

The Summer Beit Midrash program at Mechon Hadar was such an amazing experience.

Spending the entire summer studying something I want to dedicate my life to learning, making life-long friends, exploring the Big Apple (a place I haven't been since I lived there as a toddler), and doing it all on my own was unbelievably rewarding. I learned so much. The text was difficult to get through, especially at first - we were learning in the original text, which means I was using my small knowledge of modern Hebrew to delve into

rabbinic texts in both rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, doing translations and attempting to piece together an understanding of the law of a culture that has existed in one form or another for thousands of years.

The learning done at Hadar is reminiscent of the academic study of Judaism I have done in the past, which was a relief. But at the same time, I had thrown myself into a foreign environment with no practical background in the material at hand, and worked alongside observant Jews who were there to study their own faith in a measured, critical way. One thing that I really enjoyed about the nature of the people at Hadar was their open-mindedness and their warmth in welcoming me. While they didn't know at first that I was not Jewish, once I told them they took time to carefully and subtly make sure I knew the things about our study that I wouldn't otherwise have known. But beyond that, they also invited me to Shabbat dinner on the 4th of July and





to kosher vegetarian Chinese food in Chinatown and even to services. They went out of their way to make sure I felt welcome, and I made so many friends. Even just the other day I got an email from one of my classmates about the possibility of continuing hevruta together long-distance. I learned so much about specifically Askenazi practices and viewpoints too, lessons that were not intentionally part of my schooling but that flavored everything we did. Ashkenaz pronunciation was another roadblock that I have now conquered and can handle should it arise again.

More than all of that, I feel so competent in study of Gemara (especially our tractate of the Bavli Bava Kama on injury law) and I feel that I have the necessary tools and background to study any tractate, as long as I get to have a dictionary nearby. My Hebrew was rusty to begin with, not to mention that I had not previously attempted to read rabbinic Hebrew or any form of Aramaic, but now I can claim some measure of comfortability with them. At the very least, I feel like I can now at least try for comprehension in them, whereas before I would not have been able to. My dictionary skills have improved dramatically, and I know the alephbet literally backwards and forwards.



The tractate of the Talmud I studied was in the בבלי בבא קמא, floating around פה/פג:

החובל בחבירו חייב עליו משום חמשה דברים: בנזק, בצער, ברפוי, בשבת, בבושת.

We were focused on what the Gemara lists as the five things that an assailant is obligated to pay for when it comes to the victim. We roughly translated the five things as the following: permanent and severe injury/physical damage, pain, medical bills, paid sick leave, and shame. We began with נזק and worked our way through all five things. The classroom viewed our tractate as the method through which we can discuss Jewish legal philosophy. Where in the Tanakh is this issue coming from (We go between ויקרא 24:18-20 and שמות 21:20-30)? What does the Gemara say? How does the Mishnah answer that? What does Rashi have to add on the matter? And then, finally, what do we think about this? There were more questions than answers, and that was treated as part of the experience, a necessary component to the study of Talmud that was welcomed and so much fun.



One of my favorite things about this summer was watching the people around me learn the same things I was learning. It's fascinating to not only learn the material, but also to learn how it is taught, and beyond all, to see the learning that my classmates and friends are doing as true believers of the faith. It's something I found to be a major component of my experience. My colleagues were far from afraid to be critical of the material, even when the speaker behind a specific text is widely accepted as a Jewish authority. Perhaps even especially then.

I also got to just explore New York City. I got to know the city through the food, through the subway, through the people. While waiting for the F Train back from school, I watched an orthodox Jew pass a Buddhist monk in orange robes, people dancing, and so many busy people rushing to get to where they needed to go. I got to



see Broadway shows and the ballet and street art. It's such a vibrant city, and it has something that even Houston lacks. Being in New York for two months felt like my first real steps into the world truly on my own. And now I look forward to returning to Houston and diving back into my studies, never having stopped. I would not trade this summer's experience for the world.



