

Why Traveling to Israel ‘Was the Closest I’ve Ever Felt to God’

My trip to Israel completely changed my life. And the amazing thing is, it almost didn’t happen.

When I first applied to travel to Israel with the Passages program, I wasn’t accepted—too many qualified applicants, too few slots. I was crushed at first but began to make alternative plans for my summer a bit closer to home. Imagine my shock when one day, I picked up my phone to discover that I was going to Israel after all! Someone had dropped out of the program at the last minute, opening up a door for me to travel to the Holy Land in what turned out to be the trip of a lifetime.

Over the course of my trip to Israel, I had my faith strengthened and my preconceptions shaken. There’s nothing like seeing a place for yourself, especially if you’re a visual learner like me. When I returned home, I told my friends it was like the difference between listening to a band’s album and then hearing them at a live concert. Sure, you’d get a sense for who they were and what they were about through listening—but being there is a whole new level of transparency and intimacy.

As I reflect on the trip a few years later, a few key things have stuck with me. One, of course, is the impact it had on my faith. I was able to spend a few mornings in prayer alone on a pier on the Sea of Galilee. There’s no real way to put it into words, but it was the closest I’ve ever felt to God in my whole life.

More unexpected, however, were the lessons I learned about leadership and relationships during my time there. Passages

does a good job giving program participants diverse perspectives on the Israel-Palestinian situation, as well as on politics in the Middle East more generally. I had to question some of the ideas that I'd received from American news sources and ultimately recognized that the reality of the situation was far more complex and nuanced than what could be crammed into a tweet or a headline.

That willingness to reflect and reconsider has served me well upon my return. I've been able to connect with Jewish students through our campus chapter of Hillel, and we've been able to talk about the same places and same events. Some of my closest friendships wouldn't exist were it not for my trip. But I've also been able to form relationships with students who don't have warm feelings toward Israel and come from a background totally different from my own. If Passages hadn't equipped me to approach these conversations with humility and a listening ear, my approach would have been totally different—and far less effective.

I've also been able to exercise these newfound leadership abilities in a more direct capacity as a fellow for Passages. As a 2018 fellow, I led a group of first-time students through the trip that I had taken just a year ago. It was a unique privilege to be able to see their reactions to the Holy Land—the awe and confusion, the grief and the wonder. It helped us get comfortable around one another far more quickly than we otherwise would have and paved the way for long-lasting friendships. I'm still in contact with several of the students in my group, and we continue to try to make sense of the overwhelming experience together.

I'm also working with the Philos Project to build a network of young professionals who share an interest in discussing the Middle East, hearing from top experts on the issues and forming friendships out of the shared experience of Israel—another leadership opportunity that wouldn't have come my way had it not been for this experience.

As many begin a new school year, it's a time to think about where we want to study abroad, where we hope to travel in the summer or what kind of job we hope to land. I'd encourage everyone, if at all possible, to seek the same kind of immersive cross-cultural experience I had in Israel. It taught me that I had strengths I didn't even know I had and gave me questions I wouldn't otherwise think to ask. It will make you a stronger leader, a more confident worker and, above all, a humbler and more inquisitive thinker. {eo}

For more on Israel, check out this special \$.99 offer on Charisma's new e-book, *God's Plan for Israel*.

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