

CRT Blogs

Jason's Blog from Israel - 2010



My name is Jason Kaufman and I am a senior at Byram Hills High School in Armonk, New York. From May 12 to June 16 I will be interning in Jerusalem with the Center for Religious Tolerance and Jerusalem Peacemakers. I will first be working at the Cultural Center run by Sheikh Bukhari until the end of May, and then at the Jerusalem Peace Center run by Eliyahu McLean. While in Israel, I plan to immerse myself in all of the Center for Religious Tolerance's efforts, including interviewing youth on life in East and West Jerusalem, performing administrative tasks, and helping to organize interfaith events. Having grown up with relatives in Israel, Israel has always been a part of my life. I have traveled to Israel twice before for family weddings combined with tours of Jerusalem and Northern Israel. From these two trips I have had a comprehensive overview of many of the Jewish landmarks, but not much more. I have always been aware of the Muslim, Armenian, and Christian quarters in the Old City, but have only seen the Jewish quarter. I understand that I have been blind to an integral part of Israel's identity, and I hope to use this opportunity to get a more complete and personal picture of

modern Israel.

June 23, 2010

I spent the last segment of my time at an organic farm called Bustan Qaraaqa in Beit Sahour, a city next to Bethlehem, in the West Bank. The farm prides itself on acting as a model for ecological and sustainable living in the Palestinian environment. The farm uses only a compost toilet, which can reduce household water use by 60% (very important when water can be unavailable in the West bank for long periods of time, especially in the summer), recycles all of its plastics, glass, and aluminum (currently, they are constructing beds by using old tires stuffed with garbage as building blocks) and uses permaculture tactics in its farming. When necessary, Bustan Qaraaqa will send volunteers around the surrounding area to help build such structures. The farm also calls itself the "Green Intafada." For example, if land is being taken from a Palestinian for construction of settlements, etc., they are often given 30 days to prove that the land in question is useful and can be productive. Bustan Qaraaqa maintains a tree nursery and will plant these trees in the land that is threatened, hopefully helping Palestinians keep their land. My work while at Bustan Qaraaqa included farm work such as harvesting sunflower seeds and watering olive trees, but also more manual work like cleaning out caves and sorting trash and recyclables.



Yet beyond working on Bustan Qaraaqa, the experience of actually being in the West Bank and speaking with Palestinians was invaluable. On Tuesdays we attended lectures at the Alternative Information Center in Bethlehem. The first talk involved language and media perception, and the man discussed the difference of using language such as "popular resistance" as opposed to "violent protest." The second talk dealt with the topic of Justice Tourism, which is the idea that the West Bank should be more of a tourist destination. Not only has the security wall greatly reduced the number of visitors, but about 75% of all visits to Bethlehem specifically are under 2 hours, whereas visitors used to stay overnight before the security wall, which hurts the economy with the reduced tourism. Also, it is thought that tourists should be able to interact with more Palestinians, hear of their problems, and be able to form their own conclusions about Israel and the Palestinian territories. Yet I learned so much from just living in the West Bank. I not only was able to talk to several Palestinians and learn



about the refugee camps, whose symbol is a key as a key is often all they have left from their lives before living in the refugee camp, but I also was able to watch an anti-wall protest in a town called Al Wajala, where people were upset because the wall was almost circling the town and cutting it off from a lot of its land. I was shocked, and a little confused, to see that none of the protesters were Palestinian, however when I asked the friend who accompanied me, I was told that it was simply too dangerous to protest as a Palestinian, as when foreigners get arrested they are almost immediately released when the same is not nearly true for a Palestinian. Overall, being able to live and first hand experience the issues I had been learning about in a theoretical context for the majority of my experience was an amazing, fulfilling, and enlightening way to end my time in Israel.

June 6, 2010

Yesterday I visited Ibrahim's Peace Home on the Mount of Olives. While I had been to the Muslim quarter of the old city, this was my first true exposure to an Arab area in new Jerusalem, and it really felt like entering an entirely new country. Restaurants and cafes were labeled only in Arabic, and the call to prayer was more audible than it had ever been in French Hill (where I'm staying). Ibrahim told me to find a certain restaurant and start asking people around for how to get to his house. I was amazed by how I could simply ask where "Ibrahim's house" was and people knew not only exactly what I was talking about but where Ibrahim lived. Still, it was only after several wrong turns that I finally had someone, who was actually in Ibrahim's extended family, walk me to his home. Before Ibrahim arrived, I got a chance to meet his grandson, also named Ibrahim Abu El Hawa, who is 15 years old (soon to be 16). Ibrahim (the grandson) immediately welcomed me inside and offered me iced tea. After a short while, Ibrahim arrived. After explaining the background of his peace-based guest house, he immediately got to work on making lunch, which was a huge stew of onions, tomatoes, potatoes, and sausage-like lamb. We ate lunch with his grandson and two people staying in the guesthouse, one who will soon be volunteering at a children's hospital. After lunch, I asked Ibrahim about his thoughts on the flotilla incident that occurred last week. Ibrahim seemed to get a little furious, and immediately began explaining how all the religions based in Israel believe in a love of one's neighbor. He explained though, that it is unfortunately impossible to love neighbors if there is no interaction or learning between the two neighbors. This became most clear to me when Ibrahim explained that the government gave permission for Sheikh Bukhari's child and spouse who lives in Gaza to come to Jerusalem to his funeral, but only for three days. Also, Ibrahim's grandson explained to me that he starts learning English and Arabic at school from Kindergarten and does not start learning Hebrew until about 5th grade. Ibrahim himself does not have citizenship, while his children who live abroad in the US can only visit him for a few weeks at a time. Overall, traveling to Ibrahim's peace home was a great diversion from some of the more formal work I was doing previously.

May 27, 2010

On Tuesday, I visited the Knesset, where the Israeli government is located, with Ron Kronish of the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel. There was a talk given by Professor Sammy Smooha of the University of Haifa. Smooha performs sociological research on Arab attitudes towards Israel. His talk was to discuss developments in recent history, and most of his research is done through surveys. Some of the most notable statistics include the increase from 35% to 48% of Arab citizens dissatisfied with their lives in Israel since 2003. The percent of Arabs unwilling to have a Jewish friend went from 16 to 25% since 2003. Smooha also found that 65% of Arab citizens support a two state solution to the conflict, compared to 90% seven years ago. The number of Arabs who believe that Israel acts democratically towards Arab citizens fell from 63% to 50% in the same time period, and the percent of Israeli Arabs who support all methods of public demonstration, including violence, rose 14%. The study also contained some evidence of progress too. The Jew's fear of the high Arab birth rate dropped from 70 to 58%, while about 80% of the surveyed Jews felt that Arabs have a right to live in Israel as a minority. Unfortunately, though, still 58% admitted to being unwilling to work under an Arab boss, and the amount of Jews who fear a change to Israel's Jewish character stayed at 70% in the same time period.

On Wednesday I attended two talks. The first was given by Ron Kronish at Kibbutz Ramat Rachel. Ron gave some background information on modern Judaism and Zionism to the audience made up of members and volunteers from the organization Bridges to Peace, which is an organization made up of Christians who support Jews and Israel. Most notably, Ron presented Zionism as the shift from religion to nationalism (the original Zionists were not very religious), discussing how Zionism emphasizes Judaism as a nation of people.

Later in the evening, I was able to see Eliyahu Mclean and Sheikh Bukhari, the founding members of Jerusalem Peacemakers, give a talk to a tour group from South Africa. First Sheikh Bukhari spoke, discussing his



background. Sheikh Bukhari explained how his family came to Jerusalem in 1616 to teach Sufism, and that he is the descendent of Imam Bukhari who, 1300 years ago, decided to write the commentary of the prophet Muhammad into the “Hadith,” which, Sheikh Bukhari explained, is the second most important book in Islam, after the Quran. Sheikh Bukhari was born and raised in Jerusalem but studied in the US at age 20. After talking about his history, Sheikh Bukhari began to discuss his feelings on the conflict in Israel. Sheikh Bukhari believes that there has to be an end since “no war lasts for ever.” Sheikh Bukhari also explained, “I want [peace] now, not next year.” Sheikh Bukhari discussed how it is undeniable that Muslims and Jews are both sons of Abraham, joking

that “we both inherited the same stubbornness.” Sheikh Bukhari, however, hopes that eventually this stubbornness can turn into stubbornness for peace. Alluding to his recent heart injury, Sheikh Bukhari stated that Jerusalem is the heart of the world, and if the heart is good, then the whole world will be good.

Next, Eliyahu spoke. He explained how he first came to Israel with Young Judea at age 15. When studying at the University of California in Berkeley, he became a pro-Israeli activist. Eliyahu explained, though, that he wanted to experience the other side, and started studying Arabic and interacting with pro-Palestinians. Eventually Eliyahu made Aliyah to devote his life to peacemaking. Eliyahu then began to explain his own visions of peace. Eliyahu discussed how security should not be through military strength, but through building a bridge of dialogue with neighbors. Eliyahu then discussed the Jerusalem Hug, which is one of the biggest events that the Jerusalem Peacemakers organize, and will take place this year on June 21st. The Jerusalem Hug brings together about 1000 people to form human chains around the Jaffa and Damascus gates to pray together. Eliyahu explained that the root of the issue is that every religion’s love for Jerusalem is exclusive of others’ love for Jerusalem. Ultimately, it is the same place, and Eliyahu explained how this love for Jerusalem is often channeled in a dangerous way. He explained that gatherings such as the Jerusalem hug do not exist to say that peace has been reached, but simply to represent a step closer. Eliyahu discussed how physical walls can be destroyed within days, but it will take much longer to destroy the walls in our minds. Eliyahu explained his commitment to inviting both Palestinians and right wing Jews to his Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur celebrations.

Today, I went to One Voice Israel’s office in Tel Aviv. My main project was to help gather material to prepare for a simulation debate to take place this Sunday in Jerusalem. At the simulation, One Voice Israel will represent the Palestinian delegation, while One Voice Palestine will represent the Israeli Delegation. The delegations will be discussing the issue of Jerusalem. Guy Lupo, the Program Director of One Voice Israel, outlined the aspects of the issue of Jerusalem to help in my search for articles and other resources. Talking with Guy was eye opening, as I never realized how in depth and broad the issue is. Guy outlined the major issues of the potential two state solution: security, religion, economic development, tourism, and municipal development. Within security, more specific issues include the kinds of borders, how to deal with tourists crossing the border, how to deal with crime if the crime involves both Israel and Palestinian territories, how to divide airspace and electronic space (radio, TV, etc.), how to deal with riots, and what the demilitarized zones will be modeled after, if any. Within religion, specific issues include the sovereignty of the holy sites, religious supervision on holy sites on opposite sides (i.e. a mosque in Israel), who will supervise religious freedom, the degree of religious freedom (i.e. Jews allowed on Temple Mount, etc.), freedom of religious narrative, sovereignty over archeological sites (will people be able to dig in religion-sensitive areas), how to deal with religious figures passing through borders, and the role religion will play in areas such as the old city. Within economy, more specific conflicts are what city taxes will look like (i.e. a resident of one side with a business on the other), and the crossing of businessmen between borders. Another economic issue is the VAT tax, which is a purchase tax that a tourist can get back at the airport (what will happen if a tourist buys something in Israel then flies out of a Palestinian area?). Tourism includes issues of

tourists passing between sides, labeling of cities and streets (Arabic/Hebrew), international marketing and publicity, and joint transportation. Municipal development includes issues of municipal services such as garbage collection, hospitals (if a Palestinian needs to get to western city hospital), the sovereignty over infrastructure (roads, water, sewage, phones, light, electricity), building permits, city image (for tourists, businesspeople, and residents), cultural events, city beautification, and a municipal government (joint or not). Speaking with Guy made me realize the specificity and depth of the conflict, and I learned a lot just by reading through the many articles trying to find ones that fit these specific issues.

May 20, 2010

Yesterday I returned to Jerusalem from celebrating Shavuot. On Tuesday afternoon I drove with my aunt and uncle to Kibbutz Kinneret in the north to visit family. Shavuot is a holiday primarily centered around agriculture, so being able to experience it on a kibbutz was incredible. A huge group of people were gathered in a clearing, as the different branches of the kibbutz made announcements on how they had been doing that season. There was watermelon, dates, and other sweets. Most people were dressed in white (traditional on Shavuot). The community slowly made their way to a stage area where different age groups performed dances or songs. All the children that had been born that year were also presented on stage. The celebration was followed by a huge dairy dinner with vegetables drowned in cream sauce, quiches, pasta, and cheesecake. That night I stayed about 20



minutes from the Kibbutz, half way between Kibbutz Kinneret and Kibbutz Hanaton, my destination for the next morning. That night I walked around the town, which offered stunning views of the valley below. People were still studying late into the night when I passed the synagogue (it is also tradition on Shavuot to study the torah the whole night). Kibbutz Hanaton is a conservative Kibbutz, so I spent the morning at Temple. We had another big dairy lunch concluded with a cheesecake contest, where judges tasted different cheesecakes made by several members of the Kibbutz, before my return to Jerusalem that evening.

Today I met with Ron Kronish from the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel. The ICCI office is in a starkly different location than Sheikh Bukhari's home. The ICCI office is in an area of Jerusalem known as Emek Refaim. While the Via Dolorosa is a narrow alley paved with stone, Emek Refaim is a street crowded with cars and buses and lined with Cafés, stores, and even a McDonalds. While Sheikh Bukhari's Uzbek Cultural Center is in a 400 year old home, the ICCI office is fully modern.

Ron had me interview three different people associated with the ICCI. The first was Zuza Radzik. Zuza Radzik is a Catholic student from Warsaw, Poland. Zuza was encouraged to come to Israel by one of her professors at the University of Notre Dame. Zuza was interested mostly in Christian/Jewish relations in Europe, and really had no intention or desire to travel to Israel. After living in Israel for almost three years now, Zuza said that she understands why the professor meant it. Zuza explained that coming to Israel gave her a whole new perspective and insight into Jewish/Christian relations. She also was able to learn Hebrew at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and explained how the people she met have enriched her experience here. ICCI started a Polish/Israeli conference two years ago, and Zuza immediately wanted to get involved, impressed with the work she had seen. She loved that the conference opened up the field of Jewish/Christian relations in the context of Poland and Israel. She began helping with the expansion of these conferences. She then helped to plan a year long course about Poland at the ICCI and in cooperation with the Polish Institute of Tel Aviv, with meetings every other week. Every meeting there is either a guest from the institute or a guest from the ICCI to discuss Polish and Jewish relations. The program is meant mostly for guides of high school groups to be ready to take groups to Poland and understand Jewish life. The program, however, is also followed by teachers and people who are just interested or for family reasons. Zuza explained that she hopes the course will continue after she leaves this fall, as this has been the first year the program has been carried out.

I then asked Zuza what she thought of the changes in the Polish Catholic Church to Judaism and Israel in recent years. Zuza explained that a lot has changed. In 1989, new systems in Poland allowed for free historical debates about Polish and Jewish relations. She also explained the start of a new yearly custom. Polish bishops decided

that around the time of the 7th of January should be a celebration and reminder to educate people about Judaism. Specifically, Zuza mentioned that a hallmark of the day is to teach the unique relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and how Christianity has roots in Judaism. The day is meant to encourage people to think and reflect. The holiday has manifested itself in discussions about the bible and prayers between the chief Rabbi of Poland with the Bishop. The tradition has been slowly spreading throughout Poland. Zuza explained her experience with a woman in a small town in Poland who was furious that she had not been taught such a lesson before. Zuza also explained how there has been a newfound interest in Jewish culture in Poland. Students are beginning to want to study Yiddish. Zuza explained how few students finish the University of Warsaw without taking some courses on Judaism. Zuza explained how students learn about Judaism and begin to relate it to themselves. Students are suddenly discovering that their small hometowns have Jewish histories or cemeteries. Zuza explained that this trend is bringing an interest in Christian/Jewish relations; however, the Jewish population in Poland is so small today that it is mostly theoretical.

Zuza stated that her favorite part about working at the ICCI has been meeting the people who work there. Zuza stated that she came to Israel knowing no one, and immediately found a circle of people at the ICCI similar to the circle of friends she previously had, all with an interest in global issues. When Zuza returns to Poland at the end of the summer, she plans to continue studying Christian/Jewish relations at the University of Warsaw. For her PhD, she plans to write about how the thoughts surrounding the Christians' accusation of Jews for the death of Christ have changed and why. She wants her work to span from antiquity to the present times. In order to do this, she stated that she needs a strong background in Jewish history in Poland. The official name of the humanities area in which she works is the "Theory of Ideas".

The second person I interviewed was Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, who founded Congregation Kol HaNeshama in 1985. Kol HaNeshama is very focused on religious pluralism in Israel. Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman teaches at the Hebrew Union College and the Schecheter Rabbinic Seminary. He has been a board member at the ICCI for a long time, and first came to represent rabbis for human rights. He has always had a long term commitment to interfaith dialogue and coexistence. He is also very involved in the Jonah group, which is a dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians.

Rabbis for Human Rights is a multid denominational group of rabbis. He described it as a "watchdog" organization to monitor human rights in Israel. He is most specifically involved in fighting against home demolitions when they are unjustifiable. The group has also helped Palestinians with their harvesting of olives when tension with settlers prevents them from reaching their orchards. The group was also very successful in fighting against what is known as the "Wisconsin Project", which made it very difficult for people on welfare to find employment. The group tries to work with Palestinians to highlight human rights abuses. He explained how having Rabbis of all denominations with a Priest and an Imam helps publicity to fight policies.

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman explained how the ICCI supports grassroots interfaith and coexistence groups in a belief that in the future they will succeed in achieving peace. At the end of the discussion, he added that even though he has no rational basis, he is still hopeful for the future.

I then interviewed Hiba Aliyan, who has been involved with the ICCI since she was 15. She is now the program coordinator of ICCI's youth programs (Face to Face) and is the interpreter for the current Face to Face group and camp in New York. She studies English and Spanish at the Hebrew University. She returned to Face to Face in 2006 as a leader in training, and then started working at the ICCI as an interpreter (from Arabic to Hebrew and vice versa).

Hiba explained that her work at the Face to Face camp "never gets old," as every year there is more or less the same conflict with entirely new students. She explained how it was interesting to see how each year's students deal with the problems. Face to Face brings together students from Israel, South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the US. The aim of Face to Face is to bring students from regions with ethnic conflict. When I asked her how her work with Face to Face has changed her, she explained that it changed her the most as a child. She grew up in a primarily Jewish neighborhood but never had a Jewish friend. She said that she would talk to people on the street, but nothing serious. She explained how she went from knowing nothing to suddenly knowing a lot; from

talking quickly on the street to sleeping in cabins together at camp. She found the initial impact to be the strongest.

Hiba referenced one anecdote that stands out in her memory. Before leaving on her first trip to the US when she was 15, she had become closest with the Jewish students on the trip. When she and her friends reached security in Ben Gurion airport, she had a much harder time getting through than her friends. Hiba revealed that she felt that she wanted to cry and was confused at what was happening. She was confused at why she, like her friends, possessed Israeli citizenship but was not allowed to cross with them.

May 17, 2010

I first met Sheikh Bukhari on Sunday. He invited me to his home to discuss the work he wanted me to do. When he first told me, over the phone, directions on how to get to his house, I had no idea what was coming. It was only my third or so time in the old city, and my first time in the Christian and Muslim quarters. As we walked down Via Dolorosa, my uncle pointed out to me that the Via Dolorosa is thought to trace the path that Jesus walked on his way to crucifixion. Roaming through narrow alleyways while dodging carts pushing diverse goods, I finally reached the Ecce Homo arch, which I was told was near his home. Very few doors were marked, but it only took one attempt to find someone who, to my surprise, knew where Sheikh Bukhari lived.

Once inside the doors, I traveled up flights of steps that led out to a rooftop courtyard with a beautiful view of Jerusalem. I knew I was meeting Sheikh Bukhari at the Uzbek Cultural Center, but I had no idea that that was his home. Not only was it his home, but it was the same house his family had lived in for four hundred years. The Cultural Center, which is about one flight of steps above the rest of his house, is incredible. Sheikh Bukhari comes from a long line of Sufi Sheikh's, and his collection ranges from family photos to old manuscripts from early Islamic history. Sheikh Bukhari's family was very warm and welcoming to my presence, and I am very excited to learn more about his life and his work with Jerusalem Peacemakers!

