

Daniel Kaplan

1. What was the most memorable and compelling experience from the trip and what makes it stand out?
 2. What was the most surprising experience on the trip?
 3. What assumptions did you have about the middle east regarding interfaith relations& religion, social entrepreneurialism and conflict transformation that were proven wrong or somehow altered by the trip?
 4. What steps will you take to apply the lessons learned on the trip to your local community, work place or school?
 5. How will you share the knowledge you acquired? [powerpoint is one way]
 6. What specific plans do you have for promoting greater cross cultural/interfaith understanding in your community or school?
 7. Was there a moment that you think our group bonded and connected with each other? Or perhaps a series of moments that helped band the group together?
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1. The most memorable experience from the trip was when we were served kosher fish at the Diplomatic club in Oman. Maggie, our guide in Oman, knowing there were three kosher eating Jews had arranged for the preparation of strictly kosher food. Upon arrival at the diplomatic club Maggie asked the head waiter, Jon, to explain to us [the kosher

eating students] how the fish was prepared. Jon had researched what is required to make kosher food and had prepared a kosher style meal for the entire group. He was familiar with the issue of mixing meat and milk as well as the requirement that kosher fish have both fins and scales. After explaining to us how the fish had been prepared, it was quite apparent that in fact we would not be able to eat the fish. The head waiter insisted that we explain to him would it would require to make the fish according to the standards of kashrut. We explained to the head waiter that to make kosher fish in his kitchen he would need a new knife, a new skillet and fresh fish. After approximately ten minutes the three of us who ate strictly kosher were served a delicious meal of fish and vegetables. This episode demonstrated the true nature of Omani hospitality, welcoming and serving guests of all ethnicities and religions. In a region plagued with so much religious violence it was nice to see an oasis of religious tolerance and acceptance.

2. The most surprising experience was the ease with which I felt I could openly practice my religion. Throughout the trip I felt that as an Orthodox Jew I could practice my religion freely with little to no hindrance. As an Orthodox Jew I prayed three times a day and donned phylacteries every morning. Before I left NYC I spoke to Prof. Rosenblum countless times to discuss my religious observance over the course of our trip. Time and again I was reassured that no matter where we were I'd be able to freely practice my Judaism. Obviously, there were times when praying in public was not optimal however I never felt that I could not find a time and place to pray or lay phylacteries. Over the course of our trip I donned phylacteries in the airports in Amman, Tel-Aviv, Muscat and Istanbul. I prayed in locations such as the high school of one of our students in Jordan, on

the beach in Oman, Petra, etc. As the trip continued I became accustomed to finding a location and time that would allow me to pray the afternoon prayer, usually the most complicated prayer to arrange.

In regard to kosher food, I never felt more accommodated for, even though often my meal consisted of carrots, tomatoes and cucumbers. Wherever we went the three kosher eating students were served almost an endless supply of vegetables. When we were in Israel our group made sure to eat in strictly kosher restaurants. It was very reassuring and comforting to know that the entire group, including students who had met Orthodox Jews for the first time just a few days earlier, went to such great lengths to make us feel comfortable.

3. Coming from a Zionist background I had been exposed to one viewpoint on the middle east my entire life. I had grown up visiting friends and family in Israel and had even spent some of the toughest summers during the second intifada in Israel. I have both friends and family that have been killed for simply living as Jews in Israel as well as friends who were killed serving in the Israel Defense Forces. My family history is rich in Zionism and unfortunately that often leaves little room for learning about the other. I have been raised to fear Arabs for they have killed so many close family and friends. I have learned to be aware of my surroundings on an Israeli bus because the person next to you may blow themselves up. But, this all began to change when in high school I began a senior project on interfaith relations. Upon entering college I met many Muslim and Christian friends and felt a stronger connection to some of them than to some of my Jewish friends.

Throughout our trip I felt a similar sentiment. I felt a close connection to practically everybody on our trip regardless of religious, ethnic or racial background.

In addition my perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has changed. I no longer view the conflict as one sided but rather a multi-faceted complex debate of narratives.

Although I have my beliefs and ideologies, no individual can claim that their perspective is more “right” than any other. Both sides have strong emotional ties to parts of the land being controlled by the other. For example, the Jews have no access to the tomb of Joseph in Nablus while many Muslims from Ramallah cannot reach the temple mount in Jerusalem. It is hard truth to come to grips with considering everything that I have grown up with, however, it describes the true nature of the conflict. It also tremendously difficult to acknowledge and witness how much pain, suffering and damaged has been caused by the conflict.

4. I intend to run a series of interfaith dialogues with student leaders in the MSA and Catholic Newman center. I would like to see a series of dialogues on prayers, holidays, and dietary restrictions. Along with the Center for Ethnic, Racial and Religious Understanding (CERRU) I hope to put together a series of lectures and dialogues to discuss the above topics.

Furthermore, I intend to set up “lectures” at local synagogues, churches and mosques to discuss my experiences. Along with the other students on our trip from the NYC area I would like to set up speaking engagements at local cultural and religious centers.

5. In addition to the formal speaking engagements I hope to set up, I will spend time speaking to friends and family informally and tell our stories. I have already been doing so for the past two months and I know I will continue to do so. The powerpoint presentation will also be a helpful tool in promoting both the program and cultural dialogue in general. I hope to prepare a video with after thoughts from the student participants on the Ibrahim & QC Leadership and Dialogue Project.
6. On a similar note as described before, I hope to run programming with religious and cultural centers in Queens. It is often difficult to find the means to meet people of other religions when living in an insular community like my own, however, if a program is established to create a safe space for doing so I believe many more people would join such programming. A series of events run along with MSA, Hillel and the Catholic Newman center can be extremely useful in promoting a safe space on campus for dialogue on topics that are otherwise ignored or instigators of violence.
7. When we finished our walking tour in the Omani mountains we were met by one of our drivers, Suleiman. He had arrived in a jeep to shuttle anybody that did not want to walk back to the hotel. All the students except for one opted to start the trek back on foot. After a few minutes of walking a couple of students, myself included, decided to hop onto the side of the vehicle while holding onto the racks on top of the Jeep. Suleiman continued to drive slowly while we held on to the side of the vehicle. Eventually the entire group had hooked onto the vehicle in some way or another and Suleiman drove us back to the hotel while blasting music the entire way through. This moment was the first time since our

intense experience in Israel that we were able relax together as group . It afforded us an opportunity to bond together despite our various differences.