

Building Israel from the Bottom Up: Insights from JNF-USA Sr. Educator's Journey
By Yifat Mukades 7.31.23



As an educator, my quest to deepen my understanding of Israel's rich history and culture while seeking insights to share with my students, led me to embark on an immersive journey with JNF-USA. Being part of the KKL-JNF World Education Conference, with delegations from 23 countries, provided a unique platform to explore Israel's nation-building efforts. Over the course of eight days, we journeyed throughout Israel, engaged with innovative leaders and visited sites nurturing vibrant communities. This venture reinforced my belief in the transformative power of unity and the realization of human potential, and has given me a renewed sense of inspiration. Here, I will share my journey as a US. educator, detailing the profound impact it had on me as an Israeli living abroad.

The journey began with a tour of Alexander Muss High School, led by the Head of School Dr. Steve Kutno. I was deeply impressed by the school's immersive programs for teens. These programs, ranging from semester-long studies to summer experiences for US teens, foster a meaningful connection with Israel. It was a privilege to experience a place where young minds are being prepared to engage with their heritage.

In Israel, you find a deep connection between the land and its people. One of the highlights of our journey was the tree planting ceremony. I understood the meaning of binding people with the land. I said a blessing for the tree, and my own growth yet to come. It was a definite Shehecheyanu moment to remember.

At the Hula Nature Reserve, JNF-USA's contribution to revitalizing this once dried-out valley gave me hope in our ability to rewrite narratives of decline into ones of renewal. The innovative water management was a testament to Israel's environmental ingenuity.

Our visit to the Golan Heights brought us to the Valley of Tears. There we listened to Brigadier General (res.) Avigdor Kahalani recounts his experiences of battling Syrian forces during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. His courage under existential threat underscored the tenacity of Israel, and the value of resilience and duty. I was deeply moved by the thought that visionary leaders often emerge in times of crisis.

In Katzrin, a reconstructed Talmudic village, I experienced firsthand the diversity of Israel's communities. Walking amidst the ancient layers of Jewish heritage juxtaposed with modern vitality was a vivid reminder of what makes Israel unique.

Our journey through Israel also exposed us to an array of diverse cultures and beliefs. From meeting the Charchez people in Recania (Muslims who pledged unwavering loyalty to Israel) to wandering the narrow cobblestone alleys of Tzfat, where the city's mystical Kabbalistic roots still permeate the air, our experiences testified to the country's capacity to embrace and celebrate its diversity.

The work of the IDF Education Corps exemplifies the values of inclusive citizenship. They provide support to diverse populations, ranging from immigrants to youth with disabilities. We heard from Lt. Col. (res.) Tiran Attia how Special in Uniform, integrates teens with special needs into active service, and from IDF Education Brigadier General Ophir Levius about the Education Unit which shapes and builds the "Army of the People" and by doing so, is reshaping and building the Israeli Nation. This experience reaffirmed my belief in the IDF's role as a crucial civic institution. Our visit to Mechava Alon IDF base held a special place for me. Returning to this base after 30 years stirred a flood of memories. As a teenager, this place had pushed me to persevere through my rigorous training to become a "Ma-danit", a special youth counselor who would work with immigrant teens. Standing there again as an adult educator, I marveled at how those formative months had profoundly shaped my path. This visit brought my journey of leadership growth full circle, a journey that this JNF-USA mission beautifully illuminated.

Our time in the Negev desert was a testament to JNF-USA's commitment to transforming David Ben Gurion's vision of making the arid landscape bloom into a reality. Our encounters with the grassroots leaders making change happen, like Sarit Menashe who transformed a bomb shelter into a place of joy, humbled and inspired me. Sarit's passion for running the Sderot Indoor Playground, turned a space of fear into one of joy. Her courage in the face of trauma was truly humbling.

At Halutza, innovative greenhouses were helping families make the desert habitable. The Zionist ethos of cultivating the land lives on through their efforts. Their perseverance proves limitations can be overcome.

Our visit to Nir Am further enhanced our understanding of Israel's diversity and resilience. Here, we met Ofir Libstein, head of the Sha'ar Hanegav Regional Council, a stalwart leader who, despite being located near Gaza, carried an unyielding belief in a peaceful future where children from both sides could coexist in harmony. I was struck by his unwavering hope. Despite constant threats, he speaks of a future where children from both sides can live in peace. His

belief in betterment through mutual economic prosperity highlighted leadership through endurance. This visit was a testament to the power of hope and steadfast leadership.

Among the many memories of personal growth, our visit to Kfar Adi Negev - Nachalat Eran, a village for young adults with diverse abilities, stood out. As Elie Klein the Director of Development walked us through the village, we witnessed firsthand the incredible potential that can be unlocked when each individual is given the opportunity to shine. At Kfar Adi Negev, adults with disabilities gain independence through work and creativity. Empowering them as individuals unlocks the potential in them all.

At the new immersive experience at Ammunition Hill, the site of a pivotal battle in 1967, we heard firsthand stories from Alon Wald Ammunition Hill Vice Chairman, of those who were at that battle, including the story of his own personal sacrifice. Visiting the new Mount Herzl's National Hall for Israel's Fallen, we heard from Aryeh Mualem the Deputy Director General and Head of the Department of Families Commemoration and Heritage Department Ministry of Defense, and Col. Res. Yair Ben Shalom the Director of the National Hall for Israel's Fallen about the efforts to transform collective memory into individual ones, and vice versa. We were humbled by the sacrifices made while standing in the middle of this enormous, marvelous structure. The experience of laying a wreath at the memorial, and singing Ha-Tikvah as an Israeli, was one of the emotional moments for me in the trip and served as a stark reminder of the steep price of freedom.



Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Further, we visited the 9/11 Memorial in Israel, funded by JNF-USA. This memorial is unique as it is the only one outside the U.S where all the victims' names are listed. This monument stood as a symbol of the shared grief and resilience of both our nations.

In the Ness Harim forest, we learned about JNF-USA's impactful B'nai Mitzvah Remembrance Wall project, which links young people's coming-of-age to honoring Holocaust young victims, while fostering their bond with Israel. This site, intertwining past losses with hope for the future, moved me deeply.

Our journey concluded at the ANU Museum, previously known as the Diaspora Museum, where we discovered the shared experiences and legacy of Jews worldwide. A touching testament to our shared legacy was finding a family heirloom, a Torah donated by our team member's grandfather: a poignant moment as she remembered herself as a child looking through the drawings and flipping through this German-language Torah.

The journey through Israel, under the aegis of JNF-USA and KKL World Education Conference, was a profound revelation of grassroots leadership's transformative power and ability to nurture both a land and its people. This tapestry of experiences underscored the pioneering ethos of Israel, where communities, despite adversities, kindle a spirit of unity and resilience.

The sites showcased how investing in human potential is a long-term commitment that yields significant results for both present and future generations. We met with innovators who, through their diligent efforts, are preserving heritage, fostering talent, and nourishing cultural diversity, in the process painting a vibrant picture of a hopeful future. The echoes of this journey shall continue to inspire and energize our educational endeavors, reminding us of the richness and purposefulness that Israel offers.

Further, the journey was a testament to JNF-USA's impactful work in uplifting communities. From bomb shelter playgrounds to villages designed to empower those with disabilities, the seeds of change are being sown from the grassroots. This rekindles and sustains the Zionism dream, and pioneering spirit across Israel.

We encountered everyday heroes on this journey, whose stories of compassion and determination hold the potential to inspire leadership and national rejuvenation for generations to come. The changemakers we met reaffirmed the power of collective efforts in advancing society. Their stories serve as a beacon of hope, inspiring us to empower our students to carry forward this torch of change. The future belongs to those who dare to dream and act upon those dreams.

In conclusion, KKL-JNF World Education Conference and my journey with JNF-USA Senior Educator Mission to Israel, provided a unique lens to view Israel as a living mosaic of old and new, its struggle and progress, emanating from the resilient Jewish spirit. We are the inheritors of the flame passed to us by exemplary leaders from the past, present, and future. The journey was an enlightening experience that emphasized the profound impact of educational exploration in Israel, undertaken with an open heart. I return with stories of everyday heroism and compassion. In them lie seeds to inspire leadership and national rejuvenation for generations to come.

Yifat Mukades is the Director of the Etz Chaim Learnign Center at Valley Beth Shalom Synagoue in Encino CA. She is a proud American, Israeli, and Mizrachi Jewish educator, dedicated to curating experiences that foster her learners' engagement and connection with Judaism and Israel.



At closing Gala from right to left: Shalomo Benhaim (Manager Department for Zionist Education in the Diaspora, Education and Community Division KKL-JNF)

Zohar Vloski JNF-USA Global Executive Director of Zionist Education), Yifat Ovadia Lusky (KKL-JNF CEO), Yifat Mukades (School Director, Valley Beth Shalom CA.), Sar-Shalom G'erby (Head of KKL-JNF Educationa nd Community Division), Michelle Geft (IsraelLINK Regional Director CA.), Amy Gold (Head of School, Epstein Hillel School MA.), Miri Sharon (Israel Trip Coordinator Epstein Hillel School MA.), Rabbi Moshe Schwartz (Head of School Krieger Schechter Day School MD.), Rena Rosen (Associate Middle School Princple and Director of Israel Engagement, Leffell Middle School NY.) Dr. Marnie Nadolne (Director Community Engagment JNF-USA) and Malca Barkay (Director of Diaspora Education KKL-JNF). Missing in photo, Dovi Paritsky (Head of Overseas Dept.Education & Youth Division KKL-JNF)

Additional Photos Below:



Planting Trees in Golani Junction



At Agamun Ha-Hula





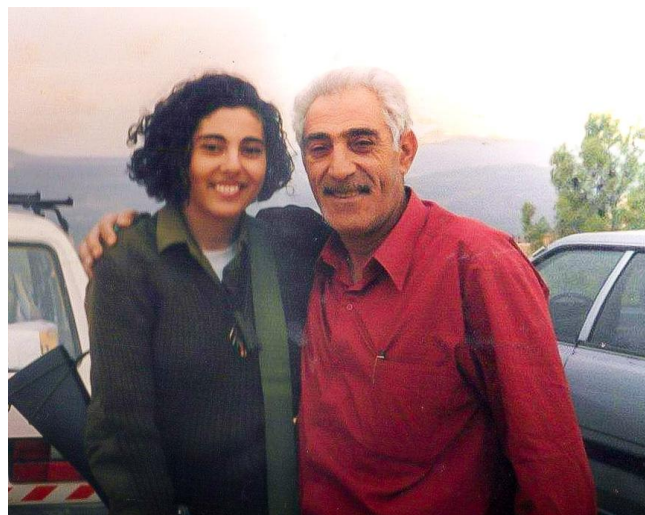
With Brigadier General (res.) Avigdor Kahalani



With IDF Education Unit Brigadier General Ophir Levius & Lt. Col. (res.) Tiran Attia



With IDF Education Unit Brigadier General Ophir Levius



30 years in the making of an educator. With my parents outside Mchava Alon November 1996, and today as a Sr. Educator, July 2023.



At Chalutza innovative Organic green houses with Tzipi

Taube and Miri Zaritsky Sharon



Zohar Vloski, Ofir Libsman and Michelle Geft at Kibbutz Nir Am next to the Gaza Border



With Elie Klein at Adi Negev - Nachalat Eran



At ammunition Hill



With Alon Wald at Ammunition Hill



Placing a wreath at Mount Herzl's National Hall for Israel's Fallen



Mount Herzl's National Hall for Israel's Fallen with Col. Res Yair Ben-Shalom



At the B'nai Mitzvah Remembrance Wall at Ness Harim



At the 9/11 Living Memorial outside of Jerusalem



With Michelle Geft at the Closing Gala



Last group photo at KKL-JNF offices in Jerusalem.