



**מסע masa**  
Israel Journey



# “Lifting the Veil”

## Report on the Retrospective Study of Alumni: 2005–2014

### Executive Summary

November 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Conceived by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Masa Israel Journey was officially established in 2004 as a joint project of the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Today, Masa's programs, ranging in length from four to twelve months, include over 12,000 participants, ages 18-30, from over 60 countries.

This report documents the impact of a Masa Israel experience on the approximately 100,000 individuals who participated in programs between 2005 and 2014.

## SAMPLING AND ANALYTICAL METHODS

Data for this report come from two sources: 5,732 individuals on the Masa contact list who responded to an on-line survey (representing 12% of those to whom the survey was sent); and 45 individuals who participated either in focus groups or in one-on-one interviews.

The mix of participants in this study corresponds well to the general mix of participants in Masa programs.

- 41% of survey respondents participated in programs at yeshivot and religious seminaries, or in youth group programs.
- 36% of survey respondents participated in career development programs which include

academic programs, internships, professional development, leadership, and other programs for post-college participants interested in learning, working, or volunteering in Israel.

- 8% of survey respondents participated in programs intended for emerging market countries, currently France and FSU, whose participants who have a strong desire to make, or consider making, Aliya.

A further 15% of survey respondents did not participate in any program, but at some point inquired about a Masa program. These individuals constitute a valuable comparison group.

The profiles of those who responded to the survey closely corresponds to the broader population that participated in Masa.<sup>1</sup> These alumni were then compared with a robust sample of non-participants to make visible the contribution of the Masa experience to alumni's attitudes and behaviors today.<sup>2</sup>

## GENERAL IMPACT

Taking these steps has allowed us to arrive at a conclusion that a Masa Israel experience is related to significantly enhanced levels of Jewish engagement, Israel engagement and leadership in the Jewish community. Jewish attitudinal and behavioral expressions among Masa alumni, as well as expressions of Israel engagement, are significantly greater than those exhibited by

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<sup>1</sup> Through comparing respondents' profile data with data in Masa's own (CRM) database, we found that the respondent sample is generally representative of the broader population that participated in or inquired about Masa programs, in their age, gender, denominational identification, and prior experiences in Jewish education settings.

<sup>2</sup> To address concerns about the lack of a randomized control group for this study, we took extreme measures. We focused our analysis on Masa alumni who do not

define themselves as religiously Orthodox. This enabled the most rigorous possible comparison of program alumni with non-Masa participants, most of whom are also not Orthodox. Then, going one step further, through the statistical discovery technique of Cluster Analysis, we compared Masa alumni to non-Masa survey participants with similar Jewish educational backgrounds.

comparison groups of individuals who inquired about going on a Masa program and then did not. These differences are generally stable no matter how long it has been since individuals participated in a Masa program, following a small decline in intensity about a year after the end of the program.

## MARRIAGE AND FRIENDSHIP

Participation in Masa Israel programs is related to a decrease in rates of intermarriage. When controlling for age and for whether respondents' parents are Jewish, **Masa participants are 37% less likely to marry non-Jewish partners.** Looking specifically at alumni of Group B (career development) programs within the 'low' and 'medium' background clusters, as many as 82% of those who are married indicated that their partner is Jewish. By contrast, only 58% of married non-participants with the same Jewish education background have a Jewish partner.

These personal choices seem related to the nurture of social networks and meaningful peer groups during time in Israel. These dynamics are very much part of the collateral effect of participating in a Masa program. While only a quarter (26%) of non-Masa participants met "some," "most" or "all" of their closest friends in Israel on a short-term program in Israel, nearly three-quarters (72%) of Masa alumni indicated that "some," "most" or "all" of their closest friends were from their Masa experience. This is consistent with interview and focus group data which reveal how after their return home alumni seek out like-minded peers who have participated in similar life-experiences.

## JEWISH LIFE BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES

Compared to non-participants, **almost twice as many Masa alumni participate frequently (34% compared with 18%) in a set of Jewish**

**behaviors** that includes celebrating holidays such as Rosh Hashanah or Passover, giving money to Israel and Jewish related causes, and participating in Shabbat dinners. Following a small dip, these patterns do not fade the longer the period of time after alumni return home.

**The Jewish behaviors of Masa alumni are stable more than four years after completing a program,** a pattern that holds for Masa alumni as a whole, and especially among participants in Yeshiva, youth group and career development programs.

The duration of the Masa experience relates to the frequency of post-program Jewish life behaviors. Those who attended longer programs (8 months or more) reported higher rates of engagement in Jewish life behaviors compared to those who went on short programs (4 or 5 months long). The lowest rate of engagement in such behaviors was reported by non-participants most of whom went on short programs.

A last measure of Jewish outcomes was our examination of alumni attitudes towards being Jewish. While asking about attitudes is less testing than asking about behaviors, such questions make it possible to compare Masa alumni with young adults who have participated in other studies that have been interested in exploring Jewish attitudes and outlooks. Responding to the question, "How important is being Jewish in your life?" 25% of participants in the 2014 Pew study of Jewish Americans, between ages 18-30 who do not identify as Orthodox, thought that being Jewish is very important. By comparison, 57% of non-Orthodox Masa alumni indicated that being Jewish is "very important" to them. This is also significantly higher than those who did not go on Masa programs at all but who did go on other short-term programs to Israel (39%).

## CONNECTION TO ISRAEL AND ISRAELIS

Time spent on Masa is consistently related to higher expressions of emotional connection to Israel and to behavioral expressions of connection and interest following one's return, including return visits and, for some, the decision to make Aliya, emigrating to Israel.

There is a significant difference between Masa alumni and their 18-30 year old peers in the Pew dataset in response to the Pew survey question: "How emotionally attached are you to Israel?" Non-Orthodox Masa alumni are six times more likely to say that they are "very attached to Israel" than are Pew respondents who have never been to Israel, and three times more likely to say they are "very attached to Israel" than peers in the Pew dataset who may have been to Israel. When comparing Masa and non-participants on this measure, the differences are greatest among those identified as having 'low' or 'medium' Jewish educational backgrounds: among those with 'low' backgrounds, 52% compared to 36% say they are very attached to Israel, and among those with 'medium' backgrounds, 53% compared to 35%.

Our analysis included a measure of Israel-related behaviors that represents interest in and connection to Israel. The behaviors included both personal and public expressions of connection to Israel: attending Israel-oriented events; following news about Israel; reading books and magazines connected to Israel and Jewish matters; and listening to Israeli (and Jewish) music. While the proportions of those who responded most positively (5.5 or higher, on a scale of 1 to 7) was lower than in relation to questions about attitudes towards Israel (confirming our thesis of the high bar set by the measurement of behavior), there was again a significant difference between the responses of Masa alumni and Non-Participants: Masa

alumni were twice as likely than Non-Participants to be connected to Israel behaviorally (27% compared with 12%). Again, these differences were greatest among those identified as having the least intense Jewish backgrounds (20% compared to 11% among those with 'low' backgrounds, and 28% compared to 6% among those with 'medium' backgrounds). Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the reported behaviors of those who had participated in different types of Masa programs. The intensified behavioral connection to Israel of Masa alumni was consistent across all types of Masa programs.

## ALIYA: ON-RAMP AND SPRINGBOARD

In many ways, the ultimate expression of connecting to Israel is making a decision to move there. Some – especially from FSU and France – sign up for Masa programs already knowing that they plan to make Aliya. As explained in interviews, they see **Masa as providing an easily accessible on-ramp to life in Israel**; it provides a chance to learn the language and perhaps learn a profession. Others – mainly from North America - did not plan on making such a move before they started the program. For them, the experience is less an on-ramp and more a springboard enabling them to make an unexpected leap.

Twice the percentage of North American Masa alumni (including Orthodox respondents) have made Aliya than did North Americans who were only on short-term programs in Israel (22% vs. 11%). The rates of Aliyah among alumni from France and the Former Soviet Union are much higher. Among alumni from the FSU they have consistently been about 50% for the last four years,. For those coming from France, there has been a steady increase over the same period, rising from 39% to 53%.

## JEWISH LEADERSHIP

In a last dimension to the study, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate how the experience in Israel whets an appetite to share with others what one has experienced and learned. Overall, when comparing Masa participants with non-participants, **alumni are twice as likely (14% vs. 7%) to report participating to a great degree in leadership activities upon returning from Israel (5.5 or higher, on a scale of 1 to 7).** This pattern is repeated across a series of specific activities.

- Alumni volunteer with an Israel advocacy group almost three times more than do non-Masa participants
- Alumni are twice as likely to donate money to Israel or Jewish-related causes than non-Masa participants
- Alumni take a leadership role in Israel-oriented events almost three times more often than non-Masa participants
- Alumni are 43% more likely to take a leadership role in Jewish life at home or at university

Two features of this pattern are worth noting. First, it is only a minority of alumni who act in this way; between one-in-ten and one-in-five. Secondly, this phenomenon is concentrated among alumni of yeshiva, youth group and career development programs. This second finding may reflect the fact that a higher proportion of alumni from these programs return to their own countries rather than stay in Israel. Perhaps those who make Aliya are simply getting on with the business of living in Israel rather than acting as leaders.

Interviews reveal that while a small proportion of alumni purposefully use time on Masa to develop their capacity to serve as leaders in their communities when they return home, many act as leaders on their return out of a sense that they have something to share from their time in

Israel. Acting in this way was not something they prepared for. Now that the veil is removed they want all to know about what they have seen and experienced.

## SPACE AND TIME: ENABLERS OF CHANGE

Qualitative data shed light on how many of these outcomes are produced. They underline the special contribution of an extended period of time in Israel within frameworks that allow individuals space and time to encounter Israel for themselves. Alumni have had a chance to learn things about Israel that disappoint some and inspire others, and to experiment with ways of being Jewish that they had not previously considered. Interviewees and survey respondents repeatedly come back to these hallmarks of the Masa experience as accounting for how they think and act today. These program features, are what typically distinguish longer-term Masa programs from even the most effective short-term programs in Israel, as indicated by a couple of alumni.

*I became involved in the day to day life of Israel, learning a language, living amongst a people...Making a place my home (navigating roads and grocery stores, meeting people...) made me feel like I belonged there. These are memories that I am still strongly attached to...I want to bring my family and show them where I lived. I want to go back and see parts I never got to see. These are deeper experiences and connections that you cannot get on a blitz tour.*

*I don't think I would have started keeping kosher. I decided to keep with it when I came back. I probably would not have started davening [praying] on a regular basis had I not gone to Israel where I could do what I wanted in terms of observance without being attached to a community.*

Adding a further layer of texture, the qualitative data surface an intriguing dynamic that continues *after* people return home from their Masa experience. In a kind of nesting behavior, many alumni, it seems, seek out others like themselves, people with whom they have much in common and who have been formed by similar kinds of powerful experiences. These dynamics play a large part in sustaining outcomes set in motion while they are still in Israel and well after their return home.

### **"LIFTING A VEIL"**

One of the more than 3,500 individuals who responded to the survey at the heart of this study referred to their time in Israel as like

"lifting a veil." These words provide an apt title for this study. As we have indicated a great many **participants perceive their time in Israel as enabling them to see and understand things about Israel of which they were only dimly aware before they came to the country.**

There is one more connotation in this image to make explicit. In Jewish tradition, lifting the bride's veil is a precursor to a consummated relationship. This, we believe, is how Masa is experienced by many of its participants.

**Spending four months or more in Israel, and seeing it much more clearly than before, is a precursor to consummating commitment and engagement with Israel and with Jewish life. Masa lifts a veil in this romantic sense too.**



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