

### Study Abroad Reflection

In Cape Town, South Africa, I was surrounded by beautiful beaches, adventurous mountains, and extensive wildlife. I spent the first month of my time in Cape Town, fully immersing myself into the culture, discovering the cuisine, heading out on safari, and stepping outside my comfort zone. It was my first time outside of the Jewish bubble and I imagined that the experience would allow me to explore life beyond my Judaism. In my classes and on my field trips, I was challenged and intellectually stimulated by the looming atmosphere of a state post-Apartheid, the economic disparities, and the harsh realities of a crippling health system. I was so content and excited to take in everything Cape Town uniquely had to offer, especially the blue flag beaches and gorgeous sunsets, yet, deep within me, I struggled because I missed the security of being surrounded by people who understood my culture, religion, and roots.

A month deep into my experience, I was connected to a local Jewish student who arranged to meet me at synagogue on Friday night. I walked through the synagogue gates and smiled as I saw adolescent Jewish boys playing basketball. When I sat down for Kabbalat Shabbat, for the first time in a month, the soul-felt prayers spiritually uplifted me. I finally felt a sense of home that I had been missing so deeply for the past month. When the prayers ended, the community made me feel so welcomed, by introducing me to everyone that filled the room, and I left services with several open invitations to Shabbat dinner. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and amazement for the embodiment of *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming guests) that the community expressed. At the Rabbi's house for Shabbat dinner that night, I was surrounded by Jews for the first time in a month. We sang my favorite Jewish songs. We shared our favorite

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moments from the week. I bit into a delicious homemade challah. I quite literally felt like I had found my home away from home.

For the following weeks, I returned to the synagogue, attended Kabbalat Shabbat services, and was invited to Shabbat dinners. My invitations soon expanded to Jewish learning events, dedication ceremonies, holiday celebrations, and so much more. It was not before long that I felt that I was an integral part of the intimate Jewish community in Cape Town. I had never felt more connected to my Jewish community and more engaged to discover a deeper connection with Judaism, than in Cape Town. Each invitation was intentional and made me feel incredibly valued by the Rabbi and his wife.

It was a freeing feeling to learn, and each learning session was perfectly curated, powerful, and relatable. Before Rosh Hashannah, I attended a Jewish learning session where the Rabbi's wife outlined the questions to ask yourself in reflection for the Jewish New Year. That night and for the weeks that followed, I guided myself through a Jewish self-reflection, writing down the elements of the year I was grateful for, evaluating how I had grown, and contemplating my expectations for the new year in the Jewish calendar.

Eager to delve deeper into the Jewish community, make connections, and continue to experience the comfort of home, I reached out to KAHAL who connected me to two Jewish women also studying abroad and seeking fulfilling Jewish experiences. The two women became my best friends and my biggest supporters. In just a matter of weeks, Keren, Reeve, and I

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became the most frequent members at Shabbat services and dinners, planned Sukkot themed events, learned how to make the most delicious challah just in time for Rosh Hashannah, and attended two live performances of the band Zusha. These two women helped me feel comfortable in Cape Town and shaped my study abroad experience. I left Cape Town spiritually uplifted and in awe of all of the natural beauty that South Africa had to offer. But, more importantly, I left South Africa with a newfound love and gratitude for Judaism, my spirituality, my Jewish friends, and my communities.

My journey with KAHAL did not end there. The following semester I travelled off to Tel Aviv, Israel. Knowing just how special it was to discover two like-minded Jewish women in South Africa, I sought out to create a beautiful community of inspired Jewish students in Tel Aviv. I compiled the skills and lessons I had learned in Cape Town and planned programs that embodied those skills in Tel Aviv. I planned Shabbat dinners that mimicked the intimacy of the Shabbat meals I had in Cape Town and organized challah baking events that used the recipe from Rabbi's wife in Cape Town.

While my time in Tel Aviv was upended and while I faced a whole disarray of different challenges and emotions during March and April, I had also never felt more comfortable and more grateful for the support system of KAHAL. During a time of change and transformation, the KAHAL staff continued to empathize, care, and give value to my emotions and circumstances.

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As the spring semester winded down, I continued to gain virtual invitations to events happening in Cape Town for Holocaust Remembrance Day, Israel Independence Day, and Mother's Day. Soon those invitations transformed into invitations to join in Olami Connect, an international Jewish meditation group run by Jewish students in Cape Town. For me, I was grateful that I had been so fortunate to be a part of the beautiful intimate community in Cape Town. Even more so, knowing that the Cape Town Jewish community and the connections that I made on the other side of the world continue to remain with me today is incredibly powerful. My Jewish friends and mentors in Cape Town, the Jewish learning sessions, the two amazing Jewish study abroad women I met in Cape Town, and the KAHAL staff have truly shaped me into the person who I am today. Without these experiences, mentors, and friends, I would not still be studying in Jewish learning initiatives by KAHAL or cultivating community and providing resources for future study abroad students on my college campus this upcoming fall as a KAHAL Campus Intern.