

RACHEL LIEBERMAN SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



RACHEL LIEBERMAN

is a senior at Orange High School. She is very interested in politics, current events and advocacy, as she believes it is important to be an active citizen and voter. She is involved with the Know Abuse program, Write for Israel and Interact Youth Fellows. Rachel is considering a career in counseling or mediation and will attend The Ohio State University in the Mount Leadership Scholars Program this fall.

Concentrating on the dangerous task ahead, I noted the locations of the twists and rocky spots in the river. As my group of 45 fellow American Jewish teens talked and laughed, I prepared myself for the worst-case scenario: the raft tipping over, the jagged rocks popping the lining- but in retrospect, my fears became inconsequential compared to what I was about to experience.

As my group and I made our passage down the Jordan River in northern Israel, a conflict slowly started to emerge between oncoming rafts filled with Arab children and rafts with my traveling companions. Gentle splashes turned forceful. Suddenly, my American friends used their paddles to redirect the Arab rafts as the Arab youth used their paddles to redirect our own. Soon this water fight was not a friendly exchange- it exemplified a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I wish I could say this incident was isolated, but on the four-week tour of Israel I witnessed vicious hatred. When a new friend on the bus proudly announced that Arabs were not human beings, I did not know how to respond. Once, my counselor announced that Islam was a violent and evil religion, claiming that all Muslims were Jihadi terrorists. I helplessly tried to disagree, but I was ignorant in defending my convictions.

I never experienced this overt prejudice against Arabs. My impression was that the media made up most of the animosity between the two groups; I did not realize that people held beliefs so fully ingrained with this hatred.

Returning home from Israel, I was unaware of how to deal with the multiple forms of prejudice. I decided to join Interact Youth Fellows, a group consisting of local teens from different faiths dedicated to promoting respect and understanding of other religions through community service and discussions. Through this year-long program I have visited different places of worship and learned respect by not only gaining knowledge of other religions but by creating friendships.

So far, my visits to three holy sites have not only made me aware of the differences but the striking similarities. A visit with a rabbi brought awareness that a common core in most religions is a holy text, whether it be the Torah, the Koran, or the Holy Bible. Our group studied with a Unitarian Youth Minister who impressed upon us the need for community and the interconnectedness of religious ritual. At the Islamic Center, I hid my hair in a scarf, took off my shoes and learned about the Five Pillars of Islam. The parallels of Islam to my own Jewish faith were simply remarkable. My preconceptions disappeared with all these educational and spiritual experiences.

I never want to be in a situation again when I hear cruel claims based on ignorance and fear. It is my hope that if I was ever in a situation like that sunny day on the Jordan River, I would be able to speak and act in a very different way.

