



Jewish Federation & Foundation

of Northeast Florida

Shlichut Program

My first experience with Jews from North America was as a participant in Birthright Taglit in December 2022, during my military service. I met close to 30 students, most of them from Ohio State University. This summer, just short time before I start my work as a Shaliach in the Jewish community of Jacksonville, I had the opportunity to participate in another Taglit group - but this time as a staff member.

First of all, I must admit I was surprised to find out that Taglit groups continue to arrive to Israel during the war. The first thing I said to the students I met (after Shalom and welcome, of course) was that they are really brave. The group initially had close to 40 participants and a few additional staff members, but only about 12 participants arrived - without any staff member, due to the security situation. To be honest, I'm happy that the staff members canceled their arrival, because that's basically why I got this job. A day and a half before the group was supposed to land in Israel, a close friend of mine who works for Taglit asked me if I'm interested in joining as a staff to this group. My first answer was "There's no way I can do it" (it's a ten-day trip and I already had scheduled plans), but I felt I had to participate in it, and so I did. It is important to say that the trip itself was adapted to the war, so there were places we could not visit, for example the city of Safed, because is too close to the northern border. On the other hand, we visited places related to the war, to understand better the ongoing situation.

With a lot of excitement we started the trip in ancient Caesarea and then we visited the Rothschild Gardens in Zichron Ya'akov. After that we continued to Tiberias, we sailed in the Sea of Galilee and climbed on Mount Arbel. From there we went down to Tel Aviv and slept in a hotel located a minute's walk from the beach. We enjoyed a culinary tour of the city and in the evening we had a night out. Also, we visited the Hostages Square and completely by chance I met there one my teachers in high school. She told to the participants of my group the story of a student she taught, Omer Wenkert (23), who was kidnapped on October 7th from the Nova festival and is still being held by Hamas. For some people in the group it was the first time they were really exposed to the story of the Nova and other events that happened on that day.



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Another point that is important for me to mention about Tel Aviv is the fact you can really notice the coexistence that exists in it. For one moment we walked along the coastline between hotels and lawns, and just few minutes after that we entered Jaffa and heard singing in Arabic from the mosque, calling the worshipers to come and pray. After the short stay in the city "that never goes to sleep" we went down to the south, visited the Nova site next to Kibbutz Re'im. To be honest, it was the first time I visited this place. From many personal reasons I couldn't visit there, but eventually (and luckily) it happened. It is very hard to explain the experience of walking through people's photos and recognizing their faces, knowing that they will never come back, some of them even younger than me. The phrase that echoed in my head was: "We will dance again". Later, we spent the night in Kfar HaNokudim (a Bedouin village). In the early morning we climbed Masada and visited the Dead Sea. For Shabat we went to Midresht Ben-Gurion, and visited the tomb of David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel. We ended the trip in Jerusalem, where the group participants got to visit the Wall (some of them for the very first time), and some other parts of the old city. From what I saw, they were mostly amazed by the magic of one of the oldest and holy cities in the world. After ten intense days the journey was over. I must say that unlike my first experience in Taglit a year and a half ago, this time the feeling was different. It's not obvious to come here during wartime, and it definitely changes the whole perspective of the trip.

So how do I know the trip was a success? 3 people from the group (equals to 25% from the participants), announced that they plan to make Aliyah. Two of them want to join to the IDF. Beyond the fun, these numbers are particularly impressive. In conclusion, you really don't have to make Aliyah to prove your connection to Israel, but it's always exciting to hear how much this unique program effects on people's lives