

Diaspora English: On A Year of War, Plague, and Turning

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The final part of the yearlong “Diaspora English” series, Daniel Crasnow reports on a year spent teaching in Israel during the coronavirus pandemic. You can read other Diaspora English articles [here](https://newvoices.org/?s=Diaspora+English) (<https://newvoices.org/?s=Diaspora+English>).

Three days before I left Israel, I interviewed for a job with Hillel back in the States. The last, simple question of the conversation stuck with me. My interviewer asked me if there was anything else I thought she should know about me. I answered, realizing that this year has uncovered my own complexity in a way I could not even have imagined.

In the last 10 months, I've taught English in Tel Aviv and Nazareth. I inserted myself into the Jewish and Arab community in a new way. I lived through a war, and toured the country, visiting some of the most underserved communities who called this place home.

For the first time, I really gained appreciation for the fact that the pursuit of a pro-peace ideology can be a dangerous thing— not just on the interpersonal level, but on the communal and societal level as well. The 2021 Israeli/Palestinian conflict made me realize that, in order to build peace, Jewish people must be willing to put faith and trust in an Arab community that many Jews, even many liberal Jews, are unwilling to trust in any substantive way. Though my left-wing Jewish community fights for peace, their definition of peace in Israel and Palestine involves two countries, both of which should abide by our left-wing, Jewish narrative, priorities, and worldview. As such, when the conflict arose, most of the Zionist Jews I know (even liberal Zionists) still fell into the Israeli block and supported Israel in the conflict to varying degrees. Even as we refused to visit and fund settlements, the conflict between Zionism and pro-peace ideology was more on display than ever before.

Certainly this conflict wasn't universal, but now more than ever I continue to struggle with the task of identifying both as a strong Zionist, and as a left-wing, pro-peace activist. Many within Israel struggle with this as well (<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210518-against-backdrop-of-gaza-violence-israel-s-jews-and-arabs-join-forces-for-peace>).

To be honest, I am not sure what reaction I was expecting, but I was not expecting the American, liberal Zionist community I work with, and the pro-peace, collegiate-level activist community I care so much about, to so quickly fall into the Israel or Palestine, us-or-them divide. This wasn't just among the other teachers I taught with, but it expanded to the many friends I have on Facebook and beyond. For those weeks of the conflict, and even the weeks following it, my Facebook feed was covered by non-Jewish and/or anti-Zionist left-wing activists accusing Israel of genocide, followed by liberal Zionist Jews praying for Israel's victory over the terrorist threat. There was no in-between, even though there needed to be an in-between, then more than ever.

Similarly, I found myself critical of everyone around me— from the Left-wing Israelis who claimed they cared more about Palestinian's Rights than the Palestinians did (which I certainly hope is not true), to my religious and conservative family members closer to Jerusalem who argue that Alternate Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid is antisemitic for how he stands against the religious community, to my Arab friends who argue that Zionism is Nazism.

I didn't participate in all of these arguments, but I found myself at odds with the vast majority of new opinions that I heard in Israel. Hearing, reacting to, and arguing against these opinions was a task that made my own opinions stronger and more aligned with the real-world implications of my goals. I've undergone a process of realigning my beliefs so that my beliefs actually work to pursue the goals I care about.

Some would say that this is really what it means to be educated. I learned a lot of history and culture, tradition and conversation as well, but it was the contextualizing of these lessons within my own belief system that gave these lessons their value.

Friends and family have told me that they can see— both in my writing, and in how I hold myself— how much this year has changed me. But it wasn't COVID or lockdowns, it wasn't teaching, and it wasn't even the war that did it.

The moments that changed me were more particular. It was in Nazareth, when my students first learned I was Jewish, and they were amazed to know that not all Jews speak Hebrew and live in Israel. It was during the conflict, while I was safely stored away at Kibbutz Yagur, and my housemates posted “Am Israel Chai” or “Long Live Israel” on their Instagram feeds while I knew there were people dying in Gaza and Israel alike. It was going to Kiryat Arba and seeing the word “holy” on Baruch Goldstein’s grave.

As I finished recounting these moments, my interviewer simply responded by reminding me that “Israel means to wrestle with God”.

I am proud to say that, through all of this, my worldview and my faith have only grown stronger and more refined. My beliefs stood up to the challenge of redefinition. My faith survived seeing so many different situations that should turn the faithful into atheists. I come out of this experience more knowledgeable of myself, and of the world around me. I come out of this experience rereading my own essays from earlier in this year, and being able to pick out moments where my own ideology fails itself because of how naïvely I represented the idea.

I find myself more and more amazed by the process of human growth. Within 10 months, the things I knew about myself were questioned and destroyed. By surviving, I grew to produce a stronger understanding of myself and the world around me. I think this is the first time I've looked back on my year and seen this process so clearly.

Unfortunately, in the end, I didn't get that job. So now I am back in America tutoring English online and preparing my applications for Graduate School. In Israel, the next generation of MASA Teaching Fellows have already begun their own journey. There is a part of me that already misses being there— the independence. The students. The opportunity to not only affect my world, but be proud of the world I was affecting. And there is a part of me that is happy to be home, with a chance to review my thoughts and the lessons I learned. I know I'll go back one day. And when I do, I hope to be better prepared to make a difference in a conflict that goes way beyond me, as part of a world that is far from my understanding. But until then, I have more essays to write, and a few more language lessons to take on Duolingo.

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Daniel Crasnow is a multi-genre writer and scholar who graduated from Stetson University in 2020. While there, he held a Sullivan Scholarship in creative writing. [\(https://newvoices.org/author/daniel-crasnow/\)](https://newvoices.org/author/daniel-crasnow/) He is gay and Jewish. His work is published in, or forthcoming from 30 N Literary Magazine, The Gateway Review, The Mochila Review, and more. When he was young he created a sword and fought a demon in his dreams. He hasn't had nightmares since.

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