

Israel

a birthright diary

by Miriam Stone



On returning from Israel,
I find myself committed to
stand firmly...**exactly**
where I had been before

Deciding to go on a “birthright Israel” trip was like coming out to my friends. “I know you’re not like that, but what about the other people on the trip?” was the general response. “Like that”: Israeli flag-bearing protesters on our campus walk, shouting at the pro-Palestinian groups across the way. Like that: the yarmulka’d boys in the front of the class on “Israeli-Palestinian Politics and Society,” hands shooting up to interrupt the Arab professor at every possible opportunity. Like that: the pro-Israel groups who hung up pictures of maimed Israeli children as justification for Sharon’s newest military offensive.

Meanwhile, as an anthropology major reading Said and Fanon, I couldn’t help but apply the concepts I was learning to the situation I saw in front of me. Wasn’t Israel an outpost of the “West” in the “East”? Didn’t it mirror, in some ways, the colonial oppressor?

But still, here I was actively deciding to go on a trip famous for its “pro-Israel indoctrination.” I wondered if, by going, I was being true to myself and my beliefs. Did I want to go on a program sponsored by the Israeli government? Could I stand up to the reactionary politics I would surely face? And, most of all, would I be able to survive a...group tour?

But in the end it was curiosity that won me over, along with the free ticket. The truth was that I wasn’t sure what my beliefs were, which side of campus walk I belonged on. I had always believed in Israel’s right to exist, but wondered if it has won its existence in the wrong way. So where did that leave me? I went to Israel not only to explore my Jewish identity, but to also to understand better my political identity as a Jew.

Day 1

We hit the ground running at 9 AM after the overnight flight. I was glad I had taken a sleeping pill and gotten a few hours of airplane sleep. My boyfriend, Josh, and I had barely spoken to anyone so far; in fact, I found myself pulling inward with an adolescent nervousness, probably because I hadn’t been shuttled around with a group so large since middle school. We headed first to Neot Kedumim, a biblical garden with plants and harvesting tools from ancient times. After lunch (kosher and slightly soggy) we sat in a circle and met the other people in our group. I was surprised that many of the 40 people on our bus had been to Israel before—some were even born there—but hadn’t been on an organized,

I went to Israel not only to explore my Jewish identity,
but to also to understand better my political identity as a Jew.

Instead of the **hard-core, militant stance** I expected, I found a very open, knowledgeable person who was willing to sit with me.

educational trip, which would have disqualified them from this one. There were people from all parts of the U.S.: A girl with spiky red hair just entering college in Florida, a med student who would turn 27 in a few days (26 is the maximum age for the trip), along with a bike mechanic, an art teacher, a legal analyst and a metal sculptor.

Much to my surprise, no one said they had come on the trip to “support Israel” or revealed anything remotely political; most people admitted they signed up because, well, it was free. Then it suddenly dawned on me: the flag wavers from

Most people admitted they signed up because, well, it was free.

campus walk and the outspoken boys in my poli sci class had probably already been to Israel on organized trips. We were the unconverted, the ones who hadn’t yet made Israel a focus of our lives. We were birthright’s target audience.

After that I felt relieved—these were just normal, everyday 20somethings lured by a free trip to a faraway land. Still, no one in the circle besides me had said anything about wanting to learn more about the political situation, to view firsthand what the struggle is really all about. I decided to let down my guard a little and see what the trip might bring.

Day 3

So...very...tired. Sleep (except on the bus, between stops) had become a luxury, along with calling home to the U.S. and having clean hair. I’d learned an unbelievable amount in the span of just a few days. Every sight we stopped at—the old city in Jerusalem, the synagogue in Tsfat, even the cities we saw out of the bus window on our drive North—brimmed with history. Our guide, Amir, was a walking Israeli encyclopedia. I felt lucky to have such a knowledgeable person to show me the country.

But for all we were learning about history, culture and religion, the first political topic we broached happened the night before, and it was only because Josh decided to break the ice. We were having a group discussion with seven Israeli soldiers who would be joining us for the next few days. After making the rounds of surface-level questions like, how long is your army service, what do you do in the army, what kinds of jobs do women have, Josh raised his hand and asked the soldiers how their lives are affected by being so close to violence and basically living in a war zone.

They all answered very openly, and the conversation soon turned from violence to the subject of people who get out of the army in some way, either by claiming to have a mental disability or because they are conscientious objectors (“refuseniks”).

The soldiers, as well as many of my traveling companions, expressed negative reactions. Naively, I suppose, I was shocked. Refuseniks are the heroes of progressive Jews in the U.S. Yet here was a roomful of people, my guide included, who did not respect that choice. Amir ended the discussion with a note on how we birthright participants were becoming armed to go home and defend Israel against all the “pro-Palestinians” out there. I thought: You mean my friends? To Amir, “pro-Palestinian” was synonymous with “Anti-Israel,” as if it wasn’t possible to believe in the right of both groups to have a homeland or a state. I was very disturbed, but decided that I would keep my mouth shut and just vent to Josh behind closed doors.

But the next day I got up the nerve to walk down the aisle of the bus and talk to Amir directly. I asked him again about the refuseniks, and he told me his opinion in a much more nuanced way than he had in front of the group. We continued talking, and instead of the hard-core, militant stance I expected, I found a very open, knowledgeable person who was willing to sit with me for what must have been 45 minutes and discuss the issues I wanted to know about.

It seemed that the more facts you have **the more complex the situation becomes.** Amir rejected seeing things in black and white. And I started to really enjoy **thinking within the gray area.**

He was certainly armed with more facts than I, but he listened to my opinions. And though I didn’t agree with his analysis of all the facts, I was thrilled to find the kind of discussion I had been craving. I went back to my seat feeling relief. I wouldn’t have to spend the next seven days stifling my opinions and feelings. And I had found someone to whom I could pose the really tough questions; that was why I was there, after all.

And what about the security fence, which almost every Israeli I met believed, rightly or not, is helping to keep them safe?

Day 5

Shabbat. Finally. I'd never appreciated the day of rest more. I slept till (gasp) 10 AM, missed breakfast, and read my Amy Tan book over coffee in Kibbutz Hagoshrim's courtyard. A group of us got together to do yoga on the grass in the late afternoon. A relaxing day.

The night before, Josh and I had taken a bottle of wine and met up with Amir. We asked him a lot of the questions we'd been saving up: Did Camp David really offer a good deal to the Palestinians? What ever happened to the Geneva Accords? Why is there less dialogue now between Israelis and Palestinians than there was even a few years ago? His answers didn't always please me, but I found, over and over, that there was no simple answer to any question. In fact, it seemed that the more facts you have the more complex the situation becomes. Amir rejected seeing things in black and white. And I started to really enjoy thinking within the gray area.

Soon, others joined our conversation. I guess they, too, were looking for something more than the drinking games going on at the other side of the yard. At first I was pleased, but I soon became frustrated. The newcomers started saying things like "There is no possibility of a fair peace treaty with any Arab nation" and "Barak offered everything to the Palestinians at Camp David." Amir, calmly and eloquently, responded with his arsenal of facts, such as, "We have a peace treaty with Egypt." And, "Actually nothing was officially offered at Camp David. Barak and Arafat never even spoke face to face, and having Arafat back out was quite convenient to both sides involved." But still, the black-and-white, unnuanced questions continued. Josh and I finally had to leave the conversation, giving Amir the rest of our bottle of wine—he'd need it more than we would.

Day 8

We went to Rabin Square, where I found myself more moved than anywhere we'd been so far. I felt an enormous sense of loss. The unraveling of hope was palpable. Amir stood in front of the memorial and asked us, his voice shaking, "Where is the next Rabin?"

Rabin Square in Tel Aviv shows that this situation can never be pared down to us vs. them or right vs. wrong. One of the people who actually had a chance at bringing peace to the region was killed by an extremist—and not a Palestinian one, but an Israeli. There are countless examples of how complex every issue is in Israel. For example, can you make the blanket statement that "Israel" is the oppressor, when polls show

that about 70 percent of its citizens don't support the occupation? And what about the security fence, which almost every Israeli I met believed, rightly or not, is helping to keep them safe? Or what about the question of the Jewish "character" of the state, when Arab Israelis may one day become a majority? None of these are simple questions, so none deserve simple answers. I lingered in the square long after the rest of the group started walking to the bus. I knew the memory of this place would stay with me back in the U.S.

Reflections

I was afraid of coming back "pro-Israel." Instead, I've found that that's what I've been all along. But to me, that's never going to mean waving a flag on campus or immediately going on the defensive when the topic of Israel comes up. To me, supporting Israel means committing myself to listening more,

I was afraid of coming back "pro-Israel," but instead I've found that that's what I've been all along.

to discussing more, to rejecting simple answers or black-and-white statements. Our guide said to me one night that birthright participants, who by their very nature are just beginning to understand their ties to Israel, aren't ready to really address the political situation in a formal way. I very much disagree with that. What better time for people to begin to analyze, discuss and understand the situation than while they are in Israel, experiencing for themselves why this land is so important to so many people? I think the reason birthright has a reputation for indoctrination is because real discussion is not at present part of the program. I shouldn't have had to corner my guide in order to ask the questions most important to me. I believe that encouraging discussion and debate, besides being a fundamental part of Judaism, will only help in the pursuit of understanding, peace and the flourishing of the Israeli state. ●

Miriam Stone is the author of *At The End of Words: A Daughter's Memoir* (Candlewick, 2004). She lives in Brooklyn and is completing a novel.