and included study, travel and community service, a few featured programs for the junior year of college. If I hadn't known we were in Israel, I would

have thought that we were on American campuses with modern buildings housing up-to-date classrooms and laboratories.

Journey is what the students do, too. They're living an authentic life in Israel, gaining an international perspective and giving back to their communities as volunteers in soup kitchens, absorption centers and elementary schools. They hailed from all over the United States and Canada, and some were from Western Europe and Australia. The myth that only religious kids take a year off is exactly that -- a myth. The students we met had graduated from day schools and from public schools; their families were Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist. Many would be going to college in the fall at Ivy League universities, as well as Johns Hopkins University, Binghamton University, New York University, the University of California, McGill University and lots more. But for the moment, they were happy to be where they were.

"Where's the race," asked one student. "This year is about my soul, my character, my inside development. College will be there next year, and I'll be more ready to benefit from it if I know myself better."

"It's a chance for me to grow up; I think I'll be a more focused college student," another said. And yet another: "It has already helped me to be even more sure of what I want to do."

I learned a lot from these students and from others like them. Yes, I'm happy to recommend that students consider not rushing off to college but, instead, think about taking some time to know themselves, where they've come from and where they're going.

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You can find a listing of all of the MASA programs at www.masaisrael.org. Financial aid is available.