The Minister of Public Security, Yitzhak Aharonovitch, poses with Fire Scouts at a course completion ceremony



Fire Scouts

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An alarm goes off at the main fire station in Jerusalem's Givat Mordehai neighborhood, and 17-year-old Amir Bitu pulls on his fire suit and helmet. Bitu runs toward one of the station's fire trucks, on the heels of the team commander. A brush fire has started in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramot, and Bitu, as all firefighters are trained, is wearing his gear and on the truck in just 60 seconds. But 17-year-old Bitu is not a typical firefighter – he's a 12th grader who volunteers as a Fire Scout after school and during his free time.

The Fire Scouts program (Tzofei Esh, in Hebrew), was established in 1959. Fire Scouts are boys and girls, aged 15 and older, who volunteer in the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority after undergoing a 40-hour basic training course. Upon completing the course, the boys and girls are deployed at any of the country's 109 fire stations to provide support to the firefighters by operating machinery and equipment, helping deploy hoses and breaking down doors. Today there are over 700 fire scouts throughout the country – mainly high school students fulfilling their 60 hours of "personal commitment" required by most schools in 10th grade.

According to Fire Superintendent Tomer Pinkas, head of volunteers in the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority, the training the Fire Scouts undergo, familiarizes them with the Fire and Rescue Authority and its roles, teaches them basic firefighting skills and first aid, and transforms them into more aware and educated citizens who know how to act during a fire, and who can easily spot fire hazards.

Fire Scout Training

While regular firefighters in Israel undergo a grueling 6-month training course, much like military basic training, the fire scouts have it relatively easy. Because the scouts are not meant to put themselves in danger, they undergo an abridged course where they learn both practical and theoretical aspects of firefighting. They learn how fires start and spread, which firefighting



Fire Scouts, undergoing training

chemicals and hoses to use in which situations, basic knowledge of rescue equipment and procedures, and firefighting history.

At the end of the course, the volunteers undergo an exam, both theoretical and practical, and if they pass, they are assigned to shifts and respond to calls. When responding to fires, the scouts keep a distance and perform important tasks such as laying down and attaching hoses, operating pumps, refilling water supply, and operating machinery on the fire trucks.

Fire Scout Amir Bitu, who lives in Jerusalem, says he volunteers so that he can contribute to his country. "There's a lot we can do as fire scouts, and as we get more experienced, the team commander gives us more responsibilities and lets us do more," he says.

Bitu explains: "If there's a fire in a house, we usually won't go in until after the first wave of firefighters is finished. But we'll help spread out the hoses and attach the right nozzle, break open doors, and anything else the team commander thinks we're ready for, as long as it isn't a life and death situation. We're an extra pair of hands, and we can take some of the strain off the firefighters."

Equal but Different

When asked how the scouts are treated by the firefighters, Bitu is happy to say that they feel like equals. "They treat us well and they show us respect. Even though we are not full-fledged firefighters, they still rely on us and know we are valuable."

Overall, Bitu says he has had a great experience being a fire scout. "It's fun to help, to respond to calls, and to get a pat on the back and be told we did a good job. And if we mess up, they explain what we did wrong and teach us how to improve."

The Fire Scouts are required to be on call at the stations for at least four hours every two weeks, but many come much more. "I try to come in 3-4 times a week, especially when my school work load is less or we're on vacation. I've been volunteering for about six months, and I've probably responded to over a hundred calls. I've had my taste of almost everything," Bitu says.

Fire Superintendent Pinkas says the main goal of the program is to provide the firefighters with extra support in responding to calls. Despite the one shift per two week minimum, Pinkas stresses that the most important

thing is still the scouts' studies, and that the volunteering is not allowed to interfere with schoolwork.

"We are in close contact with parents of the Fire Scouts and keep them up to date. If a parent tells us a child is performing poorly in school, we take them off the shifts until their grades improve," explains Pinkas. "But they do have a lot of free time hanging around the station in between calls to study, and they can often opt out of minor calls if they need to catch up on homework."

More Than Firefighting

Pinkas also notes that aside from the aid the firefighters receive, the scouts benefit as well. "When these teens volunteer, especially the weaker ones, we give them responsibilities, they develop skills and they become more empowered. Some of these kids," says Pinkas, "If they weren't volunteering with us, they would be in much worse places; instead of walking the streets they're spending time with us and learning leadership skills and being given responsibility."

To turn them into leaders, Pinkas says the fire scouts become the instructors for subsequent courses of Fire Scouts, working alongside a professional firefighter. "As they train their peers, they learn to speak in front of an audience and they explain what it means to be a fire scout and how important it is," he explains.

From Scout to Pro

But what happens after the Fire Scouts finish their required duty? While many dream of becoming firefighters themselves, it is not a straight path. First, the scouts have to enlist in the army. Though there are army firefighting units, not all of them get in or want to serve there. Only upon completing their three-year compulsory military service can they apply to become firefighters, though the Fire and Rescue Authority only recruits as needed, and there are not regular recruitment dates. But Pinkas is optimistic: "I was once a fire scout, and much of the upper echelon of the Fire Authority was once fire scouts, including two district commanders and many station commanders."

So how does being a scout help your chances of becoming a professional firefighter? "In theory, we are more than happy to enlist former fire scouts," explains Pinkas, "but we can't guarantee them anything. For every 400 positions, there are thousands of applicants. However, when we conduct our tryouts, former fire scouts have a minor advantage in the point value we assign them as they perform different tasks."

Fire Scout Amir Bitu says he will enlist in the IDF this coming year, and hopes to go to a combat unit or firefighting unit. Afterwards, he wants a career as a fire officer.

Fire Scout Amir Bitu, far right, responding to a call in Jerusalem

