

## Alpha Sigma Summer Scholarship Write-Up

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To begin, I would like to thank the Alpha Sigma Foundation for its generous summer scholarship. As someone who grew up in a dual-faith household and studied Peace, War, and Defense at UNC, I have always wanted to visit Israel. In my opinion, there is no better way to understand the monotheistic religions or Israel's geopolitical situation than to visit and talk with people who live there. The summer scholarship gave me this opportunity and helped bring to life what I had learned at home and in the classroom. In this final write up, I highlight the learning experiences that stood out to me the most.

I arrived in Ben Gurion International Airport and was immediately pulled aside by a security guard for questioning. He interrogated me about why I was there, where I was staying, whether I had friends in Israel, and if I had any plans to visit the West Bank. I got off the plane as a wide-eyed tourist, but the questioning brought me back to the reality of where I was and the geopolitical issues in the region. It wasn't the friendliest welcome, but it was the first of many ways I would see Israel take extreme measures to ensure its safety.

I spent my first three days in Tel Aviv, which is a secular city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The main highlight of my time in Tel Aviv was meeting with Monica Bland, a political officer in the U.S. Embassy Branch there. During our hour-long conversation, I learned about the controversial move of the embassy to Jerusalem, the main mission of U.S. political officers stationed there, and Israel's internal religious and political divisions that may pose an issue in the future. It was a privilege to speak with Ms. Bland because she provided me with a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the political situation there.

After Tel Aviv, I visited Jerusalem for five days. Jerusalem is a modern city, but the historic Old City combined with a prevalence of Orthodox Jews in various types of dress provide a stark contrast from Tel Aviv. Secular Tel Aviv is very different from more traditional Jerusalem and it was fascinating to see these differences first hand. During my conversation with Ms. Bland, she mentioned that the secular-orthodox divide in Israel is a real point of political tension, and by visiting both cities I could see how this tension was real. As an outsider, I believed that all of Israel was united, but in reality, many people have different visions for Israel's future.

In Jerusalem I had the opportunity to meet with Rabbi Ada Zavidov at Kehilat Har-El. I connected with her through one of my professors at Chapel Hill and she could not have been more friendly or helpful. Rabbi Ada is not your average rabbi. She is one of the first women rabbis in the world. She is also a Reform rabbi meaning that she leads a congregation that is deeply religious, but more modern than Orthodox Jews. We spoke about the varying thoughts on what qualifies someone as Jewish and how that looks different for different groups. For example, a Reform Jew in the U.S. might consider me Jewish due to my Jewish father, but an Orthodox Jew would not (they only consider someone to be Jewish if their mother is). We discussed the unique identity of the Jewish people and how it has been shaped by history, whether that be the destruction of the Temple hundreds of years ago or the Holocaust more recently. She told me about her faith journey and what ultimately inspired her to become a rabbi. We also touched on the similarities and differences between the three largest monotheistic religions as well as how Jews view Christianity and Islam. It was a fascinating conversation and one of the best ways I got in touch with my own Jewish heritage.

I visited Jerusalem's Old City as well. The history of Jerusalem is a history of multiple different religions, peoples, conquests, and defeats. Many groups have sought control of the land such as the Romans, the Crusaders and the Muslims. Thus, the Old City is rich in history and culture. I took a day-long history tour that took me to sites important to each religion, all of which were within a short walk of each other. I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock, and Western Wall to name a few. It was cool to link physical places to what I learned in school and to see how close each of these sites were to one another.

I also visited Yad Vashem, which is the Holocaust museum and memorial there. It was important for me learn more about the Holocaust as someone who lost ancestors in the Holocaust and as someone who is seeking to understand more about the Jewish identity. After visiting the museum, I could empathize with those who feel the need for a Jewish homeland and better understand the controversial ways Israel keeps itself safe. Of course, there are ways Israel conducts itself that are unacceptable; however, the visit to the museum helped me to more fully understand the history of the Jews as a people that haven't found a true home anywhere else before and their desire to preserve Israel.

I used Jerusalem as my home base to visit other places of interest such as the Dead Sea and Nazareth. The Dead Sea is the lowest place in the world at 430 meters below sea level and it receives only 50 millimeters of rainfall each year making it a striking environment. The water is also 34% salt, which makes it very easy to float. I learned about the history of the sea and its importance to the region both past and present. My trip to Nazareth took me to where Jesus is said to have grown up. Nazareth was full of churches commemorating different parts of Jesus'

life including where the Angel Gabriel first spoke to Mary. While on my tour I also visited other places mentioned in the Bible, including the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee.

Overall, my trip to Israel helped me dive into my Jewish heritage and area of academic study. Being there, speaking to foreign service officers, rabbis, and others helped me understand and engage with the world's three largest monotheistic religions and Israel's political situation in a deeper way. The trip was an eye-opening experience and the next step in an academic and personal faith journey that will continue. I'm truly grateful for this opportunity and for how Chi Psi has enriched my college experience as well.

Church of the Holy Sep Pt1



Church of the Holy Sep Pt2



Desert



Masada



Dome of the Rock



Old City Walls Jerusalem



Tar Heel Pride in Market





Western Wall pt1



Western Wall pt2



Yad Vashem

