

Nine Lessons I Learned Living in Israel

By Nathan Lam

In 1952, twenty-three year old medical student Ernesto Guevara went on a journey across South America in his final semester of medical school. The journey culminated in a medical elective at a leper colony in San Pablo, Peru. His experience profoundly impacted him and changed his life.

A few months ago, I too left on my own journey. Also twenty-three years old and in my final semester of medical school, I departed for a different destination: Jerusalem, Israel. I spent - one month in the haematology department of Ein Kerem Hospital in Jerusalem, and one month travelling throughout the rest of Israel, including the West Bank, Galilee and the Golan Heights.

I can only describe my experience in the same words Guevara did when he was a medical student: "Wandering around has changed me more than I thought. I am not me anymore. At least, I'm not the same me I was."

Over the two months, I got the chance to experience life like a local, learning its backstreets, its customs, and its way of life. Through the relationships I made, and the places I saw, I was taught much more than just medicine. What follows are just a few of the many lessons and stories I took away from living in this dynamic part of the Middle East.



HIKING THE JUDEAN DESERT AT EIN GEDI

1. Medicine can transcend hate.

It was the first week of my elective. “Can you help me with this patient who needs a lumbar puncture?” the consultant asked me. I was surprised: this was a job usually done back home by medical registrars, and I doubted whether they even remembered how to do lumbar punctures once they became consultants. The patient had particularly difficult spinal anatomy, and all the registrars had failed to perform the lumbar puncture successfully. Furthermore, cancer had spread to his brain, leaving the patient confused and frightened. Getting the patient to comply and stay in the foetal position for the procedure would be extremely difficult.

When we got to the patient, I got a bigger surprise. Being in the heart of Jerusalem, the majority of patients at Ein Kerem Hospital were Jewish in ethnicity. But this patient was different – he was a Palestinian from the West Bank. He had come to the hospital due to his

worsening blood cancer and Ein Kerem was one of the few places in the region with the facilities for the treatment he needed.

This was my first time seeing such a situation and I wondered how a Palestinian would be treated at a Jewish hospital in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Would there be enmity between the doctors and the patient?

On top of this, the procedure was very difficult. The man became very scared and repeatedly yelled out in Arabic. He struggled to keep still for the lumbar puncture. This was a situation that could make any doctor lose their cool in the best of times, let alone in this potentially tense situation.

I looked up at the doctor who began to speak in Arabic. "You are being brave like a hero," he said softly to the man. He smiled and continued to encourage the patient, making an effort to speak to him in what Arabic he knew. The Jewish nurse put her hand in the Palestinian man's hands, gently squeezing and reassuring him in soothing tones. He calmed down, and the consultant smiled as he said, "All done!"

In those moments, it didn't matter where the patient was from or where the doctors were from. All that mattered was treating the patient like a human being: with compassion, dignity and respect. Outside the hospital walls, there may have been tension and conflict. Last year, the hospital windows had to be sandbagged as rockets exploded in surrounding areas and thousands died in conflict at the Gaza Strip. But in this undocumented moment inside the hospital walls, I learned that the patient bedside can become a place of peace where differences are laid aside in the interests of helping one's fellow man. This was not an isolated occurrence – throughout my elective, I saw Palestinians being treated with exactly the same care and dignity as Jews were. Compassionate medicine can triumph over hatred.



EIN KEREM HOSPITAL, JERUSALEM

2. The secret to avoiding burn-out: a day of rest.

One weekend, I was invited by a Jewish friend to stay for a few nights at his house in the city of Ra'anana, near Tel Aviv. As I walked down the street, I was amazed to hear something I rarely heard in metropolitan Israel: the chirping of birds. It was a Saturday, and the usual chorus of honking Middle Eastern traffic was gone.

This weekly phenomenon occurs every Friday at sunset: shops close, traffic dissipates and all computers and mobile phones are put away. It is called "*Shabbat*" – the Jewish day of rest. For twenty four hours, Jews refrain from going to work, checking email or doing household

tasks, and instead dedicate time to the things that really matter. In the absence of computer screens, there is time to enjoy nature on a hike, share meals around the table with friends and family, and collect one's thoughts and give thanks for the week just passed.

The benefits of people resting together were obvious to me. There was a wonderful sense of community over *Shabbat* without the distraction of work or technology. Time goes slowly on that day, and one can simply lie on the grass and enjoy the sunshine if they so wished.

Without mobile phones to call ahead, friends would suddenly turn up at each other's' doorsteps to hang out and enjoy each other's company. In a workaholic world where we are always juggling commitments, working towards deadlines and scheduling our calendars full of activities, there was something profoundly simple in intentionally taking time out each week to simply rest and enjoy life.



A JEWISH FAMILY AT MARY'S SPRING, EIN KEREM

3. The hospitality of people in the Middle East to strangers is exemplary.

The average Australian knows little about Islam or Arab culture. However, rather than a desire to become more informed, racism against Arabs and Islamophobia is growing at an alarming rate. In the mainstream media, the only time you hear about Islam or the Middle East is in violent incidents from radical minorities. In such an environment, it is hard to not subconsciously develop negative stereotypes and prejudices against those who are different from us. Similarly, anti-Israeli sentiments are commonly encountered in all countries. Indeed, anti-Semitism has been widespread throughout history.

However, in my travels, I encountered a hospitality that was unlike anything I had previously experienced. When my rental car burst a tyre in the middle of nowhere, an old Arab man came out of a nearby house and approached me. Without asking, he proceeded to help me change the tyre and drove with me to the nearest mechanic so that I could replace my temporary tyre with a proper one. There, he offered me coffee and negotiated a very reasonable price for the new tyre, which would have been very difficult for me given my lack of Arabic.



REPLACING MY TYRE AT THE MECHANIC, SHIBLI-UMM AL-GHANAM

On another instance, an overly ambitious day-hike left me stranded in a small Arab village called Jisr az-Zarqa. With no taxis around and nightfall approaching, I was forced to hitch hike for the first time in my life. I prepared myself to wait for a long time for a lift. Instead, I barely waited two minutes before a car pulled up and an Arab man with his baby daughter in the back seat invited me in. This was in spite of my dishevelled appearance from hiking in the summer heat all day. Despite his limited English, he made the effort to make small talk and shook my hand when he dropped me off at my destination.

I encountered similar hospitality from Jews as well. After hearing that I had just arrived in Israel after thirty-six hours of flights, a phone store owner pulled up a chair behind the counter for me, left his store unattended and returned with iced tea for my refreshment. He proceeded to give me tips about living in Israel: valuable advice for any traveller. Another Jewish man invited me to stay with him for Shabbat and let me sleep at his apartment for a few nights, free of charge.

These are just a few stories of the practical compassion that Middle Easterners showed to a complete stranger like me. There was personal risk in doing things like giving me a lift, inviting me to stay or sharing a meal with me. For all they knew, I could have been a dangerous person wanting to take advantage of them. The offer of hospitality always comes with risk to the good Samaritan. But after I had been given help when I was in need, how could I ignore hitchhikers and drive past them due to concern for my own safety? We must not be reckless, and there are boundaries, but when we lose the ability to help others because of risk, we end up helping no-one and lose part of our humanity.



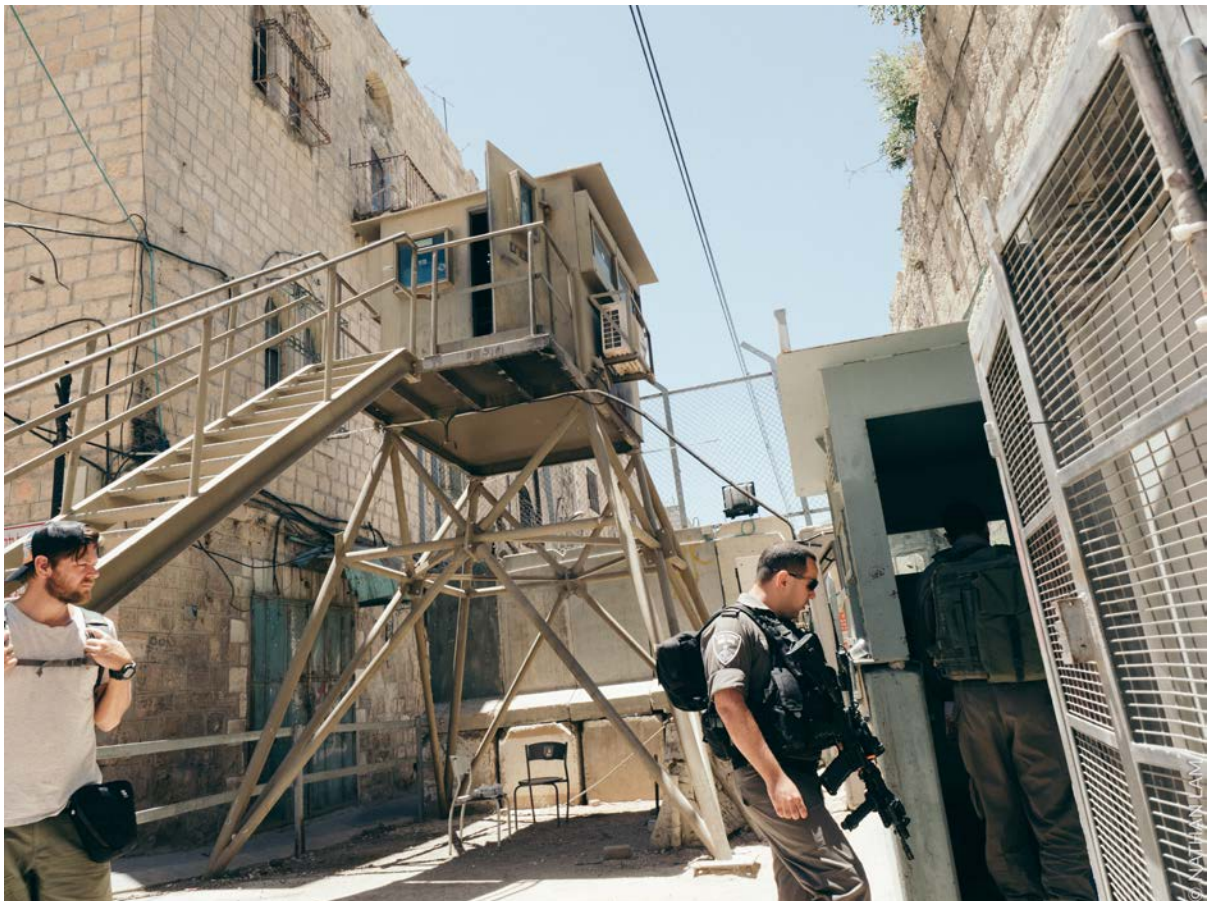
SHARING A MEAL WITH AN ARAB MAN IN NAZARETH

4. You don't value your freedom until it's gone.

A huge part of the culture shock I had when I first arrived in Israel was coming to grips with the restrictions around me. Suddenly, there were places I couldn't go, clothes I couldn't wear and things I couldn't say. We are told to appreciate what we have in Australia and the freedoms of our country. The truth was that I hadn't.

I didn't value my freedom of travel until I was interrogated at the airport for forty minutes. I was then separated from other passengers and led to a small room for further questioning, a strip search and a confiscation of my camera and MP3 player for "security reasons" (they were mailed back to me weeks later).

I didn't value my freedom of movement until I had walked through hundreds of military checkpoints with armed soldiers, had my bag searched hundreds of times, and witnessed the plight of Palestinians who cannot travel without a visa. Imagine having to be searched at checkpoints and carry your identification papers with you every time you wanted to walk to a friend's house down the street. That is the everyday reality for many Palestinians in places like Hebron in the West Bank. Even at Ein Kerem Hospital, I had to walk through airport-style metal detectors and have my bag searched every single day,



A TYPICAL CHECKPOINT IN HEBRON, THE WEST BANK

I didn't value my freedom of religion until I couldn't enter a famous historical mosque (The Dome of the Rock) because of my religion. Religious persecution became real to me when a Christian conference I attended was broken into by protesters from *Lehava*, a xenophobic

radical Jewish group. This group were recently implicated for arson attacks of Arab-Jewish schools. Attending a religious service and having to require the presence of armed police for protection brought me down to earth.

I didn't value my freedom to voice my own political views until I had to remove certain political statements and photographs from my Facebook and email as a preventative measure before flying out of Israel. Why did I do so? It is not unheard of for Israeli airport security to force you to show them your social media so they can screen for anti-government sentiments or evidence that you travelled to the West Bank, which I had. What if you refuse this invasion of privacy? They simply say that you cannot board the plane, which was what some of my Israeli friends experienced.

We are fortunate to live in a country with many freedoms. We are fortunate to have a voice. These were things that I had always taken for granted. Now I see that they must be protected and valued. If we do not care about what is happening in our own country, what is stopping these freedoms from being taken away?

5. Apathy to the issues around us can kill.

"Dad, can you tell the story about how grandma escaped Warsaw again?" As I sat at the dinner table with a Jewish family for a *Shabbat* meal, I heard how the very existence of those around the table with me was because of their grandmother who managed to escape the Nazi genocide. What about the rest of her family? Every one of them was murdered in Auschwitz. Other guests at the dinner table began to share their stories of the Holocaust. With the rawness of their testimonies, it was impossible to not be confronted with the reality of the Holocaust and the evil that exists in our world.

On another occasion, I visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Here, I walked amongst hundreds of pairs of shoes belonging to men, women and children murdered in gas chambers. Seeing something like that puts things into perspective; the tragedy changes from a numerical statistic to an emotional picture of mass-murder. I was angered as I learned about the apathy of the majority of German citizens to stop the Nazis, as well as the apathy of surrounding nations to the Jewish plight and the refusal of many to take in refugees.

However, I also realised the difference that a single individual can make in an environment of apathy. When I visited the grave of the famous German ex-Nazi Oskar Schindler, his brave actions in personally saving 1,200 Jews from death-camps like Auschwitz became even more real to me. People like Schindler who risked their lives to help their fellow man are dubbed by Jews as “the righteous among the nations”. Seeing all this, I asked myself a confronting question: “Will I risk my life to help others when the time comes?”

From my time living amongst the very descendants of Holocaust survivors, I am convinced of the truth of what the politician Edmund Burke said on apathy: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”



YOUNG ORTHODOX JEWS IN THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

6. The views of a people cannot be summed into one generalisation.

Asking someone in Israel, "What do people think about the Arab-Israeli conflict" is like asking someone, "What do Australians think about the government?" Everyone has a different view.

One Palestinian in Bethlehem told me, "I value Israel. Without them, we would be unstable like much of the Middle East. The West Bank is one of the safest places in the Middle East. One day we will have our own country, but right now, we as a people are not ready." However, others were blunt in describing their feelings with a simple "F--k Israel!"

On the other hand, my Jewish landlord told me about how he joins protests against Israeli military operations and advocates for peace between Jews and Arabs, whilst another Jew in Hebron felt that the best solution for the conflict was the military annexation of Palestinian cities of the West Bank.

It is gross oversimplification to put generalisations on what a whole people group think. To say that all Jews or all Arabs have a certain viewpoint is to rob them of the wide variety of different perspectives held within each community.



"JEWS AND ARABS REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES" READS THE SHIRT OF AN ARAB BAKER, TEL AVIV

7. Peace comes when we are able to see the humanity of our enemies.

The first time I crossed into the West Bank, in my ignorance, I had expected to see a dangerous war-zone. Instead, I was shocked to see normal humanity. Ordinary people were going about their everyday business; shopping, drinking coffee and chatting on mobile phones. A young man approached me and warmly greeted me, "Welcome to Palestine!" These people are more than media headlines of radical Fatah and Hamas members – they are all human beings. When I was in the Druze village of Majdal-Shams, I asked a local whether he identified as Israeli or Druze. He replied, "I identify as human being."

When you see people doing ordinary everyday things that you and I do, you realise that we are all the same: human beings. With that realization, we learn to not take sides and acknowledge the rights and wrongs committed by all, for no one is perfect. Behind every headline and every stereotyped racial or religious group are ordinary people who have

aspirations, dreams and fears, just like all of us. Until we put a human face to a situation, it is difficult to rise above indifference and apathy. Labels dehumanise us and fear-mongering and xenophobia thrive when we fail to see the humanity of the people outside our local community.



FASHION BOUTIQUE AND RESTAURANTS IN HEBRON, THE WEST BANK

Illustrative of this is the Israeli-West Bank separation barrier. This huge concrete structure reminiscent of the Berlin Wall runs for hundreds of kilometres along the West Bank and physically divides the Jewish and Palestinian people. They are forbidden to cross it except in special circumstances. Its purpose is to reduce violent incidents, but also results in dehumanisation: what happens when the only time a Palestinian sees a Jew is when armed Jewish police officers cross the border? What happens when the only time a Jew sees a Palestinian is when a suicide bomb goes off, or stones are thrown during a riot? What happens when you don't see other communities doing ordinary things and living like ordinary human beings? When we fail to see the human side of any community, we provide the breeding ground for mistrust, hatred, racism and fear.



THE ISRAELI-WEST BANK WALL, BETHLEHEM, THE WEST BANK

8. Religion can be used to divide people in hatred, or unite them in love.

It is clear that every religion has its radicals. The most obvious example is the growth of *Daesh* (Islamic State). But one must be clear: there is a very strong voice within Islam who condemn them. "*Daesh* is not true Islam," said my Palestinian taxi driver as we drove through the West Bank. "We do not want them here in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip."

The contrast between *Daesh* and other Muslims was illustrated in an experience I had whilst travelling in the Arab city of Nazareth, the home town of Jesus Christ. After a full day of hiking, I stopped at a café for a meal. An Arab man approached me and asked whether he could join me and we began to chat. Whilst I ate a chicken shawarma, he didn't eat or drink anything - he was fasting for *Ramadan* (the Muslim holy month). However, he assured me not to worry about eating in front of him as we shared an enjoyable lunchtime conversation. Afterwards, he ordered me their specialty coffee free of charge and would not accept payment. When I asked him about how his Islamic faith influenced him, he replied, "In the end, religion is what I am. You are Australian and I noticed that you were a foreigner... But I didn't sit down for lunch with you for business reasons. I know you are going out afterwards and maybe in your life time you will never come back. I just wanted to give you a good emotion, to be hospitable to you; that you would remember Nazareth well. I think this is the essence of religion."

Perhaps the most visual picture I experience of how religion can encourage peace and unity was at a Christian conference in Jerusalem. Here, Christian Jews and Christian Palestinians came to worship together. I had never seen anything like it. People from Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Jordan and internationals like myself all gathered together in a spirit of unity. At one point during the conference, Palestinians, Jews and internationals all linked arms, knelt down together, prayed together and forgave one another for the hurt they had caused one another. When faith leads us to forgiveness, love and unity, it can be a profound and powerful force towards peace and reconciliation.



JEWS AND ARABS LINK HANDS AND PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER, JERUSALEM

9. Danger is relative.

"You're crazy!" "Please come back home safe!" "Don't get bombed!"

When I told people I was going to Israel in the Middle East, the overwhelming response was of incredulity or concern. I began to get discouraged and fearful of traveling by myself into the unknown.

What I discovered instead was a life-changing journey. I have met people, made friends and seen things I will never forget. Compared to Australia, one of the safest nations in the world, there was of course an element of danger. But throughout my journey, I still felt very safe. Compared to some parts of the world like Iraq and Syria, Israel is one of the safest places one can be. Danger is relative and cannot be measured.

One must not be reckless: do your research, get advice and information from locals and be sensible and street-smart. But until we lay down our fears and step out of our comfort zones, we will never learn about the humanity that exists outside of our current world view.

Solo travel can be terrifying at times, but makes you grow immensely in a unique way. Travelling by myself, I found myself going out of my comfort zone to meet people, and found others more likely to strike up a conversation with me. I had expected to learn much about others, but was surprised to learn even more about myself.

If you considering embarking on your own off-the-beaten-track journey, I would encourage you to take the plunge. Explore the unknown. Do something completely different, and step outside your comfort zone. With courage, one will go on a journey of discovery into the humanity of those around us, and of ourselves.

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

- Mark Twain



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