

Today is Shabbat Shoftim, 6 Elul 5779. During this moon cycle, we pour over our souls and the impacts our actions have had on the world around us over the past year. It is time to listen closely to the still, small voice that guides us, and it is time to blast the shofar to demand a better future. Here in Minneapolis, we are praying at the crosshairs of Dakota and Anishinaabe territory. Indigenous people, who have been stewarding this land for generations, are being victimized by the state of Minnesota and the federal government, facing constant violations of their treaty rights and basic human dignity. We read liturgy tonight 6,223 miles and 8 time zones away from Jerusalem – guess which city I’m talking about tonight.

[if no one laughs – “it’s Jerusalem. That was a funny joke.”]

[Breath]

I am an American Jew. I am a queer, lefty, observant, American Jew who did not grow up in a Jewish family. These are the identities I hold deep in my bones, and these are the realities I brought with me to Israel and Palestine. This July, I was one of 30 participants in J Street U’s experimental Let Our People Know trip. The trip was marketed as an alternative Birthright – a free trip to Israel for young Jews who didn’t want to ignore the occupation.

A young Jew’s first trip to Israel is so hyped up. I’ve heard it described as beautiful, miraculous, the only place where Jews are able to breathe freely, the hotspot of Jewish flourishing. But the Judaism I saw in Israel was not the Judaism I fell in love with in Minneapolis - the hegemonic ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel rejected me before I even got on the plane.

Our group joked that El Al staff were magic because they somehow knew our deepest insecurities before they even opened our passports. I still remember the fear and embarrassment as five staff members huddled around my passport, whispering and glancing at me. They figured I was undergoing some sort of gender transition (correct) and ‘were fine with that’, but they were utterly confused about how someone like me could ever be accepted in Jewish community. I had to give halahic justification for my existence before I could get on the plane. The only African American Jew on our trip was immediately flagged as a potential security threat. A few days before our trip kicked off, Solomon Tekah, an Ethiopian Israeli Jew, was murdered by Israeli police.

[Breath]

From the moment our tour guide opened his mouth it became clear that, like structural racism in the United States, the geopolitical conflict in Israel was unescapable. On the bus ride up to Galil, we saw the city skyline of Tel Aviv to our left and the separation barrier marking the West Bank to our right. From Galil, we could see Jordan, Lebanon, and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights all at once. By night, I admired the big dipper above the Kinneret, the lights of Tiberias cascading down Mount Arbel. By day, we learned to avoid the land mines still planted in the fields between the road and the Israeli-Jordanian border.

In Tsfat, another transmasc Jew and I were waiting anxiously and awkwardly, hoping the Habadic teaching a white, muscular man how to lay tefillin would also teach us. The street vendor next to us started yelling in Hebrew – the only word I could understand was “nashim”/“women”. The Habadnic walked away without even looking at us. We cried on the steps behind the shuk and prayed minḥa without tefillin. We couldn’t understand what we had done wrong – we were wearing masculine modest clothing and we desperately wanted to be observant, but we were locked out of our own traditions in the land of Israel.

On Shabbat morning I went to the Kotel. I imagined that in this moment – on a sweltering, sunny Shabbes, halfway between shaharit and minḥa, at Robinson’s Arch, I could finally touch my forehead against the rough stone and... have some kind of vision or something. Robinson’s Arch has been undergoing ‘repairs’ for two years now. For two years, Jews like me who are desperate to touch our heritage and who are locked out of gendered spaces, have been unable to touch the kotel. I stood at the edge of the platform, yards away from ancient brick, overflowing with rage and despair and longing.

That Shabbes afternoon, an armed security guard told us to hide all signs of our Jewishness to prepare for our tour in East Jerusalem. I tucked in my tzitzit, hid my Magen David, and took off my special Shabbes kippah. As we walked down the street, a giant menorah loomed from a mountaintop, and Israeli flags littered the police building. Around the corner, swastikas were painted over gravestones. 18 miles away in Hebron, Magen Davids were painted alongside newly scrubbed walls that used to say heinous things like ‘gas the Arabs’ – walls that lined streets that Palestinians were forbidden to walk. The soldiers who harassed Palestinians at checkpoints wore kippot.

We learned that East Jerusalemites wake up every day to learn of a new checkpoint that will racially profile them on a daily basis, or another man killed by police, or another home demolished, or another child hauled off to prison. It reminded me of home, where every morning we wake up to another massacre, to ICE kidnapping another one of our neighbors, to another brutal policy enacted at the border. Every building in Ramallah has a poster commemorating a young Arab man who was either dead or in prison. I thought of Jamar Clarke, Philando Castille, Thurman Blevins, Marcus Golden, and those whose names I shamefully don’t have memorized and those who have been shot by police between then and now.

[Breath]

It’s a cliché for young Jews to come back from Israel feeling more Jewish, but it is true for me. The state of Israel shattered my pride, and I come back defiantly holding the shards of my Jewishness so tight I can feel them cut my hands as if they were the razor wire spooled around every fence in Jerusalem. I came back from the Let Our People Know Trip feeling connected to Israel. The constant attack on human dignity 8 time zones away mirrors the shameful acts of our government and moderate bystanders in our own communities. I am accountable to the people I met in East Jerusalem, whose lives are impacted by our votes, by our activism, and by our communal consensus. I remember a buggy night in Jerusalem, after an exhausting week of feeling the fear and the brutality and the willful ignorance of the occupation, we had a dance party at Sulḥa Peace Project. I held hands with a Palestinian man and an Israeli woman and danced so hard sweat and sunscreen dripped into my eyes, so I closed my eyes and kept dancing. And I knew that ‘this is what peace feels like!’

Shabbat Shalom