

Daniel Russell

Desirée and Max Blankfeld Fellowship

Intermediate Arabic Immersion

On June 17, 2018, I departed from the airport in my hometown of Stillwater, Oklahoma. For five weeks, the Desirée and Max Blankfeld Fellowship that I received allowed me to study Arabic at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Beyond classroom study, my skills in both the Arabic and Hebrew languages increased dramatically as I used them every day; I gained a greater appreciation for the diverse culture of Jerusalem; and I formed relationships with people from many different walks of life. I had a brief stay in Hadassah Hospital and learned a lot about myself through the ordeal of being very ill in a foreign country. I returned to that same small airport in Stillwater one month later as a new and better man with these new skills and experiences.

I flew from Stillwater to Dallas. Then Dallas to Charlotte, NC. Charlotte to London. Finally, I flew from London into Tel Aviv. I was struck with the increased security before my flight to Israel, and I would continue to be struck by the high levels of security employed to protect the Jewish state as a tangible reminder of less tangible political uneasiness surrounding the region.

From Tel Aviv, I took a *sherut* or shared bus to Jerusalem. I enjoyed the drive very much. Even as I was very tired, the winding highway through the Holy Land up into the city of Jerusalem had an almost spiritual element to this traveler. The city carries a solemnity that is felt within one's soul. I was dropped off at the university on Mount Scopus where I immediately went through security, as I would every successive day after that, and roamed around until I found the orientation office. The whole process of orientation and registration was incredibly

relaxed but not disorganized, and I was constantly reassured that this was just the Israeli style of doing things. I was lucky enough to be staying in the dorms with my friends from Rice, Daniel Cohen and Colton Cox, who were also in the program, and together we figured out the systems for living at the university. Here is a picture from the window of my dorm room.



Our first day was occupied by a tour of the campus and introductions to my classmates and professors. The campus is truly beautiful and houses a wonderful botanical garden that I walked through every day. The views from Mount Scopus are spectacular. On a clear day, one can see the Dead Sea and the mountains of Jordan. More immediately, the university has a striking view of the Palestinian neighborhood of Issawiyyah on the other side of the security barrier with the different standards of living on either side in stark contrast. A photograph of

Isasawiyyah that I took from the university is below.



On the first day of class, I switched from the Intermediate program to the Advanced Program. The courses consisted of several hours of Modern Standard Arabic every morning and early afternoon and the colloquial Arabic of Palestinians in the late afternoon. We also had several hours of homework assigned every day. I found the courses to be rigorous and engaging, and they pushed my abilities to read, write, and speak to new levels.

I found the colloquial courses very useful to my everyday life. I was able to use this Arabic to converse with restaurant owners and shopkeepers and taxi drivers around the city. One interesting example of this is when Daniel Cohen and I attended a Shabbat dinner on the other side of the city. On the taxi ride back, we spoke to our driver in Arabic and mentioned that we

were Arabic students. This man was so intrigued that he talked to us for a very long time about strategies for learning the language beyond classroom study like listening to music and poetry and reading the Quran, all of which I have found to be very useful.

Besides classroom study, the program led guided tours of important sites in Arabic to help our cultural understanding of Jerusalem as well as our linguistic understanding. We took tours of the Old City, the Katamon neighborhood, the Islamic Art Museum, and Lifta National Park. These tours were incredibly interesting to me, especially the tours of Katamon and Lifta both of which used to be Arab neighborhoods and are no longer. These trips highlighted the sometimes-tenuous relationship between the Arabs of Israel and the State of Israel. On the other hand, the trip to the Islamic Art Museum highlighted an effort by Israelis to be more inclusive. Here are some pictures from my tour of the Old City:



Here are some from pictures from Lifta:



d in the program, I found living in the city of Jerusalem to be an incredible experience. My friends and I would frequently take the light rail into the city to explore different areas and try new restaurants. I met up with several other people from Rice

who happened to also be travelling in Jerusalem at the same time. I enjoyed opportunities to use my much smaller knowledge of Hebrew when I went grocery shopping or talked to people in the Jewish neighborhoods. My combined knowledge of the three languages of English, Hebrew, and Arabic seemed enough to get me through most conversations, and I found it fascinating how the three constantly interacted and intertwined in Jerusalem. The most interesting place for this phenomenon for me was the Hadassah Hospital. In third week, I went to the emergency room for abdominal pain which turned out to be acute gastroenteritis. Everyone on staff spoke English very well with me, but they would argue about the nature of my condition in Hebrew. Also, because it is located in East Jerusalem, many of the admitted patients spoke Arabic. I spent my last day in Jerusalem in the Old City, and it was a wonderful day. I'll never forget the sights, sounds, and smells as long as I live. Leaving was bittersweet.