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JERUSALEM, ISRAEL, AND PALESTINE

PEACE/SHALOM/SALAAM

*Peace cannot be kept by force;
it can only be achieved by understanding.*

Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize winner in Physics and
named *Time's Person of the Century*

The week of June 3, 1972, became a turning point in my life. I turned 18, voted for the first time, graduated from Holy Names High School, and left the home I once knew. Due to my mom's mental illness, my brother chose to become emancipated that summer at age 17. Neither of us ever lived at home again. Within the same week, I flew to New York City to meet 45 other participants who were joining me for an 11-week "Summer in Kibbutz" program.

As the only Christian and non-Jewish participant on the trip, I felt curious to learn more about the Holy Land. For six weeks, I provided manual labor at Kibbutz Ein Harod. Founded in 1921 as the first large kibbutz in Israel, it is located about 16 miles southeast of Nazareth. I picked pears in the orchard, sorted potatoes from dirt clods on the combine, hoed weeds in the cotton fields, inoculated baby chicks, and helped with meal prep in their shared kitchen.

The Avinoam family became my assigned "hosts." After I completed my volunteer work for the day, I often joined them for Nescafe coffee and butter cookies in their tiny apartment kitchen. Although they ate their main meals in the communal dining room, on this more established kibbutz, each family maintained a private space for eating and sleeping. During my time off, I read the book *Exodus*. After reading how the Nazi's tattooed numbers on the forearms of prisoners, one of their friends came to visit. I couldn't help but stare at the faded numbers on his forearm. History became a living reality.

As part of the summer program, we traveled for two weeks, ranging from the Golan Heights near the Lebanon border to the southern city of Eilat, along the Red Sea. I floated in the Dead Sea and briefly rode a camel while visiting a Bedouin Camp in the Negev Desert.

Our program ended in Jerusalem, a mixture of the old and the new, which is divided into four quarters, serving Armenians, Christians, Jews, and Palestinians. I also visited Yad Vashem, a very sobering Holocaust memorial museum built in 1953. It honors the memory of 6 million Jews slaughtered during WWII, as well as the "Righteous" or Gentiles, who risked their lives to protect Jews from these atrocities.

Before returning to the United States, I prayed for guidance and decided to explore the Christian sites in Jerusalem independently. Although scared, literally shitless (*See Introduction*),

these two weeks became the two most powerful weeks of my life. They provided a foundational experience, reminding me I could trust God to provide for my needs.

I stayed with a Palestinian Family in the Old City of Jerusalem. The wife worked at the Ecco Homo Convent/Rooming House and made extra money by providing a bed in her home for solo travelers. I navigated the winding, cobblestone route of the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, commemorating the site where Jesus was crucified and buried. Frankly, I felt overwhelmed, annoyed, and distracted by the Greek Orthodox priests swinging their incense thuribles and the elaborate gold ornamentations that cluttered this sacred space.

I resonated more with the simple Dominus Flevit Church, shaped like a teardrop on the Mount of Olives. It commemorates Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem and is maintained by Franciscans. I could easily imagine Jesus weeping in the garden, anticipating his betrayal and death. From this viewpoint, the famous golden dome covering the al-Aqsa Mosque glittered in the sunlight. I could also see the remaining Western Wailing Wall of Solomon's Temple. Inside the mosque is the Foundation Stone, also known as the Noble Rock, a sacred site revered by all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Believers revere this rock where Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Muslims honor this as the location where Muhammad ascended into heaven. It remains controversial because devotees in three major faith traditions claim it as their own. Although it's no longer allowed, in 1972, I went inside the mosque, with my head covered and wearing modest clothing, to experience the "Rock." Mainly, I felt sad that "People of the Book" (*Jews, Christians, and Muslims*) haven't been able to find peaceful ways to honor Abraham, their common ancestor.

During my final week, I lived on the Arab side of Jerusalem. Palestinian women consistently demonstrated hospitality by inviting me as a guest in their country to sit in their seats as the local bus jolted through heavy traffic in narrow streets. I saw firsthand how Israelis treated Palestinians as second-class citizens, despite their generational family roots in Palestine.

The Israelis have made the desert bloom in Israel, and Jews deserve a homeland. However, I also support the ancestral rights of Palestinians to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship within their native land. I pray for peaceful resolutions to this ancient conflict, where people from three different faith traditions each claim Abraham as their forefather.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. *What choices have you made that became a turning point in your life?*
2. *When have you experienced being a minority within a dominant culture, and how has this perspective shaped your worldview?*
3. *What encourages you to focus on our commonalities rather than differences to support a peaceful resolution to conflicts?*