

A JEW IN JORDAN

By Ben Winer

Less than a day before the spring 2022 study abroad application deadline, I felt an impulse to at least keep the option open, so I quickly put together an application to participate in Middlebury's Arabic program in Morocco. Over winter break, I realized that although I had yet to experience a full spring semester at Penn due to the pandemic, I would never again have the opportunity to improve my command of Arabic and experience Middle Eastern society in an immersive and academic environment. It also didn't hurt to get away from COVID restrictions, take unique classes, and travel to a place with good hummus, nice beaches, and warmer weather. I soon became intent on going; however, towards the end of winter break, the Moroccan government closed their country's borders due to a new wave of COVID, leading to the cancellation of the Arabic program. My idea of spending the semester abroad on the beaches of Casablanca and Rabat, far from the frigid Philadelphia winter, was short-lived.

As a consolation, however, Middlebury had offered to transfer the students previously enrolled in the Morocco program to their Arabic program in Amman, Jordan. I was initially hesitant. With protective Jewish parents, asking their permission to live and learn in an Arab country where no Jews existed outside of the Israeli embassy was a stretch. In Morocco, there was at least a small Jewish community, and it was a popular European tourist destination; Jordan, however, seemed to be in a whole different league. I wasn't only worried for the peace of mind of my parents, but also for myself. I wondered: would I be a target if people knew I'm Jewish? Was I in danger? How

was I going to keep Kosher? What else was in Jordan beyond an endless, hot desert? I knew almost nothing about the country, but I vaguely remembered that Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in the nineties and that much of the country's population is Palestinian.

I decided to go. During the semester, I lived with a host family, took an Arabic language pledge, and had one of the most unique, mind-opening, and enriching experiences of my life.

From the outset, one of my main goals was to improve my Arabic. I thought that the Arabic skills I had developed for over two and a half years through classes at Penn, language tutoring sessions during my gap year in Jerusalem, and a homestay program in an Israeli Druze village during high school would have prepared me to engage meaningfully in Arabic. I soon realized that even with that background, without any long-term use or exposure to the language, it was difficult to achieve fluency from classes or tutoring alone. After the first week and the commencement of classes, students signed a pledge vowing to speak only Arabic during their entire time in Jordan. At first, it seemed impossible. "What is the word for fork?", "How do I tell the cab driver to make a right?": conversations were limited to a few words, and people's personalities adapted. I just wanted to speak in English, especially when I had so many questions about the new country, culture, and people I was surrounded by.

My other main goal was to better understand Jordanian and Arab culture and society. I took it upon myself to engage with cab drivers, local students, and friends about the challenges they experience, what

they love about their country, and their perspectives on international news, democracy, Israel, and the United States. It was important for me to understand their traditions and history in order to gain insight into Jordanian identity. Everything from the role of family, community, and religion seemed to have unique meaning, but trying to engage about these topics in Arabic wasn't easy.

Before arriving in Jordan, I was informed that I would be staying with a Christian host family, since staying in a Muslim home would burden all women in the house to constantly wear hijabs and dress appropriately around non-relative men. My host mom, Hind, was born and raised in Syria—where all of her family still lives—but moved to Jordan thirty years ago. She has older kids who no longer live in Jordan, and she had gotten a divorce many years beforehand when her children were still young, making her the sole resident of her home in an upper-middle class neighborhood of Amman. She has hosted American students for nearly ten years and loved telling me stories of her other students. Hind is one of the kindest people I have ever met; she always prepared meals for me and my roommate and was always willing to chat about our days, the news, and politics. She used to work as a hotel manager but now spent her time attending female Bible meetings, talking to friends and family, taking care of the home, and playing with and feeding local cats who she has functionally adopted. Hind invited church friends over for coffee, tea, and cookies almost every night, and we often talked about religion, politics, and the overlap between the Torah and the Old Testament. It was comforting to have those conver-

sations about our common stories in the Bible, since religion plays an important and grounding role in my life.

Jordan is generally religious and traditional. At my local university, the University of Jordan, the vast majority of women wore hijabs. I never saw a man wearing shorts as it is Muslim custom for men to cover their knees, even in the scorching summer. Many women wore pants, but some wore long dresses with sleeves covering their elbows, and even fewer wore niqabs, full face veils with a small eye space to see.

During the month of Ramadan, all restaurants were closed during fasting hours. It was forbidden to be seen eating, drinking, or smoking in public, and alcohol, which was expensive and hard to come by in the first place, was prohibited from being sold. My program had a private room for us to eat lunch and living with a Christian family made it easy for me to eat at home. My host mom and I once picked up sweets from a bakery near the end of the daily fast, and we were accosted for carrying food in the street.

When it came to politics and current events, it was fascinating to hear local Jordanians' opinions. Everything from the war in Ukraine to the role of the United States and democracy, and of course the Israel-Palestine conflict, were hot topics for cab drivers. Speaking about Jordanian politics or the King of Jordan was usually off the table, however, unless they wanted to praise the royal family. I typically avoided initiating any political conversations out of respect and deference, so many discussions ended up being about culture and work. When drivers themselves brought up the topic, however, I was eager to engage. As a Jew and someone who

has spent extensive time in Israel, I had to balance a tight rope when discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict. Uber drivers often asked if I was Jewish since they could see my name, "Benjamin," when accepting the ride, and often associated it with the long-serving previous Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. I always responded that I was Christian, in hopes of avoiding all personal risk and dangerous confrontation.

In my discussions, a minority of drivers were vocal in accusing Israel of genocide, stealing Palestinian land, and murdering children, but nearly all drivers expressed some level of resentment and hatred towards Israel. The common phrase that I heard was, "between governments there is peace, but between the people there is tension and war." This was difficult for me, since I eagerly wanted to change that perception in hopes of fostering mutual understanding, peace, and appreciation, especially since Jewish and Arab histories are so intertwined and because we have lived, and continue to live, together as neighbors. I never ended up countering them, mostly out of fear for myself, but also because I realized it was not my place to do so. I had certainly grown up with my biases, perspectives, and own historical narrative, and they were equally entitled to theirs. It was valuable enough for me to get a sense of those perceptions and attitudes.

There were times when being in Jordan felt foreign and I wanted a sense of familiarity. With no Jewish community, I felt very out of place. To get that sense of community, I traveled to Israel frequently for Shabbat and holidays. Other incentives included eating at Kosher restaurants, practicing my Hebrew, seeing

old friends, and bringing back food. The ride from Amman to the Israeli border is about 45 minutes, and since prices were inexpensive in Jordan, I usually took an Uber for \$20. To cross the Sheikh Hussein Bridge from the Jordanian side, foreign tourists and Palestinian residents have separate entrances and buses. Because of COVID-19, crossing hours were restricted to 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM during the week, and even more so on the weekends. This continued throughout the semester and made it hard to plan trips across the border. It was even harder for Palestinians who have relatives or work on either side of the border to make it back and see their families. When the border terminals were open, they were often overcrowded and unpleasant.¹

On the Jordanian side, I was never asked about why I was going to Israel. They were often more surprised that I could competently hold a conversation in Arabic, and with an American passport, they had no reason to bother me. On the Israeli side, however, which also had separate entrances for foreign tourists and Palestinian residents, I used my Hebrew to converse with the border officials. They were pretty shocked by that, since Israelis are not permitted to use the Sheikh Hussein Bridge and must cross either at the southern Eilat/Aqaba crossing or the northern King Hussein border crossing near Beit She'an/Irbid. They would ask, "Do you have an Israeli passport? What are you doing in Jordan? Why are you learning Arabic? Do you work for the U.S. government? Why are you coming to Israel? Where is your negative COVID test? How long are you staying? Do you have a weapon?" Eventually, after crossing the border enough times, I got to know the of-



PG: Danny Lyulyev from Wikimedia



ficers well. The whole interrogation basically came down to “welcome back” and “Shabbat Shalom.”

To get into Israel or the West Bank from the border crossing, there are three options: a bus to Jericho (Palestinian controlled), a bus to Jerusalem (Israeli controlled), or an expensive private taxi to anywhere in Israel. The bus from the border to Jerusalem takes 30 minutes and I found myself in a unique position, able to help tourists with directions in English and speak with Jordanians and Palestinians in Arabic about their weekend plans.

I felt that my frequent travels between Jordan and Israel came at a busier, more tense period of time. With the overlap of Passover, Easter, and Ramadan in mid-April, the tension between Jewish and Muslim prayer-goers at the Temple Mount—the holiest site for Jews—and al-Aqsa Mosque—the third holiest site for Muslims—was at its highest.² This was a recipe for conflict, with rocks being thrown by Palestinian protestors and tear gas being launched by Israeli police. It led to the arrest of hundreds of Palestinians and wounded dozens of worshippers at the Mosque.³ At a similar time, separate terrorist attacks had been carried out against Israelis in Tel Aviv, Bnei Brak, Elad, and Beer Sheva, leading to the injuries and deaths of

many.^{4,5,6,7} I happened to be eating shawarma with a friend in Tel Aviv when a terrorist opened fire on a crowd full of people in a bar from his motorcycle a couple blocks away on Dizengoff Street. We had discussed eating on Dizengoff earlier but had been too tired to walk the extra block or two.

The semester of tension culminated in the killing of a famous Al-Jazeera reporter, Shireen Abu Akleh, during an Israeli military raid in the West Bank city of Jenin.⁸ A funeral procession occurred in Jerusalem days later, where Israeli police clashed with pallbearers and demonstrators, almost causing them to drop Shireen’s coffin in the middle of the street.⁹ In Jordan, where the majority of citizens are of Palestinian origin, people were enraged by the tumultuous series of events. My host mom would often have the news on in the kitchen and nearly a quarter of the topics discussed each day were related to Israel/Palestine.

By the end of the semester, I was grateful that I ended up in Jordan instead of Morocco. While I’m sure I would have had a unique experience in Morocco as well, I was able to gain so much insight into a culture and community linked so closely to my own identity and history. The memorable trips to beautiful nature spots like the deserts of Wadi Rum,

the forests of Ajloun, and the beaches of Aqaba were very special. What will always stick with me from my time in Jordan, however, along with the Arabic skills I developed, are the similarities of tradition, national identity, community, and culture that I have experienced in my own Jewish community. The holy locations, centers of culture and religion, and sense of identity and belonging were largely shared by Jews and Arabs. It was of course for this reason that I witnessed so much emotion, violence, and tension. Decades of emotional, intergenerational baggage on both sides fuel this sense of anger and frustration; it continues to pain me that these powerful ties, relationships, histories, and emotions cannot be directed towards appreciation, feelings of similarity, and admiration.

The language pledge certainly worked. After four months of non-stop Arabic, I can almost confidently say that my Arabic is as good as my Hebrew, if not better, even though I spent thirteen years in Jewish schools and a year living in Jerusalem. My hope is that I can continue to use my language skills as a bridge rather than a barrier to foster relationships that have been inconceivable—but are desperately needed.