

2015 MSU Jewish Studies Summer Program, Hebrew University in Jerusalem



THE GROUP AT THE BAHÁ'Í GARDENS IN MOUNT CARMEL,
OVERLOOKING HAIFA BAY

Ten MSU students participated this summer in the MSU Jewish Studies study abroad program in Israel which highlighted experiential learning, focusing on study tours with an

anthropological orientation (we had two additional students study on their own at the Technion in Haifa and at Hebrew University). Along with a course on the emergence of Zionism and the history of the State of Israel taught by Dr. David Mendelsohn, the students experienced Israeli society through a “traveling seminar” on identities, communities, and intergroup relations taught by Israeli anthropologist, and former Serling Israeli Visiting Scholar at MSU, Dr. Chen Bram, whose summary is presented.

During extensive study tours, we explored the different collective identities, focusing on Jerusalem, Haifa, and the Galilee. We met with people from various groups, heard about dilemmas of ethnic, national, and religious encounters in the most diverse and unique holy city in the world, and analyzed the differences between the dynamics of civil and national identities in Jerusalem, Haifa, and the Galilee. Our studies benefited from the support of Deborah Margolis, the librarian of Jewish Studies, Muslim Studies, and Anthropology, who joined the program.

Taking an anthropological approach, we experienced religious holidays and community events. We took part in the Ninth of Av prayers at the *Kotel* (Western Wall) and in the *Hurva* synagogue at the heart of the Jewish quarter of the Old City. In these events we also learned about the diversity of Jewish identities, and especially the diversity of orthodox Jewish approaches. During a tour to the north, we took part in a vivid *Kabbalat Shabbat* event in Moshav Nahalal, seeing the transformed attitude to Jewish religion and culture in one of the birthplaces of Israeli socialism, a place that used to symbolize a revolt against tradition. We also joined Muslim events, such as an *iftar* (breaking the fast) Ramadan dinner with a former mayor of an Israeli Arab village (Abu Ghosh), and celebrated the Muslim *Eid-al-Fitr* holiday with a Jerusalemite Palestinian family in the neighborhood of Tsur Baher. In these places we learned about the diversity of Palestinian and Muslim identities. We also learned about the importance of Jerusalem to Christianity, visiting the Holy Sepulcher, meeting the pilgrims in the Via-Dolorosa, and visiting additional Christian sites such as the colorful chapel in the Austrian hospice. In Haifa we



LISTENING TO A LECTURE BY RABBAI YEHUDAH
IN THE MAGNIFICENT SYNAGOGUE IN
TIRAT HAKARMEL (NEAR HAIFA)

visited the world center of a comparatively new world religion, the Bahá'í Faith, and also visited the Ahmediyya Muslim community on Mount Carmel.

Visits to synagogues allowed us also a look at the diversity of Jewish communities. We visited the Chortkov Hasidic court in Mea Shearim (Jerusalem); enjoyed the communal atmosphere in a small, veteran

neighborhood synagogue community of Jews from Urfa (Turkey, in the southeast Kurdish area); were amazed and surprised by the highly decorated synagogue of Jews from the Caucasus (Tirat Hakarmel, near Haifa), and of the Akko Tunisian Synagogue, rightly famous for its mosaic work. In an interesting conversation with the founder, we learned how he immigrated to Israel in 1948 and designed this special site in collaboration with artisans from the nearby Kibbutz Eylon. In each of these places we saw the myriad diversity of Jewish and Israeli identities, and we were moved by the differences (but also the similarities) of the efforts made by Jews from all over the world to construct renewed local identities in Israel. These sites exemplify how the history of Israel and Zionism manifested in the construction of places, of identities, and in current affairs. Some signs and symbols were shared in these different communities, such as the central place given to the seven species of the Holy Land in decorations and architecture, and the stressing of connections between the past in the diaspora and current life in Israel (in contrast to older ideas of “new beginning” and “neglecting of diaspora” characterized in the early years of the Israeli state).

Interestingly, the centrality of the Holy Land seven species were evident also in Palestinian sites that we visited, such as the ruins of the village of Lifta, the extant buildings a reminder of the once-thriving local Arab culture, leading us to discuss the great dilemmas arising from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. We focused on issues of intergroup relations in contemporary Jerusalem, learned about the complexities of the city and the conflict over it, which involves both national and religious aspects. While examining everyday intergroup relations, we examined the differences between the characteristics of relations between Palestinian residents and Jewish citizens in Jerusalem versus the relations in the other parts of Israel, where both national groups are citizens of Israel.

Along with the study of the dilemmas of contemporary Jerusalem, we also dedicated time to understanding the city as the capital of modern Israel. We visited the Knesset, the High Court, and the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. On the same day, we also walked from the Knesset to the magnificent fortress-like Monastery of the Cross. Situated in biblical scenery of olive and carob trees right at the very center of west Jerusalem, this monastery is kept by the Greek Orthodox but has special meaning also for Georgians: this is where their medieval national poet, Shuta Rostaveli, wrote his famous epic poem *The Knight in the Tiger Skin*. We discussed how the Israeli authorities tried to mediate between the Greeks and the Georgians. There we were served fresh orange juice by Muslims whose family has worked at this Christian site for generations. Indeed, an example of Jerusalem as both the capital of Israel and at the same time “a city of all nations.”



ON THE CARMEL BEACH PROMENADE IN HAIFA, WITH THE ACTIVISTS FROM *MEDOR LEDOR* (FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION) ORGANIZATION IN TIRAT HAKARMEL

Finally, the highlight of our programs was meeting with different groups of younger people and spending time with them. This included a visit to the John F. Kennedy Memorial in the Jerusalem forests, followed by a bonfire evening with Israeli Jerusalemites, most of whom recently finished their military service. We enjoyed a beachside dinner in Haifa with a group of immigrants’ activists from the Caucasus, and one of our MSU students’ favorite experience was a meeting with peers from the Circassian Muslim community in their beautiful village of Kfar Kama in the Galilee, which included also traditional dancing. During this visit we also had an opportunity to take part in an annual cultural festival of this community. During our visits we learned and experienced the difficult dilemmas that all local people face as part of the ongoing conflict, we saw how Jews and Arabs from the Galilee both attend the Circassian cultural event and enjoyed together a mesmerizing performance by a guest ensemble from Jordan. This left us with a taste of hope for the future. ~ **Chen Bram**, program director

“My trip to Israel this summer was truly an experience unlike any other. All our experiences showed us how diverse Israel is, and how many different stories and perspectives exist in this small state. For my final project, I am researching the extent of gender equality within kibbutzim, which was inspired by our tour of Kibbutz Ein Dor in the Galilee. This was a study abroad unlike any other, and one that really pushes you to dig deeper and meticulously examine everything around you. For me, this is just the beginning of an understanding of Israel and its place in the world.” ~ **Samantha Drasnin**, 2015 participant, James Madison College, Jewish Studies minor