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IMMIGRANT ADVANCEMENT MATTERS



On the Sea of Galilee

I remember when I first heard about the opening of the United States Embassy in Jerusalem, there was a spark of curiosity about the impetus for the historic action, the impact on future peace talks, and the perspectives of the people in both Israel and Palestine. Weeks later, I received the invitation from Rabbi Michael Miller to join a group of JCRC fellowship alumni on a Mission to Israel. The trip was described as an “opportunity to explore first-hand the current situation in Israel, as it strives to achieve a lasting peace and provide security for its citizenry.” The Mission seemed like the perfect opportunity to connect with my religious roots, explore my curiosity of current US-Israel affairs and build on my knowledge of Middle Eastern present history. I hoped to see a more in-depth portrait of Israel, explore my own connection to the land, and discover different views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I arrived three days prior to the start of the Mission spending two days in Akko and one day in Haifa. As I explored these two cities, I found myself receiving the same question from locals “what do you think about Trump?” My response generally focused on grievances with the President’s domestic policies and my inability to move past his serious indiscretions. I would immediately fire back with the same question. The most common response I received was “Trump is good for Israel.” As a student of history, a woman of color, a naturalized American citizen who was formerly undocumented, I struggled with this response. Initially I had a difficult time understanding why a people who deeply understood how rhetoric can quickly transform to systemic oppression would accept the friendship of the Trump Administration. Like many of the challenges faced by Israel, the context was more complex. Complexity would become one of the main themes of our conversations.



With Member of Knesset Ayelet Nahmias-Verbin

When I arrived at the airport to meet the JCRC alumni participating in the Mission, I was impressed by the diversity of experiences. They are leaders in their own right working across sectors to impact change in their communities. Their background ranges from the tech sector to elected office which yielded lively interactions with invited speakers. During the Mission we met with Knesset Members, Mayors of various cities, scholars, security experts,

community leaders and members of the press who addressed the most pressing issues for the State of Israel. The conversations touched on matters of security, new laws/policies, economic development, education, cultural diversity, among others. These candid discussions peeled the layers beneath the surface offering a portrait that was new to me.

We spent time with Sarit Zahavi in Mt. Bental discussing the challenges across the borders of Lebanon and Syria. We drove to Sderot and received a Police Station/Gaza Border briefing by Grisha Yakubovitch. We also visited Ramallah and met Dr. Khalil Shikaki at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. They described Israel’s objective of security and the Palestinian struggle for freedom. In an exchange with Knesset Member Ayelet Nahmias-Verbin about the relationship between Israel and the US during the Trump Administration, she talked about the values of the Jewish people and their commitment to Democracy. Within the same context, she described the complexities of foreign policy when protecting the interest of a nation surrounded by groups who question Israel’s legitimacy and sovereignty.



With Efrat Mayor Oded Revivi.

understanding. He emphasized the importance of getting to know one another and understanding being the foundation of an agreement that will last. Revivi's rhetoric and values he espouses reminded me of Martin Luther King's words, "Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they can not communicate; they can not communicate because they are separated." His plight reminded me of the social challenges in America we have overcome and those that remain barriers to our own transformation.

One of the most inspiring meetings was with the Mayor of Efrat, Oded Revivi. He shared stories depicting the relationship between the city and the surrounding Arab villages. The stories he shared described the mutual respect shared by both parties in spite of political disputes and opinions. He spoke about peace through dialogue, common interests, and



At The Jerusalem Intercultural Center

We also had the opportunity to meet with community-based organizations including Tsofen, Olim Beyahad, Cooking Women, Susan's House, The Jerusalem Intercultural Center, and Ruach Hadasha. Meeting these prominent community leaders shed light on common societal challenges Israel shares with the US. Both countries are grappling with the integration of diverse communities into the workforce, legislative and executive policies that raise questions about the national identity, and the new tech economy and how to support innovations for social good.

The meetings were coupled with stops at major tour sites in Nazareth, Jerusalem, Galilee, and Bethlehem. At the Sea of Galilee, I was reminded of Jesus's lessons of forgiveness and love. Perhaps the most moving experience for me happened in Jerusalem, the home of the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and The Dome of the Rock. It is a place where the hope of religious coexistence triumphs. I shared many special moments with the leaders on the trip. Our bond transcended from collegial to spiritual while we wept in front of the Western Wall. These experiences fostered a strong spiritual connection to the land.

On our first Saturday in Israel we participated in Shabbat where we broke bread with people of different walks of life. I spent two hours talking to people who had different opinions about security, the building of settlements on the West Bank, and the future of peace in the region. Once again, I was reminded of the complexity of the nation.

We are living in a time in history when our country feels more divided than ever. We are accustomed to media channels putting an emphasis on polarizing ideology versus nuanced discourse. In conversations with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances it often feels like there is no room for complexity in our political views or beliefs. There is a lot to learn from Israel. The people we met were comfortable leaning into the complexity of the land. This is a value for the country and a strong pillar of their democracy.

After my return to the US, I came away with a more nuanced understanding of Israel and varied perspectives on the road to peace in the region. I feel a renewed sense of responsibility to continue to foster a dialogue about peace in Israel and around the world.

