

**Blog Articles: Israel and the West Bank**  
**By: Alexandria Caputo**

**East Jerusalem (January 7, 2016)**



This is East Jerusalem. Here, you do not see grand holy sites, families walking around, or much of anything like the other parts of Jerusalem, to be blunt. This sector of the Holy City is the Arab Quarter, considered by the international community to be a Palestinian area.

As you can see, there are separation walls heavily marked with graffiti; cars are not coming or going from this area. For the most part, simply they cannot. Words such as "apartheid" have been crossed off by soldiers drawn onto the wall, which I view as a desperate form of censorship. While they are not posted, I have them on file.

To be completely honest, I could not pay attention too much to what our guide was saying because the scenes were so haunting. Suffocating is a word that comes to mind. Suffocating so

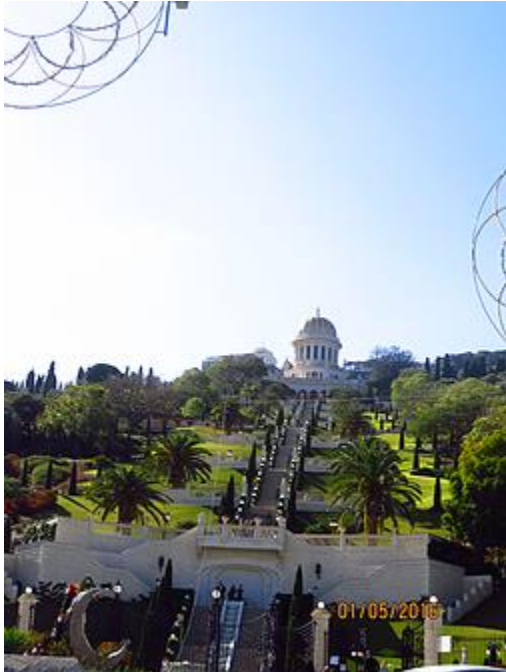
much, that above you can see where portions of the barbed wire were cut off in order to create a hole for escape so that residents can maintain work in Israel.



I refrain from taking pictures of soldiers, as well as any military vehicles, but try to visualize a hybrid between a tank and truck, with the windows gated from every side. Now what you can visualize from these pictures is the degree of living conditions: incredibly poor. The guide expressed some sort of shock when he saw a garbage truck passing, which you can imagine why. This is not living. These conditions only allow for the simplest form of survival, so why the international community is not more pressed only allows me to assume - politics.



Though rather than engage in the politics of the situation, I simply wanted to share these pictures with a wider audience in hopes of achieving greater numbers who hopefully want to understand more about other sides of the story happening during this ongoing conflict.



## The Bahá'í Gardens of Haifa (January 6, 2016)

Waking up this morning, I expected a full day of sitting in lectures, but surprisingly enough, the events for today were canceled. A quick decision was made, and within the hour some of the group took off for Haifa in order to get a view of the famous Baha'i Gardens.

The Bahá'í Faith is a monotheistic religion, founded in Persia during the 19th century by a man named Baha'u'llah who placed the most major emphasis of the religion on the spiritual unity of all mankind. The presence of the Baha'i Gardens is strong, especially in the midst of the political and social climate between Israel and Palestine; even deeper, there is much to be said about the message of the Baha'i Faith in the midst of the Middle East as a whole.

Baha'ism teaches the unity of **God**, the unity of **religion** and the unity of **humanity**. Simply, this means that *one God is responsible for creation, the major religions share a singular spiritual source, and all humans, no matter what the circumstance, are created equal.*





## Three Religions, One Spiritual Center: A Story of Jerusalem (January 5, 2016)

*A lecture by Mrs. Yisca Harania; "The Sanctity of Jerusalem & the Holy Land of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – A Comparative Approach"*

Jerusalem is a fascinating topic in the eyes of the three major monotheistic religions due to the nature of its spirituality and position in religious texts. Using notes from the lecture presented by Mrs. Harania, I will elaborate the role of Jerusalem starting with Islam, moving onto Christianity, and lastly, Judaism.

### Jerusalem in Islam

Jerusalem in the eyes of Islam is remembered as *Bayt al-Makdis*, otherwise, the house of the temple. Geography holds sanctity, thus is a powerful factor in theological matters. Jerusalem is seen so highly in the eyes of Muslims, that at one point in history the Muslims even directed their prayers towards this city. Later, the direction was changed towards Mecca.

While the name of "Jerusalem" is not directly stated in the Sura noted in this lecture, it is assumed that this is the location.

*Sura 17:1 "Exalted is He who took His servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa whose surroundings We have blessed to show Him of our signs, indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing."*

Within this Sura from the Quran, we interpret that this is the story of the Prophet Muhammad traveling from Mecca to Jerusalem and back in one night. On this night, he supposedly climbed



the ladder to Heaven, meeting biblical figures along the way, concluding with Jesus Christ.

Here in Jerusalem, whether he ascended in a physical or spiritual manner, did the Prophet Muhammad receive the directions from the Angel Gabriel to direct those of the Islamic Faith to pray 50 times a day. This was bartered down to 5 times a day, counting tenfold. There are two interpretations of Sura 17:1.

As mentioned above, there is debate whether this ascension was physical or spiritual. Those of the Sufi sect of Islam will claim that the Prophet Muhammad ascended spirituality, thus creating a divide in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

### **Jerusalem in Christianity**

While geography is important in the Muslim faith, in this case regarding Jerusalem, the Christians take a different route of thinking. Sanctity is not derived from the ground, but is rather a result of the deeds, actions, and events of Jesus. Theologians of the Christian faith will urge people not to make the mistake of thinking the geography is of sincere importance. As Saint Jerome had once quoted, "*The Kingdom of God is within you.*" Christians will walk in the steps of Jesus (as I was very excited to do myself!) but prayer in my own home country is no more or less significant from anywhere else in the world.



According to the Gospel of John 4:19-24, Christians worship God physically on a mountain but the ability to do so will not last forever. As much as Jesus was present in Jerusalem, what's important is the worship of the spirit.

### **Jerusalem in Judaism**

The notion that Jerusalem is the temple of God is very present within Judaism is based on the word of God, "I want to have a house, and where my house is will be your neighborhood." HE is present physically in an unphysical manner within Jerusalem, thus the Jewish people come to this city in Israel in order to be in the presence of God. This right here is what Mrs. Harani describes to be the Jewish understanding of the sanctity.

Within the borders of Jerusalem, earthly people may live their daily lives with one another, and more importantly with God.

## **The Dome of the Rock (January 5, 2016)**

Below are photos of the Dome of the Rock. This mosque has relevance to people of the Muslim faith, as well as Christians and Jews. This is a magnificent structure, heavily guarded and



maintained by soldiers as well as other police whose role is to make sure that there is no prayer, demonstration, haram clothing, or even sitting on the stairs. These police are serious about their job, for the Temple Mount is an incredibly important location for all faiths. Though this is true, you will only see Muslims gathered in groups and tourist groups.

According to Islam, this is the spot where the Prophet Muhammad ascended into the three levels of Heaven, accompanied by the Angel Gabriel, and met with many religious figures ending with Jesus Christ.

According to both Muslim, Christian, and Jewish tradition, the Temple Mount is where Abraham brought his son (depending on the faith, this may have been Isaac or Ishmael) to be sacrificed. The Angel Gabriel saw Abraham's dedication to God and stopped him before he could make the sacrifice.

## **Roots, Part One (January 4, 2016)**

Since Friday, I have been touring throughout Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the West Bank, and with much excitement I now am able to share the story of Roots, a grassroots initiative promoting non-violence amongst Israelis and Palestinians. This organization truly works at the heart of the situation, and is very hands-on with the both locals and even throughout the global community. At first I was skeptical about what I was about to walk into, not even truly knowing where I was within Israel, but now I can say that I believe this portion of the program will resonate with me strongest.

*Since the story of Roots' founders are so long and complex, I will break my notes up into two parts in order to elaborate to the best of my abilities.*

Huddling inside a log cabin, Shaul Judelman and Ali Abu Awwad greet us warmly, despite us shivering from the cold outside. Shaul Judelman is a Jewish-Israeli, who's candid and brutally honest words offered a rare sense of optimism, though it is important to note, nothing unrealistic. Instead of closing with this message, I will open with explaining that I wholeheartedly believe that if Roots continues at this rate with its mission, the Israelis and Palestinians both have the opportunity taking a huge step forward with progress.

To Shaul, Judaism is not a religion, but is rather a story of the people, and even as an ardent Zionist, he does not believe in a one-state solution. This is a man who recognizes suffering and victims amongst both the Jews and the Palestinian people, and understands that a two-state solution would take even more sacrificing of ones' identity from both sides, thus more suffering. And from Shaul, a quote he received from Rabbi Froman after meeting with HAMAS leader Sheikh Hussein, *"This story of Redemption cannot be another one of exile and despair."*

Both sides want justice, but Shaul tells a side of Judaism I never quite grasped before. He explains that when you want to become a Jew, you are passionately willing to become a part of a population that has been running from oppression since the beginning of time. This is a message that instilled within me clarity regarding the Israeli side of the situation.

Shaul clarifies deeper: the Jewish population of Israel is paralyzed by fear and distrust. Such emotion derives from not only the historical standpoint of oppression and events such as the Holocaust, but other past events of violence and exile. This as well includes the present question of security from the Israeli people, to the Israeli government. There are hundreds of soldiers with guns, checkpoints and high walls, yet violence is still occurring. Reoccurring violence means that there is still a population in fear.

On the topic of the wall, we discussed the wall and its creation. It is quite a possibility that this wall was structured from desperation, but is this creation doing its job? This is up for debate.



Rabbi Froman, who was quoted above, seems to have been a major mobilizer in Shaul's life. The rabbi's narrative as a Jewish religious leader in my opinion, should undoubtedly be told throughout this region which from the beginning of time, is still experiencing conflict. Rabbi Froman not only protested against the Separation Wall, he took the initiative to speak with the HAMAS leader in order to gain perspective of the extreme opposing side after he was released from prison.

To conclude this message, Shaul told us a story about Rabbi Froman that presented an image of the land and people of Israel. As the Rabbi was entering a store, he read a sticker on the door in which he paused and said that he refused to enter. Everything was all wrong. The sticker quoted, "*the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people,*" in which he proclaimed, "*The sticker should read **the Jewish people belong to the land of Israel.***"

Shaul is not just a visualizer, he is a mobilizer who seeks out the potential in people. This man has an incredible, natural ability to bring out the inherent good will in people through encouraging open dialogue, thus an honest conversation. If you personally know me, you know how strongly I believe in this concept, and right before my eyes was a living, breathing example of a man who makes this work.

*(Next, I will speak about Ali Abu Awwad's personal story, as well as summarize how Ali and Shaul became affiliated, thus creating Roots.)*

## **Roots, Part Two (January 5, 2016)**

Continuing on about the grassroots initiative, Roots, I hope to present the story of co-founder Ali Abu Awwad. Ali is a Palestinian non-violence activist, who much like Shaul, has a unique story of his own regarding the conflict. He is a refugee of 1948 (the date of the establishment of Israel, otherwise known as Nakba Day), and was born into a family who had a presence in the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). Ali explains that he grew up feeling much anger and pain, wanting desperately to grow up and live as a human with dignity. Dignity is a factor that he hopes one day everyone will experience.

It was not until 1990 did Ali realize the power of non-violence, fatefully enough through his time spent in prison. Wanting to see his mother who was placed in another prison, he turned to hunger strike rather than seeking out a violent means of getting his way. The hunger strike succeeded, thus Ali was able to see his mother. After returning, he began to study the ways and life of people like MLK, Mandela, and Ghandi.

*Anger creates blindness, Ali explains.*

After being wounded by an Israeli soldier himself, the worst happened. His brother was killed not soon after, and all these feelings of revenge began to swell within his mind. From the unimaginable, an instance of unexpected beauty occurred.



A series of events led to meetings with the “enemy,” who were willing to meet with him and exchange stories. Even more surprising, his mother, a past participant in political activism invited Israelis into their home. Stories were shared, tears were shed, and a massive realization was made.

*Humans cry, feel the pain of others, and are emotional beings.*

Ali, after this excerpt, makes a wonderful observation to the group: is peace about talking to the nice ones? **First**, peace needs action – courageous action. **Second**, peace needs value. Ali explains that the peace movement lives in a bubble currently, and the mission needs to be on the ground, promoting dignity and the security of both sides. *Fears need to be overcome in order to take a step forward.*

**This idea of fear and security is a major reoccurring theme these past couple of days.**

Ali continues on to explain that he believes the problem is the vision, because “*how can you divide people from their roots and expect a solution? Are we strong enough to say that TWO people have rights, legitimate rights, to TWO parts of the land?*”

The part that resonates strongest with my own thinking is once again, open dialogue. There is a need for a secure place so that an argument can take place to hash out ideas, and hopefully one day, creating a solution. Anger and frustration are natural emotions – people have a right to express their sentiments in a secure area.

**In order to conclude** this bit about Roots and its’ co-founders, it is important to know that this organization is about doing and learning. The location of this organization is in an area where Israeli settlers are present and although there is some controversy, there also has been tremendous progress, including an instance where about 300 of these settlers congregated for peace. Mind you, this is area that sees much violence, death, and was the center of the news at some point regarding the three Israeli boys whom were kidnapped.

**Roots hopes to serve as a catalyst for progress, urging people on both sides to take responsibility and act through non-violent means.** Those involved must recognize the roots of the situation, rather than move too quickly and forget where they sprouted from. Seek engagement rather than confrontation.

*Note: The posts regarding both Shaul and Ali are from their words, in which I only elaborated on to share with a larger audience. Their discussion was a powerful one, in which I attempted to relay to the best of my abilities. Please check out [friendsofroots.net](http://friendsofroots.net) for more information.*

## **The Palestinian Refugees (December 31, 2015)**

Below is from a portion of a lecture given by Dr. Maha el-Taji Daghash, a Palestinian refugee, who gave us an inside, personal look into the situation, as well as a timeline of the refugee crisis.

Deciding on where to begin with the Palestinian refugee crisis was difficult, but gaining insight from a refugee urged me to begin with solutions that were proposed during the lecture, especially due to the nature of the two laws I will present before you at the conclusion.

### **Solutions for the Palestinian Refugee Crisis:**

1. Repatriation
2. Resettlement
3. Compensation

**Repatriation:** Some refugees have a desire to return to the homes that they were forced to abandon. A major question is, what about their right to return? Does this even exist?

- There is also a desire among some refugees that the injustices are admitted
- The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 called for either the repatriation, or the compensation for those affected from the 1948 declaration of Israel as a state

### **The Right of Return under International Law:**

The Right of Return falls under International Humanitarian Law, and deals with the right to leave ones country, and the fact that no one should be deprived the right to return back to his or her country once after they leave. The refugees have been and are facing this situation. Palestinians are unable to return to what once were their homes and businesses – their livelihood - a major human rights issue legalized under the Knesset Resolution of 1961.

### **The Knesset Resolution of 1961:**

This resolution states that it is not possible for Arab refugees to return to Israel, as explained above under the Right to Return. The only solution for this situation is to have the Arabs resettle in other Arab nations. This ties into number two of possible solutions listed above, and is an Israeli law posed against repatriation.

**Compensation**, well, I either missed that part or it wasn't covered, but I believe the idea is rather self-explanatory.

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The solutions presented have led me to start forming opinions, but as I have been told, the more I learn about any situation pertaining to both Israel and Palestine will simply lead to another question and cloud of confusion. Personally, I believe that blocking of refugees from what was one there home is unjust and needs be addressed. The failure of action under International Law has passively allowed for thousands of peoples to become homeless, and even more, stateless. Once bound to land, many are struggling, as am I now mentally, trying to wrap my head around the story of Dr. Maha. Yesterday's lecture rings louder today after this law was presented:

**Law of the Return:** According to law, anyone who has one grandparent of Jewish decent may come to Israel. This law was reinforced by the Nuremburg Trials, which allowed for any person with one Jewish grandparent could be legally sent to the concentration camps during the Holocaust.

Those of Jewish decent, even if they have never stepped foot in Israel, are by law allowed to enter Israel and call this nation their home. On the other hand, individuals and their families who owned land, homes, and businesses were forced to leave and under Israeli law are not allowed to return, unless through extraordinary loopholes, similar to Dr. Maha's situation.

The presence of laws of allowing certain groups to return to the land, and the creation of laws to keep certain groups out of borders, is an idea I now must put much thought into, BUT, what I cherished about this lecture was the closing statement about moving forwards from conflict and disparity.

We cannot see things so strict, so black and white. As there are grey spaces in life, there are grey spaces in the situation present here in Israel and amongst the Palestinians. Dr. Maha encouraged us to have an open mind. As someone who believes so strongly in listening to every side of the story, and asks a million questions along the way, I cannot think of a more positive way to face the rest of the lectures, my time spent here in Israel, and most importantly, moving forward with both my career and life in general.



## **A Hebrew Lesson In Bringing People Together (December 30, 2016)**

A lecture by Zvi Harel on *Kibbutz*:

Kibbutz: "to collect, or to bring people together"

Kibbutzin: "plural of Kibbutz"

Kibbutznik: "someone who lives in a kibbutz"

For the duration of my stay in Israel, I will be staying in the *Kibbutz Mizra*. A kibbutz is a community of people who live, work, and eat together, as well as go about much of daily life as a unit. There are about 276 kibbutz communities spread about Israel, with members constituting approximately 1.5% of the Israeli population. These communities are important in both the growth and economics of this small nation.

Economically speaking, the kibbutzin produces 35% of agricultural products in Israel, including veggies, fruits, and milk. Industrial products makes up approximately 10%.

The first Kibbutz was established in 1910, just 38 years before the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. Kibbutz Mizra, where I currently reside was established in 1923, just 25 years before the declaration. In addition to the timeline, Tel Aviv was established in 1909, just one year before the first Kibbutz; here we begin to see a small, yet significant part of the growth of the nation of Israel.

*Original ideology behind the kibbutz:* The concept of the Kibbutz was born in Europe, and was originally designed as a utopic i\society, socialist in nature with no apparent differences between the rich and poor. Basically, a society of people living without exploitation. The people of the kibbutz were to share one income, which means they shared one bank account, receiving their funds off of need-base.

The kibbutzin typically live without crime or delinquency, for example, the most major crime being a young person getting into trouble with hashish. If conflict was to become present, it would be without violence and solved through peaceful means, ensured by the protective nature of the kibbutz environment.

Interesting enough, one cannot become a member of the kibbutz without becoming accepted via a secret referendum held by members (*kibbutzin*) of the community. For example, 550 people may live in a community, but only 400 of this group are solidified members who have committed themselves to a permanent life within the kibbutz. The rest of this number consists of the children and young adults. They attend school inside the kibbutz, until their high school years.

After graduation at the age of eighteen, males are required to commit three years of service to the Israeli army, and women are required to commit two years as long as they are not married, pregnant, or an Orthodox Jew. After the army, the young adults might travel or begin university, and they must decide within those years if they wish to return to the kibbutz lifestyle.

*There is a challenge.* Many of the elders have found that the kibbutz is a tree without roots, meaning that the kibbutz is not a very attractive option for the younger generations. It was decided that the lifestyle must change or perish. The elder members have decided that change was inevitable in order to preserve the way of the kibbutz, and were open to the ideas of the younger generations.

The kibbutz societies have turned away from their communist/socialist stature, and in turn have become capitalist societies. The people of the kibbutz now enjoy separate bank accounts, are encouraged to work, and short-term welfare projects are provided to those who are unemployed until they can get back on their feet. Those unemployed must seek employment in order to supply their own salaries so that they may contribute fairly to the tax system. Progress within the kibbutz has encouraged younger generations to return to the kibbutz after the army.

Although Israel is a Jewish nation, kibbutz remain secular societies, as they always have been. Religious buildings will never be found within the community, and people will not be questioned

about their faith or excluded from the community if they are not Jewish. While the majority are Jewish, it should be pointed out that I saw a woman wearing the hijab while walking to class.

My experience thus far in the kibbutz has been an interesting one. Watching families and children grow up together, share meals, and contribute to the well-being of the community as a unit has been a completely unexpected surprise having no prior knowledge of such communities existing. What I personally felt was the most impressive factor of the kibbutz are the agricultural and industrial aspects because there is a great deal of contribution to the society of Israel and have been important factors in the success of the nation.