

Village Way Educational Initiatives

Report to the ImpactIsrael Board - October 2020

Full Report

Impact in Educational Communities, Especially in Times of Crisis

Over the past six months, the world has gone through unpredictable changes. Unfortunately, youth at risk across Israel are now more vulnerable than ever. The health crisis, financial effects, and social isolation have impacted them greatly, as have the instability and uncertainty that characterize this time. These young people are getting stuck in a "survival" mindset, and feeling that everything is hopeless.

At Village Way Educational Initiatives, we continue to believe that education leads society, even – especially – in times of crisis; and education based in values for our most vulnerable populations will allow for better futures for these children and serve to build a stronger civic society. In these past months of crisis, we have seen our work become even more relevant and vital for our partners in diverse educational communities of youth at risk throughout Israel.

We are proud that our Village Way Educational Institute has been able to continue in its flagship program of partnering with educators and educational communities working with youth at risk for a three-year Village Way integration process. This work has adapted throughout the crisis, with the content and methods modified to the changing realities, but the core of our work has remained the same: partnering with educators for a tailor-made learning and training process, together with close mentoring, educational programming development and support, peer learning, content development, and more.

This fall, there are 5 new educational communities beginning the Village Way integration process. They decided to take on this comprehensive process which requires additional work and resources on their part, despite the extreme challenges that educators are currently facing. Our original plan had included taking on 6 new communities this year, and last year we had many discussions with potential partnering communities before March. When the coronavirus virus struck, priorities changed, and due to the circumstances, we are only taking on five communities. The fact that there are five educational communities willing to start such a process, even in the midst of such a time, reflects the impact and relevance of our work. We are proud to be able to continue expanding our work during the crisis and reach additional deserving youth at risk. **We now can count 60 educational communities that have adopted the Village Way, bringing our direct cumulative impact in these communities to 25,550 youth at risk and 2,750 educators.**

The Village Way methodology is now so critically relevant for educators and educational leaders, as it highlights exactly the issues that need addressing during the crisis, allowing educators to remain focused on what is important during anxious and uncertain times.

Our team has been working with partnering educational communities on making plans for all possible logistical options for the future (in-person learning, distance-learning, the need to quarantine staff or students, etc.), and how to plan for each possibility. An example of how the Village Way is helping

communities during this crisis can be seen at Ramat Hadassah Youth Village. In recent months, our facilitators worked with the village leadership on learning lessons from the first lockdown last spring. Focus was placed on how much they succeeded when the youth were given real responsibilities in the crisis, when both the staff and kids felt like they were meaningfully contributing to the community, and also when there was transparency about what was going on in the village, breeding trust. When there was an unfortunate coronavirus outbreak at the village this fall, and many youth and staff had to go into quarantine, the leadership was prepared to do all that was necessary logistically to protect the health of their staff and kids, and were also able to act according to the values and lessons they had focused on over the summer: transparency, trust, community, responsibility, and meaning. They took active steps, such as coordinating information, giving a specific role to each community member, and even recording messages to parents in Russian and Amharic that explained the situation. They focused on daily contact with each youth and staff member in quarantine. This is a case study being shared and analyzed by other youth village directors, as it is unfortunately a relevant lesson for all.

While educators have to deal with so much right now, those working with youth at risk understand that the larger issues that the Village Way methodology addresses are what are most important now in this time of crisis. The new reality of “distance learning” is creating significant challenges for all educators, but **for our population of at-risk youth, there is a deep concern that "distance learning" will quickly degenerate into “no learning.” Many of our students already struggle with academic challenges and emotional issues and live in environments that are disruptive for learning. They need a lot of interaction and personal attention to enter the emotional space required for learning. The Village Way Educational Institute has been working with educators to meet the challenges of this new reality and respond to changing needs in real time.** Our staff has been working tirelessly to develop and distribute materials, provide training sessions, host online events and initiate conversations to encourage educators to create and maintain strong relationships with their students, to ensure each youth feels seen, supported and like they belong to their educational community.

One example of this is from Mahat Acco High School, a Village Way Graduate Community, where Samach is an educator and a participant in our Trailblazer’s Course for Emerging Leaders. She recently shared with her Trailblazers cohort that she was most concerned during this time about the new students entering school this year. How could she make a connection and foster a sense of belonging among these kids who have just arrived at school and need to start distance learning? Samach shared the story of how for a particularly challenging student, she really employed Village Way principles, to positive effect. First, she went on a (socially distanced) home visit, to get to know the student and his family. Then, when other students were going out on a local community service activity, she called this new student and asked him personally to join them. While out volunteering, their photo was taken, and his picture appeared in the local news. Samach sent this news item to his mother, sharing with his family the positive impact he is having as part of the school community.

Another focus of the past few months has been **creating a sense of meaning among students who otherwise feel helpless and isolated during these difficult times.** A central tool in this has been getting them actively giving and doing, getting involved in community service activities. When they are practicing Tikkun Olam, they are helping others while actively building up their sense of self-worth. An example: just before the Rosh Hashanah holiday, many of our educational communities had students packaging and delivering food packages to families in need.

While our staff is working to ensure that the students have the opportunity to practice Tikkun Olam and be on the side of the giving, the harsh reality has also required many to receive assistance as well. At Ort Technology Kiryat Gat High School, Principal Avi Hajaj knew there were students whose families were struggling financially, and had lost their income during the crisis. Some of these families are too proud or embarrassed to apply for welfare assistance. Understanding this shame, he began distributing food boxes to these students' families, with a letter explaining that the food box was a prize for that student for doing something positive in school, for things like improving their attendance, overcoming an obstacle, or helping a fellow student. Avi explains, ***"We always engaged in community service, but in our work with the Village Way, we learned how to do Tikkun Olam, how to approach giving in a way that always retains the respect and honor of their person who is receiving."***

Time and again, we have heard from educators, and especially from educational leadership, on how important the support and assistance of the Village Way has been to them during this time of crisis. At David Tuviyahu High School in Be'er Sheva, Principal Ofra Fruend said, *"The Village Way team are the only ones who stood by our side. In our loneliness, through all of the challenges during this time, you have been there with support and tools we can use tomorrow, not just more tasks to be carried out."* Psagot Amir is a high school for teenagers with special behavioral and emotional issues located in the city of Harish, which has just begun partnering with VWEI this fall. Despite the fact that the staff has only had a few meetings, Pazit Ben Dor, the school Principal, says, ***"In general in my work I feel very lonely working with the local council and the Ministry of Education...but your partnership, working and thinking together, and the fact that you stayed with us even when we were in our homes in isolation have truly strengthened us."***

Spotlight on Educational Programs

An integral part of our Village Way integration process is educational program development. Each community is provided with a budget for educational programs and works with their Village Way facilitators in an involved process: mapping out existing programming and needs in their community and creating a plan to improve upon existing activities and develop new impactful programs in the spirit of the Village Way. They work to write an extensive work plan, which then goes through multiple channels of review before approval for funding.

For the 2019-2020 school year, VWEI facilitation and funding allowed educators to develop and implement 110 educational programs in our current educational communities. In addition, the With You All the Way support for Graduate Communities provided funding for an additional 65 educational programs. These programs directly impacted the lives of the youth across our partnering communities.

The following list provides a sample of programs developed and implemented last year:

- Graduate support programs
- Establishing a community library and literacy program
- Cultural enrichment field trips to the theater, museums, etc.
- Outdoor education – "Challenge Hikes"
- Music enrichment programs
- Holiday celebrations from different cultural traditions
- Preparing students for next steps after graduation, beginning in 11th grade
- Student council and youth leadership programs

- Year-long Tikkun Olam community service activities
- Therapeutic sports programs, such as a cycling program
- Therapeutic horseback riding
- Field trips exploring the diversity of Israeli society
- Constructing a hydroponic greenhouse

It is important to note that some of the programming in the original work plans had to be altered due to the coronavirus crisis. This took flexibility and agility on the part of all involved, as Village Way facilitators and educational staff had to identify new needs that arose as a result of the crisis and plan programming that could meet these needs within the changing health restrictions. VWEI staff assisted with quick approval for programs serving those in immediate need. These programs including distributing activity kits and lesson plans to the homes of youth on lockdown, sending packages of exercise equipment to be used during active distance learning activities, and even providing food packages and other resources to student's families who were in real crisis.

Graduate Communities

At the end of the three-year process, the educational community becomes a Village Way "Graduate Community." **This year, we have continued to work to support our Graduate Communities to maintain the policies and programs that had been developed during their intensive integration process.** During the crisis, many have been grateful at the level of support they received from VWEI. The relatively new director of Hadassah Neurim Youth Village, Ami Magen shared this sentiment: ***"At the very beginning of this crisis, when I felt very much alone in this system, to deal with all of these new and unexpected challenges on my own, the Village Way Educational Institute was there for me, for my community."***

Representatives of Graduate Communities have participated in Online Forum Meetings and Village Way courses, and received practical Village Way content and materials. We have provided focused consultations and training sessions for specific Graduate Communities that have requested it. Our "With You All the Way" initiative provided critical programming and financial support to graduate communities that met essential Village Way criteria, which allowed the communities to continue implementation of key programs to sustain the Village Way blueprint. This year we are proud to report that 85% of eligible Graduate Communities received this support.

We are working together with our Graduate Communities to maintain the impact of the Village Way integration after the completion of the three-year process. Adivi Ashkelon Ort Technology High School has partnered with VWEI for seven years. During the initial three-year integration process, one issue that was a focus of much of their work was "Anchors in the Past," especially connecting youth to the strength of their cultural heritage. In their first year of partnership, creating a community-wide Sigd celebration was identified as an important opportunity to send a message to their Ethiopian-Israeli students as well as the entire school community. The celebration developed over the years to involve students, parents, and staff in the process and has become a built-in tradition. This process of connecting youth to their cultural heritage continues to play an important role in the Adivi community. This year, the school is working to construct a Godjo, a traditional Ethiopian home, to serve as a local museum and community center, working with parents and students to plan and run the program. This is just one example of how our graduate educational communities continue in their process of learning and development far beyond the three-year process.

In recent years, the Educational Institute has had a Graduate Community Coordinator who has taken on most of the responsibility for working with these communities. However, the amount of Graduate Communities is growing every year, and as we think strategically about how to best serve and support our Graduate Communities, this year a decision was made **to distribute responsibility of maintaining contact with our Graduate Communities among more of our Educational Institute staff**. There are currently eight of our facilitators working directly with Graduate Communities in addition to their other responsibilities.

The Village Way Educational Institute

Just as this time has been challenging for our educational communities, so too has it been challenging for our committed and professional Educational Institute staff. Throughout this period, we have been committed to working within all guidelines to ensure the health and safety of our staff and our partners to the best of our ability. At the same time, **our team has worked tirelessly to ensure meaningful, relevant, and impactful training sessions despite the restrictions**. The facilitators have had to get creative and flexible, bringing in more Village Way staff to training events in order to work in smaller groups, working outside, and hosting sessions on Zoom when necessary. They have also had to adapt content to the changing realities and challenges of educators in the field.

Through all of these challenges, our Educational Institute continues in its commitment to professionalism in its work. An important component of the Institute is its work as an educational think-tank that is constantly engaged in learning and professional development. Over the course of the year, the entire Institute team comes together once a week for day of learning, meetings, work in committees, and case study analysis. Many times throughout the year the Institute will bring in external lecturers for a workshop, study session, or course. The Institute also works according to an impressive detailed annual work plan, with processes of mid-year and end-of-year review.

Intercommunity Forum Meetings – Moving Online

The Educational Institute has produced special Zoom events throughout this period, bringing together educators from around the country, both those in our partnering educational communities and beyond. The Institute also recently held an online session for the leadership of our educational communities, as part of the series of “Director’s Forums,” focusing on management during times of uncertainty.

In the recent months, the Educational Institute held an online Forum meeting on maintaining strong relationships with students and preparing for the upcoming school year, especially for the new reality of distance learning. Dotan Levy shared with the over 100 educators: *“We want to start the year with a sense of mission. Today, we want to think about what we **can** do for this school year, even with distance learning.”* Lara, a Village Way facilitator, explained, *“We want to work on how we can make this a meaningful year. With distance learning, we need to ask them to turn on the camera, look them in the eyes, ask them to comment, to participate, making them feel that they are not invisible, that they belong, even from a distance. We need to create a safe place where the child feels loved and accepted.”*

The Institute will be running 10 such Forum meetings this year, on topics such as preparing graduating seniors for their next steps, grading and report cards through the lens of the Village Way, safety and respect in adolescent relationships, developing personal responsibility among teenagers, and more. Each of these sessions are accompanied by content and materials distributed to educators afterward, in order for them to bring the lessons learned and ideas back to their educational communities.

Content and Material Development

Throughout this period, **the Village Way Educational Institute has been developing and distributing relevant resources and materials to meet the challenges that educators face in this new reality, and respond to changing needs in real time.**

There are so many roadblocks for our population of youth that stand in the way of them being able to successfully learn from home: existing academic challenges, emotional issues, disruptive home lives. Getting them emotionally ready and willing to learn requires a lot of interaction and personal attention on the part of the educators. For the start of the new school year, our team designed a resource packet of games and activities that educators can use over distance learning. These include icebreakers, ways to organize lesson plans, reviewing material learned in the lesson, and activities to create much-needed breaks during the day. All of these utilize the resources available to them in an online setting to get students actively participating, thinking, and connecting.

When the most recent lockdown was announced, our team quickly developed a printed educational activity packets for kids to use. These were inspired by seeing how our partnering ultra-orthodox communities engage in distance learning – by printing and distributing materials to students, and working over the phone. The idea was to create activities that have educators engaging with students, who are being productive and learning, and also encourages breaks from screen time. A similar packet was also created for younger siblings, and students were encouraged to solve these together with young siblings and create important sibling activities.

The materials have been sent out on our e-newsletter, posted on Facebook, and passed around social media channels, reaching thousands of educators and colleagues across the country, far beyond our Village Way partnering communities. **The feedback that we have received from teachers and administrators is that these are practical, accessible tools developed by professionals who understand the challenges educators face.** Time and again, our team members are receiving messages that say: *“Thank you for sharing these great resources!”*

Trailblazers Course

The Village Way Trailblazer's Course for Emerging Leaders is a year-long program for a select group of educators from across our educational communities for those who hold mid-level leadership positions and who show leadership potential. The study program involves interactive learning sessions, round-table discussions, activities, lectures, case studies, and peer learning. In addition, much of the course content is focused on the educators as leaders in their own educational communities, so that for any topic studied, each participant must ask themselves: "What here is relevant, how can I as a leader take this and implement this in my community?"

We are proud to have 18 participants who began the program this fall, all of whom serve on significant positions of leadership in their communities. The group had the opportunity to meet once before the lockdown and have connected in a way that gives each of them a source of support and inspiration.

Past graduates of the Trailblazer's Program serve as leaders in their communities – spearheading new educational programs, assisting in facilitating staff learning, and working closely with the Village Way facilitators as a point person for a range of issues and initiatives.

Village Way Milestones Course

This fall we launched the 2nd cohort of the Village Way Milestones Course, which brings select school principals and youth village directors from very diverse educational frameworks together for a year-long program. The program provides 100 hours of professional development training, focusing on issues such as developing an educational vision, strategic thinking, and implementing practical tools. These leaders also benefit from opportunities for peer-learning and sharing best practices from the field. The course is run in partnership with Avney Rosh: The National Institute for Principal Development. This year we interviewed 40 worthy candidates, of whom we were only able to accept 18 to the program, as health restrictions in Israel will not allow for more than 20 people to congregate in one place. We are proud that already in its second year, this has become a respected and sought-after program for educational leadership. The first cohort, which completed the program in June 2020, was comprised of 20 leaders from truly diverse backgrounds, who had overwhelmingly positive reflections of their year on the program, including:

Ellen Aviyashar, the director of Mevoot Ayrone in Ein Shemer: *"The facilitation was excellent. The issue of graduates was something that I recognized as a missing link with us in our school, and I understood we have to be a supportive community even after they graduate high school. It is an insight that every principal must engage in learning, must be a part of a group of other leaders and continue to develop."*

Expanding the Village Way Impact

In recent years we have seen the great need for expanding activities in the field. Not all educators will be able to go through a long-term Village Way integration process; however, they can still benefit from so much of what the Village Way methodology has to offer them in providing holistic, value-based solutions and tools to respond to some of the biggest challenges in their day-to-day work. These educators have often heard about our organization and methodology from their colleagues and are looking for ways to learn more and benefit from what the methodology has to offer. Our team has worked in a serious process in recent years to develop strategic directions that will most effectively utilize our resources and allow us to reach these educators in the most effective and impactful ways possible.

It is also important for us to note that the numbers of educators and youth that we report are directly impacted by the Village Way above only include work in our partnering educational communities, and do not include the initiatives described below. The number of youth ultimately impacted by these partnerships are harder to measure, but we are confident that they include thousands more.

Academia

The Educational Institute has continued to bring the Village Way methodology to future educators in Israel. **This year, the Institute will be teaching four Village Way courses in total:** two courses at Oranim College, one course at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a new course at Tel Hai College. These courses continue to receive positive feedback from students. *"The course is important because it gives a different perspective on existing education methods. In addition, it gave practical tools that I can use in the field immediately,"* said one student. Another shared, *"The content of the course is so comprehensive, and creates a more holistic, complex and empowering view of our role as educators, and what we can do to facilitate a sense of belonging."*

These courses invest in educators in the early stages of their careers, with the belief that it can make an impact throughout their professional lives. In an early meeting with Prof. Anat Yitzchaki, Head of

Development and Methodology at the Department for Youth at Risk of the Ministry of Education, she said, ***"You don't have to explain to me about Village Way Educational Initiatives, their reputation precedes them – I can always tell when one of my educators has been through their courses as a student; they are a different caliber of educator."***

Community-Wide Initiatives

We are proud to have officially completed our three-year partnerships with our city-wide initiative in the cities of **Beitar Illit and Tamra** which were organized through the Ministry of Education. We are proud of the changes made in these communities and our staff continues to remain in contact with the leading professionals in these locations.

This year, we are taking on a new type of partnership and expanding our work with the city of **Harish**. This is an initiative on a much larger scale than previous city-wide initiatives, as it includes working with professionals from all formal and informal educational frameworks in the city. The aim is to build a city-wide educational approach, by working together with a forum of 20 city leaders and 20 school principals. We are also working with a group of guidance counselors, and additional work is being carried out with educational programs aimed specifically at youth at risk.

Harish is a new city growing at a very rapid rate – teachers say that every week they have a new student join their class. The city is very diverse currently with religious, secular, Jews and Arabs all moving into the same neighborhoods. The majority of families come from low socio-economic backgrounds and are coming from around the country looking for a better life. This initiative is a unique opportunity to be significant partners in the formation of new city, and to help lay a foundation that we hope will bear fruit for many years to come. This partnership is being partially funded by the city of Harish as fee-for-service.

New Partnerships with Educational Networks

This year, we are beginning a new partnership with the **Da'at Educational Network**, which runs nine schools and youth villages around the country. The network's leadership has decided that they want to shape the educational worldview of the Da'at network according to the Village Way methodology. We are in the first stages of planning long learning process, which will include the senior leadership of Da'at and the principals of their schools. We are also beginning a new partnership with a Da'at youth village for the three-year Village Way integration process.

Village Way Book

The Hebrew book on the Village Way, published in 2018, continues to make an impact, and to date, it has sold 11,000 copies. We are proud to note that some notable Israeli leaders have received copies of the book, including renowned researchers, leaders in the public sector, as well as prominent figures in media outlets. We have received a **significant amount of positive feedback** from those who have read the book, on how much it is impacting their day-to-day work as professionals in formal education, informal education, youth movements, Israel's security forces, and to students and those interested in pursuing education and work with youth at risk in the future. ImpactIsrael is having the book translated into English.

Security Forces

Our work with Israel's security forces answers the need for expansive training of professionals working with immigrants, minorities and at-risk youth and young adults. We have continued to make an impact

with the security forces in recent months, despite the many challenges with all of the coronavirus health restrictions, and we are among the few organizations still working with them during this time. Immediately following the "reopening" of Israeli society from the first lockdown in May, we received requests to begin scheduling training sessions right away. We see this as a testament to the relevance and importance of this work for our partners, that they are seeking out our sessions even during this time. It is important to note that these partnerships are being partially funded by fee-for-service.

Israel Defense Forces

We are working to integrate the Village Way educational methodology as a basis for work with what the army deems "special populations." Over the past year, we have expanded our relationship with the IDF, reaching meaningful leaders in relevant and significant positions. We were proud to be asked to have our content and facilitation as part of the curriculum of the prestigious commander's course of the Educational Military Leadership Center in Jerusalem. We also recently were invited to contribute to a training session for 60 of the highest leadership in the IDF Officers' Training School (BAHAD 1), at the end of which the leadership purchased 60 copies of the Village Way book for each of the officers. One IDF commander shared, ***"The workshops were interesting, and the tour at Yemin Orde shows practical ways to apply the idea of the officer as an educator, someone who makes sure everyone is included and feels that they belong. Getting to know the Ethiopian community, and the difficulties they have had to face in the past. This will contribute to my ability to foster a sense of belonging among Ethiopian Israeli soldiers in my unit."***

Israel Border Police

The Israel Border Police provides border security, counter terrorism, and law enforcement operations. We are proud to be continuing our strong relationships with the Border Police and to work to integrate the Village Way components into the educational culture. In the upcoming year we are continuing with our "training the trainers" model and focusing on providing extended, in-depth training sessions to educational officers, instructors of the officer's course, and to officers-in-training. The Border Police has also been utilizing Village Way materials for the periods of lockdown, including printing our activity booklets for officers who have teenage kids at home.

Israel Police

We are hopeful to begin building a framework for partnership with the Police force in the future. Our leadership has had significant meetings with leadership, yet no work plan has been established to date, as the Police is currently dealing with enforcing coronavirus restrictions, nationwide protests, and the lack of an appointed Police Commissioner for some time. However, we have had a number of interactions with the force this year, including an event in July, when the Ethiopian-Israeli Police Officer's Forum came to Yemin Orde for a day-long seminar. There were 50 officers in attendance, about 20 of whom were Yemin Orde graduates, and almost all had some other personal connection, through siblings, cousins, or friends. The day began in the synagogue, with an emotional meeting with Chaim Peri, who for many had been the director of the Village during their time there, and a meaningful presence in their lives. The officers then participated in active workshops on issues of identity, integration and belonging. ***"I can take from today the insight of how much one person can have an impact on the lives of so many people. We all have the power, the question is what we use it for, what we do with our leadership role"***

Additional New Partnerships

Dor L'dor is an organization started by a Yemin Orde graduate with the goal of empowering young people whose families immigrated from the Caucuses Mountain region. Village Way Educational Initiatives has been engaged in training sessions with this organization in the past. In this work, VWEI has helped change their focus from survival to leadership – from focusing on integration to speaking about what their community can contribute positively to Israeli society as a whole. This year, Dor L'dor is working to establish its own national youth organization, with college students serving as counselors for teenagers, with goal of reaching 1,000 youth nationwide. Dor L'dor has decided to have the entire educational platform of the organization to be the Village Way methodology, and has asked VWEI to accompany its leadership this year in the creation of this new initiative. We are working with the organizational leadership on their values and direction, as well as on developing content for them to use with their youth on issues like preparing for meaningful national service and Tikkun Olam. This partnership is being partially funded by Dor L'dor as fee-for-service.

In addition, this year VWEI is facilitating a group of youth village directors from around the country who are meeting (in-person and virtually) in order to engage in peer-learning and knowledge sharing. This group was first established at the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis and was originally facilitated by the organization Maoz, who we were happy to partner with during the transition period.

Mechina Programs

Our gap-year leadership programs have been a lifeline for young adults from difficult circumstances, especially during these times of uncertainty and upheaval. The staff of all of our programs have been working to ensure that our participants continue to have meaningful experiences and a stable support system to help them enter young adulthood with a strong foundation. Our team has also provided critical support to our hundreds of program graduates during this time. We were proud to have been able to provide vital financial support to graduates of our Mechina programs who are in the most desperate situations as a result of the coronavirus crisis, thanks to your support and quick action.

Yemin Orde Young Men's Mechina

The Young Men's program continues to provide a meaningful transformative experience for deserving young men from disadvantaged backgrounds. The participants who completed the program in the last year had their time on the program altered by the virus outbreak, and staff had to adapt the program accordingly. This presented many challenges, but also "silver linings." The program was not able to travel in the same way for some time, but was able to participate and take a leadership role in local community service projects – packaging and delivering food supplies, medicines, and hot meals to those in need, and assisting families with special needs children. Eyal Eldar, director of the program, explains, *"This cohort of participants was truly shaped by their experiences of Tikkun Olam, and became leaders by seeing the impact they could have on others in a time of crisis." The group even received a volunteering award from the Mayor of Hatzor Haglilit for their efforts, who noted, "It would have been near impossible to go through this crisis period without your help."*

This fall we welcomed the 21st cohort of the program with 65 young men beginning the year. We continue to face challenges of the current crisis while looking for the opportunities that these restrictions present. The larger group had to be divided into 3 pods with their own staff members assigned to each. While this has taken away somewhat from the feeling of a larger united group, it has allowed the staff members to get to know the participants in their small group very well quickly, and these small groups have bonded

quickly. This method of dividing the group into smaller subgroups may continue to be adopted in future years.

Our graduate coordinator has actively been reaching out during this pandemic, providing emotional and logistical support, while identifying those in most financial need. We have provided 52 graduates with crisis stipends coupled with basic financial counseling to help them buy necessities or pay bills during this time. Other graduates have heard about the financial counseling provided and contacted the Mechina staff to schedule sessions to help them improve their budgeting skills. In addition, this year our staff developed a new program for graduates in which graduates from all of our cohorts are invited to an online seminar led by one of the Mechina graduates in their area of expertise. This has graduates learning, connecting, and networking among themselves. Recently, Gilad Buzaglu, a graduate from the 3rd cohort, spoke to a group of 50 graduates about investing in the real estate market.

We are happy to share with you that we have established an Israeli “friends” for the mechina programs in Hatzor Haglilit, to support the Young Men’s Mechina and Nitzotz. We are hopeful that this group will serve to bring in more local Israeli partnerships for these programs.

IsraElite Young Women’s Mechina

Our Young Women’s program also felt the impact of the crisis, with all of the uncertainty, anxiety, and logistical changes it brought on participants and staff. We are proud of the young women who were able to complete the program last year under challenging circumstances, and worked hard to go through a process of personal development. Alem, one of the participants who graduated in June, shared, *“When I first arrived, I was inundated with questions of what was I doing here, was it for me. But slowly I started to take responsibility, and only then the program started to be much more meaningful for me. I went through a lot of experiences, a lot of ups and downs and mostly I learned a lot about myself. I learned that I am capable of anything and if I want something to go out and achieve it. I learned to set goals and meet them, to dream and aspire because I am capable!”*

As we previously shared, the past year of the program has been wrought with challenges regardless of the corona crisis. Throughout the last number of months, we have spent time strategically assessing the program. We started by creating a steering committee made up of the leaders of our Village Way Educational Institute and our men's leadership program. This committee met once a month, asking hard questions about improvements needed, planning ahead and determining policy. We then spent more time, effort and resources in strategically reaching those who need us, finding the right young women for the program; and these efforts have paid off! We are proud to report that there are currently 33 young women who have begun their year as the 8th cohort of the program.

We also welcomed a new director to the program over the summer. Orly Barzel brings with her 25 years of experience in informal education, as well as energy, passion, and leadership skills. She considers this role as one that is fulfilling a dream. In commenting about the year ahead, she whole heartedly believes in the program and notes how *“we have a role that we are responsible for, that in only ten months we must give these young women an experience to last a lifetime - building trust, giving them tools for life, creating chances to succeed and giving meaning to their surroundings.”*

These past few months have been tough for our graduates, especially those who have recently finished the army and have yet to make the next step in their lives. They are navigating young adulthood while facing lockdowns, uncertainty and seeing their families in even more dire economic situations. We have

been in contact with them, providing guidance in making life decisions and helping them consider options for their futures that take into account the current situation. We have provided 15 graduates with crisis stipends coupled with basic financial counseling to help them buy food or necessities during this time.

Nitzotz (Spark) Mechina

The Nitzotz ("Spark") Mechina Program, located in Hatzor Haglilit, was established in 2018 to provide young men from very difficult backgrounds with a transformative gap-year experience. It is run in cooperation with the National Insurance Institute and the Ministry of Social Welfare, serving young men who are on the margins of society, and who are looking to make a change in their lives. This fall, we welcomed the third cohort of the program, which began with 30 young men. There have already been many challenges with the restrictions and changes with this group, as they come from very complex backgrounds and often do not have a place to go home to when necessary – we are proud of our staff for providing them with the necessary support even after only a very short time.

In June, 15 young men completed the second cohort of the program. Over the course of the year, each and every one of the program participants went through a significant process of personal development. *"Despite the coronavirus crisis, we were able to achieve our educational goals,"* says Mekonet Gadamo, Head of the Program, who is both a graduate and valued previous staff member of the Yemin Orde Young Men's Mechina. *"This was a very successful year thanks to our amazing and dedicated staff, and mostly because of our participants who chose life over and over again, and who believed in themselves throughout the length of the journey. At the end of the day, that is the most important value that they have acquired here, and that will stick with them in the years to come."*

The significant personal transformation was also accompanied by changes in their next steps for the future. We know that mandatory service is a critical time for Israeli young adults, and is also an important steppingstone towards other opportunities. However, young men with the most extreme backgrounds are often unable to even enlist. At the beginning of the year, only five of the 15 participants on the program were set to enlist, with the other 10 classified by the IDF as unfit. At the end of the year, as a result of the process they went through and the Nitzotz staff working closely with the IDF, 13 of the 15 of the program graduates are now enlisting or on track to enlist. For those who are still not eligible to enlist, the staff is working closely with them to ensure that they also continue onto meaningful, productive life path.