

Assemblyman
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From February 18-26th, 2018, I was fortunate to lead a diverse group of 11 colleagues from the New York State Assembly on a JCRC-NY mission to Israel. As I reflect on our time together in Israel, the overarching lesson for me is the realization that although this was my second visit, the things I thought I knew and understood about Israel, I didn't really know. After my first visit with JCRC-NY and Rabbi Michael Miller, I described that experience as life changing. I felt immense emotions connecting to my faith, was awed by the geography of the State of Israel, and most shocking to me was the close proximity of groups that are hostile to Israel.

As we prepared for this most recent trip, I thought I knew. I thought I understood the basics of the 'Middle East conflict', that I learned enough about the efforts to connect Jewish people from around the world to the State of Israel and that I understood the primary security concerns of its residents.

But as my colleagues on this trip and I realized, we had much to learn. First, I was amazed at the technological advancements driven by Israeli entrepreneurs and start-ups, fueling an economic boom in the region. Secondly, our visits to historic and religious sites like Masada, Nazareth, the Galilee, the Old City of Jerusalem and others were spiritually enlightening and fulfilling. Our visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial was a painful and necessary reminder of the incredible journey of the Jewish people from statelessness to statehood, and the suffering, discrimination, and violence incurred by the Jewish people even in the recent past.

Our group also encountered amazing people from across the Israeli political and social spectrum. We heard their stories, learned about their work and its impact, and the diversity of opinions on many different issues – many that I will never forget. As Americans, it was important for us to get a glimpse into the social challenges Israelis face as they relate to immigration, race, and religious differences. As a Latino, who fights every day for the acceptance of those whose immigration status and race are the basis of attack in the United States, I will never forget visiting immigrant children from across the world being educated in Hebrew at the Bialik-Rogozen School in Tel Aviv and the visions of Jewish and Arab children learning together at the Max Rayne Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem. Their efforts to bring people together, break barriers of division, and enhance acceptance of diversity was inspiring and something I could deeply relate to.



The opinions shared with us by journalists, activists, Knesset members, mayors, educators and residents framed the complexities of the regional conflicts. One major takeaway is the difficult challenge Israelis have, which is to balance democracy, public safety and the long sought regional peace, which shapes nearly every conversation and step taken by the State of Israel. But while I thought I knew that, it isn't until you are there in person, to see first-hand the geo-political risks, see the array of ways in which the State of Israel supports its residents and those in places considered hostile, visit Efrat and see how Jewish and Arab families work together toward normalcy in relative peace, sharing shops and everyday life – until you put aside your preconceived ideas and see and listen to the people and their stories, you will continue to underestimate the great challenges in achieving peace and the importance of the continued relationship and support of the United States for the State of Israel.

And finally, yes, while in Ramallah, visiting with renowned professor and researcher Dr. Khalil Shikaki, we were confronted with protestors who did not agree with our visit. They assembled, they chanted, they screamed and challenged our presence, they even threw things at us. Despite our initial fear and concern, I'm grateful that JCRC-NY, Dr. Shikaki's office, and the Palestinian Authority police ensured our safety throughout the entire experience. But most importantly, I had an opportunity to not just listen and hear the anecdotes, but to feel a glimpse of the emotion driven by history, decisions of leaders on both sides and diverse beliefs and opinions that drive all discussions in the region. It was a moment I will never forget, and for the rest of my life will find a newfound prayer for peace, not just for nations and regions, but more importantly for people, who no matter their faith or race, ultimately want the same basic rights and opportunities for safety and quality of life that the human race deserves.



There's so much more I did not mention, but will always remember fondly, such as experiencing my first Shabbat dinner with Rabbi Miller's family and the security briefing we received while visiting Mt. Bental overlooking Syria from the Golan Heights. But I leave you in saying that all of us who experienced this trip walked away as closer friends, as supporters of peace and while better educated, reminded that there is always more to know. Toda Raba, Israel.

