

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Kerrie Lindsay

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Before beginning my report on the trip itself, it is important to note that I was asked to accompany the four students from K.H. at the very last minute (due to Ken Mulryan's foot injury). This meant that I had not had the preparation time, with regards to educating myself more fully on the conflict, or to create aims and objectives that I wished to fulfil. I saw myself in a supporting role, primarily for my own students, and as a back-up for the students from the other schools. I hoped that I could be a useful facilitator in their learning experience, a neutral observer that they could use as a 'sounding-board', so to speak. Travelling to an area of conflict inevitably heightens one's sense of the need for responsibility and safety, so we came up with a plan of 'constant communication' in Dublin Airport before meeting with the rest of the group and setting off for Tel Aviv.

Our exuberance and positivity seemed to seep into the staff at Tel Aviv airport as Darran passed through security without any of the usual difficulties. We dropped each student off to their host families, waking them from their slumbers and finally got some sleep ourselves.

Late **Saturday** morning I woke to the most beautiful view overlooking Jerusalem framed by the huge windows of the apartment we were staying in. Our first introduction to Jewish culture came in the form of 'what not to touch' in the apartment with tape covering whole cabinets and drawers, a little strange for us perhaps, but the view more than made up for it.

We had the day to ourselves so we set off on a walking tour of the city with Darran as our guide. It was my first opportunity to really get a handle on the complex history of the countries. I was immediately forming comparisons with the Northern Ireland conflict in my mind - the dichotomy of opinions on ownership, rights, land, power, fear and the idea of home.

As it was the Sabbath for the Jewish community, the shops and businesses were all closed in west Jerusalem. So we walked to the east side of the city where the Palestinian shops were open for business as usual. There was a lively atmosphere, with street vendors selling their wares and families going about their day to day business. Darran brought us up to a great viewing point atop the Austrian Hospice. The juxtaposition of crucifixions atop synagogues and crescent moons atop mosques clearly illustrated how these two cultures, whether they like it or not, are inhabiting the same space. It was sundown and the call to prayer rang out over the city, and although we were soon to visit some of the most historically religious places in the world, it is this moment that, on reflection, held the most spirituality for me.

On **Sunday** we met at Hebrew University Secondary School and had a briefing session in a large upstairs room that Debra had organised for us. When discussing what we had done the previous day it immediately became apparent that the struggle for affection or for our students to see and understand the Israeli viewpoint had taken effect from the very first day. One of our students opined that we shouldn't compare the two sides of Jerusalem as it had been the Sabbath. She immediately, as did her host it seems, came to the conclusion that we would prefer the Palestinian side because of its 'hustle and bustle'. We proceeded to explain that one does not have to prefer one side or the

other, simply experience the differences for what they are. I felt that this assumption that we and the students would, or had to, choose which side we preferred or agreed with was evident in our discussions with the some of the Israeli students throughout our stay.

After meeting with the principal of the school we had our first group discussion with students from the 10th grade. This was a very large group therefore we focused mainly on the nature of identity and what is important to the young people, regardless of where they are from. The group was too large to go in to detailed questions and opinions on the conflict; however it was a good introductory session for the students.

Dr. Amir, the principal had told us about an attempted 8th grade trip to Hebron to meet 'Breaking the Silence' a group of ex-Israeli soldiers that were informing the wider society about the injustices suffered by the Palestinians living in Hebron. Unfortunately the trip was cut short by the Israeli police. However it was still successful in acting as a springboard for discussion, both in the media and in the classroom. Our group met with these 8th grade students. They were very well informed and had obviously thought about and researched the issues in-depth. It is possible that this type of grass-roots educational endeavour could be the beginning of a movement towards conversation between the youth of both countries. As their trip was unsuccessful they asked our students to carry messages of peace to the young people living in Hebron. This is a very real, tangible benefit of spending time with young people from both sides of the conflict.

The second half of the day was spent on a walking tour of the city. We met up with Pippa's sister's boyfriend, Oren, who is Israeli and by a stroke of good fortune is a tour guide during his free time from doing his duty as a soldier. We walked through the the old city and got a flavour of the layers of its history, both religious and sociological. Before being allowed enter the vicinity of the Western Wall we had to pass through a checkpoint. The incongruity of guns, checkpoints and security with religious sites struck me on several occasions in both Israel and Palestine. Visiting the Western Wall was also our first experience of the separation of the sexes. Although the numbers of men and women praying were roughly the same, the women had only a fraction of the wall in front of which they could pray. It was a strange feeling that my young male charges were permitted somewhere that I was forbidden from. The division between the sexes is extremely strict in sections of the Orthodox Jewish community, where women are only permitted to sit in certain seats on a bus etc. This is causing various levels of concern and outrage amongst the rest of the Israeli people leading to protests and riots. The separation of the sexes in the Muslim world is well known to us, this was the first experience that I have had of this type of segregation in a Christian community.

We then visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the church that was built on the place that Jesus reputedly died. I'm not sure if I was expecting a 'eureka' moment exactly, but whatever I was expecting the experience fell very short. Tourism and hundreds of years of possessive squabbling seems to have drained the spirituality out of what ought to be a sacred place.

We ended the day off with an evening of rock climbing with the Israeli host students. I was just about brave enough to give it a try myself... on one of the easier routes. When we were in Palestine we commented that we had done this with the students and were told that no such activities were available to the young people of Palestine.

Early on **Monday** morning, myself, Darran and Ann met with the students that were being hosted by the Hebrew University students in their school to have a group discussion. This was Debra's English class, which consisted of around 25 students. The question about settlements was the main point that was discussed in-depth. The Israeli students were keen to impress that there was a very big difference between what are known as settlements on the Israeli side of the wall and what settlements on the Palestinian side of the wall are. Some of these young people had grown up in a settlement and simply considered them their home. They said that they were not aggressive to their

Palestinian neighbours and that there are several examples of the two living peacefully side by side. They also discussed the question of right and left wing political views. One of the students spoke about how he had left wing views but how his friend sitting beside him had right wing views. Tellingly, the friend stayed completely silent throughout the discussion and when it came to the group photograph he tried to avoid being a part of it. His silence rang out loud and clear.

We then quickly made our way over to Ha Nissui School where we were introduced to Judy, the Principle and several teachers. The school is an experimental school where the students do not wear uniform and can choose when they attend classes. This openness was evident during the discussion where the students did not shy away from expressing their opinions. The main area of discussion focused on the military. Military service is compulsory for Israelis. Some of the students expressed how they were looking forward to doing their service and protecting their country while others did not want to go into the army at all. Three things came to the fore for me during this discussion- firstly that they felt that as a people, as a country they were under constant threat of possible attack and that they therefore must protect themselves; secondly that, some of them, did not believe that their soldiers would act inappropriately aggressive or abuse human rights in any way; and thirdly that, again some not all, simply did not recognise Palestine as a country.

It became apparent during the course of the morning's discussions that the Israeli people are not wholly united in their views on the conflict, as there is little doubt that the diversity of opinions being voiced by the young people is in some way reflective of their parents' views.

Having sat for some time in the sunshine in the schoolyard, Judy then brought us to the school memorial for Bnayahu Zuckermann, a 12th grade student from the school that had been tragically killed in a suicide bomb attack in 2004. We then went back into west Jerusalem, I sat with one of our students who felt unwell while the rest of the group toured different parts of the city. We then regrouped at a site of a suicide bomb attack before taking a break and regrouping once more to visit the place that Bnayahu and seven other people were killed. It is a Jewish tradition to place stones at a memorial. I didn't have to look far for one as I had been carrying a small but beautiful stone in my pocket for several weeks, one that I had picked up on a walk with my son back at home and for some reason had not thrown it away.

The following morning, **Tuesday**, we met with our bags at the Hebrew University School and travelled from there to Yad Vashem. This was the first time that Darran had brought the group to Yad Vashem, a Holocaust museum on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We had debated whether it was the correct thing to do. The Israeli students, some of whom had not been to the Museum before, felt very strongly that in order to understand the Jewish mentality and psychology we must understand the persecution that they had suffered. Our students also wanted to visit it and almost all of them had studied the Holocaust at school, some even visiting Auschwitz.

Although I too had studied the Second World War and the Holocaust in school I had never been to any of the museums or concentration camps. The reality of what had happened was horrifying. The museum traced the progression of events from closing down shops and business to segregation to labour camps to extermination to mass exodus.

Popular opinion often points to perceived Western and American guilt surrounding the Holocaust as a reason that a 'blind eye' has been turned on the injustices that the Israeli government and army are committing against the Palestinians. Certainly one can empathise with a persecuted people wanting to protect themselves and fight for a place in the world. However, having visited both places, neither can one fail to see the tragic irony of the similarities of the treatment from the Germans towards the Jews during the early part of the Nazi regime and the current treatment of the Israeli army and settlers towards the local people in Palestine.

While we were waiting for everyone to come out of the museum I witnessed a very touching moment when one of our students, who is from Germany, comforted one of the Israeli students who was visibly upset. They sat in silence holding hands.

Having collected our bags we made our way to Checkpoint 300 to cross through the wall and security. We were amongst several Palestinians who were returning from work that have to pass through the checkpoint twice daily. The scene that awaited us on the other side was more akin to cities I have visited in Africa, with the chaos of touts and street vendors shouting and taxi men vying for our business, than the westernised calm of Jerusalem city from which we had just come.

There was a lot of artwork and political graffiti on the Palestinian side of the wall. Banksy had done several pieces unseen in the dead of the night.

After our eventful taxi-ride to Hebron we met at the **centre belonging to the International Palestinian Youth League (SAB's partner organisation in Hebron) and were warmly greeted by its Director, Adli Daana** and all of the Palestinian host families. The students went home with their new families and we, after checking in at the Hotel, went to Adli's house for a lovely dinner. At dinner Adli and his wife told us about a political prisoner that had been on hunger strike for 60 days. He had been kept in prison for 7 years without a trial, this is known as administrative detention. When we were leaving Palestine I asked after his status, they held little hope for his release or his survival.

On **Wednesday** morning we visited the Palestinian Ministry of Education in Hebron. They had been expecting us the previous evening and so there was some confusion as to which schools we could go and visit. It was decided that we would quickly visit three girls' schools to thank their Principals for their support for the project. Widaad Nisredeem School, Khadeeja Abdeen School (where our girls had great fun joining in with a P.E. class that were learning to high jump!) and Yakoubia school. In Yakoubia a small group of girls were asked to come and speak with us and although they were not prepared for our questions or our visit they told their stories with open and honest dignity. One girl told us about how her home had been recently raided by soldiers in the middle of the night. She told of the two sides to this story, on the one hand the raid had terrified her and her family making it difficult to fall asleep or to feel safe in her own home and on the other hand she told about how her father had asked the soldiers not to disturb her younger sibling who was unwell, and they did as her father asked.

We then visited Al Qawasmeh School for a full group discussion. This was an interesting discussion in which some strong opinions were aired. The girls were reluctant to believe that the Israeli students meant their messages of peace which our students passed on for them. They felt that the messages were possibly more for our sakes and our ears. The language barrier made comprehension difficult at times with only a handful of girls confident enough in their English to express themselves. At one point one of the girls said that the Israelis should be killed – there was obviously a strong reaction around the room from our students and her classmates to that statement. However, on further probing the girl seemed to be trying to say that the Israelis that she had come in contact with, namely soldiers and settlers, would never change their ways or desire peace and that they would have to be gone altogether for Palestinians to live peacefully.

A core message coming from the girls was that they would be patient and resilient.

We were then brought downstairs where a large group of girls sang Palestinian songs for us and a young group danced a beautiful traditional dance, not dissimilar to our traditional soft-shoe Irish dances.

The next school that we went to visit was in the H2 area, named Qurtuba. In order to go to the school we had to pass through a checkpoint. We met peacekeepers on the other side who told us that they were documenting the soldiers' treatment of the schoolchildren as they entered and exited

the area each day. There had been reports about soldiers terrifying young children on a daily basis. We also heard from the principal of the school as well as the peacekeepers about some very young boys almost being arrested by the soldiers a week or two before our visit. They had been playing football when the soldiers charged up the steps to arrest them, claiming that they had thrown stones at the soldiers. The principal and the teachers managed to talk them out of arresting the boys.

We spoke briefly with the girls in the school and the principle spoke to all of us in the small yard about their experiences of being a Palestinian school in an Israeli settlement.

Walking around the H2 area was the moment that was so reminiscent of the photographs of the early stages of the Nazi regime, only now there are Stars of David painted on the closed doors of the once Palestinian shops instead of swastikas on once Jewish businesses. The streets were eerily desolate. We saw a young boy peeking out at us through the grates that cover his window. When we came out of the H2 area, the principal of the school was detained by the soldiers at the checkpoint for questioning - I did not feel that our visit there was welcome.

Some of the Palestinian students then joined us for a walking tour of the Old City of Hebron. We wound our way through tiny streets which were enclosed by grates above our heads. These grates formed some protection against the rubbish, bleach and urine that rained down onto the Palestinian shop owners and goes by the Israeli settlers living in the apartments above. These metal grates gave a prison/caged-in feeling whilst we were walking below.

After looking at some shops and at the city from some vantage points we proceeded to the Ibrahimi Mosque. Here the juxtaposition of place of prayer and armed security was brought sharply into focus. We had to rid ourselves of any possible weapon, including keys and a violin, before going through the checkpoint at the bottom of the stairs of the mosque. Inside the mosque its significance as a holy place was overshadowed by the terrible atrocity that took place there in 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein opened fire inside the mosque at prayer time, killing 29 people. The Muslims fleeing the mosque were mistakenly thought to be charging at the soldiers and so the soldiers opened fire on them. We tried to have a minute's silence inside the mosque in honour of the dead but the security officer kept interrupting us and asking us to leave. At first I thought that he was merely being rude so I asked a Palestinian student about it, as he had been speaking with the guard. The student said that the soldiers would be watching the guard on CCTV and that he could get into trouble if it looked as though he was promoting reflection and silences for the Palestinian lives lost.

We then continued into an area that is forbidden for Palestinians. The students felt that they could accompany us because our presence would deter the soldiers from doing or saying anything to them. The soldiers were not happy about us walking along there and ran up to Darran to see what we were doing. We then further negotiated with the soldiers for the Palestinian students to be allowed to cross a barrier and come into a little pottery shop with us. Two of the Palestinian girls said that they were afraid that the soldiers would not let them pass because they were not carrying their ID cards, which is an offence. However it all passed off peacefully and we purchased some lovely pottery to have as reminders of the small but significant feat.

On **Friday** morning we met at the **IPYL** centre to discuss how the school group sessions were going and how best to proceed. There was a general feeling that the larger group work was proving difficult for various reasons, confidence in public speaking, language difficulties etc. So we set about organising the students into pairs and gave responsibilities to different groups so that the same people weren't doing all of the talking all of the time. They also wrote down all of the questions that they wanted answering and read them out to each other.

We then went to Hussein Boy's School where the teachers met with the principal while the Palestinian students set the room up for the discussion. Evidence was all around the office of how deeply proud the principal was of his school and his country.

We divided the group into small groups and divided our students amongst them. Emer, Tagdh and I moved around the room making sure that the discussions were developing and that everyone was being permitted their chance to speak. One Palestinian boy and one visiting student from each group then summarised what had been discussed in their group. Again some very strong feeling emerged from these sessions. Some of the boys believed that unless something was done soon to resolve their predicament that there would be a war, not unlike the uprising in Syria – he said it could develop into World War 3.

As a teacher I was glad that we took this approach as a few of our students approached me afterwards to say that they felt that they had benefitted from working in small groups and felt more comfortable asking what are very sensitive questions in that set-up.

Our last school to visit was Mazania Girls' School. The room was too small to break into small groups but we still kept the same structure as the morning session with the same pairs introducing our group and the programme and ending the discussion. Our students seemed very focused and confident in their questions. The girls were very open and lively in the discussion offering differing perspectives and opinions. They too were wary of accepting the messages of peace from the Israeli students but conceded that even by saying the messages or taking part in the programme there was a small chance that when their time came to be soldiers they treat the Palestinian people with more dignity.

On Thursday afternoon we took a bus to Bethlehem and visited the Church of the Nativity. Once again I found the profusion of noise and focus on tourism too much to bear and simply waited outside with the Palestinian students.

We wandered around Bethlehem and played some music in the square. There is a noticeably different atmosphere in Bethlehem to Hebron. When one of the students remarked that we didn't play music in Hebron a Palestinian student replied that that was because it would be 'Haram' and they all laughed, "Everything is haram in Hebron". Haram, I later found out, means forbidden.

We had torrential rain all day on **Friday** and due to the non-existent drainage system the streets turned into rivers. Myself, Darran and the four KH students went to visit Samah and her family in her home. KH students have helped to support Samah's education over the last few years. She is obviously very bright and relishing the chance to advance her education and career prospects.

On **Saturday** morning we woke to snow in Hebron. We travelled by bus through the checkpoints, where an armed soldier came on the bus to inspect our passports. Back in Jerusalem we took the chance to pick up some presents to bring home and then made our way to Shauli's home for a goodbye party.

We had a final discussion with the Israeli students about our experiences in Palestine. One of the girls suggested that to make a true comparison that we would need to speak with Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territories as they (Israeli students living in Jerusalem) were mostly unaffected by the conflict on a day to day basis. All of the students, both Israeli and visiting, agreed that the project was hugely educational and worthwhile.

Our departure from Tel Aviv was eventful, to say the least. The security insisted on taking some of the students' bags off the plane to make sure that the presents that had been given to the students by Palestinian host families were not in fact explosives. Suffice to say that they were not. We arrived home almost a day later, exhausted but singing, just for posterity, one last blast of 'Galway Girl' as we left the terminal.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my report I didn't set out with any definite objectives other than to do my job as a teacher and the adult responsible for four young people. I didn't have definite expectations and so on that front I went with an open mind. I have attempted to summarise my

experience and reflect on the moments that stood out for me as I have gone along. I truly feel that by a stroke of good luck I became part of something that is truly a project like no other I have ever come across. This is not a history trip; the students are asked to delve right into a current conflict that would otherwise never affect their daily lives. They, and I, were exposed to opinions on and complexities of a conflict that we would never normally be engaged with.

What is the tangible 'good' being done by such a project? Is almost impossible to surmise. But the idea, that thousands of miles away on a little island there are people the same age as the young Israelis and Palestinians, and are learning about their situation, are aware of it, are listening and becoming friends, that's an idea that bigger and more important than any single aspect of the project. A project like this asks the young people not to be bystanders but active participants in their world, ambassadors for their country, sensitive and mature in their opinions – an invaluable educational experience.