

1. When I sit back and reflect on my participation in the Ibrahim Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project, there are a flood of memories, jokes, and experiences that come to mind. The people I met, the things I experienced, and the knowledge I gained made each country we traveled to distinct and unique, and in each place I learned a tremendous amount. But for me, the most memorable and compelling experience from the trip was two part, and it occurred where I least expected it to: in Israel.

Israel is a country I have traveled in extensively, one that I grew up hearing about, and one that I love and care about deeply. I feel an intense connection with the language, the people, the culture, and the history. It is not merely a foreign country, it is my home. As a religious Jew, being outside of Israel in various countries we traveled in was difficult for me. Because of Israel's negative image on the world stage, negative feelings people have for Israel often get transferred to Jews they might encounter. So arriving in Israel was a tremendous relief for me not only because of my familiarity with the country, but because it was a place I could feel completely safe with my identity.

On arriving in Israel I felt this instant ease of tension and a sense of serenity, especially when we arrived in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is one of my favorite cities in Israel, and it is one of the most beautiful. Being there I felt serene, and at peace, and I assumed the other participants would feel the same way. Not only is the city a modern and ancient city at once but it is brimming with the deep complexities of daily life between Jews and Arabs, between the religious and the secular. But the city that I love so much turned out to be one of the hardest places for other participants.

In Jerusalem they felt the pain and strife of inequality, of bigotry, of hatred bred from birth. Their experiences pained me deeply. I was mortified when I heard how my Moslem friends and Fellows on our program had been taunted as they prayed by small Jewish children, and I was depressed by the deep sadness of one of the participants who described how much it agonized her that when she met Palestinians, she was told that being a Muslim was "the right thing" to be as opposed to being a person of character and value who cared about both sides of the conflict. Hearing them recount their experiences made me feel acutely the hate that I'd been so oblivious to as I traveled before, and I felt reality break upon me in an icy wave.

This feeling was further cemented when I spotted some graffiti scribbled on a bus stop near Jewish settlements in the West Bank. It read "The Temple Mount to our hands. Next to this proclamation was drawn a small sketch of the Dome of the Rock with an arrow pointing to a comment that said, "sometimes it's necessary to take off the kippah." This was an illusion to the name for the Dome of the Rock in Hebrew, roughly, "the golden kippah". The message sent a chill down my spine and filled me with sadness.

After residing in Israel throughout the duration of "Operation Brother's Keeper", hearing as they discovered the bodies of the three kidnapped Jewish teens, learning of the gruesome murder of the Arab boy from East Jerusalem, and after watching the news day after day of rockets falling in Israel, Gazans being killed, and tunnels meant for massacres being destroyed, these experiences have stayed with me and featured most prominently in my thoughts and reflections. If there are those who wish for a better future for these peoples, then they must be part of creating a future without hate. Israel and Palestine are poisoned by the blood of their peoples and by the hatred of decades. And seeing it, experiencing it, and living it through my own eyes and those of my fellow

participants was what made the most powerful impact on me throughout my experiences on the Ibrahim Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project.

2. Throughout my time on the Ibrahim Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project, outside of Israel, I was careful to keep my religious identity discrete with those outside of our group. I was consistently cautious for fear that volunteering information about my religious beliefs might alienate others I might meet or anger them because of the natural connection drawn with the state of Israel.

In Muscat, we were graciously invited into the home of Sheikh Abdullah al-Rawas for a traditional Omani meal. At dinner, I was seated across from the Sheikh. A religiously observant Jew, I follow the Jewish dietary laws of kashrut. Because of my religious convictions, I was unable to partake of the main dish (chicken) and of most of the other items laid out before our group. I ate sparingly, but very satisfied. The Sheikh took notice, and began to inquire of one of the participants next to me (a native speaker of Arabic) as to why I was taking so little food, encouraging me to take more. Without hesitation, he told the Sheikh that I was a Jew and kept the laws of Kashrut, meaning that I could not partake of many of the foods the Sheikh had laid out for us. At that moment, I felt my stomach plummet and I prepared myself for the worst. It was not that I expected a rebuke from the Sheikh, but because I had no information about Oman nor about the Sheikh with regards to their responses to Jews, and because I had had negative experiences in the past, I remained cautious. But his response shocked me, and is one of the most memorable experiences I had throughout the trip.

Upon hearing that I kept Kosher he nodded his head in understanding, and proceeded to inquire as to what foods I might eat, and to describe what ingredients were in various dishes such that I might partake. He inquired about my schooling and my family, and proceeded to talk about how important it was for all religions to accept one another, and to have respect for the other's traditions and cultures. In his house, I was welcomed not just as a representative of the United States of America and a fellow of the Ibrahim Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project, but as a Jew. That welcome was unique to Oman, and enabled me to feel more relaxed and excited about my time there than in any of the other countries we visited outside of Israel.

3. In the above two questions I touched on my misconceptions regarding conflict transformation in Israel, and religion & interfaith relations in Oman. But the days we spent in the United Arab Emirates also had a big impact on my conception of the Middle East and changed my perspectives on society with specific regards to social entrepreneurialism. Before arriving in Dubai, I didn't quite know what to expect. I knew that the U.A.E. is rather wealthy, and I'd read about the gap that existed between Emiratis and foreign workers. For these reasons, I was less excited about arriving in the U.A.E. than anywhere else we traveled. In addition, I didn't have a good conception of what "social entrepreneurialism" was, and from what I knew of Dubai, it was a tremendous business capital, but all very elite and professional, similar to what I associate with Wall Street and midtown Manhattan. But in arriving in Dubai and visiting various start-ups and "the Hub", I was incredibly fascinated by the number of small businesses started by one or more people that were completely different from what I'd expected. Instead of encountering the heads of multi-million dollar corporations, I met everyday people who

had had a dream for a business, and came up with creative business-savvy ways of translating their dreams and ideas into reality. For me, knowing very little about social entrepreneurialism, it was an incredible insight into an area in which I know very little.

4. One of the most important lessons I learned while I was traveling with the other fellows of the Ibrahim & Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Program was the importance of challenging my own opinions by engaging in open and honest dialogue and truly listening to other opinions. As Professor Rosenblum often said, we should strive to be able to articulate the most compelling case for the position that we disagree with as well as the one which we embrace. This is an incredibly difficult thing to achieve, yet one that I've realized very clearly is a necessity if I really want to work in the Middle East. In addition, for American Jews who see themselves intimately tied to the future of Israel, and for strong advocates for Palestine, this is a crucial lesson. At Columbia, there is a great divide between these two camps, and any exchange between them is based on furious arguing. There is no attempt of either to listen to the perspectives of the other, nor to try and understand their views.

Professor Mark Carnes teaches in Barnard's history department, and was one of the creators of the Reacting to the Past series. This year I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to take one of his courses. When remarking to friends how much I wished there would be a similar game for Israel/Palestine, they said that there was, but it was only for Barnard study-abroad students in Israel. Because not all of Columbia's student body is as lucky to be a fellow on the Ibrahim & Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project, I want to try and bring this game to campus, so that other students can also have the chance to learn this valuable lesson.

5. I plan to share the experiences I have had through participation in the Ibrahim Queens College Leadership and Dialogue Project through a dialogue group on campus that I hope to create (see #6) this coming semester as well as through face-to-face conversations and discussions with my peers. I think that perhaps the latter is the way in which I will most effectively be able to share the knowledge I've acquired, because in discussions with friends and acquaintances I'll be able to offer insight into certain issues they don't have as much detailed knowledge about, and that in sharing what I learned and experienced on the trip, not only will I perhaps challenge the perceptions and beliefs peers have, but I will encourage them to learn more, and to see the issue differently. In addition to these conversations, I would like to pair with my fellows in the New York area to contact local religious centers to offer to come and speak about our experiences and what we learned.

6. Columbia University is known to be one of the most politically polarized campuses around issues concerning the Middle East, particularly with regards to Israel and Palestine. Every year there are protests in the center of campus staged by SJP (Students for Justice in Palestine) and LionPAC (a pro-Israel advocacy group). There are confrontations, and there are fights. There has never been any meaningful dialogue nor attempts at reconciliation. Upon returning to my campus, I hope to partner with some of my fellow peers to create a dialogue group that fosters meaningful discussion about the Middle East. Initially I want to seek support from an impartial party on campus with

whom I've had previous experience, such as the University chaplain. We would begin to meet once or twice a month to discuss developments in the Middle East and certain topics of significance to us. In addition, I'd like to bring in Professors or professionals who have expertise and a particular knowledge about the Middle East to share their insights and views with us. In this way, I hope to counter the deep chasms torn yearly in the student body and to begin to foster a sense of understanding and respect.

7. I think that rather than one single moment where we bonded as a group, there were a series of moments that made us all laugh, or cry, or feel a deep connection existed between all of us. One moment in particular that stood out to me is the night that we went to the center for cultural understanding in Dubai. Many of us were infuriated by what our host said, and we were comforted by the fact that not only did we feel equally angered by his comments, but we were united in a need to combat the statements he made that infuriated and offended us so deeply. When we left the center, we were still deeply frustrated by what we'd experienced, and visited a local coffee hangout to grab something to drink and talk with local people. The first room was filled with couches and a TV broadcasting the World cup, and behind it was another room in which were various seats on the ground as well as a rack of clothing. In a whirl of cheerful abandon, a number of us fellows as well as the Professor donned local garb, took pictures dressed up, and then some of us proceeded to spin like whirling dervishes. Looking back on that moment, I remember being in the company of people I respect and admire, of lasting friends. The ability to relax amidst my frustrations and to feel a connection with my fellows provided me a sweet moment in which I felt the group bond.