

IMPRESSIONS FROM OUR ENCOUNTERS

Trip to Israel, Palestinian Territory & Turkey
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SETTING AN INTENTION: We would like to share glimpses of our travels in the hope that you too will feel drawn to the power of relating to people from other cultures in an intimate and casual encounter. Making personal connections during our journey was THE most important thing to us. The result was a three-fold opening: of eyes, heart and mind. Perhaps it will stir feelings in you as well. We hope so.

We do not make any generalizations from our meetings. This is a collection of impressions with particular individuals, in particular circumstance, on particular days. It is not a study, but a glance; not meant to represent all “sides” but to provide an inside view. Shortly after our return home, the situation in the locations that we visited changed dramatically. The headlines shouted flare-ups in the Mideast. We travelled between outbursts. Had we been in these regions two weeks later we would not have had the freedom to travel as we did. And perhaps we would have heard different stories.

How did this trip come about? We were invited to an Israeli wedding of close friends in Tel Aviv. We felt immediately drawn to go not as tourists but to gain authentic exposure to people of other cultures whom we would not ordinarily meet, and to have a first hand view of their current life circumstance. We recalled an inspiring and thought-provoking presentation, by two Palestinian young adults, that we had recently attended. The evening was sponsored by Encounter, an organization that arranges for personal meetings between Jews and Palestinians. This left us wanting more as we continued imagining what it would be like to live there, what our concerns would be and what we might feel and do. The word “encounter” resonated with us and we aimed to fulfill its calling. Now was our chance.

Via the network of our various circles we made extensive arrangements. We cannot emphasize enough how much persistence it took to formalize these connections, but we really wanted to have meaningful personal contact. Our plan to go solo into the West Bank was met with concern (even alarm, at times) among our friends and Israeli hosts. Early on in our trip planning we decided to include Turkey as part of the trip, as visiting Istanbul, the ancient city on two continents, was alluring. Here again we thought it important to have inter-personal experiences, to understand the daily lives and concerns of locals. Sight seeing was secondary, though we fully enjoyed the richly endowed cityscape of Istanbul and fascinating geography of Cappadocia.

Were we looking for answers to solve world peace? No. We realized how multi-layered and intractable the issues are in that region of the globe. We decided we wanted to show up, open-hearted to those whom we would meet and to see what evolved. So in our encounters we looked, asked, listened and shared. The nature of our questions was primarily to get a sense of our new friend’s every day life. We intentionally did not engage in dialogue about the perennial conflicts, nor were we focused on the perspectives of history.

Given the complicated context and convictions in that part of the world, some of these tellings may be difficult to understand and honor. We invite you to stay open to hearing people’s truth from a population not often heard from directly, without pretense or adornment. We wanted to go beyond the sensationalized reports typically on American media. Our goal was simple and our intent was pure. We returned home grateful to be in American and with an expanded world-view supported by an experiential context and new friends in our lives.

SHARING STORIES: Here are the encounters that informed, saddened and inspired us. We are attempting to give voice to the individuals with whom we met.

TEL AVIV We stayed with gracious and caring friends of our friends. Our host, Anita, had a comfortable apartment where her mother had been a seamstress, migrating to Israel from Poland after the Holocaust. We were joined by Anita's boyfriend Kobi, and other guests for Shabbat dinner around the expandable kitchen table. Many conversations ensued, proudly describing daily life as good and Israel as strong. "We have to live with what is, as there is no one to talk to about peace." Leftists long ago, they seemed to have grown hardened and despondent over the years of living in a volatile situation. "Our way of life [being an occupying force and in the midst of hostile neighbors] is not sustainable over the long run, and without enlightened leadership there is no movement towards a vision of co-existence." "Our army is strong but seeing my grandchildren make drawings of their homes including bomb shelters is heartbreaking," lamented Anita. Her grown daughter added, "We do not know how to live with the Palestinians yet, but perhaps we can start by not judging them." And late one night in frustration our host said, "Tell Americans and Europeans to solve their own problems of race relations and inequities, and not to judge us." We heard this as being not as a rationalization of Israel's problems, but for the critics to leave the finger-pointing and accusations aside. Most of the Israelis whom we met see the separation wall as necessary for safety but antithetical to Jewish values and human decency. So they live resigned knowing The Wall protects them and stifles the Palestinians, seeing it as a necessary despite its being a barrier to peace for the foreseeable future.



Our Israeli Host Anita and her boyfriend

JERUSALEM We met with Eliyahu, a rabbi who reaches out in peace work thru Jerusalem Peacemakers, a network of faith and peace leaders. He leads day trips to the West Bank where he uniquely includes dialogue time with Palestinians and settlers. "I think if someone is deeply rooted in their own story, in their own spiritual practice, in their own culture, then they have nothing to fear by encountering the other." "I see peace coming but it will take many generations of one-to-one relationship building." We agree wholeheartedly with this, feeling it to be true. Eliyahu is truly inspired by his work with women, whom he envisions as the best hope for change in the region.

BETHLEHEM, PALESTINE We were a bit apprehensive, but eager to find our pre-arranged guide, Rami, on the Palestinian side of the Wall. Walking on our own, we had no questions from the military guards and no directional signs to follow. We found our way by trial and error thru Security Check Point 300 to a bustling city street filled with cabs and Palestinian men looking for fares. Thanks to texting, Rami appeared within a few minutes and we jumped into his car, grateful to be in good hands. Over coffee we made our introductions. Rami, an educator and director of an after-school program in the arts, had studied in the US for seven years, which accounted for his perfect English. Married and with one pre-school child, the essential question for Rami and his wife is where the future is for their daughter. They love Bethlehem, all their family is there (for 350 years) however, he says, ". . . the external Wall is horrendous, but what really concerns me are the internal walls that are being built up around peoples' hearts. They are scared, their self-esteem and dignity are suffering.

If children have nothing to look forward to, no future to envision, no hope, then all they have is their past which is full of anger, sadness, frustration and powerlessness. We are trying to give the students a safe place to tell their stories so that some healing has the potential to happen.” Rami’s goal of trying to give children hope and self-esteem for the future as an alternative to their negative feelings came alive for us. We did not see any parks, playgrounds or signs of growth. Our hearts were heavy, but how truly amazing was the school where our guide was attempting to shine some light and kindle hope.

Rami did not need to say too much about the Wall as it expresses itself. Looking at it from the Palestinian side we saw the graffiti, the activist posters, the rubble, the no-man’s land along its length because no one wants to live in its shadow. The Wall winds and constricts, cutting across neighborhoods, keeping farmers from their orchards. The presence of the Hamsin (hot dust storm) on that day compounded the effect of desolation. Upon our request, Rami drove us through refugee camps in Bethlehem. The physical environment is rundown and depressed. A striking, ubiquitous image was “the key of return”, a coveted symbol of hope mounted above entryways. The key refers to the homes these Palestinian families were forced to leave or fled from in 1948. For the ensuing multi-generations of refugees there is nothing to replace the loss and despair felt in their current life, with its limited opportunity and poverty. The language of “return” is echoed widely in our own Jewish tradition.

We were told of the daily humiliation of Palestinian day workers at the checkpoints. Subjected to the impulses of teenage, machinegun toting Israeli soldiers, the workers frequently are harassed and feel incensed. As we exited back across the checkpoint at the end of the day, we saw the throng of exhausted workers returning home and could sense their hardship. Our heading back to Jerusalem held such a contrast; a different world only a few miles away.



With Palestinian Guide at the Wall in Bethlehem

EIN HOD, ISRAEL For over 50 years this has been a village of artists; built upon land of a former Arab village, whose inhabitants moved (or fled?) up the mountain, giving over room for new-coming Israelis. We were told that the Arabs just got official recognition for their village, with resulting governmental benefits such as infrastructure support. The artists told us that there is coexistence with the Arabs and there are some interchanges at times. (We met with an artist who had immigrated to Israel and Ein Hod twenty years ago and had not once been to the Arab village.) Our hosts had made aliyah from the US and another country, with divergent attitudes distinctly expressed in their non-verbals and opinions. As to their future, even though their children live in foreign cities they will stay in Israel despite the uncertainties. They were questioning what will happen to the next generation and for the next generation.

ISTANBUL & GOREME, TURKEY Our encounters in Turkey were of a different ilk. Our two day-guides were very friendly and hospitable. Esin, our guide in Istanbul, a chic, educated daughter of an imam who herself does not practice Islam . . . Memet, our guide in the Cappadocia region, a university professor. A colleague of one of our guides arranged for us to have a most interesting dinner at the home of a middle-class Turkish family with three grown children. The twenty year-old daughter was studying in the city university and wants to teach in an impoverished African country when she graduates. She said that she had just recently started wearing a headscarf of her own free will. Her mother and father are religious Muslims, but her siblings are thoroughly secular. It seems that in that family at least, there is choice and acceptance of individual expression. On our last evening in Istanbul On our last evening we had a haunting exchange in the street with a Syrian refugee family of two young parents with their three sick children. In Goreme we had a brief encounter with a middle-aged couple from Canada who had fled Bosnia at the outset of the civil war, when neighbors literally turned upon them overnight; a shocking account of atrocity that is now being replicated in Syria.

GOING FORWARD We recognize that we all share responsibility in the way things are in the world. That insecurities and injustices need to be faced, that all need to feel seen in their humanness. With the reality of deep divides, peace needs to be nourished from the grass roots. Inspired and effective leadership on the world stage is in short supply. Now back in the routine of our daily life, we continue to think of those we encountered. We have redoubled our attempts to gain awareness and to enter into dialogue. We joined a local organization that is establishing a refugee resettlement program. We encouraged Rami to connect us with young Palestinians with an interest in serving elders, who could benefit from the Jordan Liebher Scholarship Fund (JLSF). The same with the Turkish family that we met. As a result there are already new recipients from Palestine and Turkey. (In addition there is another international recipient from Uganda, and soon possibly from Kenya.) In these direct actions we feel that we are contributing to transforming the world in some way.

Thank you for reading this. We would like to hear the responses that these stories evoke in you to keep the dialogue going. If you too are interested in making personal contact on an upcoming trip, we can share strategies and information with you in fulfilling your intent to grow peace by encounter.



Dawn Over Cappadocia



Peace Dove from Bethlehem