



SEEKING PEACE *in the* MIDDLE EAST

by Liv Leader '02

photos by Jennie Aleshire '00

In the four years I spent at Earlham, some of my most important educational experiences didn't take place on The Heart or in the classrooms of Carpenter Hall. Rather, they were on the limestone streets of Jerusalem, on field trips through the plains of Galilee and during hot afternoon lectures on the history of Zionism.

The Great Lakes College Association (GLCA) Jerusalem Program brought several hundred students to the Middle East between 1982-2000 to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Inspired by Professor Emeritus of English and former Director of Peace and Global Studies, Tony Bing, the program allowed students to witness some of the most significant events in Middle Eastern politics during this 18-year period.

Like many students, I knew little about the Middle East when I decided to travel to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Bing taught my first-year Humanities course, and by the end of my first semester at Earlham I had been persuaded to join Bing, and his wife June, the following autumn in the Middle East. This program was not only Bing's last before retirement; it was also the last semester GLCA students would study in the region. The beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September of 2000 forced the evacuation of students from the region and placed the program on indefinite hiatus.

Left: The Old City of Jerusalem is divided into the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Armenian Quarters.

CONFLICTED TERRITORY

I was 19 when I arrived in Jerusalem in late August of 1999, and like many of my predecessors on the program, I was to begin an educational journey that would fundamentally change the direction of my life.

The semester was divided into two units: one Palestinian, one Israeli. Students studied the history of Zionism, Israeli and Palestinian culture and politics, Palestinian historical geography, conflict resolution, Hebrew and Arabic. Our Palestinian and Israeli professors lead us in the classroom and on field trips throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories, from the United Nations administered refugee camps of the Gaza Strip to Israel's northern ceasefire lines with Syria and Lebanon. Outside of our coursework we kept a rigorous schedule of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, women's groups, Israeli settlers, Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists, government representatives and journalists. During our home-stays on a kibbutz and a Palestinian town in the West Bank, we developed friendships with our Israeli and Palestinian peers.

This curriculum forced students to develop a set of questions and vocabulary to understand the events surrounding us. Why were some Palestinians committing terror attacks in Israel after Yasser Arafat signed a peace accord? Wasn't the Oslo peace process giving the

Palestinians a state? Why couldn't our Palestinian professors sleep on the Israeli side of the green line if there was a peace agreement? How can people lead normal lives in such close proximity to violence?

As a Jewish student, I developed a more personal set of questions. What is my relationship with the Jewish state? Will Palestinians not like me because I am Jewish? How can Israeli soldiers treat Palestinians so inhumanely? Why are American and Israeli members of my family angry with me for spending time with Palestinians? How can Jews have such racist ideas about Palestinians, when we know racism so intimately?

Looking back at the journal entries I wrote during my first days of the program,

my thoughts and feelings now appear raw, unedited, naïve — as I had no language or political framework in which to place the events I was witnessing. These rambling entries are testament to the fact that our education reached beyond the political language of the moment, and allowed us a human entry point into the ideas and people fueling this conflict. (A selection of journal entries are available at www.earlham.edu/alumni/content/relations/spotlight/)

Our rigorous coursework, dedicated professors who wanted us to understand the politics of their nations and living in the heart of a major international conflict left indelible marks on many students. For some of us, the questions raised on the program were pivotal in our personal and professional lives.

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SEEING ALL SIDES

Since graduating, Charmaine Seitz '95 has lived in the region working as a journalist for publications including the *Palestine Report*, the *Economist* and the online magazine *Bitterlemons*. In 1993 her class was in the region for the beginning of the Oslo peace process.

“When Oslo was signed, we were excited. But already at that point we could see what was happening and the structural inequalities that were built into the agreement. We saw the seeds of what is happening today,” says Seitz.

“On the one hand I was drawn in by the hope that this long conflict could be solved, and at the same time really interested in the signs that showed that this already was going bad.”

In forcing us to spend academic and personal time with Israelis and Palestinians, the

program showed us the possibility of seeing multiple truths and multiple victims. Pushing students to stand on both sides of the fence, our work in and out of the classroom forced us to see the rights and conflicting viewpoints of Palestinians and Israelis. For Tony Bing, this is the purpose of the program: to allow the students to see the world in a different way.

“The program forced students to get inside the other in a way that Palestinians and Israelis aren't able to do. I always felt the students had a special gift given to them because they could imagine — which is the secret to how there could be peace: If people could put themselves in the place of the others' suffering,” says Bing.

In the years since attending the Jerusalem Program, I've returned to the region several times as a journalist, and have focused much of my work on the region. I've felt my skin grow thick as the gulf between Israelis and Palestinians has widened and filled with distrust, indifference, hate and sheer exhaustion. I look at my generation and I feel despair: Israelis have opted for security instead of peace, and my Palestinian peers emit numbness, a sense that life holds little for them.

Here in the United States, both the Palestinian and Israeli solidarity groups that have proliferated in the last six years make little effort to dialogue. As exemplified

by fiery events at universities like Columbia and University of California at Berkeley, these groups have fought viciously to win the public debate. At times it appears that Palestinian and Israeli advocates are content to wage a proxy war echoing the virulence of their counterparts in the Middle East.

While the Jerusalem Program was divided equally between studying the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives of the conflict, the program was not without controversy. While no students were ever injured on the program, and as Bing explains, most parents were amazingly willing to allow their children to study in a conflict zone, several students were arrested while picking olives at non-violent demonstrations in the West Bank. Students were in the region during the

massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, during the build up to both Palestinian uprisings, the Israeli demonstrations forcing the military to withdraw from Lebanon and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. While there were both Jewish and Palestinian students who studied on the program, both in the region and on the Earlham campus it was accused of having a Palestinian bias.

“One of the things that we really struggled with as students, was getting over our own biases,” reflected Seitz during a recent phone interview from Ramallah.

“Even though I didn't think I knew anything about the region. There were so many debates: Was the program fair? Was it pro-Palestinian? It really made us think about history. How is history written? Who shapes it? And what are the assumptions that we are taught as Americans?”

NEGOTIATING CONTROVERSY

Earlham is not devoid of controversies regarding the Middle East. As Bing reflects on past campus events, he notes that President Emeritus Landrum Bolling's 1970 book, *Search for Peace in the Middle East*, was controversial for promoting a two-state solution to the conflict years before the Oslo Accords solidified this notion. Quakers are often accused of being biased for their long relationship with Palestinians and for supporting a private elementary and secondary school in Ramallah. Bing himself has been accused of allowing his support for Palestinian issues unduly influence students.

“How you stand on the Palestinian issue is a litmus test about whether you believe in human rights. I feel I led a more moral existence and felt that my involvement in Palestine issues was a gift and made my life worthwhile. It helped my moral compass and I think maybe a better human being and American citizen,” says Bing.

While many students developed a political perspective on the conflict — and I think it's fair to speculate that most students developed a deep sympathy for the Palestinian case for statehood — that didn't

exclude students' ability to understand why Israel is important to the Jewish people. On my program, we truly struggled, shed tears, and debated about whether we could realistically empathize and support the rights of both Israeli Zionists and Palestinian nationalists. Could Oslo truly deliver sovereignty, safety and rights to both people?

This was not easy intellectually or emotionally, but I don't think a single student could honestly choose a side without recalling the passion, integrity and legitimacy of the other. This ability to hold multiplicity is something I see lacking in many Americans who advocate for either Israeli or Palestinian rights. The ability for Jerusalem Program students to do so is possible only because the program expected us to push beyond surface-level politics and to develop an under-



standing of what truly fuels conflict.

While the Jerusalem Program experience was unique, the values that we were taught reverberated on the Earlham campus. During my four years at Earlham, I sensed an unspoken understanding between Jewish and Palestinian students. While we did not always agree politically, we were aware that our time on campus was our opportunity to learn about each other. Yes, it was often awkward for a Palestinian student to come for Shabbat dinner at the Jewish Cultural Center or for a Jewish student to attend a Committee for Justice in the Middle East meeting — but there was a sense that we needed to move beyond what was comfortable. There was suspicion, anger and real disagreement expressed in class and on the edi-

torial page of the *Earlham Word*, but Earlham expected us to engage.

It's not just Earlham's Quaker values that made this possible, but also the interplay between Earlham's international students and the Americans who study abroad. The fact that many of Earlham's Palestinian students came from the Quaker schools in Ramallah and the Seeds of Peace co-existence programs strongly contributed to the maturity of the debate. For students who studied on the Jerusalem Program our education was not limited to the theoretical, we had become connected with the people and politics of the region. In the fall of 2000, as Palestinian fighters, terrorists and Israeli soldiers were deeply engaged in the violence of the Intifada, we watched carnage envelop a failed peace process. The horror that we've

watched for the last seven years illustrates how “catch-phrase” ideology and political intransigence leads to death, demoralization and polarization.

Despite critiques of the program's biases, it undoubtedly taught students to juggle the complexity. As our world becomes more politically polarized and violent, I believe there is no more important education. Earlham ethics, while sometimes stubbornly apolitical, is also equally stubborn in its refusal to deny the humanity of these two peoples. In the finest tradition of Earlham, this program has inspired students to

become lifelong learners dedicated to the pursuit of truth and peace.

Like Seitz and many of the other students who have continued to work in the Middle East, I am still looking for answers to questions raised on the Jerusalem Program. It's an educational gift for which I am deeply thankful.

Liv Leader '02 is based in San Francisco and has reported from Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Her work has appeared in such publications as Alternet, LiP, Mother Jones, and Tikkun. This fall she will begin graduate work in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago.

Above: Last summer Tony Bing led a group of 30 friends and alumni of Earlham on a two-week tour of Israel and Palestine.