



Atlanta Jewish Academy

HEARTS AND MINDS INITIATIVE Area of Focus

Long before the Atlanta Jewish Academy (AJA) became involved with the Hearts and Minds initiative, our administration and Judaic Studies faculty had been asking ourselves the types of questions that undergird this Avi Chai initiative. Part of our questioning was driven by the large percentage (typically two-thirds or more) of our graduates who spend their gap year in Israel. And we are proud of the fact that four or five of our recent graduates are currently serving in the IDF.

Despite these figures, all of us – students and teachers alike – had a sense that our school was not doing enough to prepare our graduates for their gap year, both philosophically and emotionally. An important first step to addressing this shortcoming was taken by the students themselves. A small step, to be sure, an Israel Advocacy Club (IAC) Facebook page, but a first step nonetheless. These students approached Rabbi Reuven Travis (who is heading the AJA Hearts and Minds initiative) to be their faculty adviser.

Working with Rabbi Travis, the students undertook a chesed project with an Israel focus: funding a portable bomb shelter in a school in one of the communities that border Gaza. Not once, but twice, our students raised enough money to help install a portable bomb shelter working through [Operation Lifeshield](#). Currently our IAC members plan and implement special programming for Yom Ha'atzmaut and for other occasions during the year.

More recently, with the encouragement and blessing of the administration, several additional Israel focused, school-wide undertakings have been launched:

Mini-mester Israel culture courses – two years ago, our school launched a mini-mester in which most regular classes are put on hiatus for a week, and students are allowed to choose among a long list of specially crafted electives, ranging from photography to car-repair to forensics to computer programming and bioengineering. Each year there have been a number of Israel-related courses offered, such as *Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State*, *the American and Israel Legal Systems*, and an Israeli film festival.

AIPAC partner school – in 2014 we became an AIPAC partner school. As a result, two of our students attended an AIPAC leadership program this summer, and four other students will be traveling to Washington in November to take part in an AIPAC high school conference. As part of this initiative, members of our AIPAC club will be organizing at least one lunch-time program each month to help students become more involved in their advocacy for Israel. Concurrently, our IAC members will be making presentations (also at least once a month) to the entire student body during Friday's "community time." These presentations will be geared towards building student awareness and understanding of current issues that involve Israel.

Modern Israel instructional modules – Ken Stein of Emory University heads the college's [Institute for the Study of Modern Israel](#) (ISMI). Two of our faculty members attended the ISMI's special summer institute for educators. Both remained in touch with Ken, and last year, as they were brainstorming with Ken about ways to improve our teaching of Modern Israel, Ken proposed creating a pilot program with our school in which the ISMI staff will craft four 15 hour educational modules. Each will focus on a different aspect of Israel, and each will be taught in the week prior to Yom Ha'atzmaut, beginning in the spring of 2016 (this is

a development we will be announcing to our students and parents in early September). In this way, our graduates will receive 60 hours of instructional time devoted to Modern Israel during their four years at the AJA upper school.

There is one last bit of background necessary to contextualize our involvement with the Hearts and Mind initiative. During the summer of 2014, our high school (formerly known as Yeshiva Atlanta) merged with a K – 8 day school (formerly the Greenfield Hebrew Academy) to create the Atlanta Jewish Academy, the city's only K – 12 Jewish school. That merger led the upper school to revisit and overhaul its Judaic Studies curriculum. This resulted in a two-track model for Judaic Studies (see attached for curricular grids), and an integral component of our new program is a special senior seminar devoted to Israel advocacy.

Including such a seminar in our new curriculum was a relatively easy decision. Crafting such a course is a much greater challenge. That is where we stood when we learned of and applied to be part of the Hearts and Mind initiative.

We knew that this Israel advocacy course needed to prepare our graduates for the challenges Jewish students now face on college campuses across the country in terms of increased levels of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias. We want and need them to be able to stand up for themselves and for Israel. We need to teach and train them how and where to find real and accurate information about Israel. We want them to feel even greater ties to the Jewish people and to the people of Israel.

This will be the focus of our Heart and Mind initiative, creating a well-thought out and well developed course we can launch in the fall of 2017.

We have a good sense of what we want to impart to our students about Israel, and we have a realistic sense of what we are actually communicating to our students. We will be launching in the coming weeks a survey of our students to accurately understand what THEY are taking away from their educational experience here at the AJA upper school.

There is great support for and excitement about this focus area in the administrative team and among our faculty. Moreover this is an area of focus that our Head of School believes in, and he has made clear that he will marshal the needed resources necessary to carry out plans that emerge from this process.

The bottom line is this. This is an exciting and eminently doable initiative, and we are looking forward to working with the Hearts and Mind cadre to make it a reality.