

Abby Shulman Spends Five Weeks in Israel

This summer, I spent five weeks in Israel. As part of a Birthright Israel group, I spent the first ten days traveling around the entire country, and for the remaining month I lived with my aunt and uncle in Tel Aviv. I took a three-week beginner intensive Hebrew language class at Tel Aviv University, ate a lot of great food, and missed a lot of buses. I am very grateful for the experience and am already planning my next trip back!

Prior to this summer, I had visited Israel several times, but never for more than a week. Three of those times I went to celebrate Passover with family, which means I was following a strict itinerary and constantly reminding extended relatives of my age. I was young, and my only goals were to eat good food and learn how to say “ani lo medeberet ivrit!” quickly enough to alert strangers who started asking me things. Importantly, my perception of Israel grew exclusively out of the experiences I shared with my Israeli family members, who, astoundingly, don’t represent all Israelis.

This summer, I was eager to visit Israel with an adult perspective, for a longer period of time. My goals were still humble—visit family, eat good food, learn more Hebrew phrases than “I don’t speak Hebrew”—but I intended for it to be a more meaningful experience than any I previously had.

It is impossible to disentangle Israel from its history and current politics, and thus I believe that it is impossible to visit Israel entirely casually. I came with no political agenda, only to learn some Hebrew and visit family. Yet, Israel’s foreign—and local—conflicts leak into the most innocuous of environments. Dinner table conversation with family inevitably turned political; friends my age were in the Israeli Defense Forces. Even the food I ate carried political weight, determined by what laws of Kashrut (Jewish dietary restrictions) it complied with.

One way I organized my perspectives on Israel was by listening to other tourists and deciphering what Israel meant to them. My five weeks had three natural phases: a ten-day Birthright trip in the beginning, an intermediate week of seeing family and exploring Tel Aviv, and a three week beginner Hebrew Ulpan (language course) at Tel Aviv University. This combination of experiences exposed me to tourists ages 18 to 40, from all over the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Naturally, they all had different reasons for visiting Israel.

Of the 38 people on my Birthright trip, at least 9 spoke Hebrew fluently, had family in Israel, and would be extending their trips to spend the summer there. It was obvious that given the choice, they would spend the rest of their lives there. “Israel is my favorite country in the world,” said one girl on my trip, whose parents are both Israeli and work for Israeli companies in the US. The rest of the participants were mixed. Some were involved in Jewish communities and programs in the US but had no relationship to Israel, some were not religious at all, and some had visited Israel but, like me, never for much more than a week. Around a third of the group could not name the Prime Minister of Israel (we played a trivia game during the trip). In a not-exactly-random sampling of 38 American Jews, there were Jews who ultimately considered Israel their

real homes, and there were Jews who considered Israel a nice travel destination, given that it's a free trip.

My Hebrew Ulpan also consisted of students with diverse reasons for being there. Three students were learning Hebrew as part of a frustrating requirement before studying abroad. Two of my friends in the program were from Denmark; they told me about the experience of taking positions both supportive and critical of Israel depending on their environment. Denmark has a very active BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction Israel) movement, which meant that those they identified with politically on most issues would also reject Israel. While they felt compelled to be pro-Israel in Denmark, in Tel Aviv my friends realized that positions they previously fought to defend were now assumed. As people who don't endorse the current Israeli administration, my friends felt like they were suddenly on the opposite side of the debate.

One classmate of mine was an 18-year-old from France making Aliyah (immigration to Israel) with her entire family. When I asked her what made them decide to move to Israel, she said, "France is all right, but in Israel, you can wear a kippah, and tzitzit, and nobody will bother you! It is better to be Jewish here." After the Ulpan at Tel Aviv University, she would be taking a subsequent intensive Ulpan for 6 months and applying for jobs.

In this class of 13 people, there were students who came to party in Tel Aviv clubs, a student studying security and diplomacy for a Master Degree, a 17-year-old studying Middle Eastern history, a non-Jew whose father grew up on a kibbutz, and a girl who was restarting her life in Tel Aviv to escape anti-Semitism. Tel Aviv is a modern tech hub designed for young people and a place to study political conflict in close proximity; it is just hours from the Kotel (the Western Wall) and settlements in the West Bank. These elements don't operate in isolation, and I felt that my time in Tel Aviv—and Israel in general—was colored by it all, no matter what I came personally to do.

And what I came to do was learn some modern Hebrew. The three weeks I spent in class were productive, but ultimately too short, and I never got to the point where I felt comfortable using the phrases I learned in real contexts. Sometimes I tried to ask for water, or for the price of something, and about 30% of the time I was responded to in English. Each time this happened I was inevitably slightly crushed, but I understand that it's one of the hazards of learning a new language in a city where nearly everybody speaks English. I feel more comfortable writing than I do speaking, so I'll use this as an opportunity to list some of the phrases I learned, divided into the categories of "useful" and "not-useful."

Useful

אין כסף, אין זמן
אני רוצה ללכת הביתה
אני אוהבת לאכול חומוס
לא יודעת

Not-Useful

הארון אל יד החלון
המטבח גדול מאוד
אני צריכה ללמוד







