

For eight days I had the opportunity to travel in Israel as part of my Mandel Executive Leadership Fellows program. The experience was rich with learning. I had just returned from Spark, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies' community Israel trip, where I served as a cohort leader. Leaving barely two weeks later for another long international trip, away from work and home, back in Israel, felt crazy. Yet I immediately understood that this would be a different opportunity, additive to my Spark experience. I returned with so many ideas about leadership missions, and I am deeply grateful for the chance to have seen Israel through another lens, this time as a learner and participant. I found myself often experiencing a moment at two levels simultaneously – taking in the content for understanding and stepping up to the balcony to reflect, synthesize, and consider what I could bring back to our community, especially about leadership encounters in Israel.

The primary goal of the Mandel seminar in Israel was to give all 22 of us – Jewish communal professionals from across North America – the opportunity to learn first-hand about the multi-faceted, complex nature of Israeli society today and to explore whether Israel can remain both a Jewish and democratic state. Former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin's concept of ["four tribes"](#) (Haredi, Religious Zionist, Secular, and Arab), which he introduced in a 2015 speech, formed the organizing framework for our trip. We spent time diving into each of these segments of society, to better understand the animating identities, interests, and concerns of each sector. We also examined other fault lines, including center and periphery (geographically and economically), ethnicity, shared society and mixed cities, and the ever-present questions of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Mandel's program placed significant emphasis on *mifgashim* (people-to-people encounters), aided by the significant presence of the Mandel Foundation and its leadership programs throughout Israel. We spent two full days alongside Mandel leadership fellows, first in the Negev and then in the North, learning as much from observing the bridges they are building through relationship with each other as from the specifics of their projects. As we heard from the director of the Mandel Program for Leadership in the North, "the question [for Mandel] is not *whether* to continue the work of living together in diverse society, but *how* to do it." That message resonated deeply for me, both as we consider our ongoing relationship with Israel and the challenges we're facing within our community at home.

This was a unique moment to be in Israel, and many of the fellows attended the protests in Tel Aviv on Saturday night. Although my lack of Hebrew limited my contextual understanding to the translations generously made by my colleagues, the opportunity to stand within that crowd, see the range of causes and ideas represented, and feel the energy of people awakened to defend their values was powerful. The following evening, we had an hour to speak with a high-tech entrepreneur who has played a key role in supporting the protests over the past 20 weeks. Though I personally disagreed with much of his political philosophy, which is centered on the idea of a federalized system in Israel, the chance to move from the streets to the classroom, to investigate (and interrogate) a possible endgame to what's happening right now, was really special.

Throughout the week, I found myself asking questions, sensemaking, trying to contextualize our visits. Were we hearing the whole story – in each community and across communities? Is there a “whole” story, or many interconnected individual pieces? How did the style of the messenger affect my willingness and ability to receive their message? There were leadership lessons at every turn. These included the humbling experience of feeling like a novice in a room packed with long-time Jewish communal professionals, many of whom have lived in Israel or done significant Israel education work during their career. I listened and learned, and looked for other ways to add value as I processed the conversations at my own speed. Though it was uncomfortable, I’m also grateful for this part of the experience, to remember and feel what it’s like to be a quieter leader.

In our final reflections, I shared my colleagues’ deep gratitude for the opportunity to be in Israel at this moment, with a group of smart, curious professionals, to hear directly from Israelis across the social, religious, and political spectrum. I shared my sense of possibility following such a trip – to consider how we might bring some of the compelling speakers we heard to our community or bring our community to them on upcoming missions. I also asked what I believe to be a critical question—how can those of us lucky enough to have been on the ground share our experience, reflections, and love for this complicated, vibrant place with others?