



Preparation for Life

Youth with disabilities at risk of social marginalization

Youth with special needs face unique challenges in the passage from school to independent adult life. Those youth with various physical disabilities who were mainstreamed in regular high schools find themselves without a continuation framework upon graduation. Their classmates join the IDF or National Service, and begin to establish themselves as adults, independent of their parents. However, since special needs youth are exempt from serving their country, they miss out on the opportunity to contribute as well as the formative IDF or National Service transitional experience.

Many youth who are physically disabled, blind or visually impaired are not able or ready to volunteer or continue on to higher education frameworks immediately upon graduation from high school. Leaving the home setting is also an especially difficult transition for them. Consequently, they and their families are at a loss for what to do next. They find themselves stuck in their childhood homes - with the same desire as their peers to find their own place but without the practical means to do so. They need appropriate support at this critical juncture in their lives.

***Mechina Lechaim* – Making the transition from youth to young adulthood**

The *Mechina L'Chaim* – Preparation for Life program, started in 2005, is a two-year residential program designed to help young adults between the ages of 18 to 20 with disabilities transition to autonomous, independent and productive adult lives. It offers these young adults an alternative to the universal frameworks for their age group (IDF, National Service and higher education). Through the program, they live with peers – who also face challenges with their own disability – and volunteer in the National Service program, begin their college studies or enter the job market.

During the first year, participants live in a group home where they enhance their social skills and learn to manage a daily routine on their own. They either volunteer in the National Service program, gaining valuable work skills and experience, or begin higher education studies. In the second year, they continue their volunteer work and studies or enter the workforce. The program helps its graduates move on to group apartments as a transition to totally independent living. The combination of group living, job and educational experiences teaches the young people necessary life skills, and builds self-confidence, self-awareness and dignity.

To date, Preparation for Life has enrolled 68 physically disabled, blind and visually impaired young people in two regions – Bustan Hagalil in the north, and Sderot and Netivot in the south.

Program Partners

JDC-Ashalim's program partners include the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Insurance Institute, and the Kivunim and Gvanim associations.