

Daniel Johnson

Shalom everyone; I'm Daniel. I went to Israel this summer on a Taglit Israel Birthright trip. When Rabbi Rosenthal asked me to speak about my experience traveling to Israel this summer and to discuss how going to Israel changed my life, the first thing I thought was, the rabbi is going to be sorely disappointed. I still go to work every day. I still follow my general routine for the most part. I'm still attending services maybe once a month. Honestly, not much has changed in my day to day activities.

But then over the course of the next few weeks, I began to delve more deeply into the question. How did my time in Israel affect my thoughts about Judaism, about Israel? How do I see Judaism, Israel, or the world differently? I began to realize that going to Israel did affect my thoughts about and my connection to Judaism, the Jewish people, and especially to Israel.

After graduating from UC Santa Barbara and moving to San Diego four years ago, I began to make many Jewish friends in the area including a group of Israelis in their 20s and 30s many who had recently finished their military service and moved to the US. I hadn't known many Israelis before this, but I instantly realized how warm and welcoming these people were. They all told me how I had to go to Israel. My father in law also grew up in Israel and my wife, Miriam, spent many summers there as a child. So it's safe to say, I'd heard plenty about the place.

I've seen pictures of Israel, read stories in the Torah and the Bible about events that occurred in Israel. I had some form of image about what Israel was. I knew I was supposed to have a connection to Israel, but I've always been a person who needs to see and experience something to really understand. Israel was really just a faraway place to me.

But today, it's different. After swimming in the Jordan River, after seeing the ruins at the top of Masada and hearing the stories about what it was and what happened there, after touching the cave at Ein Gedi where King David hid from King Saul, after bargaining for souvenirs in the shops, after smelling the shuk on a Friday afternoon, after sleeping in a Bedouin Tent, after feeling the rush of

emotions while putting a prayer in the Western Wall, after walking the empty streets of Jerusalem on Shabbat, Israel became alive. Today, Israel is no longer just a place in my mind.

One of the things that struck me most is just how close all these people are that want to wipe the Jews of Israel off the face of the planet. It is one thing to look at a map and see that Israel is a small, Jewish country surrounded by larger, Muslim countries, but it is quite another to look out over the land of Lebanon one day, and the next to stand on a hillside overlooking the Gaza strip and see the vast array of missile detection sensors. It's like standing on Cowles Mountain and looking out over El Cajon, except that the people of El Cajon could launch a barrage of rockets at you at any moment.

This is something that I never really appreciated until seeing it with my own eyes. I could not begin to comprehend the constant threat of attack until seeing a playground in Sderot built as a bomb shelter.

But the Israelis; they are not afraid. Our tour guide, Yoav, and the rest of the Israelis that traveled with us were very adamant that they did not live in constant fear. They were very proud of the fact that they would not let anyone scare them into not living their lives as usual. I gained an immense respect for the people of Israel.

Our tour guide, Yoav told us an intensely emotional story about a fatal bombing that took place in the cafeteria at Hebrew University in Jerusalem while he was on duty as a security guard. He concluded the story by emphasizing that these events happen, but the Jewish Israelis do not live in fear; they do not change their habits; they will not be bested. I can now begin to understand the pride Israelis feel from living in Israel. It's not just the pride of living in the Holy Land, but of proudly living without fear in the Holy Land even though their neighbors could kill them at any moment.

Not only did I discover that Israelis are a very strong and proud people, but also an exceptionally welcoming people. While traveling across Israel, Israelis would

often inquire as to where we were from. When we told them we were from California on a Taglit trip, they would always light up and say, "Oh Taglit!"

They were always excited to hear about our journey and how we liked Israel.

It was very clear that the Israelis were very supportive of the Taglit Israel Birthright program. An example of this is when a group of locals who we'd met while rafting on the Jordan River invited a few of us over to their car afterward for some snacks and drinks. We were constantly welcomed throughout the country.

One of the most interesting facts I learned was while visiting a bird sanctuary in the Hula Valley. I learned that Israel is the central hub for birds migrating from Europe and Asia down to Africa and back. More than a half a billion birds pass through Israel on their annual migrations. They said the reason was something about Israel being the only land bridge and that there are strong wind currents that go through Israel, but I think the real reason is that all these birds know a thing or two about the Israelis' warm, Jewish hospitality.

I not only gained an appreciation for the people of Israel, but also of the importance of Israel to the Jewish people. This was emphasized most by going to the Kotel on Friday afternoon and then again in the evening for Shabbat. The afternoon trip was an extremely spiritual, quiet time when I became overwhelmed with emotion as I put a prayer in the wall and talked to God. The feeling I got as I approached the wall was one I'd never felt before. It was a mix of joy and sadness, excitement and calmness one after another.

When we went back on Friday evening, I could not believe how many people were there. It was packed shoulder to shoulder. I'd never seen so many people davening with so much animation, with so much genuine passion.

I became swept up in the sensation and joined a circle of perhaps 50 Israeli soldiers in uniform and bearing rifles on their backs. We wrapped our arms around each other's shoulders and danced and sang the same songs and prayers we sing every Shabbat here in San Diego.

It was exhilarating, and I felt more connected to the Jewish people than I ever have. Singing with people from across the world, singing the same songs, in the same language; it's incredible.

This is what Judaism is; a common set of practices and rituals shared among otherwise possibly completely different people. And I began to really understand for myself why Israel is so important. Not only because there is so much history and meaning in every square foot of earth in the country, but because it is a common place for Jews to come to from around the world to sing and to dance and to pray together. I had to do it to know it.

Overall, while my experience in Israel did not really change my day to day activities, it definitely changed my connection to and understanding of Israel and the vital importance of Israel to the Jewish people, it greatly increased my respect for the people of Israel, and it strengthened my love and my bond to Judaism and to the Jewish people.

Shana Tovah.