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31 August 2018

Summer in Israel Final Report

This summer, I enrolled in two summer courses at Hebrew University's Rothberg International School in Jerusalem, Israel. For the month of July, I lived like an Israeli student, staying in the university's student village, grocery shopping at the shuk, and travelling by bus across the country on weekends. Thanks to the professors and classmates of the two amazing classes I took, I learned more than I ever thought I could about the country of Israel, Judaism, and myself.

During my time at Hebrew U, my day would begin with a class called *Understanding Identities: Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Israel*. The class was taught by Dr. Yore Kedem, a native Israeli and Hebrew professor at Michigan State whose academic background is in education. The class, broadly, explored how different immigrant and cultural groups have influenced Israeli culture and society over time. We began by discussing the foundations of Zionism, the creation of the Arab minority in Israel, and the struggles that the Arab community continues to face in modern Israel. We then turned our focus to Jewish immigrants, studying the Law of Return and the periodic waves of Jewish immigrants who have arrived under it, with a special focus on former Soviet and Ethiopian Jews. Next, we looked at non-Jewish immigrants to Israel, such as migrant workers from the Philippines and Central America and refugees from Eritrea and Sudan. We then placed all this immigration in context, examining the way that these diverse groups interact with Israel's education and political systems.

Though we spent a fair amount of time in class discussion on these topics, the hallmarks of the class were our observation assignments, field trips, and independent research projects. For a typical observation assignment, we had to people-watch for about three hours, writing down anything of note and interviewing at least three locals within that time. In total, we did three official observation assignments for the class (one on Jaffa Street, one in the Arab Quarter of the Old City, and one in Tel Aviv) and we were encouraged to do more observations and interviews on our own. The idea was that, in talking to locals in these locations, we would learn about

Israel's diversity in a very hands-on way, and that, increasingly, the questions we were asking these locals would grow more specific as we worked our way towards a final research project. *Understanding Identities* also included multiple weekend field trips; we travelled to Wadi Ara, Tel Aviv, Yad Vashem, Ashdod, Rehovot, and to Yore's childhood home in Gedera. Usually on these field trips Yore would give us a guided tour of things that might seem mundane or off-limits to the average tourist, like a controversial lookout point in a residential neighborhood or a neighborhood populated by migrant workers. We also had plenty of free time in these places to explore, observe, and talk to locals.

For my final research project in this class, I ended up focusing on Israeli multicultural spaces, with a focus on Jerusalem. Something that struck me immediately about living and observing in Jerusalem the division and segregation inherent in the city; secular Jews, religious Jews, and Arab citizens live in dramatically different areas of the city and occupy different public spaces as well. I was curious about the places where, in a city that seemed to consist of discrete pockets, people interacted with people who were not like them, whether this interaction was unintentional (like frequenting the same store) or intentional (like attending an event held by an interfaith organization). I focused my class observations on the unintentional spaces, asking locals where they usually interacted with people of different social or ethnic groups and letting the information I learned drive me to those places. On my own time, I contacted various multicultural and interfaith organizations in Jerusalem and interviewed organizers and participants on important elements and considerations of an intentional, successful space for interfaith and multicultural dialogue and interaction. My research in this area drew two main conclusions: what constitutes a "multicultural" or "diverse" space varies depending on a person's social and cultural context, and bonding and friendship in these spaces are often created through activities or conversation topics that are seen as de-politicized or neutral.

The second class I took at Hebrew University was called *the Body in Jewish Thought*, and it could not have been more opposite of *Understanding Identities*. While Yore was a native Israeli residing in the US and considered himself a Jewish atheist, the professor for the Body in Jewish Thought, Dr. Eliezer Shore, is a native New Yorker who converted to Orthodox Judaism and now lives in Haredi neighborhood of Jerusalem. While *Understanding Identities* focused on

getting out on the streets of Jerusalem and interacting with all different types of people, the Body in Jewish Thought was a deep philosophical dive into the specific views of one distinct religious group, and class would consist of three hours of debate and discussion on religious philosophy. We spent a long time discussing the concept of God's body, approaching the topic from the perspectives of strict Biblical interpretation, Maimonidean philosophy, and Talmudic and Kabbalistic thought. We also discussed the traditional dress of religious Jews, circumcision, sex and sexuality in Jewish thought, and laws of mikvah and ritual purity for women. This class also included a day of field trips, where we visited a mohel, a self-described Kabbalistic feminist who talked to us about modest dress and empowerment, several clothing stores in the religious neighborhood of Mea She'arim, and a Kabbalist yoga studio.

These two classes provided me with two very different educational frameworks for learning about Israel. In *Understanding Identities*, I learned about Israeli political and social issues in a very hands-on and human-oriented way, and in *the Body in Jewish Thought* I was able to do a deep dive into the philosophy of the religion that the country was built for and founded on. I often felt like I was experiencing mental whiplash through this daily drastic shift in contexts and perspectives. Taking two such different classes also allowed me to do some personal reflection and mental growth regarding my religious and cultural identity as a Jew. Often, I would find myself arguing to Yore about the validity of religious Jewish perspectives, then switch classes and argue to Dr. Shore that Orthodox and Kabbalistic perspectives don't comprise all of Judaism and Jewish thought. Identifying with a gray area between religious and secular, both in the classroom and in the larger city of Jerusalem, forced me to clarify my perspectives, reaffirm why I believe what I do and make the choices that I make, and be more bold and confident in voicing my opinions and representing myself. I'm extremely grateful for the well-rounded education that I received from these two classes and the personal growth that resulted from my brief time at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

At the Jerusalem Festival of Light in the Old City.



With my classmates and professor from the Body in Jewish Thought, outside Mea She'arim.

The view from the rooftop of the Museum on the Seam, a sociopolitical contemporary art museum located on the former border between Israel and Jordan within Jerusalem.



The entrance to Kehillat Har-El, one of the few Reform synagogues in Jerusalem. This was one of the few places where I was able to meet Israelis who also occupied a middle ground between



religious and secular.

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With classmates at the childhood home of our professor in Gedera, Israel.



At Minat al-Qal'a, a 15th century beach citadel in Ashdod.





At Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The first photo I took while a Hebrew University student! This was from my first day of observations for Understanding Identities, in the Jaffa Street area.

