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## OTZMA 25 COMES TO ISRAEL



OTZMA 25 hiking at Nachal Tamar during the Opening Tiyul.



Shauna Gamsey (Miami), Ellen Holtzman (San Francisco),  
Vanessa Friedman (Boston), and Whitney Frost (Richmond)

## One Month Done With Nine to Go

By Alex Kadis Edited by Lauren Zink

Somehow a month has already passed us by. In that time, we've been taught about our history and our faith, helped each other overcome our fears, "rode" camels, floated in the Dead Sea, practiced yoga, attended a rally, hiked to a waterfall, moved into Merkaz Klita (absorption center) Beit Canada, began studying Hebrew together, watched the sun rise over the Old City in Jerusalem, welcomed in the new year, ate massive amounts of food with our new host families, celebrated a couple birthdays (**Jason Winkler**, New Jersey and **Shauna Gamsey**, Miami), and witnessed the serenity of Jerusalem on Yom Kippur. Perhaps most importantly, we've become a family.

Our introduction to Israel was fast-paced, exciting and highly varied. On our very first group hike, we helped fellow group members overcome their fears of very, very tall ladders. If it hadn't been for a full moon, we would have had the chance to truly see the stars near a Bedouin tent - after quickly "riding" camels in a circle. The Dead Sea's salt stung our cuts and our eyes after some of us decided that dunking our heads in the water was a good idea. Despite the pain, the Sea, and the nearby spa, were a wonderful experience - we especially loved lying out and swimming in the pool. We lived on a kibbutz, where we were fortunate enough to celebrate our first weekend together. Abiding by the Shabbat traditions we were able to kick back and relax. One morning we were even taught yoga by our very own OTZMANik yoga instructor, **Nikki Avershal** (Pittsburgh). When the sun went down on Saturday night, we said Havdallah prayers in a

circle on the lawn underneath a tree. It was the perfect way to end our first Shabbat in Israel. After the candle was extinguished, we had a few hours to explore the nightlife of Jerusalem. Many of us attended a rally in honor of the twenty-fourth birthday of Gilad Shalit - an Israeli soldier that has been held prisoner in the Gaza Strip by Hamas since 2006. Mere days after getting off the plane, we were able to witness firsthand the affect that the conflict has had on the lives of those who live here. The Israelis in the crowd expressed their kinship with Gilad and his family, saying that in Israel, he could be anyone's son.

Within the week, we moved into our new home located minutes from a beautiful Ashkelon beach. For the next few months we are living in Merkaz Klita Beit Canada, a very lively absorption center filled with

more children than adults. Most of the residents are olim chadashim (new immigrants) from Ethiopia. They brought their own unique culture with them to Israel - which they gave us a small sample of when some of the girls performed a traditional dance, and then we all sang along to Shakira's "Waka Waka". A few days later we held a small carnival for the children of the Beit Canada, full of games made from items we could find cheaply in Ashkelon or around the Merkaz Klita.

***"I have to say that as far as what I did right, being in Israel at that moment was certainly something I am very proud of."***  
***-Lauren Zink (Berkshire County)***

We were soon split into two classes for Ulpan [intensive Hebrew], as some of us needed assistance with the basics of the aleph-bet while others could pass rather well for Israeli if they wanted to. Our teachers Miri (aleph class) and Nana (bet class) have been helpful and entertaining throughout our studies so far. They even screened two movies in the *gan yeladim* (kindergarten classroom). While those of us who had only just begun our Hebrew studies had difficulty understanding what was said, we were given more exposure to Israelis speaking in their native tongue. Unfortunately for those who actually do understand Hebrew, it seems that the kindergarten television is set to "Alvin and the Chipmunks" mode - all of the voices came out incredibly high pitched.

On the morning before Rosh Hashanah, we left quite early for a seminar in the Old City of Jerusalem. There we learned about Selichot - how we as Jews atone for our sins.



Nikki Avershal (Pittsburgh) meets her new neighbors at the Beit Canada Absorption Center in Ashkelon.



Ariel Sternberg (Boston) at Welcoming Ceremony for OTZMA 25.

On thoughts of her own past year, **Lauren Zink** said, "It is around this point according to the Jewish Religion that G-d decides if you are going to live for another year, or if this one will be your last. When thinking about myself and everything I have done this year, I have to say that as far as what I did right, being in Israel at that moment was certainly something I am very proud of."

We ended the morning by eating bagels and watching the sun rise over the Old City.

For Rosh Hashanah, we traveled to our host families, our homes away from home. Some of us have family in the country, so there was no need for OTZMA to assign us an adopted family. Others joined their fellow OTZMANikim on their trips to meet their own families. But most of us met new people, traveled to new cities, stayed in new homes and ate new food. We were graciously adopted by these families that knew very little about us other than that we needed homes for the holidays and the occasional Shabbat. Those of us who were assigned families were given a glimpse at the second part of the program. In a few months time, we will end up living near our host families in our Partnership 2000 (P2K) cities.

**Erin Leibowitz** (Washington, D.C.) spoke enthusiastically about her family in Ofakim. "My family in Ofakim is truly amazing. They are of Moroccan and Iraqi descent and they run an ethnic catering business. Osi (my adoptive mom) is such a cool woman."

During our most recent seminar in Jerusalem, we learned about Yom Kippur through six different lenses. We learned about the Torah through our bodies in yoga, and the prophet Jonah through texts and art. We deconstructed prayer and the confession. We looked at what repentance means in the eyes of different AA groups. We delved into the secular side of Israel - what it means to be non-religious in a Jewish country. Finally, we discussed why tradition plays such an important role in Israeli society.

The following day was Yom Kippur and we each reflected on our year in our own ways - some prayed in synagogue, others around the Old City and some just slept off the exhausting day before.

Most of us have been to Israel before, either with family or with Taglit (Birthright). Some of us have family here, others didn't know a soul in the Israel before they stepped off the plane at Ben Gurion International. Some planned months in advance for this trip, others mere days. In the end, we're all here for many different reasons and with many different motivations. We come from diverse heritages and have rich personal histories. But as different as our lives may have been before we arrived here, we have all come to share in a love for Israel, its people, and helping those around us whether it be other Israelis or members of our new OTZMA family.



**Laura Reader**  
**(Los Angeles, CA)**  
 Laura is a recent University of Washington graduate, with a B.S. in Applied Math and a B.A. in Sociology. Laura loves to travel, to learn new languages, and to help people find their own path in life while finding her own.

## Slichot in Jerusalem— Reprinted from Laura Reader's Blog

רעש

Resh. Ayin. Shin.

Noise.

Yesterday, very early in the morning, OTZMA 25 journeyed to Yerushalayim for Selichot. This is a special ceremony to offer your apologies to whomever you think is listening, to ask for forgiveness in order to live another year. I have been to the Kotel before. A looming tower of white stone, I forced it to have meaning the last time I visited. After stories of revelations occurring in this very place, how could I not have a life-altering experience? Well, I didn't. Instead I watched old women, hands pressed against the cold wall, eyes clenched closed so as to fully feel each crevice of worn rock and crumpled note. Barely breathing, except to let out a muffled sob—these people had arrived at the latter part of their life and were visiting the Wall for the first time. And there I was, struggling to think of what to ask for, or if I even believed that it was worth asking for something from a G-d I wasn't sure existed.

And now today, I returned. A little over 2 years later and a firmer foundation in faith and believing (because faith and believing are two separate things to me), I looked at the Kotel hesitantly. After all, it represented until this point a formidable foe from my past, a reminder that I couldn't feel what I thought I should. I approached the wall and did the same as I did last time. No prayer or conversation. No pomp or circumstance. Just a rapid approach, palms open, eyes closed. Slowly the energy I searched for last time began to pulse through my hands. It blocked out all the noise within my head, allowing the sounds around me to melt all distractions away. Behind me, there were young boys praying as loud as they could (perhaps G-d has a hearing problem?), louder than the old men that have probably been coming to the Kotel for years. And then it comes, the blow of the shofar, and finally I feel Israel and the chag seep into my body, cell by cell. Again there are the older women next to me, praying like Chana—our powerful female model for prayer.

שקט

Shin. Kuf. Tet.

Silence.

For what may be hours or minutes, I am frozen in this position. The pulse has moved me to rock back and forth and there are no thoughts in my head but the now. (Like I read in a book, the power of living in the now has a sense of godliness and this is perhaps why we call it a presence.)

Finally, with tranquility and a steady hand, I write my note. I ask for love, pure and simple. Not the kind I want but the kind I need.

I walk away from the wall, never turning my back on it.

Shana Tova Umetuka everyone. <3

*Laura/Liat's blog can be found at [lchaimliat@blogspot.com](mailto:lchaimliat@blogspot.com)*

## OTZMA Helps Build Israel

ON September 1st, not long after arriving to their new home in Ashkelon, OTZMA 25 had the opportunity to kick off the year of volunteering by working with a student organization called Ayalim (<http://www.ayalim.org.il>). In the spirit of the *chalutzim*, the pioneers who helped transform Israel into a barren desert and swampland to the flourishing modern country it is today, this organization builds student villages in peripheral towns and communities in the North and South, as an attempt to encourage students from the center of the country to come live in and help build the less populated areas of Israel. In a fun-filled and rewarding afternoon, OTZMA-niks helped make a path within the Ayalim community in Ashalim, and added to a long tradition of young Jews from across the world who helped build the State of Israel.



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Questions or comments? Contact us at [otzma@jafi.org](mailto:otzma@jafi.org) or call 02.621.6274

OTZMA is a 10-month program that offers Jewish adults ages 20-26 (college graduates preferred) an opportunity to live and volunteer in Israel in a variety of settings.

[www.OTZMA.org](http://www.OTZMA.org)