

The Israel Gap Year Guide

FIND YOUR RIGHT DIRECTION

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For more information about the information laid out in this book, you can also visit:
<https://www.americanisraelgapyearassociation.org/>

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INTRODUCTION

A Daughter's Journey

Almost twenty years ago, my husband Mark and I put our oldest daughter, Lauren, on a flight to begin a Gap Year in Israel. As a recent high school graduate questioning where she wanted to land Jewishly, we were concerned that she would be lost in the college milieu that awaited her. We hoped that the warm blanket of Israel would strengthen her to remain true to Jewish values and to resist pressures to conform that often present themselves on a student's first foray into campus life. Despite her initial protests, we presented Lauren with the "opportunity" to devote a year of study at a program of her choosing in Israel. She chose one known for self-exploration with soft guidance from warm mentorship. The first few weeks of Lauren's Gap Year *were* difficult. At first, my daughter felt so lost in Jerusalem. She was distressed that she could jog through surrounding observant neighborhoods only if dressed modestly in a skirt. She found more comfort in the familiarity of beaches, malls, and restaurants. But then, quietly, without fanfare, the magic took hold—friendships developed, mentors emerged, and the learning jumped off the page into real-life examples of Jewish-connected joy.

When my family and I visited her that January, I met a self-assured young woman, maneuvering easily through the streets of Jerusalem, chatting confidently with shopkeepers and taxi drivers in Hebrew and hosting her friends for get-togethers in our rented apartment. “Mommy, you were so right about coming to Israel.” She told me that the highlight of her year had been feeling “comfortable in her own skin.”

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I witnessed a special quality to her demeanor, a distinctive inner glow of growing maturity, self-confidence, and focus with generally more appreciation for her family and heritage.

Her time spent in Israel and her college education were not mutually exclusive. I considered the experience an investment in her soul. My daughter did not defer her education but began a path of continued learning, self-exploration, and spiritual growth that brought her happiness and direction that has helped her navigate her life.

That daughter went on to graduate magna cum laude from Columbia University, founded and now heads an innovative school in Manhattan, and is the mother of six children who are inspired by a mother who is clear and focused in her parental guidance. Lauren’s experience, along with my second daughter’s successful Gap Year experience, influenced my future professional life as a college counselor and advocate for the Israel Gap Year experience through the American Israel Gap Year Association.

My View as Teen Counselor

Before founding the American Israel Gap Year Association (AIGYA), I worked with teens as a high school counselor. I saw so many students who were on an academic racetrack in high school, and by the time they got to college they were burned out or lacked focus. I saw too many students with no real sense of purpose and meaning and no ultimate goal in mind except getting into college. I began to see that taking the time to breathe and explore who you are culturally, combined with some real-world experience, was not unique to my own children but crucial to a meaningful and successful post-secondary experience.

The vision of the Gap Year as a deep gorge that you fall into needs to change and be seen more as a bridge to cross over. You are not on hold during a Gap Year. If anything, you are on an ever-evolving trajectory to see what impact you can have on the world. The bridge you cross to new experiences will be built on the educational foundation already provided by parents, educators, and mentors. A meaningful Gap Year allows you to develop a sense of true self-awareness as a catalyst to finding your right direction in college or whatever the next step will be.

Because the Gap Year is *not* a goof year, you are wise to start thinking about it early as a viable option to explore.

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So You Want to Take a Gap Year in Israel? Good Idea!

If you picked up this book, then a Gap Year is probably already on your radar. You may be feeling positive about the idea but do not yet know all the Israel Gap Year opportunities there are to explore. If you picked up this book, it's because you are in some way connected to the Jewish people—through family, camp, school, temple, lox and bagels, or some other way. We will show you the many reasons why Israel should be your place of destination for a fantastic Gap Year whether you are exploring your heritage or looking for your career. This book will help you—students, parents, teachers, and counselors—find the best program to maximize each individual student's potential. It will give you the vocabulary and resources to have the conversations you need to have about what a Gap Year means and the resources to intelligently make the right choices.

The American Israel Gap Year Association was founded in 2013 to champion Jewish continuity through the Israel Gap Year experience, connecting students with engaging opportunities to study, work, and travel across the denominational spectrum. We are not a Gap Year program unto ourselves, but an umbrella organization that works in concert with programs in Israel and with Jewish high school students and their families to find their right fit. While we don't represent any one particular program, we are a conduit and a resource to many.

The crown jewel of our organization is our incredible ambassador program which selects a diverse group of articulate gappers in a variety of programs to chronicle their year on social media, on our own Instagram page, @IsraelGapYear. We call them ambassadors because they are a connection between AIGYA and the individual Gap Year programs and you! Stories and testimonials from AIGYA gappers are

woven throughout the book; ninety percent are recently returned alums, while a few are college graduates, who have a longer perspective of time in which to look back at their Gap Year experience. To learn more about the alums, the ambassadors, and AIGYA, check out the videos on our website, www.AIGYA.org.

This book is the product of my years of experience as a high school counselor and as founder of AIGYA. The first part of the book will lay the groundwork of why Israel should be your place of destination, giving you historical context, personal reflection, and some how-to tools to make your evaluation. The second half of the book will provide you with a comprehensive program guide with summary descriptions of all the Gap Year options in Israel and insider tips from recent AIGYA ambassadors about the best things to explore during an Israel Gap Year.

Are you ready to start this journey? I can't wait to share all the possibilities with you!