

Peace Now: A Personal and Professional View of an Israeli Visit

In the summer of 2016, I had the pleasure of hosting Jane and Frank Ollendorff as guests in my Toledo home—Jane and Frank are golf fanatics who follow the Ladies Professional Golf Association circuit, a tournament of which is played in an Ohio suburb near my house.

The meeting was serendipitous; I'm a host with Airbnb, a web-based service that matches travelers with people who have extra bedrooms. When I noticed that Jane and I were alumni of the same school, Washington University in St. Louis, I quickly hit the invite button.

As expected, Jane and Frank were delightful conversationalists, and during an evening of wine and tea, they told me about CIF/CIP and Henry Ollendorff's role in its creation. All this was pleasantly intriguing as over the years I've been a frequent traveler-abroad and at-home host to foreign students and international visitors. Who I am is a product of the places I've traveled and the people I've met. Every conversation, I like to say, is a multicultural experience.

Who else I am is a tutor of individuals for whom English is not a first language, an editor of world language curricula for elementary aged students, a former journalist and social services grant writer. Though my degrees are an MBA and an MFA, not an MSW, the work about which I'm passionate deals with helping expats and immigrants feel comfortable in America, and teaching Americans to embrace other cultures.

Primarily, this involves language acquisition: not speaking a local language puts newcomers at risk for frustration, depression and stress. But language is only part of well-being: many learners need help navigating US bureaucracies as allegedly "simple" as the Bureau of Motor Vehicles or as seventh-circle-of-hellish as the USCIS, the citizenship and immigration service. Some newcomers, left alone while their significant others go to the office and their children go to school, suffer anxiety; families need help finding faith communities, physicians, playgroups, grocery stores, friends. Much of the time, I am their first responder.

"I'm not a social worker," I said to the Ollendorffs, "but it sounds a lot like what I do. Any way I can become part of your organization?" "There may be," Jane responded, directing me to the website and membership application. My first reach-out was to CIPUSA president Lisa Purdy at the Cleveland CIP office. "If any CIP participants might like to visit Toledo," I said, "I can connect them with agencies and attractions." So far this hasn't happened, but the relationship is young. My second reach-out was initiated when I viewed on the website a listing of CIF PEPs. A peace program that involved visiting Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish agencies caught my eye: One of the curricula I edit is for Arabic learners; the city of Toledo has an enormous Middle Eastern population; we are one of the main entry points for Syrian refugees; you won't find better hummus anywhere. And I'm a Jew. Not an observant one. The kind who used to keep a sign in her yard that said "Erase the Hate," a campaign sponsored by a collaboration of Toledo area religious, educational and community organizations. For the most part, Toledo is a community where religious tolerance works. With Jane's encouragement, I applied for the program, interviewed by phone with CIFUSA president, Carolyn Sutton, and in February of 2017, I received an acceptance letter from Edna Bar-On, the Israeli CIF president. I learned that I would be traveling with three other participants, Agneta Bjorkland from Sweden, Salima Senders from the Netherlands and Bhavna Mehta from India. Each of us is firmly ensconced in middle age with about the same years of experience, and we learned later, we were selected because we appeared to be a compatible traveling cohort. And compatible we were, despite occasional passive-aggressive jockeying for who would get to ride in our hosts' front car seat and who would be squished into the rear. Agneta, now retired, stated on her application that she was most involved in programs for the elderly and child protection; Salima's areas of interest included youth and refugee/immigrant welfare, and Bhavna, a social work professor in her home state of Gujarat, wanted to learn more about how Israeli agencies handled survivors of violence.

Our Israeli hosts and presenters—Edna, Nili Dror, Ruti Flesh, Miriam Bar-Giora, Muhammad Diab, Ofra Lichentrit, Gila Atal, Yaron Ziv, Hadas Zeev, Judith Shlaski, Baruch Shalev, Ilana Engel, Naomi Shacham, Hana and Uzi Elisha and others whom I apologize for forgetting the names of—I kept a detailed travel journal but left it on one of my return flights--were generous of time and knowledge-sharing.

In Jerusalem where we spent our first days, we were given an introduction to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Services, visited a home for individuals with developmental disabilities, participated in Independence Day dancing, toured Yad Vashem and the Israel Museum rotunda housing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Our visit coincided with the 50 year anniversary of the 1967 "Six Day War," an event that continues to provoke delight and disappointment, dependent on one's take of the outcome: the establishment of Israel's current borders.

From Jerusalem we travelled northwest to the Arab city of Tamra where we were more-than-graciously hosted by Muhammad Diab, the director of several wonderfully-run group homes for individuals with mental disabilities. With Muhammad we visited Nazareth, Tamra, Haifa, and Akko, including centers dedicated to domestic violence, substance abuse, and incarceration rehabilitation. We spent a day on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and a morning visiting a Druze couple near the Syrian border. Arab Israel—about 20% of the country's population, is mostly off limits to Western visitors, so the opportunity to spend time with Muhammad, his family and his colleagues, was particularly welcomed by all of us.

We next bussed south to Tel Aviv where we toured old Jaffa, took a drive down historic Dizengoff Street, then were delivered to our individual hosts—in Jerusalem we bunked together in a hostel; in Tamra, Muhammad's sons were whisked (happily!) to their grandparents' house so we could have their bedrooms; but in Tel Aviv, Agneta, Salima, Bhavna and I were assigned different host families. Or actually, I wasn't even in Tel Aviv; my hosts Hana and Uzi Elisha, and their still-at-home kids Mayan and Ben live in the town of Rosh Ha' Ayim. For me, it was a perfect match. Hana and Uzi run a private agency headquartered on the Einat Kibbutz, also the home of Hana's parents, Holocaust survivors who spent an afternoon sharing their stories with us. The kibbutz tour was a Tel-Aviv area activity in which I participated, though I missed several others since Hana, knowing of my interest in education, arranged for me to spend time with students and instructors at Begin High School, where Ben is an 11th grader. As it turned out, the national 11th grade English language competency exam was being given one of the days I was with the Elishas, so not only did I give an impromptu review lesson to a room full of 17-year-olds, but I also participated in the testing.

Interestingly, some of the most illuminating elements of the PEP came from events I and the others missed. Not only did our visit coincide with Independence Day, but it similarly coincided with Remembrance Day, the day on which Israelis recall their war dead. Historically, this event is pro-Jewish, which in the politics of the Middle east, means anti-Arab. However, as this was a peace program, we were connected with an organization called Ossim Shalom, a "bipartisan" attempt to connect Arab and Jewish social workers in a non-politicized space. We spent the early evening of Remembrance Day (Jewish celebrations begin at sunset) at a private event center in East Jerusalem...traditionally a part of the city Jews keep their distance from, and, in fact, several of our Jewish hosts were cautious about traveling there. Mahmoud Jamal Al Refai, an Ossim Shalom founder and chairperson, poured mint tea, offered falafel in pita bread, and together with co-founder Baruch Shalev and other CIF members, we meditated, explored inspirational figures in our personal histories, and discussed programs to move peace forward. Afterward, we boarded a minibus and proceeded to Tel Aviv to attend a rally commemorating the lives of soldiers killed on both sides of the battlefield, but it turned out that Israeli officials banned the joint remembrances and protestors had overtaken the venue objecting to Arab participation. We were refused entry, but also had a close encounter with the reality that impedes regional peace even among the most earnest players.

It would be naïve to explore social services in Israel without awareness of the wall that separates its Jewish and Arab inhabitants...or the wall that separates segments within the Jewish community—roughly speaking, of the 80% of Israel that is Jewish, 20% of residents adhere to Orthodox faith, 20% endorse Zionist nationalism, and another 40% defines itself as more-or-less secular. For this reason, it was enlightening to have exchanges with individuals from differing backgrounds. Israel is a fraught country: not only are it's Jews and Arabs skeptical of each other, but there's distrust among Jewish contingents. As an American, Israel reminded me of my own divided country; as a Jew, Israel made me proud of its accomplishments, but ambivalent about its fraught politics and policies

Because of my background, I came to Israel with a better-than-basic base...I can read the alphabet (though I don't know what the words mean ;) I loosely follow regional politics; I've read Holocaust and contemporary Israeli literature. That said, almost every conversation with every agency host or presenter revealed an ah-ha moment of understanding. Many of these were disturbing: abuse is growing in the Orthodox community; "traditional" values are gaining over secularism; the socialist founding spirit of Israel has morphed into privatization; even at the secular Rosh Ha' Ayim high school, instructors fail to question the division between Jews and Arabs.

But others were inspiring: more Arab women are attending university; organizations like Ossim Shalom are slowly gaining ground; there may never be a lasting peace—it works in the government's favor to keep groups

at each other's throats, was a sentiment I heard more than once—but individuals are reaching out in small but meaningful ways, and taking responsibility for their own communities.

I speak for each of my colleagues in expressing our delight at spending time with the Diab family; not only was Mohammad a fabulous host, but his responses to our not-always-discreet inquiries about living in an often-hostile society were thoughtful and generous. My personal take-away was a connection with his sister Rania, an elementary school English teacher who I hope to connect with an elementary school Arabic classroom in the States.

I came close to not being able to attend this program...my original flight was cancelled at the last minute and it took two days, dozens of phone calls and four flights to complete what should have been a 13-hour trip. At many frustrating steps in the rebooking process I considered throwing the towel in, but when my grungy body and beat-up suitcase finally arrived in Jerusalem, the group gave me a round of welcoming hugs and applause. I would like to say I handled this with grace, but the reality is I fell over my suitcase and stumbled to the floor of the Eden Hotel reception room.

From that introduction, I discovered a cohort of like-minded, big-hearted individuals...people very much in the mold of Jane and Frank Ollendorff. I want to thank everyone who made this program the exceptional experience it was: it opened my eyes, expanded my world, increased my knowledge and well, the hummus was equally as good as any we have in Toledo.

Barbara Goodman (with input from Bhavna and Agneta)



Meeting Druze in the Golan Heights



Visit to Kibbutz Einat meeting with Hana's father