

# The Middle East and Me: The Jews and the Druze

By Ben Winer

How is it that someone born and raised over 7,000 miles away from a location across the globe can feel so emotionally and personally attached, having only been to that place less times than a person has fingers? A feeling so strong, that at times, the place can feel like a second home.

From a young age and throughout my life, my parents and teachers have given me a robust knowledge of the history of Jewish people. Beginning with the ancient stories of the Torah (Jewish bible) and stretching to modern-day discussions and classes about Israel and the Jewish diaspora, I was surrounded by a tradition and community that emphasized the importance of participation in the Jewish story.

From my extensive survey of Jewish history, I understood that I belonged to a people that had survived the tests of time, persevered through the severest of pains, and had yet come out relentless and striving. The stories of slavery in ancient Egypt, the destruction of the Jewish Kingdom and Temple in Judea by the Roman Empire in first century C.E., the repeated expulsion of Jews from non-native countries, and the eventual culmination into the slaughter of six million Jews in the Holocaust, left me feeling that I was privileged to live today without fear of existential threat due to my cultural and religious identity. These stories presented to me the brutal, ugly truth of history and established within me a desire to make the world a better place.

In high school, this understanding of my Jewish identity motivated me to initiate my own journey as a participant in history. As an American and as a Jew, the Middle East has al-

ways represented the front lines in news headlines, wars, and political involvement. I grew up reading and watching the news voraciously; there was never a dull moment in this region halfway around the world. I was intrigued.

During the summer between my Junior and Senior years in high school, I decided to travel to Daliyat al-Karmel, a small Druze village in Northern Israel, to begin an immersive Arabic language home-stay experience. Being the only White person in the village, I drew strange stares from the local Druze population who were just as bewildered at me as I was at them. I had been to Israel countless times on family and class trips, and always felt right at home, but for the first time I felt like an astronaut on another planet. Men walked the streets with long gray kaftans, white skull caps with pompoms, and curly mustaches, while the women wore black head-toe *abayas* and white veils—I thought I had been transported to another century. Being around such an unfamiliar culture and people was unsettling, but as I grew to understand my host family, their community, and their culture, I realized I had a lot to learn.

The Druze live throughout the Levant, ranging from Lebanon to Syria to Turkey to Israel. A separate, breakaway religion from Islam in the late 19th century, the Druze are well-known for their loyalty to their home country. My host family barely spoke any English, so lacking any Arabic skills, I relied on my Jewish-school, Hebrew education to get me through the first week. I learned that the father and all the sons of the family had served in the Israeli military. While Israeli Jews were

obligated to participate in mandatory military service, most Druze enlisted voluntarily. And the women were proud that they had served in Sherut Le'umi (national service), an option for those who wished to opt out of military service and commit two years to volunteering.

During the day I spent the bulk of my time learning Arabic, and because I was only there for such a short period of time, my teacher, Nihaya, decided that it was pointless to learn the Arabic alphabet. I ended up learning Arabic in Hebrew and writing down English transliterations in my notebook for verb conjugations and common vocabulary. By the end of the day, my brain was exhausted from all of the lingual gymnastics.

In my free time, I joined my host family for coffee and tea with their distant cousins, week-long weddings, cooking, and touring the mountainous region which they call home. It was exhilarating, and my experience only cemented my desire to learn more about the Middle East.

Two years later, I went back to Israel, this time for an extended period of time to explore my religious identity. Coming from a fairly observant and traditional Jewish home, I decided to take a gap year studying in Yeshiva (an all-male Jewish learning institution) to learn more about Jewish practice and belief. While nearly all my other high school friends were starting their Freshmen years in college, I was learning Jewish law, bible, and rabbinical texts for nearly 14 hours a day with few breaks to eat, pray, exercise, and continue learning Arabic.

Every morning, Yeshiva Bochurs (students) attended morning services by 7:40 A.M. sharp to wrap Tefillin (prayer ornaments on one's arm and head) and to pray. This was followed by morning classes where students were divided into groups of eight to 15 to study Talmud (an ancient discourse of Jewish

law written in Aramaic from the sixth century). Next, we had afternoon prayer services, lunch, and a two-hour break before diving back into studying. The order of afternoon and evening classes were bible studies, topics in Jewish thought, Jewish philosophy, and more Talmud study from 8:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M.

At times it was exhausting. And after one year in Yeshiva, I learned more about my religion than I did in 13 years of Jewish day-school. Not only did I gain knowledge of Judaism, but my habitual routines became accustomed to Jewish practice. Everything from reciting prayers before eating food, incorporating time for Jewish learning into my day, and making time for the morning, afternoon, and evening services became staples of a healthy Jewish life during my time in Yeshiva.

The biggest personal struggle came after I had already finished the year—debating how much of the experience I should include in college and future life. As a twenty-one-year-old sophomore at Penn, I continue to feel the tension between a more traditional lifestyle with the exciting, spontaneous, and energetic college environment around me.

The most important lesson that I took from my time in Yeshiva was a commitment to values that lead to a more meaningful and thoughtful life, as well as dedication to a purpose that provides fulfillment.

It goes without saying that these experiences have transformed my perspective on nearly every aspect of life. From my career ambitions, to my personal beliefs, and academic interests, the rich history and culture of the Middle East has shaped who I am and who I want to become.

My hope is that these memories, passions, and experiences will continue to motivate me to create positive change within myself, others, and the greater community.