

Anna Sobol Levy Fellowship Report for Academic Year 2009-2010

Prepared by Kim Seifert, Chris McIntosh and Max Stoneman

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I. Border Security Measures Tour, September 2009

Location: Negev/ Sderot

Discussion: After an hour and a half driving from Jerusalem, we drove into the center of Sderot and saw every bus stop cocooned within a thick concrete hood and poles with public-address loudspeakers attached in case of rocket attacks. We were told that after the sirens begin, citizens of Sderot have between 30 and 90 seconds to find shelter before impact.

Our first stop was at the police station, where Tom had arranged for a meeting and tour with one of the policemen there. He took us out back to the “museum,” basically a series of shelves and cases holding the fragments of recovered rockets since they had begun to fall on the city a few years earlier. We were able to lift a few them, others were far too big. Hebrew lettering on each fragment showed the date and place of recovery.

On our way to an overlook on the edge of town, we passed schools and playgrounds with concrete bomb shelters near the soccer fields and basketball courts. From the hill, we could look down on the Beit Hanoun area within the Gaza border wall and the remnants of the Gush Katif settlement district. Driving down from Sderot toward Netiv HaAsara, we passed the Erez border crossing station, now shut down to keep supplies and weapons from reaching Hamas and other groups in Gaza.

The mayor of Netiv HaAsara, another Negev town, took us first to the hill overlooking the wall bordering Gaza. About every 200 yards or so, a massive dome-shaped post sat atop the fence, with a long, slim barrel pointing out toward Gaza. These are remote-operated machine guns

used by Israel to target rocket crews and others who might attempt to cross the border. We were then shown several homes, including the mayor’s that had been damaged by rocket fire.



Commentary/Recommendations: Without question, this was an eye-opening trip and certainly valuable as it addresses one of Israel’s top threats currently. As long as Qassam rockets remain a threat, the Fellowship ought to include this trip or something comparable to it. In fact, one guideline for organizing trips and events should be centered around Israel’s threats. Concurrently, being at a locality has much more significance when we possess a comprehensive understanding of

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the situation. It would be much more useful to have a lecture/discussion on the situation in Gaza with emphasis on the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS) prior to visiting Sderot and other areas threatened by their rockets. Given that Fellows come from a variety of backgrounds and have strengths in different arenas, thinking that they already have the requisite background on a certain topic is a poor assumption and a missed opportunity for Fellows to engage in meaningful conversation.

II. Tour of Ammunition Hill Jerusalem, September 2009



Discussion: Our tour of Ammunition Hill gave us a detailed history of the area's strategic importance and the crucial battle that took place there during the Six Day War. First we saw a light show that introduced Ammunition Hill while illustrating the story on a topographical map. We were led through the remaining trenches and bunker within which the Israeli military defeated an unexpectedly large Jordanian force. From there we continued to the museum which is located in what used to be Jordanian living quarters.

Commentary/Recommendations: Ammunition Hill was excellent. The area has clearly received quite a bit of funding and effort to be made into a very impressive and well-run historical area. It is also a great location because it combines a more standard museum with a very nice light show and actual trenches that we could walk through. I highly suggest that this remain on the agenda for ASL tours.

III. Tour of Latrun Armor Museum, October 2009

Discussion: This was a good tour, close to Jerusalem, and very uncomplicated. At the same time it was valuable for the sake of getting down onto the tactical level in a focused look at the tanks and other armored vehicles Israel has used over the years. It was surely an education to see the basic tanks Israel employed early on and then get on top of a modern day Merkava. The museum allows visitors to climb on the



vehicles themselves and their collection is exhaustive. Our visit prompted many useful discussions about the finer points of weapon systems and ground tactics.

Commentary/Recommendations: As mentioned, this was a solid tour and surely something to keep for the future. Next time however, the tour guide needs to be a more senior soldier than the guide

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who spoke to us. One of the Fellows and the coordinator supplemented the soldier's commentary and helped make it worthwhile but having a seasoned IDF veteran would have made the trip much more of an experience.

IV. Major David Levin of IDF Rabbinit (Air Force), 20 November 2009

Location: Aroma Café - Mount Scopus, Jerusalem

Discussion: Major Levin described to us how the IDF integrates religious Judaism into military service. He gave us a power point presentation informing us about the lengths that the IDF goes to in order to accommodate religious requirements. Passover, for example, requires a huge logistical effort to convert all of the military kitchens to the level of being kosher for passover. Major Levin also spoke to us about 'Project Sachar', an effort to further integrate religious persons into the military while also giving them a transferable skill.

Commentary/Recommendations: Major Levin's discussion and presentation was fairly broad and for the most part introduced certain elements of religious observation to those of us who were not so familiar. Especially given his position as the active Deputy Chief Rabbi of the Air Force, he was unable/unwilling to respond to some of our more poignant questions. In the future, this presentation could be left out with no hard done.

V. Mr. Carmi Gilon, former Head of Shin Bet "Shabak" (1995-1996), December 2009

Location: RIS

Discussion: The fact that we could get a former Shabak Head to speak to a handful of students is in itself an fascinating window into how small and informal Israel is in comparison to the United States. This is especially so considering how gathering such an audience around a former FBI director would be almost laughable. Without doubt, we are quite fortunate to be able to get face time with such prominent figures. Beyond this however, Mr. Gilon did not offer much that cannot be ascertained from officially published documents or the typical rhetoric of official spokesmen. He spoke for a small amount of time to lay a foundation for discussion and we then went into question/answer time. He did leave more time for questions than most speakers which was appreciated. Something he offered which is not necessarily published is his opinion that after 9-11 the situation of human rights in the United States became worse than those of his country but for some reason Israel has a worse reputation. When challenged on this, he cited the Guantanamo Bay prison as the primary culprit in human rights violations.

Commentary/Recommendations: Perhaps the take-away of this event is that simply because we are able to meet with prominent Israeli political figures, does not mean that we should. It is wonderful that accessibility is so easy here but we need to first find out if it a speaker will be worthwhile before committing him/her to a meeting. Mr. Gilon added little to our Fellowship and this is regretful since he was one of a few disappointing speakers. From this experience we learned that speakers are not guaranteed to be an effective use of time and are not sufficient for an entire month.

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At a minimum in the future, the coordinator ought to schedule a supplementary activity during months when the event is a speaker at the Rothberg International School.

VI. Tour of Regavim Golani Brigade Training Base, January 2010

Discussion: Regavim is the training base for the Golani Brigade, one of the most elite forces in the IDF. This infantry brigade was established during the 1948 War of Independence, is one of the most highly decorated brigades in the Israeli military and has participated in all of Israel's major wars and most major operations. Here we saw Israeli soldiers undergo their weekly gear inspection and were able to check out for ourselves their weapons and supplies, including the Tavor assault rifle.



A soldier from the elite Egoz Special Operations and Reconnaissance Unit spoke to us and described to us a bit of the history of the Egozim and some of his experiences as an elite IDF soldier. After being established then disbanded several times since its initial founding in 1956, the modern Egoz unit was reestablished in 1995 as an anti-guerrilla unit in response to the experiences of the First Lebanon War. In Lebanon II, the Egoz unit spearheaded a mission which left five Egozi soldiers killed and six wounded.



The soldier informed us that Regavim is only the first level of training for an Egoz soldier. After basic training at Regavim, an Egoz soldier undergoes further interviews to determine suitability before being allowed to continue to the higher levels of training. We were also free and welcome to tour the grounds and were able to test our own skills on Regavim's training circuit.

Commentary/Recommendations: This tour was highly educational and a lot of fun. It was great for us to go to the Golan, and even better to be in an actual training base. Moreover, the tour was definitely enhanced by the fact that our 'speakers' were regular, young soldiers. The soldiers were very nice, responsive to our questions and very informative. It is obviously valuable for us to hear not only what these soldiers had to say but also how they said it. All of the soldiers at Regavim were quite proud to be part of an elite IDF unit, and were



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very forthcoming about their experiences and sentiments. It was also awesome for us to be able to handle the Tavor rifle, one of the most advanced rifles in the world. This trip was very good and I recommend that it stay on the schedule.

VII. Tour of Air Force Museum near Beer Sheva, February 2010



Discussion: Aside from the trip to Sderot, this was the only time we visited an area south of Jerusalem and so for the sake of geographic understanding, this was useful especially since few of the Fellows had ever visited the Beer Sheva area previously. The museum itself was fairly well organized and certainly had a great deal of aircraft, many of which had great historical significance. Our tour guide was a young IAF soldier who gave us a fairly decent tour and good explanations of the distinguished history of the IAF. There is no question that the visit would not have been half as good if not for

her. However, her technical knowledge was very limited and subsequently she could not field our questions very well.

Commentary/Recommendations: Museum visits are definitely useful and we appreciated the chance to have this trip especially to such a remote location. Having tour guides in museums really makes it worthwhile too. The only issue is that just like the Latrun tour, the coordinator needs to go the extra mile by locking on a more experienced, well-versed tour guide who we may engage in discussion.

VIII. Professor Eyal Ben-Ari, Hebrew University Department of Sociology and

Anthropology, March 2010

Location: RIS

Discussion: Of all lectures, this was by far the most interesting and horizon broadening. Professor Ben-Ari is a dynamic lecturer and opened us up to a different examination of the IDF through a social, psychological and anthropological lens. He began with a relatively brief but poignant talk of his research and the issues facing the IDF today with emphasis on demographics and its specific Israeli military character. After his introduction, he took questions which led to a truly fascinating discussion of the IDF from this unique perspective. The only thing disappointing about this event was that it only lasted 2 hours. Professor Ben-Ari had much to offer the Fellows since his research and knowledge is exactly the kind which helps to see the IDF and Israel from the inside.

Commentary/Recommendations: So much of the time, we look at the IDF as a fighting force and component of the security apparatus. Ben-Ari bridged a gap by forcing us to look at it in the bigger

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framework of Israeli society. From this point, we gained invaluable insight into what the IDF means for Israelis, not just their security. This event proved that Hebrew University is certainly a phenomenal resource for speakers. Commensurate with this, the coordinator ought to look for other professors on campus across the disciplines so that the Fellows may engage in a more comprehensive examination of the IDF. It bears mention that three of the current Fellows are taking a tutorial with Professor Ben-Ari in order to fulfill the Fellowship's requirement for a tutorial.

IX. Mr. Efraim Halevy, former Mossad Director (1998-2002), May 2010

Location: RIS

Discussion: Mr. Halevy gave us some interesting background on the Mossad and shared a fascinating explanation of Israel's brief but significant involvement in Africa, even citing a personal story of his during his time with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He then proceeded to lecture us on the history of the special relationship between Israel and the United States. His lecture ran over time on account of its length and the fact that he arrived quite late in the first place. Additionally, his commentary was gratuitously one-sided. Essentially, he painted a picture of the relationship between Israel and the United States as being the result of Israel's selfless dedication to the connection. He emphasized the sacrifices his country has made over the years in order to maintain this relationship implying that the United States has done little on its part to preserve close ties.

Mr. Halevy seemed to be under the impression that his role was one of lecturer and that the attending students had no understanding of the topic. At best his comments lacked academic courtesy and at worst, were quite insulting. Without a doubt his chosen subject was particularly relevant for the Fellows but his delivery and disinterest in engaging in discussion nullified much of what may have been useful about the encounter.

Commentary/Recommendations: It should go without saying that the Fellows are supportive of Israel and certainly of the relationship this country has with ours. Concurrently, we were not selected as Fellows because of this support alone but rather our proved intellectual capacities and interest in a real and deep understanding of Israel and its security apparatus. We are all able to access the party line, so to speak, of Israel but the very spirit of the ASL Fellowship is to move far beyond this. Mr. Halvey's talk was a step backwards and a waste of an event. During the middle of the academic year, mainly we just had lectures each month without excursions and so to have had this spate of weak speakers like this one and Mr. Gilon left an unfortunate dead space in the Fellowship.

X. Golan Heights Trip, 18 – 19 June 2010

Discussion: This trip began with a view from Misgav Am where we viewed the Israeli-Lebanese border after travelling a few hours from Jerusalem. From this point, we headed east towards the Kary Desh Hostel on the Kinneret where we stayed overnight. The following morning we journeyed to Katzrin in the Golan where we took in a panoramic video featuring the natural beauty

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of the Golan Heights and some of the agricultural projects Israelis have developed there. In the same building we also saw a light show of sorts over a massive topographical map of the Golan Heights. The lights discussed briefly the history of the region beginning with pre-historic times, moving through the Temple Periods up to the wars of 1948, the Six Day War in 1967, and of course the 1973 Yom Kippur War in which the Golan witnessed one of the most intense tank battle in Israeli history.



At the next stop in Kibbutz Alrom we watched a documentary about this very battle in what is now known as the Valley of Tears. Continuing with this thread, we next visited a monument to the warriors of another battle in the Golan, the Battle of Tel Faher. Tom oriented us to the land and the schemes of maneuver of the battle. We saw old Israeli tanks that are left there as well as a captured Syrian tank.

Our next and final stop was Mount Bental and the surrounding area which overlooks the Syrian cities of Old and New Qunetra as well as much of the Golan itself. An additional attraction of Mount Bental is the small bunker system there which has not been used in decades but remains as a good example of the many bunker systems which intermittently overlook Israel's border and



were also constructed in Lebanon during the country's extensive military presence there. A much smaller apparatus is the mountain's signpost pointing to destinations all over the world and the region with distances. Perhaps the most surprising is the arrow pointing to Damascus, a scant 60 kilometers from that point.

After seeing the area from above, we took a ride down to an old Syrian police academy at which point we were meters away from the border. The building of the police academy still bears marks of battle with bullet holes and shrapnel impacts. Most striking at this location is the proximity and the absolute tranquil atmosphere of the border area itself. From the roof of the police academy we could see the outskirts of Old Qunetra which has long since become a ghost town.

Commentary/Recommendations: This trip was an excellent lesson in the geography of Israel, the present day relevance of the nation's military history, and of course the Golan itself. For Americans, understanding the intensely parochial nature of Israel requires a severe adjustment of geographical understanding in terms of distances. Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon are close to one

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another and not far at all from most of the country most particularly when one begins to speak of maximum effective ranges of modern missiles. Of course, most of us understood this on an intellectual level but to be able to stand on the ground and see Lebanese people going about their business brings one's understanding of the situation into sharp focus. Also, we spent quite a lot of time in the car just driving but again, for the sake of geographical understanding in terms of distances as well as terrain was invaluable. The Golan Heights/Galilee in particular are beautiful and offer amazing vistas, seemingly in every location.

The Golan trip is an indispensable part of the ASL Fellowship. It gives fellows the opportunity to see the north, round out their understanding of geography, as well as the place of Lebanon and Syria in Israeli's past and present. With the plethora of sites there, the numerous subjects to discuss and given the prominence of the region in Israel, the trip ought to take place much earlier in the academic year and be followed up with another one during the Spring Semester. Without a doubt, this was the highlight of the Fellowship and really gave us the chance to see things in Israel which we otherwise may very well have missed.

