

**EVALUATION OF THE LOS ANGELES - TEL AVIV  
EXCHANGE STUDENT PROGRAM  
MILKEN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This evaluation is part of the Los Angeles - Tel Aviv Partnership Project, which pairs schools in both cities and organizes an exchange program for its students. This report focuses on the evaluation of the exchange program for students in Milken Community High School, in Los Angeles.

A group of nineteen tenth grade students from Milken participated in the program during the 1999-2000 school year. Milken was paired with Tichon Hadash, a high school in Tel Aviv. Students were paired with “buddies” or “partners,” such that the Israeli student stayed with the family of an American student for three months, and then the American student stayed with the family of the Israeli “buddy” for another three months. The Israelis visited the Los Angeles first, during the fall quarter. They each spent their winter quarters in their own countries, and the Americans then traveled to Israel during the spring quarter.

A parallel evaluation was conducted in Tel Aviv with students from Tichon Hadash. A broader report integrating results from both “sides” will be prepared in the future.

This report will present briefly the methods and procedures used for conducting the evaluation, and will then focus on the narrated experiences of the students and parents who participated in the exchange program. Their own personal evaluations and experiences give insight into the strengths of the program, and indicate areas for improvement. First we present the findings from the student interviews, followed by those from the parent interviews, and then finalize with a summary that integrates both students’ and parents’ perspectives.

## II. PROCEDURES

The evaluation used a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with all students who participated in the exchange program during the 1999-2000 school year, as well as with one of their parents. In total, 38 interviews were conducted - 19 with students and 19 with parents. The parents were actually mothers, who had more flexible schedules than fathers; in two cases, the interviews were conducted with both mother and father, simultaneously. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and most were conducted in the school, during school hours. Students were mainly interviewed during their free periods and lunch hours, and parents were contacted directly to find appropriate timing for the interviews. Three interviews with parents were conducted in the interviewees’ homes. Interviews followed a protocol that addressed issues regarding the students’ and parents’ experiences and opinions of different aspects of the program (see Appendix). They were recorded and transcribed, and extensive notes were also taken during the interviews. Finally, the interviews were coded and analyzed, identifying major themes, and the data was organized into main findings.

### III. FINDINGS

Below we present the main findings from the perspective of students, and then from that of parents.

#### A. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

##### MOTIVATION

Students had different motivations to participate in the program. Some of these motivations focused specifically around Israel and the learning experience, while others focused on more personal "teenage" issues, such as gaining independence or having fun with peers.

When asked why they chose to participate in the exchange program, several students mentioned that they wanted to experience Israel as an insider, and not as a tourist. For example, one student said that he "had been there as a tourist, to visit family, but I wanted to *live* there, and I knew this programs would give it to me, I knew I had to join" and another said she "knew it would be amazing to go not as a tourist but to live there." Others gave reasons which focused on a love of Israel, the importance it had to them and the connection to their history and culture, as illustrated by the following students' comments: "I wanted to understand why it should be so important to me, what makes Israel Jewish," "...this was special, I connect, it's part of my history," "...[to] get an Israeli culture and identity," "...because I love Israel," "Israel's important, that's why I go to a private school," "I felt this program is just for me because I belong in Israel."

For several students, this was a chance "...to be away from parents and regular life," as one boy put it. Many students explained that their motivations centered on their personal development and gaining independence:

"I wasn't very independent person in my childhood and wanted to become more so, I figured college comes, I'm going to have to be able to do this, I'm going to have to be able to go away."

"It would make me more independent and it would open me up to other things."

"I needed some time to be on my own, in this trip I learned about myself, I found myself."

"I wanted to test myself and prove to myself that I can, now that college is near... I wanted to grow... and I wanted to learn who I was."

Others mentioned the importance of social interactions: "It would give me new Israeli friends and family," "I knew we'd develop bonds with people," "[to] meet people, get involved." For students who were single kids, having a sibling was attractive: "I'm an only child, the idea of having a brother for three months is appealing."

Another group of students didn't have a clear idea of why they had decided to participate, but felt that if they didn't, they could regret it later. Two girls mentioned this: "I hadn't heard too much, but I knew

that if I didn't apply, I would regret it," "I thought why shouldn't I apply? ... I could miss out on great experience."

Finally, the idea of traveling, changing the routine, having fun, or just thinking that it would be a great experience was also a motivation for many students. Students mentioned reasons such as:

"To be in Israel and lead a different lifestyle. I hate routine, like to visit, know the world, experience things."

"Everyone said that Tel Aviv was the teenage paradise - I had to see it"

"I thought that it would be great."

"I saw it as a cool way to see Israel for the first time ... thought it could be amazing, fun, it was not that expensive, I would learn, it'd be a good experience."

"Originally, I didn't want to. Three months away from home, no way! .... Then the students who had gone to Israel came back and they were *so* happy, so I realized that I *had* to go."

## EXPECTATIONS

The majority of the students expressed that before going into the program, they had mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were very excited about the program, but on the other hand, they felt nervous. Most of their anxieties related to not getting along with their buddies and their families, being away from home for three months, having a stranger live with them, or having to share a room. The following examples illustrate students' feelings:

"Before going, I felt excited, a little nervous, didn't know what it's like to live with someone you don't know. I freaked out: what if I don't like her.... But I was also very excited."

"I was nervous that [the Israeli student would] be annoying, afraid that he wouldn't click into my family, or that what my family had to offer wasn't what he was looking for"

"I wasn't sure how I'd get along with him [buddy], how it would change my social life.... I was so excited. In the plane it hit me - leaving my family for three months was hard, but it was not hard to leave school."

"I was scared to leave home, I'm very family oriented, didn't want to leave family and friends. I had never shared a room with anyone."

"I'm used to my own space, I never had to share things with anyone, so I was apprehensive."

"Sure, [I had mixed feelings], I was anxious, excited. I'd never left home for three months, it's natural to feel that way; will everything work out?"

Despite these fears, students expressed that "the positives outweighed the tensions," mentioning feelings such as: "I worried... but I was still excited", "I was apprehensive, but I knew it was worth it."

A couple of students also mentioned the political situation and safety issues. One girl said that she was "afraid of the political situation, the bombing", while another said the opposite: "people fear [Israel's safety], but I didn't."

For several students, traveling overseas was made easier by the fact that they already knew their buddies: the fears were overcome by the happiness of seeing their buddies again. One of the girls expressed her feelings this way: "I was very nervous before the experience: I had never been away from home more than a few weeks, [my Israeli buddy's] father and brother didn't speak English, I was

worried of not getting used to it, of school, I was really nervous. But it all went away the moment I got on the plane, I was so happy I'd see [her] again.”

Most students also felt that their parents were supportive, and that although they were happy and excited about having them in the program, they were also sad to see them leave. One student said: “It was my own decision, my parents were supportive but not pushy.” Another confided: “My mom had a little more trouble; she cried when I told her, she worried about me leaving home, but then she was really happy and excited for me.” In some cases, students mentioned that one of their parents was more in favor of the program than the other, such as the case of this student: “My mom wanted it from the start; my dad was hesitant, he thought three months away from home was a lot.”

## SELF-EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE

Students' overall evaluation of the exchange program was extremely positive and enthusiastic. The majority described the experience as “amazing,” and many insisted that “it's the best thing I've done in my life.” One boy said that if he “had to rate the program from 1 to 10, [he'd] give it a 20,” and many found that “words can't describe it.”

When asked what they got out of the experience, their answers reflected that they were more than satisfied: “I got everything that I expected and more,” “all the goals,” “[it's] invaluable, you can't measure the effects.” Their answers can be categorized into three basic areas: (1) gaining a new knowledge about themselves and gaining independence; (2) gaining a new family and new friends; and (3) gaining a new connection with Israel.

The majority of the students mentioned that the experience had made them mature, grow, gain confidence in themselves and become more independent. For one student “the most important [lesson] has nothing to do with Judaism: I learned about myself.” Another one felt the trip was “like a rite of passage, I felt older, I came back different. You learn a lot about yourself.” Many students agreed and expressed their feelings in the following way: “I gained independence,” “experiencing self-reliance,” “I became more outgoing and confident,” “I'm more responsible now,” “I felt more independent, I gained tolerance,” “taking my independence to another level,” “I came back grown, while others are still the same,” “I grew emotionally, maturity... I realized things about myself I wouldn't have here.”

The fact that Israeli teenagers have more freedom and move around alone was a key factor in this new gained independence. One boy expressed that “it aged me: I had to manage my own money, it was up to me to get everywhere, I took the bus or walked alone.” A girl expressed similar feelings: “I grew and gained experience, using taxis, buses, walking.”

For some, the experience allowed them to realize how privileged their lives are in LA. Two girls referred to how ‘well off’ their families were compared to Israeli families.

“I learned about the world and how sheltered my life is. I grew up privileged; when I got there I saw not so nice houses, and they were happy.”

“They were not well off, and I go to Milken, but it was a totally different experience. Looking at another side of the world, we had only one bathroom, one shower, having to wait for the shower, I never had that before, and I loved it. It felt so communal, sharing.”

“I’d get frustrated with things like the water heater - having to wait 10 minutes before the water got hot to take a shower - when here, you just have hot water.”

One boy illustrated how privileged he felt by expressing that “our concerns are whether we’re going to get our license, theirs: the army.”

Several students mentioned that having someone stay with them in their homes also taught them about sharing; this student said that having her buddy “was a little difficult at first. We shared a room, sometimes you need space, three months is a lot.” Other students pointed out that “sometimes [Americans] had homework and [Israelis] didn’t.” This made it “difficult at times. It was hard managing homework with her in the house; but she understood, she was cool.”

Additionally, having the Israeli here made this student reflect on his own family: “Having someone else [staying with you in your house] makes you evaluate your own family. I learned about my family. And he also made things more fun.”

Gaining a new family and friends was another thing that students appreciated. Several students expressed that the connection they gained with their buddies made them feel like sisters or brothers. One student mentioned: “I feel like she’s my sister. We lived together for three months and when she left it was awful, I couldn’t wait to go there. *so* important.” Another girl commented that “I love [her] like a sister now.” The connection was not only with their buddies, but with their families as well. For one student, “the biggest was learning to love someone like family,” and for another “the greatest was the connection with my family in Israel.” Many students expressed that they gained “a new family,” and that they know that “if I go to Israel I can just knock on their door and stay there.”

Students developed bonds not only with their new families, but also with other Israelis and with their American peers. Several described their relationships with Israelis peers in this way: “I made friends with my buddy and the buddies of others,” “I gained... good friends that I’ll have forever,” “I gained a brother and a friend.” Others stressed the interactions with the Americans they traveled with: “I gained 20 amazing new friends;” “the camaraderie with the people I went with was great;” “I established a good connection with the Americans who went. Before, only two were semi-friends, and now I’m pretty good friends with all of them”.

Finally, another important issue that students feel they got out of their experience is a stronger connection to Israel. One girl expressed: “Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I feel more a connection to Israel now than I ever did to America.... My connection to Israel changed; I knew that it was my homeland but I didn’t feel it until I lived there.” Another said: “I learned their style of Jewish living. They celebrated other holidays, and I learned to celebrate those holidays with more spirit. I have more of a connection with Israel now. I made a new family across the world. I called yesterday, to see if

they're safe. I have more interest in current Israeli events now." The connection to Israel included learning the language, as one girl explained: "learning so much Hebrew, I started thinking in Hebrew. Israel became a part of me."

Some students felt they learned about things they don't necessarily agree with. One boy mentioned: "I can understand the Israeli perspective even if I don't agree." The issue of violence was also mentioned. One girl said: "I learned about fighting, I don't think they handle political disagreements that well," while another narrated her lived experience: "I dated a soldier and whenever he'd get together with his friends, when they said good bye, they gave each other huge hugs, like they might not see each other again. I saw it then, but it hit me here. And now I understand, with the violence going on."

In addition to the issues mentioned above, a few students emphasized how much fun they had: "to go out after school, really enjoy," "being an American teenager in Israel, touring and partying." One girl, on the other hand, mentioned a couple of "negative things" that came out of the experience. One the one hand, she didn't do as much schoolwork as she would have in LA, and on the other hand, she missed a more religious experience: "I'm more observant. If I'd say 'let's go to shul,' they'd laugh."

## JEWISH IDENTITY

Students have a 'wide' perspective on what it means to be Jewish, going beyond religion. As one student phrases it: "There's no *one* way to be Jewish, we have different ways and no one way is better; we each see Jewish identity different." For one student, "there are other methods of being a Jew than praying. For Israelis, it's being a good moral and ethical person, pride in their country, supporting other Israelis." Another student considers that "being Jewish is not about religion. The most religious thing I did there was go to the wall... But singing and dancing, yes. They mean more to me now." One boy mentions: "If you call yourself Jewish, it's broad, you need to specify. An observant Jew in the US is no more Jewish than a secular Jew in Israel who risks his life in the army."

For one boy, "Judaism is not a belief in God or being Kosher, what unites us is not religion but coming from the same place; what unites us is the Torah and the Holocaust. Jews are more a civilization than a religion." For another student, Judaism is a "culture," and for yet another, it is "what you believe."

When talking about what it means to be Jewish, students very frequently mention differences between being Jewish in the US and in Israel. A very common theme in their opinions is that "it's harder to be Jewish in America: in America you have to prove it; there, you just are." A student considers that in Israel "everyone's Jewish, it's a given; [in America] we have to define it, we don't take it for granted." For them, "being a Jew in the US, you have to keep up," "have Shabbat, be part of a community." A girl mentions that "most Israelis that I met there were seculars, some don't even believe in God. Here, we're a minority and it's more difficult to continue with our traditions." They give other examples as well: "Here, when you meet someone, you ask yourself if they're Jewish. In Israel everyone's a Jew so you don't even think about it, you're not preoccupied with it." Additionally, "it's obviously easier to keep kosher there than it is here." "In Israel you can feel Jewish and not *do* anything. You keep half

the laws even without knowing it: most restaurants are kosher. Here, you have to go on an extra limb not to drive or take a bus on Shabbat, there, the buses don't run on Shabbat. We try harder here; there, it surrounds them constantly."

A few students value their Judaism more after the experience. One girl expressed that "now, my being a Jew comes *before* anything else." Another said that "Judaism has always been a big thing in my life.... But I didn't really feel connected to Israel.... it means something to me now, I value my Judaism more."

Some students mentioned that being in a country where everyone is Jewish gave them a sense of community and safety, but also the sense of a closed environment. For example, one girl said "everyone feels like a family just because of living there." Another said she "had a safe and secure feeling having everyone around you like you," while at the same time she expressed concern about "not learning to interact with other kinds of people." Another student mentioned that "walking in the streets I felt more comfortable; I didn't have to worry having a big Star of David." For yet another student, "it's as if Milken were the entire world; it's a rather closed environment."

With respect to Jewish religion, differing feelings and opinions emerge. Many students feel that being in Israel didn't affect their feelings about Jewish religion; they mentioned opinions such as: "my religious feelings and practices are the same as before, I practice the same," "Israel didn't change my religious life," "it didn't change my ideas about Judaism or my practices," or "my opinions on religion didn't change." Several felt that the exchange program was not a religious experience: "I didn't practice Judaism there," "praying is not part of my experience there," "we didn't practice religion in Israel."

Several students feel that they are less observant after the exchange. One student mentioned that he "felt less obligated to go to Shabbat [services] or pray: Jewish life was just living there," while another student expressed: "I'm more questioning now. My family's kosher. Now I don't see a point to many things I do. I see a point in keeping family tradition. I'll keep kosher in the future so I can have my family over, but other things, no." Another girl gave her opinion: "After being in Israel and seeing that they don't really pray, I have a different view on Judaism. It's not necessary to pray. I would never abandon my Judaism, but I don't feel a need to pray. It's difficult for my grandmother, who is a holocaust survivor, to see me not praying."

In a couple of cases, the students mentioned that they had influenced their Israeli buddies, who had become more observant. One girl described: "I celebrate Shabbat every Friday and my 'sister' didn't. When she went back, her mother started to light the candles. I felt good to influence her like that."

About half of students feel that their feelings of Jewish identification didn't really change after the experience. They describe opinions such as: "I feel as a Jew as I did then," "I'm a Jewish American woman, basically the same as before," "I came out a reform Jew, just like before," "personally, it didn't have such a big difference." In a few cases, the students' Jewish identity is less clear after the experience, as is the case of this girl: "I used to be sure about my Jewish identity: a conservative Jew

who believes in God. I question myself now, even God. I'm still questioning it. Israel influenced this but didn't change it."

For others, however, the exchange experience enhanced and strengthened their Jewish identities, as illustrated by the following examples:

"I'm a stronger Jew now, I can be Jewish and not be religious; I know what I feel and believe in, I'm proud but I'm also humble."

"I haven't changed my practices, but I have a better connection to Israel and Israeli culture. I'll celebrate Israeli holidays more. Songs and traditions mean more to me now. It makes me proud of my homeland."

"I feel more Jewish now, I feel more like an Israeli, I *lived* there."

"Yes, I'm prouder now to be Jewish."

"My responsibility is to be as aware as I can. I didn't have a conversion but I pay more attention to what goes on [in Israel]."

There are aspects of American Judaism that some student said they now valued more. Two students, for example, missed celebrating Shabbat: "I appreciate here that we have Shabbat dinner every Friday night. I missed it there. Friday wasn't special, I appreciate looking forward to being with my family, the good food, relaxing." "I missed my Shabbat dinners, I appreciate my family and being with them for holidays." Another student appreciates being brought up in a more observant environment: "I realized how much easier it is to be Jewish there, but if I lived there, I don't know how Jewish I'd be, they're less observant. I'm almost happy I've been brought up here. I taught [the Israeli student] more [about religion] than she taught me." Finally, a girl emphasizes the importance of being part of a Jewish community in America: "Being part of a congregation is important. You get that feeling that Judaism is special when you're with other people like you."

## VIEWS ON ISRAEL AND ISRAELIS

About a third of the American students said that before the exchange program, they didn't have an opinion about Israelis, or they didn't know many Israelis. The majority also said that before going to Israel, they had the stereotypical idea of an Israeli being "pushy, stubborn," "loud, annoying," "not very patient," "opinionated," "aggressive," "rude." After their overseas experience, this view changed; most students consider Israelis "warm," "sweet," "strong," and "honest, truthful people." They now understand why they behave the way they do. For example:

"I didn't know much about Israelis other than the stereotype of the sabra, tough on the outside and sweet in the inside. Life there is intense, they don't know if they'll be alive tomorrow. Everything's extreme. You go from extreme sorrow to extreme joy (for example, remembrance day to independence day). Life is tough but they find time to celebrate."

"They are opinionated and stubborn.... Part of it is because of their society, stressful times, they've had to overcome so much, they need that mentality. Also due to the army, it's a different life there. I'll never know what it is to put your life at stake for your country."

"I knew the stereotype of them being pushy, loud, annoying. Now I don't see it as pushy, but as "I'll get the job done, if I don't do it, no one will", and there's a reason for that, their history."

In a few cases, some of their preconceived ideas were reinforced, such as the case of these two students: “Israelis, you always hear that they’re pushy and I just found evidence that it’s true.” “I confirmed my suspicion that Israelis were stubborn people.”

Students also mentioned characteristics of Israel that they enjoyed, especially that “there’s more freedom for kids.” As was mentioned earlier in this report, they liked using public transportation and walking from one place to another, with a feeling of safety that they do not have in Los Angeles. This gave them independence, because here, they relied on their parents for transport. “I took busses and cabs and walked by myself, things I would never do here. I matured from living in that environment.”

One boy mentioned a different aspect of Israeli culture that he appreciated: “In Israel for remembrance day, they mourned their dead. Here, for memorial day, we have barbecues and sales! There’s a clear appreciation for their dead there.” The way Israelis celebrate independence and remembrance days had a big impact on the students. They enjoyed being a part of that experience and some expect to celebrate them in a similar way in America. According to one boy, “Yom Hazicaron, Yom Hatzmaut, Yom Hashoa, they’re amazing holidays, I saw the screaming Israelis dancing, and the siren, really sad, and I saw the busiest road completely stop and everyone getting off their cars.” Other students added: “they celebrated other holidays, and I learned to celebrate those holidays with more spirit,” “I’ll celebrate Israeli holidays more.”

For one girl, the experience also “modernized what I knew about Israel and Israelis. I knew it was not like biblical times, but anyway, I had trouble picturing it as a modern city. Another girl had a similar experience, and “found a technological, advanced society.” This same girl added that the experience “changed my views on politics. Israelis amaze me; how they honor the army, how they love protecting their country - that’s so different from the US.”

## MILKEN PREPARATION EXPERIENCE

Students were quite divided as to what aspects of the Milken experience best prepared them for the overseas exchange program. A few considered that the school didn’t really help them prepare, but the majority did acknowledge at least some aspects of the preparation experience.

A couple of students mentioned that “learning about Israel all my life, having a background in Hebrew, that helped.” A pair suggested that the best preparation was “having the Israelis here first.”

Most of the students mentioned the extra Hebrew (Ulpan) and Math they had during the X-Block at the end of the day. Their opinions were very diverse: for some, it was helpful, for others, it was a burden; some students found Math helpful, others found Hebrew helpful, while others complained about one or the other. Despite this variability, the majority considered that both math and Hebrew preparation could have been better, and that the classes were not at all that helpful. Following are examples of students’ opinions:

“We had the x-block, but neither Hebrew nor math were too good. I felt a little behind in math. Hebrew I really learned [in Israel].”

“In the x-block; math helped a lot, it was great, but Hebrew not much, could be better.”

“Ulpan was helpful, but the extra math wasn't. I came back [from Israel] and I still need to work on it. [The x-block] was at the end of the day, I just couldn't take any more math at that time.”

Regarding the math class, a couple of students acknowledged that it was relaxing to finish up the year's math before leaving for Israel. But for several others, it was stressful:

“Math, the ideas was good, but personally, it was not effective. It was late in the afternoon and I couldn't concentrate, I'm not good at math.”

“Math worries me because of the SAT. They should give homework and quizzes [in the x-block], because it's hard to be a teenager and study alone... but then we have SATs!”

Students suggested specific issues that could improve the Hebrew preparation. For example, one student suggested splitting the Ulpan into levels, “so that those who already knew could learn more.” Another student suggested instruction in more conversational Hebrew, while another two considered that more Israeli culture and lifestyle should have been included: “learn about Israeli designers, artist, the music, what our friends talked to us about.”

They also mentioned the social activities which helped them unite as a group, such as the Shabbaton, an overnight retreat. Students mentioned that they “became good friends before going; the retreat was a bonding experience,” and that “the Shabbaton brought the group closer together; we talked about what we were scared of; we had group activities with the Israelis; [it was] helpful.” A few students considered that although they enjoyed the retreat, it was not that necessary: “The Shabbaton was a bonding experience, but I was already friends with most of them.”

The lectures on current events given by Yoav Ben Horin, the program coordinator, were also commented on by students. Students said that “Yoav was phenomenal, he did a wonderful job,” “he was like a father to us.” Although many of the students praised Yoav and expressed warm feelings towards him, their opinions were divided as to how useful the lectures and activities had been. Several kids appreciated this aspect of the preparation: “Yoav's lectures were interesting,” “the activities with Yoav at people's houses, what we learned about politics, and also the school psychologist/counselor, that was all very good.” These students, however, expected more: “Yoav was a great coordinator and person to prepare us, *he* was very good, but other than that, the preparation wasn't that good.” “They made sure we were on top of current events, and it helped; they told us about life there, we had to learn the bus system, etc. They didn't do anything wrong, but they could do more.” Another student complained that “some lectures were too long,” while another said that “the lectures were not so needed - it gave us a biased view of Israel; debates would've been more important.” A girl explained her view: “Yoav taught us so much about history, the Arab conflict and peace process... When we got there, we didn't experience history in that way. I didn't benefit from it, but I love him... He taught us important things, but we didn't benefit from them.”

Finally, some students commented that they did not feel the need for much preparation. For example, one student mentioned: “They didn’t prepare us that well, but you don’t need anything else. The first two weeks there are like orientation and you learn everything there.”

## HEBREW LANGUAGE

Students all agreed that language was not a problem in their overseas experience. A few students were bilingual and had Israeli parents, so their Hebrew was fluent to begin with. Many others considered that their Hebrew improved, as did this girl: “Language was not a problem. I was forced to speak, so no my Hebrew improved, I’m in the honors class. Being around the language, you catch on; you get so much more exposure that you learn in the family, the school, on the bus, etc.” Several were thankful that their Israeli families spoke Hebrew with them, so they could learn more. For example: “At first my Hebrew sucked but my family there spoke Hebrew to me and now I’ve improved. It’s cool for me now, I give advice [in Hebrew class].”

Others felt that language was not an issue in Israel because “everyone speaks English there.” They cited English subtitles, restaurant menus, TV shows, English speaking cab drivers and salespersons, etc. This helped students get by, but a few complained that because they spoke so much English in Israel, their Hebrew didn’t improve.

One girl appreciated that the classes at school were in English, because she “couldn’t have studied history or physics in Hebrew.” Another acknowledged that although language had not been a problem, she had needed time “to warm up.”

## ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE OVERSEAS

In general, students felt that the academic experience overseas could be improved. They considered that it was not well organized and that “academics was secondary in Israel.” One student mentioned that “classes were interesting, but not very organized,” while another said that “school is not organized at all.” Most of the students considered that Israel was “a nice break from academics,” and described the academic experience as “kind of easy,” “not as rigorous as I expected,” or “almost a joke.” The majority actually liked having a lighter workload than they have at Milken, as explained by the students quoted below:

“It was great because I was looking for little work. They assigned no homework.”

“We never got tested... [but] we went to learn a way of life more than [for] a school experience.”

“We had less [school] work, but that was good, so we could experience more the Israeli life.”

“I was happy academics was not a big deal: I wanted to be with my [new Israeli] family and go out.”

“I don’t want it to be hard for the others that will go this year or next, but it was fairly easy. It was not *too* easy, I did have work. But it was good because I *lived* as an Israeli, I experienced an Israeli student’s life.”

For some, however, this lack of academic work was a source of concern. Several expressed some kind of concern over SATs coming up, such as the following girl: “We should’ve had English class, we came back and then it was summer, so we had no English in six months, right before SATs!!” Students also complained about other issues: “In History we were left with an incomplete year.... This part of the program should be changed.” “In math I’m struggling a little this year, because they rushed last year.” “My grades went down partly because here I was so excited, and there, they barely have any homework. I didn’t do well in my homework.” Additionally, students taking AP classes expressed that they were left on their own and the experience was not a good one: “[It] was shaky... we were supposed to teach ourselves, take tests and fax them in, but it wasn’t very organized.”

Among the classes students felt did not work out well, science and Hebrew stood out: “Science was not too good, we had three hours one day and then we didn’t meet till next week, not too good. Some of the Hebrew teachers didn’t show up. It needed more consistency.” The main criticism for the science class was the scheduling: “the biology class which was three hours in one day, which didn’t work well at all.” In Hebrew, students complained of teachers not showing up, and considered that they “learned more Hebrew in the street than in the classroom.”

Another issue that didn’t work out was the history project/essay. One boy explains his experience: “For history, we had to write a paper in English and we didn’t have many resources in English (other than the British consulate and the Internet); we weren’t the teacher’s top priority and it was a problem. In the end we didn’t have to do the paper, but the paper could have helped my grade, plus, I wanted to do it, it was interesting, and I wasn’t able to do it. It wasn’t required, but I wanted to do it.” Another student had a similar experience: “The lack of resources was a major issue. We couldn’t check out books from the library and we had limited access to the Internet. I had to ask for the information I needed from here [Los Angeles], via email. I did the project, but they canceled the project, it wasn’t structured, I did the work for nothing.” Yet another adds: “We had to write a paper, and at the last minute we were all stressed about it, and at the end we didn’t have to do it. The person who should help us didn’t seem to want to help, he wasn’t very supportive. I personally did very little work on the paper.

Many felt that the communication between the Israeli teachers (at Tichon Hadash) and the American teachers (at Milken) needed to improve. “The communication about academics between teachers here and there was not good.” “Some teachers shouldn’t have worked with us. There was lots of miscommunications. They’re still experimenting on how to make it work.... The communication between the teachers here and the teachers there was terrible.” However, they understand that these problems may be due to the lack of experience and to the fact that the program is still new. “It was only the second year, so it was a little disorganized,” “they’re still learning; we’re only the second year.”

Despite the criticisms, there were several aspects of the Israeli academic experience that the American students appreciated and enjoyed. Some classes were very well evaluated, especially photography, biblical archeology, Arabic and drama, which were mentioned often by students. One boy stated that “the electives were wonderful,” while others gave examples of the classes they liked most: “We had a

few really interesting classes, like biblical archeology, with a top guy, great. Also on modern Israel, very good. Photography was great, and Israeli theater, we saw some plays.”

Two students also emphasized that they liked the student-teacher relationship in Israel: “The relationship with teachers there is great, more friends, kids call them by their first names, more ‘equalness’, they’re really there to help you and guide you.” “The students bond with the teachers like friends.”

## CONTINUING EFFECT OF THE PROGRAM

Most students consider that the exchange program has had a ‘continuing effect’ that has lasted beyond the months of the actual exchange. The friendships that they made tie them to Israel and to the families they met. This students experience is common to many others: “I know my relationship will last; [the Israeli student] will be in my life forever, this is a lifelong thing.... I talk to her almost once a week. This does not last 9 months, it lasts all my life.”

They continue to be in touch with their buddies over the phone and through email. Several have already traveled to see them or are planning a trip soon, and a few Israelis have come to Los Angeles. For example: “I’m still in touch with [my buddy], I just talked to her. She came for my brother’s Bar Mitzvah, after I came back from Israel. I visited in the summer, I miss her so much.” Some Americans are also planning to attend a trip to Poland with their Israeli buddies this summer, one mentioned wanting to spend a year there during her college year, and one wants to move to Israel.

The friendships that developed are key to these teenagers. They describe their feelings in the following ways: “She’s my sister... Our moms are good friends too.” “I feel I could go there and have tons of friends.” “I hope our grandchildren will be friends.”

In some cases, the contact is not as close, but there is still a feeling that it will persist over time: “I call once in a while, the last time was for Rosh Hashanah; [my two friends] both have emails, but they’re family emails, so they don’t check it. I wrote a letter but haven’t gotten around to mailing it, we’re lazy with mail. [In the future communication will be] probably less often, 3 to 4 times a year, but I’ll see her when I go to Israel for sure in the future.”

The program has had an effect on the relationships these students have with their American peers as well: “With the Americans we’re all friends now, that changed my normal friends, I have more now.” One student also mentioned her relationship with Yoav: “And there’s Yoav, he’s amazing, we keep in touch with him, we visit him, meet with him, just like last year.”

One boy mentioned that he incorporated aspects of Judaism from his buddy’s family: “now our Shabbat is more about family than friends; I brought this to my home.” Another has plans to share some of what she learned in Israel with others at school: “I was just in a meeting, planning an alumni club, activities with the school, to share our experience, for example for Yom Haatzmaut. For that holiday, [Israelis]

were ‘psycho-happy’, as a friend put it; we went clubbing, everyone was *so* happy. We want to bring that feeling here, decorating and with loud Israeli music, the spirit.”

One girl explained that there has been an effect on her personal development: “The program changed our lives; we grew and changed for the better. When I came home I felt so different to my other friends who didn’t go, I felt older, with new emotions that they didn’t understand.”

For yet other students, the program has had the effect of making them more aware of Israeli issues. This boy stated: “the experience enlightened me. When I read Israelis news now, it hits me much harder.” This other student explains that although she has a concern for Israel, the personal relationship is what is most meaningful to her: “I don’t need to know what’s going on in Israel all the time, but now, with the problems, I’m horrified. At a personal level, I communicate almost every day (phone, email). To us, the political awareness is important, but mainly, it’s our connection with our friends. I cried when I had to leave. I know I’ll see them [again in Israel]. [My buddy], I feel like I’ve known her my whole life; we’re sisters, her mom is my mom. I can’t imagine my life without them.”

## DIFFICULTIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

Students made some suggestions for change, especially regarding the preparation process and the academic experience overseas, which were described earlier. Basically, they felt the academic aspect of the program needed more organization. One girl suggested that “educationally... it’s like a B, compared to the rest which is all an A+.” There were specific complaints about the Ulpan and math classes they had in the X-block. In Israel, they felt the history project did not work out well, and felt the whole academic experience could be better organized.

In addition, some students commented on the issue of group size: many students considered that their group of 19 was the perfect size, and thought that increasing the number is not a good idea: “the group shouldn’t get much bigger, about 20, for a close relationship.” Another pointed out: “For next years, going over 18-20 students is a lot. It gives less of a chance for students to get to know each other. When it’s a bigger group, you stay with 3-5... We opened ourselves to *everyone*, people I’d never thought I’d be a good friend with.”

Despite considering that the school should not increase the number of exchange students in the program, two students indicated they are aware of the conflict this poses: “I think more people would have been too big a group, but everyone should do it...” “I feel bad for the people who have to choose who gets accepted, it’s so hard.”

One student suggested that “there should be a little more religion, more of a religious basis. We’re a Jewish school. My favorite times were in Jerusalem.”

Two students also considered that the school needed to do a better job in the matching of the American/Israeli pairs, because “there were a couple of mismatches,” people who couldn’t get along and whose “personalities conflicted.” For one student, “the biggest suggestion is with the pairs, because I know others weren’t completely satisfied with it either, the school should coordinate it better.... You should take the 50 people [who applied], see their qualities, match it up with the other 50 people, which are the most *similar* instead of ‘which are the best to send.’ So you make the 20 best *pairs*, instead of the 20 best people and pairing them up *after* that, which is how they’ve been doing it.”

Despite the fact that for most students the pairs worked out, there were several instances where things did not work out as planned. Among the girls in the program, the pairing seemed to have worked better than with the boys. Ten out of the twelve girls hosted an Israeli in their homes and then stayed with that same Israeli when they traveled to Israel. The other two girls faced special circumstances. One girl did not host because the school determined that her family’s situation (she spent part of the week at the home of each of her divorced parents) was not favorable for the exchange student. Thus, in Tel Aviv she stayed in the home of a “new” student who had not been to LA. She said she would have liked to host, but also appreciated the opportunity of having a buddy when she traveled to Israel.

The other girl only hosted for a few weeks; she had been assigned an Israeli boy as a buddy, but he didn’t seem to be happy with the matching and was transferred to the home of another Milken boy. Additionally, when this girl traveled to Israel, she lived with one family, but had to spend a few weeks with another family because the first family traveled to the US while she was there. She commented that this was not the ideal situation and did not recommend it, but also appreciated the opportunity to have met not only one, but two, families.

With the seven boys in the program, a few more problems arose. Only three boys stayed in the home of the Israeli buddy they had originally hosted. One boy did not host because his family could not take responsibility for an exchange student, so when he traveled to Israel it was to the home of a “new” buddy; things turned out fine and he was happy with his partner in Israel. The other three cases worked out less smoothly. One boy stayed with a “new” buddy in Israel because his relationship with the “original” Israeli buddy who stayed at his home in LA did not work out well (the Israeli ended his stay in LA by moving into the home of another student, with whom he got along better, for the final weeks of his visit).

Additionally, there were another two boys who stayed with new buddies (boys which they had not hosted in Los Angeles) when in Israel. One stayed at the home of the Israeli who had moved out of his host’s home and into his home during the last weeks of the exchange. The other stayed with an Israeli who had stayed at the house of a boy who did not travel to Israel.<sup>1</sup> These last two boys did not view this as a problem. They both mentioned they had the choice to stay with either their own “original”

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<sup>1</sup> One extra boy hosted but did not travel to Israel, and he was not included in the sample of students who were interviewed.

buddies or the new partners, and had opted for staying with the boy they got along with best, making it clear that they still had a good relationship with their original buddies.

In total, thirteen out of the nineteen pairs worked out exactly as planned, that is, the Milken students stayed in the homes of the Israeli partners they had hosted in their homes in LA.<sup>2</sup> Three Americans did not host, and therefore stayed with new families when they traveled. The final three stayed at the homes of new buddies because they felt the relationship would be better than with the original pair.

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, originally there were 20 pairs, but one boy – who hosted but then did not travel to LA – was not interviewed for this study.

## **B. PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE**

### CHILDREN'S MOTIVATION

Parents were asked why they thought their children decided to participate in the program. Most parents mentioned that a key motivation was the opportunity to “experience Israel.” Some parents mentioned that this trip was part of their children’s Jewish education:

“My daughter has always had a Jewish education, from nursery school, she went to Jewish camp, she likes Israeli dances and singing, there’s Judaism in our home, in school. It was the icing on the cake to go to Israel and experience it all first hand.”

“He wanted to experience Israel, he’s very passionate about being Jewish. He’s more religious than most other kids here.”

One mother mentioned that for her son, it was an opportunity “to learn what secular life is, [because] he lives in an observant Jewish family.”

Other parents felt their children were motivated by the possibility of experience something new and learning from it; for example, one father mentioned that her daughter “is extremely bright and inquisitive, so the possibility to go someplace new and learn” was attractive to her. Several considered that “it was a great experience that wouldn’t come again.”

For some children, the trip represented the chance to know Israel for the first time; for example, one mother said: “In nursery school she had teachers from Israel and they told stories about Israel, biblical stories, etc. Since she was 5 years old she said ‘Mommy, I want to go to Israel.’ It’s difficult for us as a family to travel, it’s costly, so this was a possibility.” For many others, however, it was a chance to enhance or strengthen a connection they already had:

“He’d been to Israel before, as a visitor, to see our family, but he’d never experienced living there. For him to close the loop, how it is to live and to go to school in Israel.”

“It would be fun. He had been to Israel three times before, to visit family, when I studied there. To enhance his relationship with Israel.”

“We were there for her bat mitzvah, she felt a strong connection to being [in Israel].”

For many of the students, there was more of a social component; kids wanted to have fun, enjoy, be with friends. Parents mentioned that “she got excited, her good friend applied and went as well,” “he’s an all around sociable kid – to enjoy the whole thing,” “for her, she likes to be with friends, [so] she was interested.”

Another motivation recognized by many parents was becoming more independent, experiencing more freedom, being away from home and living far from their parents for three months. The following examples illustrate this:

“He also wanted to be away for three months.”

“He went for the experience, the excitement of leaving home, the independence.”  
 “Like a normal 15 year old, a chance to get out of parent’s wing was attractive.”  
 “Mainly the excitement of traveling overseas, going away, having independence.”

Two parents mentioned that for their children, it was a challenge to participate in the selection process, to be accepted: “She liked the challenge of being selected or approved;” “he wanted to see if he’d be accepted.” For another girl, the challenge was being away from home. Her mother mentioned that “it was a complete challenge. She had never been away from home, not even at camp. She’s independent but connected to home. To see if she could pull it off.”

Another two parents mentioned that they had played an important role in motivating their kids, in encouraging them to go. One parent recognized that “we pushed him,” while another said that “We encouraged her to. We heard it was a good program, we knew about the planning of the program, we thought it was a great opportunity.” Finally, one mother mentioned that the people in charge of the program in the school, such as Yoav and Metuka, should be credited with motivating her daughter: “At first I was shocked that [my daughter] wanted to go; she’s a home girl. I give credit to the people in charge.”

Practically all of the parents thought that their children had no qualms at all prior to participating in the program. When asked if their kids had experienced mixed feelings, most gave answers such as “no, he was so excited!” “not one drop, not a tear at the airport,” “I asked him if he was nervous at the airport and he looked at me as if I were from another planet.”

Only four parents recognized that their kids did have mixed feelings about the program. One said: “Of course, she stated it would be difficult for her to live in a home with different rules and structures and strange people. She had reservations about living in an apartment with one bathroom.” Another mentioned that her daughter “was a little apprehensive. The Israelis came here first, so she had an advantage, but how would the mother and father be like? How would her room and home be like? Would she fit in?”

## FEELINGS TOWARDS CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION

Parents expressed different feelings towards their children’s participation in the exchange program. Although the majority said they supported their kids and were happy and excited for them, they also expressed concerns. Four parents said they had no concerns at all, but most others mentioned issues such as academics, safety, personal adjustment, missing their kids, or having to take responsibility for another child while they hosted.

Academic issues were a source of concern for some parents. For example, one mother mentioned that “the only concern was academic,” and another that she “did have concerns about her [daughter’s] grades.” One parent was concerned about the disparity in the amount of homework between the Americans and the Israelis during the time they were in Los Angeles.

On the contrary, many parents expressed that academic issues were not a concern for them at all. One mother said: "I wasn't concerned about academics, she's a good student, the life experience was important." Another two expressed similar opinions: "Not academically; they have too much stress on academics at Milken anyway." "I had no fear of his organizational skills or his responsibility, because he's very on task."

Personal safety, the political situation and terrorism was also mentioned by many parents. Again there was disagreement, with some considering that safety was not a concern to them, and others expressing that it was. On the one hand, a group of parents said that they felt "no safety concerns," and were not worried about the "political unrest." An Israeli parent said: "Because I come from Israel, I didn't make a big issue of safety, I felt just as if he were going to any other country." However, the majority did feel uncomfortable with the situation:

"I had only one concern, the terrorism, the constant terrorism, the random attacks; safety was my only concern."

"I had concerns about her personal safety. It was less troubled a year ago, but still. Another kid said: 'Don't worry mom, in America there's crime and rape, in Israel, all you have to worry about are bombs!'..."

"I'm always concerned when my kids are out of the house, and in Israel, the safety... This year, I'd have been *very* concerned."

"I had background terrorism concerns; there was an article in the LA Times just before they left about increase in terrorism that made me crazy."

Some parents mentioned that safety had not been a concern a year ago, but that this year, things would have been different: "Safety was not an issue, the political situation was stable then. Now, I'd discourage him from going." "[We had] no [concerns]....This year it's different, because of all that's going on. I don't know what I'd do this year."

Several parents were worried about the freedom that kids experience in Israel, and how they would handle it. For example:

"I was concerned about the Israel part, the freedom there."

"I was concerned about teen drinking and a lack of parental supervision.... They're more independent there, they have boy-girl sleepovers.... They go out and come home at 5 AM, it's not like that here."

"I was also concerned about the freedom. She's responsible and I felt she'd make the right choices, but I was still concerned."

"I knew the lifestyle was different, the freedom, I was concerned."

"She looks older than she is, I was worried, Israelis are freer, more open, she's had a sheltered life."

Other parents worried about how their children would feel staying with a new family. They mentioned concerns such as: "I was concerned of where she'd be living, how the home was like, how the parents are like." "I was concerned about who would look out for her.... Would she feel safe and comfortable is a problem came up to ask for help? Who would help her with homework?" Having their kids stay at the home of strangers worried one mother: "I sent [my child] to a complete stranger [because we didn't host]. I had no idea what the family she was going to was like." Another worried about her child getting along: "I did have concerns about whether the kids would be compatible; with the Israeli who

came here it didn't work out. They were very different personalities and I was concerned whether they'd mesh."

Parents also mentioned that they were worried about missing their kids and having them away; for example, "[One of] my two greatest concerns [was] that I'd miss her, so long without her..." "It was tough having her so far," "I had mixed feelings. She's my baby. I was not thrilled to see her go."

Finally, several parents expressed concerns about having another child stay with them in their homes:

"I had concerns about having [the Israeli student] here. I have four kids, and for three months I had five. Would it work logistically? Fall is the worst time for me, they're all in sports, so I was concerned if I'd have the stamina [to take care of them and drive them around]. And having a stranger in the house, you have to be on your better behavior, not your best behavior, but your better behavior..."

"I had qualms about having a stranger in my house for three months. I worried about her feeling welcome." "I thought 'How will I put another boy in this mix?' Because I already have three teenage boys. He came from a completely secular family, not interested in religion at all.... [And we're a religious family], we're kosher and we're vegetarian."

## EVALUATION OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE

Parents overall evaluation of the exchange program for their kids was very positive. They said it "was a great experience... [they] loved every moment," "the most wonderful experience," "fantastic, it can't be beat." One mother said "it's the best thing that has happened in this high school for my daughter."

Parents were asked what they felt their children had gotten out of the experience. They generally agreed that their kids "gained a lot," "had a great time" and "met the goals". Among the things their kids had gained, the major issues mentioned were maturity and independence, new family and friends, a connection with Israel and a grasp of the Hebrew language.

One of the most frequently mentioned issues was that of the students' personal development. The majority of parents considered that their kids "grew up" and "gained independence." One parent said her daughter "became a different person, confident and sure of herself. There, she took public transportation, walked alone, did everything by herself. She matured, she appreciates what I do for her now." Another parent said that his son "gained self-esteem," and yet another mentioned "maturity [and] confidence."

Several parents also felt their children gained a new family. One mother said her daughter and the Israeli student "became sisters and I feel [the Israeli student] like our daughter; my sons feel they have a new sister, I'm close to her parents, we share a bond of caring for each others children. Now I have a new family there." Another said her child gained "a new family, an extension to our family." A few parents also mentioned the new friends they made at Milken, with the other students in the program.

Parents expressed that the students got a connection to Israel, “creating a connection to Israel through relationships with Israeli kids.” For some students, this was related to political awareness; one parent says her daughter is “very politically interested in Israel, she sees it as her second home; [she gained] political awareness;” and another says her son “gained comfort with Israel, a social and political understanding.” Other parents expressed their children’s connection to Israel in the following ways:

“He has a lifelong connection to Israel and Israeli kids”

“He got a connection to secular Israel.”

“She knows her way in Israel, the buses, the streets, where to buy...”

“He was ready to join the army before he came home. He got an incredible love for the country, in his heart, the fighting for the land, he fell in love with Israel. He talks about going back after graduating.”

“He got a connection to Israel much deeper than as a tourist. He doesn’t want to make aliah, that was a concern for me, but he has a lifelong connection to Israel.”

Additionally, many considered that their kids now had a better grasp of the Hebrew language. Many said that their “Hebrew improved,” or that now they were fluent.

A couple of parents mentioned that their children had gained an appreciation for America. In one case, this was related to Jewish culture: “He gained ... insights into American Judaism because the families there were secular. He was surprised. Purim without readings? It was just like Halloween. Or they’d have Pesach, a seder, but with the TV on in the background, or someone getting up to check on the basketball game. He appreciates our home life more and Milken’s attempt to include Jewish values.” In another case, this appreciation was more related to comfort: “She came home and said she loved her house, her room, her bath, her garden, she smelled the flowers, she was *so grateful* for what she has and for America.... She appreciates [that I drive her around]. You appreciate what you have when it’s not there.”

One mother mentioned that her daughter increased her religious observance after staying with a more religious family in Israel, although this was not a common experience. “[The Israeli] family was observant and more religious than us. When [my daughter] came home, we had Shabat, and she put on a sweater [to cover her shoulders] and covered her head for Shabat. I know that she’ll never marry a non-Jew, I know.” Another parent felt that his son “had less [religion] there than here. He was out Friday nights, he’s not allowed to do that here.... They had some minimal Shabat candle lighting - I was thankful - but it was still hard to rope him in when he came back.”

Finally, some parents also mentioned that their kids had fun: “He had a great time!” One mother said her daughter “learned where all the discos were;” another said her daughter “had a three-month party” and that the “highlight was the social environment.” Yet another mentioned that her daughter had been able to “not work so hard; they had a break [from Milken’s academic requirements].”

## CHILDREN’S JEWISH IDENTITY

Parents were asked how they felt the exchange program had affected their children's views on what it means to be Jewish, on Jewish religion, and on Jewish identity.

Some parents said they did not think their kids had different feelings about what it means to be Jewish before the program, while others felt that there were differences. That is, some parents felt their children had not changed the way they defined Judaism, while other had.

Among those who said they had not seen big changes in their children, one parent said that her daughter "did not change at all, she stayed the same." Another explained that this is because her daughter had already had a clear idea of what it is to be Jewish: "[My daughter] didn't change at all; [she] always went to a Jewish school, since she was little. When she was a little girl she thought everyone was Jewish, we have Shabat every Friday, we build a "succa" and eat there, we go to temple on the high holidays... In Israel, most kids don't feel Jewish." Similarly, this mother said that her son had "always had positive feelings. Maybe he has a more realistic idea of what living in Israel is like. He noticed a difference, that they're more secular there, but it didn't bother him or conflict with his values."

For another parent, his son "didn't change.... He has a strong connection to Israel and a Jewish tie, but in the religious aspect, he's more of a skeptic.... He questions [religion] more, but he has a strong connection."

In contrast, other parents felt that their children had broadened their definition of Judaism, especially incorporating a connection to Israel.

"The family was very secular, they felt they were Jews and that's it. But she feels a connection to Israel she didn't have before."

"His understanding of Judaism is broader. He has a secular and political understanding. And he understands liberal Judaism as important."

"She's more committed, more ardent about her Judaism and herself as a Jew. And she's more concerned about Israel, watches the news, more political."

"Yes, her Jewishness is more deeply invested than before. In what she'll talk about; she's carrying on about Jewish philosophy, Torah, discussion. But she's much less religious. She's more concerned about Israel as a Jewish state. But she doesn't want anything to do with prayer anymore. For the high holidays we had a fight about going to shul. It's the age, but also from being with non religious Israelis."

"Yes, definitely. He was really surprised at seeing everybody's Jewish but they didn't practice."

"In a sense it was broadened, about history. She truly felt a sense of pride in her Jewish heritage. It was a seed planted in her. It won't change her day to day practice, she's not going to dive into Shabat, but she has the seed, she knows who she's a part of."

With respect to religion, many parents said that the experience did not affect their children's feelings about the Jewish religion. One parent considered that this trip "didn't have any positive impact on religious Jewish identity, nor negative. It's a secular Jewish experience." Another mentioned that "I don't see it in practice. She hasn't become more or less religious than before." Yet another added: "It made her OK to be Jewish. It wouldn't cross her mind to go to an exchange program to France, for instance. It's Israel.... But I don't think her religion changed."

This parent did not see a change at a religious level, but she observed more commitment to Israel: “When we went to the synagogue for the high holidays I didn’t see differences. She looked bored, like not really getting much out of the sermon.... But I can’t really say she changed in religious terms. She has more a commitment to Israel and to Judaism than the religious part.”

Some parents think their children have not given much thought to the religious aspects: “No change. She still doesn’t want to go to temple. I don’t know if she gave it much thought.” “He’s comfortable with a liberal Jewish expression. He’s committed to Judaism, but I don’t know that he has a sense of God or that he thinks about it. He saw Israel with minimal understanding of what it is to be a Jew.”

This other parent mentions that after being less observant in Israel, his son has gone back to his more religious practices in the US: “It’s the same, it didn’t change. He came back to the family routine, to what we do here, going to synagogue in the holidays, that he didn’t do so much in Israel. He feels the need here.”

Several parents mentioned that although their children’s practices didn’t change, they saw a lack of religious experience in Israel. For example, “she felt that it was not appropriate that there was such a lack of Judaism in Israel;” or “she was as surprised as I that Israeli kids had such a shallow exposure to temple and the holidays. She had more practice experience as a Jew than [the Israeli student] or her family.”

A couple of parents expressed that their children’s religious views were strengthened. One felt strongly about this: “He’s a stronger Jew now. He was stronger than average to begin with. But now even more. He has a stronger sense of being a Jew.” Another parent had more doubts: “I don’t know. Maybe his beliefs are stronger. He’s always been strong. It confirmed everything.”

With respect to Jewish identity, many parents said that their children’s sense of Jewish identification did not really change after the experience:

“His identity has always been very strong.... He was aware of the differences, but it didn’t affect him.”

“No effect. She defines [her Jewish identity] from her thoughts, not from being in Israel for three months.”

“She has a strong Jewish identity, she left with one and she came back with one.”

“He had such a strong Jewish identity before, and he came back with one. I don’t know if it increased, but it didn’t decrease.”

Others, however, feel that the children’s Jewish identities became stronger, especially after incorporating a connection to Israel. The examples that follow illustrate parents’ opinions:

“He sees more clearly the centrality of Israel in his own Jewish identity, the importance of Israel. It was not a change, but on a spectrum, it’s slightly more intensified.”

“Absolutely. Discussing the land, what belongs to the Jews, how they can’t give it up, he has strong feelings about that now.”

“[His Jewish identity is ] stronger, enhanced. He has a link with Israel, understands how small the world is. He’s sensitive to the news. His notion of Jewish people-hood is deeper.”

“It got stronger, or reinforced.”

“I don’t know. She felt strong about being Jewish in LA before and still feels it. It didn’t change. Just her love for being in Israel was important and grew.”

“In some way it did. She identifies more with Israel now as the Jewish state.”

## CHILDREN’S VIEWS ON ISRAELIS

Parents were asked how having an Israeli living with them in their homes changed their children’s feelings about Israelis. Several mentioned that their kids did not really have any preconceived ideas before the exchange, so they did not see much *change*. For example, parents said things such as: “no, [my daughter] didn’t have any preconceived ideas”, “I don’t know that she had any thoughts; she didn’t know many Israelis before,” “no, he had a realistic idea of what Israelis were like,” or “not a change, but introducing her to a [different] life.” Others mentioned changes, such as an increased appreciation for Israelis. For example, “we’ve been to Israel many times, to visit family, but being among Israeli peers helped her develop a more positive attitude towards Israelis.” One parent said that her daughter “learned to love them more; she likes their personal freedom, their way of not being fake, they tell you what they think, their honesty, they have guts and are not ashamed.” Another parent, who is Israeli, appreciated that her son had acquired some of the Israeli *chutzpah* and *spice*.

One mother mentioned how having the Israeli student opened them up to negative aspects: “Yeah. [My son] knew a lot of Israelis before [his buddy]. [The Israeli student] never made his lunch, he didn’t do his laundry or even help with it, [in Israel] his mom would do it. She’d say: ‘The kids are going to the army, so we’ll treat them.’ I was astounded! He never had a household responsibility. And he didn’t have limit on money.... We were surprised at how spoiled [the Israeli student] was.”

Finally, one parent said that the experience had helped her child have a less prejudiced view towards Israelis: “[She’s] more open minded. Some Israelis have the negative stereotype, pushy and aggressive... [it] showed her people are people, there are aggressive people everywhere, not only in Israel.... It wasn’t that she was an Israeli, it was who she was.”

## MILKEN PREPARATION EXPERIENCE

Parents talked lengthily about the preparation that the school gave the children before the program. In general, they identified many aspects that had helped the students, as well as themselves as parents, to prepare for the experience. However, they also indicated that there was room for improvement in several areas.

Among the aspects that had best helped their kids prepare for the exchange program, they suggested that the activities for families had been very helpful. They had helped both the students and the parents bond as a group, share experiences and develop friendships. Among the activities, they highlighted the trips, the Shabaton, meetings, etc. For example, this parent expressed her opinion: “We enjoyed the activities for the families of hosts. We became a nice, solid group. The trip to Zion park, had a great

time, it makes them bond. It makes the American kids bond so they knew that they had buddies in case they needed them.” Another had a similar experience: “Yoav had meetings with the families; there was a bond with the parents. The children got together, knowing who they were going with, it became more familiar so that they could count on each other in Israel. Shabaton was good, they spoke about life in Israel and the social environment.”

Despite the fact that most parents appreciated the social activities and meetings, a couple of parents considered that there should be “more group activities before, so the American kids were more cohesive; when they came back from Israel they were a cohesive group. More activities before they left would’ve been helpful. I know they didn’t want to separate them from the other kids in the school, so it’s catch 22.”

For many parents, having the Israelis here first was considered the best preparation experience: “We were lucky to have the Israelis here first. I made it easy to learn about what was to come.”

The academic preparation had less support from parents, although opinions were divided. For example, this parent felt that “they accommodated the kids, they were not on their case with finals, they made it an easy adjustment, they covered material early so they wouldn’t have obligations when they came back.” For others, however, the situation was less favorable. The following examples illustrate this point:

“They tried to ramp up in Hebrew; it didn’t work too well for [my son] but it did with others. He had conflicts with schedules and sports. He also screwed around a lot [in class]. They shouldn’t have all the kids in *one* Ulpan, they should have levels in Hebrew.”

“Ulpan didn’t seem to help much.... They could’ve made it more conversational, functional. [My daughter] said it was a waste of time.”

“It was really hard [academically]. Everything had to be tied up by February. It was hard in math, we were concerned about the SAT.... Ulpan took place at the end of the school day, during the X-block, and it conflicted with sports... it became sticky.”

Additionally, parents with children in AP classes were not satisfied with the support their kids had overseas, and hope this improves in future years.

Several parents also mentioned Yoav as a key person in the preparation. For example, one mother felt that “Yoav did an incredible job and he’s an incredible person. Getting parents and students together, talking about what to expect, etc.” Another added that “Yoav was terrific at keeping us informed of what was going on. He got kids in touch over the summer with emails and phone calls. Talking to the kids who’d been in the program also helped, despite the differences in the program to the previous year. We got together as a group often and had our questions answered, we shared our apprehensions. It was helpful.” Additionally, one highlighted that the “lectures from Yoav, on the political and social history of Israel” had helped her child.

Despite these positive references, one parent gave his opinion: “We love Yoav, he’s great, the program would not be the same without him. But he needs help, it’s too much for one person. And he’s not

very organized. But he's great at what he does. The kids love him. But he needs help." Another considered that the kids did not always profit from the meetings held by Yoav: "Yoav had meetings ahead of time, interesting and helpful. But kids felt that they resented going sometimes; kids' attention span is shorter, [the meetings were long for them]. I don't know how much they got out of it. They had difficulty sitting through it, but it was very important." Another mentioned that "the activities were fine, but families and kids don't need so many lectures, formal education. There was too much."

## ISRAELI STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

Parents were not only asked about their own children's experience, but also about having the Israelis stay with them in their homes. Parents agreed that "it was a wonderful experience," that they "thoroughly enjoyed it" and "loved it." It also exposed their other children to life in Israel: "it was a broadening experience for all the family." One mother was happy to have been able to expose the Israeli student to a more religious family life. Another said that "it's a good experience to have a foreign student in your house; you learn about tolerance and acceptance, how to include him."

One mother said that although she had loved having the Israeli in her house, "it was very demanding, overly demanding, very heavily scheduled... hard with two working parents and three kids." Another commented that it had not been easy for her family at first, but had turned out very well: "It was a fabulous experience at home, [but at the beginning] my husband didn't want anything to do with a stranger in the house and then he cried more than anyone at the airport when they left!"

Regarding the Israeli students' experiences, parents said that the Israelis had enjoyed the exchange program, and that a few of them were saving money to come back again: "she had a great time," "he loved it, he's coming back in April, he's saving his money." Besides having fun, the Israelis "learned about a different way of life, new places and homes." Just like their own sons and daughters profited from living away for three months, for the Israelis "it was a good experience to be away from home." One mother mentioned that the Israeli living with her had "mellowed. She changed, she became more accepting, not as quick to judge."

Parents felt the Israelis had gained new friends and families with the exchange program. For example, one mother commented: "She made new friends.... She gained a second family."

Several parents mentioned that this had been a learning experience for Israelis, to get to know what an American Jew's life is like. "He gained... an awareness of what it's like to be an American Jew." "To see what it is to be Jewish outside Israel. He learned that, the type of commitment it takes here, and [in Israel] it takes so little." For several, this meant a contact with religion that they did not have in Israel. These parents express how they exposed the Israelis to their own Judaism:

"She saw a different perspective with respect to Judaism. In our home, on Friday the kids don't go out, they stay with the family. [The Israeli student] saw that and respected that. My kids bring their friends. [The Israeli student] went with us to temple for the high holidays."

“He learned the Jewish experience; we’re a traditional family, belong to a temple, have Friday night meal with all the blessings.”

One parent mentioned that this had a positive effect on the Israeli that came to her home: “She came to us with a lack of good feelings of Jewish observance. She left right before Hanukah and she called back [from Israel] and asked us: ‘What do you light first, the Hanukah candles or the Shabat candles?’ My husband asked her what did you do first, and she had done the right thing. She called to say they did Kiddush for the first time and she was surprised her dad knew all the words. She came with a resistance to God, and left with a more positive understanding.”

For others, however, it did not turn out that way. “He didn’t like Shabat observance, we usually have guests, but he had no patience to sit and talk. We went to synagogue for the high holidays and for him it was a waste of time, and he was not shy about saying it. Israeli kids should have had some introduction to Judaism.”

Parents also felt that Israeli students gained an understanding of what it is like to go to school in America. “She gained an appreciation for American student’s way of life, the amount of homework they have, how hard they work and study.” In general, Israelis did not like school in the US:

“She thought [my daughter] had way too much homework. [The Israeli student] thought that life for kids in Israel is so much better, the bottom line, they have more fun. School is too hard here. They have more freedom there.”

“[The Israeli student] didn’t like school here... thought it was hard and that they got too much homework. [My daughter] had more homework than [the Israeli] did. She would sit and do homework and [the Israeli] wanted to have fun: she was torn, she wanted to be with [the Israeli] and she had work to do.”

Language was definitely not a problem for the Israeli students who came to Los Angeles. Practically all of the parents said that the Israeli’s English was “excellent,” “fluent,” “beautiful”, so that “there were no communication problems at all.” One mother even exclaimed that the Israeli girl “speaks better English than I do!” and several marveled at the good accent that the Israelis had. In general, Americans improved their Hebrew and Israelis improved their English with the exchange.

## ISRAELI’S JEWISH IDENTITY

The parents at Milken were asked about aspects of the Jewish identity of the Israeli students who stayed at their homes.

A few parents mentioned that the experienced had broadened the students’ thoughts on what it means to be Jewish. One parent mentioned that the Israeli student “broadened his view, there are different ways to be Jewish. It didn’t make him religious but more open to understanding the experience: all or nothing [in Israel] versus something in between [in the US]. It takes affirmative action here to be Jewish, versus nothing really to *do* there. It was hard for him to believe how we celebrate Judaism here: the high holidays, the Succoth... It had not been his experience.” Others expressed that the Israelis

gained “a broader understanding of how Jews live in the world” and “learned more about Jewish life in America.” Also, “there’s a certain comfort level to know there are people like you all over the world.”

A couple of parents also expressed that for the Israelis, their Jewish identity was intimately tied with being Israeli. For example, “you’re born there, you’re Jewish” and “his feeling is he’s Jewish ‘because I live in Israel.’ Everything he does is Jewish, even the air he breathes is Jewish.” Others tied it with patriotism: “Her feelings about being Jewish are from a different perspective: she’s *Israeli*. . . . She’s very committed to Israel, she’s very patriotic, she will go to the army.” “He’s patriotic, he wants to go to the army, live in Israel.”

A few alluded to the issue of being a Jew in Israel versus the Diaspora. One parent mentioned that “in Israel you’re a Jew and everyone else is Jewish. Unless you’re religious, that’s your identity. In LA you have to reach out to form your Jewish identity.” Another said that the Israeli student had gained “a respect for the Jews in the Diaspora, understands it more now.”

Parents commented most on how the experience affected Israeli’s feelings about the Jewish religion. In general, Israelis were exposed to more religious/observant families in the US than what they experience in Israel. Despite being exposed to more religion, parents felt that the Israeli children did not change their own religious feelings, ideas or practices.

One parent explained that “we have a less black and white attitude towards religion, there are different levels of observance and that’s OK. She was exposed to different types of Jewish life, she went with us to the synagogue for Yom Kippur, she even fasted for three fourths of the day, but she was resistant at first.”

Parents said that in general the Israelis did not seem interested in religion or think it was important. For example, one parent said that “[the Israeli] didn’t have a strong sense of [religion] anyway. It didn’t seem important in his life;” while another said that her Israeli “was not interested in going to shul. She went for the high holidays, but she didn’t get much out of it, she was bored. . . .” Another added: “She was not changed. . . . There was no rebirth or religion for her.”

Some parents mentioned that the Israelis did acquire some knowledge, but usually that did not translate into practice:

“I don’t know, she said it was nice, but she didn’t feel it was necessary.”

“I don’t know if his thinking/feeling changed, but his *knowledge* changed. He learned. I don’t know if he’ll practice it, maybe in the future, but he learned.”

“Intellectually, yes: he was exposed to a different culture. His thoughts are different, but not a change in his practice.”

“No, didn’t change. She knows about the differences, but she didn’t experience them.”

One parent mentioned that her Israeli guest changed while she was here, but that the change did not endure: “While she was here it changed, but back at home, no. . . . Here, she went with the flow and

celebrated the Jewish holidays.” Another considered that the Israeli student became more accepting: “He’s more accepting of different ways of being Jewish, but his own feelings didn’t change.”

Only one parent felt that the boy staying at her house opened up significantly to religion after the exchange. She explains that “one of the things that can show it is that at the end of his stay, when we had Shabat, he said ‘I want to say [the blessings]’. He came from a family that’s *anti*-religion, it’s not that they didn’t have it, they’re anti. But at the end, he took an active part.”

Finally one student came from a more practicing religious family in Israel, and her reaction was that she “was shocked at our services, shocked by the organ and the choir and how people dress. But she never said anything, she was very respectful.”

## CONTINUING EFFECT OF THE PROGRAM

Parents generally agreed that the program has had a continuing effect on their children beyond the months of actual exchange. They saw this effect mainly in the following areas: the constant contact and communication between their kids and their Israelis buddies and friends; the bond among the American kids in the program; travel experiences or travel plans (Americans to Israel and Israelis to Los Angeles); contact with other parents in the group; and contact between American and Israeli families.

Most parents mentioned that their children were still in contact with the Israelis, that they talked on the phone and emailed frequently. For example, parents expressed that their children “continue to speak to their partner - email, phone, they send each other presents.” “The kids are in contact all the time, they email.” Two parents explicitly mentioned the phone bills: “The connection and the phone bills are there. They communicate all the time.” “I should show you the phone bills! They talk all the time, he got a phone card now, just for Israel.”

A similar bond has endured with the American students who participated together in the program. Parents commented that “the connection to the American kids who went is also strong.” And that “the American kids have gotten together a few times, and it’s almost like they’re still [in Israel], the feelings.” One mother said of her son: “His group at Milken are the guys who were with him in Israel, they are his best friends. They are like a leadership group.” Another is happy that her son increased his group of friends: “These [American] children who went to Israel are still like buddies, still friends, they play basketball, they go out. I love this. [My son] has closer friends than he did before; they have so much in common, they’re so close, they’re like brothers and sisters.

Many parents talked about their children’s travel plans: “[She want to go to the trip [to Poland] with the Israelis, want to go there on every vacation,” “he plans to go to the program to Poland and Israel,” “if one can travel, they’ll always see each other,” and so forth. Others mentioned that their kids had already traveled to Israel after the exchange, or that the Israelis had visited them. One parent even mentioned that this has opened an opportunity for travel for herself and her husband: “We want to save money to go to Israel ourselves [my husband and I]. I’ve never been to Israel.”

Some parents also highlighted the relationship that they had established with other parents in the program. For example: “We [parents] have kept together as a group, we’ve gotten together.” “The [American] families really liked each other; three weeks ago we had a family get together.” “We [parents] became like a family, we have a ‘brotherly’ relationship, we went through something special together.”

Other parents felt that the continuing effect was apparent in that the families had been extended. One mother said: “[The Israeli student] and her family are part of *my* life,” while another added: “we talk to the family every week.”

Additionally, one mother mentioned the continuing effect of the program on his son’s Jewish identity. “Above all, his sense of Jewishness. It made them aware and proud. They don’t take it for granted anymore. Israel is a part of them. He would have moved if he had a choice. They will be more supportive of Israel [in the future, as adults] than others who didn’t go.” Another suggested that her son is now “more curious about the news, has a more immediate connection to Israel and at a personal level.”

## DIFFICULTIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

Although their overall evaluation of the program was excellent, parents made several suggestions for improvement. These suggestions included a wide array of issues.

As was mentioned earlier, not all parents agreed on the effectiveness of the preparation process. Some parents questioned how helpful Milken’s Ulpan had actually been. As was quoted earlier, one parent felt that “they shouldn’t have all the kids in *one* Ulpan, they should have levels in Hebrew.” Another parent felt that Milken’s Hebrew teaching in general was not enough:

“I would like to see... Hebrew approached in a different way, taught more as a language in a more intense way. They learned Hebrew, but still missed the boat. Israelis speak English in a way our kids can’t speak Hebrew... Why are our kids - who receive an expensive education - not learning to speak Hebrew fluently? Maybe the teaching techniques and methods aren’t evolved enough. Why do they not get a whole grasp of the language? I think the education of the teachers might have something to do with it; they’re Hebrew speakers [but not necessarily can teach well]. Ulpan should be all along, since elementary school. Hebrew as a language should be more intense, not only for the program.”

This parent considered that the Ulpan in Israel could have been better: “In Israel, they should have a stronger Ulpan, to get the kids to communicate in Hebrew so that they can have classes with the Israelis there. Maybe without credit, but in the classroom with them. It would be nice if they had the chance to learn the language and integrate.”

In terms of academic concerns, parents with children in AP classes expressed discomfort. Although there were few students in the program with AP classes, parents tended to agree that “those who take

AP exams need more support.” One parent said her daughter “did it all on her own, they even gave her the wrong information. They need more support and a teacher to guide them.” Another added that she “had a little problem. She was in an AP class and didn’t do so well. For three months she had to study ... on her own. [The school] fell down when giving them the support they needed. They took the AP exams in Israel, and they needed more support.”

Another parent considered that the exchange program was “a wasted academic experience. They’ve tried to improve it, but ‘it’s party time’ [for the kids]. There are no clear demands on them, and there are things that can be done. It creates a strain for kids: the hosting kid has academic demands and the other kid does not. It doesn’t have to be the same level of demand, but some assignments.” One parent said: “I’d like to see Israeli kids have more homework while they’re here, they didn’t have much to do. In my house, there’s three other kids, so there was always something to do, and [the Israeli student] was self-sufficient, but in other families it was a problem; Americans had homework and Israelis did not.” Another added: “Academics are more serious in America on an ongoing basis. Israelis didn’t have work to do. [The Israelis] had a lot of free time and wanted me to drive him [to friends’ homes].”

On the other hand, one parent did not agree: “They need the social part, the freedom. Academics wasn’t a priority.... Academics shouldn’t be a big deal. Maybe this should be explained so that the kids don’t feel the pressure.” Despite this, the general opinion seemed to be that “the program has to be clearer in the educational part.”

Several parents mentioned that the Israeli kids should have more activities sponsored by the school why they are in Los Angeles. One said “they could learn more about American Jewish organizations, for example, Jewish issues. There’s more emphasis on sports and the glitz of LA. The Jewish aspect is up to the family, not the school. They could have rabbis, guest lecturers, demand that they do... Americans came home with homework, the Israelis with nothing to do or classes to go to.” Another considered that “when the Israelis were here I felt the imbalance of the homework level. [My daughter] was studying and [the Israeli student] was watching TV. I would’ve liked that [the Israelis] experience LA more. Maybe once a week that they would’ve had an activity, organized by the school, for example, visit the museums.”

In addition to this, one mother offered that “it would be nice if the Israeli and American kids took a class together, whatever, but something that they both take all year long. I don’t know what that something could be, but for example, current events, Jewish survival issues... That it be a mandatory elective for all students participating in the program.” Another gave an interesting suggestion that could be used to monitor and evaluate the program: “No one was required to write a journal or an essay on things like your interview [the evaluation interview]. It should be a requirement that they write a paper about their experiences. Did you see their posters? The creativity! In words it would also be good, and it would be an assignment that enhanced it.”

A few parents felt that the exchange program lacked a religious component, especially when the kids were in Israel. One parent said:

“I wish they had spent more time in Jerusalem, at a liberal synagogue, that they had gotten together with youth groups in liberal synagogues. Biblical Archeology should be taken more seriously. I understand that LA and Tel Aviv has this partnership, but I would have paired the school not with Tijen Hadash, but with a school in Haifa [that ] has integrated Jewish values in a liberal way. Tijen Hadash has no understanding of ethics or rituals as a religious experience. They can’t match Milken with an orthodox school, but they can match it with a religious school. . . . They should give the kids more exposure to religion, orthodox and liberal religion, go to Jerusalem. There was a reform synagogue close to the school, I was surprised they didn’t go!”

On a similar note, one parent felt that “Israeli kids should have had some introduction to Judaism.” Another, that “it’s not so obvious what the Israelis will get. There could be more definition of the goals. There’s an emphasis on seeing the Lakers, etc., but there has to be some clarity on *Jewish* goals and how to implement them, from the school to the hosting families.” Yet another commented: “In the future, I’d like to see more Judaic activities. For example, we went on a 4 day trip, and it had no Jewish aspect to it.”

Planning and organization was another issue mentioned by parents. For example, “I’d say the program is new and going through growing pains. A lot of work still needs to be done, more organization, more people working on it, for one man it is impossible, they need more resources, an assistant, it’s too much.” “They should be more supportive of Yoav; he’s wonderful and he needed more help. He took the kids alone to Yosemite.” Other parents also mentioned staffing in Israel: “They need a better preparation of social worlds each kid is going into. In Israel, the staffing and program could be enhanced. They need more teachers, a better program coordinator.”

Another parent said that the extra curricular activities while the Israelis were in LA, such as the trips, should be better planned. She also considered that “the trip to Northern California with the kids should have had more supervision.”

A few parents mentioned a lack of clarity regarding financial concerns. These two mothers gave examples:

“More information should be given to the parents about financial concerns. For example, the phone bills! They were over \$1000 for three months. We were told to expect about \$1000 for spending money and it was more. Those are huge realities. We were presented with a ‘free’ program, with a little more. But they should be clear about it. Parents need financial information, so we can plan for it. The greatest expense was how much it cost when Israelis were here. We took the kids to Vegas, to Disney, etc., and nobody allowed their Israeli to pay for themselves. And that comes out to be a lot of money! The families in Israel were less involved. I loved it, but it was expensive.”

“A few financial things were unclear. For example, I paid for all of [the Israeli student’s] pictures to be developed, and when [my daughter] asked where she could develop hers there, they said the place was around the corner. You have to make financial choices but you can’t expect that anything should be returned. It’s a personal thing. We paid for Sea World and souvenirs and restaurant bills and everything. As a host, I expected to pick up the bill. But if you can’t afford it, make sure you let the kids know. It’s

much more [money] than we realized, all the things we bought for [my daughter's] trip, the extra lunches and snacks, the invitations, etc.”

One parent also mentioned that there should be more clarity on selection procedures and criteria, to avoid gossiping and misunderstandings: “the interview process, they have to tighten it up.” She mentioned that “one boy dropped out at the end, another girl was added, it caused some commotion in the group. The kids questioned; some kids were added without preparation, *why*, what about the other 60 kids who weren't accepted? [One girl was added at last moment because she] had been in the Ulpan so they decided she should go. But why did she host if there was another girl in the program who didn't host? There was so much gossiping behind the scenes. They'd call Metuka and Yoav. We never really got to discuss it. Was there a waiting list? Who was on the wait list?”

Other parents criticized the matching of the student pairs. For example “there could be better matching, more sophisticated matching,” “they have to devote more time to matching the kids; the fact that they were both bright was not enough.” One mother felt the school should consider things such as if the hosting family smoked or not, because that was an important issue in her life and she would not allow her daughter to stay with a family who smoked in front of her. In a few cases, the problems generated by poor matching had an important effect on the families, and they think their “individual circumstances could've been better” with better pairing. Although they were few cases, some parents had a difficult time with the kids they hosted.

But many parents did not agree because their own experiences were excellent. This mother said: “This program wouldn't have been as successful without the amount of prescreening and pre-evaluation of the kids and of the families, and without such good matching. They picked so well. The amount of work beforehand... Yoav, Metuka, Tzipi, they did a great job in picking and matching. To have this success rate, very few problems, it's a credit to their insightfulness.”

Another area of difficulty was that some families were not able to host and were unhappy with how that turned out. They felt that their daughters missed out on experiences by not hosting an Israeli in their homes. One mother was resentful that because of her being divorced, she was not allowed to host; she felt the decision was arbitrary and unfair, and that in the future, they need better planning of these issues. Another mother felt “a lot of bitterness” towards how it all turned out, and thought that the school had not been careful enough in the initial match that resulted in her family not hosting.

Finally, another issue that was commented on by parents was related to the problem of dividing the tenth graders into two groups, those who participate in the program and those who don't, and how “exclusive” the exchange is. This mother explained how she viewed the problem:

“It had an impact on the school that was both positive and negative. All the school's kids benefit from this. But it's difficult for the 10<sup>th</sup> graders: there's the “haves” and the “have nots”. Some kids [who didn't participate in the exchange program] feel like outsiders for a whole year. And some of those feelings were turned into our kids - you're not doing enough to include us. That was the only negative thing. You give a great thing to 20 kids and another 100 are left wondering how they fit in. Perhaps the weekend activities should be opened up to all 10<sup>th</sup> graders? That it be a 10<sup>th</sup> grade activity more than an exchange program

activity? But maybe it's impractical. It's an exclusive experience. There's a lot to do for the kids. It was hard to see kids who wanted to be a part but weren't."

Another offered her perspective: "It was perfect for me, but I know that for other families of kids not in the program, they were upset that this was dividing the school - they felt left out. The kids had so many activities [related to the program].... It's difficult to select the children - tough to say no to some children. I wouldn't want to be the one to do the selection. They all felt they deserved to go. It's difficult not to be chosen, and see how everyone had such a good time, at 16... I feel for those children." Yet another mother gave her opinion: "When the kids are selected, only 20. It's hard for the kids who didn't get in. Milken students felt left out. I don't know how to change that. Even when they came back, it's a problem with the kids feeling left out. The class is of over 100 kids! I don't know how much the Israelis interacted with the other kids. They could've formed groups of American kids with an Israeli, on a voluntary basis, maybe kids outside the core group. They have to think about how to include the other kids."

One mother openly suggested that "everyone who want to go should go." She thought that "everyone should have a chance, they should not be discriminated. They learn so much.... [If more kids go] you'll have more supporters of Israel, kids who are more Jewish; when you discriminate, you hurt their feelings. This is not Disneyland, it's *Israel*." On the other hand, some parents mentioned that it was important to keep the number of participants around twenty, because "having more children hinders them from getting close."

One parent felt that a way to deal with this was to work on the "post-experience." She considered that "there should be more funneling of the group into a leadership role for the school so that there would be a bigger impact on the high school community as a whole. Or else, this is an experience for a very select group; 20 go but there are like 150 in a class, and there's a potential there. The kids feel dropped: they had a special experience in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and now they're one of the bunch. They could use it as a leadership program for the school."

#### **IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The overall evaluation of the exchange program is a very positive one, with both students and parents saying that it was one of the best experiences that the teenagers had been through. Parents and students agreed on the value of the program and felt it had helped the students learn about themselves, mature and gain independence; gain a new group of friends and a new family; and develop a connection with Israel.

Students and parents generally agreed on the reasons that motivated the kids to participate in the program, basically an interest in Israel accompanied by the personal and social components of living away from parents and being with friends. With respect to expectations prior to the exchange, students said that they had mixed feelings; most were excited and nervous at the same time. Parents, however, were not very aware of their children's qualms. Most felt their kids did not have mixed feelings at all.

They, on the other hand, did express qualms about having their children far, about safety, and about hosting.

Parents and their children also expressed similar opinions about how the program had affected their feelings towards Judaism. Although most kids did not change their religious practices after the experience, in general the program helped them develop a broader view and incorporate a better understanding of Israel, along with a connection to the country and its people.

Students and parents felt that the preparation offered by Milken for the program had positive and negative aspects. Opinions were divided, especially concerning the academic part, but in general, the feeling was there was room for improvement in this area. The same was true about the academic experience in Israel.

Parents gave their opinion about the Israeli students' experience. In general, the program helped them acquire a broader view of Judaism, experience life in America, and develop strong bonds with the American buddies and families.

Parents and students coincided in feeling that the program had a continuing effect: that it had affected the students lives well beyond the actual exchange period. The connections between the Israelis and the American students are strong, and they have continued to communicate. Similarly, they have established a solid connection with Israel.

Among the main suggestions for change, parents and students indicated the preparation activities and the academic experience overseas. The issue of matching the student pairs is also a delicate one, especially in the cases where it did not work out as well as expected. Finally, parents made reference to planning and organization issues, as well as to the problem of extending such an exclusive program (to which only 20 students were accepted), to the rest of the school community.

Despite a few particular difficulties, parents' and students' opinions were enthusiastic and overwhelmingly positive. Everyone enjoyed the program and benefited from participating in it. They felt grateful for the opportunity and praised the school's efforts for providing such a good experience to the kids.

## V. APPENDIX

### *Student Interview Protocol*

Introduction: I would like to get your impressions of your exchange experience. We hope to make improvements, if necessary, based on your comments. There are no right answers, I just want your views.

#### I. General

- A. What do you think are the goals of the exchange program?
  1. PROBE: What do you think it's supposed to achieve?
  2. PROBE: What do you think that the school hoped you would gain from the experience?
  3. PROBE: What do you think that the school hoped the Israeli exchange student would gain from the experience?

#### II. Personal

- A. Why did you choose to participate in the exchange program?
  1. PROBE: Before participating, what did you think you would get out of the experience?
- B. What thoughts and feelings did you have about the program prior to going?
  1. PROBE: What feelings did you have about receiving an Israeli exchange student in your home?
  2. PROBE: Did you have mixed feelings about going to Israel?
  3. PROBE: What were your qualms, if any, about going on the exchange?
  4. PROBE: How did your parents feel about your participation?

#### III. The Experience

- A. What did you get out of the exchange experience?
  1. PROBE: Did you have different feeling about what it means to be Jewish?
    - a. Sub PROBE: feelings of Jewish peoplehood.
    - b. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences between being Jewish in U.S. and in Israel.
    - c. Sub PROBE: feelings about being in a place where most people are Jewish?
  2. PROBE: How did being in Israel affect your feelings about the Jewish Religion?
    - a. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences in the practice of religion. Why do you think that was so?
  3. PROBE: How did the exchange experience affect your feelings about Israel and Israelis?
    - a. Sub-PROBE: changes in what you thought or knew about Israel and Israelis

- b. Sub-PROBE: Did having an Israeli living with you in LA affect your feeling about Israelis and about being Jewish?
  - 4. PROBE: How did the experience affect your feelings of Jewish identification?
    - a. Sub PROBE: extent of change in feelings of Jewish identity.
    - b. Sub PROBE: aspects of Jewish religious experience in the U.S. that you now value more.
  - 5. PROBE: What aspects of the Milken experience best helped you prepare for the overseas experience?
  - 6. PROBE: What did you think of the overseas academic experience?
    - a. Sub PROBE: the classes you took.
    - b. Sub PROBE: the school experiences and interchanges.
    - c. Sub PROBE: your U.S preparation for the academic program.
    - d. Sub PROBE: suggestions for change.
  - 7. PROBE: Was language a problem in your overseas experience?
    - a. Sub PROBE: If yes, in what ways and in what situations?
    - b. Sub PROBE: If no, in what ways was it made easier for you to communicate?
      - 1. In school.
      - 2. In interactions with fellow students.
      - 3. In daily life.
- B. Has the program had a “continuing effect” after the exchange period was over?
- 1. PROBE: Have you continued to have contact with the Israeli exchange student and his/her family? (E-mail, phone, visits, etc.).
    - a. Sub-PROBE: If yes, what have you gained from this relationship?
    - b. Sub-PROBE: If no, why do you think you have lost contact?
  - 2. PROBE: Do you think you will continue to have contact in the future?

#### IV. Concluding Remarks/Summary

- A. Overall, what are your general feelings about the value of the exchange program.
  - 1. PROBE: The Milken preparation experiences.
  - 2. PROBE: Having the Israeli exchange student in your home.
  - 3. PROBE: The overseas experience.

Thanks, very much, for your assistance.

## ***Parent Interview Protocol***

Introduction: I would like to get your impressions of the exchange experience. We hope to make improvements, if necessary, based on your comments. There are no right answers, I just want your views.

### **I. General**

- A. What do you think are the goals of the exchange program?
  1. PROBE: What do you think it's supposed to achieve?
  2. PROBE: What do you think that the school hoped your son/daughter would gain from the experience?

### **II. Personal**

- A. Why do you think that your son/daughter chose to participate in the exchange program?
  1. PROBE: Did he/she express mixed feelings about going?
  2. PROBE: What were his/her qualms, if any, about going on the exchange?
- B. How did you feel about your son/daughter's potential participation?
  1. PROBE: Before going, what did you think he/she would get out of the experience?
  2. PROBE: Did you have concerns about your son/daughter's participation?
    - a. Sub PROBE: as an academic experience.
    - b. Sub PROBE: about personal adjustment (e.g., being away from home so long).
    - c. Sub PROBE: about personal safety.

### **III. The Experience**

- A. What do you feel that your son/daughter got out of the exchange experience?
  1. PROBE: Did he/she have different feelings about what it means to be Jewish?
    - a. Sub PROBE: feelings of Jewish peoplehood.
    - b. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences between being Jewish in U.S. and in Israel.
    - c. Sub PROBE: feelings about being in a place where most people are Jewish.
  2. PROBE: How did being in Israel affect his/her feelings about the Jewish Religion?
    - a. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences in the practice of religion.
  3. PROBE: How did having an Israeli exchange student living with you in LA change your son's/daughter's feelings about Israelis?
  4. PROBE: How did the experience affect your son/daughter's sense of Jewish identification?
    - a. Sub PROBE: extent of change in feelings of Jewish identity.
    - b. Sub PROBE: aspects of Jewish religious experience in the U.S. that he/she seems to value more.
  5. PROBE: What aspects of the Milken experience best helped your son/daughter prepare for the overseas experience?

#### IV. The Israeli Student's Experience

- A. What do you feel that the Israeli student got out of the exchange experience?
  - 1. PROBE: Did he/she have different feelings about what it means to be Jewish?
    - a. Sub PROBE: feelings of Jewish peoplehood.
    - b. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences between being Jewish in the U.S. and in Israel.
  - 2. PROBE: How did being in the U.S. affect the Israeli student's feelings about the Jewish Religion?
    - a. Sub PROBE: thoughts on differences in the practice of religion.
  - 3. PROBE: How did the experience affect the Israeli student's sense of Jewish identification?
    - a. Sub PROBE: extent of change in feelings of Jewish identity.
    - b. Sub PROBE: feelings about Jews on the Diaspora.
  - 4. PROBE: Was language a problem in the Israeli student's experience?
    - a. Sub PROBE: If yes, in what ways and in what situations?
    - b. Sub PROBE: If no, in what ways was it made easier for you to communicate in daily living?

#### V. Has there been a "continuing effect" of the experience?

- A. Has your son/daughter continued to have contact with the Israeli student?
  - 1. PROBE: If yes, what has he/she gained from this continuing relationship?
  - 2. PROBE: If no, why do you think they have lost contact?
- B. Do you think they will continue to have contact in the future?

#### VI. Concluding Remarks/Summary

- A. Overall, what are your general feelings about the value of the exchange program.
- B. Overall, what are your general feelings about the value of the program for the exchange student who lived in your home?

Thanks, very much, for your assistance.