

On Sabbatical

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I knew I would have the opportunity to apply for sabbatical during the 2017- 2018 academic year. Truth be told, I could have applied a year earlier, at the same time that I submitted my tenure application, although the stress of trying to get tenure prevented me from being able to rationally think about other topics simultaneously. So there I was, applying for a sabbatical leave, and trying to figure out where to go. Could I move the entire family someplace else? I wondered, immediately thinking about the logistics of a spouse with a full-time, demanding career of his own, of a house that was in no shape to rent to strangers, of 3 children, ages 9, 6, and 4, and what it would mean for them and their schooling and their friends to move them for a half year appointment, as appealing as that might be. I knew of some colleagues who had left their families at home and traveled independently for a sabbatical, but the mere thought of broaching the idea to my husband made me realize how laughable that would be for our family situation. The colleagues who had done that were uniformly male, leaving behind stay-at-home wives and children for the wives to manage. We did not have a situation like that, not even close.

No, I decided, slowly and somewhat regretfully. It was not feasible to move to a new location for sabbatical. I found a location close to my house where I would be able to do a meaningful sabbatical, at an Army research laboratory with an even shorter commute than my commute to URI (60 miles each way), and applied for and secured a sabbatical appointment to do research there.

That was the decision, right up until the time that our family took our first trip to Israel in May of 2017. During the course of that trip, I had the opportunity to visit Bar Ilan University (outside of Tel Aviv) and meet with many faculty members who were doing lots of exciting research. I could see multiple pathways for collaboration with several of the faculty members here, and I mentioned that to my contact person who had arranged the visit.

“Would you ever think of doing sabbatical here?” he asked.

“Funny you should mention that,” I replied. I have sabbatical starting in January 2018, and I think I can switch the location to come here instead.”

I could switch the location, it turned out, relatively easily, and in a short amount of time I had decided that I would do sabbatical in Israel, and move my entire family with me to do so. The logistics of doing so were non-trivial, as I knew they would be, made more difficult by the fact that our long-term apartment rental was canceled 2 weeks before we were scheduled to arrive, and we had to scramble to find alternate housing, in a different city, and with different schools. We decided not to try to rent out the house, and were fortunate to find a house sitter who lives in the house and informs us of any disasters (floods in the basement, as a non-hypothetical example).

Our time in Israel has been interesting to date (writing now 3 months into a 5 month stay), with all of the children relatively well adjusted to life here. “I am teaching my friends English and they are teaching me Hebrew,” said the middle child, a 6 year old kindergarten boy, not long after we arrived. “Say something in Hebrew,” I requested. After a few minutes of thinking, he responded, proud of himself and his abilities, “Shalom” (“Hello” in Hebrew).

My husband is here too, fortuitously able to arrange his 8-week work sabbatical to coincide with my semester-long one. Interestingly, sabbaticals outside of academia have a certain connotation of freedom and vacation; here in academia, I need to figure out how to stay productive, and then account for my time spent on sabbatical when I return. So far, it seems, I have figured out that productivity reasonably well, with a Chemical Review article submitted, 3 other publications, teaching two graduate classes here, and numerous other talks and visits to other universities.

Of course, most relevant for this audience is my role as 2018 Chair of the Northeastern Section, and how I am able to do that effectively from a remote location more than 5000 miles away. To this point, I say, technology is outstanding for video conferencing, for email communication, for document work-flow, and for making sure that I can be virtually present in any situation in which that is required. I am thrilled to serve the local section in this capacity, and can't wait to see everyone again in person on my return.