

Yahel Israel Service Learning Program

Leah Topper, Summer 2014

This summer I spent six weeks in the Negev, the desert region of Israel, with a service learning program. Unexpected by all on the program, we experienced some interesting challenges to our original plans as the tensions between Hamas and Israel developed into a full-



fledged air raid and operation during our program's second week. About half our group returned to America before the end of the program, but I adjusted to the changes with a positive attitude and enjoyed a meaningful, educational, and fun six weeks in Israel.

For the first two weeks, I volunteered in Be'er Sheva at Ma'an, a non-profit organization that serves Israel's Bedouin population by supporting Bedouin women and advocating for their rights. They



provide many different services for this population, and I worked both at their office and in a couple nearby Bedouin towns teaching English to three different groups of children. I quickly realized this volunteer placement was more difficult than I had anticipated, and the

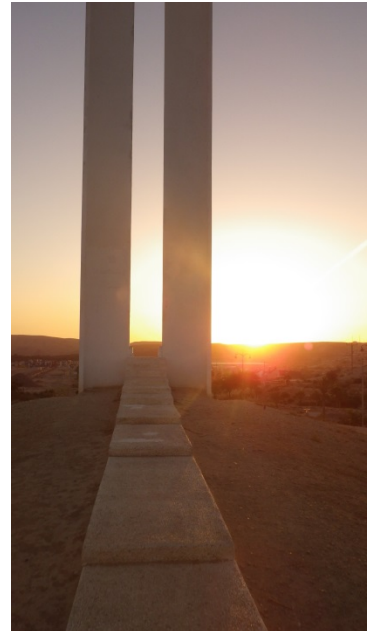
brevity of our time with them made me question the possibility of a long-term effect. What could we realistically accomplish in just four weeks? Was it better to teach them as much as possible or take it slower and play more games? Unfortunately, we never had the chance to determine exact answers to these questions. A few rockets landed near Be'er Sheva on the evening of July 5th while we were away for the weekend, and we never returned to the city or to our volunteer placements there.



Because we couldn't go back to Be'er Sheva, we lived at a kibbutz in northern Israel for the next week. We picked tomatoes and planted a community garden that week, and we returned every night to the kibbutz to read the news on our phones. In hindsight, this was an

unproductive and unhealthy way to deal with our situation. We nervously waited to hear what would happen to us and our situation next, and the Jewish Agency finally made the decision to move us to another, smaller town in the Negev named Yerucham for the final duration of the program. We arrived there late at night on July 21st, and we immediately began our new volunteer placements that next morning.

A small town of ten-thousand people, Yerucham immediately welcomed us and integrated us into her community. We volunteered wherever they needed us: in bomb shelter cleaning crews, a center for the elderly, a café, and local kindergartens. I chose to work at a *gan* (kindergarten) whose duration had been extended for a couple weeks into the summer because of the situation in Israel. Alongside the two adults



that worked at there regularly, I volunteered four days a week in a classroom of four to six-year-old kids. The first day I walked into the gan, I was overwhelmed by the amount of Hebrew I didn't understand, the sheer number of kids in the room, and the chaos of kids practicing their "*azakah* (siren) positions." By the last day, I could follow about sixty percent of the Hebrew spoken in the classroom, and I knew each of the kids by name. I quickly responded when someone asked me to help them cut, glue,

color, clean, or hold something. I knew the words for many animals, colors, and articles of clothing in Hebrew, and I knew about five different ways to say “good job” in Hebrew. Although this wasn’t my expected volunteer placement in Israel, I am very glad I had the opportunity to volunteer at the kindergarten and remarkably improve my Hebrew in the process.

In addition to volunteering, I learned about Israel through the educational component of my program. Each Thursday, we learned about the internal issues and the complexities of Israel by traveling to other places and speaking to people directly involved with these issues. I absorbed an incredible amount of information on



these trips, and we also reviewed and discussed our experiences twice a week during group meetings. Of course, we also learned about the Arab-Israeli Conflict in an almost instinctive but necessary manner when Operation Protective Edge began. I acquired a wealth of new knowledge about some of the multifaceted concerns currently prevalent in Israel, and this new information has opened my eyes to better understand and recognize Israel in her entirety. I left this trip with more unanswered questions than with which I began, and I am eager to continue my quest for knowledge about Israel using resources at home and at school.

In addition to learning about Israel, I learned about myself on this program. Subjected to a week of ambiguity and uncertainty, relocation from Be’er Sheva to Yerucham, and a modified lifestyle due to



red alert rocket sirens, I handled the entire situation in a way that revealed to me much about my strengths. Although I was previously aware of my usually positive attitude, I recognized the power of my optimism when



our circumstances were changed by war. I realize now that I live a very fortunate life, and these six weeks exposed my ability to cope with harsher situations. Additionally, after two weeks of volunteering at the *gan* in Yerucham, I learned that I really love working with kids. I usually shy away from camp counselor jobs because I doubt

my ability to connect with kids, but this summer showed me that I can take on this role and interact with young children relatively easily. While I'm almost positive I don't want to be an early-childhood educator, I can see myself as a pediatrician, say.

I've learned from this summer that I can, although it may be a difficult process, embrace and acknowledge change with a positive attitude. Instead of complaining about change, we can learn from it and develop ourselves by responding to it. While the program in Israel has ended and I am home once again, I gained an amazing



experience that will drive and motivate me onward. The service-learning component of my program has only just begun. When I go back to school, I will volunteer in the Houston community with a different perspective than before; I will be more aware of both the benefits and costs of my volunteering.



Additionally, as a component and requirement of my program, I will create a service program at Rice that addresses one of Israel's social issues. As Ayala, our *madricha* (counselor), repeated frequently

during our last few group sessions in Yerucham, this is only the beginning of my involvement in social justice work for Israel. I have new ambitions, understandings, and close friendships due to my six weeks in Israel, and I am looking forward to seeing where I will go from here.

