I spent two months in the Middle East for my medical elective, and was able to split my time between Israel and Palestine, thanks in no small part to the generous contribution by the Pressland fund. I am completely fascinated by this region and its people, so often at the heart of geopolitical controversy. As a Jewish medical student, I felt personally involved in the healthcare disparity between Israel and Palestine. I had done some research before I went into the diverse geographical and political landscapes that exist within this small strip of land, but I wanted to see things for myself and, crucially, to meet people on both sides of the Green Line. My main aim, I suppose, was non-judgmentally to inform myself about this complex conflict and amazing place, and to begin building a relationship with the region that would allow me to contribute wherever my skills might be of use. I knew that language skills would be crucial.

There were two languages that I encountered during the summer, and ideally I would love to have devoted time to studying both, but two months gets filled extremely quickly! I was informed by my host organisations that the Palestinian medical system mostly used English as the medical language. I also had more of a basis in Hebrew – I completed a language centre course and had been using duolingo through the year – and this allowed me to attain a meaningful level in a small amount of time. So I learnt some survival Arabic from a recommended self-study course (the BBC’s Talk Arabic), and will hopefully engage in more formal study in future years. But I used the generous Pressland award primarily to fund my two weeks of intensive Hebrew Language Tuition, on which this report will be focused.

Ulpan Or

Mere days after my 5th year medical exams, I landed in Jerusalem – the beautiful and bizarre city at the epicentre of three major world religions. My husband and I lived in Nachla’ot, an old district of winding alleyways. Our basement flat had a little courtyard, where pink petals floated down from the shady bougainvillaeas above (see right). It was a long walk each morning to Ulpan Or, but a lovely one, and it just worked for me to sort the accommodation and course out separately. Ulpan Or is in a very expensive area of Jerusalem, whereas we lived very centrally but found a very reasonable AirBnB. I would hugely recommend Nachla’ot – reasonable, picturesque, and right next to the Market, buzzing town centre, and helpful Light Rail. Jerusalem is a large, hilly city, with many personalities and districts, but we could easily walk to the buzzing market with its spices and fruits and souvenirs; to the metropolitan city centre; and to the ancient, holy, old city. One of the wonderful aspects of my language course was that I was able to gain proficiency in the language while settling in and exploring.
The very next morning, I set off for my Hebrew course – a long walk but a nice one (see left). Ulpan Or is a little establishment, above a row of shops in the German Colony. They have a large reputation and teach thousands of students all over the world through Skype lessons. Their study method comprises a few different aspects, which are centred around the impressive and extensive e-book resources. When you arrive you are set up with an account and, after a one-on-one spoken assessment of your level, the appropriate e-books are enabled on your account. These then form the basis of your lessons and self study, as you work through the dialogues and scenarios that arise, with accompanying vocabulary, embedded videos, and audio.

My mornings were spent in intensive classes, one-on-one with a wonderful teacher, called Mor. There’s a strange part of language learning with someone that makes you feel quite intimate – particularly once your language enables you to discuss politics, thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. I sat with (and slightly fell in love with) Mor in half hour blocks that were alternated with half an hour of self-study time, in which she would set me achievable but ambitious goals. I tended to try and accomplish these along with some tea from their supplies, and amused everybody by going through large volumes of milk in the process. By the time the morning was done I was quite tired but always felt I had really come along way, and was at that glorious exponential part of language learning where each morning I came away really able to say more – so would enjoy going and ordering my lunch and explaining my allergies in Hebrew (lunch on my first few days was pretty basic!).

Each afternoon, I would go out and about around Jerusalem with another teacher, on what they call ‘walking lessons’. This was such a good way to consolidate my morning lessons, and get practice speaking with different teachers. They would have liaised with Mor so that they were expecting the right level, and we would go out together: to the market, a coffee shop, or the shopping district. The whole time we were talking in Hebrew, even when I’d only been learning for a couple of days! The teachers insisted on using what I had to get something across, and encouraged me to speak to other Israelis in shops, on the street, or to order. At first, I found this monumentally embarrassing! But these trips really helped me to grow in confidence and convert theory into conversation, and helped me to see quite how wonderfully surrounded by ‘resources’ you are when learning a language in the country. This
was true even at a very basic level: before I knew numbers above 10, a teacher would ask me how much things were on a menu and I would tell them the digits individually. Or in a shop we would go round the different foods and I would have to decide what the offers meant from the signs. Within a few days, to my surprise, I found myself asking people in shops or stalls what their names were on my own time after lessons. Because I am clearly not Israeli, and because asking for someone’s name is a childish opening, they tended to slow down a little and engage me in a basic back-and-forth. I remember working my way up a main road on the way back to our flat on about the fourth day, and realizing I was having happy little conversations with complete strangers – it was great fun!

At the end of each week all the students, from lots of different backgrounds and ages and places, get together, and there is a ‘graduation’ (see right). Everybody has to prepare and say something on a theme, which would be vague enough that everyone could take part in at their own level. So some complete beginners would nervously read out a transliterated sentence, and one or two people had all the tenses and would speak for a fluent minute without notes. I was somewhere in the middle! The first week I was there it was ‘how do you make the everyday special’, and I am going to include my little bit because it took me hours but I was ever so proud to construct and say something coherent, and I think it exemplifies the way that I was encouraged to use the kind of constructions and words that I already knew to get something across (and forgive me – it’s more than a bit silly).

Thanks to their clever methods, I felt I came on leaps and bounds in just that fortnight.
On to other things

After Ulpan Or, I went on to work in the Paediatrics department of an Israeli hospital for three weeks, and then in Palestinian General Practice for another three. I learnt a huge amount: about medicine, about the people, about the areas, and about myself; but feel that the details are not the focus of this report. Nevertheless, my language skills from Ulpan Or were sorely needed in the Israeli hospital, where it is almost a point of pride that medical matters are conducted mostly in Hebrew. In fact, it was a little disheartening to come from Ulpan Or where every skill was praised and encouraged, to a place where I suddenly realised there is an awful lot more Hebrew to be learnt! But I picked up helpful words, and was able to broadly follow along with consultations by the end of it. And I can't imagine how lost I would have been without those first two weeks of tuition – it was invaluable!

In general I feel very positively about my Hebrew course, as is probably obvious from above. The only thing I would say is that it was extremely expensive. I was lucky that with the Pressland fund and other grants, I was able to justify the expense, and I knew I wanted a really intense course as I could only spare a couple of weeks before I started more straightforwardly medical work. The language skills certainly paid off, but I suspect a future student looking for a longer-term course could find more economic options.

One thing I am sure of is that this language investment was a long term one – I am sure I will be back. I wanted to learn more about this conflict, this region, and these people(s), and I certainly did. I mostly tried to be interested and listen, without judgment or comment. I think that one of the problems is that the people are currently so separated in most ways, that they can’t even imagine living side by side. The fear and the hate are so pervasive. But medicine is very leveling, and the chance to meet children and families on both sides, with my (albeit basic) language skills, was invaluable. I really hope that one day these people will be able to see that they all want the same thing: for their children to be healthy, to be happy, and to grow up in peace.

I feel much more intimately connected to, interested in, and invested in, both Palestine and Israel. This summer has sowed the seeds for what will, I hope, become a career-long involvement in the region, and language skills were a key part of what was an amazing summer.
Abigail Magrill
Successfully participated in **novice-mid**
level Hebrew course
WELL DONE!

Orly Ganor
Ulipan-Or Director

Appendix: Certificate of completion