

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Daniel Moynihan

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Before going over to Palestine and Israel I set myself some goals for the trip. I wanted to become even more aware of the conflict and to become closer to it by visiting areas and talking to people who are affected by it. I went over quite pro-Palestinian but I wanted to be as open minded as possible. When we arrived at Tel Aviv airport I was expecting very high security and hassle but thankfully for the first time in 11 or so years Darran got through without any hassle and we had no problems either. Upon arriving at my host family I was initially nervous but when I woke up the next morning for breakfast I realised how friendly the host family were and Dan who I was staying with.

DAY 1:

Me and Dan (my host student) waited for his Dad to pick us up and bring us out for pizza with his younger sister Tal. We went to Ein Karem and had a pizza. It was such a beautiful place and it is a place where John the Baptist spent a lot of his time. We then went back to Dan's father's home which I then realised was a settlement when we went on a walk and I saw the barriers outside it. I didn't feel entirely comfortable being in a settlement as I think they are one of the problems in the conflict. After some time relaxing we went home and watched some TV back in Dan's mother's house.

DAY 2:

Me and Dan walked to his school beside the Hebrew University as he lives nearby and we met up with the other Irish and Israeli students. We had a discussion with 11th graders which was quite interesting but it was difficult as there were so much students and it was our first talk as an Irish group. We showed them the posters that Irish students had made and we had a short discussion about the conflict and their views on it. They seemed quite positive towards the project and towards finding a solution for the conflict.

We then talked to younger students who visited Hebron on a school tour. This I found very interesting as they went not on a trip to see holy sites in Judaism but to see how Palestinians live. Unfortunately they were not able to reach an organization called Breaking the Silence as they were stopped by the Israeli police. However a Palestinian man and an Israeli settler came to their school to talk to them. The students were genuinely interested in learning about the Palestinians which I saw as a positive sign.

We then walked to the Old City from Jaffa Street after we had finished our visit to the school. It was amazing. I felt like I was walking through the bible! We saw David's Tower and even walked past the building where supposedly the last supper took place. We then visited the Western Wall which I found very powerful to see all these Jewish people in such deep prayer and you could see how they feel a connection with the city of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. I felt privileged to be able to pray at the wall even though I would not be a religious person and would not be a supporter of organized religion.

We then visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which I found quite intimidating to be honest. There were priests singing loudly when I walked in. It did feel pretty amazing to be at the site of the crucifixion but I didn't feel comfortable there. For instance I made eye contact with a nun and she looked away very quickly as if she had sinned. I started to get a feeling that religion plays too much of an important role in this City then. For instance very strict Jews wouldn't look at our faces because we were "unclean".

We later went rock climbing with the Israeli students which I thought was a good way to get to know the Israeli students better.

DAY 3:

I walked to school with Dan again and talked to some of his friends who were really friendly and curious about the project. After we had all gathered we had a session with Israeli students of our own age in a smaller group of one class of about 20 or so. I found this talk really amazing. There was a really deep atmosphere in the room with emotions everywhere. There was a huge mix of opinions in the room: there was one boy Daniel who lives in a settlement and he talked about how he doesn't see it as an illegal place as "it is his home". I think it was really important to hear this view point especially from someone of our own age. People said how not everyone agrees with the government, some agreed that everyone should have to do military service one girl said how the military protected her as a child and now she feels she should protect the Israeli children as it's her duty.

They were very interested in what we had to say on it from a neutral point of view. We told them the truth that most people in Ireland would sympathise more with the Palestinians but that the majority of people in Ireland don't really know a lot about the conflict. They felt that the media portrays Israel in a bad way and is biased towards the Palestinians but I don't totally agree with this as there are some very good journalists in the world and Ireland who report on the conflict and they do speak the truth. They were interested in our conflict and we explained how we have a quite peaceful country today and violence didn't achieve this. It was a quite moving talk so we ran a bit over time as we went on to our next school: Ha Nissui.

Ha Nissui is an "experimental" school. The students don't do any tests until the age of 16 or 17, they pick their own teachers and at break time there was pop music and other genres being blasted about the place! There were students present at this talk who had come over to Ireland such as Shauli and Maya. Most of the students had not studied the project yet but they were very interested in it and willing to talk. Some of the students spoke about how their opinions are always changing. For instance, one girl said she feels sorry for the Palestinians one day and then another day there is a "terrorist" attack and she does not feel sorry for them. They wanted us to know the Israelis as people with feelings too and not just a military. They were also interested in learning about the Irish conflict and trying to relate it to theirs. One girl said that she really hoped that the Palestinians would one day have their own country. There was a girl who wished to pass this message on to the Palestinians: "hate comes from fear and we don't need to be afraid of each other".

We then walked out of the school and saw a memorial for a student named Bnayahu Zuckerman who was killed in a bus bombing. We had a minute's remembrance for him. The school is a very left wing school and the the yard was full of socialist/communist and anti-fascist graffiti. We then walked through West Jerusalem to a very strict Jewish area where everyone dresses in black and white. There is no internet or TV, woman wear wigs and the news is put up on walls in black and white. Some of these people don't work and are paid by the government to pray. It was really strange, and as someone who is against organized religion I found it mind-boggling. We then went to a memorial for the bus bombing (where Bnayahu Zuckermann and seven other Israelis had been killed) and had a minute's remembrance. Afterwards, we then had coffee in the German Colony area of Jerusalem.

DAY 4:

We were supposed to go to another school called the Keshet School, but we decided to visit Yad Vashem and we needed to prepare ourselves before going into it. We talked a bit outside the museum and the Israeli students spoke about how important the Holocaust is in their lives, or if it isn't important. Some say to fully understand the Israeli mindset you must understand the Holocaust. When we went inside you could instantly feel the atmosphere about the place. We were told before that we don't have to be afraid to show our emotions if we need to.

In all honesty I did not feel very emotional walking through the museum but the things that did really touch me were the items and belongings of innocent Jewish people that were murdered, such as pictures of loved ones and other things that every human being has. I had studied the Holocaust for my Junior Cert so I knew a lot about it. Some of the students felt very emotional. I was not too emotional myself but I could see how the Holocaust plays at the back of many Jewish people's minds today.

After Yad Vashem we went to Hebron. We made our way through Checkpoint 300 at the entrance to Bethlehem. This was an experience I'll always remember: seeing Palestinians going through all this security to go through a wall where their home is. I couldn't imagine living behind a wall. It felt like the Palestinians were animals in a zoo being fenced in. We took pictures of all the graffiti on the wall from Palestinians and Palestinian sympathisers. We then got taxis from Bethlehem to Hebron where we met with our families. When I got home with Ameer I experienced the Arab welcome I heard so much about. His mother had prepared a huge amount of food for all of us and they made me feel a part of the family immediately!

DAY 5:

The next day we visited Widaad Nisredeem, Khadeeja Abdeen and Qurtuba girls schools. It was very interesting to hear the Palestinian students point of view after being in Jerusalem. Like in Jerusalem the opinions of the students varied but words such as freedom came up over and over again. You could see that the students just want their rights as a country and as a people and to have a voice. One girl said how "we must kill them" and I think a lot of the Irish students took this out of context. I think she was just so worked up and angry but didn't actually believe this. One girl said how we must "build bridges not walls" and I think this was one of the best sayings we heard from the students.

We then went to the Old City, walking into H2 was a strange experience, seeing all the shops that were once owned by Palestinians boarded up and the Star of David painted over it reminded me of Nazi Germany. We saw a little Palestinian boy look out a window and he was so happy to see us and was saying hello to us. There were volunteers who watched the Palestinian children walking to school and documented the activity of the Israeli soldiers to make sure they were not harassing the children. I would be interested in getting involved in something like this myself but this organization was CPT which is a Christian organization and I would prefer to be involved in something with no religious links. It felt strange being in H2 and the Old City, knowing that I was able to walk down certain streets because I'm Irish and the Palestinians can't even though it is their land.

We walked down a street that Palestinians are not allowed to go down with Palestinian students and soldiers started running after us and were very anxious and nervous. When we walked down the markets we could see wiring on top of the shops that protected the shop keepers and other Palestinians from rubbish, urine and other things that settlers throw down at them. I couldn't get over how anyone could have such disrespect for human beings to throw things like that on them. We also visited a pottery shop where the owners of the pottery shop were Palestinians and their business was on a street controlled by Israelis and Palestinians cannot freely go here. They were offered 4 million dollars and American passports by Israelis for their business but refused this was an example about how proud Palestinians are of their country and their heritage. We then walked through the Old City and I picked up some little presents from the markets for my friends and family.

DAY 6:

The next day we visited the Hussein school boys' group. They again said that they wanted peace but they want their freedom and their voice to be heard. Some said that peace is not a realistic option for freedom for Palestine and only force is necessary but they were very interested in our conflict and how we have managed to resolve it quite well in a peaceful way.

We then went to the Old City again with the Palestinian students and visited the Ibrahim Mosque where the tombs of Sarah and Abraham are. There was a massacre in this mosque in 1994 when a Jewish doctor came in and shot 29 innocent people dead. We had a minute silence for these people.

We then all went home and relaxed with our families. Ameer and me along with his Dad went to a shisha bar which was really interesting and fun! I had some watermelon tobacco which was really nice. I bought a shisha pipe the next day which Ameer's Dad paid for. Afterwards, he went back into the shop and got my money back and said it was a gift from the family. This is just another example of the generosity of the Palestinians.

DAY 7:

We made our way back to Jerusalem in the snow, and went shopping for a bit in the Old City in Jerusalem. After a day relaxing and getting pizza we had a final evaluation together as a group and had our final thoughts. We then went to Shauli's house (an Israeli student) for a party, and we told them what we had learned from the Palestinians. We then went off to the airport for 12 midnight. Our flight was at 6 am and we just about made it because of all the security checks because they knew we were with Palestinians. All our bags had to be searched and taken off the plane. I was more worried they would take my shisha pipe off me ha-ha! We arrived safe and sound in Dublin via Istanbul, but I can hand on heart say that it was the best experience of my life and something I will always remember!