

July 2014

To Whom it May Concern,

It is a privilege to write this letter and share a bit about my Rene Cassin Fellowship experience. I came to the program having a fairly undeveloped relationship with Israel; I had only been there once, on a Birthright trip in 2007. Since that time, I have been involved with several progressive Jewish organizations, including leading service-learning trips with AJWS and serving as a Young Leader representative on the HIAS Board, among others. But before the Fellowship, I had (consciously and unconsciously) not engaged with Israel in any meaningful way.

I was originally attracted to RCFP as an opportunity to re-connect with, and reinvigorate, my Jewish identity. I had been looking to do some more learning around Jewish values and texts as they relate to the issues I care about, as well as to build a new community. At the start of the program, Israel for me was just a lens, or a frame, or a case study, through which to do these other things.

It has now been almost a month since I returned from the trip, which in some ways feels like the distant past, and in others like the blink of an eye. When people ask me about my experience, I first warn them that it's going to be a long conversation. If they're interested, I share my understanding of the manifold issues we explored on the trip, focusing on the competing narratives we heard, each with its own language and point of view. I tell them about how powerful it was to really listen to all sides, and to connect with the humanity of each person we spoke with. Whether or not I agreed with them, I felt a certain level of respect for each of them, and also came to understand that sustainable solutions to all of these highly complex challenges will need to incorporate aspects of each of their narratives. It's rare these days to have the opportunity to be so present for such a long stretch of time, constantly stimulated and challenged to see things from so many different perspectives.

If they want the short version, I tell them that the trip was very well-crafted, that I learned a lot, that the phrase we heard from almost every speaker was "it's complicated," and that the other participants, from both my cohort and those from London and Israel, were what made the trip for me. I feel extremely fortunate to be part of such an open, intelligent, generous group of people, from whom I've learned (and continue to learn) more than I could ever have imagined.

Many of the trip highlights were found during the informal time the group had together – on the bus rides, at the dinner table, over beers watching World Cup matches late at night, during conversations in the dark with my roommate before we fell asleep, or even as we "relaxed" on the beach in Tel Aviv before catching our flight home. As much as we tried to talk about our lives outside of the trip, we were constantly drawn back to the complexities of the issues we were learning about and observing. These precious moments were when I was really able to ask deep questions, and to have company in grappling with, and working through, them

A month later, and I'm still sitting with a lot of these questions. But that's part of the beauty of the program; with the trip at the beginning, we have months to continue this work together, both with our local cohorts, and via social media. Our New York cohort has already gotten together once, to attend an Ester Rada (Ethiopian Israeli soul singer) concert, and we're planning to go to Shabbat services together next week.

My heart has been particularly heavy in the past few weeks, as events on the ground have unfolded. But I feel so fortunate to have the knowledge, framework, and community within which to understand the issues, perspectives, and individuals behind the headlines. And also the cautious hope that many of the organizations and people we met with are doing their best each day to create space for dialogue and work toward a better future.

Thank you so much for this transformational opportunity.

Sincerely,

Alexis Ortiz, Rene Cassin Fellow, Class 2, New York hub