

MARISSA

Shabbat Shalom! My name is Marissa Young and I am a high school sophomore here at Beth Am. My friend Libby and I were supposed to spend the past semester in Israel through URJ's Heller High School. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, we got sent home 2.5 months early. Even though our trip was cut short, we had an amazing month and a half in Israel and we are here today to share our experiences.

For those of you who don't know, Heller High is an abroad program through the URJ for North American high schoolers to study in Israel for a semester. The Heller High program includes Jewish History, Hebrew, General Studies classes, tiyulim --or field trips--, and a week long trip to Poland to learn about the Holocaust. We first heard about Heller High at URJ Camp Newman last summer. Two of our counselors had already been and encouraged us to go as well. I knew that being far away from home would be difficult, but having Libby made it so much easier. Personally, it was very challenging choosing what to pack, but my suitcases could only fit so much. After filling every inch of my suitcase, Libby and I arrived in Israel with 85 other Jewish teens and drove to Kibbutz Tzuba near Jerusalem, where we stayed for the semester.

At first, it was very difficult to adjust because of the time difference and the long, strenuous school days. Each day started with 2 hours of Hebrew, followed by 3 hours of Jewish History. After that, we would have lunch at the Kibbutz dining hall with all of our newly-made friends. Then, we would have all of our general studies classes, such as math and English. In total, we had 11 hours of school, from 8 am to 7 pm with some breaks in between classes. In addition to this, we had tiyulim with our Jewish History

class at least twice a week. Some being half a day, where we would come back for general studies, and some the whole day. It was somewhat like a college experience, being away from home and learning to adapt to another environment.

It was really interesting to be living in Israel and seeing so many beautiful sights, but also seeing how Israelis live everyday. Historically, a Kibbutz was a community for Jews who immigrated to Israel with nothing. Everyone worked for the kibbutz and in return they received necessities. No private property was allowed. Today, almost all Kibbutzim have evolved and now allow ownership of private property. The people living in this Jewish community go to work and some of the money that they earn goes to the Kibbutz. The Kibbutz then functions much like a homeowners' association, taking care of the public areas, garbage collection, etc. Being on a Kibbutz was a great way to be immersed in Israeli culture. Even just walking to one of my classes, I would run into people on the Kibbutz and get to know them. At the beginning of our semester abroad, Heller High took us to the Shuk, the outdoor market with traditional Israeli food and other products. To my surprise, the Shuk was filled to the brim with Israelis rushing all over the place to get where they need to be. I got to sample so many delicious foods, like baklava, falafel and pita, rugelach, and challah.

One of the most interesting things I learned during my time in Israel was about the Israeli-Palestinean conflict. Before coming to Israel, I barely knew anything about this issue or anything about the Israeli government. I learned so much from my Jewish history class about where the conflict originated and ways we could possibly make it better, but one moment that really stood out to me was when the Jerusalem Youth

Chorus visited us at the Kibbutz. This choir is made up of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Each time they meet, they spend an hour doing something called dialogue, an hour singing, and then another hour doing dialogue. Dialogue is basically where they would have a series of meaningful conversations about different political issues. This is mindblowing to me because these teens can come together peacefully, sing together, and discuss politics all while adults around them refuse to even talk to each other. Another reason this choir made such an impact on me is because I love to sing. Some of you may have seen me in Shul of Rock once a month at Beth Am. One of the fascinating things about singing and music is that it brings people together, and that's exactly what the Israelis and Palestinians need. The songs that the Jerusalem Youth Chorus sing are in Hebrew, Arabic, or English and sometimes all three. When they came to the Kibbutz, they taught us a song that had different parts: each part having one of the three languages. This was a huge inspiration to me and other teens that have seen this choir and heard their story. It was so beautiful to see the youth of different cultures-- that may not get along-- sing and share their personal opinions with one another peacefully. I am so grateful that I got the experience to come to Israel, meet so many amazing people, learn more about Jewish History, and discover more about my Jewish Identity. I will now turn it over to my friend, Libby.

LIBBY

Shabbat shalom! My name is Libby Brill and I attended Heller High with Marissa this past semester. Heller High was such an incredible experience, partly because we

were able to learn about the history of the Jewish people while in Israel. When we learned about the Bar Kochva Revolt, we crawled through the tunnels where the Pharisees attacked the Romans. When we talked about the Zealots and how they fled from Jerusalem after the Great Revolt, we hiked Masada - a stone fortress built by King Harod and now a popular tourist attraction. The tiyulim allowed us not only to learn about Jewish History, but also to immerse ourselves in it. My favorite tiyul was when we went to the City of David in Jerusalem. While exploring the city, we learned about the different biblical stories that had taken place there, and put on a really funny skit about King David seeing Batsheva bathing on the roof. We also travelled through a very cool water tunnel to understand how they brought water into the city. I really enjoyed this tiyul because it was the first time that I really felt part of my Jewish heritage.

One of the most interesting experiences on this trip was when we spent a week at Gadna, an Israeli military program that prepares high schoolers for service in the Israel Defense Forces. We, along with Israeli teens, experienced a military environment and learned how the different branches in the IDF work together. The most significant part of our time there was learning to fire an M-16 rifle. For many people it was an incredibly eye-opening moment and likely not one they'll soon forget. Although this part of the semester was definitely unusual, I feel like I learned a lot and am glad that I was able to participate.

Something that made my Heller High experience a bit different from others was the fact that I am fluent in Hebrew. I found myself translating for other people often, and I think I ordered at least 10 pizzas. Although it sometimes got frustrating to always

interpret for others, speaking the language allowed me to form deeper connections with my madrichim, or counselors, teachers, and other Israelis that we met. It also became incredibly handy when we got to Gadna. Most mefakdim, or commanders, spoke decent English, however by some luck my mefakedet didn't speak a single word. I spent the entire week translating her orders from Hebrew to English, and then translating my friends from English to Hebrew - it was quite the experience.

Unfortunately, as Marissa said earlier, our semester was cut short. Instead of leaving at the end of May, we came home mid-March: 2 and a half months early. It all started with the Poland trip. On February 24, our madrichim called us in for a meeting with the principal and staff. No one knew what it was about, but we could tell that it was serious. During this meeting, it was announced that all Poland trips, both ours and those for Israeli high schoolers, were cancelled due to COVID-19. Everyone was devastated, but we had no clue what was coming next. Slowly, our tiyulim started getting cancelled, and new regulations came out that restricted the number of people per room. People started panicking, especially when another high school abroad program, Alexander Muss High School, was sent home. Luckily, we had an amazing staff, who assured us they would do everything they could to keep us in Israel. All of a sudden, a new regulation came out that restricted the number of people per room to 10. I remember that night vividly. My friends and I were just hanging out in my room when we heard people screaming. We rushed out of the room to find all of our fellow classmates outside, along with David Soloman, the assistant principal, who was trying to calm everyone down. After the yelling had stopped, he informed us that another abroad

program was just sent home: Tichon Ramah Yerushalayim or TRY, and he announced that class for the next day was cancelled due to the new regulation. Our wonderful staff stayed up all night trying to figure out the best solution to our dilemma. The next morning, they told us to meet them at 2:15 pm, and everyone was slightly uneasy. When the time finally arrived, they told us that very late that previous night it was announced that anyone in Israel on a tourist visa, which was 95% of the group, was to leave as soon as possible and our flight was at 10 pm the next day. Everyone broke down sobbing, no one was ready to go. Just when we had finally settled in and made life-long friends, we were forced to go home. They had emailed out parents, but 2:15 pm in Israel is 4:15 am in California. I called my parents over and over but everyone was asleep. With only 24 hours left, we started packing, as our madrichim tried to make the most of the time we had left. We took a hike to the nearby hill to watch the sunset and we had a very meaningful campfire where the snacks that everyone had stocked up were shared. They even managed to organize an amazing prom for our last night, but before we knew it, we were on a flight home. There weren't any planes with enough seats for 87 students, so the URJ joined with other programs to charter us a flight from Israel to New York. As everyone started going their separate ways, we were forced to say our final goodbyes. Marissa and I flew back to California together on an incredibly empty plane, still reeling from the speed of it all.

Heller High made the decision to continue with classes online. Although it was quite difficult with the time zones, as school started at 5 am, I was very happy with their decision. The transition back home was hard enough as it was, having to transfer back

to my home school in the middle of the semester while they had classes online would have been much more challenging. Not only did the different time zones make school problematic, it made staying in touch with my friends hard as well. I knew that I would have to say goodbye to my friends who lived across the country, but I wasn't prepared to say goodbye to friends like Marissa, who lives only 10 minutes away. Although at times it seemed like the world was against us, we found ways to appreciate the friendships that we had made. If there was one thing that this experience taught me, it was to take action when I have the chance. There were so many friends I *could* have made, things I *could* have learned, and places I *could* have gone, that I missed out on because I thought there would be more time. I encourage all of you to start a friendship, or try a new hobby, or grab that tub of ice cream. There's no telling where it will lead.

Thank you and Shabat Shalom!