

Field Studies in the Age of Danger: The Case of Israel

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I was accepted to the Teach and Study Program (TASP) at Tel-Aviv University in the spring of 2005. I spent that summer in Tel-Aviv studying Hebrew at an *Ulpan* (Hebrew language school) in preparation for my two-2 year graduate program, as recommended by the faculty of the program. I was fully aware of the political situation in Israel, and that same situation is the one that drew me to studying and living there- learning about a region with so much culture and conflict. After four months in Israel, I decided not to participate in the program. My purpose of this essay is to present my opinion that only an individual student can determine in what environment their safety is threatened, by terrorism or otherwise. To disallow such an opportunity based on insurance and liability is to deny a college student, an adult, the right to choose.

The Program

The Teach and Study Program (TASP) at Tel-Aviv University is an overseas program that gives students the opportunity to earn their Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). As stated in the title of the program, students are teaching in classrooms in Tel-Aviv area public schools, while studying in university graduate classes. The TASP website states: "Teach and Study Program (TASP) interns are university graduates who wish to participate in a two year work study program during which they will teach English in the Israeli public school system and study for an MA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). You will also experience the satisfaction of teaching Israeli children English while developing leadership and communication skills" (Teach).

Why Israel?

I had visited Israel the summer of 2004 with a good friend of mine, Michal, upon her invitation. Although I am not Jewish and had little knowledge of the culture, Michal's family welcomed me to their home. People of many religious backgrounds are interested in visiting Israel because of its important place in history. I had quite a different experience than a general "tourist" as I was staying with a family that spoke hardly any English and was a guest in their home in Herzliya, about a 15 minute drive north of Tel-Aviv. I celebrated *Shabbat* on Friday night into Saturday, and observed other Jewish customs in her family's home.

I enjoyed my time there immensely, touring Jerusalem, The Dead Sea, Sinai, and the Sea of Galilee region, among others. As a student of anthropology and archeology I found Israel particularly intriguing and I asked too many questions - well, I felt like it! There was so much to learn and in such a short period of time. I made a lot of friends while I was there, and made a special connection with a man named Kobi, short for Jakob. Kobi and I kept in touch when I returned home, and he came to visit me in the United States. My interest in Israel grew after I left, and I began researching its rich history and studying Hebrew. I had been interested in going back to school to get my Master's in Education, so when I found the TASP program while searching on-line I felt it was a perfect match. I was hoping to gain more insight into this historical land, and although the program was for teaching, I knew it would incorporate my interest and background in Anthropology. In addition, the opportunity to learn the original written language of the Bible - the Hebrew Aleph-Bet - was an exciting challenge.

Life in Israel

The program would begin with TASP orientation in August. The public school year in Israel begins September first and the university studies begin in late October, after the Jewish New Year, *Rosh Hashana*. It is recommended by the TASP program faculty that students begin Hebrew studies before arriving in Israel. Since most of the other students are Jewish, they had a background in Hebrew and may have even heard it spoken while growing up in the United States. I decided to arrive in Israel in April, and begin studying the language at the *Ulpan* when I arrived. It would also give me a chance to become comfortable in a new country before I began studying.

Many immigrants have arrived from outside of Israel and experience the enculturation process, including Kobi's stepmother who had left Hungary eight years earlier knowing no Hebrew. She spoke English fairly well, and was a great source of information and support.

If you are Jewish the government offers you assistance into making *aliyah*, "immigration of Jews to Israel." The Israeli government assists *oleh* (Jews making *aliyah*) by providing them with job assistance, free language courses, scholarships, relocation expenses, health insurance and other support services. Most students in my program were making *aliyah*; therefore their tuition was supplemented by the Israeli government (*wordreference.com*). I paid for my own health insurance, relocation to Israel, and Hebrew language classes. Although at times I felt discriminated against, I reminded myself that I had joined a nation that I was not connected to in the way that most other residents were, by religion. I also believed, and still believe, in the concept of a safe land for the Jewish people as established after World War II. In addition, there are many religious and historical explanations for the creation of an all-Jewish state. I was happy to be a part of the only democracy in the Middle East.

There were cultural differences I had to adjust to. Although I had "experienced" Israel the year before, living there really taught me the ways of Israel. The driving was by far the craziest I have ever seen, even after traveling in South-east Asia. Cars ran four lanes across on two lane roads, traffic lights were virtually meaningless, and very few drivers allowed others to pass them or gave consideration for oncoming cars. As many Israelis told me, Israelis drive as though they are the only ones on the road. Although I saw only a few accidents, I couldn't help but be nervous when riding in the car, and eventually I got up the courage to drive. I did fine.

One could smoke cigarettes almost anywhere, and they do; in the waiting room at the doctor's clinic, in restaurants and malls, and in the supermarket. Then there is the experience of grocery shopping. The cashier would be ringing out our order, cigarette hanging out of her mouth, then go and take a fifteen-minute bathroom break in the middle of your transaction! Also, there was no such thing as ads or coupons. We would buy items that were listed as on sale, and they would ring up a higher price. The cashier would simply tell us "too bad" (in Hebrew, of course) and nothing was done of it. When bagging groceries, I quickly learned that dairy and meat were not to be put in the same bag, as that would make the food un-kosher.

Israelis drink coffee, all hours of night and day, and lots of it. You could barely walk into a house at eleven p.m. without an Israeli insisting you have a cup of coffee - instant (Taster's Choice) or cafe (what I called the mud coffee because it is the Arabic style grounds that you add water to and the grounds sit at the bottom of the glass - not a mug - looking like mud). The fresh fruits and vegetables were amazing, and most were organic. I have never eaten such red tomatoes or delicious grapes-which of course make great wines. It also amazed me how the Golan Heights in the north could be so forested and fertile, the Tel-Aviv area in the center is a metropolis with high-rises and flashing billboards, and then the south of Israel is a hot and dry desert. All this in a country of 20,000 square kilometers, less than the size of the state of New Jersey (United States).

The security in Israel reminded me of living in an airport. If you wanted to buy milk at a kiosk, small grocer, you had to go through a metal detector. Larger places such as malls and restaurants use metal wands and also search the your purse or bag. They may also pat you down upon suspicion. You learn to carry very little around. I certainly witnessed discrimination by the guards at the security checks, and Kobi would tell me not to speak English "so American," or not speak at all, until we had passed into the shop. Honestly, all the security made me feel safe. In this time of international terrorism, I feel that the inconvenience of checkpoints is valuable in deterring terrorists.

Kobi and I had a nice apartment in *Nof Yam* (by the sea) a few minutes from the Mediterranean. I began my study at *Ulpan* Gordon in Tel-Aviv that June. Private and public transportation are both available to get to Tel-Aviv. You can drive, which can take hours in rush hour traffic. Driving is also so nerve-racking that it made me want to turn around and go home. Another option is the bus, the frequent target of terrorist attacks. Even riding NEXT to the bus in a car is a concern for most Israelis, although the buses are full on weekdays with commuters to and from Tel-Aviv. There is a private transportation system called the *sheroot*, which follows some of the major bus lines. The *sheroot* seats only six to ten passengers and is a sort of mini-van. The drivers are able to be more selective who gets on and off them since they walk past the driver and there is no rear entrance. I had seen the driver refuse service to Arab riders on several occasions. Of course, this transportation is more expensive than the mass transit of the bus, but considered much safer. This was my chosen mode of daily transportation to Tel-Aviv. I had to take two lines, with a short walk in between, and then a short walk to my actual destination. The drivers spoke little English so the first few days were difficult for me until I learned the appropriate Hebrew words to ask the driver to stop, although they often went into an entire Hebrew conversation with me about my preference for let-off (I guess my friends and teachers did a good job in helping me perfect my Israeli accent!).

Once I arrived at *Ulpan*, there was, of course, a security check. I imagined to myself that this would be a great place to target if you were a terrorist because it consisted of students, young and old, from all over the world. My class alone contained students from ; the United States, France, Sweden, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Czech

Republic, Hungary, Thailand and India. This center in Tel-Aviv would raise concerns from all over the world if it were to be bombed. I actually thought about it so much one day that I had to leave class early.

My Hebrew lessons were six hours a day, Sunday to Thursday, as Friday and Saturday (*Shabbat*) are the weekend in Israel. Studying the language was great for me, and then using my new skills to communicate, or being able to read a sign felt close to a miracle! I would say to Kobi, "It is all Hebrew to me." As I gained confidence and started to grasp the language and the written letters, my new world became more manageable. I admit, there were times when I wished I didn't know what they were saying - especially when it came to politics, a favorite Israeli topic of conversation.

Life in Israel was good. I had my studies, I had Kobi and his family, and several friends. I walked to the beach every day, and was enjoying my summer. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for my endeavor was about to change.

The bombings in London on July 7, 2005 that killed over 50 people and wounded over 200 people (BBC) really hit home in Israel. It was obvious that this nation had empathy and compassion for this type of attack, and it was all anyone could talk about. I remember an Israeli friend telling me, in English, "I can handle it when it happens here. But it shouldn't happen somewhere like London."

A few days later, on the 11th of July, we were shopping for a watch for Kobi's stepmother's birthday at the Sharon Mall in Netanya. She really wanted a SWATCH watch, and this mall was the only place we could purchase the gift. We went to his family's home (located only seven kilometers from Gaza) to celebrate and she enjoyed the watch very much. The next day, the news was on and my little knowledge of Hebrew gave me enough information to know it wasn't good. An eighteen year old Islamic Jihad suicide bomber had attempted to enter the Netanya Mall, the very same one we had been in the day before. The security guards were suspicious of this man and would not allow him entry. He walked out into the crossroad and detonated his explosives, killing five people and wounding 70 (Gutman). The casualties would've been much worse if he had been permitted through security to enter into the mall. The reality of this terrorist attack shook me, and I started to become anxious and withdrawn.

There were several other terrorist attacks while I lived in Israel. The three Sharmel-Sheikh bombings in Sinai on Saturday the 23rd of July 2005 killed 88 Egyptians and foreigners and wounded over 200 (Toll). Sinai is a resort destination catering to Israeli and European tourists. I enjoyed my stay in Sinai the previous year so much that it reminded me of heaven. I had begged Kobi to return for a visit that summer, and we were making plans to visit, until we learned of the bombings. The situation was highlighted on the news constantly because many Israelis were trapped at the border of Sinai and Israel trying to get home. Unfortunately, and obviously, the tourism in Sinai plummeted, during what is normally a high summer season of Israeli visitors.

A vision that has stayed with me the longest is of a terrorist attack that didn't actually happen. The incident barely made the international press, but was a major incident in Israel. I found that Israeli politicians like to keep a lot of the news and the conflict within their borders. In this scenario, a Palestinian woman was given a pass into Israel to receive medical treatment at the Soroka Hospital in Beersheva. On June 20, 2005, while at the border, she was discovered to have bombs strapped to her body. She entered through the initial security gates, and then was caught in a cage of the gates behind her and those that dropped in front of her. On television they showed this woman screaming about *Allah* and attempting to detonate the bombs, to no avail. The look on her face filled me with fear. Once it was realized that the bombs were faulty, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) took her into possession. The real consequences for her actions were that Israel closed off the borders from Gaza and the West Bank, even for (and especially for) medical conditions. The Israelis I spoke with were concerned about the children and other Palestinians that would be denied medical help because of this woman's attempt at martyrdom (Israel).

Israel's pullout from Gaza was set to begin in August 2005, after several delays. Israel had occupied Gaza for 38 years, and they were planning to disengage from the territory and allow them free rule. The country was clearly torn over this issue, and the signs were all around. Blue stood for Israel and the union of the Jews into the state of Israel, blue is also one of two colors on the Israeli flag and a symbol of peace (Gross). Orange represented the opposition to the Gaza pullout, mainly Jews who believed they had the right to lands in the Palestinian Territory. Most cars had a blue or orange ribbon attached to the antenna, sometimes both depicting the extreme confusion of the issue. Orange had become extremely symbolic and the political intensity of the color dictated fashion choices during this period.

Where the blue side tended to protest quietly, the orange people led the major protests. The settler leaders have called for civil disobedience and protesters have blocked roads and have faced arrest. More extreme cases, which certainly do not gain the respect of the public, include the planting of fake bombs around public areas, hammering nails into the road during roadblocks and spilling oil on the streets. The most extreme incident recently, which was shown on national television, saw settler extremists in Gaza attempting to lynch a Palestinian youth who lay unconscious while they threw stones at his head.

These incidences and the potentially volatile situation of the upcoming disengagement were the reasons I decided that I would be unable to stay in Israel for the next two years.

Leaving Israel

It was a very difficult decision for me to leave Israel, walk away from my relationship with Kobi, and miss out on the opportunity to earn my master's degree at Tel-Aviv University. I had worked very hard to get to Israel and I truly wanted to stay. I changed my mind, and my airline ticket, several times, before I finally departed on August 4, 2005, without ever officially beginning my university program. I had given up a lot to move to Israel and I had to give up a lot to leave. In the end, I decided that the insecurity I felt, the anxiety it created, and the explosive nature of the nearing political situations were too much for me to bear for the next two years.

Conclusion

I still cherish my time in Israel and the friends I met and the historical and religious places I visited. However, I feel withdrawing from the program and a two year commitment to Tel Aviv University was the best decision for me at that time. The following summer, Israel and Lebanon went to war for thirty-three days, and I was watching it on the news from a safe distance, thankful that I hadn't stayed on. And I am grateful that I had the opportunity to make that choice. Unfortunately, terrorism is a very real and everyday threat in parts of the world. And as America has seen in the first decade of the new millennium, we are not excluded from this threat.

However, even after my experience in a volatile country such as Israel, I feel that students should not be denied opportunities to study overseas. Isn't that what education is? A way to encourage students to think for themselves, in various environments, and realize that their home is not the only frame of reference for the world? And, God forbid, if a student was affected while studying overseas by a cowardly act of terrorism, won't that student be viewed as brave and accomplished for pursuing their dreams in spite of the dangers? I feel that we should give students as many opportunities as possible.

The intent of this paper is to express my belief that students who chose to study overseas are aware, or if not should be informed, that there are certain challenges and dangers associated with studying abroad. I knew going into the program that Israel was a region plagued by terrorism and bombings. But it is what I wanted to do. And I had that opportunity. I would never take back the experience I had, even though in the end, I decided not to pursue a long-term commitment to a place that potentially put me in harm's way. That was an education for me, without ever stepping foot in the classroom.

After being in Israel, I decided the risks weren't worth the reward. I feel that any college student is capable of making this kind of decision. However, to eliminate the program's existence because of fear is another way that we allow the terrorists to win, and our students to lose.

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