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Clockwise: Because many people pray at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the men and women are separated out of respect for the Orthodox Jews, seen here in the black hats. • Sun breaks through clouds onto the hills of Haifa. • The Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem is so ancient it is possible to dig below to layers that date back to different eras of civilization. Seen here is a staircase that descends from one of the more modern levels to the ancient Roman street level below.

Jason McLean Freelance Photographer



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It was also exciting because we saw our chance to speak at length with some young people, which was an incredible opportunity for the cross-cultural exchange that many of us felt had been noticeably absent. In addition to the soldiers (who were actually serving in the air force rather than the more common army service), we would also travel with two students who were taking a sociology class on American/Israeli relations. Of all the sights I saw and the people I met, my time with these Israelis was the most revealing.

PART 2 OF 2

Last week: The perceived danger of traveling in Israel and its cultural impact on an American traveler

Today: A look at the Israeli perspective of America

Throughout the trip I had been mortified by my complete lack of fluency in Hebrew, the national language. The prospect of coming across as the stereotype of just another stupid American tourist, speaking loud English and frantically waving my arms to communicate, was quite frankly horrifying. These were the kind of Americans I detested most, and yet there I was, completely unable to speak any Hebrew.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

I apologized often, which mostly seemed to confuse the Israelis, who more often than not spoke perfect English with thick, exotic accents. All Israelis commonly take English beginning in elementary school.

Eventually, my Hebrew progressed to the point where I could say "Excuse me," "Thank you," "Thank you very much," "What is this?," "How are you doing?," "Good morning," "OK," "Wow," and "Excellent." "Excuse me" was perhaps the most useful phrase, and "What is this?" was handy for unknown foods.

I discovered, however, that my speaking English was not insulting for the Israelis, but on the contrary, very welcome. The country's economy depends heavily upon the tourist industry, and the current political turmoil has not been good for attracting tourists. To shopkeepers and Israelis, the sound of Americans or other foreign languages means that business might be looking up.

Most of my everyday interactions prompted these observations, but when I found myself sharing a seat next to an Israeli sociology student in her late 20s during a long ride from a natural hot springs spa on the border with

Jordan to our hotel in Haifa, I decided to pull out the big guns and ask the tough questions.

How did she feel about Americans? How did she feel about President Bush? What did she hope for the future, and how did she feel about Arabs? Her responses were surprising and sometimes ambiguous.

She told me that she perceived Americans as sometimes arrogant but more than anything as emotional — far more emotional than Israelis. Her words implicated something simpler than she intended and noted our easy ability to become inflamed as a nation, but also the way we interacted on a person-to-person level. She said when we believed in something, whether it was politics or love, we had a passion that she did not see in the people of her country. She called it "something in the eyes that looked for a connection."

She confirmed what I had heard other Israelis say about Bush: They could say nothing negative about his politics toward their country and felt he had supported them in a time of need. However, she said they didn't think much of him personally and that most people she knew thought of him as quick-tempered, irrational and unintelligent. Then, with a glimmer in her eye, she looked straight at me and said, "Besides, Clinton was so much more fun."

As far as the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, she found it frustrating. As she spoke, I could tell she was struggling to find the words to explain her position. She, like the rest of the country, was in emotional knots, and she described a social pressure to simply demonize the Palestinians and, which conflicted with her rational intuition that says the conflict is more an issue of communication.

I asked if she would be friends with someone who was an Arab — there are, in fact, many Arabs who live within Israel; there the term refers to any non-Jewish, non-Christian resident — and she began telling a story.

She told me of an Arab girl in her class who had worked with her on a project. They became acquaintances, but they had never done anything outside of class. I asked her why, and she said the other girl had never asked her to do anything.

I asked if she has considered making the first move toward friendship. She told me that she could never do such a thing and that her parents would never allow it. However, she also would never lead her own children to believe they could befriend non-Jews or teach them to hate. Things are not simple, she said — they are not black and white, as the older generation would have us believe. It may be a long time before those ideas fade — maybe another two or three generations — but in the end, she told me, we will change.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.