

Anna Sobol Levy Fellow's Report 2008-2009



ASL Fellow BIOS:

Adam H Bergman is from St. Louis, MO and a graduate of University of the Missouri-Columbia with a dual degree in electrical and computer engineering. While in Israel, Adam studied Hebrew and Arabic while focusing on Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. After completing the fellowship, Adam reported to Naval Air Station Pensacola, FL to begin Naval Aviator training

Taylor Dewey was a Lieutenant, Surface Warfare Officer in the Navy. In Israel he focused on Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Arabic and Hebrew. He was a Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies (JIMS) Fellow. He also interned at Search for Common Ground, for whom he now works as Assistant Editor of the Common Ground News Service-Middle East. He is currently a Stanford Center in International Conflict Negotiation Graduate Fellow and an MA candidate in International Policy Studies at Stanford University. He can speak six languages, has visited over 50 countries and has cycled the perimeter of the United States.

Dave Huffman is a 2nd Lieutenant in the US Army and is currently in Fort Knox, Kentucky for Armor Officer training. During his time in Israel he studied Arabic, Hebrew, and regional politics at Hebrew University, counterterrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, helped to organize a volunteer program teaching English to Sudanese refugees, and biked the length of the country during the holidays in October. He recommends exploring the local community as much as possible to get out of the “Rothberg bubble” and to take advantage of the personal tutorials with faculty members offered by the program.

IDF Armor Corps Museum



Fellows right to left: Meredith, Tom, Adam, Taylor on top of a Merkava IV tank at the IDF Armor Corps Museum in Latrun.

Shortly after the start of the autumn semester, the ASL fellows began making their tours. Located about 25km west of Jerusalem in the Ayalon Valley city of Latrun in a strategic area that contains the main road to Jerusalem is the IDF Armored Corps Museum and memorial known as Yad La'Shiryon. Featured in the museum are armored vehicles that date back to World War II and come from all over the world, making Yad La'Shiryon one of the most diverse armor museums in the world. The fellows took a guided tour of the museum that explained the history behind the area and many of the tanks located at the museum. The final portion of the tour included an outstanding brief film entitled "Brotherhood of Steel" that describes what life is like in Israel's Armored Corps.

Of all the vehicles located at the museum, the most interesting to the fellows was the Merkava IV which is currently Israel's main battle tank. Many questions arose as to the advantages and disadvantages of this tank in comparison to the M1A2 Abrams, the main battle tanks of the U.S. One advantage of the Merkava IV is that it can be used as an armored personnel carrier whereas the M1A2 cannot. However, the M1A2 is faster and has been combat tested more extensively against other tanks in engagements in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The fellows came to the conclusion that both tanks are of excellent quality and can both hold their own.

More than just the tanks themselves, the fellows questioned much about the crews of the armor battalions. Tom, an IDF tank commander accompanied the fellows on this trip and answered several questions in relation to the training and the life in the armored corps. Perhaps future fellows will have the opportunity to spend a couple of days with an actual tank battalion and witness the tough environment for themselves in addition to the training, leadership, maintenance efficiency techniques, and tactics that have given Israel's Armored Corps a very prestigious history.

IDF Air Force Museum



Fellows Taylor and Dave sitting in one of the Israeli Air Force Training jets at the Air Force Museum at Hatzetim Air Force Base.

In a switch from armor to aircraft, the fellows traveled south into the Negev Desert to tour the Air Force Museum at Hatzetim Air Force Base just on the western outskirts of Be'er Sheva. Hatzetim AFB is the home of Israel's pilot training program along with several fighter and helo squadrons that support Israel's Southern Command. Much in the same fashion as the Armored Corps Museum, aircraft from all over the world and from many different timeframes are parked on the museum's ramp. Interestingly enough, a couple of ME109 Messerschmitt's from Nazi Germany were at the museum that Israel used during the 1948 war. Some interesting stories discussed during the tour were the ones of the Iraqi MIG-21 jet fighter and the Syrian MIG-23 fighter/bomber that defected to Israel in 1966 and 1989 respectively. The story of the Iraqi MIG-21 provided the fellows with an interesting insight into how Israel's Air Force and intelligence community work side by side.

Above all other aircraft, the fellows took a special interest in an Israeli built fighter known as the Lavi built by Israeli Aerospace Industries. According to the tour guide, this aircraft never made it past the prototype phase because it was the best fighter in the world resulting in too much competition for U.S aerospace companies. However, the fellows quickly noticed that the plane looks much like the F-16 but with a different wing configuration known as the delta wing. As the fellows read the specifications for the aircraft, they realized that the Lavi's top speed, turn radius, and range do not exceed that of the F-16. Essentially, the fellows believed the aircraft to be more of a symbol of Israeli airpower than a weapon system that actually exceeded U.S built systems. Regardless, the existence of this aircraft demonstrates the unique ability of Israeli and American engineers to harness their advantages to improve weapon systems.

At the end of the tour, the fellows watched a short video that provided insights into what it takes to become a pilot in the IAF and the sense of community among Air Force personnel. It further described how the IAF became known as one of the best Air Forces in the world through

its successful history and amazing overall kill ratio. Perhaps future fellows will be able to spend time with an IAF squadron to better understand their culture and what has made the IAF so successful in its history.



The Fellows, right to left: Taylor, Tom, Adam, Dave and Meredith, stopped at a Bedouin restaurant for some delicious food on the way back to Jerusalem from the Air Force Museum.

Meeting with Talpiot Officer

Following the trips to Latrun and Hatzetim, the fellows remained in Jerusalem to meet with a member from Israel's Talpiot program, Captain Nimrod Shkedi. Given the classified nature of the intelligence program, it was difficult for him to answer some of the questions asked by the fellows. However, enough information was disclosed in order to understand what the program is and its purpose. Talpiot is a program intended to take the most intelligent individuals in science and mathematics that Israel has to offer in order to eventually develop better weapons systems for the military. Although very few individuals actually make a career of this program, he described it as being the golden ticket on a resume.

He further described some of the training for the program which he felt was rigorous. Cadets in Talpiot receive training in nearly all aspects of the military that include infantry, paratrooper, pilot, and the armored corps. The intent is for these cadets to become skilled enough in all fields to ensure they will have better insights and ideas to improve weapons systems, tactics, and training procedures. The total training time is about 40 months before becoming fully vested with the program and at anytime the cadet can be washed out. Since there is no quota to fill for the program, they can be very selective with who is chosen to graduate and become a full member of the Talpiot. He stated that about 1% of those accepted to begin training for the Talpiot graduate.

One of the last things discussed was the selection process to begin training. There are a series of exams that determine overall aptitude in IQ and more specifically, one's potential in science. Some of the exams include questions by military personnel and psychologists that are basically unsolvable. What he claims is important though is the way in which the potential cadet goes about solving the problem. In a sense, the ability for potential cadets to problem solve is what they are looking for in the program. Maybe future fellows that meet with members of the Talpiot can undergo some example tests to see their own potential for something similar in the States.

Meeting with a devout Jewish Major

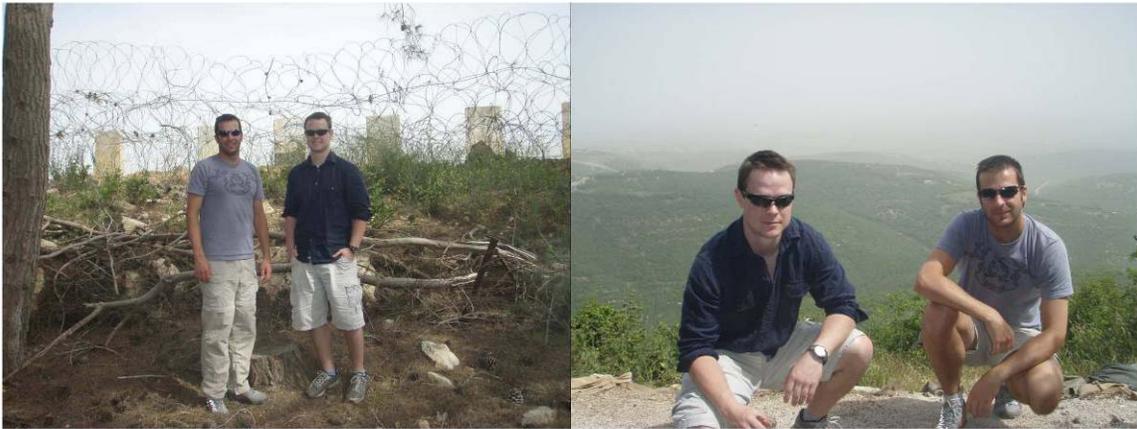
The next meeting took place on the roof of one of Tom's friends. Major Ariel Ben Gigi of the Givati brigade had recently fought in the 2008 Gaza incursion, and the Fellows hoped his perspective as both a military commander and actively practicing religious Jew would shed light on the role of Judaism in the Israeli Army. Prior to – and giving the impetus for – the meeting, an article in The New York Times suggested that rabbis had told troops heading into battle that they were fighting a “holy war,” and that the human rights of Palestinians in Gaza suffered in the name of religion.

The discussion centered around the two main issues: the notion of Holy War, and the role (and possible preeminence) of Judaism during tactical operations. For Ariel, the Gaza war was unquestionably a holy war, yet his definition differed significantly from the negative connotations typically associated with the word. Rather than “killing for God,” Ariel viewed a holy war as one conducted in light of the overarching principles found in the teachings of the Torah, principles mandating justice and compassion. In his mind, the Gaza war was holy not because the soldiers were killing unbelievers but because of the higher morality the individual soldiers derived from their faith in Judaism. While some of the Fellows disagreed philosophically, Ariel's perspective of Holy War was certainly different from that portrayed in the Times article.

The role of religion in operations represents perhaps the largest difference between the Israeli and American militaries, and the Fellows were curious about the difficulty in motivating soldiers to obey commanders with different priorities than their rabbis. Though he relied on a rabbi at his base for advice, Ariel said that ultimately operational decisions lay with the commander. Some rabbis forbade training on Shabbat, yet if Ariel found it necessary to ensure victory the soldier would ultimately be required to train on Shabbat against his rabbi's wishes. Ariel did mention that commanders take the individuals beliefs very seriously when designing training and battle plans.

Ultimately the talk was enlightening and gave the Fellows a unique perspective into the many religious considerations foreign to most American commanders. The seriousness and reverence with which Judaism is treated in the Israeli army does create obstacles for commanders to overcome, but overall Ariel portrayed the religion as a positive for both the Israeli military and nation.

Weekend trip to the Lebanese Border



Fellows Dave and Taylor on the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The Fellows' next ASL trip took them north to the Lebanese border. After a brief stop at the Bahai Gardens in Haifa they spent the night at a youth hostel in the town of Shlomi, a community which bore the brunt of Hezbollah rocket attacks prior to and through the 2nd Lebanese War. Israel launched the 2006 war against Hezbollah in response to the coordinated ambush and kidnapping of 2 Israeli soldiers, and viewing the ambush site allowed the Fellows to better comprehend the tactical aspects of the attack. While enjoying thick Arab coffee on a hill overlooking the border, the Fellows noted the proximity of certain villages to Lebanon and gained an appreciation for the dangers faced by their residents. The village of Shlomi has suffered numerous rocket attacks from Hezbollah militants; the 2006 ambush and kidnapping included a coordinated a rocket attack on the village to serve as a diversion during the raid.

In addition to the physical dangers, the area's Israeli residents must also contend with the psychological pressures of living with the ever-present possibility of war. The Fellows visited a kibbutz directly opposite a small Lebanese village and witnessed construction across the border which was – according to one of the residents – taking place in order to prepare defensive positions. Facing the kibbutz was a poster of recently deceased Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniya, a clear reminder of the political affiliation of the Lebanese village. In discussing the construction, the kibbutz member's language reflected the seeming inevitability of the 'next' war, and for the many Israelis on the border living with the potential for war is a way of life.

Overall, the tour helped the Fellows to better understand the recent military history and the present, continued security situation facing the residents of Israel's northern border.

Weekend trip to the Golan Heights



The Fellows having a beer at a brewery, after watching a movie on the history of the Golan Heights.

Dave and Taylor meeting with some of the Tank Corps trainers while they were on training maneuvers in the Golan

The final trip for this year's fellowship was a two day tour in Israel's northern most region known as the Golan Heights. Upon visiting several locations in the area, the fellows quickly acquired an appreciation for the importance of the landscape. By occupying the terrain, the Israelis maintain control of the high ground thus protecting the upper Galilee and acquire excellent early-warning radar coverage from Mount Hermon, the area's highest peak.

About four hours after departing Jerusalem, the fellows arrived at the town of Katzrin, known as "the Capital of Golan Heights". The town is well known for its kosher winery in addition to harboring the largest solar power station in Israel that generates about 50 kW of electricity. Adjacent to the winery was an information center where the fellows viewed a brief video that emphasized the beauty and natural resources of the Golan. In addition, a model of the Golan Heights was on display where the fellows received a briefing on exact locations where battles of the 1967 and 1973 wars took place.

The following day, the fellows began heading north en-route to Tel Faher along the petroleum road which runs adjacent to an oil line owned by Saudi Arabia. Tel Faher was the sight of a Six-Day War battle involving a brigade similar in nature to the U.S Army Rangers known as the Golani. The incoming Israeli Golani Brigade had to make an uphill attack on Syrian forces of which leadership, tactics, and courage ultimately won them the battle. Given the nature of the area surrounding Tel Faher, the fellows quickly understood the importance of taking the Syrian outpost.

After Tel Faher, the fellows continued onward toward an area known as "The Valley of Tears", the sight of a major Syrian offensive during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On the way, the fellows stopped at Kibbutz El Rom and watched a video that described the emotions and the difficulty of the battle. The fellows then continued to the Valley of Tears to see the actual location of the battle observing a memorial as well as damaged tanks that were never moved.

The remaining stops of the Golan Heights tour were to Mount Bental, a dormant volcano that provides an excellent view of Mount Hermon and to the former Syrian town of Quneitra. Once in Quneitra, the fellows stopped at the old Quneitra hospital and congregated on the roof to view the border and the United Nations Demilitarized Zone. Though much of the town is destroyed, it has a rich history which is of great importance to the Druze community in the Golan.

Though much of the tour covered historical background of the 1967 and 1973 wars, the fellows acquired a fundamental understanding of why both Israel and Syria would want control of the region. As the two countries work through a peace process, it is essential for future leaders of any country involved to have traveled the area to understand its importance. Thus more headway can be made in terms of helping both countries decide on a path forward.



The Fellows also had time during this trip to relax and reflect on their year with ASL in Israel. Tom took them to a few of his favorite swimming holes, and they took a dip in the River Jordan.

Recommendations

Near the end of the year the fellows created an After Action Report which was presented to the ASL Foundation. This report detailed recommendations which the fellows thought would improve the experience for future participants. Here is the summary of that report:

Plan the language courses better so they do not overlap and require a supplemental course; use an English language Arabic text. Provide more information about the program to prospective fellows, and to those who have been selected, using Wiki software. Improve the efficiency of the Rothberg Administration, expand academic resources, and ensure correct accounting.