

Sue Zeitlin

Sending Jacob to Israel with NFTY was a journey Andy and I had hoped he would experience from the time he was very young. We sent Jacob to Jewish summer camp starting at age 9. Knowing the Jewish values and identity achieved at summer camp, traveling to Israel with camp on a 5 week NFTY trip was sure to be the experience of a lifetime. Boy was it ever!!

Sending our teenager overseas, let alone to the middle east, was anxiety provoking for us. We listened in on a conference call in the spring about the trip, including comments regarding safety and security. Back in the spring, we had commented that the situation in Israel seemed relatively peaceful and yet I still had to hold back the tears during the discussion about the measures taken to assure the safety of our children.

As you heard from Jacob, his trip started with a week in Eastern Europe where they landed on June 30th. The next day came the tragic news of the death of the 3 Jewish teenagers who had been kidnapped. Shortly after hearing the news, we received a safety and security update email from NFTY assuring us that they were monitoring the situation closely and were in close contact with the security office of the Jewish Agency in Israel. That agency has direct contact with the Israeli military and police. We were informed that the program's itinerary would be monitored daily. Of course, we became uneasy upon hearing this news.

After a week in Eastern Europe, the teens arrived in Israel on July 7th and the next day, Operation Protective Edge started, with rockets being fired toward southern Israel, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Our children were in the south, hiking and sleeping outside in the Negev for 3 nights. We were not able to reach Jacob at that time. As soon as Andy and I heard of the military action by text message from a friend, our hearts sunk. We quickly tried to get more news, and turned on CNN, only to see rockets flying over Anderson Cooper's head. That was pretty much the last time we watched CNN over the summer. Our knee jerk reaction was to get Jacob home.

The first time we heard from Jacob after the fighting started was a few days later, and he casually reported to us that some of his friends had seen a rocket intercepted by the iron dome. We remained calm on the phone with Jacob, letting him know that he could come home if he wanted, and hung up and started to cry.

So, why did we let Jacob stay in Israel? Sometimes, we can't answer that question. A large part was learning about Israel's iron dome defense system and its effectiveness. We also reached out to many people and tried to gain any reassurances we could that it was safe to allow him to stay. We started an email chain with other parents on the trip to see what they were thinking and hearing, we spoke with the director of the program, we contacted anyone we knew who was traveling in Israel at that time (and we happened know a lot of people there this summer). And we even contacted the wife of the US Ambassador to Israel, with whom we went to college. Overwhelmingly, we were hearing that life was going on as usual in Israel with just a bit more caution and that the tours were being carefully monitored.

We also followed the Israeli news sources, such as the Times of Israel, and received notifications on our phone when something was happening. We knew where the rockets were landing and followed Jacob's itinerary to make sure he was not near the rockets. We cried tears when the ground operation started, knowing that young soldiers, not much older than Jacob, were going to be on the front lines of the war.

NFTY maintained close contact with us, sending daily emails about their itinerary and any changes that were being made. Although the program was not altered significantly, they were proactive about making any changes and informing us of the changes. If there were any newsworthy events, such as the need to go to a shelter because of a siren, we would receive additional emails.

We heard from Jacob every few days. I would like to think that if he knew how stressed we were, he might have called a little more frequently. Every call from him was positive and he shared his adventures, never expressing fear about the situation. The only time he expressed concern was when the FAA imposed the flight ban to Israel. This was 10 days before he was due to fly home and we tried our best to reassure him that there would not be a problem, although we ourselves found the situation very concerning.

Anyone who saw me over the summer, walking the dog or just around town, knows that it was incredibly stressful and that I would easily shed tears worrying about Jacob. Andy and I were up pretty much every night checking the news. Rationally, we knew that everything would be fine, but I was only rational about 75% of the time.

The goal of the trip was to learn the Jewish story and literally walk through history from biblical times to the Independence war of 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel. Clearly there have been many historical complexities for the Jewish people and our children got to experience the challenges first hand. Jacob and his friends learned how hard it was to build a Jewish state and really experienced how difficult it is to maintain it. Our children interacted with Israeli teens at a time when the presence and support of Americans meant a lot to them. They learned about our role as American Jews in connection with Israel and definitely now feel a strong bond and have a sensitivity for what Israel faces. Our children were proud of their families for allowing them to stay (and remarkably nobody came home from Jacob's group) and they were proud that even though they were in Israel at a difficult time, they stayed in the country and contributed to the value of Jewish solidarity. They learned the value of Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh l'zeh - all of the Jewish people are responsible for one another. Andy and I learned these lessons through Jacob's experiences this summer and feel a stronger connection to Israel ourselves. We are even planning on sending our other son, Noah, to Israel in December.

We never would have intentionally sent our teenage son to a war zone, but we are confident that this was a life changing experience for him and for us. And we are grateful that he made it home safely!