

# Gleaning a better understanding of their pasts

■ Students get a chance to connect with their culture, history, and family through a summer trip in Israel

By Lisa Toth  
Oregon Daily Emerald

The water in the Dead Sea is so dense with minerals and salt that people can float, but they can't swim. Because of its content, the sea cannot sustain any form of life.

Josh Frankel, kicker for the Oregon football team, heard rumors but didn't believe them.

"I thought I'd go in and swim like an Olympic champ," he said. "I soon realized that the rumors were true."

Frankel, a senior majoring in journalism, was one of 40 Jewish students at the University who attended a free, 10-day trip to Israel in June. Hillel, the foundation for Jewish life on campus, offered the trip.

As the largest Jewish organization in the world, with foundations and affiliates on 500 college campuses around the globe, Hillel offered the intense program to college students around the world who had never been to the ancient city of Jerusalem, but identified themselves as Jewish people. The tour, underwritten by Taglit/Birthright Israel, balanced meeting new friends with educational tours about the historic sites and a religious understanding of Judaism.

Taglit/Birthright Israel, a partnership of philanthropists, Jewish communities and citizens of Israel, is a worldwide initiative to provide this learning experience to students.

Stephanie Yellin, the Jewish Campus Service Corps Fellow for Hillel, graduated from the University of Massachusetts in May and started working at the fellowship in August. She said staffing the trip was an opportunity to meet 40 students before she even arrived in Eugene to start her new job.

One of the first stops on the trip's itinerary was Hezekiah's Water Tunnel. The ancient system underneath Jerusalem was constructed hundreds of years before Christ to bring water to the city from Gihon spring, east of the city. Yellin said actually walking through the passage with flashlights was much more exciting than just reading about it.

The group visited the Western Wall, the only wall still standing from the second temple of Jerusalem. Yellin said there were a range of responses when the group came before the wall. Some students cried, while others felt no effects.

"When I first went to the Western Wall, all I saw was a bunch of rocks," Frankel said. But as the trip went on, he said he learned it was not the physical rocks that were important, but the memories and history of the Jewish people that the rocks represented.

"One tradition is to write a note,

letter or request to God and to stick it between the cracks in the rocks in the wall," Yellin said.

Yellin added that one of the rewards of the trip was being around people who, like her, were confused and were questioning their religion.

The group camped in Tel Arad in the Negev Desert and woke up at 4 a.m. to watch the sunrise from Masada, a Jewish mountain, which features the ruins of a Jewish community. Yellin said Masada is a symbol of strength, honor and pride.

"It's hard to compare to anything in America," she said. "It's not like going to visit the Washington memorial."

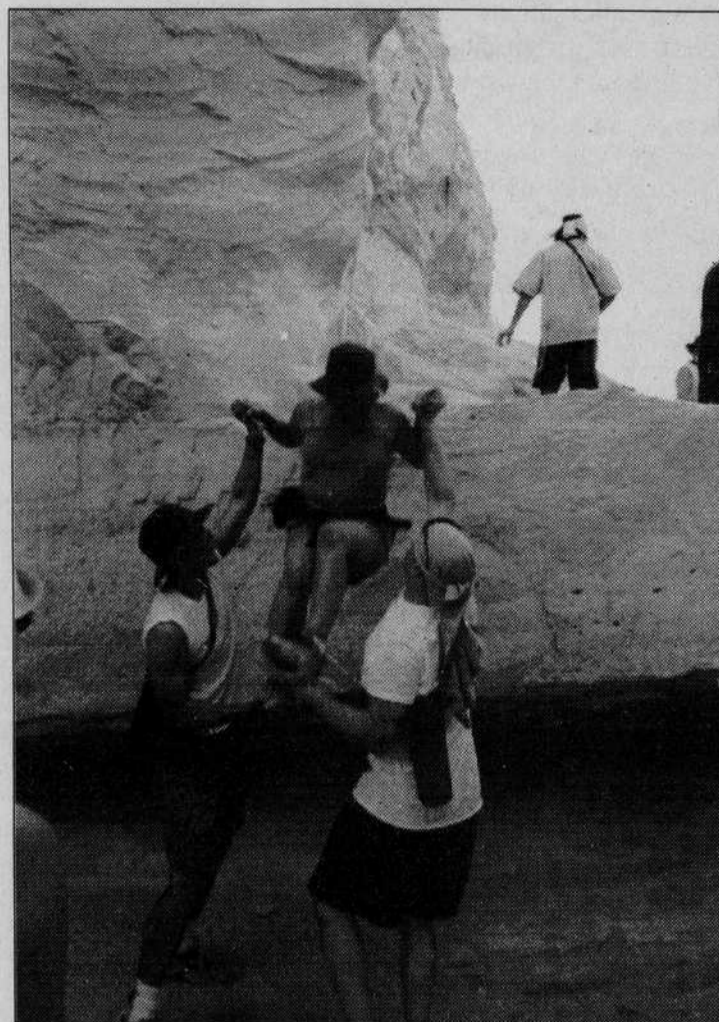
Other highlights included the club scene in Tel Aviv, community service work for the elderly and visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Director of Hillel Rachel Canar said the participants returned to Eugene with a better understanding of their identities and beliefs.

"This trip is so significant because it affords Jewish students the opportunity to learn something about their heritage, and hopefully gives them an interest in positively identifying with Jews," she said.

Yellin said she left Israel feeling reconnected with her culture, history and family.

The trip will be offered again in June of 2001. Students can contact Hillel at 343-8920 or register online at [www.israel2000.org](http://www.israel2000.org).



Courtesy Photo  
Sophomore Dan Gruber and senior Erik Nicolaisen help sophomore Lisa Warshaw down an incline during a hike in the Negev Desert.

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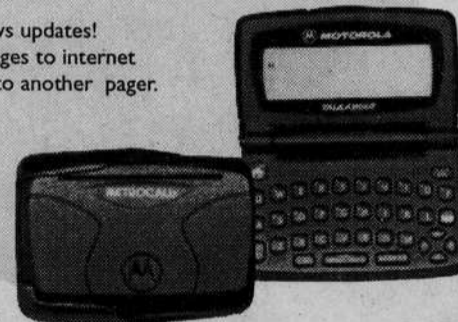
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