

Thoughts on my Trip to Israel

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The Intro

In May, less than three months ago, here at Beth Am, I delivered my confirmation speech about committing to Jewish values and a Jewish life. In my speech, I described in part what it means to me to be a Jew.

- It means that we understand our roots and our history; that we appreciate and will never forget the obstacles the Jewish people encountered and worked to survive and overcome.
- It means that we love and appreciate togetherness and food; that we live life with humor, and that we love discussing and debating.
- It means that we are compassionate; that we care about the world around us and about helping people particularly those less fortunate than ourselves.
- It means that we have a connection to other Jews, and a spirit and a strength that will never fade.

Less than three months ago, I wrote, I spoke, and I understood those words. Now, I feel those words. After an emotionally, physically, and spiritually challenging trip to Israel, I have come to realize the true meaning of Jewish identity. I developed a connection with Israel and gained a far more in-depth understanding of the history and the struggles of our people.

The Trip:

It was June 20th. Our bags were packed. We were excited. There were 8 of us from our Beth Am confirmation class that were about to embark on a 5-week adventure with other Jewish teens from all across the United States. We would finally see the place we had spent so much time learning about, hearing stories about, and seeing pictures of – the place that was described to us as our Homeland.

We were looking forward to being away from our sheltered lives in Silicon Valley. We were looking forward to hiking, to trying different foods, to meeting new people, to swimming in the Dead Sea and riding camels in the desert... to doing all those activities that we watched other teens doing in the NFTY video that we saw before we signed up for the trip. But little did we know that those activities would be the least impressive part of the trip for us. Little did we know that the experiences we would have in those 5 weeks would be life-altering and leave us with an incredible sense of pride about who we are and from where we came.

We began our journey with a week in Prague and Poland. In Prague, we saw the remnants of once vibrant and thriving Jewish communities that were destroyed by the effects of anti-Semitism. In Poland, we saw the Warsaw ghetto, and then Auschwitz. We could clearly see the horrors of the largest of the Nazi concentration camps. We walked the train tracks that took hundreds of thousands of Jews to their death. We went inside the crematorium. We saw the suitcases and belongings of the Jews that were sent there... we stood on the very ground on which they lived & and then died. The experiences we had and what we saw in Prague and in Poland were emotionally disturbing. But they gave us an even greater appreciation of what we would see in the weeks to come and of the importance of the existence of Israel.

Then, it was on to Jerusalem, the Negev, Tel Aviv, and all the beauty and wonders of Israel. We banana boated in the Kneret; we saw the Dead Sea scrolls and floated in the Dead Sea. We prayed at the Western Wall; we hiked in the heat and camped under the stars in the desert for days like Moses and the Israelites did when they came from Egypt. We ate Hummus&Falafel until we could eat no more. We climbed Massada, shopped on Ben Yehuda Street, stayed at kibbutzim, talked with Holocaust survivors, met Israeli teens and their families, and practiced our Hebrew. We ate together, we sang together, we prayed together. We laughed, and we cried together. We became exhausted and elated together.

We looked forward to each day's adventure and the places we'd go. But more important to us than what we did and what we saw, was the history behind it all, the people behind it, and why we were there. And every place we visited and so many of the sites we saw, were living proof to us that the stories in the Torah are true, and they were witness to the courage and tenacity of the Jewish people and their historical connection to Eretz Yisrael. We were impressed. And we could not help but feel pride and honor.

The Conclusion:

We know that many of the day-to-day activities that we enjoyed on our trip will fade in our memories over time. And connections to many of the people that we met along our journey will lessen as we grow older. But we will never forget who we are and from where we came. We will always feel the pride of being part of a people that have prevailed despite almost insurmountable obstacles. We will always feel a sense of belonging and the comfort of knowing that there is always a place that we can call home.