

Birthright trip to Israel in December

by Adam Zelenka

I arrived back in the United States on Wednesday, Jan. 7 at about 5 in the morning. I was excited that the next day I would be having sushi with my friends and telling them all about my trip; my spiritual journey. I had about a 10-hour layover at JFK to reflect on what those past 10 days meant to me.

BREAK

I awaited an open space to pray at the Western Wall, and I looked at everyone leaning, eyes closed, with their heads against their forearms against the wall. I realized I hadn't thought about what to pray for. I'm not a super sentimental guy, and when I ask myself deep questions I find myself producing thoughts at a faster rate than I can put words to them in my head, a series of intimations diverging

towards parts unknown. So I had a hard time deciding what to write on my note to place in the Kotel. And when I closed my eyes and put my head against my forearm with everyone else, my prayers were a little jumbley. Whatever diffused through my forearm into eternity had something to do with making sure everything turned out okay for the people in my life; mainly an assortment of images really, I couldn't quite put it in words. So I thanked Hashem for everything he has given me, said the Shechechyanu, and vacated my wall space. I think I did alright.

That was one of the things I thought about at the airport, as I sat yet unwilling to crack open the book I bought for 20 shekels at some mall en route from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky. This brought to my mind something that had occurred to me two or three times before on my journey.

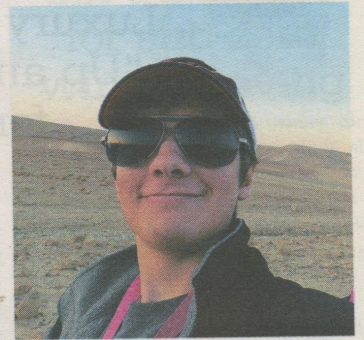
GRATITUDE

I was so thankful that the state of Israel exists and that I got to go there. The first time that occurred to me was during a talk in Tzfat with Avraham Loewenthal, who said, "Our Jewish ancestors have been praying three times a day for next year in Jerusalem. For 2000 years! That's a lot of prayers!" And I was like "Oh man, that's like—so many prayers, man! And the fact that I'm here. With you guuuuuysssss."

The second time that happened was New Year's Eve. We were staying that night with the Bedouins. One of the activities was a desert meditation circle, in which we all sat or lied down quietly in the sand and then shared our thoughts.

It was cold and a little rainy (wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, it was raining in the Negev!), but we were out there. I was on a derailing train of thought, as per usual. It was overwhelming and surreal, and I sort of had to grip the dirt with my fingers to make sure what I felt was real.

And out of fairness to the other things we did on the trip, because every day was spiritually and intellectually meaningful, I'll count the rest of the trip as the third time it occurred to me how thankful I was for a the Jewish State in the land of Israel. I am thankful to have met the IDF soldiers who accompanied us. And I am glad I got to hear their stories at Har Herzl, of the fallen soldiers they knew or of whom they knew. I am so thankful that at the end of Yad Vashem, the corridor opens outward to Jerusalem, which I can tell you really does look golden in the sunset.



Adam Zelenka

RETURN

Any kid who just got back from a Taglit-Birthright trip will tell you he can't wait to get back to Israel as soon as possible. To me at least, it feels exactly like home (Hebrew everywhere and I don't have to think twice about drinking beer... and other reasons too!). So if you were to ask me about what I'll do next, you'd send me spiraling into an oblivion of indecision and anxiety. BUT I can tell you I will be back. As many times as I possibly can, hopefully for durations of indeterminable length. As Avraham Infeld put it, it is the place where I am accepted not in spite of being Jewish, not regardless of it, but because I am Jewish. And that is totally awesome.

Adam Zelenka is a freshman at Virginia Tech. He is the son of Amy and Frank Zelenka, a graduate of Hebrew Academy of Tidewater and a graduate of the International Baccalaureate Program at Princess Anne High School in Virginia Beach.

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A MINIMUM OF 25 PARTICIPANTS
NEEDED TO MAKE THE MISSION A "GO!"

Email or call Amy Zelenka at azelenka@ujft.org or 965-6139 to add your name to the list of 2015 UJFT Argentina mission participants!