

# History in the Making

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Volume 11

Article 10

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January 2018

## Israel

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### Recommended Citation

Glaviano, Allegra (2018) "Israel," *History in the Making*: Vol. 11 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol11/iss1/10>

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## **Israel**

By Allegra Glaviano

Where are you from? What is your nationality? Due to my olive skin tone, dark brown hair, green eyes, and the name Allegra Glaviano, these questions and many others like them have become routine for me. Typically, I stick to simple answers, such as “Italian” or “mixed,” but in truth, I am a mutt, a rich blend of several nationalities and cultures. During my youth, I had the privilege of growing up with both sets of grandparents, and I regularly intermixed with different cultures as a result. On my paternal side, my grandfather is a Catholic Italian and my grandmother a Protestant southern Cherokee. This may not sound particularly crazy until you add my maternal lineage. My maternal grandfather Victor is Jewish originally from Turkey but immigrated to Israel at the age of 14 in 1948, and my grandmother Iris is Jewish of Prussian descent. This diversity of nationality, culture, and even religion has always fascinated me, and urged me to continuously learn more of my heritage. In the summer of 2016, I was blessed with an opportunity to travel to Israel for ten days, experience the culture, explore the land, and learn about my roots. After ten days in Israel, I fell in love with one of the most beautiful countries, I had ever had the pleasure to visit.

While I was excited to begin my journey to Israel, I was also nervous. The media portrays Israel as a war zone plagued by ongoing conflicts both within its borders and beyond its frontiers. After touching down in Israel, the very first person to catch my attention was a police officer. Not because there was an incident, rather due to the M16 assault rifle slung from their shoulder. I am not used to seeing firearms, let alone an assault rifle, exposed in public. Police in the United States typically carry a small handgun holstered at their side, but nothing more. Most people only see automatic weapons in movies or on the news after a mass shooting, but to see one hanging on the guy next to you is surreal. However, I did learn that in Israel, ownership of firearms is not a right, and those that do not require them (e.g., soldiers and police officers)

are not permitted to legally own firearms.<sup>1</sup> Men and women are both required to serve in the Israeli armed forces for two years after turning 18. While in the military, they must carry their weapon at *all times*, even when they are not on duty and there is no imminent threat. For example, while visiting a local bar with some American friends, I witnessed two women walked in, both sporting high heels, club dresses, and M16s slung over their shoulders. I was in shock; I had never seen anything like it during my upbringing in America. But at the same time, I could not help but marvel at how awe-inspiring it was. One of my fellow Americans was quick to point out that, as impressive as it was, it was not a particularly approachable look.

Due to Israel's portrayal in the media and popular discourse, many dismiss the nation as inherently dangerous, but I felt safe—I was safe during my visit. The Israeli Defense Forces, and police are certainly heavily armed and omnipresent in public, but they carry weapons to protect others and defend themselves against tangible threats. The suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and wars that Israel remains embroiled in are all very real, but at least according to my feeling while visiting, Israeli security has the situation firmly under control. In light of these circumstances, I believe that the need for security is clear; in my opinion, neither the safety that I enjoyed while visiting Israel, nor the nation's very existence could be maintained without it. In retrospect, I should never have been nervous to begin with.

Israel's expansive security presence was radically different from anything I had ever experienced before, but it was far from the most interesting discovery of my journey to the country. I also discovered that Israel is a wondrously diverse nation. Internationally, Israel is often regarded as a Jewish state, intended solely for adherents of the Jewish faith. By focusing exclusively on the nation's religious majority, many foreign observers fail to recognize the vast cultural diversity present within Israeli society. This perception causes controversy, conflict, and a misguided interpretation of Arab-Israeli tensions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all regard Israel/Palestine—specifically Jerusalem—as a holy place, resulting in arguments over which religion rightfully deserves to reside. It is easy for foreign observers to regard Israel

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Levush, "Firearms-Control Legislation and Policy: Israel," The Law Library of Congress, last modified July 30, 2015, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/firearms-control/israel.php>.

as a religiously based nation-state for adherents of the Jewish faith. However, this simplistic understanding of Israel glosses over the nation's extraordinary cultural nuance. Israel is a nation-state for members of the Jewish ethnic community, regardless of their country of origin. The state of Israel was founded in 1948 as a *secular* nation-state for members of the Jewish ethnic group; religion is important, but it is secondary to Israeli national identity. In fact, secular Jews make up a full 80 percent of the Jewish population in Israel.<sup>2</sup> The state of Israel's purpose is to provide Jewish communities across the world who have been attacked and persecuted for centuries, a home free from persecution. This is why they constantly fight for it. Some believe it to be rightfully theirs according to religion, but many fight merely for a place to call home. Moreover, Israel is home to diverse groups. Not all are Jewish; some are Muslim, Christian, or Druze, just to name a few.

When I first arrived in Israel, I was concerned about not being accepted because only one set of my grandparents were Jewish, and I have Christian beliefs as well. Once again, I was proven wrong. As previously mentioned, many Israelis do not rigidly follow the Jewish faith, but rather adhere to the culture, like I do. My maternal grandfather always uses the phrase "live and be well." I never fully understood or grasped that concept, until I was in Israel. In Israel, people live surrounded by war and violence throughout the region, and yet, as you walk down a city street or into the small towns, the people share the "live and be well" attitude, they live life to the fullest, without regret. They joke and continuously smile, knowing they have grown up amidst a war zone or have survived persecution, thus believing every day is not promised and therefore "live and be well."

In addition to the amazing people that made my trip enjoyable, the geography of Israel made the trip unforgettable. I started in the north and traveled southwards. On my travels, one of my first stops was Mount Bental, a towering mountain and former military outpost located in the contested Golan Heights between Israel and Syria. At the summit of Mount Bental lies a ruined bunker left over from the Yom Kippur War in 1973, a solemn reminder of the Golan's bloody legacy in Arab-Israeli relations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ilan Troen, "Secular Judaism in Israel," *Society* 53, no. 2 (2016): 153.

<sup>3</sup> "Mount Bental," Tourist Israel, last modified February 5, 2018, <https://www.touristisrael.com/mount-bental/5821/>.

From the summit of Mount Bental, I witnessed one of the most surreal moments of my trip. As is well known, Syria has been locked in an intractable civil war for seven long years, and while I gazed across the border, the earth-shattering booms of bombing could be heard as a Syrian town across the border was bombarded. Though it looked much like a Hollywood movie, this was not fiction. I stood in the safety of the Israeli side of the Golan, gazing into the cruel reality of the war zone sprawled out ahead of me just across the border.

In stark contrast to the grim window into the Syrian Civil War offered by Mount Bental, Jerusalem was a beautiful and refreshing sight. While half of my family is Christian and the other half Jewish, Jerusalem is sacred to both sides. However, even though I am not personally religious, Jerusalem is one of the most remarkable cities I have ever visited. Walking through the city, ancient stone buildings dating back centuries, and even millennia, can be seen throughout. Time-worn murals and frescos in the oldest quarters of the city provide a glimpse into the past, and the locale's natural beauty can be overwhelming at times. While in Jerusalem, I was able to visit the famous Western Wall, which is one of the most sacred sites in Judaism, and a site of pilgrimage for thousands of Jews each year.<sup>4</sup> Pilgrims visit the wall to pray and offer thanks to God by touching the wall in prayer and placing a piece of paper into the wall.

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<sup>4</sup> American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, "History & Overview of the Western Wall," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overivew-of-the-western-wall>.



War in 73 BCE. Since the foundation of the modern state of Israel, Masada has served as a reminder of the Jewish people's long, and tragic history in their homeland.<sup>5</sup>



*Sunrise over the Dead Sea, as seen from the plateau at Masada, author's photo.*

Just below Masada lies the Dead Sea, which despite its bleak name, is a remarkable tourist attraction. The Dead Sea is the lowest point on land anywhere in the world, and its hypersaline waters make it impossible for fish to survive, giving the body of water its name.<sup>6</sup> Although the water is clearly undrinkable, the mud beneath the surface is rich with minerals, and is particularly soothing to human skin. Moreover, due to the water's hypersalinity, objects—including humans—in the Dead Sea become exceptionally buoyant. It is impossible to swim properly in the Dead Sea because you will float no matter how hard you try to swim. Likewise, any attempt to wade deep into the water will inevitably sweep you off your feet and force you to float.

The last place I visited was the Holocaust museum and memorial, Yad Vashem. The museum displays the Holocaust both thematically as well as chronologically.<sup>7</sup> I started in a guided tour group but ventured away from the guide as I found it difficult to maintain my composure. It was surreal and deeply emotionally moving to know that my family, and their friends had gone through

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<sup>5</sup> "Masada," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, last modified December 13, 2001, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1040>.

<sup>6</sup> "Dead Sea," Tourist Israel, last modified January 19, 2018, <https://www.touristisrael.com/dead-sea/289/>.

<sup>7</sup> "About the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about.html>.

such trauma. I was already aware of the Holocaust, but it is one thing to read about a terrible historical tragedy that afflicted your kin, and it is something completely different to see it explored in such gruesome detail. Yad Vashem is structured to represent the Jews during the Holocaust in every possible way, from the architecture of the building to the artifacts inside. As I exited to the car and walked inside the museum, I strode in a downward slant that symbolized the downward shift in the lives of the Jews, going down to their lowest point. I walked inside the doors, and entered a dark room, the floors covered in carpet and a projector displayed images of life before the Holocaust on the wall. The pictures displayed Jewish homes in places such as Poland, and the carpet beneath my feet gave me the feeling of being at home. As I continued off the carpet onto the hard cement floor, the downward slant continued, and the pathway narrowed. The Museum is set up in a type of “S” shape and took me in chronological order through the years. Once I reached the middle, I was at the lowest point in the museum. From there, a slight rise in the grade of the walkway began, and the path started to widen. The exit doors were floor to ceiling windows that allowed light to come in, representing the hope and light that Jews could see as the Holocaust came to an end. The things I saw in that museum...I can hardly explain. But, if I ever have the chance, it is a place I would definitely return to.

Describing Israel is not an easy task. So much of the country is indescribably beautiful and surreal. It offers, religious, historical, and modern experiences for everyone. The people make these activities and experiences amazing; the beauty within the people and the countryside itself is truly astonishing. My journey through Israel was one-of-a-kind, eye-opening, and fascinating experience. I spent ten days in Israel, but to describe fully and discuss my ten days of travel in Israel would be impossible within the confines of this article. The experiences I have shared are just a handful amongst so many others. For me, Israel proved to be memorable, mesmerizing, and extremely educational. I would recommend a visit to Israel to anyone, be they a student of history, a lover of art, or a seeker of breathtaking sights.



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**Author Bio**

After completing her Bachelor's in History this spring, Allegra intends to enter the CSUSB teaching credentials program in the fall. After earning her teaching credentials, she plans to teach history at the high school level, and perhaps at the college level in the future. She would like to extend her thanks to her editor Martin Votruba for his assistance and guidance during the writing process, and express her gratitude to her family who made her travels possible.



