

Dear Birthright Participant,

My name is Alyssa, I'm 24-years-old and I went on Birthright in March 2018. It was a powerful experience but I'm writing because there are a few things I wish I had known before I went on my trip, and I'd like to share a story about some of those things with you.

I was standing outside of the Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, crying. There's this point at the very end, after you've wound your way through the museum and thought about fear, hatred, love, how your family did or didn't make it ... and you walk out and see this incredible landscape with a big open sky, and maybe you feel hopeful, or sad, or even grateful. I felt all of those things, and so I cried. I felt connected to the others on my trip, I felt connected to the family I never met, I felt connected to the trees that had been planted in that landscape that gave uprooted families like mine the chance to put down roots again.

But then I thought, "Who lived here before? The land is so beautiful, how could it have been empty before?" I had a creeping feeling that its history wasn't as peaceful as it seemed. Later, I asked my tour guide about the land around Yad Vashem. "It was nothing before," he told me, "just swamp." Just swamp. As I had heard over and over throughout the trip. I later looked up the history of lands near Yad Vashem and read reports that not too far away was once a Palestinian Arab village where, in 1948, over 100 villagers were killed. Why couldn't my group talk about this other history as well?

Birthright was full of these moments. Ten days is a short time and our trip wasn't supposed to be political, so why would I ask for more? I made great friends, I made out with a cute guy at a bar, we skinny-dipped in the ocean at midnight. I loved all of these moments, but why couldn't there be any space for me to ask about the destruction of this village? Why did my friend roll his eyes at me and tell me, "They're never going to answer your questions for real, so why ask?" Wasn't this an educational trip? Why couldn't I have my questions answered for real? So instead of speaking up and asking questions, I shut up. So I wouldn't be a buzzkill. So I wouldn't make confusing for others what was already confusing for me. So I wouldn't seem ungrateful for this incredible opportunity to travel to Israel, for free.

But here I am, a few months later, and those feelings haven't gone away. How do I reconcile with the fact that Birthright, a Jewish space, doesn't uphold the Jewish values I've been taught to cherish? We're encouraged to analyze, to challenge, to question. But why not here? Birthright is missing a crucial component of our Jewish tradition — asking questions. What does this tradition become if we bury some of its most basic values in that process?

I wish I had asked more questions. I wish I had pushed back more on the half-answers. I wish I had asked about the Occupation. I wish I hadn't felt guilty for asking questions because the trip was free. So I encourage you, ask all of your questions. Read this packet without guilt. Read other histories and narratives online. Talk to your new friends. Think critically and openly. Have fun, let it be complicated.

What do you compromise when you tuck away your questions? What do you compromise when you listen to one story without recognizing that there could be others? Please, cry at Yad Vashem, as I did. Cry at the cemetery, cry at the Western Wall, cry when you say goodbye to new friends. But if you can, go to the West Bank afterwards. Go to East Jerusalem. Cry when you see the separation wall. Cry at the statue of the key in Aida refugee camp. Cry that your Palestinian tour guide cannot walk on the same street as you in Hebron.

You can derive meaning wherever you find it. You can cry in one place and still cry in another, because you can celebrate the complexity of a place, of humanity. Is to love blindly to truly love at all? If you choose to love this place and its people, know that you can do it in a way that embraces all of this. You do not have to choose one or the other. Choose it all. Hear it all. Believe it all. Love it all.

— Alyssa