



Building **PEACE** through Personal Experience

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Dear friends and colleagues:

Every member of the Interfaith Peace-Builders community has a story, and it is the sum of these stories that makes this organization so important.

IFPB is in the “transformation” business; we transform lives, political realities, conflicts, and – ultimately – the future. Those of us who have joined IFPB delegations understand what I mean when I speak of these transformations, and we invite you to support us as we make such powerful opportunities available to as many people as possible. That is what your support means. **By supporting Interfaith Peace-Builders today, you have the potential to change the future.**

This may sound unbelievable, but my own story *proves* it is true.

I joined the staff of IFPB 15 months ago, but my journey through the history, politics, and geography of Israel/Palestine began in my youth. I grew up attending a reformed Hebrew School where I learned about Judaism, the ideas of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), and was taught to question everything. I also learned about Israel - what my teachers would call “our homeland” - and why it was such an important place for us as a Jewish community.

As a teenager, I became more and more interested in seeing what this “homeland” was all about. It sounded like a utopia: the “Land of Milk and Honey”. So, in the summer of 2000 I took my first trip – a six-week tour designed especially for hundreds of Jewish teens from across the US.

I recently found a journal I kept during that trip. I made only two entries; one, from the first day I arrived (the majority of which was composed of complaints about the long plane ride), and the second, from my last night. On that night, we walked out of dinner in Jerusalem and found ourselves in the midst of a peace rally. **It was the first time in those six weeks that anything about the conflict was discussed.** After returning to the hotel I wrote the following:

I always used to think about this place as somewhere that I guess I am supposed to fit in, but my question always was, would I really? As we walked around places where my ancestors had supposedly also walked and where so many things I learned about for many years occurred, it still didn't really feel like home. Tonight, it does, but it's not really about the place but more about the actions and ideals of the people surrounding me.

While my eyes were opened that night to a new side of Israel, I spent the next five years studying and exploring the concept of peace mainly through the lens of mainstream Israeli narratives. I decided to study international relations and even spent a year abroad studying at an Israeli university. During this time, I formed a deep connection with Israel. I also began to grapple with the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the idea of security for Israel. **I was convinced I wanted to work for peace in this region because I cared for Israel - at least the Israel I knew.**

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When I returned from my year abroad, I joined my university's pro-Israel group, and was elected president. After graduation, I enrolled in a Jewish social justice program in Israel where I spent a half year learning Hebrew and Arabic, and taking courses on Israeli society. The other half of the year I worked as an intern at a peace and social justice organization. During this trip (my fourth) I discovered that, alongside the Israeli society I knew so well, and behind the Israeli history that I had learned, there existed an entire other society and history. I discovered Palestine.

It is difficult to explain to someone who has not been there why it took me five years, four trips, and nearly fifteen months of living in Israel, before my eyes were opened to the reality that Palestinians live in. Suffice to say that the barriers constructed between Israelis and Palestinians exist on many levels – physical, psychological, and emotional. Once I found my way over, under, and around, those barriers, my life was never the same.

The organization I worked with during those transformational months brought Israeli and Palestinian youth together in order to spark dialogue and better understanding of each other. I had a number of “firsts” at this organization. I worked closely with many people who identified as Palestinian, including my supervisor whom I traveled with for my first of many trips into the West Bank. And for the first time, I experienced how Israeli policy affected Palestinians.

Like an Interfaith Peace-Builders delegate, I traveled to refugee camps, small villages, and larger cities throughout the West Bank and spoke with Palestinian youth about their lives. I met Israelis who worked tirelessly for peace and justice, not for their own benefit but because it was simply the right thing to do. I sat in lines at checkpoints, learned of the affect of the wall on different villages, and saw the ways in which Palestinians are discriminated against. My eyes were opened to what Israeli occupation really means and my mind was puzzled by how and why I did not know about any of this before.

While it took me over 5 years from the first time I visited Israel as a teenager to have these realizations, it took only a few days of travel on the ground, outside mainstream Israeli society, for the reality to sink in. I saw the situation with my own eyes; not in books, from professors, or through the media. I saw both pain and hope in the eyes of people who truly worked for peace with justice and knew I had to be a part of this movement.

That transformational experience led me to where I am today. This past summer, as a leader of IFPB's *Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Leaders Delegation*, I witnessed delegates have a similar experience and I knew that they too would return energized and prepared to raise awareness in their own communities and work to change US policy in the region.

This story – my story - is why I believe that the work of Interfaith Peace-Builders is so important. I have seen how effective IFPB delegations are, and that is why my work here is more than a job. It is a powerful way for me to help others have a truly transformational experience on the ground, similar to what I experienced during my own trips to the region.

I invite you to join me, and many others, in ensuring that the vital work of this organization continues. **Whether you are a former delegate, a past training participant, a long-time donor, or a new supporter, we can really use your help!**

Your support will ensure that we both create an environment ripe for transformative experiences and provide crucial resources to build movements for change. **That is how we will transform the future!**

Please make your generous contribution today.



Sincerely,

Emily Siegel
Delegation Coordinator

PS – As we prepared to send this letter to print, we lost Scott Kennedy. See the enclosed newsletter for more on Scott and his enormous impact on IFPB. **Please donate to ensure that this vital work, which he devoted so much to, will continue.**