

# Why the Gap Year in Israel Is So Important



I have spent the last 17 years of my life in seminary.

I have grown older, while my students have stayed the same: always 18, always post-high school, always thirsty for what is to come. As the director of Midreshet Torat Chessed, I greatly appreciated the *18Forty Podcast*'s latest episode on the gap year, but given the title "What is the goal of the Gap Year?" I found it lacking—specifically in the conversations on "flipping out" and the gap year in a post-October 7 world.

It is important to first understand why the year in Israel weighs so heavily in a child's life.

Up until their year in Israel, a child is mostly taught frontally and through sets of rules, which often leaves them either hungry for more or burnt out.

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I am extremely impressed with the way Jewish high schools insert passion into their students' Judaism, but the fact remains that high school is also a time for math, history, language, science, and the like. The year in Israel is the first extended period in a Jewish young adult's life where everyone in their life says, Ask. Ask anything. No question lacks an answer, and no halacha lacks meaning. So ask. I am not aware of another religion that takes an entire age group to the source of their religion and says "dive deep." Fight it, argue it, scream at it—until all you feel is acceptance.

I had a student who explained it best: She said that she needs the year in seminary because she needs marriage counseling with her Judaism. She is completely devoted to her Judaism, and she will never leave or look for something else, but she wants a spark, a connection. She wants to fall back in love.

No one has a magic wand, and every child is a world with endless thoughts. Unfortunately, we will never be able to ignite each Jew, but the year in Israel gives the students something they have never had before: the gift of time.

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The year in Israel is pivotal because it is marriage therapy for the most important relationship in our lives.

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Every relationship requires a time investment, and our relationship with Hashem is no exception. Once this time is properly and authentically invested, slowly but surely, the spark can come back to life, and that's when the magic happens.

I have watched students learn how to daven, and how to talk to Hashem, and as a result become lighter, less stressed, and less burdened.

I have comforted students as they cry over the Shabbatot they did not keep, over the missed opportunities of sitting next to their mother for hours on the couch, both reading, no one going anywhere.

I have spoken to girls who were dating non-Jews: fully Modern Orthodox girls from Yeshiva Day Schools, dating non-Jews. After breaking up, they were horrified that they almost gave it all up.

I have sat for hours with students as they work on mending the most important relationships in their lives and rediscovering what matters most to them.

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I have seen my students fall in love with their country, and cry as they stand for the siren on Yom Hazikaron, before those tears of sorrow turn into ones of joy as they celebrate Yom Haatzamut.

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That brings us to the two topics under discussion.

## **The Mutual Fear of Flipping Out**

I tell my students all the time that their parents' biggest fear from the moment they are born is that they will lose their baby girl.

There are many ways to lose a child, all of which parents will go to the ends of the earth to prevent. When a child "flips out"—the colloquial term for an extreme shift in religious observance—the fear of loss is real: "Will she eat in my house?" "Will he come home for Shabbat?" "Will she leave us and never return?"

I had a student whose mother said that if she came home wearing a skirt instead of pants, she would no longer be her mother's daughter. The mother couldn't bear the thought that if her daughter no longer dressed like her, she may not want to be like her. Or learn from her. Or stay close to her.

It is our responsibility as educators to know that the correct way for our students to "flip out" is, in essence, to "flip in" and oversee the process as it happens. Young adults who have had a healthy experience becoming deeply connected to their Judaism will bring their parents into their lives, not push them out. They will want to stay close to their family and have them by their side. They will want their parents to see how they shine as they find deeper happiness.

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This is undoubtedly the most common conversation I have with students: how to mend the relationship with their mother, father, or sibling. The parent fears losing the child, and the child fears losing the parent. If both sides work towards making the statement of "you will never lose me" clear, most of the time, the rest simply falls into place.

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## Gap Years, Post-October 7

All that being said, we live in a different world after October 7. Something about the Jewish People broke. I believe that we as educators in Israel and across the globe must change our institutions accordingly.

We know that we lose our country when we do not deserve it. We came so close.

We would be making a fatal mistake if our institutions continued as usual.

I am one person with one school, but we here at Midreshet Torat Chessed have done the following since Oct 7. (I welcome all other ideas as well!)

- We use our Instagram platform as a means of education. Every school has incredible educators and can use social media to inspire and connect our students and thousands of others as well. Yes, MTC posts about jeeping in Eilat and how wonderful the Yom Iyun was, but we also send out lessons for others. The internet is full of lies about Israel and it is also full of Israel advocacy; it is our responsibility to fill it with messages of Torah. There are countless Jews on social media. When we put messages of the Torah out to the world, we are empowering Jews all over the world.
- When I fly into the States for seminary recruitment, I no longer recruit just for MTC. The importance of Jews coming to Israel for a gap year is so much bigger than my school. In my presentation, I explain what our school is, but I also add about the significance of coming to Israel in general. I make sure to share the responsibility and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that awaits them no matter where they go. Our institutions need to make an effort in encouraging young adults to spend the year in Israel, regardless of where they go, there is a value in just coming.
- We must also update the curriculums in our schools. There must be an emphasis on *ben adam lechavero*—interpersonal relationships. I would love to see an October 7 curriculum which would include those halachot. We do not need to wait for October 7 to become history in order to begin to learn about it. On the contrary, learning about history while it unfolds can change the course of history itself.

I daven every day that we are doing enough; that we deserve this gift that is our country and that we will merit to connect Diaspora Jews to Israel, to their religion.

The year in Israel, just like our Judaism must never be taken for granted. If the minds of our children understand the opportunity that awaits and their hearts want in, the next generation will never fall out of love again.

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*Shira Melamed is the director of Midreshet Torah Chessed in Netanya, Israel. After making aliyah at a young age, Shira completed her National Service and continued to Bar Ilan University where she received her degree in Social Work. Shira's expertise in mental health has proven essential to students' personal development throughout their year at MTC. Her focus on individual growth allows for an environment of warmth and acceptance in which students are able to thrive. Her passion for chessed, Israel, and learning is contagious both in and outside the classroom. Shira lives with her husband and five children in Netanya.*

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