

When our OTZMA group stepped off the plane at Ben Gurion Airport, we were immediately inundated with Hebrew—this was of course to be expected. After spending a few days in Jerusalem, we often heard a combination of English and Hebrew, also not too surprising given the number of transplanted Americans and British living there. Nothing quite prepared me, however, for the languages and cultures we were overwhelmed with upon arrival in Ashkelon.

Our Mercaz Klita (absorption center) is clearly an interesting mix of cultures, with an 80% Ethiopian population, and 20% South American community, one hears Amharic and Spanish, mixed with rudimentary Hebrew and English. But we also have new immigrants from Yemen and Morocco. When we first moved in, the center threw a dance party for us and the older teenagers. The DJ tried to accommodate everyone, but when he played American music, it was mostly the OTZMANikim out on the dance floor, salsa music brought out the South Americans, and the Ethiopians primarily danced to their music. Yet the moment we heard “Od Yavoh Shalom Aleinu,” or “Heveinu Shalom Aleichem” the whole group joined in dancing and singing at the top of their lungs...it was a scene that overwhelmed me with joy.

I discovered that this diversity of cultures within the Jewish community is one my favorite aspects of Israeli life. It was also one of the most unexpected for me. Though I’ve been to Israel before, it has been as a tourist where I saw life on a somewhat superficial level. But now that I know Israelis from Ethiopia, Argentina, Russia, Mexico, Yemen, Morocco, and Brazil I have a better understanding for the dynamic, vibrant society here. Despite many serious cultural differences, most immigrants share the dream of a better life in Israel. There is also a bond they share because of their Jewish heritage, and this is most clear when external differences are highlighted. We all may move to different music, but we are all moved by the ideals of freedom and peace.

This diversity is not unique to Ashkelon, or to recent immigrant communities. One of my favorite ways to spend Shabbat is with my adoptive family in Netanya. They live in a quiet, mostly Orthodox, neighborhood in the newer part of the beautiful, coastal city. My time there is very quiet, and by most people’s standards even a bit boring, but to me it’s fascinating.

My American-born adoptive mother (also a former OTZMA participant) is married to a man from France whose parents are Tunisian. When I spent Rosh Hashanah with them and their four children, I was amazed to see that kids are all trilingual (even the 1 and a half year old vacillates between ooh-la-la and oy-vey). More than that, however, I experienced a whole new set of Jewish customs, including a Rosh Hashanah seder and an entirely foreign menu. Having met other families in the neighborhood, I see this is the norm. Many families have fused together customs from all over the world and are teaching their children a form of Judaism that is enriched by many heritages.

I’ve always been proud and happy to be Jewish, but living in Israel with the diverse communities here also excites and invigorates me. It gives me hope that the Jewish people have a long, exciting future ahead of them. More importantly, in the immediate future anyway, I’m learning to appreciate lots of new food, new music, and new friends.