

NEOT SEMADAR. A REFLECTION.

2019

One Student's 50-day Journey to Understand Neot Semadar: A Unique Self-Learning Community Nestled in the Mountains of Israel's Negev Desert

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**A 50-Day Journey to Define Neot Semadar:
A Unique Self-Learning Community
in Israel's Negev Desert**

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	6
Journal.....	10
Day 1: Arrival and First Impressions.....	10
Day 2: The Life is a Simple One	12
Day 3: Kumbaya My Lord.....	14
Day 6: A Flock of People.....	16
Day 7: Curious Work.....	18
Day 9: Sacrifice.....	20
Day 11: Shaharit	22
Day 15: Meetings of Four Eyes	24
Day 21: Teaching Clal in The Spring of The Young Goat	26
Day 22: A Spotlight Entry by Morgan Reisinger	29
Day 24: Honesty	34
Day 27: The Ebb and Flow of Belonging	36
Day 30: A Hidden Outlet For Noise	39
Day 35: A Weekend With Water	41
Day 41: Biting the Hand That Feeds Me	43
Day 47: To Be Human	45
Day 49: A Musical Goodbye	48
Epilouge	50
Results & Post-Processing Themes	52
external narratives and Video Story	65
External Narratives	65
Video Story	61
References	67
Appendices.....	68
Appendix A: Interview Questions for IQP Students.....	68

Appendix B: Interview Questions for MQP Student 69

INTRODUCTION

Before you delve into these seventeen introspective self-reflective—and at times existential—journal entries, I want to take a page to provide you with some context for these narratives. The community in which I lived has a complicated history and identity, and I will try my best to build this understanding for you through a quick introduction

Before my arrival, I knew little about the founding principles of Neot Semadar. I knew they were founded recently, in 1989, and were founded on creativity and experimental ways of life—in other words, they were not a typical kibbutz. It was not until I spoke to people who lived there that I was able to piece together the history from which Neot Semadar was founded. It was told to me in snippets throughout my stay by various founding members and volunteers. This history is left out of my journal entirely as I was too unsure of the information at the time to include it in my interpretation of the society. Since leaving I have been able to verify most of this history through sources found online.

Neot Semadar, legally, is a kibbutz located in the Southern Negev Desert, in Israel. A kibbutz is simply defined as a communal settlement and they are most commonly found throughout Israel. Before Israel's existence, there was a movement of Jewish people from surrounding countries into the region. Most were seeking refuge from discrimination and were shut out from immigration into western countries. Groups of migrants banded together, pooling their financial resources, and created what they needed in order to survive. This creation of informal settlements throughout the region now known as Israel is referred to as the Kibbutz Movement. In many cases, kibbutzim needed to be ecological communities in order to live in the desolate locations that they chose to settle. Working together in the fields to feed each other,

building shelters, and raising children together were all characteristics of traditional kibbutzim. It was a challenging life, which is looked back with nostalgia by many people who lived through the transition from the initial movement into modern kibbutz life. The groups that founded these communities were pioneers: they created something out of nothing and built strong bonds with their fellow kibbutzniks.

While some of those original kibbutzim still exist to this day, such as Kibbutz Ketura, and Kibbutz Yotvata, both only 15 minutes away from Neot Semadar by car, many were discontinued as the Jewish state was created and people had alternative options for living communities. The location in which Neot Semadar was founded was an abandoned kibbutz settlement when they acquired the land in 1989. I previously stated that Neot Semadar was legally a kibbutz, and I would like to emphasize this again because in actuality they do not identify as one. They welcomed the label, kibbutz, in order to build the oasis that they now call home as well as to be easily understood by outsiders as a communal settlement.

The basis for their society was established well before they even arrived in the Negev. A group of friends, inclusive of the sponsor for this project, convened for many years in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to discuss the human struggle. They were led in discussion by a man named Yosef Safra and his wife Neot. They discussed the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti and George Gurdjieff, both spiritual leaders said to be enlightened with the real truths of life and the human struggle. Through these discussions, they designed a community, in which the ideal human life and relationship could be achieved. It centered on creative daily life, the study of human relationships, and this idea of “self-learning” where you are constantly studying your own personal experiences in an effort to escape the mental noise created by societal norms and judgements.

This group decided to incorporate certain characteristics into their community: ecological sustenance, vegetarianism, silent eating, and frequently rotating who lived where. One member found a piece of land for them, previously the Kibbutz Shizzafon, in the Arava region in the Negev Desert, and after taking on the label of kibbutz they arrived with 40 adults and 80 children to build their community. It was named after Neot, Yosef's wife, who had recently died in car crash. Neot meaning "Bloom" and the Neot Semadar roughly meaning "Beautiful Blossoms."

Yosef Safra is no longer alive and only some of the founders are still living on the kibbutz—having reached what the community considers retirement age. The older generation at Neot Semadar insists that the community is label-less, impossible to define, impossible to understand in only seven weeks, and they preach no particular ideology other than what you find to be true through your own experience (aka. "self-learning"). The community is 250 strong today with an additional 30 international and domestic volunteers that work alongside the members every day from 6:00 AM to 8:30 AM and then again from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM with a few chores in the evening as well.

Throughout my narrative, you might notice a shift in tone and perception of the community. Having been raised by parents that value mindfulness, being fully present in the here and now, and accepting yourself unconditionally with no judgment, I was quite excited to participate in daily life and discussions at the beginning of my stay. However, at a certain point, I became critical of certain aspects of their life and perceived values. Multiple things may have contributed to the existential and relatively negative lens through which I began to write and think, including a constant environment that encouraged introspection, experiencing culture shock, being physically and mentally separated from the WPI students living at Kibbutz Ketura, and being physically challenged by strenuous work early in the mornings coupled with a new

diet. Due to my mental state, I decided to refrain from academic journaling and focus on my own mental health and understanding my personal identity. Entries 30 and on were written upon my return to the United States once I felt that I was able to revisit my experience during those last few weeks with a more academically professional perspective.

These seventeen entries are followed by an analysis in which I use deductive theme coding to define the main values of Neot Semadar which is, according to my sponsor, an impossible task. After returning home, I created a digital story of my experience using the WPI Foisie Innovation Studio Global Impact Lab. This incorporated scenes from my time at Neot Semadar, my thoughts on the main themes present throughout my journal, as well as the narratives of other students that lived there with me. This can be found at <https://youtu.be/6rJdOB5XxK8> and is a recommended companion to this document.

Endearingly referred to by Israelis as “the hippy haven” and “the veggie cult”, Neot Semadar somehow transcends labels once experienced first-hand. Every individual in the settlement holds their own definition of the community’s values and purpose. I hope that throughout my journal entries and analysis that you are able to build your own definition of Neot Semadar, the beautiful oasis filled with celebration and curiosity, that requires both responsibility to the whole and the individual, the man-made utopia that is cut off from modern society by choice, that bands together in hardship to create a strong community, the judgment-free desert jungle home to lost and found souls alike.

JOURNAL

Tuesday, January 8th, 2019

DAY 1: ARRIVAL AND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Themes: Mindfulness, Responsibility, Community

I arrived at Neot Semadar yesterday afternoon. We are staying in a guest apartment. There is a sign on the front door that says, “This is a guest house. Do not take anything from the house” in Hebrew. I am not sure if this means that they normally borrow things in residents’ homes as if all property is public or if it was because this house was not inhabited previously and therefore it contained spares of what a home might need. I will try to get an answer to this question of what people can take or move and what they must leave. There seems to be some gray areas when it comes to ownership. Perhaps the rules become clearer over time.

Our apartment is very simple. It has one main room with two wooden flats, each covered in a cushion and blanket and a small kitchenette. We are in a family-styled house so there are three rooms. One with a larger bed for the parents, and two with two twin sized beds each for children. The rooms are simple with no decorations except a woven carpet in each room and a vase of flowers in the living room. None of the doors have locks and neither do any of the houses here. Israella, a kibbutznik who is helping to orient us, told us on arrival that we do not need to worry, “People do not steal here.”

The people that we have met all have similar mannerisms. Before arriving, our advisor had told us that when she speaks with someone from a kibbutz, she can tell right away that they are from a kibbutz and that we will learn this too. I have noticed in my interactions so far that when I speak, people here look very intently at me. They have a slight smile when they listen. I get the impression that they are listening very well to what I and others say. When they speak, they speak slowly and quietly. Of course, this may not actually be very slow. I might perceive this as slow compared to the fast-paced talking I am used to in Boston and New York. They do not seem afraid of silence or pauses when they speak and interact. I am wondering if this is connected to the practice of mindfulness. I would imagine that it would be helpful to pause while

you are speaking in order to gather your thoughts and make sure that you are deliberate and impeccable with what you are communicating and that you say what you really mean to say.

We spoke with Michal, an architect originally from Brazil, who has been here for multiple years and when she spoke to us about her academic background during a project meeting, she took long pauses at times to think about what she was trying to say and then continued. No one would interrupt. One of the IQP students here brought up a good point: this pause could be them taking time to figure out how to say their words in English. However, even those who speak English very well, take more pauses and speak slower than I am used to. I think they are very active and present in what they are hearing and saying which connects very well with the practice of mindful listening and speaking.

There is a strong sense of responsibility here. Yoram, our sponsor, and a founding member of the Kibbutz was telling us the story of his life last night as we drank tea-where he came from, where he has traveled and lived and how he is dedicated to Neot Semadar. He explained that although he has been many places, he knows that being here at the Kibbutz is his destiny and is what he is doing for the rest of his life. He expressed that it is very difficult; difficult to sacrifice your independence and freedom to a group of people. This hints at a sense of shared decision-making and commitment to the kibbutz and community being the responsibility of each member. It appears he was saying his future is dictated by the people that live here.

Wednesday, January 9th, 2019

DAY 2: THE LIFE IS A SIMPLE ONE

Topics: Ecological Living, Mindfulness

Last night after dinner, Yoram offered to give us a tour of the kibbutz and we of course said yes. However, what I thought would be a tour of the buildings at this kibbutz (children's school, laundry, main office, etc.) ended up being a slow walk through the desert timed perfectly with the sunset. Yoram first brought us out past Neot Semadar's trees and past the first desert mountain visible from the kibbutz. He brought us to the property line where kibbutz members cannot go past due to IDF tanks practicing there during the day and night. He walked very slowly and stopped sometimes to continue talking to us while gazing at different views. Yoram spoke a lot about how the scenery moves him and pointed out different hills he used to sit on for long periods and just watch. It really was beautiful, and no one had to say it for us all to agree.

After the desert walk, we re-entered the settled area of the kibbutz and he walked us through the garden that is considered the leisure/vacation area for the members. There was a hut far off in the garden overlooking the empty desert. He said that this was built by the rebellious teenagers that used to live here. They wanted a place to hang out, smoke, and sing without being judged by the older people. Since these younger people left it was turned into a private retreat hut. There is not much in there and people go there for days at a time when they wish to be alone. At one point, Yoram stopped and looked out into the gardens. He said one simple thing before pausing and then resuming our stroll. He said, "So you see, the life is a simple one, but here is our luxury." He spoke as though his strong relationship with nature is the reward and privilege that he has for living here. He said that people here frequently sit and look out towards the desert after meals and sit quietly in the grass with bare feet and a hot tea in their hands. Of course, they grow vegetables and herbs and fruits but their "ecological living" encompasses much more than that. It appears their time in nature is a haven; a time to recuperate and heal themselves.

I want to focus a little bit on the topic that I previously called mindfulness. I had ruminated yesterday that the people here might practice mindfulness in their day to day activities however after an afternoon tea with Yoram I do not think that that is quite accurate anymore.

Today I asked Yoram if they try to define what their main goals are in the kibbutz or if they just appreciate their dynamic nature without putting much thought in to it. He spoke slowly and deliberately for a long time, but I will summarize. Their purpose is to study human nature- but not to study a certain race compared to another or tendencies of governments or past societies. They do not wish to change any systems in the world. They just have a pure inner interest in how a human works and believe that any individual is enough to study that. This is what unites them. He said that people are innately jealous and greedy, but no one likes to talk about it. The people here want to experiment with how they live to see if there is a way to change that. They have a strong awareness of their relationships with others and speak daily in groups about how they interact.

Meals are silent here. You walk in and sit down at the next available seat in an arch of tables. It is a strange sensation to eat in quiet with so many people in the room. You can ask for people to pass you things at your table and you can make a remark or comment here and there but it is encouraged to be as quiet as possible. During our tea with Yoram, I asked him if there was a specific reason or purpose for this quiet meal time. Did they ask people to eat mindfully or meditate? He thought for a while after saying that they never outright stated a reason for doing this. Then he called upon a thought that people learn to do many things automatically. They can drive a car without thinking too much about it and converse with others while they drive. Eating is similar. We all have automatic ways that we do things, but they are not interested in studying what people do on auto pilot. They are interested to see what people do when they are really thinking about it. To him, food is special, and one experiences it differently when they are focused on it. Although there are similarities between mindful eating and appreciating your food without distractions, they are not the same thing. They both encourage you to be present in what you are doing but one is a well-known practice and one is an act you can choose to do. It is difficult to articulate why I feel like what they are doing isn't mindfulness but something else.

I get the sense that what they practice is more of a sense of curiosity or awareness. They are genuinely curious in themselves and their judgements of themselves and others. There is no hast or plan for curbing this curiosity or answering any specific questions. They just enjoy observing their own thoughts and behaviors.

Thursday, January 10th

DAY 3: KUMBAYA MY LORD

Topics: Responsibility, Community

At one of our morning meetings, someone started singing *Kumbaya* without any warning. It had been silent for a little while, a frequent occurrence in group settings here, and after this man was singing this song by himself for a bit, another voice joined in. Before long most people were singing. It was a group and community experience. I think most people enjoyed it, but it was hard to tell. I felt a little uncomfortable at first because I need to be in the right mood to want to spontaneously sing with others but once more people started singing, I felt more at ease and eventually joined in as well. I think this is part of the beauty of community. It is a different emotional experience than an individual connection. It felt uniting yet most of the people there were complete strangers to me.

At Neot Semadar, community seems to hold a special meaning. All their activities are centered on their community. I have spoken to numerous people who have only been here for a short amount of time-three days, two weeks, etc.- and they all refer to Neot Semadar as being a special place for community. Not many people are able to articulate what they mean by this and I think the idea of not thinking about why things are the way they are but instead just observing them and moving on is something that is encouraged by the people here. For example, today the kitchen leader asked people to try not to keep track of what jobs they do and how frequently. She said people tend to think “Why do I always get this same job” but that takes away from having a fresh new approach and re-experiencing the task each time.

Another thing to point out on the topic of community is that there seems to be a very strong sense of what you should do here and what you shouldn't do. However, I do not know how many people here have lived here for a long time. Originally, I thought that there were at least 200 members and then volunteers on top of that however I only see about 100 people or so at meals and meetings. I wonder how much of this responsibility to act a certain way-calm and reflective- and to do certain things- offer to clean up other people's dishes and get tea before the morning meeting- are perpetuated by people who are only here for a short while and are eager to

do the right thing and participate correctly in the community. Hopefully I will get a better sense of this.

Responsibilities-wise, everyone on the kibbutz is expected to work each day and to show up to meetings. If a member is sick, other members are asked to volunteer to pick up their slack. However, it seems like not everyone abides by these rules. Although people are assigned to work, they may not put in that much effort during their work period. Today during field work, I noticed frustrations between people who were very productive and people who tried to avoid contributing. Not everyone takes their responsibility as seriously as others which seems like it should degrade the sense of community a little bit. Although everyone is expected at the meetings, people may sneak out early or not show up. It seems like it is very selective when the rules are followed.

Sunday, January 13th, 2019

DAY 6: A FLOCK OF PEOPLE

Topics: Celebration, Individuality

Yesterday, we celebrated our first Shabbat at Neot Semadar. Shabbat began on Friday night at sundown and continued until sundown yesterday (like always). Dinner is very different for Shabbat: you can sit wherever you like, save seats for people, bring children with you, and drink wine! Most people wear white and dress a bit nicer and you don't eat until a song is sung by the people who worked to make the meal and set the dining room. There is challah bread instead of regular bread and conversation is lively. Most people are sitting with their families or close friends. Yoram invited us to sit at a table with him and we had wonderful conversation.

After Shabbat dinner, people dance outside (if the weather is nice), and hang out later than normal, since wake up is not until 10:00 AM the next day-as opposed to the usual 5:30 AM. After dinner we were able to host three volunteers at our apartment for tea and coffee and socialize with peers in a fashion that we are more used to as Americans.

Saturday was a day of rest. No one had to work or do anything. We went on a hike with Yoram and another volunteer. There are no IDF tanks running drills on the sabbath, so we could hike out even further into the desert. We enjoyed nature and then napped. It was truly a day of rest- something that I rarely have in the US. I usually fill my free time with fun, high energy things and never set aside time to just do nothing and recharge. It was a very nice day. This day seems like it is their main celebration of life and what motivates them to get through the rough work week. It is interesting that even their celebratory time here is centered on relaxation and presence in the moment, whether they spend it out in nature or indoors.

On the topic of individuality: From my understanding of what a typical kibbutz is, you wouldn't normally hear the people talking too much about individuality. After all, the concept of a kibbutz itself, at least the way Yoram explained it, is for a group of people to come together and agree to pool their resources and money and live in a cooperative way that they are privy to. The very essence of the kibbutz is to sacrifice things on an individual basis for the creation of a greater community.

However, over the past week I have heard individuality being stressed throughout my conversations with volunteers and kibbutz members. One such way is through the description of the kibbutz. In explaining the international and global studies portion of my project (to identify the values of Neot Semadar and how this compares to other kibbutzim/what it means about the modernization of the kibbutz) I have been met with skepticism: Skepticism that Neot Semadar can be compared to any other kibbutz.

Our sponsor and others here say that Neot Semadar is NOT a kibbutz. They do not think that it is valuable to examine how Neot Semadar fits into the modernization of the kibbutz because they only call themselves one so that their identity makes sense to more people-and perhaps to get some forms of funding or land. Yoram has told us that it takes way more than two months of experiencing Neot Semadar to fully understand what it is. He described this place with a very interesting analogy. He said that you see herds of animals: a herd of zebras, a herd of goats, and a herd of cows. Then suddenly you see a group of birds flying from tree to tree and you think to yourself it is the same thing. It is a herd of birds. But it is not, it is a completely different phenomenon. It is a flock. In this way, Neot Semadar is not a kibbutz, it is what it is and does not have a label. It breaks the psychological schema of a kibbutz and forces people to make a new schema, with their own definition. We joke around now that Neot Semadar is a flock of people.

Monday, January 14th, 2019

DAY 7: CURIOUS WORK

Topics: Curiosity, Individuality

The purpose of Neot Semadar is discovered differently by each individual person here and there is no pressure to conform to a certain definition of the community or what you should be doing while you are a part of it. I have seen this from long-term residents and volunteers. New volunteers specifically are encouraged by people who have been here longer to be curious and experience everything for what it is.

This is part of why it has been so interesting to talk to other volunteers the past few days. We are all formulating our own ideas about Neot Semadar and are given new unique perspectives by each person we talk to. We are all curious as to what we will learn while we are here. There is one volunteer named Elad, who arrived the same day as us. He is here for one month for the purpose of doing some personal reflection. There is also a volunteer, Elizabeth, who is here for a similar reason but has been here for a few months already. On Shabbat, we discussed our impressions of Neot Semadar in a group of eight. Elad's personal definition of Neot Semadar was different from what I had been developing and has brought the topic of mindfulness back into the picture. He mentioned that mindfulness could be the key to life at Neot Semadar except with an omitted label. As a group we concluded that this could be the case and that additionally removing the name mindfulness allows people to experience it as it is and not become distracted with being mindful in the correct way. Regardless of what they practice here, understanding mindful practices is valuable in understanding Neot Semadar and therefore I will leave it as a topic for this journal.

I want to try to explain the curiosity that is encouraged here during work hours. I have been working 5:30–8:30 AM shifts in various places such as the vegetable garden, the kitchen, the dining room, and the olive grove doing all kinds of work. Each work session starts with a group meeting of the people you will work with and they give you reminders to be refreshed before you start working. They will say things like, "Let's see what wonderful experience this morning will bring." Most of the work is in silence, which is very peaceful for waking up slowly as the sun rises. The way I interpret this is that if I am weeding a garlic patch, I try not to worry

about why I am weeding, or what people think of my weeding, or what else I could be doing right now other than weeding. I just try to be quiet and observant and curious and focus on the sensation and experience of the task. The same goes for cooking, or shoveling, or working on an engineering project and the unique experience that each person has, is one hundred percent okay. No one seems to be trying to change that and, in this concept, they are validating the individuality of each person. They even make room for, or attempt to make room for, your preferences and comfort via making suggestions. My thoughts on getting suggestions go back and forth a lot but right now, what has seemed like a contradiction the past few days, of half-enforced rules and indirect assertiveness, is a way of making everything optional to accommodate individual identities of Neot Semadar.

Wednesday, January 16th, 2019

DAY 9: SACRIFICE

Topics: Responsibility, Community

Today I was sitting in my living room and the other students I was with were ready to leave for lunch. Lunch is at 3:00 and if you get there at 2:50 there is no one there. If you get there at 3:00 there are only a handful there. If you want to eat in a room full of people it is best to arrive at 3:10 or 3:15, and maybe even sometimes at 3:20. One student offered the idea to leave for the meal and I said that I would meet them there-I wanted to wait longer. I said out loud “I don’t like being on-time to meals here.”

Yoram found this very interesting. I explained my reasoning about not wanting to be the first one there and wanting to arrive when most people do. I did not think much of this preference. It seems normal and warranted to me to want to do what is seen as “the usual” especially in a new place where you are learning the ropes. However, Yoram began to explain how this points out an important responsibility that anyone has to a community if they want it to be successful in joining their people together. I will try to convey what he said, although as I’ve mentioned before, he speaks for long amounts of time and with many pauses, so I can rarely manage to quote him word for word.

He said that in order to have a successful community you need everyone to think of what is best for the community and not get caught up in what everyone is doing individually. It is almost as if he is stressing the will power of the individual and independence but for the power of communalism. It is another concept that at first seems like a contradiction however upon further consideration does make sense. If everyone made decisions based off what other people were doing, you would not have a strong sense of unified values as a group. You need to be the person that is always on time and hope that everyone is strong enough to do that despite the risk that others might not be as diligent. This brings me back to a conversation we had about sacrifice. There are a lot of things here that center on sacrificing something of your own in order to help strengthen the community. He explained that this falls on everyone to be self-determined to be this way. It is the center of a community that each person can rely on each other to hold themselves to the standard that they all originally set together.

All in all, it was not what I wanted to hear at the time (I really did not want to be on-time) but I do ultimately agree with it. Since I believe that I have passed the period of my time here during which I formed first impressions, I would like to try relating what I am learning here to my own life and experiences. From my experiences at WPI, in leadership positions and as a general member, I have seen first-hand how hard it is to have people hold themselves accountable to standards (even if they set them themselves). It is a type of sacrifice to not always do what you want to do in the moment if it is for something that you believe in and care about. People can get tired after a certain time of even doing simple things that at one point they truly wanted to do.

I think that Neot Semadar's method to combat this normal human behavior is to have frequent reflection that enables people to be reminded of the meaning behind what they are doing. No one will punish you if you don't show up, if you do something incorrectly, or if you make a mistake. However, most likely someone will point it out or comment on it, saying "It is best that if someone is not sick or cannot absolutely make the morning meeting, that they come to it" or "it is better to not talk right now, but you may." This has a subtle yet powerful effect (much like the parenting method that was used on me as I grew up). The small amount of words that were exchanged on the topic tend to grow in meaning and impact overtime-IF you are actively reflecting and raising your awareness of the energy you are putting out into your community.

Friday, January 18th, 2019

DAY 11: SHAHARIT

Topics: Mindfulness, Awareness

In this entry I would like to describe a mindful experience that I had today in order to help inform the readers of this journal as to what I interpret mindfulness to be. Whether you use the term mindful or not, and whether you think that this is what Neot Semadar is doing, it can be a very valuable tool to build your own awareness of yourself and your environment (in my humble opinion). It is important to note that I entered this project with previous knowledge and experience in mindful meditation and mindful listening due to my upbringing.

This morning I arrived late to *Shaharit*—translates to morning prayer although the experience was more spiritual than religious. Unlike trying to arrive fashionably late to lunch, I did not want to be late to this special tea time. I really enjoy having the 20-30 minutes before I start work to sit peacefully and warm my hands and sip tea. I am still adjusting to the early morning wake ups so every day I surprise myself by my ability to get up and schlepp myself over to the *hadar ochel*. But this morning, I arrived ten minutes late.

I did not grab tea and I went to sit down as quickly and quietly as possible. Once I sat down I kind of tuned into the room and noticed that I needed to take a second and calm my thoughts. I had a remarkable amount of thoughts swimming around in my head for 5:30AM. One way that it is easiest for me to concentrate on my environment is to close my eyes. Although it does not allow you to see what others are doing, listening is a remarkable replacement for eyesight. A key aspect of being aware is to observe what is around you but not to judge it or think more about it other than acknowledging its presence. When you close your eyes, you become less distracted by what others are doing.

I closed my eyes and found a comfortable position in my chair. I concentrated on my breathing and felt my thoughts subside a little bit. I tried to be fully immersed in the experience of breathing. However, I felt myself continuously going back to my thoughts. I kept thinking about whether how I was sitting was natural or if it looked strange. I thought about where the people I knew were sitting in the room and wondered if they had their eyes open or closed. I thought about judgement I might have received when I walked in late.

With every second I noted all the unhelpful judgements and self-conscious thoughts that I was having, and I acknowledged that they were there. However, I did not dwell on them further. Every time you acknowledge a feeling you give yourself the ability to move on from it (at least until it pops up again). It is crazy for me to see how much I am judging myself when I am trying very consciously not to. Some days I have more unhelpful automatic thoughts than others. They can vary from stressing about the day ahead to thoughts about myself or others at that moment.

So, I slowly became relaxed and I continued to acknowledge my thoughts as they became fewer and fewer. I felt like the extent to which I was experiencing the present moment increased as I continued along this path. I get to this point every morning eventually, although it is periodically interrupted by random dialogue in my head. When I am in this state, I am not concerned with how long I am in this state or how much time I have left before someone says *boker tov*- good morning in Hebrew. So, on this particular morning, I was surprised but not disturbed when I heard a low whistle tone coming from behind me. If I had not been trying to have only awareness and no judgement, I would have thought to myself “someone is playing music now” but instead I just heard it and it naturally made me smile. The sound happened again and at different pitches. Again, this would be heard as music in another mindset, but I had no expectation for if it would continue or stop or change until it did. I purely had awareness of it and noticed that it evoked a positive reaction from me-a smile.

After a long time, someone said *boker tov* and I opened my eyes slowly and tried to continue the calm and focused mindset I had to the rest of my morning.

Tuesday, January 22nd, 2019

DAY 15: MEETINGS OF FOUR EYES

Topics: Relationships

We have been at Neot Semadar for over two weeks now and I am surprised that I have not thought to add this topic yet: the topic of relationships. It has emerged as being central to the mission of Neot Semadar to study human relationships (and oneself in that context). It is crazy to think that we have been here for such a short amount of time and yet I cannot believe there was a point where I did not have the insight into this place that I now have. Of course, I know that my insight will continue to grow and that I will likely never reach a full complete vision of Neot Semadar, but that will not stop me from trying.

I kind of mentioned this in my first entry, how Yoram tried to answer my question of what their main goals are here. He explained that humans have natural tendencies: to be jealous and to be greedy, and that they aim to experiment with relationships to create an environment where those natural tendencies do not rule people's experiences or happiness. Although this might seem pessimistic at first glance, I think it is meant to focus more on honesty than anything else. I think that this is something people stray away from since numerous types of honest feelings are taboo in modern societies.

As part of an assignment from our orientation helpers, Netta and Mor, the four students I am living with and I are supposed to have one-on-one meetings with each other every week. They call these meetings "meeting of four eyes" and they encourage all people here to have three of these meetings each week. You spend 30-40 minutes discussing with an individual the relationship that you have with them-but in a certain way. You do not focus on the other person (unless it is to help them formulate their thoughts or to work on understanding what they are saying) but rather you focus on yourself and what you are responsible for. You each take a turn speaking about what your role and responsibility is within the relationship that you share. It gives you an opportunity to explain your perspective and challenges instead of critiquing or blaming one another. It makes me think of how people who are self-driven to show up to meals on time are hoping and relying on others to do the same even though that is out of their control. This is similar in the respect that people need to focus on themselves and look deep to identify issues

within their control and relationships rely on the other person choosing to do that as well. I think that this is where fear of rejection might reside. People are worried that others will not meet them at the same level of introspection or responsibility when it comes to their relationship and that is what can make these conversations seem a little frightening at first.

For our first four-eye meeting which we had yesterday at the Neot Semadar's *pundak* (café), we were given guidance from Netta and Mor on what we were trying to accomplish. We each met with one person for 40 minutes and were tasked to talk about our own challenges with relationships in general (meaning friendships, family, significant others, acquaintance-ships, or any type of relationship we wanted to bring up) and then our challenges within the specific relationship at hand. Since I have only had one formal conversation like this so far, I do not want to talk much about what it was like. I have reason to believe that every "meeting of four eyes" is very different since every individual relationship that you have is different. There is also the trust that you have with the person that could be violated by sharing so my reflections on these will never target any specific conversation.

It is such a unique opportunity, in my opinion, that we are encouraged to learn so much about ourselves while we are here. This is not something I expected to get out of my experience here and I am enjoying looking deep within myself and others. I wish this type of reflection and relationship building was more at the forefront of college education.

Monday, January 28th, 2019

DAY 21: TEACHING CLAL IN THE SPRING OF THE YOUNG GOAT

Topics: Awareness (of myself), Individuality (inner solitude), Relationships, Celebration

In a way I feel like I have barely been at Neot Semadar recently. Last week, after my journal entry on the 22nd, I left with the rest of the WPI students from both Neot Semadar and Kibbutz Ketura to go to Ein Gedi-*the spring of the young goat*. We spent two days in the region while we toured a nature preserve where we saw many ibexes and hyraxes, as well as hiked up Masada and visited the Dead Sea. It was a very busy jam-packed trip and observing the way that this trip affected me was very interesting.

In the spirit of inner reflection and observing how you react to different situations, I took the trip as an opportunity to not only see more of Israel and appreciate the natural beauty of the landscape but to see how I felt in the company of this group in contrast to how I feel at Neot Semadar. I also observed that I had to take time once I returned to readjust to the lifestyle here. I was socially and mentally exhausted from being out in the “real world.” Maybe this is telling as to how my adjustment back to life at WPI will be.

The first thing I noticed when we met up with everyone was how hard it was to describe how I was doing and what Neot Semadar had been like so far. Despite writing about it at length and discussing the matter with students and volunteers at Neot Semadar, I could not formulate an honest and accurate way of describing it to someone who was starting from scratch on their knowledge of this place. The easiest things to say were that we had been incorporating a lot of reflection and silence into our daily lives but that does not capture the experience of living here or what I am personally experiencing. I think myself and the other students living here tried our best to convey the idea that this place cannot be defined and that a lack of definition is what Neot Semadar strives for. Therefore, we all have very different opinions and experiences of this place. Any details without the context of personal definition sounded cliché or cult-like and resulted in a quick “drinking the Kool-Aid joke.” We were met with pity from the other students which I did not expect. It is hard for me to see what I am missing out on, in terms of exploring the rest of Israel, by being at Neot Semadar but they helped bring to light the realization that I have no idea what Israel is like-only what Neot Semadar is like.

Another thing that I noticed was that it was very difficult to remain peaceful and content with the group we were traveling with. In a stark contrast to Neot Semadar, the group was very loud and impulsive with words-a generalization I know but there was a micro-culture of relative chaos. Conversations at times consisted of people talking over one another and almost competing to get a word in. People stood in circles with their backs turned to others and there was a frenzy to choose where one sat and who they were next to and across from. I need to stress again that this was what I noticed in contrast to Neot Semadar however some people might view this as totally normal behavior. Although unless one is a die-hard supporter of the idea that the world is unfair-a dog eat dog world if you will-one will likely be irritated by this environment.

I noticed that within this environment I felt a strong desire to keep my words and thoughts to myself unless I felt there was room in a conversation to be truly listened to. As a relatively outgoing person, it was strange to choose not to speak up and to just be content in my inner solitude. It led to a feeling of being stifled or that I was not myself. I am still torn as to whether or not this is a healthy feeling however I think I have had this feeling in many situations in the past but did not understand why. While socializing with the group I felt pressure to entertain or make jokes or talk over others as well, but I could not tell if I necessarily wanted to do that- I just felt pressure to. This really brings to question the importance of balancing your individual experience with those around you. It is difficult to feel connected to others without approaching an experience in a similar way, yet you should not always sacrifice your experience for one that you do not find value in. I also felt pressure to have self-conscious thoughts, as many other peoples' self-conscious thoughts were spoken out loud as justifications for their natural behaviors.

At the top of Masada, I felt a serenity that was brought on by the awe-inspiring view combined with the rays of sun peeking through the misty horizon and the knowledge of the physical challenge I had endured to reach the top. I wanted to sit and watch in silence and just fully enjoy the moment. However, I was surrounded by screams of "the sun is rising!" "we are going to miss it!" When in fact all you had to do was turn your head to be a part of the experience, people were frantic to get to the perfect seat and spot and to get the perfect photo. I was irritated by the sounds of rapid-fire camera shutters-something that I have always been a little sensitive to but only selectively since I also enjoy taking photos: a pet peeve with a personal exception-quite a contradiction. I almost felt a little bit like a Scrooge from a Charles Dickens A

Christmas Carol. I knew that everyone was excited and celebrating the moment with shouts accompanied by smiles. Yet I wanted to just sit quietly and alone to absorb the moment. I think this highlights how I am unsure of the benefit of the habits I am picking up from being here. Does eliminating distractions also eliminate some amount of joy and celebration and an ability to connect with others? Maybe I will develop an answer to this during the rest of my time here.

During our last night in Ein Gedi, we had a group meeting with all of the students and our advisor asked one of the IQP students, Carly, to lead the meeting in a Neot Semadar fashion in order to give the other students a taste of what we have been experiencing. It was exciting to share but I had low expectations that it would be taken seriously. After gathering in a circle, Carly explained that it is *Clal* to only have one person talking at a time and that it is important to give that person your undivided attention. *Clal* is a Hebrew word that I have come to understand means unspoken guidelines or agreements at Neot Semadar. Carly asked if anyone had anything about the day that they wished to share-similar to what is asked in group meetings at Neot. There were some short comments, some more heartfelt than others (although that is my own judgement on them), and a few that were jokes about the day-perhaps an effort to find relief from the discomfort of silence. After a little while, one student spoke of a poem that she had written while the rest had hiked the mountain. She was asked if she wanted to read it and she did. Everyone listened intently. It was a beautiful poem and a beautiful moment that would not have happened otherwise if the environment had not been provided.

This leads me to the conclusion that the beauty of vulnerable expression is lost in chaotic environments and distracted people-distractions like a phone vibrating, thoughts about the future, or self-conscious narratives, however not every experience needs to be totally distraction-free in order to bring joy and bridge connections between people.

Tuesday, January 29th, 2019

DAY 22: A SPOTLIGHT ENTRY BY MORGAN REISINGER

A Day in the Life of a Neot Semadarian

By Morgan Reisinger

Knowing that there would be no buses to get me to Neot Semadar before the 5:45am wake up call, I hopped in a car traveling for the kibbutz the night before work. Arriving just in time for dinner on Monday, January 28th, there was little time or sunlight to see the new environment I just landed in. Sarah, my guide as I figured out the lay and rules of the land, remained by my side for most of the next twenty-two hours or so. Immediately after arriving, I placed my bag down in the WPI-assigned house, and walked to dinner.

“Whatever you do, just remember to be quiet,” one of my peers warned me on the walk to the dining hall.

I had expected nothing but the sound of forks and knives clinking for the next hour, and was surprised when that was not the case. Dinner is the loudest of all Neot Semadar meals, but still no full-volume conversations took place. Having expected to need mime-like signals to communicate my need for anything out of reach on the table, I was relieved to hear the people at my table introducing themselves and laughing over soft conversation throughout the meal. Even in a quiet place, I had made three new friends by the end of dinner.

Following dinner, Sarah showed me the tea station. There was a machine for hot water; what really impressed me was the pleasant display of nothing but raw leaves and herbs located to this machine’s side. Walking back to where I would stay for the night, with tea in hand, Sarah pointed out the vegetable garden from which the leaves in my glass were picked.

We didn’t even make it back home before I had found another direction to head in. Daniel and Benjamin, two WPI students similarly living and working on Neot Semadar, passed by us on two very different bikes. They’d repaired them themselves, and were now headed to the kibbutz junkyard to search for new bike treasures. I handed Sarah my tea, hopped on the back of Daniel’s bike, and we wobbled our way through the dark kibbutz. I couldn’t help but look up and smile throughout the entire ride. Neot Semadar is only a fifteen minute drive from kibbutz Ketura, but here you can see nearly four times as many stars in the night sky. As we

whipped through uncomfortable turns, we didn't pass by any kibbutzniks. When dinner is over, so is the night for many.

We arrived back at the homestead after spending a few exploratory minutes among piles of junk to find that everyone is ready for (or already in) bed. Days start early here, so the nights end much earlier than I am used to. Nonetheless, I said goodnight and curled up on the couch.

5:00am, somebody's alarm goes off in another room, waking me up. Still nobody stirred for another twenty-five minutes. Up, dressed, with brushed teeth at 5:15, I began to worry some of my friends would sleep too far past their alarms. 'They're probably used to this, and only need a couple minutes to pull themselves together,' I assured myself. Proving me right, the remaining five in the house gradually appeared, took maybe five minutes to get dressed, and we were on our way. There was no stress to put effort into what they wore, or check how they looked in the mirror. There wasn't even a mirror in one of their two bathrooms. You are what you are, and that is okay. That was a relieving feeling.

As we silently walked to the dining hall at 5:45, the glow of the sun barely began peaking over the mountains to our right. It was still dark, the only real indication of the starting day being the calling roosters somewhere in the distance. For the next twenty minutes, we sat in a semi-circle in the dining hall with hot drinks in our hands. We faced each other, but nobody interacted. Some closed their eyes, looked at the ground, or looked ahead. The silence was an opportunity for us to wake ourselves up and prepare ourselves for the long day ahead of us. There were no lights on; the only illumination came from the wide windows as the sun kept slowly rising. It felt very natural. At 6:05, someone in the back of the room softly said "boker tov," good morning, and everybody slowly and silently rose to head in the direction of their assigned work.

Sarah and I were assigned to food processing, a job neither of us were familiar with. We found a kibbutznik who knew where to go and followed him passed the goats and chickens. The factory was small but fit what it needed to. Two people awaited us there, with hot water already brewed for more tea and coffee. In the office of the factory, seven of us sat in a circle to introduce ourselves, our work, and our day's goals. We spoke of working in the moment, appreciating the sounds around us as well as our bodies as we integrated them into the processes of machines. I have worked about ten different jobs in my short lifetime and have never approached a workday with such a focus on holistic appreciation for what was about to come.

We began bottling olive oil for packaging and sale. Each person was placed in a position along the machines: bottle fillers, lid placer, lid securer, and boxer. I was an extra; there was no more places to work in the process. Instead, I folded boxes to be used later in the day, mixed and lifted miscellaneous things that needed to be done and stepped in olive oil positions as people needed to relieve themselves. Even without a defined position, I still felt useful towards the success of the operation.

8:30am, we broke for breakfast. On our tables were only fresh vegetables which I needed to grab and chop up myself. Whether or not this food too came from the vegetable gardens nearby, I was not sure. Nonetheless, the lack of processed foods and necessity to work for my meal made it all the more worthwhile.

A meeting of everyone on the kibbutz followed breakfast. It was a beautiful day so we met outside in a circle. One woman ran the meeting in Hebrew as some people situated amongst the group quietly translated for those who spoke only English around them. The meeting began with all new people on the kibbutz introducing themselves: that's me. Then, the leader gave updates on the needs of the community. There were many long pauses between everything she said, offering everyone around her the opportunity to both process the information and interject with questions or additional information. The man in charge of the community garden offered everyone the opportunity to visit throughout the day to offer help. Sarah said he does this every day, even though people don't always show up.

Sarah and I headed for the kibbutz office to arrange a ride home for me. After just one phone call, a kibbutznik who planned to travel towards kibbutz Ketura kindly agreed to allow me to tag along. After we sorted this out, we headed towards the vegetable garden, where everyone from the food-processing factory was weeding. Sarah and I grabbed mulch, and covered the spots the others already cleared. For the short while we were here, we became covered in dirt as we crouched, weeded, and mulched. It would have been tiring work had we not only spent a few minutes in the sun. While we got our hands dirty, we talked over the plants of our purposes in Israel and our academic projects. It reminded me of the stories kibbutzniks who founded kibbutz Ketura told me of the early days in agricultural fields.

Back in the food processing plant, we finished up the remaining oil bottles. After cleaning the machines and floors, we set ourselves up for our next project: labeling olive jars. Sarah and I manually stuck stickers on jar lids and fed them into a machine that put on larger

labels. About an hour after we started this process, the entire factory took a break and filed out to a table in a sunny patch of grass. Here awaited us a display of organic snacks and more hot tea. We sat in the sun for a while and talked about very meaningful topics. One of the people who first introduced our work in the factory offered the first topic. We were asked to talk of our “future thoughts,” or times throughout the workday where we found ourselves looking to the future, like awaiting lunchtime or this break. The conversation led to a discussion of time and the different ways in which it can be treated. In looking ahead, we do not appreciate what is happening now. Some of us spoke of the additional work, “pluses,” we would have to do later with unwelcoming attitudes. Others offered different ways of thinking. Instead of saying “I have to go,” perhaps “work is calling me” would make for a better experience, one suggested.

One worker talked of a feeling he had during our morning meeting today, how he felt a revelation when he noticed that every single person was in motion at all times. He spoke passionately and humbly and instigated a passionate response from another person around the table.

“Thank you for sharing this experience with us. The way that this experience has affected you has made me appreciate other experiences of my own and look at them in a different way.”

When we headed back inside, one person was asked to wash all of the dishes from our break. The rest of us collaborated to clean up the factory, took out the trash, wiped down the tables, and washed the floor. Despite our previous discussion of future thoughts, my appetite made me exceptionally excited for the upcoming lunch. I knew I was assigned to wash the kibbutz’ dishes after I ate, and this didn’t dwindle my excitement whatsoever.

I arrived in the kitchen, put on an apron, and told somebody I had no idea what to do. Someone immediately offered help, showing me their own station and allowing me to take over as they found other work. We worked for an hour, rotating positions as we tired of one. As I put clean dishes where they belonged, another worker relocated the dish racks to a position that required less movement and work on my part.

“We are always here to help you,” she said. We worked together to complete the whole job, down to the washing of the sinks after we emptied them.

During my short stay at Neot Semadar, I worked a twelve-hour workday. I didn’t mind a minute of it. There was a sense of work for work’s sake; these things needed to be done in order

for the community and people to survive. I particularly enjoyed the short while I was in the vegetable garden. Through all of the work, I had met so many wonderful and open people. There was an exceptionally greater sense of integration into the community while I was here compared to my stay at Ketura. Because of this, I had felt that I had made 20 new friends by the lunchtime. Even in the times of silence, I was calm. I did not even feel the need to check my cell phone (which I couldn't, because they are not allowed in public spaces). Compounded with the deepness of the conversations we had; the silence seemed to amplify the significance of what we did talk about in other moments.

Thursday, January 31st, 2019

DAY 24: HONESTY

Topics: Acceptance, Responsibility

On Tuesday, I worked a full work day with Morgan (featured in the [Day 22 entry](#)). She has been living at Kibbutz Ketura and is trying to examine a few different aspects of kibbutz-life. Neot Semadar, although it claims to not be a kibbutz, may draw some similarities to other kibbutzim and she came here with the hope of drawing those connections as well as contributing to identify the major values of Neot Semadar. I think that her entry above covers the main things that the work-day entailed so I will quickly elaborate on just one part of it-the midday break.

The midday break provided one of the strongest senses of acceptance that I have felt since being here. It started with everyone sitting around a table that had been filled with food and tea: dates, pomelos, oranges, juices, and freshly picked herbs in hot water. It was sunny and warm and put me into a state of relaxation. The conversation was started by the woman who had delegated our roles to us throughout much of the day. She asked us to think about what had consumed our thoughts while working, especially if we had had any thoughts about the future (when we would finally get to go back to bed, or our responsibilities later on in the day). Various revelations were shared. There was a lot of questioning of one another's' statements yet it never turned into a debate. Each person that responded to another tried to help them fully explore their own thoughts.

One volunteer, Elizabeth, spoke about how she felt about having a "plus." Pluses are additional chores that are assigned to take place in the afternoon. Most people view this afternoon time as their free time to rest or read or socialize with others and having a plus either means they do not get the same amount of rest that they usually do or that they are sad to miss out on whatever they had planned for that time. She said that when she has a plus that she thinks about it in dread. It colors her interactions and she knows that in order to make it through the day in a present way that she needs to stop regular work earlier than usual to get additional rest. Another volunteer, a father of two, followed after her talking about how he noticed that if he does not take a *schnatz* (nap) in the afternoon that later in the day he becomes very angry and short with his wife and children.

It really humbled me to hear him speak about this so openly and honestly. His awareness of his behavior really touched me, and his words stayed with me for a while. Of course, no one wants to be short with the people that they love but that was not what stuck with me. It was that instead of it being a taboo topic that could easily be a source of inner shame and disappointment, he shared it in the hope of helping others understand themselves and how they project on to others. Of course, this is my own romanticized version of the reasoning behind what he said but the fact that he was comfortable enough to bring that up with other people and with me- a complete stranger to him- allowed it to resonate with me. It also opened me up to share my own thoughts and be honest with the group.

This same day, Morgan and I had our own plus (to do everyone's dishes after lunch) and getting the warning of how exhausting it could be arrived just in time. After completing the plus, I went home and immediately passed out. I slept until dinner, crawled out of bed to eat and then when home again and curled up-like a squirrel in hibernation. The next morning, yesterday morning, I woke up feeling irritated and exhausted. I did not want to talk to anyone-which thankfully a silent breakfast lent itself to. After morning work and breakfast, I found myself sitting around for the morning circle almost falling asleep in my hands. The man sitting next to me asked me how I was, and I replied "tired" with a faint smile. I had talked to him before-he was one of the founders of Neot Semadar. He advised I take a nap after the meeting and I replied that I couldn't; I had to work on my project. He said "c'mon, be a criminal and take a goddam nap."

I realized that I could in fact just sleep-a dangerous thought for productivity. And so, I went home and fell asleep again and did not wake up until lunch time. When I woke up, I felt new. I was excited to socialize and excited to get back to work, and even had a new direction for my project in mind. If you stretch your definition of productivity, it was one of the most productive days that I have had here at Neot Semadar. It also put the responsibility I have to the kibbutz in a different light. The responsibility to do my part can seem to overpower my personal needs sometimes and it is nice to get a reminder that I do not carry the responsibility for the success of the kibbutz and my own project work every second of every day. You can be a criminal every once in a while and take a *schnatz*.

Sunday, February 3rd, 2019

DAY 27: THE EBB AND FLOW OF BELONGING

Topics: Community, Individuality, Acceptance

In this entry I will speak about some impactful experiences that I had during Shabbat and then pose some questions that will guide the direction of the remaining portion of this journal. This Saturday, I did not rest. I booked up my free day with fun activities and socialization and thoroughly enjoyed it despite being very tired the next morning.

After breakfast on Shabbat, I had a conversation with a man whom I had cleaned the dining room with once before and played football with on Friday afternoon. We started out talking about what had landed us each at Neot Semadar and it turned out that we were both engineers. He spoke of how he felt stifled in his job and felt that the people he interacted with were very disconnected from reality and too comfortable- financially speaking- to care much about the things that he cared about. One day he decided to leave and travel around. I asked him how long he planned to stay at Neot Semadar, and he said that he could feel it getting warmer and migration season getting near. I didn't understand at first, but he meant that he felt the need to migrate or move somewhere new just as he did every year since then.

We talked about travel and what it does to the relationships that you leave behind- geographically speaking. He said he doesn't keep in touch much with old friends since he feels like unless he is near them, he is building a relationship with his phone. I understood what he meant but at the same time I could not imagine moving every year and completely cutting ties with all of the people I met in that time. I feel a need for stability and a support system that is bigger than just myself. I shared with him my worries for the future-especially for starting work upon returning to the US- and my dreams that I have for further down the line. He said that he could sense that my future dreams encompassed a lot and that he could feel me being pulled in many different directions. It was so easy to be honest about how I felt-similar to how other one-on-one conversations here have felt. There is little judgement and a lot of honesty.

Another volunteer joined our conversation and she talked about how she used to work multiple jobs. She said she liked the work but realized that she didn't have enough time to consciously think about that simple fact. She didn't have the time to reassess as to whether or not

she was enjoying her time and she couldn't tell if she was truly happy with what she was doing with her life. This led her to decide to quit her job and travel a bit and eventually that landed her at Neot Semadar.

It's easy to assume that what they were saying is that all you have to do to be happy is to quit your 9-5 but that was not the point. They just felt like the business of their full-time jobs kept them from needing to look internally. It was easy to coast along when their day went by quickly and they survived their crazy schedules on autopilot. The conversation I had with them really did give me a sense of acceptance within the community of Neot Semadar because they were so candid so quickly.

I had another experience on Saturday that gave me a similar feeling. I joined a group of volunteers that were learning acrobatic yoga, or acro. Acro is a type of yoga that involves two people having good clear communication and trust in one another. One person is a "base" and lies down on the ground with their legs straight up and the other person is the "flyer." The flyer ends up being supported by the other and stationary in the air. Once you are flying it takes the stability of locked joints and unwavering eye contact to remain still in a position (or at least that is the advice given to a beginner). I built strong bonds with the group in a short amount of time and felt a sense belonging.

However, I notice something new that I realized has actually been a trend throughout my time here. It is the tradeoff between togetherness and solitude. I noticed that in group activities at Neot Semadar there is an overwhelming sense of community and then once the activity or meeting dissipates, so does this energy. It usually leaves me feeling grateful for the experience but sad that it has ended. I wish there was more of a constant and carried sense of community. It almost feels like everyone turns inward afterwards maybe to reflect or maybe to separate themselves and move on to their next task. Some days I appreciate the ability to branch off after a group activity but some days I wish there was more public acknowledgement of the experience. This connects well to the discussion we had on our midday break with the fruit processing team: is there a better way to arrive and leave things? a happier and more gratifying way? It also made me think of a moment when a volunteer was leaving the kibbutz and decided to say goodbye to everyone at the meeting. After a very personal statement, a kibbutznik commented that she appreciated her goodbye but wondered why she hadn't said hello. It seemed like an interesting

question but placed at the wrong time and a bit subtractive to the gratitude that had been expressed. Is this highlighting where honesty meets being pessimism?

I think in a way I am now rebelling against the positive thoughts about this place that have been building up in my mind. Perhaps I am reaching a mental saturation point for intake. I have been having a new thought about this place that their mindset encourages happiness yet not goodness. In other words, there is no real responsibility to be a *mensch* or be caring towards others. The closer I look, the more I am wondering if their habits that might create more comfort for an individual are not best suited for the greater good or for those that think in an alternative way, or with other assumptions (religious, spiritual, or value-based).

There is an ebb and flow to any environment, and I have found myself asking different questions recently. Is Neot Semadar a mentally healthy place to live? Does this place create more good in the world at large? And can these habits interface with the outside world?

Wednesday, February 6th, 2019

DAY 30: A HIDDEN OUTLET FOR NOISE

Topics: Acceptance, Community, Celebration, Noise

I want to talk about an aspect of being at Neot Semadar that I have left out of my journal so far: soccer (a.k.a. football). During my second week here, I found out that there was a pick-up soccer game that happened every Friday before Shabbat dinner and one other day during the week. I used to play soccer competitively and it is one of my favorite past-times/hobbies/ways to stay active, so I jumped at the opportunity. I was nervous at first since I was the only female and I was without cleats or shin guards while everyone else was well-equipped and very in shape. Despite these things, playing soccer has been one of my favorite parts of being here. During these practices, I feel completely included, in contrast to feeling like I stick out a bit in other kibbutz activities-as being American and as not speaking Hebrew. Playing soccer together does not require speaking the same language as the other people which is quite refreshing. During these first few games I was treated just like all of the other players and felt bonded to them through the shared experience of kicking a ball around.

It seems like in a community that frequently chooses silence and mindful sound making that soccer is the one exception. The game is full of noise, plain and simple. People shout out one another's names with increasing volume as they get closer to the net. There is grunting and yells of frustration when a ball hits the post of the goal and cheers when a goal is scored. It almost felt like this was their opportunity to get it all out before they returned to their quiet daily life. I also feel more of a lingering gratitude towards the soccer game than I do with other activities around the kibbutz-like Acro.

Today at dinner, I was sitting quietly-as per usual-with the IQP students and a kibbutz member approached me. He asked if I was going to be at soccer practice tonight and I was shocked that he remembered me nonetheless encouraged me to join in again. I said that I might not make it and he said, "Well we will have to play without the star player then!" This was the most anyone has gone out of their way to include me in something. Not only was I accepted but people wanted me there. I got a true sense of welcome not just as an American, or a non-Hebrew speaker, but as a female as well.

I ended up going and I just got back. I hurt my leg because it rained, and I didn't have cleats, so I slid around a lot, but it was worth it. There was something very refreshing about being together with a group of people doing an activity and not having to reflect on it too much or overanalyze the interactions that we had. I am not worried about what it meant to my relationship with the players when I accidentally tripped one of them or when they got past me as a defender. It was just soccer: pure and untouched by cultural difference. Perhaps that is an over-romanticized view on the sport but I it is something that I have found to be universal in rules and sportsmanship.

Monday, February 11th, 2019

DAY 35: A WEEKEND WITH WATER

Topics: Celebration, Individuality, Autonomy

I just got back from a weekend trip to Eilat with almost everyone in the Israel site program. We stayed in a hostel that was right on Coral Beach a bit south from the main area of the city and closer to Jordan. It had scuba diving and snorkeling both of which our group took advantage of. I don't want to write about it too much because it is not very pertinent to living at Neot Semadar, but I think it is important to include because every time I leave Neot Semadar, I come back feeling different about. This trip was no exception.

Eilat itself was unbelievable. We spent the two days swimming and snorkeling and exploring the city. We watched the sun rise up behind the Jordanian mountains in the morning and we watched the water turn a bright orange and gold in the evening as the sun set. Before this trip I had never snorkeled before or really spent that much time looking under water when I swim but there were so many cool creatures to see that I think I spent about two hours in the water just treading and swimming below the surface with one of the IQP students. There were big schools of fish and a few shallow reefs with anemones and reef fish. After my fingers were shriveled up like raisins and my throat stung from accidentally breathing in salt water in the excitement of it all, I finally emerged from the water. I sat on the beach and let the sun dry me off. While I was sitting there and looking out at the massive Jordanian mountains in the distance, I felt a weird sensation. It took me a while to realize that I was feeling autonomy. It was almost a sort of revelation. I felt like I was on the edge of life: gazing at an unfamiliar yet beautiful landscape, discovering fish species always known by man but not by me, and I was there by my own accord, with my own schedule, and most of all responsibility for myself.

It isn't that I don't have any beautiful views here at Neot Semadar or a shortage of nature to explore and discover but that I felt for the first time what I could have been feeling this whole time had I been traveling beyond Neot Semadar. I discovered an intricacy of Israel: its southern city on the red sea. The only way to truly build a definition of a place in your mind is to see it and experience it and on our trip I got a taste of starting to build that definition.

Returning back to Neot Semadar has left me a bit disappointed. I think I realize now why the other students pity us here at Neot Semadar. We are not learning what Israel is, only what Neot Semadar is. Unlike our last trip outside of Neot Semadar which was to Ein Gedi, I was not a Scrooge this time. I felt a lot lighter and happier almost as if I was celebrating something. It wasn't until now, now that I am back here in this same room, that I realized I was celebrating my own freedom and autonomy and the current juxtaposed lack of freedom that I feel here in the kibbutz is now sitting with me. The fact that the public buses don't stop here unless specially requested and that the members discourage us from leaving also add on to that feeling.

My daily life here at Neot Semadar is somewhat dictated by the kibbutz lifestyle and I am inspired now to try to live to fullest autonomy as possible within this environment. I have worked at the *Pundak* (café) a few times and I felt like I was in the US but working at the Bean Counter or the Birch Tree Bread Company (local Worcester cafes). I think this week I will try to work there every day as my own way of leaving for work and then returning back home. Perhaps this will make me feel more autonomous and more responsible for my schedule.

Sunday, February 17th, 2019

DAY 41: BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS ME

Topics: Autonomy, Nature, Independence, Celebration

This whole week I have felt rather stir-crazy. It could be a combination of knowing that we only have one week left, being influenced by the other stir-crazy individuals that I am living with and being a little bit homesick (dare I say). I worked at the *pundak* all week and it was definitely helpful to distance myself from the kibbutz house that I spend so much time in, but I also think that I might have reached one of my lowest lows.

This week we went to Timna Park with the whole WPI group. It is an abandoned copper mine that has been turned into a National Park complete with hikes, tunnels to explore, colorful limestone formations, and historical significance. We had a private tour guide from Kibbutz Ketura who was very kind and knowledgeable and actually grew up on Long Island in the town over from mine (small world)! However, I was very resistant to the entire experience. After expressing interest to travel one last time up north to a wonderful green hike near Haifa this weekend and being told that I could not miss the last Shabbat dinner a Neot Semadar, I was rather upset at the idea of tagging along on this midweek adventure. I also know that Timna was an amazing place to visit (in fact I am currently waiting for a bus to go back to Timna right now...but more on that later) and I was grateful for the opportunity however I felt it was contradictory to have time for a day trip in the middle of the work week (when I had a lot of work to do) yet not a one overnight trip on the weekend when I supposedly have my “free time” in the eyes of the kibbutz. They say that in order to understand Neot Semadar you need to be present by physically being present.

Needless to say, I was a scrooge at Timna, and while I saw amazing things and truly appreciated them, I felt stifled. While driving through the park I was uber-aware of my inability to choose where we went. Hypersensitive to my lack of autonomy, all that I wanted to do was to get off the bus and run into the sand fields we were passing by. I mostly wanted to do this because I knew that I couldn't.

Today was my 22nd birthday, and when I was asked what I wanted to do to celebrate my answer was to go somewhere else: half sarcastically but with the idea of Timna Park in my head.

Two of the IQP students wanted to come with me and we planned to go there and rent electric-assist bicycles and explore the park on our own agenda.

We called to have the bus come pick us up however, it left 5 minutes before it 10AM- which is the time we asked it to arrive. We were unable to catch the bus and left stuck at Neot Semadar. We were able to arrange rides from kibbutzniks to Timna Park for much later in the day. We had a solid couple of hours there in total before catching the bus back.

This trip was a great escape from the monotonous and stifling days at Neot Semadar. The whole time, I felt exhilarated by my ability to choose what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go. While riding we passed the field of sand that I had so desperately wanted to run into just earlier that week. I realized that I could. So, I did.

I parked my bike and ran into the patch of bright red sand. I lied down on my back, stretched my arms out and stared up at the clouds. I made a snow angel in the sand and then closed my eyes and savored the moment. After a little while, one of the IQP students came over to me and we looked for pretty rocks. We found a collection of rocks that were arranged in the word "Hope." It uplifted me and we carried on with our adventure.

Upon returning back to Neot Semadar, and this same room, to the same schedule, and the same food every day, I feel sad. I want to explore Israel-that is why I came here in the first place. From Eilat to Timna, each independent adventure gives me a taste of what my time here could have been so far if I could choose between Shabbat at Neot Semadar and Shabbats elsewhere. Although I am grateful for my time at Neot Semadar, I have accepted that every once in a while, I will bite the hand that is feeding me. As a rebellious individual, I am learning my limits for lack of autonomy as I quickly approach them.

Saturday, February 23rd, 2019

DAY 47: TO BE HUMAN

Topics: Celebration, Awareness, Autonomy

Today was our last Shabbat at Neot Semadar. We just got back from a hike and picnic with him into the desert mountains. Originally, he asked if we would do a full day hike with him. That sounded really fun since making it a full day would allow us to go much farther than our first hike with Yoram. However, tomorrow is our final presentation day and then we leave on Monday so we figured we would need some time today to pack, clean, and tie up loose ends, so we settled for a half day hike.

We woke up at 8am, which might sound early, but was actually sleeping in quite late compared to most mornings here. We got to the kitchen and stuffed our bags with apples, jam, tahini, bread, cucumbers, tomatoes, and salt and pepper. Austin, one of the IQP students, was late because he found a cat and felt the need to bring it to one of our orientation helper's house. We finally set out on our walk, heading to the north from the dining hall. We walked for a little while full of excitement, commenting on the beauty of the landscape, the beautiful colors in the rocks. Similarly, to our last hike with Yoram, it wasn't long before he reminded us of his way of walking: silently, with your head lifted up to look at the horizon. I could feel some of my comrades getting frustrated by the instruction however, I myself didn't mind. I was fascinated by the landscape and wished I had spent more of my free time out in the desert. When you know you are about to leave a place you see it through a different lens. Before long we came to a large formation of white stone, we climbed up to the top and began hiking on a ridge that led from one mountain top to another.

Our sponsor stopped us every once in a while, to point out a favorite view of his or to show us the fossilized shells that were embedded in the path we were walking. After having been rather resistant to participation in Neot culture for the past two weeks, I found myself enjoying the quiet and pensive walk. I felt like in a way that this hike and picnic must be a form of celebration for Yoram. It was his farewell and his thank you all in one. We paused on a mountain peak and I offered to take a photo of the IQP team with the sponsor. Yoram's face lit up with excitement. Something that I might have left out of this narrative is that from the beginning of

our stay, our Sponsor felt somewhat left out of our group. He had wanted to do every step of the project with the IQP team but was told that they needed some amount of independence and autonomy with the work. I think that this simple gesture, a photo taken together in one of his favorite spots, meant a lot to him. It was nice to see him smiling and joyous after so much time of serious introspective conversation.

After walking for two hours, we decided to find a spot for our picnic. Yoram knew of a specific tree that would be good for it, so we started our descent. Once at the tree, we put out a little blue tarp and unloaded all of the food out on to it. One of the students helped Yoram build a fire so that we could have coffee and tea. Once everyone was settled, we began to eat. There was light conversation but nothing too loud or extensive. I think that we were all trying to be as respectful as possible towards Yoram. There were a few moments where I stopped and looked around and just felt so grateful for the weather, the warmth, the smells, and the views, that surrounded us. After we ate, we cleaned up together.

Then Yoram offered to read us a chapter from a book he had brought along with him. It was a book written by Jiddu Krishnamurti called *To Be Human*. He read for ten minutes. It was about the human mind and how our internal dialogue and thoughts get in the way of enjoying life. He paused here and there to ask us if we understood what it was saying and if we could relate it to our own life. Some of the IQP students questioned him. They challenged the thoughts from the book, and it frustrated him. I did not speak.

As a highly impressionable person, I figured it best to take it with a grain of salt and not fully engage. I remembered how excited I had been when I first arrived. I was eager to have conversations like this and to challenge my beliefs. However, I believe now that that contributed to a negative impact on my own inner compass and mental health—something that I have worked hard to understand. I agreed with some ideas he spoke of. There is too much judgment in my world, not enough acceptance for natural thoughts and behaviors. I know for sure that learning not to dwell on interactions or emotions keeps me healthier and more focused on the present. I believe it is better to acknowledge feelings and not judge them or dwell on them, and this book spoke somewhat of that idea. However, there was harsh criticism for following guidelines in life, for listening to others, and for engaging in anything other than what is completely natural. I found this contradictory to losing judgment, being present, and challenging

yourself and your society. So, during this conversation I sat quietly. Listening enough to be respectful but not hard enough to absorb it.

I focused on the rock in my hand. I had picked it up at the beginning of the hike. It was black and dark brown with striations that made it look like a peanut butter cup that had been sliced smoothly down the center. I ran my fingers over it trying to get all of the sand out from the microscopic crevices in its surface. I looked up and I noticed that two of the students appeared nervous and upset. One was standing up, their back rigid, and their jaw locked tight. The other was sitting down, and their foot was shaking back and forth nervously, as they bit down hard on their lip. I made eye contact with each of them to find widened eyes saying “Help.”

It hit me that while we were in a beautiful and peaceful place, we had no clue where exactly that was. We were too far from Neot Semadar to know how to get back—Yoram was the only one that could get us there. I felt their uneasiness fill the air as Yoram continued to read to the other students. What he read was abstract and sounded poetic if you did not focus on the exact meaning. I wasn’t particularly uncomfortable because I was distancing myself from the situation but after seeing the two other students so anxious, my sense of responsibility for them kicked in. I decided to break the trance.

“Yoram, I don’t want to be rude and I also don’t want to speak for anyone else here, but I would really like to start heading back soon.” Yoram smiled and said “Of course.” I followed up that maybe the students that wanted to continue the conversation could do so on the walk back or later that day. It was that easy. We picked up our bags and started our walk. The two students who had appeared uneasy approached me as we fell behind in pace. They thanked me. They couldn’t bring themselves to ask to leave but very badly wanted to. They walked ahead in conversation. Most likely discussing how glad they were that there were only two days left here.

For the rest of the walk I just took in the views. I walked with intentionality and a mix of calmness and attentiveness. I wasn’t sure how I felt about my time at Neot Semadar. I think that most of all I have learned a lot about my own personal boundaries and have learned to enforce them as a method of self-care. Seeing that I could easily ask for a situation to change, or that I could manage to live in an emotional pressure-cooker and stay sane, gave me pride. Although, I have felt a bit stuck at Neot Semadar this past week, I have realized that there is only a little bit of time left. I am determined to make the most of it and try to focus on the positive things I can still get out of it. This will be my own personal celebration of the experience.

Monday, February 25th, 2019

DAY 49: A MUSICAL GOODBYE

Topics: Community, Celebration, Relationships, Noise

This entry will be short since we are in quite a rush to leave. Last night we had our final presentations. Yoram did not come, but Israella and Netta and Mor did. It was so nice to see them there supporting us even though the whole formal setting was not really their cup of tea. I presented on my mechanical engineering project and also mentioned that I would create a digital story of my experience. I was worried to see how they would react, but they left before I could ask them.

This morning we all had to pack up quickly before heading out for Jerusalem. We said a thank you at the morning meeting and were met with gratitude. I was shocked that there was a positive reaction. This was because of past volunteers saying goodbye in the morning meeting and being met with criticism. It could have been a form of special treatment that we were getting, or it could have been genuine gratitude for our engineering expertise. Although, we stick out in a lot of ways, I think that we sparked joy for many people living there by being friendly and excited (at least at first).

While we were packing, Jaime—a volunteer who arrived at the same day as us—came to say goodbye. He only had about ten minutes in between the morning meeting and getting back to work in the kitchen. He knocked on the door while we were all running around doing last minute cleaning and packing. When he came in, he had his guitar in his hands. He was an amazing guitarist and singer. He sat down at our kitchen table and began to play. I couldn't stop getting ready to just listen, but it really did brighten up the whole room and morning. He began to sing. In melody he asked us what our favorite Neot Semadar memory was and expected us to sing back the answer. I responded, describing the night we had all sat around the fire and sang. Carly, another IQP student, sang as well-and beautifully too-about how happy she was to leave. We all laughed.

While Jaime was playing, Mor came to visit. She found me stuffing clothes into my suitcase and came to give me a hug. We both cried a little bit. I didn't realize how sad it would be to say goodbye. She told me that it was amazing to see me present. My presentation had

touched her. It was all I had wanted to hear while at Neot Semadar. One small ounce of positive reinforcement.

I can tell that this morning will be one of the memories that I hold near and dear to my heart from being at Neot Semadar. There were so many kind and welcoming volunteers that brought joy into my life. If I had only stopped worrying about my temporary lack of autonomy to enjoy more of the little moments, maybe the last few weeks would have been more enjoyable.

Anyway, I have to go now. We are heading to Jerusalem for a few days and then our program is over. Finally, the day that I have been waiting so desperately for is here, and I am actually sad! Hopefully, I can deal with the things that I struggled with while here and treasure the beautiful moments.

Neot Semadar, what a confusing yet special place you are.

EPILOGUE

Upon returning to the US, I was met with questions and conversation small and large about my experience abroad.

“How was Israel?”

“Are you glad to be back?”

“Was it as amazing and awesome as it looked?”

I found myself at a loss for words when I was met by these questions, answering simply that it was a very complex trip for me. I had not been able to fully process what I had experienced. When I began my coursework at WPI again, I realized that I needed to face the experience head-on and build an understanding of what I had learned and what the journey had meant for me. In the next section, I will be detailed what each of the prominent themes meant to me, and how they changed over time but before I do that, I want to explain two big realizations that I had throughout my transitional term back at WPI.

Firstly, I realized just how task-oriented the western world is and realized that despite having a challenging last couple of weeks at Neot Semadar, that I really appreciated the self-care and judgement free culture at Neot Semadar. I had nourished my soul while I was away and had learned a lot about myself. Although my physical journey was not far and wide, and in fact rather stationary, my personal journey was extensive. In this paper I focus mainly on what the community is and not what it has taught me but I want to assure the reader that my perspective

has changed drastically as I have learned that there is no one way to do things, and no one way of life that supersedes the rest.

Secondly, I experienced the joy of a true community. There is a book by Sebastian Junger titled *Tribe* that explains how humans have evolved to be happiest in groups of 40 or more that band together to face adversity. I believe that I experienced this while at Neot Semadar and that it brought me a certain comfort that I do not find in most western cultures, especially within the professional world. I did not feel lonely while at Neot Semadar, even when I was consumed by negative thoughts or even when I did not contribute to conversation. I have taken away the desire to build to community around me where I go.

RESULTS & POST-PROCESSING THEMES

Coding is a methodology in which themes can be identified for qualitative research. There are two types of coding 1) deductive and 2) inductive. Deductive coding is when you approach your data already having a developed code based on prior research. Inductive coding is when you create your code as you are sifting through your data. In this section I will be using a methodology most similar to deductive coding since the themes under discussion were created prior to and during data collection (the data collection being journaling).

When I began data collection, I started out with the following set of themes:

1. Ecological Living
2. Mindfulness
3. Community
4. Individuality
5. Responsibility
6. Celebration
7. Gratitude

I was interested in seeing how their identifying characteristics played out in actuality. Ecological Living and mindfulness were the two main characteristics of Neot Semadar that I expected to find while there. How central was ecological living to their daily life? When they ate and worked silently, were they practicing mindfulness? I was also interested in seeing how their

communal living style incorporated the importance of the community and to what extent they encouraged or discouraged individuality. Did a member have a sense of responsibility to the community? Were they required to sacrifice their own desires or their own beliefs for the greater good or purpose? That is how the themes community, individuality, and responsibility ended up on the list. Lastly, I was interested in the ways in which the community expresses joy. I split this up into celebration and gratitude: two ways in which joy and purpose is obvious in a community. Did they ever take a break from their back-breaking work to laugh and dance? Did they thank one another for their time, effort, and care?

By the second week on-site, this list of themes had already changed. Throughout the seven weeks new themes emerged such as:

1. Awareness
2. Curiosity
3. Relationships
4. Acceptance
5. Nature
6. Noise
7. Independence
8. Autonomy

Awareness and Curiosity became replacements for what I originally described as mindfulness. Relationships and acceptance emerged as the four IQP students and I began to

immerse ourselves in their practice of “self-learning.” Nature as a theme had one appearance as ecological living did not quite encompass the importance of nature and the role it played in their community. Noise, independence and autonomy only arose within the last few weeks as I began to cherish them as things that I had previously taken for granted. In order to learn something from this continuously changing list of themes, I kept them all as valid themes throughout the journaling process. I decided to rely on coding to shed light on how these themes changed and interacted throughout my stay at Neot Semadar.

Table 1 below, shows how the themes appeared as previously described throughout the journal entries. I aimed to include 2-3 themes in each entry, which ever ones felt the most present throughout the period since the last entry, however, as you can see some of the entries included four themes, and one of the entries has only one them. The reason for this is because I did not want to hold myself to a one-size-fits-all format for each entry. When a theme is said to be present in an entry, it does not necessarily mean the word itself was in the entry, or that no other themes are present at all. Instead it was an opportunity for me to list which themes were the most present throughout the experiences described in the entry.

Figure 1 displays the themes present in each journal entry, with the entry number on the left column and themes listed on the right. The spotlight entry by Morgan Reisinger is not included in this coding because themes were assigned subjectively in a consistent fashion that could not be replicated for an entry written by someone else. You can see as previously mentioned, that mindfulness is replaced by curiosity in entry 7, and replaced by awareness in entries 11, 21 and 47.

Entry	Themes Present
<i>Day 1</i>	Mindfulness, Responsibility, Community
<i>Day 2</i>	Ecological Living, Mindfulness
<i>Day 3</i>	Responsibility, Community
<i>Day 6</i>	Celebration, Individuality
<i>Day 7</i>	Curiosity, Individuality
<i>Day 9</i>	Responsibility, Community
<i>Day 11</i>	Mindfulness, Awareness
<i>Day 15</i>	Relationships
<i>Day 21</i>	Awareness, Individuality, Relationships, Celebration
<i>Day 24</i>	Acceptance, Responsibility
<i>Day 27</i>	Community, Individuality
<i>Day 30</i>	Acceptance, Community, Celebration, Noise
<i>Day 35</i>	Celebration, Individuality, Autonomy
<i>Day 41</i>	Autonomy, Nature, Independence, Celebration
<i>Day 47</i>	Celebration, Awareness, Autonomy
<i>Day 49</i>	Community, Celebration, Relationships, Noise

Figure 1: Themes present in each journal entry

You can also see that certain themes such as community, individuality and celebration appear relatively consistently throughout the spread of entries, whereas independence and autonomy appear exclusively in the latter half of the journal. This accurately represents the presence that they had in my day-to-day life throughout my time at Neot Semadar. Since my perspective changed while I was there, the order of the themes is just as significant as their frequency.

Figure 2 depicts the number of times each theme was present in an entry. Certain themes were grouped together for this part of the coding since they were different words that aimed to describe the same overarching concept. Mindfulness, awareness, and curiosity were all theme

names meant to help describe what Neot Semadar practiced during their silent meals, and intentional actions. For simplicities sake, I will refer to this as “mind-emptiness”, a term used by my sponsor to describe the practice. Autonomy and independence will be referred to as just autonomy and ecological living and nature will be referred to as ecological living-with a broader meaning than originally assumed, which will be explained further in this section.



Figure 2: Number of instances each theme appeared in an entry

CELEBRATION

When I began my journaling experience, I included the themes celebration and gratitude as a measure of joy, however during the first week I quickly became discouraged. The day-to-day life of waking up early to simple work, eating quietly, and then going separate ways from kibbutz members and volunteers for post-lunch free-time left little room for celebration whether it be singing, appreciating accomplishments, or indulging in deserts or unnecessary pleasures. Although, I did not find any outwardly expressed gratitude until my final day at Neot Semadar, I was pleasantly surprised to find Shabbat dinner filled with unique behaviors reserved just for the occasion. Everyone wore clean, white clothing. The children joined us for dinner, and couples and families sat together. There was singing and lively conversation and the meal was followed by spiritual dancing every other week.

I was surprised to see celebration as one of the top themes present in my entries and during my time at Neot Semadar. I believe that throughout my time at Neot Semadar, things that seemed like every day occurrences seemed like celebrations for me. Whether they were personal celebrations or shared with the other students, things like finding rollerblades, going for runs, taking a nap, and watching a movie seemed like extraordinary activities. I find that I really learned to find beauty and celebration in the little pleasure of life more and more as my time at Neot Semadar went on.

MIND-EMPTINESS

This theme was very dynamic throughout my time at Neot Semadar. What I initially believed to be mindfulness was a type of self-awareness described as self-learning. My sponsor preferred the term mind-emptiness instead of mindfulness and explained the phenomenon as the desire and effort to escape the mental noise that one experiences in their mind. Things like judgement of self, judgement of others, assumptions, social cues, and responding in ways that are generally accepted and seen as “normal” are thrown out the door. They strive to allow each member, volunteer, and visitor to learn for themselves what this means and what mental noise plagues them. Hence the name “self-learning.” Although this seemed very similar to what most people consider mindfulness, it is less restrictive. There is no one ultimate goal, whether that be peace of mind, reduced anxiety, clearer thoughts and perspective for the practice of mindfulness, but rather you are meant to discover the goal and purpose of doing it as you experience it. I do believe that they transcend the label of mindfulness, however it may be the closest word to describe this value that is widely understood within western culture. I experienced this mind-emptiness during morning silence, *Shaharit*, during quiet meals and work time, and through my own initiative to eliminate judgments and assumptions from my perception.

COMMUNITY VS. INDIVIDUALITY

Throughout my time at Neot Semadar, I tried to understand how the values of community and individuality interacted. I assumed that one takes away from the other and must be dominant. Within their communal living style, people share the burden of responsibility. They are assigned work each day without their own input or preference and they may be required to do things that they do not want to simply because it needs to get done and they have been chosen for it. There is a mental challenge of endurance and open-mindedness in their daily lifestyle.

I got the sense that there were many ways in which the individual had a responsibility to the kibbutz: to show up to morning meetings, to be on-time to things, to volunteer to fill in for other people, to be respectful of others preference for quiet. However, the more time I spent there I realized that that was a simplification of their expectations. The believe that part of escaping the mental noise of your mind includes eliminating social pressure which is a main proponent of feeling a responsibility to something greater than yourself. I was taught by the members that no individual should be attending things out of guilt or pressure but rather only if they truly desire to. The key is that if they find the right perspective that they will naturally desire to.

This led me to missing meetings or work if I felt I was only going out of fear of the guilt I would feel if I did not. The community encouraged the individual to be true to themselves, but only the most natural part of themselves. Unspoken rules were broken by individuals here and there, such as a spontaneous singing of Kumbaya at a meeting, or loud sounds or distracting physical actions of individuals at meetings but it was assumed that these were natural actions by their body that were unfiltered. In this way individual expression was encouraged and accepted, but actions that were considered to be from social pressure were not.

As Americans that are engrained with the idea that you are meant to question authority and truths and impact your environment, we were met with resistance to what we thought was our natural expression. In a way we had to sacrifice that aspect of our identities in order to be accepted in the community and feel included.

RESPONSIBILITY

As mentioned in the Community vs. Individuality section, there was an element of responsibility to do your part as best you can and contribute to something bigger than yourself. Showing up to work and meetings as well as acting appropriately was expected of you however it was supposed to be a self-driven expectation and desire and less of pressure from the community. Many volunteers that I spoke to had come to the community in order to foster discipline and natural desire to be productive, on time, and reliable. The main way that this was taught was to find solace in the work and to enjoy it in a pure and simple way. There were also people with jobs that other relied on: the woman who made the daily work schedule, our sponsor who organized housing, and the secretaries that handled external relations and record keeping. These responsibilities were supposedly completed consistently because of a joy to do so even if it was challenging or exhausting.

AUTONOMY

Throughout the later part of my trip I noticed the autonomy that I had when I would leave Neot Semadar for trips and it highlighted the lack thereof when I would return. Before returning to the US I thought that this lack of autonomy was from an intrinsic characteristic of Neot Semadar however, through my post-processing, I have realized that this sense of lost freedom was due to living with duality. I was a kibbutz volunteer and an independent adult, but I was also an engineering student of WPI and grouped in with the IQP team in most instances, resulting in treatment that I might not have encountered otherwise.

Volunteers arrive at Neot Semadar under much different pretenses than I did and the students that I went with also had different goals and expectations than I did. At times when I was grouped together with “The Americans” I felt robbed of my independence and the opportunity to differentiate myself and make personal decisions. The rules and expectations for the other students inadvertently were applied to me. Academically, my project fell second in importance and was difficult for the sponsor to understand. Socially, I made an effort to branch out and build relationships with volunteers and participated in activities that the other students did not. In this way I exercised my full extent of independence and autonomy at Neot Semadar.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships played a periodic importance in my daily life as I struggled to become immersed in the community. As I tried to learn about the community for this project, I realized that I needed to have conversations with many people. Some of the relationships that I built were very influential to my understanding of the community, even if I only spoke to them once. It was interesting to experience relationships outside of the WPI students in a community that is so relationship-focused. Although I look back on my experience fondly and remember how much joy and support, I experienced from my interactions with members and volunteers, I also remember that relationships were rather volatile.

In a community where people were striving to be their natural selves, there were instances where people did not speak to you or smile at you if they did not desire to—even if it was only because they were tired or experiencing something unrelated to you—and therefore someone who appeared warm and welcoming one day, might be completely checked out and avoiding you the next day. This was somewhat stressful, but it did teach me something about making assumptions about people's actions. You don't always know what is going on in someone's personal life and being able to be included in a community yet not expected to contribute socially at all times is rather comforting.

ECOLOGICAL LIVING

Ecological living is a characteristic that Neot Semadar has assigned to themselves to the outside world. More the most part they live off of their own land. They grow vegetables and fruits for themselves, raise goats for goatmilk and have created a manmade oasis in the middle of the barren desert. However, I learned that their relationship with nature goes far beyond this basic idea of living ecologically. In one of my entries, Yoram explains that their life is a simple one, but nature is their luxury. They have created an environment for themselves in which they can bask in the beauty of other living things. Most people sat out in the sun with their tea for as long as they possibly could in the morning, just silently soaking it up.

ACCEPTANCE

Originally, I had thought this theme would be much higher in occurrence. It is very clear that the community preaches no self-judgement or judgement of others however, the real situations created in the environment did not lend itself to a feeling of welcome and acceptance. Not all members and volunteers were capable of not judging others—which is a task harder than it sounds—and when one fell short of expectations, they received a cold shoulder. Even though individuality was high up in terms of presence during my stay, the real manifestation of acceptance of the individual was relatively low.

NOISE

Neot Semadar had a lot of low volume activity and enabled many silent activities. In some way this made noisy experiences stick out with such distinction whether it was singing, or soccer, or brief moments of celebratory cheers or joking around. My fondness for intentional sound increased immensely during my time at Neot Semadar, and while I am now more comfortable with silence and auditory pauses, I have learned to not take the simple pleasure of sound for granted. This lesson was not learned until later on in my experience once I became comfortable with the quiet. Perhaps this appreciation is an unintended consequence of silence, but I think it may be widely appreciated amongst kibbutz members.

EXTERNAL NARRATIVES AND VIDEO STORY

EXTERNAL NARRATIVES

While I was at Neot Semadar, I lived in a house with four Worcester Polytechnic Institute Students that were completing their junior-year social science project called an Interdisciplinary Qualifying Project (IQP). They focused on journaling throughout their experience and creating narratives that highlighted their experiences. In order to incorporate outside narratives into the video, I interviewed the students of this group that were willing to participate in my project while informing them that participation was voluntary, that they could end their participation at any point, and that they did not have to answer any question that they did not want to. I also gave them the opportunity to approve individual clips that I used in my final video.

I also interviewed one student that completed their Major Qualifying Project in Israel. They lived at Kibbutz Ketura, a nearby kibbutz, and studied kibbutzim in the Southern Arava Region. They visited Neot Semadar for one full day of work. I interviewed them on the visit as well as their own research on the region.

All interview questions for the IQP students are listed in Appendix A, and interview questions for the MQP student can be found in Appendix B.

INTERVIEWEES:

Austin: IQP Student at Neot Semadar, Class of 2020, Robotics Engineering Major
Ben: IQP Student at Neot Semadar, Class of 2020, Mechanical Engineering Major
Daniel: IQP Student at Neot Semadar, Class of 2020, Robotics Engineering Major
Carly: IQP Student at Neot Semadar, Class of 2020 Biomedical Engineering Major*may remove
Morgan: MQP Student at Kibbutz Ketura, Class of 2019, History and International and Global Studies Double Major

VIDEO STORY

The video that was created to tell the story of this journey through the words and recollections of the students I was living with at Neot Semadar was made in the Foisie Innovation Studio Global Impact Lab with the training and help of its staff and can be found at:

“Neot Semadar Short Film,
HUA Project Presentation Day 2019”
<https://youtu.be/6rJdOB5XxK8>

If this link does not work anymore, you can find it on the Sarah Boecker YouTube Channel.



Film by Sarah Jonell Boecker
Music from AShamaluevMusic
Featured Students: Morgan Reisinger,
Austin Shalit, Benjamin George Tobias
Stevens, Daniel Shrives, Carly Whittle



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR IQP STUDENTS

1. How would you explain Neot Semadar to someone who has never been there?
2. Did you feel like you were included in their community?
(What made you feel included/any particular memories?
What made you feel excluded at times/any particular memories?)
3. Did you feel pressure or a responsibility to act any particular way?
4. Did you feel accepted as an individual? Did you feel free to be yourself?
5. Can you talk about some of the relationships that you formed while there? With volunteers or members or fellow WPI students?
6. What was the most challenging thing to get through mentally or physically while you were at Neot Semadar?
7. What was one of your favorite memories?
8. What forms of celebration/gratitude/joy did you experience while you were there?
9. What role did nature play in your life while at Neot Semadar? Did it have any particular effect on you?
10. Can you talk a little bit about the silence that was frequently encountered during meal times and some activities? Were there times you appreciated it and times that it frustrated you?
11. Can you compare and contrast your life at Neot Semadar and your life here at WPI?
12. Did you take anything away from the experience that you hope to incorporate into your life in the US?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MQP STUDENT

1. How would you explain Neot Semadar to someone who has never been there based off of your day there?
2. What stuck with you most from your day at Neot Semadar?
3. Did you feel like you were included in their community?
(What made you feel included/any particular moments?
What made you feel excluded at times/any particular moments?)
4. Did you feel pressure or a responsibility to act any particular way while you were visiting?
5. Did you feel accepted as an individual? Did you feel free to be yourself?
6. Can you talk about some of the relationships that you formed or interactions you had while there? With volunteers, members, fellow WPI students, or even animals?
7. Was there anything challenging (mentally and/or physically) about your day at Neot Semadar?
8. Were there any ways in which you noticed yourself grow and develop from the experience at Neot?
9. What forms of celebration/gratitude/joy did you experience while you were there?
10. What role did nature play in your life while at Neot Semadar and Kibbutz Ketura? Did it have any particular effect on you?
11. Can you talk a little bit about the silence that was frequently encountered during meal times and some activities? Did you appreciate it, did it frustrate you, or both?
12. Can you compare and contrast life at Neot Semadar and your life here at WPI?
13. Did you take anything away from your abroad experience that you hope to incorporate into your life in the US? (specifically, from Neot Semadar, and in general from Israel)
14. How does Neot Semadar compare to other kibbutzim in the southern Arava region?
15. In your opinion, what defines a kibbutz and despite Neot's own self-image of not being a kibbutz how close do they come to that definition?
16. Is there anything else that you want to share about your time in Israel?