

Writing 220 Sample: Me and אנחנו¹

My arrival at the Middlebury College School for Hebrew was a less than entirely smooth experience. To set the scene: only a week and a half earlier, I underwent surgery in Miami, Florida. I spent the next week recovering and imagining my impending travel to Vermont, where I would begin an intensive seven-week immersion program in Hebrew (which I had been strong-armed into attending by my Hebrew professor at Michigan, who happened also to be the program's co-director). There was a lot going on at the moment.

The program would begin with a long orientation weekend, Thursday to Sunday. Students would meet each other and their course instructors, all in English, and begin forming connections before the program would officially start. As soon as the meet-and-greet weekend ended, bright and early Monday morning, we would all sign Middlebury's "Language Pledge," an agreement to read, speak, and listen to Hebrew only—no English allowed—for the next seven weeks. (Or three weeks: students could opt to come only for the first three or last three rather than the full seven.)

While this orientation began—and the students with whom I would spend almost two months were all meeting each other for the first time—I was lying on a couch, worrying about when I would actually get to Middlebury. I had sent a couple emails that morning to the program assistant director, asking about logistics and a late orientation and maybe a tour and my student ID and when could I get into my dorm? And will I have to carry a lot of books around? And if I arrive late on Wednesday and also have to

¹ "Me and Us"

leave the program early on a Tuesday, would that count for the full six weeks that would make my federal funding applicable? And a lot more “and”s.

I was starting to freak out, waiting for answers to all these important questions and unsure how my time at the program would begin. Shaken by all the massive question marks floating around, I rescheduled my flight to get me into Vermont Sunday afternoon. That way, even if I missed out on meeting everyone in English, I’d be able to start classes on time along with everyone else on Monday morning. Once I made that decision, I felt better about my impending arrival, since I had taken care of the worst of it, and the rest was largely out of my hands anyway. All I could do now was get myself to campus and trust that the logistics would work themselves out.

Which, it turns out, they did. I arrived Sunday afternoon, having driven with my mother straight from the airport to my dorm building. I was met there by my friend Gaya, who would work there as a “bilingual” (essentially activities co-director, along with another of my friends, Tali). I quickly set up my dorm room, said goodbye to my mom, and had dinner in the dining hall. Then it was time for the all-schools welcome convocation—which included a lot more enthusiastic yelling than I was prepared for—and suddenly my last evening of English for seven weeks was over.

In the morning, we congregated in a conference hall; signed individual contracts stating that we wouldn’t speak English or engage in English media for the duration of the program; and counted down together until the moment that the pledge went into effect. Then we were off to our assigned classes.

The program was split into levels, one through five, indicating the degree of proficiency of the students in that level. Each level would have two courses in the morning and free time for activities and homework in the afternoon. When my Hebrew

professor at U of M first told me about this program months prior, she said that she would place me in level five, the highest level of proficiency. I remember scoffing when she said that—there was no way I would do well at that level. All throughout high school and in my first year of college, I felt significant imposter syndrome in my Hebrew classes. I felt like I was lacking in my 300-level class, so I sincerely doubted that I was good enough for a course that advanced. I even argued with my professor about it: if I applied, I insisted—and at the time, that was definitely still an “if”—I would have to be placed in the level four track. She negotiated with me until we agreed that I would start in level five, and if that really proved to be too much for me, she would switch me into level four. I conceded, believing that my impending transfer into the lower level was a foregone conclusion.

This conversation immediately resurfaced in my memories as I walked to the building where my classes this summer would take place. I didn’t know exactly where that was (I guess *all* the logistics didn’t work themselves out, since I missed the room assignments at orientation), so Gaya had to walk me there from the conference hall where we took the pledge. I entered the classroom to find that I was seemingly the youngest level-five student by ten years, and the alarms in my head that had already been blaring IMPOSTER for the last few minutes only increased in volume.

The first class, which lasted an hour, went fine. I understood most of what Hiba, our instructor, Hiba said. I got by. The second class, which went on for two hours and was taught by Jagoda, was my absolute nightmare come true. I understood *maybe* sixty percent of the words she used, and on the very first day she assigned a chapter of a novel with very flowery language and words like “enlightened” and “sorcery” that my day

school education definitely didn't cover. By the time I left class for lunch, those alarms were all I could hear.

That lunch in the all-schools dining hall was my first genuine interaction with anyone other than Gaya, Tali, and a couple of Middlebury staff. I made conversation with students in other levels—though to be completely accurate, I probably have to put the word “made conversation” in quotation marks. My contributions mostly consisted of pleasantries and discussions of the weather—safe words and phrases I'd spoken since elementary school and that presented no danger of embarrassing me. If I wasn't utterly confident in a thought's lexical and syntactical correctness, I did not say it aloud. I could have divined the meaning of life at that long wooden table, and I probably wouldn't have made a peep for fear of using the wrong relative pronoun. Of course, it was completely irrational, as these things usually are: some of the people I talked to still didn't know how to speak in the future tense, and they definitely wouldn't have noticed some of the mistakes I was afraid to make. Still, I shied away from everything from the basics. I cringed every time someone asked me what level I was in; the answer of “five” was invariably followed by “but I'm probably actually at level four-and-a-half but there isn't such a thing so they put me in five hahaha” with no pause anywhere to be seen. This was me—the hesitant four-and-a-half-er.

When lunch was over, we had an hour of designated homework time in our respective classrooms, where we could ask our instructors questions. As soon as that hour was over, I took my laptop with me to the library cafe and worked by myself for a while. It was a very necessary breather after so much time spent anxiously talking in Hebrew. Here, I didn't have to scrutinize every syllable that awkwardly tumbled from

my mouth; I could just sit quietly, sipping a late-afternoon iced coffee and slowly typing my homework for the day.

The first whole week of the program continued in the same vein. Some days, I went to an event put on by the bilinguals, like a movie viewing party or directed arts and crafts activity—all in Hebrew, obviously. But mostly I stayed in the library cafe or in my dorm room. I watched a lot of *קופה ראשית* (an Israeli sitcom about a supermarket) during that stretch. My conversations with other students remained reserved.

Then on the Fourth of July, the School of Hebrew celebrated with an outdoor party. I started to feel my barriers weaken, even if only slightly. I branched out and talked to new people. Two of those people were Zipi and Ellie, the latter of whom I learned would soon transfer into my class from level four. We chatted about wishing to go into the city with our free time over the weekend. It turned out that Zipi had a car on campus, and the three of us decided to drive to the city square market that Saturday morning.

The trip was fun, mostly. We enjoyed walking slowly past the market stalls, admiring hand-crafted jewelry, greeting cards, and miscellaneous paraphernalia. We eventually stopped at a coffee shop and maintained stilted conversation over our drinks. It was a little awkward, especially during the conversational lulls one would ordinarily fill with trivial comments that none of us knew how to say in Hebrew. Every sentence took each of us a little more effort, so things didn't flow so naturally. It *was* fun, though. And I got to learn about each of them—about how Zipi studies Russian at Brown University, making Hebrew her fourth language after Norwegian, and about how Ellie wants to live in Israel for a year after she graduates so she can eventually become a journalist reporting on Middle Eastern politics.

When we made it back to our shared dorm building, it felt like I had reached a sort of milestone. I had really *used* my Hebrew in a sustained social context, and it hadn't gone horribly wrong like I'd feared. Speaking in Hebrew outside the classroom became a bit more normal-feeling and a little less intimidating.

Things only improved after that: my more difficult class started feeling easier. I soon realized, though, that was less to do with the actual level of difficulty and more to do with my Hebrew getting better. (Few times in my life have I been as happy as I was when I recognized how rapidly my Hebrew was improving.) I also became more socially adventurous, now accepting the fact that my Hebrew was what it was, and that I shouldn't let that get in the way of forming relationships. This development invited a new milestone—one evening, I paused doing homework in my dorm room to fill my water bottle in the dorm's communal kitchen. When I entered the room, I found a group of level three students, including Zipi, working on a group project together. They invited me to sit down and do my own work with them. I hesitated a moment before recognizing this as another chance to branch out and refine my conversational Hebrew. I got to chatting with Zipi and another girl in her class, Eva, not knowing then that I would become incredibly close with both of them over the next few weeks. We spent the night goofing off, then a few days later we all walked to the in-town cafe together.

I was proud of myself, not just because I was becoming more comfortable having casual conversations in Hebrew, but because I was becoming more outgoing. I hadn't expected to make any close friends at this program, especially given the added difficulty of bonding in a less familiar language. I was grateful to get to know these girls.

Then suddenly, three weeks had passed, meaning it was time to say goodbye to a lot of the students. While Zipi, Eva, and I were enrolled for the full seven weeks, many of

our classmates had signed on just for the first three. So, in order to send them off properly, the School of Hebrew held a graduation/send-off ceremony for them. I had heaved an internal sigh every time I'd seen the event listed in the school's calendar, knowing that this celebration would mark the last time I'd see so many friendly faces to which I'd grown accustomed—faces that met me with warm smiles at meals and activities, and which I knew I would probably never see again, given their sporadic placement around the country (and even the globe, as was the case with a wonderful woman from Jordan). I was definitely not looking forward to it.

That is, until I caught a small detail in the school-wide calendar the day before: at the three-week ceremony, seven-week students would be allowed to *break the pledge* in order to send off the three-weekers. That meant that for the first time since arriving here, I would be able to talk to all my new friends and acquaintances in our first language. I spent the next day and a half practically buzzing with excitement. Zipi and Eva couldn't get me to shut up about how I couldn't wait to hear what everyone sounded like in English (not that they really tried, since they were pretty excited, too).

The ceremony itself was very nice: a series of instructors' speeches congratulating the various levels and acknowledging their vast improvements, each followed by a group photo with the whole class. I sat in a row with Zipi and Ava, my hands tingling by the end from all the clapping. When it was time for level five to take their group photo, I jumped up and raced to the front, posing next to Dani, the one level fiver who was departing. Not long after I returned to my seat, the school's co-directors gave a few remarks about how proud everyone should be for completing the three-week program,

and then they began the countdown. The room shouted שתיים שלוש, then, finally

תנאי...and the pledge was off.

I turned immediately to Zipi and Eva and asked tentatively, “We can speak in English now, right?” I half-expected one of the school directors to throw me a scolding glance.

But no, this was it, we could actually speak in English. And we didn’t waste a second—Zipi, Eva and I immediately launched into a conversation about anything and everything: types of music we like, funny things that happened in our classes, family drama, et cetera et cetera et cetera. We talked about how we each sound different in English: I apparently speak in a much lower register than in Hebrew, which was interesting to discover, and apparently it’s much clearer that I’m an American. (Zipi asked me during our first-ever conversation on July 4 if I was from South Africa, and Eva revealed to me much later that she initially thought I was German.)

Over the course of the next hour, through my conversations with my new friends, a nagging observation that had been semi-present in my mind during the last few weeks suddenly rocketed forth in HD: I wasn’t *me* when I was speaking in Hebrew. The more I chatted with my Zipi and Eva in English, the more I realized how much of my personality and conversational quirks I’d been missing. I was cracking jokes left and right in what I soon recognized as a rapid-fire attempt to make up for all the times I couldn’t get them out fast or clear enough in Hebrew. It felt like a linguistic dam had broken and everything I couldn’t express was now outpouring at riproaring speeds.

Sometime near the end of the party, my mind was entirely occupied with all the conversations I had at the beginning of the program, when my confidence in my Hebrew

was low and I couldn't force myself to say anything actually worthwhile listening to. (Back then, my sense of imposter syndrome was still at full strength and amplified every time I introduced myself as being in level five.) Thinking of these conversations and understanding now how boring I must have come off as, I turned to Zipi and Eva and told them, "When the pledge goes back into effect, remember me as I am now, when I have a personality."

When the celebration was over and we walked back to our dorm building in the pouring rain, we were once again speaking in Hebrew. But I was surprised at how much easier and more comfortable it felt now—not because I was suddenly better at Hebrew, but because I felt that we had become *closer*, as better friends. They knew better who I actually was, when I wasn't restricted by my second language. And ironically, trusting them to know me from our first language made it easier for me to be myself in our second one. In that conversation during the walk back, my personality felt more at home in my Hebrew than ever before.

From there, our relationships progressed naturally. We sat together at every meal, walked together to activities, and drove frequently into the city to explore everything it had to offer. (Which was not a lot—it was actually so sparse that we began to call the only Target יַעֲדָה, Garden of Eden, to honor its semiofficial status as the entertainment oasis in the virtually barren city of Middlebury, Vermont.) We also hosted pre-parties in our dorm rooms before each of the School of Hebrew's big parties, including a full dance and a karaoke night.

On one of these evenings, after a long night of dancing and socializing, Eva and I took our solo cups with us to the steps leading up to our dorm building. We sat on the steps in the cool summer night and became engaged in a very deep and personal

conversation. We talked about her controlling family, my sexuality, her girlfriend, and relationships in general. We philosophized on subjects that neither of us previously thought we'd even be able to touch in Hebrew. Before we said goodnight and left for our respective dorms, we expressed our excitement to each other at what we managed to discuss. We also came away from the evening with a much stronger bond with each other.

I had to depart from Middlebury early, two days before the closing ceremony and dance party that would mark the official end of the program. The night before my scheduled car would arrive at 8:30 am to take me to the airport, Zipi, Eva, and I took a blanket onto the lawn outside the undergraduate library. We lay on the blanket and stared up into the sky, chatting about everything and nothing. We talked about our summer plans after Middlebury. We talked about the possibility of meeting up in the spring, possibly in Arizona where Eva lives. We talked about seeing each other again in Middlebury next summer. It was the perfect last night, and it was all in Hebrew.

At the beginning of those almost seven weeks, I struggled to express myself in a second language. All of my speech felt so bland, and it was incredibly difficult to get myself across—in retrospect, it was not *just* because I wasn't sure about my particular word choice and whether it was all grammatically correct. It was also because I was super conscious of how I and my personality came off in Hebrew. I over-analyzed every conversation in real-time, vigilantly monitoring people's reactions to what I said and anxiously gauging their responses. This hyper-awareness got in the way of making friends, for a while.

But as I pushed myself to spend more time in conversation with others, I became progressively more comfortable with my Hebrew and with how I expressed myself. My

Hebrew felt much more authentically me as time passed and I learned to let go of my social anxiety with the language. I think one driving element of this was that my imposter syndrome largely went away over the course of the program: I was rapidly improving, and I began to feel as though I really had earned my place in level five. But mostly, as I understood after reflecting deeply on my time at Middlebury, I began to feel more authentic in Hebrew because the friends I made in that language drew me out. Without Zipi and Eva, I might still feel somewhat estranged from my Hebrew, and I am so grateful to them for their impact on me.

Meeting and befriending Zipi and Eva in Hebrew was its own revelatory experience. I had not understood until this past summer the degree to which relationships depend on confidence and comfortability in language. The three of us, all with a relatively strong grasp of the language in which we communicated, each felt the impact of being restricted to a second language on how we developed our relationships with each other—especially early on. Then as we learned more Hebrew, we all communicated more with each other, becoming closer and progressively becoming more authentic in our Hebrew, which made us comfortable enough with the language to practice it more. At Middlebury, learning the language and forming relationships were inextricably linked developments that each influenced the other. The entire experience would truly have been different without Zipi and Eva.

Writing about the events of this past summer has allowed me to comprehend more fully all the intertwining ways in which I grew during that time. Sitting here now, concluding this reflection, all I can think about is how thrilled I am to return to Middlebury next year.