

Personal Experience Essay

Israel is Real

I never imagined I would be sitting face to face with Israeli teenagers; I never imagined that this experience would render me shocked by the surprising commonalities of the two distinct cultures: Israeli and American. I never imagined I would have friends in such a seemingly remote, yet personally close, place. My friends and I discussed, shared, and differed on personal experiences, values, and overall culture, and in the end I found my ignorant stereotypes of Israel washed away thanks to the smiling faces of fellow students who live half way around the world from me. The border between us disintegrated from the conclusion that we are all humans on this diverse planet.

Going to Israel with the Anti-Defamation League forever altered my perspective of the people, the country, and life in general. This week-long adventure was a leadership mission trip provided by the ADL through a long selection process involving essays, teacher recommendations, and then an interview if you made it past the first round. Finally, after weeks of waiting, I was chosen to go on this amazing, all-expense paid trip and, also, to be an intern with the ADL for the following year. After months filled with meetings and information, the date came; I found myself on a 12-hour flight to almost another world, to the Middle East, to the small, democratic country of Israel.

My Israel experience was chalked full of visiting ancient, historical sites, three different high schools across the country, modern and very traditional districts of commerce, cities of high-tech stature juxtaposed with cities of ancient qualities, and the beautifully tragic Holocaust museum: Yad Vashem. My eyes opened to Israel as I saw the country's diverse culture that my preconceived stereotypes blinded me from prior to my visit. I learned how this culture was molded by the heat of dislike and disapproval into one of a community that thrives when they pull together—a lesson I admire and can truly apply to my everyday life.

The ability for a culture to pull together makes co-existing not only possible, but allows the culture to flourish. Co-existing is of utmost necessity to society. When it can be achieved, we can truly appreciate our fellow humans and what we can do for each other. The Israelis strive to co-exist with their neighbors, but are constantly dismayed: Gil Hoffman, a political correspondent for the Jerusalem Post, explained his dream of

Israel would be “sitting in park with a Palestinian, sharing some hummus, and talking.” Surrounded by disapproval from much of the Arab world, the Israeli lifestyle is threatened everyday, while many citizens of the world experience no existential threats from enemies of such close proximity. Contrary to the threats and hate, however, the Israeli people still thrive in surprisingly normal lives. When I asked my fellow students from Israel what they do for fun, one boy said, “We do the same things as you!” And it sunk in, that although their country faces outside threats of being wiped off the map, they live just like I live.

That was huge for me. I never thought during those countless news reports of Israeli conflict, that the teenagers would be, well, teenagers. My first reaction to Israel in any context was vivid images of brazen soldiers patrolling with intense weapons for protection. But when I actually experienced this culture firsthand, I saw no fear in the citizens’ eyes and no trace of hesitance to go about their everyday lives. I can’t help but feel some sort of distant, yet related, pride for these people and all they’ve accomplished for themselves. As well as for what they represent: a shining symbol of hope and perseverance in a world of hate and discrimination.

This trip empowered me to venture into the world of being an everyday advocate for social equality and inclusiveness. Every day I make attempts to eliminate usage of derogatory words that one might find offensive, while others find these words simple slang. Of course I encounter opposition. Those who used this damaging jargon of ignorance might in turn label me with the harmful phrases of which I politely try to explain the hazardous effects. But I must rise above the petty insults and find myself unbothered by the ignorance in which the majority of our teenage society is drowning.

While stressing the importance of tolerance and understanding of everyone from our culture, I find myself hitting a sort of brick wall. The wall is seemingly impenetrable, but at a closer look, I notice cracks in the wall’s foundation. These cracks, at first small, grow wider and grow stronger with each push. With each effort I make, I find another pair of hands helping me. These allies join my cause and continue to push strongly by my side. As my team grows, the wall sways to and fro, threatening to crumble—then finally—it collapses. This victory reveals, however, to our dismay, a great paradox: while we discover and empower more allies through the destruction of barricading walls, there

are walls bigger and stronger than the previous obstructers. It'll take time, we all know, to break this grip of ignorance, but it's the best we can do: one word a time, one person at a time, one wall at a time.