

Making Connections in Israel

By Dayna Slotkis

If I had to sum up my Israel experience in one word it would have to be connection. I gained a stronger connection to my classmates, my land, my heritage, and my roots. By spending the last three months in the most holy land in the world, I realized I am very blessed to be a part of such a rich culture. I had the opportunity to experience what it is really like to live as an Israeli and a Jew in our own land. All the places we visited, such as the Kotel, Masada, and army bases really gave me the feeling of connection to my land. Everything I learned in the classroom I can take with me throughout my life and I will remember the knowledge and experience always.

From the moment we stepped off the plane we felt the love in the air. People were kissing the ground that we would soon be learning so much about. Part of what made the experience so special was the people that left a personal mark on our Israel experience. First there was David, our beloved teacher whose unique qualities drew us to him as a mentor and a friend. And then there were the inspirational stories from Yossi, our guide, that brought tears to our eyes that are forever



Dayna (right) tries to experience the life of an Israeli soldier.

embedded in our mind and hearts. He not only taught us the 4,000 years of history of our Jewish ancestors, but also helped all of us learn about each other and most importantly ourselves.

Our first overnight *tiyul* (trip) was at Masada. Most of us knew the story and some had already hiked the snake path. David and



American Hebrew Academy teens exploring Israel.

Yossi told us we were going to be spending six hours on the top of Masada. Let's just say, we weren't very happy as we started on our long climb. However, it was while gazing at the stars above our heads, tripping and falling on our faces, that the class realized something. We realized that we were doing this hike together. The love for each other was a new experience unlike any before; and at that moment, we recognized the incredible impact of this trip. We will never again see, feel, or hear anything quite like we did that morning at Masada.

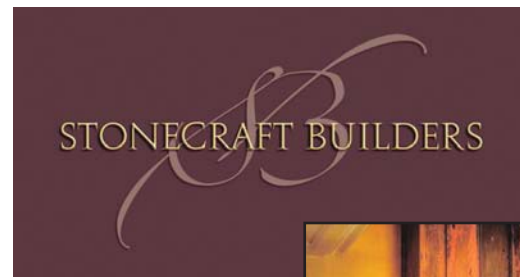
Two weeks after we arrived in Israel, it was time to go on *Yam l'Yam* (Sea to Sea), and our hearts were pounding with apprehension and excitement. Everyone had told us that this trip would be the high-

light of our journey because it would unite our class as one. We biked ten miles through banana fields, and of course, we were complaining, crying and doing everything in between. We hiked in the heat, the cold, the morning and the evening, but more importantly we bonded as a class and did things together that we could have never done alone. With the sweet smell of cows in the air, we slept

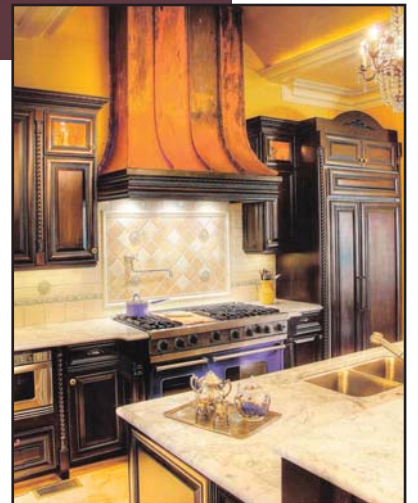
in tents that we set up ourselves, ate food that was cooked on hot plates, and walked what felt like 100 miles. If that isn't a life changing experience, we don't know what is.

Without agencies like Jewish Family Services and the Jewish

Federation, we teens may not have had the opportunity to experience such a life changing experience. For the generosity of the agencies and its donors, I want to thank all for the opportunity afforded me to partake in such an amazing journey. ✪



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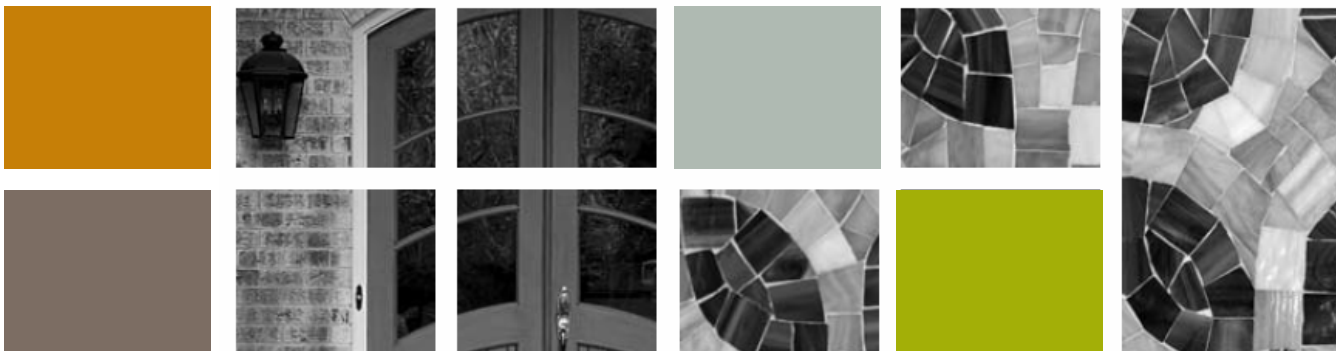
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