

**EVALUATION OF THE LOS ANGELES - TEL AVIV  
EXCHANGE STUDENT PROGRAM**

**PRESSMAN ACADEMY**

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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 Pressman Academy, in Los Angeles.

Pressman has been paired by the exchange program with Magen, a school in Tel Aviv. During the 2000-2001 school year, a group of XX 6<sup>th</sup> grade students from Magen visited Los Angeles; their visit lasted ?? days and coincided with the celebration of the High Holidays. The students, who were accompanied by ?? parents and educators, were hosted by Pressman families. Later that year, a Solidarity Mission<sup>1</sup> consisting of XX fifth and sixth grade students, XX parents and three (or four??) educators, traveled to Tel Aviv. They were hosted by Magen families during approximately 10 days. The visit coincided with the celebration of Israel's Independence Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day. During most of the stay, the students stayed with their host families, but the parents stayed at a hotel.

Parents of Pressman students were voluntarily asked to participate in the program. Once the group was defined, students were paired with Israeli "partners;" in some cases, the Israeli hosts were the same ones who had come to Los Angeles to stay at their homes, but in most cases, they were not. Additionally, not all of the Pressman families who hosted initially participated later in the Solidarity Mission.

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, parents and educators 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 and educator interviews, and then finalize with summary that integrates the three perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the difficult political situation in Israel and the lack of families willing to send their children to Israel alone, a Solidarity Mission was co-organized by the school and the Jewish Federation. (EXPLAIN MORE....)

## **II. Procedures**

The evaluation used a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of focus groups conducted with a sample of students, parents and educators who participated in the Solidarity Mission during the 2000-2001 school year. Three separate focus groups were conducted during June of 2001, at one of the conference rooms at the Beth Am Temple adjacent to Pressman Academy.

The focus groups followed a protocol that addressed issues regarding the students', parents' and educators' experiences and opinions regarding different aspects of the program (see Appendix). They lasted approximately one hour; they were recorded and transcribed, and extensive notes were also taken during the group interviews. Finally, the data from the focus groups was coded and analyzed, identifying major themes, and then organized into main findings.

Eight students, four boys and four girls, participated in the student focus group. They were all sixth graders, with the exception of one fifth grader. Two boys had traveled with their fathers, one with his mother, and one on his own. Three girls went with their mothers and one on her own. For the majority of the students interviewed, this was not their first trip to Israel, although it was for a couple.

Seven parents participated in the other focus group. Five were parents of sixth graders and two of fifth graders; two were fathers and the rest were mothers. Again, the majority of the parents had visited Israel previous to the Solidarity trip.

The group interview conducted with educators consisted of four participants, one of which was also a parent who traveled with his child to Israel. Not all of the educators were able to attend the entire group interview, but core information was obtained from the two educators who were most involved in the exchange program, who were also those present during the entire interview.

## **III. Findings**

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

## ***A. Students' perspective***

### **Expectations**

When asked what their thoughts and feelings were before the trip to Israel, all of the students who participated in the focus group said that they were “excited.” Additionally, most of them mentioned that they had been nervous. Some had been nervous because of the “bombs,” and the political situation (for example, “we’d read the papers and get nervous”). But others felt that was not a point of concern for them: “my parents were nervous but not me;” “I have family and they’d tell us the news is not so correct in LA.”

Some students had worried about not getting along with their hosts. For example, one said “I was excited and scared I’d get someone bad [a bad host];” and another said “I knew my host but I was afraid she’d be mean.”

### **Preparation experience**

Students were also asked to talk about the preparation that they had received prior to the trip to Israel, and to describe whether they felt it had been helpful. They mentioned that they had had meetings and a few other activities, and in general, were quite critical of the experience. Among the helpful activities, they appreciated knowing what they would see, receiving the itinerary, and participating in most of the meetings.

They generally agreed with this students’ opinion: “It was good to have meetings, but they were too many, it was difficult with our tests. We discussed all the same things. It was good to have them, but they were too many.” One student felt that “some meetings went on and on, it was too much,” while another said that the school “overdid it, like we were going into the unknown.”

One student said he was happy because “it was good to miss class” but another complained: “once we were watching a movie and we had to miss it because of a meeting and we never finished it, and they promised us we would.”

Among the preparation activities that had not been very helpful, some students felt “some things were boring, [such as] too many stories of where we’d be going.” Another student mentioned an activity where they had “to make a picture... it was *so* silly, that was *not* useful.” A few students

mentioned a movie they had seen and others complained that during the meetings, some parents worried too much.

They also alluded to some organizational problems, such as receiving their tickets the last day—which they felt was too late—as well as changing airlines at the last minute and having the group split in half, traveling in different flights.

Doing the projects as part of the preparation was defined by one student as “no big deal; it was not interactive.” They also said they “wrote letters [to Israelis] but they hardly read them.” One student said: “writing letters was not very good. They gave you a letter at random; and the teachers read them, so you can’t say anything! The teachers get too nosy. It would have been better if they just gave us a list of all the emails.”

The Israeli students’ previous visit to Los Angeles may be viewed as another preparation experience. However, having the Israelis visit Los Angeles previous to their trip to Israel had been helpful to some, but not to others. Only some of the families had hosted Israeli students here. Out of the eight focus group participants, only three had hosted. Of these three, two Pressman students then were hosted by the same Israelis as they had hosted, and the other stayed with a new family.

Some students felt that it had been difficult to get to know the Israelis in their visit to Los Angeles, unless they were hosting: “When they were here, we’d try to get close and the American hosts wouldn’t let us.” But even if they had hosted, they did not necessarily feel that staying with the same person there as they had hosted was helpful. As one student phrased it: “The visit from the Israelis was not good preparation, it didn’t help because the relationship changed. My host was nice here, but not there.” This was not the only student to complain about a difficult relationship with his host. Others made similar remarks: “Some hosts were good hosts, but others no!” “My host, he’d ignore me, not hang out with me, never do what I wanted to do...” “My host didn’t care what I wanted, we would always do what the hosts did. I don’t miss her.”

Other students, however, had better experiences: “For me it was helpful, he was nice, I knew what he liked.” “For me it was sort of good, I didn’t know them well, but I knew some.”

### **What they got out of the experience**

Overall, the students felt that the trip was a great experience. Among the things that they valued most were getting to know life in Israel and sharing the experience with their American friends. They were more critical about the matching up with the Israeli hosts, although for some, it was a wonderful experience as well.

The children enjoyed visiting Israel: “Amazing trip, it was the first time for me and my mom. Now my mom wants to go once a year.” “I liked it, liked Jerusalem, the wall, I loved it. . . I brag to others that didn’t go.” “It was spiritual to go to the Kotel.”

They also liked getting to know an Israeli kid’s life: “To see the school there, have friends of my age there, get experience of living there.” “See life in Israel as a kid—fun!” Some took advantage of the opportunity to spend time with relatives that they had in Israel; for example: “Nice trip, got to see my dad’s house again, see relatives [dad is Israeli].” “It was good to see my ‘real’ family in Israel. It was fun.”

They also liked having the experience of traveling with their friends and sharing time with them. Most of them mentioned that “it was good to be with all our friends,” “it was fun to be with each other.”

As was mentioned earlier, some students also valued the new relationship they now had with their host families. For example, this student said: “It was ‘homey.’ It felt like home, I was with my friends, and my ‘family’ there offered their home. Now I have a place to stay.” Nevertheless, overall there was considerable complaining about the matching with the Israeli hosts. Among the eight focus group participants, three said that their matching went well and that they had a good relationship with their hosts; two felt that it was “so, so,” or they were “kind of bored.” The remaining three said that the matching had been bad in their case. One of them complained that his Israeli host was stubborn, and said that he was much closer to other Israeli kids there than his host. Another complained that his host’s parents were “very strict, worry warts.”

They also mentioned things that prevented them from getting close to the Israelis. For example, for a trip that they took together in Israel, Americans and Israelis were separated into different buses. This student voiced his opinion: “I didn’t like having an American bus and an Israeli bus, they separated us, and then they complained that we’re not close.” In other cases, ‘cultural’ differences made the relationship difficult; for example, “sometimes the Israelis would speak Hebrew and we’d be left out;” or “a lot of Israelis can’t take a joke.”

## Traveling with parents

Because of the students' young age, the trip not only included the children, but many of them traveled with their parents. When asked whether they felt having their parents there was helpful, some said it was, while others said it was not. Within the group of eight focus group participants, six went with parents, and two without parents. One of the girls who did not go with a parent "felt left out because my step mom couldn't come."

Of these eight students, six felt that it was good to have the parents around. They gave examples of why they had liked having them there:

I was happy my mom was there, when I was bored, and when it was so hot, she bought me a coke...

It was good to be with my mom, I got to do other things, meet my aunt. She would give me money.

It was good to be with my dad, he took pictures. But I also could've stayed with my uncle...

I could buy my Talit and my Tefilim with my mom.

Some were happy to have their parents, but also saw the downside to that:

My mom is not overprotective, so it was good, I was sick and she took care of me; but it was also bad because since she was there, I couldn't 'be bad,' not be obedient...

It was nice to be with my dad, I'm diabetic and my dad helped me with meals and carrying all my stuff (syringes, etc.) and when I was sick it was good to have him. But it was bad that he was annoying, he would embarrass me.

Some feel parents worry too much.

Several kids mentioned that the American "parents bonded *so* well." They got to know each other well and established a relationship between them.

## Follow-up to the trip

Students were asked about what had happened since they returned from their trip to Israel. Regarding their contact with the Israelis, some mentioned a closer exchange than others. Some students said that they emailed frequently with their Israeli friends; others, however, complained that they had emailed but received no response. While some acknowledged that they "emailed, but that's it," others had chatted with their hosts and spoke on the phone once in a while. A few students mentioned that "sometimes our parents talk" with the Israeli families. A couple of students were upset that their hosts did not contact them, while one student said he did not have his host's phone number.

With respect to other follow-up activities organized by the school, they did not feel that much had been done. For example, one student said: “We had one activity at school, that’s it. We would like to have more stuff, especially during school.” Another added: “We [have started to] forget about it... we didn’t do a scrap book... it seems like a dream, like it didn’t happen.” Yet another said: “We should do picture album, a write up.” Finally, several concluded that they would like to go again.

## **Suggestions for change and improvement**

The students, though young, were incredibly articulate about their criticisms and the things they felt needed improvement. Even though their general evaluation of the trip was positive, one student explained why they were being critical: “It was good, but we want to say negative things ‘cause we’re not allowed to. The [school] would be mad.”

Among the things that the students would change were: having more say in the itinerary, better organization of the flights and other formal aspects of the trip, and better matching of the American and Israeli kids.

Many students felt that they should have had “more say in the itinerary. We didn’t have too much say. Have kids more involved.” Several complained that the trip organizers either did not have kids or had older kids, so they did not necessarily know what things were attractive for children their age. Most of them were very eloquent about expressing that they went to too many museums and that it was boring for them. Others offered ideas of things they would have liked to do:

Longer time in Jerusalem—and shorter time in the museums that were boring.

It should’ve been more democratic—if we wanted to do something, like going to the beach, they never took us.

Should’ve gone to Luna Park [amusement park].

Less educational things... too many museums and the air force thing... and we didn’t go to the beach! We wanted to go to the beach, to the mall. And spending our money, getting the money our parents gave us.

Some of their classmates disagreed, however: “this was a solidarity mission, not a fun trip for kids.”

The students spent a lot of time describing the problems they had on the flight to Israel, how they were separated into two planes, and how they did not agree with the seating arrangement. They

would have liked to have their tickets before hand, as well as traveling all on the same plane and sitting with their friends. They felt the whole thing “should’ve been planned better.”

Additionally, some would have liked a longer trip. Others said: “We should’ve had more time with the other Pressman students there—we liked the hotel part there.” But several complained that “at the hotel, it was fun but the food was horrible!” Students also complained that they couldn’t stay up late to be with their friends.

Finally, many students mentioned that there should have been better matching with the hosts. A few had felt that the “Magen people didn’t want to be with us.” Others, who had better experiences, felt that it should be a “longer trip, so we have more time with our hosts.”

## ***B. Parents’ perspective***

### **Expectations**

Parents were asked about their children’s expectations before the trip. In general, they felt that the children were “excited,” “curious” and looking forward to the experience. For example, these parents expressed how they viewed their children’s feelings:

Children were excited, they had no issues related to security, or those they had, were brought up by us [parents]. They had met the Israeli children before, so they were excited.

She was curious to meet her “family” there, how they lived, what Magen was like, and see Israel.

Other parents mentioned issues that made the children anxious. One parent talked about her experience hosting an Israeli family with whom there had been some tensions or “philosophy clashes.” “The mother had the perception that we were religious fanatics; we keep kosher... the mother caused the conflict...” Since the Israeli family had a conflict and could not host, they switched families. This meant that their daughter did not know the family with whom she would stay and “was concerned about how it would turn out.”

When asked about their own feelings before the trip, some parents said they had no concerns at all, while others acknowledged that they did. In general, they felt quite confident in the organizers of the program: “We knew the directors of the program, and they wouldn’t jeopardize our kids.”

Nevertheless, one father was concerned and hesitant, worried about the security issues. Another

mother had no concerns at all, but her family (her parents, etc.) did, and that put her “in two minds.” One mother was directly advised by her Israeli relatives not to go, while others, on the contrary, were told to go by their Israeli relatives.

One parent expressed some concern over the fact that they were kosher, remembering a family who had traveled the year before who had some conflicts due to this. However, she felt comforted by the fact that this year they made a rule about kosher foods and talked to the Israeli ‘mother.’

## **Preparation experience**

Regarding the preparation that the students received from the school before going to Israel, parents said that “the kids had lots of meetings. And they had a connection with the Magen kids, over the Internet, on the projects they had done together.” One person mentioned that parents were told to connect with the families, but were given little information about them: names, phone numbers, but not much more. She felt that last year, they were given more information, a photo, etc. and that had helped. In general, they were not very eloquent about the children’s preparation, and preferred to talk about their own experience as parents.

As traveling parents, they also had ‘preparation’ meetings before the trip: the first to “air their concerns” and the second, “the day before we left for Israel.” In those meetings, they had an opportunity to discuss some parents’ concerns about the situation in Israel. They mentioned a meeting “with the Federation people, and saw a video of the Israelis telling us to go.” Several of the focus group participants said this experience had a lot of impact on them. One parent commented that having the meeting at Pressman (as opposed to having it at the Federation) was good, it gave it a sense of “home” and they “could be open” about their concerns.

While some parents felt that the preparation for them had been enough, others referred to the meetings as “the *only* two meetings.” They felt that the school and Federation needed to do more. For example, one mother felt some Israeli hosts were not well prepared; for her, the preparation should include “how to take care of other kids, how to be good guests.” Issues regarding shopping should also be discussed in parent meeting both in Los Angeles and Tel Aviv, because some families thought that shopping was a major component of the trip, while others did not. One person gave the example of

some Israeli students who came to LA, bringing money to buy new clothes or electronic equipment, and who had been instructed to do so by their parents, because it is cheaper here.

## **What they got out of the experience**

Although it was our intent to explore what parents felt their children got out of the experience in Israel in addition to what they, as parents, had learned, parents were much more interested in talking about what *they* personally had experienced than in talking about their kids. They all wanted to share their experiences, what they had liked and disliked about the trip, what they had learned and how it had affected their lives.

For most of them, the experience had been “amazing!” They learned about Israel and about Israelis’ lives. One issue mentioned by several parents was how Israelis deal with crisis; for example: “Even with the crisis, people go on with their lives.” “People balance their lives, and live enriched lives. I got a different view of the crisis, a different view than what the media presents.” Another parent gave an example of Israeli families being afraid of sending their children to LA because of the earthquakes—which Israelis perceived as dangerous in a similar way to how Americans perceive political crises as dangerous—and “we didn’t see it.”

Most parents felt that the Israelis were happy to host them – “bonding [with the Israelis] was wonderful. Just talking to the family....” However, they also expressed some issues that came up; for example, some Israeli parents “were jealous that we got to go and they didn’t. Some wanted to go and weren’t allowed.” Additionally, “some [Israelis] were fighting to get on the host-family list... and some didn’t feel the selection process was fair.” “The matches [with the American families] were good, but maybe they should’ve been more open [to include other Israeli families].”

The timing of the trip also received praise: “Being there for Yom Hazicaron and Yom Haatzmaut” was a positive experience for many, as was “living the Israeli experience, not as a tourist, but the family life.” Being in Israel for the holidays that are so important, with very few tourists, “was very Israeli.” One parent mentioned that the program they had at school for memorial day was moving. Another said that he tried to explain to the Israelis what Independence day is like in America, and they couldn’t understand. “People [in America] had no conception of what it is like there, the Siren,

*everything* stops... it really moved people.” They were impacted by the fact that “in Israel, everyone knows someone who died.”

They commented on how different the situation was here: “Here, it’s the Laker’s flags; there, it’s the Israeli flag.” A couple of parents mentioned that in Israel, they are also kind of envious of the way it is here; “they look forward to a time when Memorial Day is a time for picnics and sales.” On the other hand, another parent learned that “we’re more alike than different. Our pairs in Israel were very similar, in values, in how they live, in their socioeconomics, their activities... They didn’t go to Shul, but they were similar, they celebrate the same holidays.”

Finally, they felt that “the community [at Pressman] got closer together, the parents became friends. Some parents had known each other for years and yet never been friends, and now they’ve shared so many experiences together.”

### **Traveling with their children**

Parents agreed in the importance of traveling with their children, and felt it was helpful to be there for them. They not only felt it had helped the children—who were not at the same maturity level as teenagers—but it also helped ensure a continuing effect of the program and a connection to Israel and the host families there.

One parent acknowledged that having parents on the trip “makes things more complicated,” and that “kids don’t think parents are necessary.” But most felt that it was important to have parents. “Developmentally, they’re at a different stage than teenagers, and it was good to have parents to fine tune.” For example, in one of the flights, there was a group of Christians going to Israel that were trying to talk to the kids and one mother felt it was good that she was there to explain and support their children. She felt the “group needed the extra people.” Others mentioned that because of the kids’ maturity level, having the parents there was good. Also, it helped increase the ties to do follow-through. For example, one parent mentioned that a few days before, they had called their hosting Israeli families, after one of the terrorist attacks in Israel. But he wondered whether other kids—whose parents did not go—called or continued with the relationship. Several parents agreed that at this age, if parents did not help them continue the relationship, it would be hard for the kids to continue with it on their own, take the initiative, etc. They gave the example of one boy for whom “it was the end; the families did not stay

in touch.” In the case of parents who had traveled, it was different. “Parents are important for the ongoing relationship.”

### **Follow-up to the trip**

When asked what had happened since they came back from Israel, several parents answered that they felt that the continuity of the partnership “is all at the individual level, the school has not done anything, there are no school centered activities.” Some families have remained close, are planning to travel together, have gone into business, or have invited the kids to visit.

One parent mentioned as a follow up activity a dinner at the Jewish Federation, where the kids who went on the program walked with the flags. However, she complained that “it was not even mentioned at the dinner that these were the kids who went on the solidarity mission, which would have been nice, some kind of recognition.”

In general, they felt that there had not been much done on the part of the school, “no follow up at the formal level,” although the children were continuing to have some contact at school, through emails, cards, projects, etc.

### **Suggestions for change and improvement**

Parents articulated several criticisms, mentioning things that they felt had not worked very well. They felt that the organization of the trip needed improvement. Regarding the relationship between Israeli and American families, overall they felt that the “family-family thing went OK,” but that there had been some conflicts. For example, in Jerusalem, on Friday night, “the host families felt they were separated.” They were put on separate buses and that was “a bad decision, not well planned and not well prepared.” American parents “invited them to Jerusalem and we felt bad hosts, there was no food.” Also in Jerusalem, they had a religious service, but there were no prayer books for the Israelis (Americans had theirs with them), and the rabbi commented almost everything in English, so the Israelis felt “this is for the Americans.” Most parents felt it was disorganized and could have been structured differently, for example, having seating arrangements with assigned places (for the dinner), a song

leader, and a big room for themselves. Another time, the families were separated into English speakers versus Hebrew speakers, which also contributed to the division between American and Israeli families.

Among other complaints presented by the parents was the fact that they flew to Israel on two separate flights. A few parents also commented that some days started too early; for example, for Yom Haatzmaut they stayed up until 2:00 AM and the next day, they had to be at another activity at 7:30; they felt there was no need to have it at that time, it could have been at 11 AM. “They [trip organizers] have to take the physical needs into account.” Although not all parents agreed, several of them complained that the hotel in Jerusalem was not good, that there was no air conditioning and no Internet; some suggested that a swimming pool for the kids would have been important.

Parents generally felt that the matching of kids and families worked out, although there were exceptions. For example, one parents said: “Overall, the community feels paired. There were some cases of kids not happy with the families they got and were moved to a different one, but it was not a big deal.” Another added: “The staff on both ends tried real hard... but there were some mistakes, like sixth grade boys matched with fifth grade Israelis... that wouldn’t work.”

Among the improvements that parents would make to the program are better scheduling/timing of events, more free time for parents, more “fun things for the kids, who were bored with so many museums,” and a little more down time for parents and kids.

## ***C. Educators’ perspective***

### **Expectations**

The educators interviewed expressed that before the trip to Israel, the students mainly felt excitement. There were also reservations about being away from home and some kids being “a little scared.” The felt that the fact that there were parents *and* children helped the kids feel “relieved a little: fifth graders are young and sixth graders are better, but parents still help.”

### **Preparation experience**

Educators talked in much more length than parents or students about the children's preparation experience before going to Israel. They not only mentioned the activities, but also provided a folder with examples of handouts, information given to the families, descriptions of activities, etc.

Among the activities that they mentioned were the two evening meetings with parents and their children. During part of one of the meetings, the parents were separated from the students, so that they could air all their security issues without having the children present, and so that kids could also air their personal concerns alone.

Additionally, there were classes in school; during one week, they had one hour of daily preparation during school hours. This involved educational aspects, such as geography, culture, language, etc., and helping the children understand that this was an "ambassador visit" and that they represented the "LA life." Students did research over the Internet, and also did projects on different places that they would visit. For example, they reviewed maps of where they were going, and since they would be going to the Zichon Yaacov Museum (???) in Israel, they read parts of the book before (?). They also received preparation for Yom Hazicaron, "what to expect and what we expected their behavior to be."

The preparation included "pagmatic details, the philosophy of why we're doing this, family to family contact.... We've had different contacts with Magen...." It also involved the students communicating with their hosts; they received information about the hosts, such as their phone numbers, etc. One educator said that "there was also email contact between the kids, but it was more groups emails than one-on-one." Another added: "Magen kids had visited before, the families had made contact, and families from previous years also met. There was already a sense of family between Magen and Pressman." Moreover, some kids had hosted and therefore already had developed a relationship with the Israeli kids.

The educators felt the preparation was helpful for the kids: "They felt more at ease when they knew what to expect, what to do if there's a problem, if they don't feel good, if there's a dispute, what to do in emergencies." Each educator had a cell phone on 24 hours for the kids to call, and they did call.

They explained that many hours were spent on preparation; the three educators that went on trip spent time on it. Amy Ament spent 75% of her time, for 3-4 months, on the trip. All felt that it was

a lot of work, that requires a full time person, which is difficult for the school, because there aren't always resources for this.

## **What they felt students and parents got out of the experience**

The educators felt that the trip had been an important experience in the lives of both students and parents. They described that it had developed a connection between them and Israel, had helped them learn about the similarities between the two countries, and had made the children “feel special.”

The following educator described the experience: “Those who had not been to Israel before now feel connected, rooted.” They learned to “feel at home in Israel.” For some children, it was their sixth trip to Israel, but it was still different, because “they were not tourists, they lived with an Israeli family and got to know Israeli *life*.” Another added that it was not like a trip to France, it was a “theological statement, it's part of what they are. They went to historical sites, not to the water slides. It was very powerful for the parents, and powerful for the kids to see that in their parents.” For one parent, it was his first time in Israel, and everywhere he went, he was in tears. The kids bought Tefilin, Talit, etc. Some parents extended their trip because they enjoyed it so much. And the children—who had been learning about these things for so many years—they *saw* it. They also learned that it is “both easy and hard” to live in Israel. “Israel offers so much, it naturally provides a community, and the school is the center of the community and of social life.”

Educators explained that the families were able to see similarities, for example, in children's after school activities; however, the American children were envious of Israeli children who have more freedom. The socioeconomic situation was also similar between the Israeli hosts and American families; one educator mentioned that this had helped parents demystify Israel, because she had the feeling that they perceived “that Israel was like living in poverty.”

Another educator talked about differences and similarities with respect to living the Jewish religion:

“We're a religious school. Magen didn't have it, they see it differently. The kids would be asked questions about their Judaism. Families here expected that Israelis wouldn't know anything about Judaism, and Israelis do know, in a different way... There are a lot of common things that they didn't know. There are different levels of observance there, like here.”

Finally, educators alluded to how students now had a sense in school that they were special, even if this year, anyone that applied could go: “the Federation was very supportive and there were more funds. Not only was the trip open to 6<sup>th</sup> graders, but 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders too and most of those who applied could go.” The kids were prepared to be sensitive, for example, by not bragging about their trip.

## **Traveling with parents**

When asked about how they perceived having parents travel along with their children, educators generally agreed that having parents helped the children, who were too young to go away on their own for very long. They also said that having the parents helped the exchange: “they call, there’s a family to family connection.”

They mentioned that one difficulty of having parents was that children received different standards: The parents were like “big kids.” The educators had rules for the kids, and parents sometimes said and did differently, so the kids got mixed messages. In addition, adults wanted more time for shopping, more down time; they felt it was too intense. Israelis didn’t have their normal days either, because there were ceremonies and celebrations that are not part of the regular routine.

Some returned to LA from Israel after seven days, some after ten days, some stayed even further. Originally, the idea was that parents would stay from Sunday to Monday, and the children would stay another three days alone, arriving back on Thursday. But many parents changed their tickets to stay extra time. This, to the educators, was evidence of how much they enjoyed the trip.

## **Follow-up to the trip**

When asked about what had happened after the families got back from Israel, one educator said:

This year, things are working.... The families made contact.... Some have travel plans together, another family is planning on having the girls’ Bat Mitzvahs together, others are planning business.

The educators explained that the week after the children got back, there was a meeting with Galia and Fredi [from the Jewish Federation], the children and as many parents as could go, for

debriefing, where pictures were shared. Later, some kids wrote articles. “But we could have done more.” For example, “it would have been nice to invite the kids to Shabat morning service to talk about their experience.... Maybe we should’ve given them more attention at a school assembly.” It seems like they tried to do this, but it didn’t work out: the kids were asked to come in to school on Friday morning—after they had arrived back from the trip on Thursday—but it did not work out properly, “those who came to school felt they wasted their time, those who did not come were happy they didn’t.... There wasn’t enough time to prepare the activity.”

Educators also perceive that families and kids continue with their relationship with Israelis individually: there is a personal contact that is not school sponsored. For example, some families are planning on visiting and they know they have a place to go. At a more school centered level, the students wrote notes to Israelis, sympathetic messages after the attacks; they “felt that it means so much more to them” now.

### **Suggestions for change and improvement**

Educators’ suggestions were aimed at organizational issues. They said that “the whole exchange is more than a Magen-Pressman thing.” They received financial support from different people/organizations. This meant that “everyone had a say about the program, and there were too many hands.” Logistically, many things went wrong “and we had to cover up;” there was a “lack of coordination.” They felt that the activities coordinated by Pressman and Magen went fine practically, but others went less well, they were not as thoroughly planned. The educators were stressed out working on it all the time, and felt they had too much work. A suggestion that they made would be to have “one or two people be the final coordinators, and not seven people.” When too many people have to coordinate together, things do not work out so well. “Who is responsible when something goes wrong, [for example,] when Sidurim are not available?” Still, they felt that it was good and helpful to have people from the Jewish Federation present at both meetings prior to the trip.

## **IV. Conclusion**

Overall, students, parents and educators did not differ too significantly regarding their opinions about the exchange program. Although they voiced their criticism and used the opportunity that the focus groups offered to talk about what could be improved, their overall evaluation was positive and they felt that the solidarity trip had been a wonderful experience for all of them.

With respect to expectations, students tended to be very excited, although they were also nervous about getting along with their hosts and about security issues. Some parents added that they had concerns over some family or religious practices, such as American families keeping kosher and Israelis not. Nevertheless, overall they were confident in the trip organizers and did not have major fears. It is important to note that since this was a voluntary trip, parents who did have fears and concerns—mostly regarding security—probably decided not to participate in the exchange program’s solidarity mission.

The preparation experience was viewed rather critically by the students, who appreciated having meetings and knowing what to expect, but resented that some activities were too long or boring. The prior visit from the Israelis did not serve as preparation for all of them, although it did for some. The fact that students were not necessarily “paired up” with Israelis—so that the same Israeli child who visited then hosted the American buddy with whom he or she had stayed—probably contributed to this. Parents were divided as to whether the preparation for them and their children had been helpful enough. Some felt that it had been good, but others expressed that it could have been better.

Educators, on the other hand, expressed opinions that varied significantly from that of parents and students. They talked in length about the preparation activities that they organized for the children (for example, meetings, projects, letter writing, etc.) and felt that it had been helpful for them. Educators, who had been in charge of the preparation and were very familiar with each one of their efforts, were much more articulate about what they had done to prepare the students and parents for the trip. Students and parents, who were ‘recipients’ of the preparation, did not identify as many activities and held a more critical stance.

Students felt that they had a “great” experience in Israel and appreciated getting to know life in Israel and sharing the experience with their American friends. In some cases, they bonded with their Israeli hosts very well, but overall, there seemed to be quite a few difficulties in the relationships between American and Israeli kids. Parents felt that their trip had been “amazing” and described that

they had learned about Israeli life, about how Israelis deal with crises, and about the differences and similarities between American and Israeli families. They also mentioned that the timing of the trip had been a good one and that they were able to bond with the Israeli and fellow American families.

Educators valued that students and parents were able to develop a deeper connection with Israel and learn about the similarities between the two countries; they also mentioned that the trip had made those students participating in the program “feel special” within the school.

Most students, although not all of them, felt that it was helpful to have parents travel with them to Israel. They appreciated the help and support they received from their parents, but also resented the lack of freedom that came along with that. Parents and educators considered that it was an excellent idea, especially considering the children’s age group, and felt that it helped ensure a continuing effect of the program—that the connection to Israel and the host families there was easier to maintain for those kids traveling with their parents. However, having parents also made things more complicated, since there were more opinions to handle and people to manage.

Regarding the follow-up activities after returning from Israel, students felt that the school had not done much to ensure a continuing effect. Some of them continued to communicate with their Israeli hosts, but others did not, or did so to a lesser extent. This may be due to the fact that not all of them developed a close relationship with their Israeli partners in the first place. Parents agreed with children, and in general, they felt that there had not been much done on the part of the school, “no follow up at the formal level,” although the children were continuing to have some contact at school, through emails, cards, projects, etc. Most felt that it was up to the parents and families individually to continue to have contact with the Israelis. In some cases, this contact was frequent and deep, and families were planning activities together again in the future. Educators also felt that families were continuing with contacts at an individual level, and although they talked about some of the follow-up activities that they had carried out, they also felt they could have done more.

Students, although young, were very articulate about things that they did not like about the trip and about ways of improving the program. Among the things that the students would change were: having more say in the itinerary (with more “fun” activities and less museums, for example), better organization of the flights and other formal aspects of the trip, and better matching of the American and Israeli kids. Their overall evaluation of the trip was positive, but they wanted to air their criticism

because they felt that they had not had the opportunity to do so at school. Among the improvements that parents would make to the program are better scheduling/timing of events, more free time for parents, more “fun things for the kids, who were bored with so many museums,” and a little more down time for parents and kids. Parents also criticized specific organization issues and formal aspects, such as hotel accommodations, flight arrangements, etc. Educators, on their part, also cited organizational issues. They appreciated the financial and organizational support received from many other organizations, among them the Jewish Federation; however, they expressed that it had been difficult to coordinate so many opinions and that they suggested having one or two final coordinators in charge, instead of the bigger group.