

Israel from Many Angles

by Sofia Gereta

This summer, I spent five weeks in Israel not only learning Modern Hebrew through an *ulpan*, or immersive Hebrew course, but also discovering how differing historical and religious perspectives continue to shape Jerusalem and other parts of the country.

Throughout my time there, I formed bonds with both locals and other international students, became familiar with Hebrew University, and glimpsed the everyday lives of Israeli residents. I return to Rice this semester armed with a basic foundation of Hebrew, as well as valuable insights into both ancient history of the region and modern Israeli culture.

In Jerusalem, I began my mornings with a short walk from the *kfar studentim*, or the Student Village, to the Rothberg International School. As I came into the *ulpan* knowing only the Hebrew alphabet, I was placed into Aleph One, the absolute beginner course, along with seven other students. The people I encountered in the course reflected a spectrum of reasons for studying Hebrew: a Princeton graduate student from France hoped it would help him decipher medieval Jewish philosophical texts, a former journalist from Boston wanted to better communicate with her husband's Israeli relatives, and a Jewish elementary school teacher from Canada needed to improve her Hebrew skills before teaching the language to her students. From the first day, our Hebrew instructors, Yonat and Shira, spoke with us only in Hebrew in order to accustom us to the sounds and flow of the language. Although the course lasted only a few weeks, the instructors emphasized constant Hebrew use, paired with about an hour or two of homework every night to build our vocabulary and grammar. I started every class with a basic conversation about my day, memorized and recited short dialogues, and even participated in a few Hebrew sing-alongs

led by a visiting Israeli musician. While I struggled through these activities at first, by the end of the *ulpan* I felt confident using my basic phrases in public situations.

To practice my Hebrew skills, I tried (and usually failed) to haggle at the *shuk*, the outdoor market, asked shopkeepers questions about their products, and chatted with locals. When I visited the Hurva Synagogue, for example, the gatekeeper happily offered to speak Hebrew with me after learning I was there to study the language; I returned a few times to test out my growing vocabulary and ask him about life in Jerusalem. During a few other occasions, I would not reply to English questions in order to force shopkeepers to use Hebrew phrases with me. These conversations informally taught me concepts like masculine numbers before we ever covered the topic in class. Of course, I was not well understood – and I often pretended to understand shopkeepers who answered my questions in complicated phrases – but it was extremely satisfying when a few people exclaimed with surprise, “at medaberet ivrit!” (You speak Hebrew!) I realize that in a four-week time span I was able to learn only the very basics of Hebrew, but I enjoyed the language itself so much that I plan to continue my studies independently. My ultimate goal is to hold comfortable conversations with locals in Hebrew when I return to Israel in the future.

Outside of my Hebrew studies, I aimed to deepen my understanding of both the ancient and modern history and cultures of the region. With some friends from the *ulpan*, I visited numerous museums in Jerusalem, including large institutions such as the Israel Museum, Yad Vashem, and the Islamic Art Museum, as well as more intimate, locally known spaces like the Tycho House and the Museum on the Seam. These tours introduced me to the various archeological treasures of the region, as well as contemporary socio-political

issues as seen through the lens of modern Israeli and Palestinian artists. I was also drawn to the city's cultural spaces, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. On another afternoon, a Russian classmate and I walked up the Mount of Olives and visited a Greek Orthodox convent and the Church of the Mary Magdalene, which was secluded amid a marvelous botanical garden. I was continually struck by how heterogeneous populations all co-exist (most of the time) in the small urban spaces of Jerusalem while still preserving their unique cultural and religious identities.

It was difficult to visit other regions of Israel on the weekends due to the shutdown of the transportation system for Shabbat, so after completing the *ulpan* I spent another week immersing myself in the country's vast heritage. Over the course of the next three days I hiked across more than ten Israeli national parks, driving around the country with a French Catholic seminarian. As I walked through the streets of Beit She'an and Be'er Sheva, I could vividly imagine the everyday lives of the ancient Israelites, Romans, and Byzantines who once inhabited these spaces. I was also able to better make sense of biblical narratives and classical texts, like that of Josephus, after experiencing the environments surrounding an archeological site. For example, it was easy to envision a battle between King Josiah and the Egyptians when looking out at the plains around the city of Megiddo. In addition, I was able to contextualize the function and symbolism of archeological remains, such as the mosaics of the Hammath Tiberias Synagogue, by analyzing them within their original setting of a Hellenistic, waterfront town. Throughout these explorations, I found it fascinating to compare my secular, academically oriented viewpoints with those of my travel companion, who analyzed the sites using a traditional Christian perspective and a theological background. Through conversations with him, I better understood how various

modern religious communities each place emphasis on different landmarks in the region – such as the two popular spots along the Jordan River both believed to be the location of the baptism of Christ – and what these locations continue to mean to people of different faiths.

I spent my last few days in Israel exploring Tel Aviv. After becoming used to the solemn, devout atmosphere of Jerusalem, I was shocked by the modern and relaxed character of Tel Aviv. While there, I familiarized myself with contemporary Israeli perspectives by visiting Beit Hatfutsot, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and various neighborhoods like Old Jaffa (which turned out to feel quite young). But even though the city reminded me so much of the U.S., I was acutely aware of some differences: most people my age were missing from the streets unless they were dressed in the Israeli Defense Forces uniform.

I am very thankful I had the opportunity to study at Hebrew University through the Desireé and Max Blankfeld Fellowship. In just a few weeks I gained an intimate appreciation and basic knowledge of a new language, a deeper cultural and religious understanding of the people who have inhabited the land in the past and who reside there today, and a trove of memories that I will cherish for years to come.



Tel Be'er Sheva city grid



The permanent tents at Mamshit National Park, where I spent a night (almost) under the stars



The Damascus Gate during the Jerusalem Light Festival



Hiking up to the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, at Qumran



Hiking up the hills of Galilee (and considering some of these tiny settlements survived up here)



View on the walk up the Mount of Olives



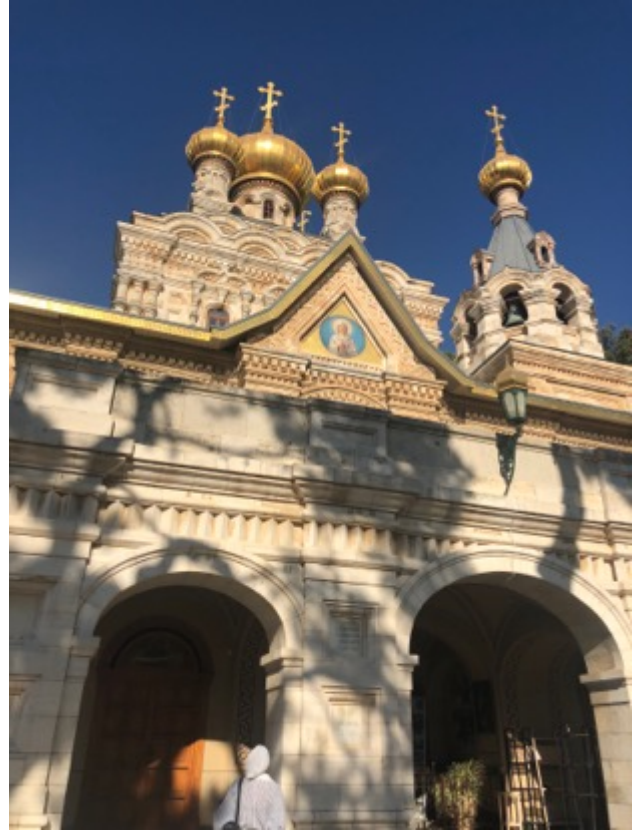
The mosaics at the Ein Gedi synagogue



The lovely, multi-faith view of the Old City from the top of the Hurva Synagogue



The view from my dorm window at the Hebrew University "kfar studentim"



Visiting the Church of Saint Magdalene