

June 2013

To Whom it May Concern,

In the past few years, I have participated in a number of Jewish-themed study tours all over the world with different groups with different foci. However my experience on the RCFP's Israel study tour was completely different.

What made the seminar unique is that even as it addressed all the major challenges of the contemporary Israeli society (eg. LGBTQ issues, poverty at the periphery, ethnic minorities, migration, refugees, human trafficking, religious pluralism etc.) it wasn't focused on everyday politics. The whole seminar was refreshingly free from the simplistic right-wing – left wing dichotomy of Israeli politics. The people we met surely had political opinions but the program's emphasis asked each presenter to speak about their struggle for systematic social change and their engagement in human rights activism. We learned about their small and sometimes significant steps forward, as well as their occasional disappointments; it was a brutally honest look at many of the critical issues facing Israeli society.

What also made the trip special were the participants itself. The group was more interested in understanding the complexity of the situation and the different, sometimes contradicting narratives, rather than hearing a simplistic political agenda. The participants displayed a high level of critical thinking and whenever a presenter seemed to be one-sided, we were never afraid to challenge him/her.

I know from my experience with Birthright groups that if we have a bus of Jewish young adults, it's always going to be great fun. But this time it was something genuinely different. On the one hand, the group was very diverse, in terms of academic and professional background, Jewish literacy and observance, attitudes toward Israel and the conflict. On the other hand, from the very first day, it was clear that the group was able to unite around issues of social justice, human rights, responsibility for the Jewish people and Israel and a broader concern for humanity. We had meaningful but heated discussions, text studies and one-on-one conversations during and between the different sessions everywhere for the entire nine days.

In the Jewish world today we use the term "peoplehood" very often, maybe too often. However, this seminar reminded me what peoplehood is, or at least should be about. For me, a peoplehood experience is what happened on our study tour: Jews from the United States, Europe and Israel gathered to learn together and to discuss issues they all deeply care about as Jews.

The program also took "Israel engagement" to a whole new level. Just as in relationships, we can tell the difference between a flirt and real love – when we fall in love, it happens despite the other person's problems, mistakes and issues. It's the same with Israel: If we want young adults to have a strong bond and a real connection with Israel, we have to see the country without any make-up, as it is, with all its difficulties and challenges. That was the main gift given to those of us who were privileged to participate in the RCFP Israel study tour.

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