

As is true for most group tours, our Lemann-Stern 2009 Mission landed in Israel, boarded a bus, and began the ritual count-off: “One” . . . “Seven” . . . “Eighteen” . . .

When my husband and I accepted our invitation into Lemann-Stern, we did so without knowing any of the other members. This was probably one of the things that gave us the most anxiety. Would we get along with others? Would others like us? We felt like middle school children, getting ready before our big trip. Two months prior to our trip, we were introduced to one another at one of our advisor’s homes - officially our first meeting. We held another meeting before we left for Israel. But for me, it was not enough. I still wanted to know back-stories, histories, and educations of my new group members, whom I would be with for the next two years. I was still nervous. Patience is not my strongest suit!

One of the features of Lemmann-Stern Mission Trip is constant movement. Not a moment of our short time in Israel was wasted. For example, we landed on Monday at 3:00 PM and made it through customs on onto our bus by 4:15. We immediately drove to Haifa for a bus tour of the city, followed by check-in at the hotel, and our first Israeli meal and speaker. Only four hours in the country, and we already had heard the editor of Ha’aretz newspaper deliver an interesting talk about the state of Israel. It was an interesting viewpoint that helped shape our impressions of the country.

(A word about our accommodations and meals on the trip. No one went hungry. We were greeted at almost every event with a veritable smorgasbord of food ranging from Middle Eastern delicacies to traditional Jewish fare. Our hotels were first rate.)

Tuesday began in what would become the traditional way: we counted off on the bus. As a former middle school teacher and lifelong summer camper, it felt like those first days of school or camp: we were unknowns thrown together by a common cause. I listened to each person shout their number, trying to ascertain, what I could learn from the way his/her number was pronounced. We made it to Rosh HaNikra, where we toured an Israeli the naval base. We observed UN Patrols, the Lebanese army patrols and had a long discussion with the base commander regarding Israeli security.

As we re-assembled back on the bus, and went through our now familiar process of identifying those present and those absent – what would I learn this time? After Rosh HaNikra, we traveled along the Lebanese Border with a retired colonel from the IDF who was a brigade commander in Lebanon until the pullout, and then commanded brigades until 2002 in the North. He fought in the 2006 war and spoke at length regarding the cause of the 2006 war, the perceived Israeli loss, and what has been done since then to rectify the situation.

As Wednesday approached we started to feel more comfortable with one another. Numbers were shouted with more oomph and pizzazz. We started early and rode to Rosh Ha'Ayin – New Orleans’ sister city in Israel. (We share it with Birmingham, Ala.). It is a city of about 40,000 about 10 miles from Tel Aviv. We started at an elderly center, to learn about a project of the

JDC to support community programs for the elderly. We heard powerful stories from Yemini Jews who made Aliya from 1948-1950 and their absorption into Israeli society. We continued on a tour of the city, and concluded the day at the city's music conservatory, with a concert from four teenagers - a percussion instrument group, who played the drums for about an hour. We learned that they had been to New Orleans last year to participate in the city's Arts Festival, and were dying to go back. What a way to end an afternoon! These kids were amazing!

As the days passed, numbers were said faster, and laughter was always heard on the bus, when we weren't catching up on our sleep. By Thursday, I was beginning to feel that I was not just the number eighteen but part of the larger whole. But Friday was probably the day when everything hit home for me. We toured Yad Vashem with a Holocaust survivor Eliezer Ayalon. He brought the Museum to us, making connections between the pictures and diagrams on the wall and his personal story. He spoke of his separation from his family, and as he parted with them, his mother gave him a cup full of honey. He held onto the cup until it was destroyed by a Nazi soldier, as he was moving between camps (by the end of the war, Eli would have been in five). He spoke of the sadness and despair of losing this cup, the one physical relic he had left of his mother. And we, numbers one through twenty-five, were entranced.

At the conclusion of our Yad Vashem tour, we didn't want to say good-bye. How could we continue our brief but meaningful relationship with him? How could we make sure other groups – other generations - experienced the power and pull that was Eli? To our dismay, we learned that he had written a book about his experience, but, unfortunately, it was out of print. As we boarded the bus, chatter could be heard about Eli –we knew we had just shared the last 3.5 hours with a most amazing man.

And it was Eli, above everything else - more than the pints of Guinness, the chocolate rugalech, or the bus lectures - that solidified my number with the group. How could I, as number eighteen, help others share Eli's stories? What could I do for future generation? What could the group do?

And for me, as someone who has always felt like a renegade Jew, someone who was kicked out of Confirmation Class, and Bat Mitzvahed at, coincidentally, eighteen, I was a part and not just a number. We were now a community, brought together, not by numbers, but by a Jewish cause. We will no doubt experience stumbles and roadblocks, as we determine our course of action with Eli, but no doubt we will be strengthened by our shared experience with not only the country of Israel, as a whole, but with its people, all the tiny parts, that constitutes the whole.

We left Israel early Sunday morning, after a “relaxing” day on Masada and swimming in the Dead Sea. After just a week, we are much closer as a group. We are twenty-five strong, each individual bringing something different to the group. We learned on this trip that when properly focused, nothing can stop us!