

Louisa Gordon Reflection

January 2024

My name is Louisa Gordon and I will be reflecting and sharing about my recent mission trip to Israel with JNF and AMHSI. In January of 2024, a mission trip of my synagogue, TBJ, returned from Israel and shared their remarkable stories of their travels to the congregation at Shabbat. After hearing the profound impact this trip had on my fellow congregants, I immediately went home and started to research missions in Israel for teens, which is when I stumbled upon the JNF teen mission.

I brought the mission trip to my parents' attention, and although at first there was definitely hesitation on their behalf, they ultimately made the decision to let me go. As the weeks went on anticipating the trip, I thought about the new people I would meet, going to Israel for the first time, and understanding the impact and importance of being there now, since October 7th. So, when the time came, I boarded my El Al flight and headed to Ben Gurion Airport.

Stepping off the flight was surreal. As I walked through the airport, I was greeted with the dark realities of life in Israel since October 7th, as posters of the hostages lined the walls. However, unlike in America, these posters were not torn down nor vandalized, instead honored with prayers and other well wishes. I met with the group and we headed to the AMHSI campus to begin our trip.

During our week spent in Israel, we engaged in a multitude of service projects, as well as had the exceptional opportunity to be immersed in Israeli culture. On the first day of our trip, we prepared meals for soldiers, learned about service efforts made by Israelis since the war, and enjoyed dinner at the home of a family in the Druze community. We spoke with the Druze people and learned about their culture and experience since October 7th. They shared with us the importance of hospitality, and explained as soon as one sits down to have bread and salt with another, they can truly connect. On the following day, we headed to Southern Israel, where we spent time at a community for people with special needs, called Adi Negev, and heard the tragic stories of the ways in which the people of the community were impacted and experienced loss on October 7th. They shared to us that Hamas trucks had simply driven past Adi Negev, which was understaffed with security on October 7th due to the holiday and Shabbat, being a complete miracle. That night we headed to the Nova Music Festival sight, where we visited the memorials of those massacred that night. As we drove to the sight, we passed rows of fields that I had once seen attendees of the festival running on in the news, however now the fields had grown, no longer deserted, and I made the profound connection that October 7th happened so recent, and the brutality of the War still waged on. At the Nova sight, we sang Hatikvah as a group, and surrounding visitors joined in, a true moment of connection.

The following days of the trip consisted of agricultural projects on Bedouin farms, as well as visits to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv, we had an opportunity to spend time in Hostage Square, an area in Tel Aviv dedicated to bringing home all of the hostages, and support the families whose loved ones are held captive in Gaza. In Hostage Square, we went through a simulation of the tunnels in Gaza, met with family members and friends of those in hostage, and learned about personal stories of October 7th. That night, we returned to AMHSI campus to bring in Shabbat.

It comes to much surprise to many that I would head off to Israel alone during my Spring Break, however my decision to go came with very little hesitation. I found that on social media, the news of the war made me feel detached from Israel and helping was out of my control, thus going brought me great comfort that I could help and connect with people in Israel. I learned so much from the Israelis I met, hearing the polarity and tensions of regular life waging on and the war's occurrence in their everyday lives. The people in Israel still laugh, dance and sing, yet there is a lingering presence of the war in each and every moment. They wanted to hear so much from us, about why we came and of the raging antisemitism in America. I experienced immense connections with the land of Israel and the people, making it so difficult to leave.

Going to Israel after October 7th was one of the best experiences that I could have ever made, and I do not have any regrets. I am so blessed to have had a safe return from my meaningful trip, and I pray for a safe return of all of the hostages and that there can be peace again in Israel. Thank you for listening to my story.