

## Ben Weinberg

This summer I travelled to Israel for two and a half months where I first participated in a diversity-themed Birthright trip then had an internship with Onward Israel in Haifa.

In the first portion of my internship, I volunteered at the Arab-Jewish community center, Neve Yosef where I taught music to a group of elementary schoolers who sang in multiple languages, recording a set which premiered at the community center's anniversary party.



In the second part of my internship, I worked at Robin Food, a food-rescue pantry and restaurant in Haifa's Talpiot Market where I learned about the country's food system and helped provide high-nutrient, gourmet meals to the community's economically depressed residents as well as worked on grants to help with funding for the project.



My main internship was a research assistantship at a social behavior neuroscience lab at the University of Haifa where I aided in the lab's study of Autism Spectrum Disorder utilizing a new lab technology developed by the lab's manager to track and analyze movement and electrophysiology.

In addition to my internship I traveled to the Negev and learned about Bedouin culture, journeyed to Rishon LeZion and participated in the Ethiopian Bunna ceremony, hiked through the Jordan river, and made many new friends throughout the country. I also had the opportunity to cross the Green Line and hear stories from residents of the West Bank to gain perspective on the complex geopolitical issues of the country. I feel very fortunate to have had such an enlightening and impactful summer experience and cannot wait to return to Israel as soon as possible.

## Averyl Edwards

This summer I spent six weeks in Israel on an archaeological excavation and a program at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

The dig was in the north of Israel, almost exactly between Tiberias and Tzfat, about a mile walk from Kibbutz Huqoq. Under the direction of UNC Professor Jodi Magness, we excavated a 5<sup>th</sup> Century synagogue with beautiful mosaic floors. This was the 7<sup>th</sup> season of the dig, so I was able to see how much progress had been made as we had uncovered different parts of the

synagogue, as well as being a part of the discovery of [new mosaics](#) and the southern wall of the building. There is nothing like the feeling of being amongst the first people to lay their eyes on these mosaics in over 1600 years! It is exciting because the dating of our synagogue challenges the existing historical narrative that life was hard for Jews in the Galilee during this time period, because who goes through the effort of having a whole capital campaign and building a new shul if you're not sure if you'll be able to stay in the area much longer? And it also gives us a better understanding of what life was like for ordinary middle and lower class Jews, enriching the picture painted by the more elite, learned Jews who were writing the Talmud at that time.

As part of the dig we also took a lot of field trips to other archaeological sites, including Sepphoris (which was excavated in part by Eric and Carol Meyers, who also live in the area and are professors at Duke), Gamla, Tel Dan, and many others. The most exciting one was our extended field trip, where we took a bus to Jordan so that we could see Petra! I was so impressed by the mathematic perfection that the Nabateans achieved in cutting giant structures out of sandstone, and how beautiful they still remained 2000 years later.

After coming back from Jordan I broke off from the dig to begin my program at the Conservative Yeshiva (CY) in Jerusalem. It was an egalitarian Jewish learning intensive, where I spent three hours in Ulpan every morning, then 7 hours in classes of various topics in the afternoon. These classes ranged from studying the Zohar to nusach/service leading to examining contemporary issues in Israeli society through film. Even though I often spent 14 hours a day at the yeshiva, I ate up every minute of it. The classes were so interesting and it was incredibly powerful to be in an egalitarian religious space in Jerusalem, where "religious" is usually defined as Haredi.

One of my favorite experiences this summer was participating in a weekly *shacharit* minyan with the CY at the Kotel, in the egalitarian section under Robinson's Arch. It was so radical and empowering for me as a woman to be in that space and count towards a minyan, wear my tallis and kippah, and wrap tefillin. It gave me hope for the future of inclusive, egalitarian Judaism in an Israel that seems to only get more and more Haredi.

My experiences this summer on the dig and at the yeshiva are memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life. They gave me an in-depth, nuanced exposure to a beautiful and complicated country that I only feel more connected to as time goes on.

## Eliana Davis

This past summer I had the incredible opportunity to spend six weeks in Israel on Ramah Israel Seminar. Having never been to Israel before, I had heard so many amazing things about the country but never had the opportunity to experience them myself. As soon as I stepped out of the airport, I was blown away by the dry heat, which felt very different than the North Carolina humidity! As we drove to the youth village called Hodayot in the north of Israel, where

we stayed for the first week, I kept noticing little differences, like the types of vegetation that grew, that made me even more excited to be spending my summer in that beautiful country.

Each day of Ramah Israel Seminar we focused on a different educational theme. For me, the most meaningful theme that we covered in the north was when we spent the day focusing on the different minorities in Israel. We were able to visit a Druze temple, the Baha'i Gardens, and a Mosque, and not only did we see these important sights but we also had a chance to speak with people who live through the struggle of being a minority in Israel every day. I had never really learned about how each of these minority groups fits into Israeli society, but now I have a better understanding what it takes for them to live in Israel.

After one week in the north, we made our way to Jerusalem. As the bus reached Jerusalem, our counselors asked us all to close our eyes. We then exited the bus, eyes closed, before opening them to a spectacular view of the old city. Standing there, overlooking the city, we had the opportunity to pray mincha and just admire the view. That first Shabbat in Jerusalem we prayed Kabbalat Shabbat on the egalitarian side of the Kotel. As we were singing the niggun after one of the psalms, members of a Birthright tour group joined in with us, and we danced in a circle together. I loved being able to come together over a shared tradition with Jews from all over the world.

Another one of my favorite parts of my Israel trip was Etgar. Etgar, which means challenge in Hebrew, is a four day program in which each of us could choose an activity which that we felt would be a personal challenge. I decided to participate in Desert Survival, a challenge that involved spending the four days hiking and camping in the Negev desert. Each day we would get up really early, pray, and then hike, cooking breakfast somewhere along the way to our midday rest spot. Since it was over 100 throughout the day, we learned to build small shelters which allowed us a cool place to rest for several hours in the worst of the heat. On our last day in the desert, we held a master chef competition to determine which small cooking group could make the best food with limited ingredients. My group made such good food that all the other groups even wanted to take some of ours! Each night in the desert we slept under the stars. Since there was no light pollution, we could see everything in the sky including four different planets, the Milky Way galaxy, and tons of constellations. This was my first time ever seeing the night sky so clearly and it was spectacular.

In the last week of my trip, we traveled down to the south of Israel where we had the opportunity to stay on two different Kibbutzim, Kibbutz Ketura and Kibbutz Mashabei Sade. While staying on Kibbutz Ketura, I learned all about what it means to live on a communal kibbutz. Even though a few things have changed since the kibbutz was founded, Ketura still maintains a number of a traditional kibbutz values. For example, members still earn an income based solely on their family size and residents are not allowed to own personal cars.

My first trip to Israel has left a strong impression on me. I return home with a strengthened connection to Jews all over the world and a love for the state of Israel. I cannot wait to share what I have learned and experienced with my community at home.

