The Theme of Identity (Categories: Identity, Meaning, Moratorium, Learning)

Identity is the most prominent theme that emerged in interviews with the heads of *mechinot* (pre-military service preparatory programs; singular – *mechina*). Many identified it as an overriding goal: “… The objectives do not focus on a particular kind of training… Instead, what matters most is shaping identity” (Rotem). “In general the mechinot aim to create a Zionist and Jewish identity” (Gavriel). Mechina graduates, too, describe a process of identity seeking: “At that stage I needed a place that was a little more for myself – to understand who I am, what I want, where my strengths lie, to learn to be part of a large group…” (Adi). It is evident that this identity-seeking process is linked to the group experience. As noted, the various categories are connected.

Yoel, who oversees a cluster of mechinot, adds the element of meaning to the element of identity: “A trainee enters in order to undergo a process with himself… He wants to explore his Jewish Zionist identity as well. He wants to understand… the meaning of Judaism in his life.” The characteristic of meaning also emerges from the graduates’ remarks, as Shir’s comment illustrates: “The mechina instilled in me a desire to have my life be meaningful, to want to advance and learn and develop all the time.”

In religious mechinot, the categories of identity and meaning acquire a religious character, although fundamentally they are not necessarily so. Omer, a religious mechina graduate, recalls his mechina years as follows: “Religiosity was perhaps the outwardly stated goal; I do not remember that this is what we were told. We were told: be good people… invest in building your soul. That was more the goal than being religious.”

Identity building entails a broad framework of diverse categories, as Nevo describes: “The aim of the mechina is to have the student undergo a process in which, first and foremost, he comes to know himself… This manifests in his having **openness**, having a real **partner in dialogue**, having **responsibility**, being trusted. It is only the umbrella of **openness**, of **responsibility**… that will bring about the internal process that the person carries out…”

The link between identity seeking and an open framework is explained using Erikson’s theory on the stages of development (1956, 1968, 1977).[[1]](#footnote-1) Erikson argued that for the sake of identity formation and the development of fidelity, youths must be granted a ‘moratorium’ period that allows for experimentation. The interviews indicate that mechinot do this through openness, dialogue, and space. In addition they demand responsibility and pose challenges. Rabbi Eliezer (head of a mechina) describes the need for such a period: “For a young man who grew up in a home where he was quite pampered to make the transition from high school to the army is a fall that scares them. They feel they need to grow up a little.” Mechina graduates offer similar descriptions: “I felt that I was not yet ready for the rules of the army… not yet prepared for this stage of life” (Shira). “I felt not quite ready for the army… I felt so unformed, so unknowing, and I’d almost never been asked for my opinion on anything in my life, so it felt too soon for me” (Edna). It turned out that many had not fully completed this stage during high school. The space was not open and enabling enough, they were not expected to take responsibility, and they were not presented with any meaningful challenges.

A key characteristic of the moratorium period is freedom. Miriam, the head of a mechina, notes that this is what the mechina tries to foster: “To foster some sort of space… to provide a place in which one can quietly grow in terms of personality.” Mechina graduates indeed describe the sense of freedom that allowed them to consolidate their identity: “It gave me what I needed at the time; it gave me freedom… I studied what interested me” (Omer). “As the year progressed, as I had more and more opportunities to put myself forward… I felt that I had the place and the backing to create… which might be what finally led me to study industrial design…” (Adi).

The mechina learning experience occurs in the context of a moratorium and is perceived as part of the category of identity. It differs from academic studies in terms of nature and objectives. Eli, who teaches at mechinot as well as high schools, explains: “In high school there’s the material I’m supposed to teach. I look at the matriculation exam questions they will be asked. The lesson is built on this first of all… A mechina lesson begins, for me, by asking about the main idea that I want them to derive from it, which they will ponder afterwards… Something that will open their eyes.” He divides the mechina learning experience into three spheres: “Classical studies: *hevreh* [friends, “the gang”] in a class with a teacher, with the text, studying, discussing, and thinking. Another sphere is that of training sessions – which the *hevreh* prepare, they prepare texts. And there’s a third sphere… by way of field trips, by way of agricultural and social volunteering… without teachers or texts.” As such, the mechina learning experience is multilayered and many of its elements are direct and personal. Miriam, mother of a mechina graduate, puts her finger on the unique nature of the mechina learning experience: “When you go to a mechina, you do not go in order to study – you actually go to a place that will build your personality, to an open place, to a place that accepts you as you are. **It is something completely different**.”

Some mechina staff members are critical of this approach to learning, which they describe as “exciting, stimulating, but not in-depth learning” (Alon), or “mediocre learning” (Yishai). According to Goel, who founded and heads a mechina: “At certain mechinot, the learning experience is in-depth and meaningful, but at most it is not.” Some graduates admit that intellectual pursuit was not their main goal at the mechina: “In many lessons I mostly sat and drew pictures and didn’t listen so much, especially when I knew there wouldn’t be a final exam… That doesn’t mean that I didn’t learn. Many *hevreh* from my year will say that they learned very meaningful things. For me this was not the case…” She continues, however: “I learned a lot, a lot, about myself. Coping with difficulties… from that I learned a lot. So I would not choose to pass up this learning – about myself actually” (Edna). The mechinot seem to create a different learning experience, as one graduate describes:

… Suddenly at the mechina I found myself going to classes and listening and being fascinated. So it was really fun!... It opens up the mind, it broadens horizons, and it’s fun to see the lecturers who come with a great passion for this… It’s different from the teachers in high school. At school the teacher prepares [us] for matriculation exams… it’s very technical… And the *hevreh* are not there because they want to listen but because they have to… At the mechina we are there because we choose to be… And the lecturers come because they want to lecture on what they’ve chosen, so everything simply becomes more interesting… There would always be discussions – something that doesn’t happen so much in high school… And if the lesson goes off course, nothing happens, because there is no test on it later… There were fascinating lessons there!

The Theme of Autonomy (Categories: Self-Management, Independence, Responsibility, Choice, Commitment, Motivation, Initiative, and Competence)

In contrast to schools, mechinot are not subject to educational regulation (only to economic regulation) and thus operate independently. Mechina directors who formerly worked as high school principals describe their impressions. According to Rabbi Eliezer: “The education system is imposed on me as a principal… The teacher is told what material to teach… The student must learn the material, meet the objectives […]. The starting point at the mechina is choice, [whereas] the starting point of the education system is compulsion. This is a fundamental difference, in my view…” Goel adds a value judgment: “The main problem with school is primarily the fact that the educational staff cannot actualize their pedagogical ambitions… The principals are so deeply buried in the Ministry of Education’s bureaucratic tasks that they do not have a free second to think, to form some sort of vision. […] There [at the mechinot] you can do that… This is precisely the story of **self-management**.” According to them, self-management generates motivation. Indeed, teachers at the mechinot describe the situation as follows: “A mechina lecturer does not teach according to some curriculum… He brings what he teaches best and most enthusiastically… because there is no curriculum to which he must adapt himself. This creates something entirely different from what exists in the schools” (Shlomo). Noga, a teacher who teaches at both a mechina and a high school, relays her impressions: “I’m not satisfied with meeting youths and teaching them math or grammar. It’s a thousand times more satisfying to learn history with them, and to learn history with them as it’s learned at the mechina – to understand what their history is, what they think about history… For me it’s worth it even… if it means less time to sleep.” The link between self-management and motivation is further discussed below.

Self-management also characterizes how trainees operate. In most mechinot, trainees are responsible for cleanliness and maintenance, meal preparation, and various projects. They also have a hand in determining some of the subjects taught and inviting lecturers. The following remarks illustrate the roles trainees play: “Everyone volunteers for a committee. Teachers’ committee, fitness committee, training sessions committee. They basically prepare everything; the staff just provides a framework” (Eli, mechina teacher). “The mechina has all sorts of committees: a culture committee, a volunteering committee… Each committee is responsible for projects. For example, the committee responsible for preparation for the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] is responsible for bringing lecturers, conducting all sorts of activities in preparation for the army, ensuring combat fitness, training for marathons…” (Adi, mechina graduate).

Yoel, who oversees a network of mechinot, explains that the goal of self-management is to instill responsibility and independence in the trainees: “…To educate them in **independence**… They are not consumers; instead they do things themselves… It’s easier for me if the director organizes a trip but that is not the event. I send them on a preparatory trip. They create their own menu in line with the budget… The trainees participate and take **responsibility**…” Ehud, a mechina director, explains: “Giving the trainees authority while demanding **responsibility** on their part is one of the most important educational tools of the mechina… It contributes greatly to creating an engaged, responsible adult figure.”

Responsibility fosters commitment, which emerges even before the trainee enters the mechina, when a reciprocal selection takes place: on the part of the trainee as well as the program, as Rotem, a mechina director, describes: “[The mechina] is a selective program, and in contrast to standard schools, the people who enter it want to enter it, and are selected from among other people. This is something that strongly influences the educational process.” According to him, the reciprocal selection fosters commitment: “The very fact that he was accepted out of thousands already makes him feel **committed** to demonstrating success.”

Responsibility and commitment that result from choice give rise to motivation. According to Nevo, a mechina graduate: “I was enrolled in high school but not actually present… I didn’t complete a matriculation certificate, lots of nonsense, lots of skipping school, sea, trips… At the mechina there’s a lot of responsibility, I felt significant and then I became a student who invests, who wants, who asks questions, who strives for the truth, who volunteers…”; “Over the years before that I was the youngster… and suddenly I’m being treated 180 degrees differently. Suddenly you’re the adult, you’re the responsible one… This was something that really built [me] up.” Eli, a longtime mechina teacher, summarizes: “This is one of the things that the world of mechinot discovered – there is motivation.”

The link between motivation, on the one hand, and learning and education, on the other, is reflected in Zvi Lamm’s observation that “motivation is the most important element in the educational process” (Harpaz, 2000, p. 28). Harpaz (2019, p. 29) argues that currently “the main problem with school is motivation to learn.” As it turns, self-management inspires motivation among directors, teachers, and trainees alike. We conclude with remarks by Yoram, a mechina graduate: “[In the mechina, learning] is something that comes from within you and [in high school, learning] is something external. [In high school, learning] is something that you’re tested on, almost against your will, and [in the mechina, learning] is something that you want to delve deeper into, it interests you…”

In addition to the categories of independence, responsibility, and commitment, which characterize education in the mechinot, there is also the category of activity and initiative leading to a sense of competence. As Adi, a mechina founder, describes: “They determine who they speak with, how much money they raise… The most influential factor is that they are given a few basic rules and told: you choose, you manage everything.” Eden, a mechina graduate, describes this from her perspective: “I mainly related to the **act of doing** – to the fact that everyone can present an idea and turn it into a project… There was a lot of room for that. I felt that we have the freedom to dream – things that were not possible before… It felt like a greenhouse of sorts that made this possible.”

Ilai, a mechina educator, explains that the expectation that trainees take action and initiative takes them “out of their comfort zone.” Indeed, two graduates of two different mechinot describe how such a departure from their comfort zone cultivated their sense of competence:

At the mechina I learned to be independent and not be afraid of being alone, and later this allowed me to travel alone for almost a year and live abroad and go places. […] Neither high school nor the army led me to understand that **I am competent** to do something. At the mechina, one of the first things we did was train for a half-marathon… And from my perspective, the fact that I did it was like wow! Crazy!... From my perspective this was a very, very big success, and it pushed me to the extreme many times. Afterwards there were many such points, when each time you think that you cannot do something, and you discover in yourself that you can, and not only that you can, you also look at it afterwards and say: wow, that was really fun! I enjoyed it too. (Eden)

At the end of the year we took a two-week trip. We were responsible for planning it and everything. This was the longest trip I had taken so far… and I really remember the feeling that, like, the legs are already hurting and you don’t have strength and you don’t want to go on, but you go on because there is no choice. And I really remember that while I was walking I thought: Wow, this is the first time I’m in some sort of pain and state of discomfort, and I’m, like, continuing. In the end it was an experience that I really enjoyed… Same with a week of navigation that I was really afraid of… and in the end I did it, and it was a really empowering experience – as if to say: Wow, I did it! (Pe’er)

It appears that autonomy, competence, and motivation are interlinked, as Self-Determination Theory (STD) posits (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985, 1991, 2000b). The theory holds that a human being is an organism with an inherent inclination to develop.[[2]](#footnote-2),[[3]](#footnote-3) That is, humans have an inherent motivation that emerges when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000a,b). The categories of autonomy and competence were discussed in the context of the present theme. The category of relatedness is addressed in the next theme.

The Theme of Group Cohesion (Categories: Group/Family, Intimacy, Partnership, Involvement, Volunteerism, Familiarity, Personal Connection, Contribution)

A central theme that emerges from the interviews is that of group cohesion. This is a salient characteristic, unique to mechinot, as reflected in comments by Rotem, head of a mechina: “A school cannot really replace a mechina… It’s an unfair comparison. The **intimacy** of a small **group** within the mechina, which lives together 24/7…” The element of group cohesion and the sense of intimacy it embodies are also present in religious mechinot, as described by Ilai, a religious mechina staff member: “This is a relatively small mechina and we want to maintain the homey feeling. All the trainees visit the mechina’s rabbis at home and sometimes even visit the head of the mechina. Nevo, graduate of a different religious mechina, relates: “I was part of a very small **group** and benefited from the close ties with the Rabbi.” Likewise, Miriam, who heads a religious mechina, describes: “We strongly, strongly emphasize the group process…” Her remarks shed light on physical-structural aspects of the group: “A kitchen, adjacent dining room, four residential caravans, another caravan for administration, divided into an instructor’s residence and an office, and in the back the *beit midrash* [Torah study house]. That’s it.” Naturally such proximity cultivates close ties and group intimacy. According to Miriam, even when the mechina’s applicant pool increased, they made an effort to preserve the group structure and, accordingly, opened another group: “They have their own dormitory and their own classroom and their own *beit midrash*, their own faculty, their own kitchen, and if we open another group, we’ll open it using the same format again…” Goel, who headed a small mixed mechina, describes a similar development: “I wanted a small mechina because in terms of education it’s more suitable. So I said: If we have 60 trainees, then we’ll form two groups… And today this vision has come true; there are two groups in Sde Boker and one in Holit, and next year were opening one Tze’elim.”

The group’s intimacy encourages the above-mentioned characteristics of independence and responsibility: “A group that lives together 24/7, in a very, very intimate way… is **responsible** for itself; this has a strong influence on the educational process. If at night the mechina’s trainees did not make sure that they have vegetables, then in the morning there’s no salad for breakfast… Their self-management is a core element of the educational approach” (Rotem). The following remarks by Nevo, a mechina graduate, indicate that the sense of belonging to a group also promotes learning: “The cohesion, it really gave me a source of something to hold on to, and from that I drew strength in all areas of the mechina, lessons, summaries, perseverance…”

Evidently, the need to belong to an intimate group is one that formal education does not meet. According to Miriam, mother of a mechina graduate: “He was basically searching for some sort of framework… He sought a mechina that […] would be more **intimate**. He did not want to go to a massive program with lots of people, but instead looked for a more familial place…” In her words, high school has “neither the time nor the surrounding.”

Life as part of an intimate group offers the trainees opportunities for **partnership**, **involvement**, and **volunteerism**. Joel, who oversees a cluster of mechinot, describes the trainee’s place in the mechina as follows: “The role of trainees in day-to-day management […] is a major one. That is, you’re not a client, you’re a **partner**.” Shlomo, who teaches at mechinot, adds the category of **volunteerism**: “One of the things that mechinot really try to do is to turn the trainees from clients into **partners**… You do not come in order to promote yourself… This really changes the position of the *hevreh* in the world, their attitude towards reality, and that creates a spirit of **volunteerism**…” According to him, “the graduates emerge as very responsible *hevreh*… And they will be the ones who volunteer in the army…”

Group cohesion, intimacy, and involvement promote familiarity with additional populations: “It was my first time meeting people from all sorts of places… Before that I hadn’t met many *hevreh* from all sorts of places, and it was very interesting… The characters were different… The characters were very significant” (Omer). “I liked that there was a really wide range of people. […] I hadn’t met religious people… hadn’t met Ethiopians, hadn’t met Russians… And suddenly I felt that there was room for lots of people, that it’s possible to be different” (Eden). Even at religious mechinot, where the trainees are by definition homogenous, there is openness and an inclination towards greater familiarity. Rabbi Eliezer, who heads a mechina for religious boys, claims that the mechina “is open to vast worlds of knowledge: literature, general philosophy, activities.” Likewise, the mother of a graduate who attended a secular mechina describes: “They have a stated goal of creating a certain mix… of providing the experience of being with those who have less in certain areas, or who have a certain disability” (Ziona).

Group cohesion, intimacy, involvement, and familiarity create strong ties among the trainees. Eden offers a retrospective view: “I look at our mechina group, it was so strong then… it’s crazy! The group’s **cohesion**… If I need help – they will all come to my aid…” This feeling also stems from having close, personal ties with the staff members. Alon, a founder of mechinot, describes the planning the establishment of mixed and secular mechinot. According to him it was a learning process: “We traveled for a few months to Oxford, to Cambridge, to see how these places established the leadership that created British democracy. There we discovered the relations between the individual and the student… that the group size comprises one instructor per six or seven students.” This is indeed the ratio maintained at most of the mechinot, each of which has an average of 35-45 trainees and usually numbers 5 staff members: the head of the mechina, a director, and three young instructors aged 22-27. Heads of mechinot explain: “The instructors are present on a daily basis, they mentor the committees, they are close to them in age. They are mediators of sorts; they are closer to their world” (Yoel). The trainees’ relations with the staff members are very intense: “It’s from 7 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. approximately. The instructors are in all units, including lessons – a very strong presence” (Miriam). Shoval, a trainee, describes it from her perspective: “… Those who are there are crazy about it … They’re there almost 24/7. They have to be people with fire in their eyes, because it comes very much at the expense of their private lives…”

Such tremendous dedication and intense relations create a unique learning experience, as Eli, a longtime teacher at mechinot, describes: “I meet the *hevreh* at all hours of the day. I meet *hevreh* at 8 a.m., 11, 6 p.m. At 8 p.m. or midnight – those are the best hours. They are alert at those times… We don’t sit in a classroom, we sit on the lawn, on couches… Those are the best lessons… I don’t bring lessons from a text, but instead [bring] life lessons.” He adds: “I have personal conversations with them and I stay there […] talking until the middle of the night and also staying there to sleep.” Thus it is understandable that a personal connection and sense of intimacy develop between staff members and mechina students.

The instructors and staff are seen as going above and beyond, which is what gives rise to the category of volunteerism. The general approach at mechinot is one of volunteerism, which permeates its activities throughout the year, as Rotem, head of a mechina, describes: “The contribution to the community, volunteerism, this is something that is very present and has a strong influence in terms of educating for activism and so on. It is very rare today to find a general mechina that doesn’t have this element as 20% of its schedule.” This category is more dominant in general mechinot, although it is also present in a large number of religious mechinot. Ilai, a rabbi and instructor at a religious mechina, describes the educational perspective at his mechina: “To combine Torah study with giving.” According to him, “there is a huge number of volunteer activities going on here…” Omer, graduate of a religious mechina, recounts: “There was another saying that permeated very much, which is concern for all. Thinking about everyone… In our case this was emphasized very, very much.”

In sum, the group theme is composed of a number of mutually reinforcing categories: cohesion, intimacy, partnership and involvement, familiarity, personal connection, and contribution.

The Theme of Informal Structure (Categories: Intensity, Extreme Experience, Turmoil)

We have identified many categories so far that characterize the activities of mechinot. How are they able to coexist? Rotem, head of a mechina, explains: “The **informal** space in which the mchinot are located allows them to do things very, very differently… and this greatly affects the educational process.” Musa, head of a Druze mechina, emphasizes the uniqueness of this aspect: "Schools are task-oriented, oriented to matriculation exams and achievements and grades … But the complementary […] and **informal** chapter is lacking. So this is the role of mechinot.”

The informal approach of mechinot is reflected in the variety of categories mentioned above: autonomy and self-management, moratorium, familiarity, and personal connection. The informal approach is evident in the sense of freedom, in learning without a fixed syllabus or exams, and the like. It manifests in group gatherings that sometimes resemble sitting together in a youth club (couches, footrests, armchairs), in the many field trips (hikes, volunteer activities, outdoor training sessions), and in other ways (see Drori, 2019, pp. 5, 74). This approach should not be confused with nonchalance or complacency. On the contrary, the daily schedule at the mechinot is very full, “from about seven in the morning until 10:30 at night” (Miriam), and at some mechinot even fuller.

There are some who recall this intensity as a difficult experience: “The intensity there was very hard for me… Being together all day every day, with no privacy and not having one second to get away, and some days are very long so it was very tiring… Being very, very overburdened with many new things that I was suddenly exposed to, and in my view there was no effective way to process things…” (Edna). The burden appears to be intentional. Goel, former head of a mechina, argues that the shape of the mechinot is to create turmoil:

1. Erik Erikson, [theory on psychological development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s_stages_of_psychosocial_development). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. an active organism. People are actively growing, striving to overcome challenges [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. natural, inherent drive, that humans are active, growth-oriented organisms [↑](#footnote-ref-3)