

10 hours on a Palestinian Tour Bus

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When you've been fed one narrative your whole life, the prospect of experiencing another is both daunting and enticing at the same time. When my dad suggested that he and I spend our daddy-daughter day out on a Palestinian tour of Hebron and Ramallah, I laughed, but agreed straight away.

We'd made the decision to try and stay quiet; not to argue with the tour guide and just listen to what he had to say. We soon realised, as we got onto the minibus with 5 other people, that keeping quiet would have been the socially awkward option. We drove to a small Palestinian village where we picked up our guide, as he did not have a working permit to enter Jerusalem. I had, perhaps naively, never realised that Palestinians were not actually allowed in Israeli territory without a permit. Certainly safety is the motive behind this law, but the notion that our tour guide, a 34 year old man, who lives in Bethlehem, had only been to Jerusalem 6 times in his life was crazy [...]

Our first stop in Ramallah was Arafat's tomb. Never in a million years did we think we'd ever be standing by Yasser Arafat's tomb, shielded by two Palestinian Authority guards. Behind the tomb, they were constructing an extravagant building which was due to open as an Arafat museum within the next year. On our way to the tomb, we had passed a few refugee camps. Though these camps were no longer full of unstable tents and were now secure buildings with electricity and water, they were still classed as refugee camps, despite them in reality being more like poor neighbourhoods. My dad asked how the Palestinian government could spend the money on such a lavish building when the refugee problems were still prominent just down the road. The tour guide's response was somewhat surprising; or maybe it was his honesty which astounded me. He said that quite frankly, the Palestinian government did not care about the refugee camps. Despite my amazement at his candid response, I appreciated that he didn't pretend that his government was flawless. Soon after this conversation, we were herded out of the area as President Abbas was due to arrive in the next few minutes. As you do.

As we walked to the next stop, we asked him about the Palestinian refugee status. I queried why he still wanted to be considered a refugee on his ID card, despite living comfortably in Bethlehem. He said that one day, a solution might occur whereby all the people with refugee status on their cards will be returned to the place of their ancestors and origins. I understood this to an extent. However, it still bothered me that each person with refugee status on their ID card was contributing to the numbers of

refugees publicised to the world. The high percentages that UNRWA claim may be ideologically true but false in reality.

The next stop was at 'the best ice cream shop in all of Palestine.' It was at this point, whilst we waited for the rest of the group, that our tour guide really came to life. He did not shy away from his views on the 'settlers;' the suffocation of the IDF in Palestinian territory; the racist checkpoints; the fascist right wing government; the injustice of the relocation of water supply to the surrounding settlements. He claimed that if all the settlements were abolished tomorrow, there would be immediate peace. When asked about Hamas, he condemned their behaviour; he disagreed with armed resistance and firmly believed that the way forward was 'beautiful resistance;' ensuring that Palestinian life thrives and flourishes. I respect that he was able to criticise the extremists on his side, which I would find myself emulating later in the day. I asked him what the Palestinian side would have to relinquish if the Israeli side were to evacuate the settlements and he effectively avoided the question.

As the conversation ensued, it became evident that he did not differentiate between the 'occupied territories' and the rest of Israel proper, deeming the whole land, occupied. When I called him on this, he once again conveniently dodged the question. It became palpable that not only did he delegitimise Israel's right to exist, but he was not ready for dialogue. Granted, basing the Palestinian people's readiness for dialogue on one person's temperament would be unjust. His views were consistent with the world he grew up in. A world where he cannot enter any part of Israel without a permit; where he has to travel to Jordan in order to fly to another country and one where despite believing that Israel has no right to exist, is forced to use the shekel as his currency. He is constrained by constant reminders that his life is at the hands of the Israelis. Though it was painful for me to hear his point of view, these facts cannot be ignored.

I was fascinated by watching regular life go by in Ramallah. I had expected the whole city to be underprivileged, dirty, violent; but in truth, if you replaced the Arabic writing on the shops, the centre of town could have easily been downtown Netanya.

After walking around Ramallah for a while, we then made our way to Hebron. Instead of the half an hour journey that it should take from Ramallah to Hebron, we had to take the alternative route as our guide was Palestinian and could not travel on the regular roads without being checked. The journey was therefore an hour and a half. America had donated money for these alternative roads to be built as Palestinians were infuriated by the constant checkpoints they faced. Truthfully, having separate roads made me feel uncomfortable.

Our first stop in Hebron was lunch in the Palestinian house nearest to Maarat HaMachpelah or the Cave of Ibrahim. It was at this point we had to inform our tour guide that we were not going to be eating the food. Although it was a little uncomfortable for us, both our guide and host were completely

understanding; the Palestinian host even made a few jokes about saying a Bracha before eating the non-kosher chicken. It was one of the most bizarre places I'd ever found myself in.

Once everyone had finished, my dad offered them money for the drinks which they refused to accept. They said that it was their gift to us. Their excessive hospitality is something that I will always remember about the day; genuinely down to earth, friendly people. We then sat outside the souvenir shop that the host owned downstairs, drank tea and discussed the conflict. A tour guide of a different group had joined us for lunch and he began philosophising as we sat there. He claimed that if there was no religion, people would treat each other like human beings. Because that's what we all are at the end of the day.

We were then told to enter the Jewish side of the Cave, though our tour guide had to wait for us by the shop. The last time I had been there was with Midreshet Harova on my gap year, nearly 2 years ago, experiencing one of the most powerful Friday Night davening services I've ever had. This time, I was in a completely different place. With Harova, we'd had a tour of Hebron on Shabbat afternoon and were taken around by an outrageously right wing man who lived in Hebron. He encouraged us to dance and sing at the top of the mountain, in front of the glaring Palestinians below. A group of us stood at the side; confused, angry and horrified at what we'd been encouraged to do. To torment them. To mock the fact that there was nothing they could do about the 550 Jewish people who have settled in Hebron. To imply that those 550 people had more power than the 500,000 Palestinians who lived there would ever have.

We left Maarat HaMachpelah and waited for the group by the Palestinian shop. A group of French Jews came up to the Palestinian shop and began shouting at the Palestinians, provoking them. What happened next changed everything for me and will stay with me for the rest of my life. One of the French Jews picked something up from the shop and threw it at our Palestinian hosts and tour guides. Within seconds, the table had been thrown, glass strewn everywhere and they were physically fighting a metre away from me. I ran to find my dad, completely shaken and humiliated that I had seen the Jewish people start it. I had seen it with my own eyes. I could never deny it. The fight was separated by IDF soldiers, but people still crowded the area. Palestinians were snapping away on their cameras, ready to use the pictures as evidence and propaganda. Why would they not? They had every right to.

These extremists were young Jewish men. They were part of the French Jewish Defence League whose aim is to 'protect Jews from antisemitism by whatever means necessary'. Yet in this scenario, to the people on our tour group, they were representing the Jewish people. On this tour, I had been submerged into this world where I was no longer on the Jewish side, I was on the other side. The pain that I felt when I saw my own people antagonise the innocent Palestinian hosts, who 5 minutes before had been discussing the necessity for us to all treat each other as human beings, was indescribable. I'm not suggesting that it is always the Jews who start these fights. I very much believe that both could

provoke one another in different circumstances. But I happened to witness a time when my people were the perpetrators.

Around fifteen minutes after the incident, everyone continued with their daily lives. This was another shocking element for me. In the general scheme of these people's lives, this incident had been so minor and insignificant. But for me, it opened my eyes to the harsh reality of the complexity of this conflict. Until this point, I had refused to open them to the truth.

Our tour guide's leg had been cut by thrown glass and was bleeding quite significantly. What bothered me is that he didn't try and clean up his wound. He left it for everyone to see. I understood why he did, but it clarified something for me. The whole conflict is a game. Whoever could convince the world that they are the victims will emerge as the winner.

We were then taken to the mosque part of the Cave[...] As we walked through the security barrier to the mosque, the IDF soldiers stopped my dad and I and asked what religion we were. To be honest, we couldn't really look more Jewish if we tried. They took us to the side and told us that we weren't allowed in, for our own safety. I was quite relieved; I didn't feel comfortable entering in the first place. They said that they keep the Jews and Muslims separate for everyone's safety. The whole encounter with the IDF was fascinating, but what struck me the most was the fact that the Muslim entrance to the mosque was manned by IDF soldiers. I began to sympathise with the discomfort that the Palestinians must feel every day.

On the walk back to the bus, our tour guide broke the news that our driver had been kept by the Israeli police as a witness to the incident. They had taken his ID card and therefore we could not leave. He said that it would take 5 minutes for him to be released. 2 hours later, we were still sitting on someone's front patio. They wanted us all to be witnesses, but our guide wanted to avoid getting his ID taken too so lied that we had already left. If they had called me back to be a witness, what would I have said? I would have had to admit to the IDF, the people who I had admired my entire life that I had seen the Jews start the fight. How would I have felt confessing to my own people, that this time, we were the perpetrators?

[...] Eventually, our bus driver returned and we made our way back to Jerusalem.

On reflection, we realised that our tour guide was not a polished educator. He portrayed his opinions as facts and did not sufficiently answer our questions. He had a clear agenda. His facts were tainted with politics, even though there was truth to certain things he was saying. Our guide was a window into a new narrative that I'd never allowed myself to look through. The conflict is so much more complex than I'd previously liked to have admitted. Our guide had asked us why we had decided to come on this tour now, after having been to Israel many times in our lives. We said that it was about time we heard and saw the other side, to which he responded that he really respected that.

I'm not sure my political stance has drastically changed after today, but it has been affected by what I saw. Before today, I'm willing to admit that I had never sympathised with the Palestinian people. I believed that this was our land; legally, historically, politically and religiously. I believed that the Palestinian people were a mere stumbling block in the road to us claiming the whole land of Israel.

I came away from this eye-opening day understanding the Palestinian narrative better. But I also came away with the feeling that they are not ready for constructive dialogue. The fact that our guide refused to admit that the Jewish people had a right to this land proved that. My previous experience 2 years ago with the crazy right wing settler in Hebron had demonstrated that people on our side are also not ready for dialogue. I don't know if either will ever be.

I left the West Bank today feeling more confused than ever before, with more questions than I had before. I recommend that people go on a tour like I did; to not be afraid of opening your mind and ears to another voice.

The day was a painful reality check; one that I'd never experienced before. I received a completely different narrative to the one I had grown up with. I still believe in the Israeli narrative. I believe in its authenticity. I still intend to make Aliyah in a few years' time. I am proud to call myself a Zionist and will continue to stand up to the people at my university and beyond who delegitimise my country's right to exist. I believe that the Jewish people have a right to our own land and specifically this land.

However, there is so much more that needs to be done to build bridges of understanding and compromise through dialogue with the Palestinian people. I know there are many Israelis who feel the same way. In order to drive this challenging process forward, we must all be open and willing to truly hear and see the other side. There are two sides to this conflict.