

# 2014 MSU STUDY ABROAD REPORT

## *Cut Short, But Not Short on Learning and Experience*

After many months of preparation and excitement, eight eager MSU students from a wide variety of backgrounds met up on July 2, 2014, at the Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They had come to participate in a month-long, MSU Jewish Studies Program at the University's Rothberg International School. The program consisted of two academic classes: the first, "The Emergence of the Modern State of Israel," taught by long-time JSP associate Dr. David Mendelsson, covered the ideological roots of the Zionist movement and a survey of contemporary Israeli society; the second, "Jerusalem—A Cultural and Historical Geography," a field course I taught, was designed to take advantage of our presence in a city with a past stretching back at least 3,500 years, but that is also the capital of a modern, dynamic nation-state founded only in 1948.

We began our sojourn together in the Holy Land with trips to the south and north of the country, which provided the students a sense for the diversity of the land and an opportunity to come together as a group. On our first day, we headed to the Dead Sea and the desert oasis of Ein Gedi. Beginning our hike at 423 meters below sea level, we ascended along the Nahal Arugot stream, where we encountered water levels whose like hadn't been seen for years and were able to enjoy swimming in the falls and pools.

The next day, we travelled north to the country's other major body of water, the Sea of Galilee, hiking and climbing in the Mt. Arbel nature reserve. From the mountain we had views of the Sea and the Golan Heights that border Syria, learned about the area's history, including King Herod's subduing of the cave-dwelling "resistance fighters" of Arbel and Saladin's decisive defeat of the Crusaders at the nearby Horns of Hattin, before cooling off in the waters of the lake. Heading west, we arrived at Moshav Nahalal for a weekend of local hospitality and R & R. Nahalal, founded in 1921, was the first communal farm of its kind and was home to some of the leading lights of Israeli political and cultural life, including General Moshe Dayan and the writer Meir Shalev, the keynote author of the JSP symposium on Hebrew literature last year. Students were paired up with host families and participated in *kabbalat Shabbat* (the Friday eve prayer service welcoming the Sabbath), visited the family farms, toured the *slik*—the



secret, subterranean small arms depot the community maintained under British Mandate rule—and lounged the afternoon away at the community pool. The visit culminated in a campfire and barbeque.

Although the visit was brief, the impact on the students was profound. Israeli life is family-oriented and this visit afforded them unique entrée to home life. As one student, Becca Rosenblatt reports: *"We got to spend the weekend with a host family, participating in, and soaking up the local Shabbat customs and traditions. This was by far my favorite part of the trip. My host family made me feel completely at home and welcomed, and a part of their family. We shared a wonderful Shabbat dinner with chicken, fish, rice, and potatoes and so much more."*

The students were to return to Jerusalem on Saturday night, however, shortly before the student's arrival, Hamas agents in the West Bank had kidnapped three Israeli Jewish boys and murdered them. This was tragic enough, but amid the heightened tensions and within a vacuum of political leadership that might have exerted a calming influence, extremist Jewish elements began to demonstrate and call for revenge. In this environment, a Palestinian boy from an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem was kidnapped and burned alive. As a result, demonstrations erupted in various Palestinian locales, and after consultation with Israeli police and military personnel, I delayed our return to Jerusalem to the next morning, when students arrived just in time for their first class.



Once in their dorm rooms, the students quickly settled into a regular schedule. In their course on "The Emergence of the State of Israel" students were treated to an insightful overview of the rise of the Zionist movement seasoned with Dr. Mendelsson's British sense of humor. Then, the curriculum for the field course on Jerusalem entailed afternoons spent together exploring the nooks and crannies of this ancient and modern city. However, the escalation of the Hamas rocket attacks on Israel soon brought an end to this routine. While attacks on the environs of Jerusalem were rare, the students experienced several sirens signaling them to take cover in the reinforced rooms of their dorm suites. While this was initially alarming, the students soon realized that they were at little actual risk and learned—like the rest of the population—to go on with their daily lives,

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while at the same time being aware of where they could take cover should the sirens sound. The deteriorating security situation, however, did necessitate changes in the curriculum: it was not a time to meet with a diverse assortment of community leaders as planned, nor did I feel comfortable bringing the students to the Muslim Quarter of the Old City and the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. And so while we continued our forays into those areas of the city deemed safe, we also ventured outside the city limits. On one trip we returned to the Galilee to explore the important Roman and Jewish town of Tzippori, where the Mishnah was compiled, and the holy city of Tzfat, where we wandered the picturesque streets and alleyways, sampled authentic Yemenite food, and learned about its kabbalistic past. Another trip took us west of Jerusalem where we toured a magnificent stalactite cave, and hiked in the ancient village of Sataf, where settled agriculture has been practiced for 6,000 years, and learned about terrace farming.

There were plans to do much more, but amid Hamas's intensification of rocket attacks on Israeli civilian populations and a projected Israeli ground response, the Risk and Security Assessment Committee of the University decided that while the students faced no imminent risk, it was time to bring the students home due to concern that it might become difficult to exit safely from Ben Gurion airport. Thus, the program was terminated on Thursday, July 14, 2014, two weeks prior to its scheduled end. On our final day, we surprised the students with a Segway tour of both the old and new city, departing from the Old Railway Station, proceeding along the Old City ramparts and through the New Gate into the Old City, stopping for a wrap-up session at the City Hall complex, where the students movingly shared their favorite moments. Upon returning to the U.S., students were provided opportunities to complete final projects for both courses and will obtain full academic credit.



Thus, our trip ended prematurely, but this wonderful group of warm, inquisitive, and hard-working students still managed to have an enriching experience. Not only did they learn about diverse aspects of Israel's history and society in an intense two and half weeks, but they had to contend with a sense of insecurity they had never before encountered and were able to observe up-close how a people endeavored to continue on with normal life while absorbing missile attacks and mourning the loss of its soldiers. The consensus among the students was that even though the program was cut short, it was one of the best experiences of their lives. As one example, Mitchel Bild summarizes his experience in this way: *"My trip to Israel this past summer was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. Though the trip got cut short by two weeks, the two weeks that I did spend in Jerusalem allowed me to see a lot of the country and the cultures associated with Israel and I am desperate to return here again."*

In the wake of the program's termination, there were several reports in the media. International Student Voice, an online journal for study abroad, ran articles and an interview with myself. Here are their links:

<http://www.isvmag.com/08/05/inside-studying-abroad-in-israel-part-one/7004>

<http://www.isvmag.com/08/07/isv-show-inside-studying-abroad-israel/7055>

<http://forward.com/articles/204469/no-ordinary-summer-for-students-in-israel-war-zone/>

For more on the students' experiences and their final Jerusalem projects, please see the blog at:

<http://msuathebrewu.wordpress.com/>.

Finally, the student participants and myself wish to express their deep appreciation to Mrs. Julie and Mr. Ed Levy, Jr., whose endowed fund for student leaders studying in Israel covers most of the program costs for qualified applicants and has made this experience a possibility for so many MSU students. For more information on this scholarship program, please see <http://jisp.msu.edu/israel/levy-scholarship/>.

For further information about this study abroad program, please see <http://jisp.msu.edu/israel/hebrew-university/>. While the program is currently suspended pending a security review, plans are being made to review the program's status this November and conduct the program this coming summer. The program will be represented at the upcoming Study Abroad Fair on Thursday, September 25 at the Breslin Center from noon to 6:00 pm. Please contact me at [msb@msu.edu](mailto:msb@msu.edu) if you have any questions.

~ Marc S. Bernstein

Program Director, and Professor of Hebrew and Israeli Cultural Studies

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*"What makes the study abroad offered by the Jewish Studies Program at Michigan State University so excellent is that it relentlessly challenges students to approach Israel through more a critical lens. During our trip, we were given the tools necessary to engage with Israeli history, culture, and politics in a way that transcended the often limited or superficial perspective we typically receive through the media or polemical discussions. The program drew attention to sites of both cultural fracturing and coexistence, and equipped us with the skills necessary to understand the complicated political and cultural issues that define the region."* Will Miannecki

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